



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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

Volume 107

(1 September 2015 to 30 September 2015)

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Assembly Members

Agnew, Steven (North Down)
Allen, Andy (East Belfast) (*from 17 September 2015*)
Allister, Jim (North Antrim)
Anderson, Sydney (Upper Bann)
Attwood, Alex (West Belfast)
Beggs, Roy (East Antrim)
Bell, Jonathan (Strangford)
Boylan, Cathal (Newry and Armagh)
Boyle, Ms Michaela (West Tyrone)
Bradley, Dominic (Newry and Armagh)
Bradley, Ms Paula (North Belfast)
Buchanan, Thomas (West Tyrone)
Byrne, Joe (West Tyrone)
Cameron, Mrs Pam (South Antrim)
Campbell, Gregory (East Londonderry)
Clarke, Trevor (South Antrim)
Cochrane, Mrs Judith (East Belfast)
Cochrane-Watson, Adrian (South Antrim)
Craig, Jonathan (Lagan Valley)
Cree, Leslie (North Down)
Dallat, John (East Londonderry)
Dickson, Stewart (East Antrim)
Dobson, Mrs Jo-Anne (Upper Bann)
Douglas, Sammy (East Belfast)
Dunne, Gordon (North Down)
Durkan, Mark H (Foyle)
Easton, Alex (North Down)
Eastwood, Colum (Foyle)
Farry, Dr Stephen (North Down)
Fearon, Ms Megan (Newry and Armagh)
Flanagan, Phil (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Ford, David (South Antrim)
Foster, Mrs Arlene (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Frew, Paul (North Antrim)
Gardiner, Samuel (Upper Bann)
Girvan, Paul (South Antrim)
Givan, Paul (Lagan Valley)
Hale, Mrs Brenda (Lagan Valley)
Hamilton, Simon (Strangford)
Hanna, Ms Claire (South Belfast)
Hazzard, Christopher (South Down)
Hilditch, David (East Antrim)
Humphrey, William (North Belfast)
Hussey, Ross (West Tyrone)
Irwin, William (Newry and Armagh)
Kelly, Mrs Dolores (Upper Bann)
Kelly, Gerry (North Belfast)
Kennedy, Danny (Newry and Armagh)
Lo, Ms Anna (South Belfast)
Lunn, Trevor (Lagan Valley)
Lyons, Gordon (East Antrim)
Lynch, Seán (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Lyttle, Chris (East Belfast)
McAleer, Declan (West Tyrone)
McCallister, John (South Down)
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McCann, Ms Jennifer (West Belfast)
McCarthy, Kieran (Strangford)
McCartney, Raymond (Foyle)
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McCrea, Ian (Mid Ulster)
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McGuinness, Martin (Mid Ulster)
McIlveen, David (North Antrim)
McIlveen, Miss Michelle (Strangford)
McKay, Daithí (North Antrim)
McKeivitt, Mrs Karen (South Down)
McKinney, Fearghal (South Belfast)
McLaughlin, Ms Maeve (Foyle)
McLaughlin, Mitchel (South Antrim)
McMullan, Oliver (East Antrim)
McNarry, David (Strangford)
McQuillan, Adrian (East Londonderry)
Maginness, Alban (North Belfast)
Maskey, Alex (West Belfast)
Middleton, Gary (Foyle)
Milne, Ian (Mid Ulster)
Morrow, The Lord (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Moutray, Stephen (Upper Bann)
Murphy, Conor (Newry and Armagh)
Nesbitt, Mike (Strangford)
Newton, Robin (East Belfast)
Ní Chuilín, Ms Carál (North Belfast)
Ó hOisín, Cathal (East Londonderry)
O'Dowd, John (Upper Bann)
Ó Muilleoir, Máirtín (South Belfast)
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Overend, Mrs Sandra (Mid Ulster)
Pengelly, Mrs Emma (South Belfast) (*from 28 September 2015*)
Poots, Edwin (Lagan Valley)
Ramsey, Pat (Foyle)
Robinson, George (East Londonderry)
Robinson, Peter (East Belfast)
Rogers, Sean (South Down)
Ross, Alastair (East Antrim)
Ruane, Ms Caitriona (South Down)
Sheehan, Pat (West Belfast)
Somerville, Neil (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Spratt, Jimmy (South Belfast) (*until 27 September 2015*)
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Minister for Social Development.....	Mr Mervyn Storey (<i>until 10 September 2015</i>) (<i>from 16 September 2015 until 17 September 2015</i>) (<i>from 23 September 2015 until 24 September 2015</i>) (<i>from 30 September 2015</i>)
Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development	Mrs Michelle O'Neill
Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure	Ms Carál Ní Chuilín
Minister of Education	Mr John O'Dowd
Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.....	Mr Jonathan Bell (<i>until 10 September 2015</i>) (<i>from 16 September 2015 until 17 September 2015</i>) (<i>from 23 September 2015 until 24 September 2015</i>) (<i>from 28 September 2015 until 29 September 2015</i>) (<i>from 30 September 2015</i>)
Minister of the Environment.....	Mr Mark Durkan
Minister of Finance and Personnel	Mrs Arlene Foster
Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety	Mr Simon Hamilton (<i>until 10 September 2015</i>) (<i>from 16 September 2015 until 17 September 2015</i>) (<i>from 23 September 2015 until 24 September 2015</i>) (<i>from 30 September 2015</i>)
Minister of Justice.....	Mr David Ford

Junior Ministers

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister	Ms Jennifer McCann Miss Michelle McIlveen (<i>until 10 September 2015</i>)
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Official Report (Hansard)

Assembly Sittings

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 7 September 2015

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Speaker: Before we proceed to today's business, I welcome Members back after the recess. I ask Members to bear with me as I have a number of items to deal with before we proceed to today's Order Paper.

Executive Committee Business

**Ombudsman and Commissioner for
Complaints (Amendment) Bill: Royal Assent**

Budget (No.2) Bill 2015: Royal Assent

Reservoirs Bill: Royal Assent

Justice Bill: Royal Assent

Mr Speaker: I inform the House that four Bills have received Royal Assent. The Ombudsman and Commissioner for Complaints (Amendment) Act became law on 20 July 2015. Three Bills — the Budget (No. 2) Bill, the Reservoirs Bill and the Justice Bill — became law on 24 July 2015.

Assembly Business

Her Majesty The Queen: Britain's Longest-serving Monarch

Mr Speaker: This is an opportune time to inform the House that I wrote on behalf of the Assembly last week to congratulate the Queen ahead of the milestone achievement of becoming the longest-serving monarch.

Ministerial Resignation: Minister for Regional Development

Mr Speaker: I advise the House that I have received a letter of resignation from Mr Danny Kennedy as Minister for Regional Development. His resignation took effect from midnight on Wednesday 2 September 2015.

Resignation of Members: Michael Copeland and Sammy Wilson

Mr Speaker: I advise the House that I have received a letter of resignation from Mr Michael Copeland as a Member for the East Belfast constituency. His resignation took effect from 31 August 2015. I advise the House that I received a letter of resignation from Mr Sammy Wilson informing me of his intention to resign as a Member for the East Antrim constituency. That took effect on Wednesday 29 July 2015. For both resignations, I have notified the Chief Electoral Officer in accordance with section 35 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

New Assembly Member: Gordon Lyons

Mr Speaker: I advise the House that I have been informed by the Chief Electoral Officer that Mr Gordon Lyons has been returned as a Member of the Assembly for the East Antrim constituency to fill the vacancy resulting from Mr Sammy Wilson's resignation. Mr Lyons signed the Roll of Membership on 19 August 2015 in the presence of the Principal Deputy Speaker and the Clerk to the Assembly and entered his designation. The Member has now taken his seat, and I welcome him to the Assembly.

Mr Allister: Where is he?

Committee Chairperson Appointment

Mr Speaker: Order. I wish to advise the House that the nominating officer of the Ulster Unionist Party has informed me that Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson has replaced Mr Roy Beggs as Chairperson of the Audit Committee, with effect from 1 September 2015. I am satisfied that the requirements of Standing Orders have been met.

Standards of Debate

Mr Speaker: Finally, before we progress to the business listed on the Order Paper, in the light of the political climate in which we find ourselves, and as we have several new Members, it would be timely to remind the House of the standards of debate that I expect in the Chamber.

Members will recall that our last session ended with a particularly heated debate, with some Members making remarks that were not in keeping with a mature debating Chamber. During the summer recess, I wrote to Mr Wilson to impose a sanction on him for his remarks and particularly for resorting to personal insults about Mrs Kelly. This is moot now that the Member has resigned, but I remind all Members that I will not tolerate personal abuse in the Chamber.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Speaker: That does not mean that Members cannot challenge each other in lively debate, which, as you know, I positively encourage. I know that we are in difficult times and, from the Chair, I will defend the ability of all Members to address issues robustly, but they must focus on the issues and not on personal abuse and insults. Members not showing respect will be asked to sit down and may not be called to speak again for some time.

Let us move on.

Matters of the Day

Her Majesty The Queen: Britain's Longest-serving Monarch

Mr Speaker: Mr Jim Allister has been given leave to make a statement on the Queen becoming the longest-serving British monarch, which fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. If other Members wish to be called, they should rise in their places and continue to do so. All Members called will have up to 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 has been finished.

Mr Allister: On Wednesday of this week, this United Kingdom and the Commonwealth will celebrate a very considerable landmark in regard to the monarchy, in that Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II will become the longest-serving British monarch in history. The scale of that achievement is perhaps illustrated by the fact that relatively few Members of the House were even born when Her Majesty succeeded to the throne in February 1952. She was already the longest-living monarch in our nation's history and now she will become the longest-serving, surpassing the record of her great-great-grandmother, Queen Victoria.

It is typical of the work ethic of Her Majesty that she will treat Wednesday as just another working day. That betokens the commitment that has hallmarked her entire life of incredible public service to the nation and the Commonwealth. Therefore, I think it is right and appropriate that this devolved Assembly in this United Kingdom should mark that occasion, salute the achievement of Her Majesty and record our deep appreciation for her long and successful reign. It would be remiss not to mention also the great support that she has had in that role from her consort, her husband of some 68 years, the Duke of Edinburgh, who has been by her side throughout the entirety of this long reign. We are grateful for that.

May Her Majesty be spared yet to continue to long rule over us. 'God Save the Queen'.

Mr Campbell: My apologies — *[Laughter.]* — Mr Speaker. Events in the Great Hall, as may soon become apparent, delayed my appearance.

I associate myself and my party with the comments that I trust were made by Mr Allister. In that respect and context, I think that I would have no difficulty whatsoever in agreeing with him. Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II has conducted herself impeccably in her reign, which, on Wednesday, will mean that she is the longest-reigning monarch in our history. This society has been privileged to have such a personage as Her Majesty as Queen in this realm for such a period of time.

We have much to be grateful for in the way in which she has sustained the monarchy in good times and difficult times. She has presided over the Commonwealth. I understand that you, Mr Speaker, are aware of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and how it has functioned. She has ensured that that has gelled together and brought many benefits to Northern Ireland as well as to the United Kingdom as a whole. For those and many other reasons, we join, across the nation state, in paying

tribute to her glorious majesty Queen Elizabeth II, and we say in that glorious refrain: long may she continue to reign over us.

Mr A Maginness: I suppose, as a member of the SDLP and an Irish nationalist, some might think that it would be a bit uncomfortable for me to speak on this issue today. However, it is an indication of the maturation of our politics that I can, with comfort, speak and endorse the remarks that have previously been made about the Queen. It is a signal public service achievement that all of us can rightly acknowledge and respect.

If one examines what the Queen has done in relation to our politics here in Ireland, North and South, particularly her visit to Dublin a few years ago, during which she expressed the firm conviction that there would be reconciliation in Ireland, North and South, and by her very presence in Dublin and her acknowledgement of those who died not just in the Great War and those who served in the British forces but during the struggle for Irish independence, that was a very great contribution to the politics of reconciliation and peace here. On behalf of the SDLP, I am, therefore, very pleased to support the matter of the day today and the congratulations that affectionately go from the House to the Queen.

Mr Nesbitt: Mr Speaker, if you will indulge me for two moments, I want to pay tribute to Michael Copeland, who has left us. We will miss him, but we will remember the compassionate focus that he put on government. It is ironic that that very compassion has exhausted his ability to continue in the job. We wish him well.

I welcome the opportunity to pay tribute to Her Majesty's 63 years in the job. Let us remember that it is a job. Can anybody imagine putting in a 63-year shift in any job, never mind one of public service with such an incredibly high profile, where not a single word goes unexamined, as her husband knows so very well? The Queen has demonstrated fantastic leadership, not least on that three-day visit to the Republic of Ireland, when she challenged us all to focus on things that could have been done differently or not at all. To that, I add the things that should have been done but were not.

12.15 pm

As well as leadership, she has phenomenal energy. As it happens, the Queen is the same age as my mother. That first day in Dublin would have exhausted her, but the Queen was able to go on for a further two in the Republic of Ireland. My mother and the Queen share not only the same age but, I firmly believe, the same values. How timely it is that we mark the Queen's achievement this week, when the values of these devolved institutions come under scrutiny and, hopefully, review for the better. She provides leadership, energy, values and the ability to see the bigger picture, and she has the discipline to understand that, sometimes, least said, soonest mended.

The Queen is an outstanding leader. The Ulster Unionist Party congratulates her on bringing a new definition to the words of our national anthem, "Long to reign over us".

Mr Dickson: I join those who have spoken in congratulating Her Majesty The Queen on this incredible milestone in her service to the United Kingdom.

We will, hopefully, all reflect on Wednesday and take the opportunity to celebrate the remarkable achievements of Her Majesty The Queen as our sovereign. Perhaps we should also be celebrating the achievements of a remarkable woman. At 89 years of age, as others have said, she is indomitable in her spirit and has time for everyone whom she speaks to. I had the great privilege of meeting Her Majesty at a reception in Buckingham Palace earlier this year, and it was incredible to watch how she met people and the amount of time that she gave individuals to listen to what they were saying to her, and to note that, at a very late hour, she was still ably engaged in conversation.

Mr Speaker, on behalf of the Alliance Party, it gives me the greatest of pleasure to congratulate Her Majesty The Queen and join you, in the correspondence that you sent to Buckingham Palace, and others in that sentiment.

Mr Agnew: I associate myself and the Green Party in Northern Ireland with the comments made by those who have spoken. I personally congratulate Her Majesty The Queen on this remarkable achievement and wish her many more years of good health and continuation in her role.

Mr B McCrea: First, I congratulate Her Majesty. It is really good, Mr Speaker, that you have written to her on behalf of the Assembly — the complete Assembly. I realise that there are some political dimensions to this, but Her Majesty's role in overcoming some of the more difficult issues cannot be ignored.

In addition to congratulating her and looking back over her great contribution, we have to realise that there are significant changes happening in our society that Her Majesty's longevity illustrates. We are in a society where many, many people live a long and prosperous life. We have challenges in the House about how we care for them in terms of medicine, housing and the provision of care.

There are some other issues that Her Majesty's long reign has brought to the fore, namely, how you deal with younger generations. Her eldest son, Prince Charles, has been an admirable son and delivered a great role. When he was younger, he might have expected to ascend to the throne before now.

All in all, this brings to us issues of how we manage an ageing population and look after our young people, and I am sure that Her Majesty will not be short in giving advice where advice is needed.

Mr McCallister: I, too, associate myself with the comments from right around the Chamber in wishing Her Majesty well, reflecting on the length of her reign.

This is a phenomenal woman who, in the 1940s, served her country during the Second World War and vowed at that time to continue to serve, whether her life be long or short. Thankfully, she has been blessed with a very long and healthy life to bring her and our nation to this remarkable milestone of over 63 and a half years on the throne.

As Mr Allister said in opening this matter of the day, most Members of the House were born during the current reign. In fact, of the 12 Prime Ministers who have served during the reign, two, including the current one, were born after the Queen succeeded to the throne. That is a remarkable length of time. In the change in our society and the change in our world throughout that time — the continuing shift

that started from Empire to Commonwealth — the Queen's enduring steadfastness in carrying out her role and her duties in those 63 and a half years has been remarkable. That is rightly highlighted today in the Assembly, with all of the difficulties that the Assembly and our Executive face.

Mr Maginness made the point about the remarkable visit to Dublin, and I had occasion to attend one of the events down there. The symbolism of the change in the dynamic in the relationships between the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland was truly cemented with that visit. I think that that has been remarkable, and, indeed, the entire royal family has made a contribution to looking at issues of the past and how we might deal with and move through those issues. I think that they have been a tremendous example to us all, and perhaps if we had taken more of the Queen's advice, of Prince Charles's advice and maybe even the advice of the Queen's grandfather, George V, we might be in a much better place. That is something that I want to associate myself with, and I wish the Queen every success. God save the Queen.

Ms Sugden: I am happy to join others today in congratulating Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. As Mr Allister said, the Queen had a good 34 years as monarch on me before I was even a twinkle in my mother and father's eyes. That is why I think that she is such a remarkable role model for all, particularly for me as a young woman, as someone to look up to and admire. Her grace and humility in her reluctance to mark this occasion demonstrates her admirable character. I have been very fortunate to have been in her presence on two occasions in this past year, and I was taken by how much she captivated her audience. She is a leader because she brings so many with her, including those who do not necessarily support what she represents. Whilst Her Majesty is reluctant to celebrate her achievement, I am heartened that the House has seen fit to do so. Long may she reign over us. God save the Queen.

Syrian Refugee Crisis

Mr Speaker: Ms Caitríona Ruane has been given leave to make a statement on the Syrian refugee crisis, 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 again remind Members that I will not take any points of order on this or any other matter until the item of business is finished.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. We are living through one of the worst humanitarian crises that we have seen. I am not going to dwell on the pictures that we have all seen but, for each of us as a mother or father or grandmother or grandfather or brother or sister, it tears our hearts to see young children lying in water, dead.

People in Syria and other parts of the world are being indiscriminately bombed. They are leaving with the clothes on their backs, with children in their arms. European Governments have an enormous responsibility for triggering many of these conflicts. They supported in some cases, and they remained silent in other cases. They did very little when there was indiscriminate bombing, torture and other dreadful human rights abuses.

Over the last number of weeks, we have seen a failure of leadership by many of those in power who should know better. We have seen the British Prime Minister use language to describe people that he should never have used, but, thankfully, people are way ahead of Governments. It is heartening to see the response of people all over Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales, and right throughout Europe. People want to open up their homes. There is a wonderful four-city initiative on this island, and the Irish people are saying, "You are welcome here. Tá fáilte romhaibh anseo." We know what it is like to suffer. We know what it is like to have to flee. We know the coffin ships that crossed the Atlantic, and many people died on those dreadful journeys. We know that people were very happy to reach a land where they felt safe and could rear their children.

Governments need to match the response of people. It is not enough to say that it should be left to NGOs or civic society. They need to provide services, and the British Government, as a major protagonist in this, need to provide funding. We should not be arguing over how many we take in or how many we do not take in. We need policies. The time for talk is over and the time for action is now.

I worked with Salvadorean and Guatemalan refugees in the eighties, and there was some unfortunate language used then by some political leaders who should have known better. I visited and worked in those refugee camps. Again, people in the United States and other countries were way ahead of their Governments, and they formed the Sanctuary movement. They were even willing to go to jail rather than support migration policy at the time. I was also present at a refugee camp when they went back to their country. They were delighted to go back once the war was over. Some chose to stay; the vast majority chose to go back, because people do not want to leave their homes. They want to be in their homes, in their country.

Mr Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Ms Ruane: Let us act now. Let us show the world that Ireland is a place of welcome for refugees.

Mr Weir: We are facing — [*Inaudible.*] — on a global scale, with a humanitarian crisis of enormous proportions. There is no doubt in connection with that. For many of us, obviously, the recent photographs have, on a very personal basis, brought that home. The question is in how many cases there have been deaths where the camera was not there. How many things have a blind eye been turned to, in many ways, because they were not in visual focus?

Let us be clear in relation to this. This is where I slightly depart from the Member who previously spoke. It is very much a human catastrophe. It is a man-made human catastrophe, and we need to ensure that we put the blame where it squarely lies. While there is work to be done by Western Governments, it has not been through the Western Governments. It has been through the evil and extremism of terrorism. It has been the so-called Islamic State that has terrorised those in Syria and Iraq, beheaded people, treated women in particular appallingly, and wreaked havoc on Christian communities and non-Christian communities, which has meant that human families have been fleeing for their lives. That is the heart of the tragedy. It is a terrorist- and extremist-related tragedy, but, at the end of it, the victims of that are the ordinary people in Syria, Iraq and other places. That is where the focus has to be.

There are many things that need to be done. A response is required from European Governments in particular, and that has to be coordinated between those Governments. There are actions that ultimately need to be taken within the Middle East to try to solve those issues and prevent this from happening in the future. I think the Prime Minister will outline a response from the United Kingdom later today. Northern Ireland has always had a generosity of spirit. I am sure that, whatever response there is from the United Kingdom as a whole, Northern Ireland will play its part.

One of the great human reactions that has been mentioned is a sense of helplessness for ordinary people at times, but there is a message that people can make a direct contribution. They can contribute to the various aid charities and those who are helping to deliver on a front-line basis.

I know that a number of Members here have made their offices available for food and clothes. That is the real contribution that can be made. Let us, as a people, channel that and play our role in helping to alleviate a great human tragedy.

12.30 pm

Mr Eastwood: One of the founding values of the European Union was to respect human dignity. As Europeans, we are all failing to respect the human dignity of the refugees. It is a catastrophe and a disgrace that hundreds of thousands of people are searching for sanctuary and, in many cases, they are not able to find it. I think that we are all responsible in that regard.

It is very unfortunate that it took the image of young Aylan Kurdi to shock us into action when so many people have drowned or, thankfully, been rescued in the Mediterranean Sea over the last number of years. It has, though, shaken us into action. Ordinary people, ordinary communities, Churches and all types of organisations want to act and help, but they cannot help without our Governments putting their shoulders to the wheel and doing what is right.

As one of the richest countries in the world, we need to be there to help people who are suffering some of the most brutal conditions imaginable.

We are also responsible because we have sent bombers and troops to some of those countries, and we have destroyed those countries. We have left people with no option but to flee, whether from the evil of ISIS, Assad or Saddam Hussein or the stupidity of Western powers in trying to interfere where they do not understand. A couple of years ago, had the British Prime Minister had his way, we would have intervened in Syria as well, and the beneficiaries of that intervention would, of course, have been ISIS. So, until we understand these issues, Western powers need to be very careful about how they act and respond. We now have an opportunity to respond in a humanitarian way, and I do not think that the British Prime Minister is meeting his obligations in that regard at all.

(Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Newton] in the Chair)

I know that the First Minister has just told us that there will be no Executive meetings unless there are exceptional circumstances, but I count this as an exceptional circumstance. We saw the First Minister of Scotland out last week willing to do her bit. I ask that the First Minister convene a meeting of the Executive as a matter of urgency to find out how this Executive and this part of the world can play a role in helping some of these people survive the most brutal of conditions. I hope that the First Minister will hear that call.

Mr Swann: The image of Aylan Kurdi lying on that beach has brought this catastrophe into every home across the United Kingdom and Europe. Until then, the crisis in Syria had been seen as a faceless humanitarian disaster, as numbers who were far removed from us in Northern Ireland and the UK and across Ireland. But that small three-year-old boy gave those people a human face and a soul and made us recognise that it could have been any one of our families if things had been different.

What really brought it home to me was that, as a father of a young boy who will soon be three, I pictured that it could have been my son. If things had been different and I had been born in another place, how would I have been feeling? How could I have coped? What would I have wanted to do? It is that image and that message that has to come out. It is common humanity for people to want to help.

We have to commit to a plan to help. We have heard three Members speak — I am the fourth — and it is with great sadness in this Chamber that we have already heard the politics coming out in this crisis. It is not what we can do as an Assembly but as a people united together. I have heard the potshots at the British and Irish Governments about Assad and ISIS.

This matter of the day should have been about what we can do and what we can do now. As an elected representative, a father and a human being, I think that that is what we should be taking out of this matter of the day. It is not about pointing the finger at who was and was not to blame, nor is it about looking at what numbers we are going to or cannot take. It is about how we can help. If that is the coordinated response, through the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom and through Europe, which is their responsibility and which we, as a devolved region, are part of, let us play our part and let them play their part.

Let this be a solution to the global crisis that many have spoken about, but let this not be another political football for us to kick round the Chamber.

Mr Dickson: Northern Ireland has a very long and very proud history of helping those in need in similar situations in the past, and today is certainly no different. No one could fail to have been horrified when they looked at the newsprint and pictures emerging from this crisis; a crisis that has been there but that has been brought sharply into focus by those photographs of the pain and suffering of people wishing to escape the unfathomable horrors of war.

As others said, perhaps more could have been done and, indeed, should be done. We all need to take responsibility, and we will all have to answer for what we did in this particular crisis situation, as we will have to do for many other things that we have had to step up to the mark for. However, I have been heartened over the weekend by those ordinary citizens right across Northern Ireland who want to do something because we all know that it is the right thing to do. Whether it is to make financial donations to organisations like Red Cross, Save the Children or Christian Aid, or to get involved in spontaneous community collections of clothing and supplies for families, no matter where they are, if they are in need and if we can help alleviate their problems, we should do that.

It has also been saddening over the weekend to look at some of the negative comment that has been made about those of us who wish to help and who do not want to make political points but to genuinely get involved in providing for those who are suffering.

It is just amazing to watch the response of ordinary people in Northern Ireland as they rise above all that negativity and as we do what we all can to help to alleviate this horrendous humanitarian problem. Even if we can help only one small child or family, we should all be getting out there and doing that. I encourage the Assembly to do what it can to help alleviate these problems, working together with our Government and Governments internationally.

Mr Allister: Of course, one would be lacking in any spark of humanity if one was not touched by some of the images that we have seen. It is right that there must be an appropriate response. I am sure that each one of us, privately and individually — in showing the genuineness of our concern, perhaps the more privately the better — will wish to respond to the humanitarian appeals. Of course, there has to be a national response, but, this being a reserved matter, the responsibility for it lies exclusively with the United Kingdom Government. If and when they announce the number of genuine refugees that are to be received into the United Kingdom, our responsibility, in this part of the United Kingdom, moves to taking our proportionate share of those refugees. In that, I am sure, we will not be found wanting.

I think that the scheme of taking refugees has to be informed by a determination not to reward the merchants of death who have been engaged in people transportation across the Mediterranean — the people smugglers. We cannot reward, encourage and grow their evil business in the response that we make.

Therefore it is right that the Government should focus on the source of the refugees being in the camps in Syria. I think that the Government have also to be careful and very vigilant in ensuring that, in the bringing in of refugees, we

do not threaten the security of the United Kingdom. By that I mean that the Government have to be vigilant in ensuring that, under the cover of the refugee crisis, there is not an influx of ISIS jihadists into the United Kingdom.

It is, of course, a huge humanitarian problem. It has to be tackled with sensitivity, but with common sense, and some of the common sense informs us of the fact that we should not be rewarding those who organise the transport, in deadly conditions, for profit, of refugees, and we should be carefully regarding our own borders for the future.

Mr Agnew: You cannot fail to be moved by the images that have been shared across the world of the current refugee crisis, but it is hard not to reflect on how disappointing and embarrassing the UK Government's response had been prior to the picture of Aylan Kurdi being circulated. To that point, the UK had taken in only 216 Syrian refugees. When compared with many of our European neighbours, we certainly could not have been deemed to have stepped up, and whilst I welcome the fact that the Prime Minister has committed to taking thousands more, I regret that it took that image and a public outcry to force him and the Government to step up to the plate.

There has been a lack of leadership. Unfortunately, it is a humanitarian issue, but it is also a political issue, because political decisions have to be made to ensure that the UK acts as a refuge for those who seek sanctuary. The Prime Minister recently rejected the EU Commission's call for the UK to take in 18,000 refugees as part of a coordinated European response.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: May I interrupt the Member? A Member's phone or electronic device is close to the microphones. I ask them to remove it. Thank you.

Mr Agnew: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. We need a Europe-wide coordinated response. No country can solve this problem on its own, but the UK should be playing its part to help others who are less fortunate, as it is still a wealthy nation. Our people have made it clear that that is what they want to see this country do, and I think that the Prime Minister should heed the words and calls of the constituents of the UK.

Northern Ireland, for its part, must ensure that it heeds the words of the Northern Ireland Community of Refugees and Asylum Seekers (NICRAS), which has said that, as an organisation, it would struggle to provide support. We must ensure that we play our part. Whilst we cannot decide the numbers that are taken in, we can decide how we allocate support if and when refugees arrive on our shores. We must make sure that they find a better life here than that life from which they have fled.

Mr B McCrea: Of course, when you look at the pictures, you cannot be anything other than distraught. I think that I join with all people here when I say that, when you looked at the photographs, it was appalling. The question then arises as to what we do about it. I have to say that I struggle to know what I, personally, can do. There are a number of questions here. There are those who say, "Let's not bring politics into this". That is wrong. This is about politics; everything is about politics. There are some hard questions to be asked. I am not saying that I have an answer, but, when we talk about the military intervention in Syria, the question arises: would we be supportive of setting up safe havens in Syria or Turkey and providing

military support to do that? Surely, it is better to keep people where they are.

12.45 pm

I also have to say that, unlike Scotland and Wales, we do not have a refugee integration strategy in Northern Ireland — maybe we ought to work on that — or a race equality strategy. I say that because it is important. This is but one case of refugees, but thousands of people are streaming in from Africa, fleeing drought and deprivation there. We need some solution and not just a gnashing of teeth and a rending of clothes. We need to find out what it is that we will do.

I have to say to you that this is a political issue that requires a political response, and we should debate it. We really need to find a way to tackle humanitarian concerns that affect us all, but that needs to be done in a planned and long-term manner. I hope that the House will address the necessary strategies and the missing policies.

Ms Sugden: Ms Ruane began her contribution by saying that we should not dwell on the horrific pictures that we have seen, but I think that we should. People dead and washed ashore, and a boy cold not from the chill of the water but through death, which came far sooner than it should have, but death was the risk that his family took for his survival. I said last week that I would not wish for his family's circumstances, and I am really sure that they would not have wished for them either.

I am very fortunate in the life that I lead. In fact, every single one of us in the House is very fortunate in the life that we lead. What all this does, other than hopefully ensuring that those people now get the help and support that they need, is to put things into perspective. Is it not ironic that the House is united when it comes down to real human tragedy? I hope that, in the days and months ahead, we can look to our own advice for our own circumstances, but I do think that we need to help these people.

Whilst I agree with Mr Swann when he said that energy from some quarters had gone into blaming, I think that that energy should be refocused on helping, because those people need help and support right now. Equally, I agree with Mr McCrea: political circumstances brought these events about on a long arm, and the only way that we will fix this politically is to look back and see how we can help them. Bickering about those circumstances today will not bring that little boy back, but help may stop others from finding themselves in the same circumstances.

Mr McCallister: Like others have said, not only in this country but around the world, that photo certainly seems to have shocked the world into action. I have a three-year-old son who is the same age as that wee boy. The difference in their circumstances, as Mr Swann highlighted, depends on where they happened to be born and are living. One lives in a modern, wealthy, affluent nation where a three-year-old goes to nursery school. The other fled and tragically drowned trying to get to a better life. That has rightly shocked our nation and the world into action. There is a longing out there in that everyone wants to do something, whether that is in a very personal, quiet way by providing either financial or practical support that they can send out in aid, which brings out the good in everyone

across our country. There is a yearning to do something and to respond to this.

The wider issues will not be solved today. We have a huge humanitarian crisis on Europe's doorstep, and it is about how Europe and the world respond to that. How much aid? How many refugees can they take in, and how much need can be met?

What dangers will be faced by those who are left behind? How do we respond to that? How does the world deal with that in a part of the world that has had so many problems for so many years? People have talked about intervention and its difficulties, but Syria is one place that the UK Parliament voted not to intervene in. Looking at where the bulk of these people are moving from is something for another day and a longer-term strategy. It is about how we deal with the here and now, and that will bring out the very best in each and every citizen in our country as we all try to respond and do something to provide support at a practical level.

Mr Rogers: It is shameful that it has taken the death of one little boy to shock the western world into action. One of the major focuses of our deliberations has been on global migration, including the growing refugee crisis resulting from the persecution of Christians and other minorities in the Middle East and north Africa. The particular plight of Syrian refugees is such that one in every four refugees is Syrian.

As legislators, we are united in our opposition to the politics of fear and in honouring rights and the common good so that migration can be legal and of choice rather than of necessity. In the light of there being over 60 million currently displaced persons worldwide, we believe it imperative that we provide humanitarian refuge. Even more importantly, it is imperative to effectively address the causes that force people to flee their homes and to offer durable solutions for those whose lives continue to be uprooted. These solutions include effective international protection and concrete support for persecuted minorities who wish to remain in their home countries; the restoration of political stability and security to allow for voluntary and safe return; socio-economic development and the rule of law, including anti-corruption measures to ensure that people can enjoy the fruits of their own lands; long-term planning and training standards and the bilateral organisation of legal migration flows to effectively match the needs of the receiving countries with the labour talents of the sending countries; and effective and peaceful integration into host countries, offering communities between them of diverse peoples based on values of love, justice, equality and freedom.

We trust that the Westminster and Dublin Governments will follow the lead, albeit a bit late, of Germany and Austria and welcome migrants to this island. It is not so long since our ancestors left this island on coffin ships to seek a better future. Now is the time to show that we really care about our fellow man. Words are just a start; we need action.

Assembly Business

Committee Membership

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: As with similar motions, the motions on Statutory Committee membership will be treated as business motions. Therefore, there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That Mr Gordon Lyons be appointed as a member of the Committee for Social Development. — [Mr Weir.]

Resolved:

That Ms Claire Hanna replace Mr Seán Rogers as a member of the Public Accounts Committee; and that Ms Claire Hanna replace Mr Joe Byrne as a member of the Committee for Regional Development. — [Mr Ramsey.]

Executive Committee Business

Houses in Multiple Occupation Bill: First Stage

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to introduce the Bill on behalf of the Minister for Social Development.

Mr Bell (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): I beg to introduce the Houses in Multiple Occupation Bill [NIA 60/11-16], which is a Bill to make provision for and in connection with the licensing of houses in multiple occupation.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Committee Business

Water and Sewerage Services Bill: Extension of Committee Stage

Mr Clarke (The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development): I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended until 25 November 2015, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Water and Sewerage Services Bill [NIA 51/11-16].

The Water and Sewerage Services Bill will amend and confer power to amend the Water and Sewerage Services (Northern Ireland) Order 2006, and for connected purposes. The Bill was introduced on Tuesday 16 June 2015, with its Second Stage taking place on Monday 29 June 2015, following which the Bill moved on to Committee Stage. The Committee agreed at its meeting on 1 July 2015 to seek the permission of the House to extend the Committee Stage to 25 November 2015 to allow for a full consultation and consideration of a number of important aspects of the Bill.

The Committee has undertaken pre-legislative scrutiny of the Bill and worked very closely with the Department in ensuring that this tight deadline can be kept to, including consulting on the Bill, with Committee officials meeting the departmental briefing team during summer recess. The Committee agreed during a recent strategic planning exercise that the Bill was a priority and confirmed its commitment to continuing to work with the Department to ensure its passage through the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended until 25 November 2015, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Water and Sewerage Services Bill [NIA 51/11-16].

Legal Complaints and Regulation Bill: Extension of Committee Stage

Mr McKay (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel): I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 18 December 2015, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Legal Complaints and Regulation Bill [NIA 50/11-16].

Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. As Members will be aware, the Bill arises from the policy recommendations made by the legal services review group chaired by Professor Sir George Bain in 2006. As I outlined at Second Stage, the Committee has been endeavouring to proactively gather evidence on the policy aims of the Bill and commissioned research into the approaches being taken in other applicable jurisdictions for the regulation of the legal profession and the handling of complaints. Given the significance of the Bill, it will be important that the detailed provisions are carefully scrutinised at Committee Stage, since the new regulations will impact solicitors and barristers in how complaints are handled, with the introduction of a Legal Services Oversight Commissioner.

Moreover, the proposed new arrangements will have a direct bearing on the consumer. During its preliminary scrutiny, the Committee noted that a power relationship can exist between lawyer and client. That is something we need to be careful to factor in when identifying and assessing the evidence.

I reiterate my previous comments that we must ensure that a balance is struck and that the new arrangements are proportionate, but also that they command the confidence of the public. As part of its scrutiny, the Committee will need to ensure that it has the full picture of the level and scale of complaints on the ground. The Committee is therefore seeking this extension to provide sufficient time and space to consider whether the Bill strikes the necessary balance in meeting the needs of the legal profession and consumers, whilst providing efficient and effective arrangements into the future. I ask Members to support the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 18 December 2015, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Legal Complaints and Regulation Bill [NIA 50/11-16].

1.00 pm

Growing the Economy and Creating Jobs with Lower Corporation Tax: Committee Report

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to two hours for this debate. The proposer will have 15 minutes to propose the motion and 15 minutes to wind. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr McGlone (The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment): I beg to move

That this Assembly approves the 'Opportunities for Excellence' report of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment on its inquiry into growing the economy and creating jobs with lower corporation tax; and calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, in conjunction with his Executive colleagues, to implement the recommendations contained in the report.

Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom toiseacht anseo agus mo bhuíochas a ghabháil le gach aon duine a thug eolas dúinn i rith an fhiosrúcháin. I would like to start by thanking all those who gave evidence to the Committee during this inquiry: those who provided written submissions, those who corresponded with the Committee and those who attended the Committee to give oral evidence. I would also like to thank officials from the Department and Invest NI who provided written submissions and attended the Committee. I would particularly like to thank the Committee staff for their support, and indeed members for their input and scrutiny throughout the inquiry.

The inquiry has been very comprehensive. The Committee has looked at every relevant aspect of Government and at how the decisions made at the Executive table can influence the economy here. We have heard repeatedly that the devolution of corporation tax is not the silver bullet that will solve all our economic problems at one stroke. It was with this in mind that the Committee undertook the inquiry. The Committee sought to achieve three aims through the inquiry: first, to identify the main factors that will influence economic development in the future; secondly, to assess the adequacy of current provision in relation to those factors; and, thirdly, to make recommendations where improvements are needed.

The inquiry was undertaken on the assumption that corporation tax would be devolved and that the rate would be reduced significantly from 2017. It is important, however, to highlight the fact that the recommendations in this inquiry remain relevant regardless of whether or not corporation tax is devolved and regardless of the rate at which corporation tax will be set in the future. Personally speaking, I hope and trust that we will see progress on that.

This is about getting our economic house in order to make Northern Ireland attractive to investors as a good place to do business. I would like to start off by commending the positive and constructive work that is being undertaken by some of our Departments, arm's-length bodies and district councils to support business growth and job creation. There are a number of examples highlighted in the report where policies focus on business needs and demonstrate a joined-up approach between various parts of government. The fundamental problem is that there is

just not enough of this sort of thing happening and that what is being done is not always being done at a high enough level.

Key business representative organisations have demonstrated that there is no overall long-term, strategic, integrated approach to economic development. Long-term policies within Executive Departments often seem to be developed in isolation and with little consideration of the wider needs of other areas of government. Many policies are not sufficiently strategic. They are not aligned to a strategic vision. They fail to see beyond the four- or five-year Programme for Government cycle. There is no evidence of a strategic, joined-up approach, horizontally between Executive Departments or vertically between regional and local government. Worryingly, there is no recognition that a problem exists. There was no evidence that there is any agreed approach at Executive level to look at how policies can be better integrated in future.

If we are to create an attractive environment for business investment, we must make sure that we have a workforce with the skills that businesses will need into the future. We must make sure that we have the right infrastructure in place for key services such as transport, energy, telecoms and water, and we must make sure that those are adequately developed across the North, not just in pockets here and there. There is no point in trying to attract a large financial services company to north Down if we cannot provide that company with an appropriately skilled workforce. There is no point in trying to attract a data centre to south Antrim if we do not have the required level of connectivity. There is no point in trying to attract a manufacturing company to mid-Ulster if it cannot get the electricity supply that it requires. What is needed is a fully integrated approach — a joined-up approach between Departments that involves all district councils with input from the business, employee and community sectors.

The key recommendation from the inquiry is for a rolling 20-year shared vision and strategy for economic development. It is difficult to see where we will be in 20 years' time. The Programme for Government provides a firm five-year plan, but it should do so with a view to what is expected to transpire in the five years beyond that and how that is likely to impact in the longer-term future. We need to be bold, forward-thinking and visionary.

We are told that a reduced level of corporation tax could potentially bring up to 40,000 jobs by 2030. That is only 15 years away. How was that figure determined? Where will those jobs be located? Will we have an additional 40,000 cars travelling into Belfast, or will the jobs be located across the region? Will we have adequate housing to accommodate the people whom those jobs will bring, or will it create a property boom that we cannot sustain in the long term? We have already had some of that. Will our transport infrastructure be able to cope? What sectors will those jobs be in? Will we have the skilled people to fill those vacancies? Although such questions cannot be answered with any level of accuracy, we need to be aware of them and start to plan, manage and develop answers and begin to plan strategically for where we want to be by 2030 and beyond.

We need to be in a position where we have influence and control over the answers to those questions by providing the right conditions for investment. That is why we need a rolling 20-year vision. The key elements of the

vision should be: that it is articulated so that all parties understand it and can buy into it; that it is rolling in that it keeps being updated and refreshed as important external factors change; that it is shared across government at all levels and across the private and public sectors; and that it is a vision not only for what the economy will look like but for how all parties work together to develop the economy.

The vision for the economy must be driven by an overarching strategy for economic development. The Committee acknowledges that an economic strategy exists, but government must start to work in partnership across the business sector, the employee sector and the education, skills and community sectors. The Committee has therefore recommended the establishment of a steering group that includes representatives from all levels of government, the education and skills sectors, and business, employee and community representative organisations to develop and implement the vision and strategy.

The Committee has seen how a long-term vision can work in Stuttgart with partnership working between various interests. I would like to take this opportunity to record the Committee's gratitude to the representatives of the Stuttgart region who took the time to provide members with a detailed understanding of how government supports businesses in that part of Germany. The Committee understands the difficulties that the development of partnership working can potentially involve, especially in the early stages of development, but if we accept that everybody involved has an interest in growing the economy and creating long-term, sustainable, skilled employment across the North, we can, with the right attitude and leadership, overcome those difficulties and develop a vision and strategy that says, "We're all in this together to create a prosperous and successful region for everyone".

I venture that the beginning of this week and the talks process no less emphasise that very point.

Included in the overarching strategy must be strategies for education and skills, economy and employment, and infrastructure. Those are the key areas that we have to get right to provide the right conditions for economic growth. Importantly, we must also include our responsibilities for society and communities. We may work in an economy, but we must not lose sight of the fact that we live in a society.

An adage that is often attributed to Lord Kelvin is this: "what gets measured gets managed". However, measuring is not something that Departments here are particularly good at. There is often a tendency to provide measures for the level of actions rather than to measure outcomes and benefits. There is also a tendency to confuse activity with achievement. If the Executive are to succeed in achieving a vision for the economy, it is important that progress towards the achievement of that vision is effectively monitored and measured. For that reason, the Committee has recommended the establishment of appropriate working groups to develop strategies and to monitor their implementation.

The development of a vision and strategy must include a review of strategically important structures, policies and processes, and we must ensure that we have strategies in place to achieve horizontal, vertical and geographical

integration of high-priority policies and strategies. We must ensure that people can reap the benefits of economic growth and job creation right across the region.

In the report, a number of issues have been highlighted on creating an economy and employment strategy. DETI and DFP must have confidence that the available economic data on which decisions are based is robust, accurate, complete, timely and appropriate. That has not been the case in the past. The export plan and other strategic and local economic development plans must fully consider the relationship with our closest trading partners in the South to maximise cross-border opportunities. The advice and support provided to businesses at local level must also be reviewed, and plans should be put in place to improve and integrate the provision of advice and support in line with business needs.

Firm commitments must be made to subregional economic growth and job creation. The Departments should work in liaison with councils, which should be encouraged to work with Invest NI to develop local propositions and set targets at those local levels. Mechanisms should also be put in place at the earliest opportunity for the evaluation of the planned enterprise zone in Coleraine to consider whether and how the concept can be rolled out across the region. Similar mechanisms should be established to evaluate the planned agrifood competence centre, and consideration should be given to how that model can be adopted as a pilot to assess the viability of future competence centres in other priority sectors.

The banking sector should be encouraged to become involved as a partner in economic development to achieve a step change in the relationship between banks and business and in access to finance for those businesses. We must also look at how we can reduce the burden of unnecessary bureaucracy on businesses. In the first instance, we must draw on the experiences of other EU member states to review the way in which EU legislation is interpreted. We need to provide legislation here that removes all unnecessary bureaucratic burdens on businesses. Other EU member states seem to have developed mechanisms and ways of interpreting those rules and regulations, which facilitate and help their local economies to grow.

In creating an infrastructure strategy, DETI must revisit the recommendations in the Committee's reviews on electricity pricing and grid connections. The Committee's electricity reviews have been commended in the business sector for providing a sound and comprehensive overview of the electricity market. It made key recommendations on pricing and grid connections that were based on the evidence that was gathered by the Committee. However, since those reviews, there has been very little activity by the Department to demonstrate how the Committee's recommendations will be implemented. In fact, it is still unclear which of the Committee's recommendations the Department has accepted. For example, where recommendations on pricing had implications for the single electricity market, the Department often referred to the ongoing work on electricity market reform, which it wished to see completed before further considering recommendations. That was last year. In the meantime, large energy users continue to pay, as they say, the highest electricity prices in Europe.

1.15 pm

In relation to a recommendation on the contestability of grid connections, which could significantly decrease the costs to businesses for connections, the Department informed the Committee that it remains supportive of measures to implement contestability. What does that mean? What has the Department done to support businesses to achieve grid connections at less cost?

In response to a recommendation calling on the Department, as the lead body for electricity policy, to clearly state and communicate a long-term vision for electricity, the Department referred to its strategic energy framework. The strategic energy framework runs out in just five years' time.

More urgency needs to be given to the critical matter of electricity policy and how it impacts on businesses. Recent and ongoing events relating to electricity policy have demonstrated the need for a fundamental review of how electricity policy is developed and managed. It is essential that the potential for future economic development is not curtailed because of a failure to consider important economic factors in the development of electricity policy.

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

Mr McGlone: OK. Maybe at that point, as there is a fair bit more to go, I will conclude.

Mr Dunne: I must say that I was not expecting that call. I thought that I was further down.

I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion on the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee's inquiry. I think that the Chairman has covered most of the issues. The title is 'Opportunities for Excellence', and I think that we all recognise that, with the reduction of corporation tax, we would have great opportunities for excellence in business development.

There is no doubt that this has been a very extensive inquiry. I thank all those who have been involved in the development of the report. Obviously, the Committee Clerk and Committee staff have put in a tremendous amount of work, along with the various members who contributed. We need to have a real focus on our economy and on creating jobs and developing the potential for lower corporation tax.

The Committee engaged in a considerable amount of work, gathering evidence on how any reduction in corporation tax would bring maximum benefits to the Northern Ireland economy, both in relation to inward investment and the sustainable growth of indigenous businesses. I appreciate the Chairman's remark earlier about trying to encourage businesses right across Northern Ireland, and I welcome the fact that he mentioned north Down.

Throughout the presentations that the Committee received, the message continuously presented was the need for political stability. It is somewhat ironic this week that this debate comes to the Chamber when the talks are about to begin. I think that we all emphasise the need for progress in the talks and for the establishment of political stability, because political stability will help this place to grow. Without it, business will not increase because of the lack of confidence in our community. Selling the message

across the world that this is a positive place — a place where we have skills and where we have people waiting to work — is something that we must support.

Mr Swann: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dunne: Yes.

Mr Swann: How does that political stability tie in with the Executive not meeting?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Dunne: Thank you. I am sure that they will not take any lectures from the Ulster Unionist Party and its recent stunt to pull out of business in the Executive.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. Of course, that point was raised by the Ulster Unionist Party, which is a party that is slow to do everything. In fact, you have to ask why it did not move out of the Executive two years ago. The only thing that it did in recent history quickly was to release prisoners.

Mr Dunne: It is imperative that we are able to demonstrate that Northern Ireland is politically stable and is an economically ambitious place to do business. Throughout the inquiry, it was important for the Committee to keep the focus on the key drivers of economic development that have the greatest potential for economic growth and job creation. These are telecommunications, ICT, life and health sciences, agrifood, advanced materials and advanced engineering. Northern Ireland has an excellent skills base across those sectors and combines its rich heritage in heavy industry and manufacturing with the skills and research to excel in many of these fields.

We need to bridge the skills gap — that was emphasised on many occasions by contributors to Committee evidence sessions — and prioritise STEM subjects at our universities and colleges. The South Eastern Regional College (SERC) in my constituency of North Down customises courses to meet the needs of local businesses and the service sector. It has also built relationships across the world in Japan and developed exchange programmes. I appreciate the work to develop valuable apprenticeships, and we should put on record our thanks to DEL and my North Down colleague, the Minister, for pushing apprenticeships. We very much appreciate the work that has been done. We see the public advertising and the need to increase awareness and develop apprenticeships as a way into work for so many people.

There is also a clear need for a more strategic alignment of government support and a greater need at Executive level to integrate the policies of Departments that impact on key areas of economic development. That message came out clearly from the Institute of Directors, the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce, the Federation of Small Businesses, the CBI and many others. There was also discussion of regional balance in economic development across Northern Ireland and the importance of treating Northern Ireland as one region. Invest NI, which has done an excellent job over recent years, believes that setting subregional targets may be a negative decision. It would take the focus away from Northern Ireland as a whole and, in many cases, stimulate a situation in which opportunities for this country would be missed.

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

Mr Dunne: Energy costs remain a real challenge for the development of our business sector. It is important that, come 2017, when the opportunity arises, the Executive move forward with a lower rate of corporation tax to make Northern Ireland a very attractive place to do business.

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

As this is the first debate in which the Assembly will hear from Mr Adrian Cochrane-Watson, I remind the House of the convention that a maiden speech is made without interruption. That, of course, is predicated on the basis that the Member does not express extreme views in any way.

Mr Cochrane-Watson: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I speak on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party on the recommendations in the ETI Committee report, 'Opportunity for Excellence'. I know that my predecessor, Mr Danny Kinahan MP, was keen for the Committee to explore the economic implications of the devolution of corporation tax for Northern Ireland. I start by paying tribute to Danny. He brought a very optimistic, positive political view to the Chamber. He will continue that to the greater good of my constituency, South Antrim, and, indeed, of all in Northern Ireland as he continues the hard work at Westminster. I am honoured to represent South Antrim in this Chamber.

Although I was not on the Committee, I pay tribute to its hard work in conducting the inquiry and bringing together the report. I have no hesitation in supporting the 15 recommendations. I would, however, like to comment on a few of the issues raised.

First, I note that the inquiry discovered a consensus of opinion across the business world of Northern Ireland that there is no overall, long-term, strategic and integrated approach to economic development. That surprises me, particularly given the existence of our economic strategy, investment strategy, regional development strategy, apprenticeship strategy and Programme for Government. However, all the key stakeholders, such as the Institute of Directors, the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB), the CBI and Manufacturing NI, agree that there is no joined-up plan to grow the Northern Ireland economy. Let us face it: we have enough strategic plans and documents to paper the Great Hall — they are simply not joined up and not delivering. That is an indictment of the Sinn Féin/DUP-led Executive from 2007.

The Committee inquiry was undertaken on the assumption that corporation tax would be devolved and tax-varying powers might come into existence as early as April 2017. That now seems a very forlorn assumption, to say the least. On Monday 23 February, all five main political party leaders agreed with proposals from Invest NI that tax-varying powers should be introduced, with the aim of having a rate of 12.5% as early as 1 April 2017. Of course, the very next month, our deputy First Minister was overpowered by the southern command and reneged on that commitment. A certain Mr Declan Kearney, who, I note, is not elected by anyone, gave the judgement that Sinn Féin would not support the position of adopting a cut to corporation tax. Sinn Féin bleats about others playing politics, but it is totally about political appeasement. It tries to portray itself as a party of austerity in the Republic of Ireland.

In responding to the debate, will the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment give us some clarity on corporation tax? Will he confirm that, as far back as February, all major parties in the Assembly had committed themselves to the lowest rate possible and the earliest implementation date, namely 12.5% and 1 April 2017? Will he confirm that, because of the decision that polarises the Executive, the chance of making that rate on that date and, indeed, of introducing lower corporation tax has been lost?

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

Mr Cochrane-Watson: Will he further confirm that potential overseas investors will not wait for ever and that the dysfunctional Executive have proven themselves entirely unable to make decisions and stick by them? Is there a plan B if corporation tax is not devolved?

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

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I wanted to make life relatively easy for the Minister and the Committee Chair by sticking to recommendation 1, but it is important to say to Adrian that a rate and date have not been agreed. That has not been agreed by the DUP or Sinn Féin, never mind by all five parties. Although the previous Minister said that she was minded to have a 12.5% rate of corporation tax, that has not been fully confirmed by the DUP either. We all wait for a rate and date, and we travel in the hope that we can get this right.

As to the inquiry report, I thank the staff who put hours and hours of hard work into making sure that we were able to come out with a cogent and strong report with clear recommendations. I also thank all who came forward as witnesses.

There is a variety of recommendations; we managed to limit ourselves to 15, which I am sure will cheer the Minister. Among those is a recommendation that mentions horizontal, vertical and geographical integration, but I will not focus on that at the minute. I want instead to talk about recommendation 1a, which is about the need for investment.

I think that we all can unite behind that.

1.30 pm

The scale of investment needed — not only an investment strategy and fund — is very clear from the demands and requests of those who came to give evidence. In particular, we need better transport infrastructure. It remains a source of distress and concern not only to business but the community that we do not have a proper dual carriageway from here to the city of Derry. I congratulate the Minister on recent announcements. OneSource of Texas and Metaverse of California both committed to putting new investments into the north-west, but we can double down on those investments if we can improve our road infrastructure. The Dublin-Belfast economic corridor calls out for a rail link commensurate with its potential. In fact, a one-hour Belfast-Dublin express train would be a real boon to business in the time ahead.

I appeal to the Minister, as he works through the recommendations, not to skip quickly past recommendation 1a. Investment will show the business community and the entire community, especially

those seeking work, how we understand that a correct infrastructure can be a boon to business and can help to facilitate business in the time ahead. I believe that we have here, certainly among those who gave evidence to the Committee, businesspeople of great ambition of confidence. I think that, if we can get our act together here, they are willing to put their shoulder to the wheel in the time ahead.

I want to finish by referencing two small businesses — of course, every large business started off small — that give me great hope in terms of the entrepreneurial flair and vision of our young people. One is Venuebooker, which is a small company that I had the pleasure of accompanying to the west coast of the USA in 2013 on an investment mission and is now up and running in Belfast. It is trying to be the Expedia for hotel meeting rooms, which is a very ambitious global vision, but we wish it well. The other is Brewbot, who are the people who invented a way to brew beer in your office. Needless to say, that managed to attract lots of interest and equity financing. If we can match the confidence, vision and ambition of those start-ups, I believe that we can build the sort of economy that our people deserve and demand in the time ahead.

Ms Lo (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment): I welcome the opportunity to speak in today's debate as Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment. In its inquiry report, the ETI Committee found that there is a perception locally and outside the region that planning in Northern Ireland is too slow and bureaucratic in its decision-making. Planning has recently undergone a huge transformation following the transfer of the majority of our planning functions to local councils in April 2015. This presents a great opportunity to deliver a planning system that will further sustainable development and improve well-being, but also support economic development and job creation.

As the new planning arrangements bed in, the Committee will wish to monitor the effectiveness of those arrangements. The Committee is aware that DOE is awaiting Executive approval before publishing its single planning policy statement (SPPS) in final form. The draft SPPS outlines its intention to provide a set of overarching core principles that planning authorities should observe in the formation of local planning policy and the preparation of development plans. It will provide a shorter strategic expression of the Department's planning policy. The ETI Committee is of the view that the draft SPPS does not contain enough of an economic "golden thread" to set Northern Ireland apart from its competitors and suggests that an early task of any Minister with responsibility for planning powers in the next mandate should be to review the statement with the aim of achieving an economic golden thread throughout.

While the Committee for the Environment appreciates that a review of the SPPS will be required, we are six months into the new planning arrangements, and it has still not even been published. While the Committee is aware of the reasons for that, it creates great uncertainty amongst local councils and those who either are submitting applications or are affected by them. It is essential that the SPPS is published as soon as possible so that councils can make planning decisions based on a clear policy direction, making the process more transparent and accountable.

Also, any planning policy framework must ensure that our local environment and all its inhabitants are protected.

The other area that I would like to provide comment on is better regulation. The ETI Committee has found that a stable and business-friendly legal and regulatory environment is a key selling point to a new investor. The European Commission has begun its regulatory fitness and performance review. Closer to home, DOE has also initiated regulatory reform, which includes the Environmental Better Regulation Bill and prosperity agreements. The Committee recognises that reform is necessary and that there is a need to streamline aspects of the regulatory system to reduce the burden on business and provide a clearer, simplified regulatory system whilst maintaining environmental standards.

Prosperity agreements are an innovative approach adopted by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) to work in partnership with its customers who comply or go beyond compliance with their environmental obligations. Prosperity agreements aim to improve customer and outcome focus, reduce red tape and unlock opportunities. They allow NIEA to provide additional regulatory capacity where it is needed and to support companies with a stable environmental performance to self-regulate.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to bring her remarks to a close.

Ms Lo: That is a voluntary management arrangement and can help improve a company's environmental and economic outcomes. That concludes my comments.

Mr Frew: I support this piece of work and the Committee inquiry, which we undertook several months ago. Of course, we had to read up on it to make sure that we were refreshed with its content, because it was an extensive piece of work around a very, very important issue, namely the economy and creation of jobs in this country. The most important things that the people of this Province worry about, which I hear when I knock on the doors of my constituency, are prosperity and a future for their children. In this House, we are tasked with making sure that the future is real, tangible and profitable for our people, and that is the job that we should set ourselves to.

There is absolutely no doubt about it: corporation tax will be a massive tool in the toolbox of government if we can get tax-varying powers. However, with every single tax-varying power that any Administration or Government have, there comes a massive responsibility. Why would any sovereign Government give this Assembly tax-varying powers of that nature when we cannot even make the hard decisions that have to be made in this House? I work with parties across the way on the Committees every day to produce reports like this, but until they start doing what they say and practising what they preach, these Committee reports will mean nothing. Until we can make the hard decisions around welfare reform and close that bulging hole in our Budget, we will not be able to do anything for our people.

It is down to the intransigence of parties across the way. What are you scared of? Why will you not make the hard decisions? They affect your people, they affect my people and they affect your families and my family. They affect all our people, yet you sit on your hands and do nothing. It is about time that parties across the way grew up and

decided to make hard decisions around welfare reform and mend the gap in our Budget. If we cannot mend the gap in the Budget, we can do nothing. We will be paralysed. We will not be able to help families and we will not be able to help businesses. We will be no help to anyone.

Mr McCallister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Frew: I will, yes.

Mr McCallister: How will the Executive not meeting help to deal with the very issues that he mentions?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for that because he is coming on to the very next subject that I was going to speak on.

It is also very clear that, when politicians in this House cannot make a decision around the hard decisions to be made, it is also true to say that murders on our streets, committed by people who are connected to people in parties in a Government, will undermine and sap away all of the confidence that the business community has. We cannot sit idly by and allow that to happen. We will take —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to return to the motion.

Mr Frew: OK, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I will return to the motion by saying that, unless the business community has confidence in this place and the parties that take part in this place, we are in a very bad place. Things have to be addressed around the confidence issues in this country and by some of the parties involved.

There is no doubt that this piece of work is of great merit, and, having spoken to the Minister, I know that he is taking a lot of this on board, and he will speak to it very shortly. It is important to look at some of the things that need to be done. We need to make sure that the skills are there for companies to come into Northern Ireland. If we want to promote Northern Ireland to global companies, we need to make sure that the skills are at hand to be employed. We need to ensure that schools produce students who are employable. It is not good enough to have students coming out of school with exam results or grades; they need to be employable, and that employability has to be attached to the education system, with business having a greater say in schools. I think that government must be agile yet not react with a knee-jerk. I think that they must be responsive to business but not restrictive. We need to be the runway for business to take off. We should not be in the cockpit; that is business's job. We need to lay the runway for business to take off.

Some things are hampering the take off. There is no doubt that energy is a massive issue, and, until we tackle the core pressure of everything to do with energy — that being the cost of it — everything else will be problematic. The grid strengthening will be problematic. Connection to the grid will be a problem until we get the cost of energy down, and getting the cost of energy down is the most important aspect. Not everybody wants to connect to the grid. Not everybody wants to put up a turbine.

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

Mr Frew: It is the pressure and the burden of the costs of energy that make people want to connect to the grid, and that has a ripple effect and a snowballing effect on the costs. These are very important issues, and I commend this report to the House.

Mr Humphrey: Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, can I start by asking the Minister whether he will join with me, when he comes to the Dispatch Box, in wishing Michael O'Neill, Steven Davis and the Northern Ireland team all the very best for tonight's international qualifier at Windsor Park, which could see us going to France next year?

I want to start off by congratulating the Committee Clerk and the staff of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment for all the work that has been done in compiling this report. As colleagues have said, this report has been a long time in the making, but I think that it is a valuable piece of work. Investment is key to the Northern Ireland economy and how we get that economy to grow. My party has worked very hard to try to have that economy rebalanced, and I will perhaps return to that if time allows.

1.45 pm

Many of the issues that Members have spoken about have been addressed in the Stormont House Agreement. Had that been agreed, as it was by many of those parties that are now complaining about issues, and had it been implemented, perhaps we would be in a different place. People talk about the date and rate. We cannot get the date and rate if people are not prepared to recommend it to the executive of their party or are told by people in another country that their policy has to change, as happened with Sinn Féin. We also cannot have these things passed on and implemented to the devolved Assembly by the national Government if we do not have stability. Of course, the actions of the IRA over the summer, in the murder of Mr McGuigan, as well as the other murders that happened on the streets of this city, which have to be condemned by all right-thinking people, all indicate that that stability is not there. Work needs to be done in Northern Ireland to provide that surety to government and to deal with the issue — the cancer that is paramilitary activity and terrorism.

Rebuilding the economy, introducing corporation tax and welfare reform are hugely important. Parties need to demonstrate in the Executive and Assembly and to the national Government that they are fiscally and financially literate. We have seen some parties that have failed lamentably to do that in theory, never mind in practice. Paying fines to the national Government instead of having investment in education, roads, health, training and so on is an absolute crime. It is a shame. That is a false economy. That opportunity cost and that investment issue are things that Northern Ireland is suffering from. We need a more joined-up approach in the governance of this place, in the Assembly here at Stormont and in local government, as well as to work with the private sector, universities and colleges to try to ensure that that which is needed out there to provide skills for young people to get long-term and meaningful employment is exactly what we provide. I think we have been failing lamentably in the process of trying to do that.

The fastest growing part of the Northern Ireland economy is tourism. I congratulate all those who have been working hard to deal with the issues of perception and reputation. Northern Ireland has suffered because of the Troubles

and because of terrorism, which is why we need to have those issues resolved once and for all. It has suffered internationally in its reputation and in perceptions, with people not wanting to come here on holiday and not wanting to come here to invest. Those are issues that we thought we had put behind us. Sadly, as the summer unfolded, that was not the case. We need to address those issues and to have that investment. We need to work and support Invest NI, Tourism NI, Visit Belfast, the Northern Ireland Executive writ large and Tourism Ireland in selling Northern Ireland nationally and internationally.

This city is the travel and transportation hub for Northern Ireland. It has a huge and growing number of hotels. That is important as we continue to sell Northern Ireland as a tourist destination. I welcome the investments that were announced over the summer by local hoteliers in the private sector to further invest in more hotels, and I give credit to the government agencies that have been working hard to do that. Rebalancing the economy and addressing those issues is absolutely vital. There have been events such as the Giro d'Italia, the World Police and Fire Games, the Tall Ships, the City of Culture and a wide number of other sporting events, and there has been, indeed, sporting excellence. I congratulate yet another of our rowers on becoming a world champion in the latter part of last week. Sporting excellence such as that in the Northern Ireland football team is very important.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Mr Humphrey: I ask Members, when considering the report, to remember what their party stands for and is committed to and to get on with doing it so that we get the investment that we need in Northern Ireland to provide the infrastructure, rebalance the economy and provide jobs, certainty and financial security for our people.

Mr McKinney: I rise as a member of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment and on behalf of the SDLP to support the recommendations put forward in the report. Over the last year, corporation tax has divided opinion among economists, academics and businesses etc, but we have consistently heard that it will bring 40,000 jobs and have also been told that, on its own, it will not be a silver bullet. The report today serves as an illustration of that point.

It is a comprehensive and wide-ranging report that took a holistic approach in analysing how Executive decisions directly influence the economy and how we can best facilitate long-term infrastructural development, economic growth and, most importantly, job creation.

I would like to take this opportunity to commend all those involved in bringing forward this report, including the Committee Chair and members, Clerks, departmental officials and the many stakeholders who gave evidence. It has been an arduous task, by any measure.

Today's report is a timely reminder of the major economic problems that we face. It is clear, as has been reflected here, that our economy is not performing as well as it could be, and we only have to point at the key indicators that compare us with the rest of the UK and the Republic of Ireland to emphasise the point.

I am glad that we now have the ability to debate the report and its key recommendation of implementing a

20-year rolling plan for Northern Ireland. That is what it is calling for, but I repeat what it says we do not have — a view shared by those at the heart of business here — we do not have a long-term economic plan for the North. There is no overall strategic integrated approach to economic development and there is no recognition that a problem exists. Is anybody embarrassed? They should be. Departments developing policy in isolation is not dependent on welfare reform. They are not aligned to a long-term strategic vision; that is not dependent on welfare reform. There is no evidence of a joined-up approach between Departments, local councils, business and the community in developing new policies; that is not dependent on welfare reform. Joined-up government should be a fundamental principle of any economic policy, as there is little value in one Department attempting to attract FDI to areas where there are skills deficits.

Mr F McCann: Will the Member give way?

Mr McKinney: Yes, I will.

Mr F McCann: I noted that the previous Member spoke about the need for tourism, which we all agree with, but do you not find it strange that a person who stands at Twaddell Avenue and is blasted all over the world is talking about tourism, and that, in itself, goes against people coming to this place?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr McKinney: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I thank the Member for his intervention; he makes the point very well. As I was saying, there is little point in one Department attempting to attract FDI to areas where there are skills deficits in the workforce, where there is limited connectivity, transport links and electricity supply. The Chair of the Committee made that point very well indeed. That should have been the job of government. It should be a top priority during the end of this mandate and throughout the next. We cannot continue to have a shared-out government — one for me and one for you — but genuine, joined-up and delivering. In what way is it joined up, and in what other Government, would it be acceptable for one Minister to instigate a judicial review against another? What we need is a fully integrated and collaborative approach to economic policy that is truly joined-up and which transverses all levels of government, and, even as the report reflects, transverses mandates and fully involves business and the community.

May I add one point that the Chair did not have the opportunity to make? It reflects a point in the report that further work will need to be undertaken to further consider the requirements for a society and community strategy.

Ministers will big up their own strategies, for example, the joint 'Enabling Success' for 2030 and its focus on economic inactivity, and that is welcome. However, in the meantime, STEM subjects are being cut, most recently, maths and English language courses at the University of Ulster. Where is the economic focus there? We are cutting higher education while other parts of the UK and the Republic are investing more in it. Here is the irony: we want corporation tax to attract companies to bring in students and graduates, and, in the meantime, we are cutting the training for those very graduates.

We need to make a very clear point. We do not need to restructure the institutions of the Assembly to get joined-up government. Ministers must realise, first and foremost, that their brief entails a major economic component and that working in silos must no longer be an option.

Today's report also makes recommendations for key economic interventions across government, business and the community. It highlights the need for more robust and accurate economic data; encourages better cross-border cooperation; calls for a more detailed analysis of the impact of a potential EU exit; and calls for the establishment of economic zones to target regional imbalance.

I am conscious that time has beaten me, but I recommend the report to the Assembly.

Mr Cree: I support the Committee's report into growing the economy and creating jobs with lower corporation tax. Clearly, a lot of work has gone into the Committee's inquiry. I note its key recommendation:

"the Executive must articulate and implement a rolling 20-year shared Vision & Strategy for Economic Development."

This has been debated over the years, but the prevailing view was that a short Programme for Government was the right thing to do.

No business can work successfully without a strategic plan, which has to cover the short- and medium-term. The plan must also be reviewed and updated through each Programme for Government, and the strategy must be fully integrated. It is essential that the Executive change their current, comparably passive approach to one that is proactive and has a can-do attitude to developing Northern Ireland's economy and infrastructure. That will be a new and more challenging issue for the Executive, but it must happen. For too long, the Executive have been slow to react and shown little original thinking or innovation.

I also support the vision of a strategy that is driven by a regional economic development framework, with integrated strategies for the economy and employment — Members referred to that — education and skills, infrastructure, society and community. I believe that that is the way to go.

The Ulster Unionist Party was first to push for the devolution of corporation tax. In my time on the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, which started in 2007 — I was very young then — we were very aware of the Republic of Ireland's success in attracting business because of a low rate of corporation tax. Even during the bailout, following the Irish Government's financial crash, they were determined to hold on to a low tax regime at all costs. That illustrates how important the tax was to foreign direct investors and, indeed, to indigenous businesses. We recognised that fact as important then and have been pushing for the power to administer corporation tax in Northern Ireland since then.

At Stormont House last year, we had agreement to have the tax devolved. Sinn Féin agreed to it and supported the principle completely. Unfortunately, following pressure from its colleagues in the Republic of Ireland, it reneged on the whole deal on welfare reform and on the devolution of corporation tax. That is myopic and is a lost opportunity, especially as the Westminster Government,

in honouring their part of the agreement, have arranged for the necessary legislation to be put in place. We need to correct this matter urgently if we are serious about developing our economy and creating a future for our young people.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

I recognise the uncertainty about the United Kingdom's membership of the European Union and its potential for the economy. If we get the right deal, fine, if not, we must be competitive in the changed circumstances. Either way, we need the power to decide corporation tax. The Executive have to address the issue and consider the impact on the Northern Ireland economy, should the United Kingdom exit the European Union. The report highlights this issue, and the work has to start without further delay. There will, of course, be a cost to the block grant, but that can be phased in after a date has been set. Companies wishing to expand their businesses will base decisions on the planned future tax rates. There is always a planning period ahead of investments by local or foreign companies.

The current fiasco of the Stormont House Agreement sends the wrong message to investors and undermines business confidence in Northern Ireland. It was intended that the legislation would be implemented by April 2017. Sinn Féin's stalling on the agreement has the potential to destroy years of hard work and will damage our economy.

Access to finance has been a problem for businesses in Northern Ireland. Banking is not a devolved matter, and bank lending has been a major difficulty for businesses here. I am aware that the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has created some financial facilities to assist SMEs over the years. That is to be commended, but more needs to be done. The report recognises this and has undertaken significant surveys and taken much evidence on the subject.

I commend the report. It is a great pity that it was not undertaken before now. The Executive need to up their game to ensure that Northern Ireland is prepared to succeed in a difficult global economy and to operate in a very changing world.

The debate stood suspended.

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Childcare Strategy and Child Development

1. **Mrs Cochrane** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given the implementation of the childcare strategy, for their assessment of the capacity of the current childcare system to meet increased demand for services and trained staff. (AQO 8562/11-16)

10. **Ms McCorley** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given the importance of child development in early years, to outline how any new childcare strategy will address child development issues. (AQO 8571/11-16)

Mr M McGuinness (The deputy First Minister): A Cheann Comhairle, Mr Speaker, with your permission, I will ask junior Minister McCann to answer.

Ms J McCann (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): Mr Speaker, with your permission, I will answer questions 1 and 10 together. The Executive's draft 10-year strategy for affordable, integrated childcare is out for consultation until mid-November. It fulfils a Programme for Government commitment and puts child development at the heart of the Executive's vision for childcare. A central aim of the draft strategy is to give all of our children the best start in life, preparing them for lifelong well-being and achievement, thereby creating the basis for a better and more prosperous future.

The draft strategy sets out the Executive's vision for childcare, which is one based on shared aims and objectives. It proposes 22 areas of development where action is needed to give effect to that vision and proposes the creation of a significant number of new childcare places to meet need. We recognise that that will lead to an increased demand for skilled childcare workers, and we fully expect the current workforce to expand. Workforce development is a key element of the draft strategy, building on the key first actions launched in 2013. There are a number of specific proposals for training to enhance skills and create pathways into working in childcare. We are working closely with the Department for Employment and Learning on the detail of estimating the extent of demand for new training places and the cost of meeting that demand. We are also undertaking a skills audit in each of the childcare partnerships' respective areas. Delivering the childcare strategy and achieving its aims and objectives will require coordinated action from a range of Departments and services.

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Minister for her answer. Given that children born at the start of this mandate started school last week, does the Minister think that it is acceptable that the parents of those children have been disadvantaged for four years and will continue to be disadvantaged due to the failure of OFMDFM to deliver real, tangible action on affordable childcare, even when money was allocated for it?

Ms J McCann: I assume that the Member is talking about Bright Start and the 15 actions. The money has been allocated. Several millions have already been spent in those childcare programmes. I have been involved in situations in which a number of service providers came and got money for different elements of Bright Start and those first actions. We were concentrating on school-age childcare because that is where the need was identified in the beginning. I think that that is getting rolled out. This will complement the childcare strategy, as I said. This is a 10-year strategy. Money and resources have been put into this strategy, and, hopefully, it will be rolled out in the same way as the first actions were. Obviously, we always hope to do more in childcare — you can never have enough childcare — but we hope that this will provide a quality service, an affordable service, which is very important for people, particularly families on a low income. We certainly hope to make those childcare places available.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagraí. I thank the Minister for her answers. How will disadvantaged children be catered for in any childcare strategy?

Ms J McCann: As I said, it is important that disadvantaged children and disadvantaged families are included in the strategy. As I said in my response to the substantive question, a central aim is to give all our children the best start in life. Early care and education initiatives, including childcare, should, first and foremost, be focused on the developmental needs of the child.

Investment in the strategy must also address the needs of disadvantaged children to ensure better life chances for them and help to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty. It cannot simply be about servicing a labour market. That is what this particular strategy looks at: it is about the developmental programmes that are there to develop a child and meet the needs of that child.

We also know that investment in the early years leads to greater economic, social and emotional benefits later in life at an individual and societal level, and it can counter the effects of that disadvantage and deprivation. That includes children in workless households as well as working households. We need to make childcare more affordable. That is essential because 70% of children in poverty are in families where at least one parent is working. It is very clear that we need to ensure that those low-income families are provided for as well.

Just last week, we had child poverty figures published in DSD's 'Households Below Average Income' report. Again, there has been a three-point rise in relative child poverty. We cannot separate child poverty from poverty and families. That is very clear. They cannot be separated; they have to be seen in a holistic way.

Mrs Overend: I would like to ask OFMDFM why it has failed to spend the £12 million that was set aside in the Programme for Government for accessible affordable childcare. What is its assessment of the number of people stuck on benefits who would rather be in work but cannot be because of this OFMDFM failure?

Ms J McCann: To answer your last question first, I do not think that it is a failure of OFMDFM. We are going to see from the Westminster Government not just welfare reform but cuts to tax credits, which will hit families and actually put people out of work. More people will be out of work

because of the decrease in tax credits, which will very much come to the fore.

In terms of funding — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ms J McCann: To answer your first question about funding, between 2011 and 2015, a budget of £12 million was to be ring-fenced in support of the childcare strategy and £4.7 million has already been allocated and, to date, £3.4 million has been spent. Money has been spent. OK, not all of it has been spent but, at the same time, this is all going to be part of the strategy.

I also remind Members — this is very important — that this is an Executive childcare strategy, so all Departments have responsibility for it.

Mr Agnew: While I welcome the long-awaited publication of the consultation on the childcare strategy, to some extent the strategy will only be as good as the resources that follow it. I ask the junior Minister what work has been done to cost the proposals in the childcare strategy. Are those costs likely to be met?

Ms J McCann: The development of the strategy was a co-designed process, as the Member will know. We have been out talking directly to stakeholder organisations that provide childcare. More importantly, we have been talking to parents who need that childcare. All that has been costed within those proposals. As the individual actions are rolled out and delivered, we will have to look at an economic case for that. Certainly, there have already been costings, and the resources needed will be very easily identifiable within those.

Abuse Inquiry

2. **Mr A Maginness** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on an inquiry into cases of abuse that are outside the terms of reference of the Hart inquiry. (AQO 8563/11-16)

Mr M McGuinness: With your permission, Mr Speaker, junior Minister McCann will answer this question.

Ms J McCann: The Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry was initiated by the 2009 Assembly debate about historical institutional abuse of children. Its terms of reference refer to children under 18 years. It was on that basis that the inquiry was designed and its chairperson and panel members appointed.

We are sensitive to the views of those who have suffered abuse who fall outside the scope of the current inquiry and we are mindful of the equally destructive impact that it has had on many people. To consider amending the scope of the terms of reference at this stage would undermine the work that has already gone into reaching this critical juncture of the inquiry. Officials have completed a scoping exercise in relation to mother and baby homes, the Magdalene laundries and clerical abuse, which we are giving careful consideration to.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for her reply, but it really does not meet the full gravity of the situation where you have a discrete number of cases outside the terms of reference. It really is not sufficient for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to simply say, "It's outside the terms. Therefore, we can't do anything."

Something has to be done, and I urge the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to go back and look at this to see whether, even at this late stage, something can be decisively done in order to remedy this anomalous situation.

Ms J McCann: The Member has made a very valid point. The deputy First Minister's office has made its views very clear on the options it would like to see, such as those around the mother-and-baby homes and the Magdalene-type laundries. We believe that there should be a separate inquiry into that. It is essential, particularly for the women who were over 18 and were in those institutions. We feel that there should also be an inquiry into wider clerical abuse. Even in the options around redress, we have already had a number of meetings with the Churches and different religious organisations about that and, more importantly, with the people who were directly impacted. All those issues are being discussed. As I said, we have had discussions with the First Minister's side on this, so we will be looking to pursue that and make progress on it to see where it goes.

Mr Moutray: Given that last week the murder of Bernard Teggart was described as:

"the most horrific incident of child abuse to come before the Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry",

and given that the junior Minister has just said that she is sensitive to those who have suffered abuse, what would her comments be to the family of Bernard Teggart, given that she was also a member of the IRA in the past?

Ms J McCann: I have spoken to that young fellow's family. Really we have to say that killing — I am talking about historical institutional abuse here. For any child to suffer such abuse, no matter what institution they were in, was horrendous. The death of any child, no matter what the circumstances are, is very tragic.

Mr Moutray: Was it wrong?

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. What work has been done on the issue of redress for victims and survivors of institutional abuse?

Ms J McCann: As I said in my earlier answer, we have had a number of meetings, over a long period, with different individuals, the four main Churches and religious orders to discuss the issue of redress. We have also had meetings with Professor Kathleen Daly, who came from Australia to talk particularly about redress and to try to develop a redress model. That work is ongoing and, while we cannot pre-empt the recommendations that will come out of the inquiry, we are hopeful that a parallel process, in which work gets done, will carry on alongside that when those recommendations are made.

Department for Communities: Functions

3. **Mr Maskey** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the departmental functions that will transfer from their Department to the planned Department for Communities. (AQO 8564/11-16)

Mr M McGuinness: The functions transferring from our Department to the new Department for Communities were agreed by the Executive and outlined by the First Minister

in a statement to the Assembly on 2 March. The new Department will assume a range of OFMDFM functions in relation to the social investment fund, racial equality, united communities and good relations, disability and poverty, gender and sexual orientation and north-west sites and strategy. It will also assume sponsorship responsibilities for the Community Relations Council and Ilex, which are currently arm's-length bodies of OFMDFM.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the deputy First Minister for that response. Can he give us a sense of the other functions that are being transferred to other Departments under the departmental restructuring?

Mr M McGuinness: In addition to the functions that are transferring to the new Department for Communities, we are transferring functions across many of the other future Departments. For example, policy responsibility for the childcare strategy and for children and young people will transfer to the Department of Education. The Department of Finance will take over the functions of the government advertising unit and the NI Direct central editorial team. The Department for Infrastructure will take over responsibility for Crumlin Road Gaol and some former military sites. The Planning Appeals Commission and Water Appeals Commission will transfer from OFMDFM to the Department of Justice.

We believe that those arrangements will ensure better and more-joined-up government.

2.15 pm

Mr Campbell: Among the functions that the deputy First Minister mentioned was the uniting communities function. What contribution does the deputy First Minister believe that uniting the communities would deliver if he were to admit to all of the extent of activity that he engaged in when he was a Provisional IRA second-in-command in Londonderry?

Mr Speaker: It is a matter for the deputy First Minister whether he wishes to answer that.

Mr M McGuinness: I do not think that is relevant to the question before us.

Mr Speaker: OK. I call Mr Mike Gibson. I beg your pardon, I did write down Mike Gibson for some reason, but I call Mike Nesbitt.

Mr Nesbitt: Mike Gibson? [Laughter.]

Mr Speaker: Did you ever play rugby in Cambridge?

Mr Nesbitt: Mike Gibson? Same school, wrong person.

The deputy First Minister is no doubt aware that the policy on coastal management and erosion is a scribbled note from a civil servant called Bateman in the 1960s that effectively says that it is not an issue. But it is an issue when roads outside Ballywalter collapse because of coastal mismanagement that impacts on an everyday basis on the people of the Ards peninsula. Will the deputy First Minister commit to looking at that in the restructuring of functions and promise the people that there will be a lead Department for coastal management matters?

Mr M McGuinness: We are certainly willing to give that consideration, yes.

Programme for Government: Delivery

4. **Mr Cochrane-Watson** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the delivery of their Programme for Government 2011-15 commitments. (AQO 8565/11-16)

Mr M McGuinness: The Programme for Government 2011-15 set a challenging agenda for the Executive. Since its publication, despite difficult economic conditions, our record on delivery has been strong. Overall, 81% of Programme for Government commitments have been achieved, improving on the 70% achieved in the last Programme for Government.

OFMDFM led on 14 of the commitments, finding innovative approaches to tackling deep-seated, cross-cutting issues. Through Delivering Social Change, notable successes have been achieved in supporting numeracy and literacy as well as providing more help for families and young people. We have committed £55.4 million to the social investment fund projects, 67% of the total fund. Over £80 million of competitive funds have been drawn down from Europe, demonstrating our increasing success in engaging with Europe. Seven major good relations programmes have been put in place under Together: Building a United Community. This is the largest investment in constructive community relations in our history.

When we published this Programme for Government, we made sure that we set the delivery bar high for Departments. It was meant to be ambitious and to aim for transformative change. The achievements of the Executive in this period show the benefits of that approach.

Mr Cochrane-Watson: Does the deputy First Minister not agree that failure to deliver on the Programme for Government — the failed regeneration of the Maze/Long Kesh site, the £80 million in the social investment fund not spent and the failure to deliver the construction of the police, fire and prison services college — is indicative that the Executive are dysfunctional and failing to deliver to the people of Northern Ireland?

Mr M McGuinness: I welcome the Member from South Antrim as a new boy to these institutions. The question shows how new he is because the Member will be aware that the attempt to implement the Maze/Long Kesh project, create thousands of jobs and develop one of the most prime sites in western Europe was opposed by his party — but not by just the Ulster Unionist Party; it was opposed by others.

I think that it was a big mistake, but the track record of the Ulster Unionist Party over the last four or five years is there for everybody to see. I know that the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party tries to portray himself in the media as someone who is up for agreement and for forging agreements. He criticises the DUP and Sinn Féin when, in fact, the Ulster Unionist Party was at the forefront of opposing the development of Maze/Long Kesh site. The Ulster Unionist Party is also at the forefront of opposing the move of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development from Belfast to west of the Bann. That sends a very negative message to people west of the Bann about where they are coming from on the whole issue of equality. Of course, it also opposed the determinations made by the Parades Commission and found itself lined up alongside

loyalist paramilitaries in a unionist/loyalist pact that was formed some time ago.

So, I will not take any lessons from the Ulster Unionist Party about forging agreements. I think that, in the course of the delivery of the Programme for Government, being able to deliver 81% is some achievement.

Mr Nesbitt: We will see tomorrow.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat. Will the Minister provide an update specifically on the Programme for Government commitment to the One Plan for Derry?

Mr M McGuinness: The One Plan, as many people know, is embedded as the keystone of regeneration in the city of Derry. A number of the buildings in Ebrington are shortly to be completed, and a future phase of market testing is also planned for four buildings. ILEX is tasked with the development and regeneration of the Ebrington site, helping to make it one of the key shared spaces within the city. To date, £16.5 million has been spent on capital works in Ebrington. A further £2.8 million has been made available to ILEX for 2015-16. There has been significant development on the Ebrington site, which will increase confidence in the city and help to bring businesses to Ebrington. The recent success of the North West Regional Science Park and capital developments at Ebrington, which will come on stream in 2015-16, will provide opportunities for job creation in Derry and the north-west.

Mr Lyttle: The deputy First Minister mentioned the key Programme for Government commitment on building a united community. One of the key commitments in the Together: Building a United Community strategy is tackling all manifestations of paramilitarism in our society. What more does the deputy First Minister think the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister can do to ensure that that is achieved?

Mr M McGuinness: I think that, as always, there is a duty and responsibility on all the political parties and on every single politician in the Assembly to be seen to stand together against all forms of paramilitarism, armed groups or those who are involved in criminal activity. I think that my track record in the last eight years as deputy First Minister is second to that of no other Member in the House to such an extent that I have been very up front in my condemnation of those who would resort to violence of any kind. My life has been threatened as a result of it. That has not put me off. I will continue to oppose those who would attempt to drag us back to the past. I do not care what labels they put on themselves or others put on them. It is the duty of everyone in the Assembly to stand against criminality and violence. I have stood with unionist ministers. I have stood with the Chief Constable of the PSNI. Sadly, when it comes to confronting the activities of extreme loyalists who are attacking and injuring police officers on the street, I have yet to have any unionist leader stand with me.

Mr Nesbitt: What about Saville?

Mr Speaker: I am not going to issue any further warning. If people continue to barrack from a sedentary position, they will not be called to participate in the remainder of this plenary session.

Child Poverty

5. **Mr Agnew** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what consideration they have given to proposals by the UK Government to redefine child poverty. (AQO 8566/11-16)

Mr M McGuinness: With your permission, a Cheann Comhairle, I will ask junior Minister McCann to answer this question.

Ms J McCann: On 1 July 2015, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Iain Duncan Smith, announced that he will bring forward legislation to amend the Child Poverty Act 2010. Mr Duncan Smith and the Secretary of State for Education, Nicky Morgan, wrote to the First Minister and the deputy First Minister following that announcement to outline the potential proposed amendments.

On 9 July, the Westminster Government announced a Welfare Reform and Work Bill in Parliament, which aims to put the new proposed approach into law. The Bill includes clauses to remove the duty on the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to meet the four current statutory targets and to enact a new approach to tackling child poverty in England. The Government have indicated that each devolved Administration can decide whether or not to propose amendments to the provisions in relation to their duties and statutory obligations.

In line with Scotland and Wales, we have agreed the proposals of the Department for Work and Pensions. We are considering the potential impact of the positive work carried out to date locally to address the circumstances that cause more of our children here in the North to face poverty and the impact of poverty on their lives. The Executive's approach to child poverty will not be determined by the Bill that is currently before Parliament.

Mr Agnew: I thank the junior Minister for her answer. One of the proposals from the Secretary of State Iain Duncan Smith is to move away from the measure of poverty at 60% of the average income. There has been plenty of documented evidence of how inequality impinges upon the prosperity of the poorest in society. Will the junior Minister give a commitment that Northern Ireland will not move away from that important measure of inequality and poverty?

Ms J McCann: As I said in earlier answers, you cannot divorce child poverty from poverty in families. It is very important that, when we are looking at measures of poverty, we look at low income but also at deprivation. Those measurements, in my opinion, are probably the two most important when looking at child poverty. There are other measurements, such as educational underachievement, health inequalities and everything else, but I think that, when we are looking at child poverty, we need to look at family income and particularly deprivation among children in those families. It is clear that a child not having enough to eat because the family does not have enough money to feed it, a child living in a damp house or in inadequate housing or not having a computer to do homework, that all those things will all have an impact on the life chances of that child in later life. So, it is very important that those measurements of income and deprivation are there.

Programme for Government: Delivery

6. **Mr Lynch** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline whether an outcome focused approach has been applied to the delivery of the Programme for Government 2011-15. (AQO 8567/11-16)

Mr M McGuinness: The Programme for Government 2011-15 sets five priorities for achievement by the Executive. Each priority has a set of identified outcomes for achievement. In managing the implementation of the Programme for Government, our role is to support Departments to deliver their commitments and to ensure that the commitments deliver on the outcomes that we have identified. For example, Programme for Government priority 2, which is about creating opportunities, tackling disadvantage and improving health and well-being, identifies outcomes, including fewer deprived communities, reduced health inequalities and greater equality of opportunity in economic participation. One of the advantages of having a Programme for Government managed centrally from OFMDFM is that it enables that strategic focus on the achievement of outcomes.

Mr Lynch: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his answer. Is any work ongoing regarding the next Programme for Government for 2016-2021?

Mr M McGuinness: Notwithstanding the current political difficulties and acknowledging that a Programme for Government for the period 2016-2021 will be a matter for an incoming Executive following the next Assembly election, work is ongoing to look at potential high-level objectives and to identify possible delivery models and governance and accountability structures. In particular, we are exploring the potential benefits of an even greater focus on outcomes through the development of an outcomes framework for the public sector.

It is helpful that the development of the new structures in government and preparation for a new Programme for Government are progressing together. That should ensure that the future delivery of outcomes will benefit from better collaboration and decision-making across Departments, leading to improved accountability.

2.30 pm

Mr Speaker: That brings us to the end of the period for listed questions. We now move on to 15 minutes of topical questions.

Syrian Refugee Situation: OFMDFM Action

T1. **Mrs McKevitt** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what representations they have made to the Prime Minister and European representatives about the Syrian refugee situation. (AQT 2761/11-16)

Mr M McGuinness: I had the opportunity to speak to the British Prime Minister, David Cameron, just a few days ago. Obviously, the conversation centred on the present difficulties that we are experiencing at the Assembly and exploring how we can take those forward, and I welcome the fact that we will go into vital talks over the next short while to try to resolve those difficulties. During that conversation, I took the opportunity to raise the plight of the refugees and to stress what I believe to be the case, which is that, in Scotland, Wales and the North, we are

willing to play our part and do more but he needs to do more. Of course, he is making a statement today in the House of Commons about the numbers.

It represents a huge challenge for all of us. It is a horrendous situation in which people have been displaced from their homes as a result of war and conflict in their country. Of course, we look at the journeys that these people have undertaken and the way that they have risked their lives and those of their families to escape from war-torn situations, and we have to look at all those people with incredible admiration for their willingness to walk some 170 kilometres from one country to another to find safety. There is an argument about whether they should be called migrants or refugees: they are clearly refugees, but they are also people who are willing to take enormous risks to save their lives and those of their families. They do not strike me as people who want to end up in the North of Ireland, Scotland, Wales or Germany — I applaud the Germans for the way in which they have welcomed the refugees and the fact that they have offered to take some 800,000 of them — and sit on their backside when they get there.

Mrs McKevitt: Has a plan been thought out about what role Northern Ireland can play to help the Syrian refugees? What example will you, as a leader, set the people in our society regarding the Syrian refugee crisis?

Mr M McGuinness: From the comments that have been made by all the political parties who have spoken on the issue, it is obvious that we all want to do more and to do something. I know that OFMDFM officials, under the tutelage of the two junior Ministers, have been involved in discussions in recent times about how we can contribute to alleviating the plight of those people. That work continues. I hope to have a conversation shortly with the First Minister, because urgency is required in taking the matter forward. Work is already under way. Officials and junior Ministers are involved in that work, and there is no doubt whatsoever that the First Minister and I want to contribute and play our part in alleviating the plight of those poor people.

Programme for Government 2011-15: Missed Targets

T2. **Ms Sugden** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to state whether the 2011-15 Programme for Government targets that the Northern Ireland Executive fail to meet will default to a 2015-16 Programme for Government or have the Executive forgotten about government policy until an election. (AQT 2762/11-16)

Mr M McGuinness: No. When you consider that we have delivered 81% against the backdrop of a 70% return for the previous Programme for Government, you see that it represents a huge success for our Executive. On a consistent basis, we deal with commentators and some news reporters — not all — who continually try to portray the Executive as a place in which no decisions are taken. The fact is that many decisions have been taken. Eighty-one per cent of the Programme for Government has been delivered. There is outstanding work to do on the other 19%. As we go forward with the future Programme for Government, whether it is for the rest of this term or into the next term, there is no doubt that serious consideration will be given to how we can continue to up our performance.

Ms Sugden: I thank the deputy First Minister for his answer. I still do not think that it is good enough, so will he now provide me with the names of the civil servants to approach in order to get things done for the people whom I represent, now that the Government have proved themselves finally defunct?

Mr M McGuinness: I do not agree with that analysis. It sounds like a wee bit of political point-scoring and ignores the fact that I was able to present to the Assembly today the reality that 81% of the Programme for Government has been delivered. That, against the backdrop of a previous 70% return, represents a considerable improvement. I know that, as we approach the election, there are people — they are not all members of political parties — who are also fighting their own election, and that includes the Member for East Derry or, as she would call it, East Londonderry. I understand all of that; I am very philosophical about it. The reality is that an awful lot of good work has been done, not least in job creation and attracting foreign direct investment, which has put thousands and thousands of people into new jobs.

Stormont House Agreement: OFMDFM Support

T3. **Mr Cree** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they continue to support the Stormont House Agreement. (AQT 2763/11-16)

Mr M McGuinness: Yes.

Mr Cree: That being so, I wonder why they object to the Ulster Unionist Party going into opposition.

Mr M McGuinness: I do not object to the Ulster Unionist Party going into opposition; I do not know where the Member got that notion from. Should the Ulster Unionist Party, the SDLP, Sinn Féin or the DUP want to go into opposition, we have made provision for that in the Stormont House Agreement. It is interesting that the question comes from a member of a party that does not support the Stormont House Agreement. My understanding is that the Ulster Unionist executive has never met to endorse the Stormont House Agreement. Correct me if I am wrong.

Mr Speaker: I do not want you to take up that invitation. We will move on.

Mr Patsy McGlone is not in his place, so I call Mr Neil Somerville.

Mr Somerville: Question number 1.

Mr Speaker: You are listed for a topical question, Mr Somerville. Present your question, please.

We will have to move on.

Enniskillen Courthouse: Potential Closure

T5. **Mr Somerville** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the deputy First Minister is aware of the serious concerns with the prospect of Enniskillen courthouse closing and the impact that that will have on accessing justice, with the subsequent delays across Fermanagh and South Tyrone. (AQT 2765/11-16)

Mr M McGuinness: I applaud the Member's ability to come up with a question and whoever gave him the

question in the last few minutes. The Justice Minister is following me in answering questions; no doubt, he might have something to say about Enniskillen courthouse.

Mr Speaker: Mr Somerville, are you ready with a supplementary?

Mr Somerville: No.

Mr Speaker: OK. I will move along quickly.

Syrian Refugee Situation: Church Reaction

T6. **Mr McKay** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they welcome the statements from Church leaders, particularly the Pope and the bishops, encouraging the public to care for Syrian refugees and, indeed, bring them into their own homes. (AQT 2766/11-16)

Mr M McGuinness: I am very encouraged by what I hear from every section of society, not least the Church leaders. I think that the terrible events of the last couple of months have brought it home to everybody, even though it is very sad that we had to see the dead body of an infant lying on a beach in Turkey for it to be brought home to everybody.

There has been a very strong response in our society to what is an incredibly sad humanitarian crisis.

I welcome the change of position by the British Government on this issue. As I said earlier, I spoke to David Cameron last Thursday, and we await his announcement on how many refugees will be assisted and what the British Government intend to put in place. We will certainly play our part in that.

It is a tragic situation and OFMDFM has been discussing how we might respond for some time. Months ago, our officials met Belfast City Council, Derry and Strabane Council, the Community of Refugees and Asylum Seekers and the North West Migrants Forum on this issue, and in the coming days we will look very seriously at what needs to be put in place. The public reaction is heart-warming, and it is great to see that Germany and other countries are prepared to play their part. We, too, have to play ours.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I see that the Dublin Government have announced that the Twenty-six Counties aim to take 5,000 refugees. Will the deputy First Minister be in contact with the Dublin Government and the Taoiseach to ensure that whatever can be done on a cross-border basis in regard to the refugee crisis will be done?

Mr M McGuinness: This is something that transcends politics in terms of the human misery that people are going through at the moment. We certainly will have discussions with the Irish Government about how we can all contribute on the island of Ireland.

People are exercised by the numbers. During an interview at the weekend, I talked about my willingness to take 2,000 people. At that time, the talk was that, in the South, they would take 1,800. This is something that we have to agree among ourselves, and no doubt in our discussions the First Minister and I will deal with this as a matter of considerable urgency. I do not think there will be any difficulty in coming to an agreement, and we are prepared to work with the British, Scottish and Welsh Governments, and the Government in Dublin, to help people through what has been a horrendous ordeal.

Welfare Reform: Tory Version

T7. **Mrs Cochrane** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the deputy First Minister believes that it was a mistake not to progress welfare reform as per the Stormont House Agreement, which he supports, with Northern Ireland concessions in place, rather than risk the full Tory version being imposed. (AQT 2767/11-16)

Mr M McGuinness: The Member knows as well as I do that the announcement that talks are to take place provides an opportunity for all the parties to try to resolve the outstanding difficulties in relation to the Stormont House Agreement, particularly around the issue of welfare. I do not think it was helpful of Theresa Villiers to say what she said over the weekend; it effectively undermines devolution. I note that Charlie Flanagan, the Foreign Minister, made a critical comment on those remarks. What we all need to do over the next couple of weeks is knuckle down, get the agreement and, hopefully, put in the past the arguments about how to protect the most vulnerable, disadvantaged and disabled people in our society, whilst ensuring that we have the ability to deliver first-class public services.

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Minister for his answer. I wonder if he has learnt any lessons from the climbdown of the Greek Government in July, and will he therefore bring some fresh thinking to the table?

Mr M McGuinness: My track record over 20 years is of bringing new thinking to the table and resolving some of the most intractable problems, some of which people thought would never be resolved. All those decisions have resulted in the Member sitting in this House today. Yes, as we face into talks over the next couple of weeks, we all have to recognise that there are huge challenges and that the entire community out there supports all of us in different ways and expects strong leadership. The difficulty is the austerity agenda being imposed by the British Government, whether in England, Scotland, Wales or here. That provides an opportunity for us to do something different. Devolution is about making a difference, and that means a difference from what they do in England. That is what I am trying to achieve.

Mr Speaker: Time is up.

2.45 pm

Justice

Court Estate: Rationalisation

1. **Mr Somerville** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the rationalisation of the court estate. (AQO 8573/11-16)

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): The consultation on the rationalisation of the court estate closed on 18 May. The responses to the consultation have been analysed, and advice will be submitted to me later this month. I will wish to carefully consider the responses and recommendations before reaching any conclusions.

Mr Somerville: I am sure that the Minister already knows what my supplementary question will be. Is he aware of the serious concerns about the prospective closure of

Enniskillen courthouse and the impact that that will have on access to justice, including delays across Fermanagh and South Tyrone?

Mr Ford: I am aware of the concerns of a small number of people about a number of courthouses across Northern Ireland. The reality is that access to justice is not about having a courthouse in every town: it is about ensuring that we have proper, fit-for-purpose courthouses with modern facilities.

In the context of the financial circumstances that we live in, the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service, like other agencies, has to deliver significant savings in the coming years. That cannot be done by maintaining 20 courthouses for a population of 1.8 million; rationalisation is required. The important thing is to ensure that courthouses meet the needs of people when they get there, rather than having inadequate facilities in every town and village.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat. Does the Minister agree that his views on the closures are not shared by the Lord Chief Justice? Does he agree that the current proposals will undermine access to and quality of justice?

Mr Ford: To take the second point first: no, I certainly do not agree that the proposals will undermine access to justice. Justice may be slightly further away, but if it is in a better building with better facilities — for example, in order to segregate vulnerable victims and witnesses from the alleged perpetrators of crimes — then I believe that that will be a bonus for access to justice.

I have just heard the Lord Chief Justice give his annual speech for the start of the legal year, and, while he expressed his concerns, I note his acknowledgement that there are significant issues around finances that need to be addressed. For example, I note the good work that has been done by the presiding district judge, which is already resulting in a reduction in the number of court sitting days required. That is all the more reason why we should be concentrating those court sittings in modern, fit-for-purpose courthouses.

Mr D Bradley: Gabhaimse buíochas leis an Aire inniu as a chuid freagraí. I thank the Minister for his answers. I do not know where he gets the idea that only a small number of people are concerned about this issue. I attended the public meeting in Armagh courthouse, and all of the political parties on the then council were against its closure. Does the Minister agree with me that the closure of Armagh courthouse will downgrade Armagh's status as a city and deny people access to justice locally? The legal profession believes that it will lead to the backlogging of cases in Craigavon and Newry courthouses.

Mr Ford: Again, the evidence from the proposals that were put forward was that adequate court sittings could be provided, in those courthouses proposed to be retained, to meet the needs of court sittings in those proposed for closure. I do not believe that that will impinge on access to justice.

I am well aware how local councillors tend to view facilities in their towns or cities, but that is not the basis on which we can take a rational decision on how to fund the operations of the Courts and Tribunals Service in the years ahead. It is not the function of the Department of Justice to maintain historic buildings, as some have suggested; it is the function of the Department of Justice to provide a

fit-for-purpose and modern justice system for the people of Northern Ireland. That is what we are seeking to do, within the financial constraints that we have been put under.

Mr Speaker: Before we move on, I inform Members that question 9 has been withdrawn within the appropriate time frame.

Access NI: Enhanced Checks

2. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of Justice whether cautions, informed warning and other non-court disposals are to be included as part of the information disclosed in Access NI enhanced checks. (AQO 8574/11-16)

Mr Ford: Disclosure requires a balance to be struck between the rights of the individual and the need to protect vulnerable people. Access NI is required by statute to disclose information in relation to informed warnings, cautions and diversionary youth conferences in standard and enhanced checks. Those non-court disposals are considered to form part of an individual's criminal record. To ensure a proportionate approach before disclosure, such disposals may be filtered — that is, removed — from the certificate if they are considered to be old or are for offences that are considered minor. Informed warnings are filtered after one year; youth cautions and diversionary youth conferences are filtered after two years; and adult cautions are filtered after six years. Disposals are not filtered for violent, sexual or drug offences.

The Justice Act 2015 makes provision for anyone who considers that a non-court disposal should be removed from their certificate to appeal to an independent person. That independent person can require the Department to remove such non-court disposals from a certificate if he considers that they are not relevant or ought not to have been disclosed. I propose to commence the provisions early next year.

Mr Dallat: I welcome the response from the Minister so far. Does he agree with me that, given the serious problems that this has caused not just for new applicants but for people in existing jobs, will he undertake to monitor and review that situation on an ongoing basis? People who got warnings about very minor infringements of the law find themselves not just in a very embarrassing position but sometimes in a position where their job may be lost.

Mr Ford: I am certainly happy to give the assurance to Mr Dallat that this is an issue that, like many other issues across justice, is kept under review. There are certainly issues as to how we define minor convictions. I know that concerns have been expressed where somebody has two or three minor convictions that have a cumulative effect, which would not be the case if there were a single one, but there is a real issue about how we balance the rights of the individual to live a life as normally as possible in the future and ensuring that we protect vulnerable members of the public. I am happy to keep it under review, but it will not be easy to take the decision one way or the other in every case.

Legacy Inquests

3. **Mr Maskey** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on his Department's plan to recruit extra investigating officers to assist the coroner to prepare for hearings of legacy inquests. (AQO 8575/11-16)

Mr Ford: I am discussing with the Lord Chief Justice a number of measures to improve the performance of the Coroners Service, including the appointment of investigating officers and the Lord Chief Justice assuming the presidency of the Coroners' Court. As the Member will recognise, progress in dealing with the past, including the legacy inquest process, can be made only in the context of the full implementation of the Stormont House Agreement and the provision of the associated funding.

Mr Maskey: I thank the Minister for that reply. Does he agree that the recent comments from the coroner, John Leckey, point out that the current system is having a very negative impact on public confidence and that remedial action is required to restore that confidence?

Mr Ford: It is not just a matter of remedial action being required; remedial action is being taken, including, for example, the appointment of an additional County Court judge to enable judges to take over some of the more complex issues of coronial investigation, particularly the legacy inquests. That work is being done. As we look to the retirement of the current senior coroner, the assumption of the presidency by the Lord Chief Justice will provide leadership for the Coroners Service, and that will help us to move forward. Clearly, a number of issues, including the illness of coroners, have created difficulties in the past.

Mr Eastwood: I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. Imagine for a second that the Stormont House Agreement is implemented and the funds are available: is he confident that we can fill the gaps in personnel and recruitment to ensure that we meet all the needs of the legacy issues?

Mr Ford: Of course, Mr Eastwood raises, quite rightly, the issue of appropriate personnel. The question was originally around investigating officers. There are then issues around the coroners or judges acting as coroners. There are significant resource implications that require the provision of the finance to do it. There are, of course, other roles that are provided for under the Stormont House Agreement that may require people with similar skill sets working in the historical investigations unit (HIU), for example. I cannot give any guarantee, but I can guarantee that the DOJ will do all it can to ensure that we get the process under way. There are issues of the very significant number of legacy inquests currently listed and the work that needs to be done by the judiciary to ensure that those are put into order and proceeded with as fast as possible.

Mr McGimpsey: In view of the fact that this matter is a key part of the Stormont House Agreement — I welcome the Minister's comments about the full implementation of the agreement — will he confirm that he is not currently considering a partial implementation of the Stormont House Agreement and is in fact working towards its full implementation?

Mr Ford: I appreciate Mr McGimpsey's question. I am not sure that the Minister of Justice can say that he is working towards a full implementation, and it is not the role of the Alliance Party leader to argue at this rostrum that he is arguing for the full implementation. The Minister of Justice is seeking to ensure that the DOJ fulfils its responsibilities, principally around the HIU and legacy interests, and that we play our part in getting a joined-up system so that the Stormont House Agreement can be put into place as fast as possible.

Mr Speaker: Ms Megan Fearon is not in her place, so I call Mr Robin Swann.

Prison Officers: Assault

5. **Mr Swann** asked the Minister of Justice how many on-duty prison officers have been victims of assault since May 2011. (AQO 8577/11-16)

Mr Ford: Any assault in prison, whether it is on a prison officer or a prisoner, is unacceptable. There have a total of 282 assaults on prison officers on duty in prison establishments in the four financial years beginning in 2011. From an operational perspective, the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) has taken forward detailed analysis of assaults on staff and has found that the greatest contributing factor is crowding. A significant number of prisoners were moved from crowded residential areas in 2014 to address that issue. The use of accommodation is kept under regular review, and the prison population is dynamically managed in that respect.

Additionally, the Prison Service has recently commissioned a pilot to evaluate the effectiveness of body-worn cameras for prison staff to prevent violence and assist in the management of disruptive prisoners. Initial results at Maghaberry suggest a significant deterrent effect. NIPS has improved its mechanisms for recording assaults and analysing the factors involved and maintains a high level of vigilance in respect of prison violence. It also engages constructively with the Prison Officers' Association on a regular basis to discuss staff safety.

Mr Swann: To be honest with you, Minister, I am shocked at those figures, because, over that four-year period, that is an average of one prison officer per week being injured while on duty. If the core issue is crowding, what is the Minister doing to ensure that manning levels are sufficient to ensure the safety of officers? What is he doing to address the low staff morale in the Prison Service at this minute?

Mr Ford: Mr Swann talks about low staff morale. There is no doubt that particular issues have resulted in, for example, significant sickness levels in Maghaberry in particular but much less so in Hydebank and Magilligan. That may be attributed to low morale. That is why, at leadership level in Maghaberry, work is being done to deal with issues like sickness levels and to ensure that there are better staff ratios. However, as I said in my principal answer, the key issue is crowding. That appeared to be the principal reason. The opening of an additional block and the movement of people out of some of the crowded old square houses has produced a better atmosphere and less difficulty, but the Prison Service will have to continue to manage within the limited budget that it has to ensure that staffing ratios are at the best possible level consistent with living within that budget.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat. Minister, are you satisfied that there are sufficient resources and that prisoners are out of their cells engaging in meaningful activity during the day, rather than there being a regime of lockdown resulting in tensions?

Mr Ford: I would never be satisfied that we have all the resources that could be profitably used in the Prison Service, no. Am I satisfied that we have seen significant progress in good work being done by the Prison Service?

Yes. Some Members had the opportunity to visit Hydebank Wood recently and will have seen the very significant progress in the regime being offered to both the young men and the women in Hydebank Wood. Good work is also being done in Magilligan. Progress has been slower in Maghaberry. That is the reality, but all that is predicated on living within the budget, living within the staffing numbers that we have and seeking the best form of management.

When I became Minister, there was, for example, no free movement of even the lowest-category prisoners in Maghaberry. That sort of change has freed things up, created a better atmosphere and produced better use of staff. Progress has been made, but there is undoubtedly still a lot to do, particularly at Maghaberry.

3.00 pm

Mr Rogers: I am concerned at the level of assaults. Has the redefinition of recording assaults been a factor in the fading number of recorded assaults, Minister?

Mr Ford: I think that Mr Rogers raises an entirely valid point. It may not be so much a matter of redefinition as slightly more accurate recording. We should be aware that, whilst, in every case, assaults are serious if there is an intent behind them, some of them are not described as "serious assaults". Therefore, we should not suggest that there is a very significant number of major incidents, but, undoubtedly, there has been a small number of serious incidents and a rather larger number of minor incidents. The important issue is to ensure that we provide the necessary support to staff, that we deal with issues like crowding to address some of those problems with frustration that have led to assaults and that we get an overall picture where we make improvements in the current situation. That is why I have emphasised that there have been significant improvements in some cases but sadly not everywhere.

Kevin McGuigan

6. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Minister of Justice what contact he has had with the Secretary of State and the Chief Constable of the PSNI regarding the murder of Kevin McGuigan. (AQO 8578/11-16)

Mr Ford: Let me first recognise that the family of Kevin McGuigan is suffering a grievous loss, as is the family of Gerard Davison. The way in which these men were brutally murdered has shocked the entire community. These were cowardly and despicable acts, and those who committed them or assisted should face justice. There can never be any justification for murder. I was, of course, briefed by the Chief Constable in general terms. We need to keep in mind that there is a live investigation ongoing, and the detail of the investigation is an operational matter for the Chief Constable. My officials and I are also in regular contact with the Secretary of State and her officials.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for his answer, and I share with him condemnation of the murder and the feeling of regard for both Mr Davison and Mr McGuigan's families. There was an assessment made by the Chief Constable that was made public, which was that the Provisional IRA existed and that members of Action Against Drugs and members of the Provisional IRA were involved in the carrying out of this murder. What weight and what authority do you place on that assessment?

Mr Ford: I think that Mr Maginness has put his finger on exactly the issue. We have all seen the comments made by the Chief Constable and the assessment that he has made. It is clear from what he is saying that he does not believe that there was a sanctioned murder of Mr McGuigan, but it is also clear from the statement that he made that he believed that members of the Provisional IRA and other criminals, including dissident republicans, were involved in that murder. That is something that I believe requires the attention of all of us to ensure that we provide a political solution that moves away from these kinds of troubles leading to death and destruction and loss on our streets. I also believe that we need to ensure that we create the atmosphere in which an organisation that is said to not be active but clearly still has members who have engaged in criminality should fade away entirely in line with what we wish to see, particularly those of us who supported the Good Friday Agreement and its concept of moving to a different society.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Is the Minister satisfied that the PSNI has the necessary resources to carry out a thorough and proper investigation into the murder of Kevin McGuigan?

Mr Ford: The issue is for the Chief Constable to deploy the resources that he has. Members are well aware of the fact that the Police Service has reduced resources this year compared with last year, but how those resources are used against the different demands on the Police Service are operational issues for the Chief Constable. He has not suggested to me that that particular murder requires him to have any more resources than were already planned for. Clearly, that is the kind of issue that can be kept under review.

Mr Nesbitt: Given the remarks of the Justice Minister, can he assure the House that he is not going to recommend that the Provisional IRA is removed from the list of proscribed organisations and that he holds evidence to justify it remaining on the proscribed list of illegal organisations?

Mr Ford: Sorry, Mr Speaker; Mr Nesbitt does not seem to understand the difference between the roles of the Secretary of State for national security matters and the Minister of Justice in the devolved arena.

Legacy Issues

7. **Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on his Department's public meetings regarding the legacy issues identified in the Stormont House Agreement. (AQO 8579/11-16)

Mr Ford: Under the Stormont House Agreement, my Department is responsible for the establishment of a new historical investigations unit (HIU) and improving the legacy inquest function. The HIU will be an independent body to take forward investigations into outstanding Troubles-related deaths. My officials have been engaging with stakeholders and victims' groups throughout this process. In order to advise a wider group of stakeholders on the DOJ proposals, the legacy unit held three engagement workshops in early August to set out the policy position of the DOJ in relation to these initiatives and to allow stakeholders to raise any queries. Whilst the DOJ will not hold any further workshops, the legacy unit continues to engage with stakeholders on an ongoing,

bilateral basis as the legislation to introduce these elements of the Stormont House Agreement is finalised.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. Is he satisfied that the Department's stakeholder list is comprehensive? Is there provision for bona fide groups to be added to that list?

Mr Ford: My understanding, in terms of those who were invited to meetings, is that there was an invitation to those who represented victims to involve other victims' groups in attending those. I attended to welcome members to one of the three workshops, which was held in the DOJ. There was very substantial attendance at that. But it was not intended to be a full-scale consultation process, because the five parties meeting in the Stormont House implementation group had not agreed to a document being issued for consultation. That is why engagement has been largely on a bilateral basis as well as those three workshops. That continues, and if there are groups that have not yet had the opportunity to engage with my officials, I invite them to write in and arrange such consultation.

Mr Attwood: Mindful that the Secretary of State announced over the weekend that the British Government would unilaterally legislate on welfare, and having regard to the reported comments of one of your officials in the 'Belfast Telegraph' over the summer, has London given any indication to you that the London Government might be minded to unilaterally legislate in respect of the legacy mechanisms, including the HIU, in the event that political progress is not made?

Mr Ford: I appreciate the point that Mr Attwood is making. No indication has been given to me of a unilateral intention to legislate, but, of course, the proposals in the Stormont House Agreement require legislation this autumn in Westminster. The important thing, I believe, is to see the five parties engaging together to ensure that we put a collective view to the Westminster Government as to how that legislation should be carried. Unfortunately, the decisions that have been taken so far in the implementation group have not yet resulted in a firm, agreed proposal going to the Westminster Government. That is why I believe that it is important that we continue to engage in that format to ensure that agreed proposals are put forward.

Provisional IRA

8. **Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Justice how long he has known that the Provisional IRA still exists. (AQO 8580/11-16)

Mr Ford: I am already on record as saying that I was aware of the Independent Monitoring Commission's (IMC) final report in 2011, which stated that the Provisional IRA was committed to peaceful means and had moved away from paramilitarism, but that some members and former members were active in non-terrorist types of crime.

Mr Allister: The Minister purports to be the Minister of Justice. In that role, he doubtless receives briefings. Is he suggesting to the House that he had no knowledge that the IRA was still likely to be involved in killing, such as in the McGuigan case, or was he just turning a deaf ear to that? Can he tell us if there are any members of the Provisional IRA on the Executive in which he sits?

Mr Ford: I am afraid that Mr Allister is falling into the same trap that Mr Nesbitt fell into a few minutes ago. The Minister of Justice does not have responsibility for national security matters. Of course the Minister of Justice receives general briefing from the Police Service, not all of which is given on a basis other than in ministerial confidence, but the Minister of Justice does not have access to the national security information on which the Secretary of State might have responsibilities to make judgements in the future. That is an entirely different issue, and I am really surprised that neither of the gentlemen understands the current legal position.

Provisional IRA: Ceasefire

10. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of the Provisional IRA ceasefire. (AQO 8582/11-16)

Mr Ford: My assessment as Justice Minister is, naturally, based on the views of the Chief Constable. He is on record as saying that the police do not see the Provisional IRA as being involved in terrorism and that:

"They are not involved in paramilitary activity in the sense that they were during the period of the conflict".

The Chief Constable has also indicated that he does not have information at the moment to suggest that the murder of Kevin McGuigan was sanctioned or directed at a senior level.

I believe that we need to be guided by the Chief Constable's view, based on the evidence and intelligence available to him. That, of course, does not make what happened in any way acceptable. Murder is not acceptable in any circumstances.

Mr Nesbitt: Given that the Minister is the Minister for Justice, given that he has a relationship with the Police Service of Northern Ireland, given that the Police Service of Northern Ireland spends a significant budget and devotes significant resource to patrolling terrorism, can the Minister explain why he keeps ducking the question?

Mr Ford: Mr Speaker, I could understand it if some Members of this House and, dare I say it, Members with a nationalist background who do not approve of Northern Ireland being part of the United Kingdom, were to raise the kind of question that has just been raised by Mr Nesbitt and Mr Allister, but it really is slightly bizarre that unionists do not understand the concept of the national security of the United Kingdom being the responsibility, funnily enough, of the Government of the United Kingdom. They do not understand the basis on which justice was devolved in 2010, they do not understand the role of the Minister not interfering in operational issues, and they do not understand the entire way in which the system functions.

If Mr Nesbitt is going to start talking about people ducking their responsibilities, he really ought to look at his actions and those of Danny Kennedy. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order, order.

Mr Allister: The Minister repeated to us the assertion of the Chief Constable. Can I ask him to explain to the House how a member of a proscribed organisation can be involved in murder and that not be an act of terrorism? Will he explain that conundrum please?

Mr Ford: Just as I said that I do not deal in operational matters, which are the responsibility of the Chief Constable, neither is it my role to explain what the Chief Constable means when he makes statements. However, it seems to me that he made a fairly clear distinction when he said that the Provisional IRA is not involved in paramilitary activity in the sense that it was during the period of the conflict. That does not make murder acceptable. That does not make what has been happening in Belfast — the murders of two men in recent months — acceptable in any way.

I condemn those murders utterly, and I have no hesitation, in the case of any criminal activity, in asking anyone who has information to assist the police in catching the perpetrators so that the justice system can play its proper role. However, to suggest that it is my role to explain the words of the Chief Constable and his responsibility is just the same as expecting me to explain the role of the Secretary of State. Those who want to know what the Secretary of State or the Chief Constable should be doing in current circumstances really ought to contact the Secretary of State or the Chief Constable and not ask somebody who has a very specific role in the devolved sphere, not in connection with national security and not in connection with operational matters, but who has the job of doing policy and legislation work in the Assembly of providing the finances and leaving other people to carry out their responsibilities just as I do not expect them to carry out mine.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. We have exhausted the list of questions, so we will move straight on to topical questions.

Paramilitaries

T1. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of Justice whether he is aware that Loyalist paramilitaries in north Antrim and east Derry have been doing their very best to run parallel systems of justice, given that the existence of paramilitaries is very topical in the House today; whether he has been screaming from the rooftops about that; whether he has raised the issue at meetings of the Executive; and whether he accepts that the Assembly cannot tolerate paramilitaries of any kind and that the continuing existence of some over the last 15 years is an absolute disgrace. (AQT 2771/11-16)

3.15 pm

Mr Ford: I sympathise entirely with Mr Dallat's point. I have not been screaming from the rooftops about unionist paramilitaries. I have not raised the issue at the Executive. However, I certainly have regular and frequent discussions with the Chief Constable, the Secretary of State and others who have particular responsibilities, whether dealing with organised crime or issues that, frankly, cross over between criminal activities and national security activities. That includes those who claim to be unionists and those who claim to be republicans. I certainly discuss those matters frequently.

On the resources issue, I have responsibility for the police, and I am determined that adequate resources be given to the police and to other aspects of the justice system. However, Mr Dallat is absolutely right: more than one paramilitary group has created difficulties in Northern Ireland generally over the years. There certainly appears

to be a level of activity by those who would claim to be unionist in some shape or form, whose activities are just as much criminal and terrorist as some of those who claim republican motivations.

Mr Dallat: I thank the Minister for his answer, which I regard as positive and very timely at this moment of crisis in the Assembly. Whatever outcomes there are from the talks, does the Minister agree with me that, for the first time, this Assembly must be allowed to move forward as one people, completely free of any paramilitary influence of any kind? Indeed, is it opportune now for some people in the unionist parties to reflect on their continuing association with the so-called political advisers of loyalist paramilitaries?

Mr Ford: It is not only the Assembly that needs to be able to move forward but this society needs to be able to move forward from those who would seek to subvert the rule of law, those who claim political motivation to run drug empires and those who continue to behave in a way that is utterly unacceptable. I agree with the Member's final point about the association between some who are democratically elected politicians in this place and their association with some of those who maintain links to criminal and paramilitary groups, particularly over issues like the so-called Twaddell camp. It really is time that those who point the finger about the behaviour of paramilitaries on one side look at the people with whom they at times consort.

Coroner: Replacement

T2. **Mr G Kelly** asked the Minister of Justice, given that he will be aware that the coroner, John Leckey, is retiring, while two others in that office are sick, to outline the plan and time frame to replace the coroner and to state whether the other members of staff will be replaced on either a temporary or permanent basis. (AQT 2772/11-16)

Mr Ford: As Mr Kelly said, the senior coroner is due to retire shortly. I have been discussing with the Lord Chief Justice the issue that we provided for in the last Justice Act of his assuming presidency of the Coroners' Courts. I hope that that will happen shortly. As I have said previously, he has also appointed an additional County Court judge to lead on some of the more complex inquests, particularly legacy inquests. He also has the power, which I recently raised with him, to appoint temporary coroners who would be able to carry out some of the additional work, given that, as Mr Kelly highlighted, there is an illness issue among some of the coroners as well as the pending retirement.

Mr G Kelly: Go raibh maith agat. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagraí go dtí seo. The Minister will also be aware that many families are waiting for inquests to come through, so this is a matter of urgency. If he talked about a time frame, I was not quite sure of his answer. This is an urgent issue for all of us and is certainly so for those families. Will he give some idea of the time frame involved?

Mr Ford: I understand that the senior coroner is due to retire at the end of October. The expectation was that the Lord Chief Justice would assume presidency from the beginning of November. The Member rightly raises the issue of concerns among a number of families about the delays in holding inquests. It is unfortunate that, in a number of cases, inquests have been listed without resources being provided either for the investigative

function before the hearing or for the precise time for the Coroners' Court to be held.

That is the sort of management issue that I hope will be addressed shortly by the Lord Chief Justice. I trust that we will also see a positive outcome to the discussions over the next few weeks, meaning additional resources to fund the legacy inquests properly, alongside the work of the HIU, because that will be essential to providing comfort to individuals and families who have been waiting many years for results.

NIACRO: Funding Withdrawal

T3. **Mr F McCann** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the withdrawal of funding to NIACRO for the transportation of prisoners' families to and from prison. (AQT 2773/11-16)

Mr Ford: I am allowed a slight smile, Mr Speaker, as I had a suspicion about what Mr McCann might ask about. He referred to the withdrawal of funding. To be fair, it is not a withdrawal of funding; it is a reduction in funding. Over the summer, detailed work was done on looking at the usage of NIACRO buses travelling to the prisons, the level of need and what an appropriate charge was. At this stage, it is likely that we will be able to continue to maintain grant aid to support NIACRO running buses on the longer runs — from Belfast to Magilligan and from the Derry area to Maghaberry — but, frankly, some of the shorter runs, given the use made of them, are not viable. Issues are being looked at to ensure that the Prison Service funds the meeting of public transport services to take people to the prisons, rather than running the complete distance, and I hope that a modest increase in the charges levied will mean that it is possible to maintain the services and leave them relatively unaffected, though not on as many days.

Mr F McCann: I thank the Minister for his response. Recently, I have been speaking to relatives of prisoners in the greater Belfast area who are concerned that the reduction in funding, as the Minister said, will have an impact on their ability to visit and maintain relationships with their loved ones in prison, and that it will have an impact on prisoners' relationships with their children. My understanding is that there has been a considerable cut in the number of hours that this service will be available to those families.

Mr Ford: I am not sure that "considerable" is fair, although I accept that it will have an effect on those who have been using it on particular days. We are looking at the Derry to Maghaberry service, for example. It still runs on two days a week, rather than three. That may mean that some people will need to vary the times at which they go, but, faced with all the other cuts that are happening, I think that it is not unreasonable to accept that still providing that service on two days a week is a reasonable effort. As I highlighted, I certainly think that we also need to look at making better use of public transport: at meeting public transport rather than a NIACRO bus running the whole way. There were cases in which bus occupancy was below 40%, and, in those circumstances, it seems not unreasonable to reduce the number of days per week on which they travel and have the buses fuller when they are running.

Legal Aid

T4. **Mr Rogers** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on any discussions that have taken place between his Department and the legal profession about the provision of legal aid. (AQT 2774/11-16)

Mr Ford: Mr Speaker, if I went over the two minutes on that, you would probably tell me off. Over the summer, there have been very significant discussions on legal aid rates. Those discussions continue, and significant work is being done. It is absolutely clear that we have to live within the budget that we have and that it is not credible that the current expenditure on legal aid can be maintained into the future. Following a period in which there was reluctance on the part of the Law Society and the Bar to engage, there have been detailed, positive and useful discussions, and recommendations are being made. Of course, Members will be aware that there is a judicial review pending against the Department, jointly by the Law Society and the Bar Council. I hope that it will be possible to avert that on the basis of proposals being put forward. I believe that the Justice Committee is likely to see some of those proposals this week.

Mr Rogers: I welcome that from the Minister. I know that everybody has to live within their budget. Concerns have been expressed by many, including the president of the Law Society, that a reduction in legal aid funds is an attack on access to justice for the most vulnerable. How does the Minister hope to further address that?

Mr Ford: In a sense, there are two elements: the first is the immediate issue of how we live with the current arrangements and the second is the wider issue, and I will shortly see the report of the second stage of the access to justice review, which will enable us to look at issues of scope and whether there are different ways of meeting needs. I certainly believe that there are some areas where it is possible to have decisions taken at lower tier courts, which would therefore reduce the cost but still provide a service. There may be some issues for which mediation is suitable, rather than going into an adversarial court system, which would provide benefits. I think that we also need to look at issues like insurance.

All those issues are being considered, but the key issue at this point is to find a way of living within the budget whilst doing the best that we can to maintain as much as possible within scope. That will not be the case if there are viable alternatives that are suitable for the future.

Waste Water Treatment Works: Magilligan

T5. **Mr Ó hOisín** asked the Minister of Justice, following a recent visit to the new waste water treatment plant at Point Road in Magilligan, a facility that many of us fought long and hard for and which now treats much of the waste from the prison, whether he is confident that the treatment capacity exists, particularly in high season when the population swells by many thousands. (AQT 2775/11-16)

Mr Ford: Mr Speaker, I am aware that we do not have a Minister for Regional Development at the moment, but I am really not sure that I am in a position to answer a question about the capacity of a waste water treatment work. Mr Ó hOisín outlined specific concerns. I am quite happy to say that, if I can find a Minister for Regional Development

to engage with in the coming weeks, I will so engage with him.

Mr Speaker: A supplementary question, if you can.

Mr Ó hOisín: I will get a supplementary question out of that. Thank you, a Cheann Comhairle. The prison has been in operation for some 40-odd years with its own internal system. Given that it is in a sensitive environmental area with a number of designations, I wonder whether the Minister is aware of any environmental damage caused during the period when the prison did its own waste water treatment.

Mr Ford: The answer to that is that I am not aware of any damage that has been done. Indeed, the Prison Service has an interesting environmental record in providing for ground-nesting birds around Maghaberry, for which we can claim some degree of credit. I certainly take his point. I will investigate it and come back to him.

Bonfires: Sectarian Hate Crimes

T6. **Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Justice for an assessment of the number of sectarian hate crimes that were reported and acted on at bonfires over the summer. (AQT 2776/11-16)

Mr Ford: The simple answer is this: not at the present time. I certainly share the concern, which I suspect Mr McKay is about to express, about the way in which hate crimes were carried out. If he wants me to put it very personally, putting a Sinn Féin election poster on a loyalist bonfire is no more acceptable than putting an Alliance Party poster on a bonfire. There are real issues with what is claimed to be cultural expression, and it is not just done by those who burn bonfires on 11 July. There are real issues where cultural expression tips over into sectarian hatred. I certainly believe that there is a real need to address hatred, whatever kind it is, whatever day of the year it occurs and wherever it happens.

Mr McKay: I thank the Minister for his answer. Those displays are totally unacceptable, no matter what the bonfire is, what its location is or what its background is. Will he ensure that steps are taken to ensure that there is a significant reduction in such displays next year? Given the restrictions that he operates under, will he ensure that a strong message goes to the police that they need to take a tougher line on those bonfires?

Mr Ford: Again, Mr McKay has almost the same problem as Mr Allister and Mr Nesbitt in inviting me to interfere too much operationally. It is, however, reasonable to say that I have expressed a view to the police of my concerns about the management of those bonfires, but not in the sense of giving a direction, which is what he was almost hinting at there.

There are fundamental issues about the way in which this society functions, the need to be rather more respectful on some issues and the need to ensure that cultural expression by those who wish to engage in certain activities is positive and not a negative sign of hatred. Sadly, we have seen too much of that.

One of the pleasant things about the last few days has been the fact that people are concerned about the issue of refugees arriving in the European Union and have been talking about what Northern Ireland could do to help them.

I hope that, if that is the case and a number come, we do not see the kind of hate crime that we saw in parts of Belfast on racial grounds, just as I wish to see an end to hate crime on sectarian grounds, homophobic grounds and against people with disabilities.

All of those are issues that are unacceptable, and they all need the support of society generally to fight as well as requiring the police to carry out their duties under the law.

3.30 pm

Mr Speaker: Time is up. Thank you, Minister. You ended up taking a few extra minutes and questions on a number of other briefs. I ask the House to take its ease while we make changes at the Table.

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

Committee Business

Growing the Economy and Creating Jobs with Lower Corporation Tax: Committee Report

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly approves the 'Opportunities for Excellence' report of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment on its inquiry into growing the economy and creating jobs with lower corporation tax; and calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, in conjunction with his Executive colleagues, to implement the recommendations contained in the report. — [Mr McGlone (The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment).]

Mr Lunn: I welcome the report, although it is fair to say that, not being a member of the Committee and not having been able to access a copy of it until this morning, I am taking it for granted that it is a good report.

I want to talk mainly about corporation tax. I know that the report is much wider-ranging than that, but let me put it this way: were I an investor looking at Northern Ireland as a prospect for a new venture at the moment, what would I be looking for? I would be looking at the infrastructure, the telecommunications, the energy costs, the planning regime, perhaps, and the transport links. I would also be looking for evidence of stable government, an agreed Budget and a Programme for Government. I would certainly be looking at the availability of skilled labour. Of course, I would be looking at currency issues and, last but not least, the tax regime.

On the basis of all that I might well conclude that it is not for me and go to Hungary instead. Despite those problems, however, businesses come here as they have always done, right through periods when our corporation tax rate, for instance, was up at 28% along with the rest of the UK. We still managed to attract foreign direct investment, and we have been particularly successful in certain areas such as IT, computer skills, legal services and call centres. That is largely due to the efforts of various Ministers, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and, of course, Invest NI, which has in my opinion punched above its weight over the last 10 years. All that is despite a corporation tax rate that had been 28% but is now 20% and is about to come down gradually to 19% and 18%.

Where do we go with our proposed cut? We should soon have the decision in our own hands whether to reduce in order to match the Republic of Ireland's rate but it comes, obviously, at some risk and cost. Alliance supports the transfer of the power to set our own rate, but it must not be achieved at the cost of further Budget cuts, particularly in Departments, mainly the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Education, that provide the skills that need to be available when companies come here or if they decide to expand existing operations. We already have companies complaining that they cannot obtain the skilled employees that they need to look after their present operations, so we need to be careful.

In the present climate, it should at least not be so expensive to cut the corporation tax rate in 2018, which appears to be the earliest point that we can achieve it. Cutting it from 19% to 12.5%, however, is not as big a challenge as it was when it was sitting at percentages in the mid-20s. Unless we stop leaking finance and wasting money on some old chestnuts such as the cost of division, welfare reform, the failure to agree our Budget and our Programme for Government, the rationalisation of our school estate and school system and even teacher training, we will continue to waste money on these things. Teacher training could almost be called a successful export matter: we are exporting so many teachers, having trained too many who cannot get a job here.

It will be all the more difficult, and we risk achieving a low rate not having solved the problems that would make investors nervous. We should be increasing skills investment in preparation for a corporation tax cut, not cutting FE and HE places and maths, languages and STEM subjects. Our current approach and priorities have made that unavoidable. The DEL budget has been slashed, and the Minister has had little option but to cut the cloth to suit what he has available.

I hope that we can move forward looking at all this in the round. Corporation tax is only part of the equation. The report at least points the way forward in a lot of areas, but, unless we achieve the resolution of our basic problems, corporation tax will never, in isolation, be enough. I welcome the report.

Mr Allister: The one aspect that I wish to comment on is the Europhile tone of the report, which surprises me in its clear lack of objectivity. It also surprises me that it seems to have been approved of by all the members of the Committee, some of whom from time to time like to present their Eurosceptic credentials. I also note that, not for the first time, I am left to make these remarks without the assistance of the UKIP Member in the House, who does not seem to have anything to say on these matters.

The report is a brazen attempt at promoting the EU propaganda that Northern Ireland would wither and die if the United Kingdom dared to reassert control over its own affairs and dared to leave the EU, whereas the very opposite is the truth. By liberating ourselves from the EU, we would do the very thing that Northern Ireland needs: open up with far greater freedom the right to trade uninhibited by Brussels across the world. One of the binding chains of the EU is that no member state can make even a trade agreement with any other country. Only the EU can make trade agreements, hence the fact that for decades we did not even have a trade agreement with the UK's biggest trading partner: the US. When you analyse the figures, you discover that, since we entered the EU, because it is itself a withering economic institution and its own GDP is falling drastically, the majority of our trade as a nation is outside the EU. We trade more outside the EU than within it, so how a report could reach the conclusion that leaving the EU would be disastrous for Northern Ireland — that seems to be the tenor — is, frankly, beyond me, other than to recognise the propaganda that lies behind it.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Member for giving way. As a member of the Committee, I can say that we heard representations from business groups, including, I think I am right in saying, the CBI, which stated why it saw our

position as being better within the EU than without it. Does he believe that those organisations are not best placed to make such a judgement?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): The Member has an additional minute.

Mr Allister: Did the Member ask the CBI how many hundreds of thousands of pounds a year it gets from the EU Commission? The CBI is a paid mouthpiece for the Commission. It benefits to the tune of hundreds of thousands of pounds per annum from Brussels, so of course it is not going to bite the hand that feeds it in its vested interest.

I am talking about realities, and the reality is that we trade more outside the EU than within it. We also have the reality that our trade deficit with the rest of the EU has never been wider.

There is a huge trade deficit now, which debunks the foolish and childish contention that, if you leave the EU, the rest of the EU will not trade with you. The deficit is such that, believe you me, the Germans will still be very anxious to sell us their BMWs. They sell us far more than we sell them. So, the notion that we would handicap Northern Ireland on the world global trading stage by leaving the EU is a total fallacy, and it is one that I want to nail. It would, in fact, liberate trade.

The second key factor in the liberation that it would bring to the economy of Northern Ireland is that it would lift the dead hand of regulation. It has been well documented that the dead hand of regulation from Brussels imposes something of the order of £600 billion a year on the economy. That is something that it would be well worth being liberated from.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Member for giving way. What would happen to our agrifood sector, given that in Northern Ireland we have to export 85% of our total agricultural produce? Where would that produce be traded? How does he think our farming community would be able to adapt to what he is suggesting?

Mr Allister: With a very simple economic reality, which is this: we would liberate the money that we are pouring into the black hole that is called Brussels. The net contribution from the UK is more than £1 million an hour. That is money that would stay in our own coffers and that would enable us to help our own farmers and businesses —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): The Member will bring his remarks to a close.

Mr Allister: — rather than paying in that huge amount of money, which is a net loss. That is why there would not be the dire circumstances that the Member suggested.

Mr Agnew: Whilst I welcome the report and, as a member of the Committee, know the work that has gone into it, I oppose its basic assumption, which is that we should reduce the level of corporation tax in Northern Ireland either to the rate in the Republic of Ireland or, as some would suggest, lower.

It angers me to hear some in the House say that we absolutely must get on with cutting the incomes of the poorest in our society by implementing welfare cuts so that we can get on with providing this proposed subsidy to some of the largest businesses and most profitable organisations in Northern Ireland. To me, the moral

absurdity of that is striking, and such calls have been made from a number of sources, not least the leader of the Alliance Party, Mr David Ford. He attacked me in his conference speech last year, saying that we could not afford the costs of protecting those on benefits and that we must progress to reducing corporation tax, despite the cost of protecting those on welfare being a fraction of the cost of the corporate subsidy.

The moral basis for that is certainly unsound. It would be unfair to impose further cuts on our society when we have had so many cuts forced upon us by the Conservative Government. The economics do not even make sense. The unanimity among the now four Executive parties, supported by the Ulster Unionists, that we must make the move needs to be challenged. The whole assumption has been that we must compete with the Republic of Ireland, but it is worth noting that the Republic of Ireland reduced its corporation tax rate in 1958. The Celtic Tiger, which was the key argument for reducing corporation tax, did not happen until 1980, showing that corporation tax is not a key driver in producing a turnaround in an economy. In its report, 'Corporation Tax — Game Changer or Game Over', PwC stated that it could not find:

“any clear evidence of a simple correlation between low Corporation Tax per se and high levels of FDI.”

3.45 pm

Indeed, for the same report, there was a survey of companies looking to invest in the UK. They listed the priority factors for them investing in the UK, and corporate taxation was 17th on the list, behind a number of very interesting other factors, including political stability. Instead of the unanimity that we have on the corporate tax break, we need to get unanimity of purpose on governance in Northern Ireland, our structures and on the stability of politics. That will do much more to make Northern Ireland attractive for investment than cutting corporation tax will.

Furthermore, the need for skills is oft repeated. A week after the announcement of significant cuts to our universities, it is ludicrous to propose that we take what could be up to £300 million extra per year out of our public services and say that we can still maintain the skills level that companies demand when they are looking at investing in Northern Ireland. Last week, the languages department of the Ulster University was cut to the point where, in Northern Ireland, you will not be able to study German at degree level. This will mean that, when looking at making international trade, we will not even be able to communicate with some of the business partners that we propose to have in the future. Indeed, transportation infrastructure is another area that is ranked higher than corporate taxation on the PwC list. Northern Ireland is still undoubtedly behind much of Europe in its public transport infrastructure and provision.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): The Member will bring his remarks to a close.

Mr Agnew: We cannot maximise the so-called benefits of this proposal if we do not change those things, and we cannot change them if we cut public investment by £300 million.

Mr B McCrea: I only got the chance to look at this report today, and I am a little surprised at some of the things it talks about and some of the things it ignores. I am also

very surprised by the comments from some people around the Chamber and what they have ignored.

Mr Agnew talked about the PricewaterhouseCoopers report, but I will talk about a former Member of the Assembly Esmond Birnie who is the chief economist in PricewaterhouseCoopers. He says that Northern Ireland will remain the lowest growth region of the United Kingdom and that it will be bad this year and worse next year. Where is the attack? Where is the, "Let's do something about this and try to work out what is wrong"?

There are another couple of things that are not mentioned that I find really surprising. Nobody is talking about the increase in the minimum wage and what impact that will have on our SMEs and our businesses. There is no discussion about how it will affect our nursing homes, how it will affect nurses coming from overseas and how we will look after our hospitals. Those are key parts of our economy that you are ignoring.

The next thing that you are not talking about, which again I find frankly incredible, is that Osborne —

Mr Flanagan: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: I will give way in just a moment. Osborne has announced that he wants to make £20 billion more in cuts over the top of the welfare cuts that you are all getting so excited about. He will make cuts totalling £20 billion in DFT, BIS, DEFRA and all those areas. Do you know what they are talking about doing away with? The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. Maybe we should do away with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Department for Employment and Learning. I will give way.

Mr Flanagan: I thank the Member for giving way. He is raising a number of issues that the Committee did not focus on during the inquiry. Perhaps if he and his party had responded to the call for submissions earlier in the year, we would have considered some of those issues.

Mr B McCrea: There is one thing that I find really disappointing, and I will put this on the record now for the Speaker's office to look at. This is a two-hour debate, which means that, quite unusually, people on this Bench get to make a contribution. Perhaps if the people in the Assembly listened more to the people in this corner, they might do a better job.

This corner is absolutely committed to making a contribution; this corner has things to say; and this corner will not make the mistake of not taking on people when they talk gobbledeygook. That is what I see in all of this — platitudes and people going on that somebody should do something and that something should be done. Listen: the economy is tanked, and you are not doing anything about it. Do you want to know what will really make our economy take off? I agree with Mr Agnew; it is not corporation tax. I will tell you what it is. It is three things: skills, infrastructure and political stability. Let us face it; you are not doing a great job with political stability. That is the key thing that drives this.

Earlier, Mr Frew laudably tried to inject a little bit of energy into the debate and talked about the thing that he had come across on the doorsteps. Correct me if I am wrong, Mr Frew, but you said that people wanted to know about jobs and the economy — those issues. That is the simple thing that we have to tackle, and we are not tackling it.

I look at this statement. I think that it was SDLP Members who mentioned that the thing that is really missing in all of this is an overarching strategy that will take us forward. We keep patting ourselves on the head and saying that Invest NI and the Department have done great. That is rubbish. Our productivity is still not being tackled; we still do not have a plan; and we do not have any integration in the way that we approach things. If we go into direct rule, I really want to see what Osborne will do to this place, with DETI, DEL and all the other bloated Departments that are not cutting it. If we want to take action, we need to get together and go forward. If you want to talk about the EU and our contribution to that, look at where our industries actually participate. Aerospace is an international, worldwide business. We should look at how we might compete in the world.

I want to see a strong, confident and prosperous Northern Ireland, where we have the skills to compete — not some sort of begging bowl, where we go out and say, "Give us some sort of handouts on this." Do you know what? If you do not try to come up with a plan, other people will impose their plan on you. The plan for Northern Ireland is not the same as the plan for Dublin, London or any other part of the world. We need our own plan; we need people working together; and we need absolute consistency and drive on the way forward.

I will finish on this point. There is nothing more important than getting an economy that can sustain our old and elderly people, but the fact that we have the travesty of having the highest rate of youth unemployment, compared with the rest of the United Kingdom, is something that we really ought to strive to deal with. I do not think that we are doing enough.

Mr Bell (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): I am pleased to be here this afternoon for what has been an interesting debate. I accept William Humphrey's invitation to congratulate Michael O'Neill on the potential position that he has brought the team to tonight. I think that we will all be behind them on this historic occasion and wish them well.

I welcome the publication of the report by the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment following the completion of its inquiry into growing the economy and creating jobs with lower corporation tax. I thank the Committee Chair, Committee members and staff for the effort that they have put into producing the report. I also thank the stakeholders who provided evidence.

Our economic recovery is now well established and that is evidenced by improvements in our labour market. July witnessed a further fall of 400 in the number of people who are claiming unemployment benefits, which is now more than 21,000 lower than its previous peak. The economy has also added almost 28,000 jobs since March 2012.

There is also positive news coming from all our main sectors. The construction sector — our most impacted sector during the downturn — posted its highest growth in output in three years. The services sector has grown in both output and jobs. Service sector job levels are now above their previous peak from 2008. The manufacturing sector has been posting growth in output and jobs, with the latest quarterly job figures at their highest since December 2008. I welcome those improvements, but I recognise that challenges remain and that new ones will emerge. Across

the Executive, we have to do all that we can to continue the momentum that has been built over the past few years.

Members will be aware that the Executive's ability to respond to economic challenges is hampered by the impasse over welfare reform, which has prevented the implementation of the Stormont House Agreement and has slowed progress towards implementing a lower rate of corporation tax. That is set against continued fiscal austerity and departmental budget reductions and at a time when the Executive are considering the restructuring of Departments.

Today's debate on the report of the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee is about growing the economy and creating jobs with lower corporation tax. There is a significant body of evidence to suggest that a reduced rate of corporation tax would significantly add to the attractiveness of Northern Ireland as a prime investment location. I view corporation tax as a key economic lever that can help to achieve our long-term economic goals, and I remain hopeful that those powers will be devolved, helping to secure greater economic growth and jobs for our people.

In the Northern Ireland economic strategy, we acknowledge that corporation tax is important but that, by itself, it is insufficient to transform the Northern Ireland economy. We must, therefore, continue with efforts to improve other areas in our economy in order to grow Northern Ireland's private sector and ensure greater export-led economic growth. In that context, I welcome the insight that the Committee's report provides into what we can do to help Northern Ireland to realise its long-term economic potential. That work is timely as we make preparations to take forward the important work of implementing a lower rate of corporation tax.

I was surprised by the contribution from the Ulster Unionist Member for South Antrim, who criticised the role of his own, now former, Minister in respect of Danny Kennedy's work on the Executive subcommittee on the economy, particularly when Danny is no longer in a position to defend his record. I was also surprised by the contribution of Mr McKinney, so let me give him some facts. We do, indeed — wake up — have a long-term economic plan; it is called the economic strategy. That plan is absolutely joined up. It is not a DETI plan; it is an Executive plan, with your Minister involved. It was developed by a cross-departmental group of officials; it was developed alongside our Programme for Government and our investment strategy. In addition, it was developed under the Executive's subcommittee on the economy, including the Ministers from the five other Departments. It was widely consulted on, including with key industry stakeholders, and was unanimously agreed by your party and Mr Kennedy — by the Executive — and endorsed by the Assembly.

Moving on to the inquiry report itself, I am pleased that there are clear synergies between the Committee's recommendation for a 20-year strategy for economic development and the vision for the Northern Ireland economy for 2030 as set out in the Executive's economic strategy and endorsed by the House in March 2012. I remind the House that the Executive's vision for the economy is:

"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."

You will recall that the economic strategy set out five key rebalancing themes to drive growth in the Northern Ireland economy and work towards achieving that vision. Those are to stimulate innovation, R&D and creativity; improve skills and employability; compete effectively in the global economy; encourage business growth; and develop a modern and sustainable infrastructure.

It is important for Members to note that the Executive's economic strategy is a living document. It was developed in advance of a decision on the devolution of corporation tax.

Once the Assembly has agreed a way forward for corporation tax, the Executive subcommittee on the economy will oversee the development of a refocused and realigned economic strategy. During the process, the subcommittee will assess the degree to which we can strengthen the ambition of our overarching economic goals. This will be important work. I recognise that the refocused economic strategy will need to reach more widely than the Executive and public sector. We will, therefore, work closely with the private sector and the voluntary and community sector, which remain key drivers of our economic growth.

4.00 pm

I agree with the Committee that it is vital that all parts of government, central and local, work together to achieve better outcomes. We will work closely with the new super-councils, given their extended economic development responsibilities, to create a link between the Assembly and local government during the development of the new Programme for Government and refocused economic strategy.

I also agree with the Committee that it is important for an economic strategy to align with the Programme for Government. My Department is working closely with OFMDFM throughout this process to ensure the refocused economic strategy aligns with the economic and social outcomes of the new Programme for Government 2016-2020.

The report suggests that the development and implementation of an economic development strategy should be supported by a steering group with representatives from all levels of government, education and skills, business, employee and community representative organisations and that working groups comprising key stakeholders will be required to develop and monitor the implementation of strategies.

The Assembly will be aware that our economic strategy is an Executive-wide strategy that is monitored by the Executive subcommittee on the economy. Through this, Ministers with key responsibilities for the economy ensure that the implementation of the economic strategy is robustly monitored and reported on. The development of the refocused economic strategy will also be overseen by the economy subcommittee.

My Department is also advised by an economic advisory group (EAG) and MATRIX, the Northern Ireland science industry panel. I would suggest that there is already sufficient economic support and advice available to the Executive and would not accept that there is a need for a further steering group.

Mr Nesbitt: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Bell: Let me make some progress. I will see what time I have at the end.

I will, however, consider the Committee's recommendation on membership of the EAG in the context of a restructured Department for the Economy.

The Committee's report highlights a number of areas that respondents suggest are vital for driving economic growth. I am pleased to note that we have been progressing these areas under the economic strategy's five rebalancing themes. I will now address a number of those key issues.

As the Committee highlights in its report, innovation and research and development are increasingly important in supporting businesses and attracting inward investment. The Committee proposes that this should be a key priority in a future strategy for the economy. I would point out that the Executive already recognise innovation and R&D, alongside skills, as the key drivers for the economy as outlined in the economic strategy and Programme for Government. Significantly, increasing the levels of innovation across the public sector is critical to future growth, and the Executive have a role to play in this.

Work remains to be done to increase the number of our companies that are innovation active. Currently, only 40% of our local companies are engaged in innovation, compared with a UK average of 45%. I am committed to creating the conditions in which entrepreneurship and innovation can flourish so that local businesses can keep ahead of their competitors and compete on the global stage. The aim of the innovation strategy, published last September, is for Northern Ireland to be one of the top four UK regions by 2025. This will be very challenging.

Horizon 2020 offers a great opportunity to bring additional funding into Northern Ireland and can also provide access to potential new markets and customers. To increase Northern Ireland's success, it is important that more of our local companies participate in Horizon 2020. We have secured €15.5 million from the first 18 months of Horizon 2020, and we are confident that this will continue to rise.

On skills and employability, the economic strategy recognises that the most important asset to the economy is our people. We are developing our understanding of the future demand for skills to ensure that our skills system meets the needs of investors, particularly if a lower rate of corporation tax is implemented. In that regard, my Department, in conjunction with the Department for Employment and Learning and Invest NI, is taking forward a research project that will help to identify the skills needs of companies attracted by a cut in corporation tax. This will help to inform future skills planning and forecasting work, and it will feed into the development of the refocused economic strategy.

The Committee suggests that, in order to develop education and skills at a school level, we need to consider how best to integrate education with business needs, including the increased provision of skills in STEM subjects. I particularly welcome the recent performance of our students at A level and GCSE. It is encouraging to see the rise in economically important subjects chosen at A level and, in particular, the increase in the uptake of STEM subjects and the improved uptake of STEM courses by female candidates.

The report identifies that any initiatives taken in schools will need to be complemented by the further and higher education sectors. Invest Northern Ireland works with those sectors through a number of initiatives, including, alongside DEL, the Assured Skills programme and Success through Skills strategy. I recognise that it is also vital to raise standards at a school level and ensure that all our young people have access to courses that meet their needs and aspirations and lead to clear progression routes in educational attainment.

One important area of work that my colleague in the Department for Employment and Learning is leading is the implementation of 'Securing our Success: the Northern Ireland Strategy on Apprenticeships'. The Committee rightly outlines the importance of apprenticeships in growing the economy and creating jobs. The Securing our Success strategy will be central to transforming the skills landscape. It will help us to ensure that employers obtain the skills that they require and that there is a critical mass of people with strong technical and employability skills in the high-demand sectors.

The Committee report identifies a number of key issues for businesses, including access to finance, business regulation and supporting SME growth. Those issues are explored under the economic strategy's business growth theme. Having a local banking sector that meets the needs of consumers and businesses, and provides bank lending on a competitive basis to local SMEs, is vital to sustaining economic recovery.

Much progress has been made in recent years on improving the availability and affordability of finance for businesses in Northern Ireland. However, I agree with the Committee that access to finance remains a key issue for our businesses. While it is encouraging to see that access to the finance landscape is improving, it is important that we also continue to explore options to ensure that local companies have access to appropriate and affordable finance to support investment and assist in continuing growth.

On the competing globally theme, our economic strategy identified that the route to economic success would come from a renewed focus on export-led economic growth, and that still holds true today. The promotion of external sales and exports will remain a key priority for the Programme for Government and the refocused economic strategy. I am pleased that the Committee welcomed my Department's work in developing 'Export Matters', the export action plan for Northern Ireland. I hope to publish that later this year.

I reassure Members that, as suggested in recommendation 5, we have fully considered the relationship between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland in supporting economic development and job creation. Continuing with the competing globally theme, I think that Northern Ireland has a very strong track record in attracting foreign direct investment, outperforming many larger regions.

In 2014-15, we had the highest number of new-to-Northern Ireland projects ever — 25 — including the world's number one law firm. A lower rate of corporation tax will enable us to build on that and extend our position as the best performing region in the United Kingdom for job creation.

Firms have been attracted by skills availability, our competitive cost base, the ease of doing business and government and Invest Northern Ireland support, and it is essential that we continue to use those to our advantage.

A reduced level of corporation tax would further strengthen our position and help to promote Northern Ireland as a good location for potential new investors and undoubtedly bring benefits to our business base. It also gives Northern Ireland the opportunity to specifically target strategic business functions that are regional or global profit centres and additional high-technology functions. That will involve a new and additional area of work for Invest NI and other key stakeholders in developing sales propositions, targeting investors and putting in place appropriate support packages.

Infrastructure and accessibility are often identified as key factors in determining an investment location. Investment in communications infrastructure will remain a priority. External accessibility to markets and suppliers and ease of travel are all important drivers to increase investment across the whole of Northern Ireland. The Committee report identified energy as a key driver. The report suggests that energy costs continue to be an important issue for existing businesses and in terms of attracting new inward investment. There have been recent falls in energy prices that have benefited all customers. I would welcome further falls, but I note that the CBI's evidence to the Committee suggests that, for many companies, energy is not the biggest issue.

I will now turn to some of the issues that were raised. Mr Agnew seemed to want to promote welfare. I inform him that I do not want to promote welfare; I want to promote jobs so that people do not rely on welfare. Cutting corporation tax will promote investment and jobs and will provide employment. He should note that the Irish Government concluded that the number one factor in their success on foreign direct investment was their corporation tax rate. The UK has seen a boom in foreign direct investment since it lowered corporation tax from 2011, so the fact is that corporation tax is important for FDI. The Member seems to be ignoring all the evidence that shows that to be true.

For those who have said that it is all about jobs, that is what the people are interested in. I will outline the record: we asked Invest NI, in four of our Programme for Government targets, to promote 25,000 new jobs. It achieved over 37,000 —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): The Member's time is almost up.

Mr Bell: — new jobs. We asked it for an investment of £1 billion to our local economy, and £2.6 billion was achieved. That is a record that I am happy to stand over.

Mr Flanagan (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to support the Committee motion today. In particular, I thank all those who provided written and oral evidence to the Committee; it really helped us in formulating this plan, which is a great improvement on anything that is out there at the minute. I thank the officials in the Department for their support and continued information throughout the course of the inquiry, and I thank all the Members who participated in the debate today. A particular word of thanks must go to the staff of the Committee, particularly to our Clerk and the bursary student, Peadar, who have done tremendous work in supporting us to get this far in the inquiry. It was a work in

progress. I suppose that some members would agree that the last few meetings, as we tried to formulate the words and get this tied down, were cumbersome and challenging. I pay tribute to the Chair for his diplomatic ability and trying to keep us all together.

In terms of the inquiry, the main aspect was growing the economy and creating jobs. It was very wide ranging. The focus was on how we can grow and develop a vibrant sustainable economy across this region in the long term. One of the most important outcomes of the inquiry has been that, in order to create a vibrant economy, we have to look beyond the activities involved in providing direct incentives to attract business. It has to be about much more than that.

4.15 pm

Selective financial assistance certainly has its place, and we need to be attracting businesses, through Invest NI's efforts, through foreign direct investment. However, it seems that the FDI boom is over, and maybe the Minister's predecessor got out at just the right time because, under the new rules, things have changed. Under the current selective financial assistance rules, 83% of the jobs that were promoted with Invest NI support in 2013-14 would not be eligible. Of the record number of jobs promoted between April and June of last year, 99% would not be eligible under the current rules. Things have had to change within Invest NI on how it attracts jobs. Unfortunately, we are not going to see the record levels of job promotion and job creation again for some time.

We need to get beyond simply handing out grants to businesses to get them to come here or to expand their existing offering. We need to focus on other factors that are just as important in attracting, retaining and growing businesses and in contributing to the vibrant and sustainable economy that we all want to see. That is the main purpose of the inquiry.

What other factors need to be looked at in how we create, grow and sustain employment here? Many of those factors have been touched on this afternoon by Members from all parties. Leaving out some of the party political contributions, every Member that spoke had a valuable contribution to make on the positive aspects of the inquiry and on what needs to be done to help maximise the potential for economic growth and job creation. The key factors that were focused on were skills, education and issues around energy and telecoms, as well as those related to transport infrastructure and communities. Those are all essential, but if they are considered in isolation, without consideration for their interrelationships, there is a danger that those efforts will be wasted.

The inquiry makes it clear that there seems to be a lack of recognition that a problem even exists. We hear mention being made by some Ministers about Government Departments operating in isolation, and that was one of the clear points that we got back from every single business, organisation and membership organisation that engaged with the Committee. They want to see a much more integrated approach from the Executive, and they want the Executive to be much more strategic.

The Committee has decided that we need to be much more visionary in the future and to make sure that we provide opportunities for business and employment across

the North. That has to be balanced across all of our areas, because there is a feeling out there that not all areas are benefiting equally from the recovery that the Minister highlighted.

Gordon Dunne highlighted the need for political stability to increase confidence in order to support economic growth. That call was echoed by his party colleagues Paul Frew and William Humphrey. In fact, that is one of the key issues that was addressed by groups that presented to the Committee during the inquiry's evidence-gathering sessions. There was a recognition that political instability harms business confidence and is detrimental to investment. Businesses certainly do not like all the decisions that we make in here, but they want to know what decisions we are going to make so that they can plan for the future. That is something that we are all agreed on: we need to provide businesses with clarity as to where we are going in the future with decisions.

Some ongoing uncertainty on key issues is providing serious uncertainty to businesses with regard to future investment decisions. One of those issues is ongoing uncertainty relating to EU membership, which largely went unmentioned in the debate until the Member for North Antrim who is no longer in his seat brought it up. That has the potential to bring considerable harm to the economy.

During the inquiry, the Committee recognised that the North benefits considerably from EU membership. The Committee also agreed that any future debate on EU membership must take into account the impact of the result of a referendum here. So the Committee was quite clear with regard to Europe and where we stand. There were some questions about what future funding streams would be provided by the British Government if we left Europe to make up for the loss of CAP funding and things like that, which our agri-food sector heavily relies on. Some Members reflected that, and collectively we must recognise that we have a duty and responsibility to work together towards the goal of political certainty at all levels. From my point of view and that of my party, decisions by parties to walk out of the Executive or block meetings of the Executive from taking place is not the way to build stability, and we all know it.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for giving way. I regret that the Minister found himself unable to give way. I wonder if the Member agrees with me: am I the only person listening to the Minister who thought he was listening to some sort of Yellow Pack audio version of Voltaire's 'Candide', the premise of which, of course, is that everything is for the best in the best of all possible worlds, despite the evidence to the contrary? I would have asked the Minister whether he would tell us how many potential foreign direct investors have already withdrawn because of our failure to set a rate and a date for reduced corporation tax or whether he was going to pretend that the answer was "None". Perhaps the Member knows the answer to that. Perhaps the Member also knows why we have the worst rate of start-up failures in the whole of the United Kingdom.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): Order, please. I remind Members that interventions should be short and succinct and should relate to what has been said.

Mr Flanagan: On the individual that the Member quotes, I do not necessarily agree with everything that the Member says, but I defend to the death his right to say it.

When he was closing, the Member highlighted the fact that start-ups here were the least successful of those anywhere in Britain or the North, but I put it to him that, if you look at the proportion of start-ups here that grow beyond a £1 million turnover within three years, you can see that this is actually the most successful part of Europe for that.

Some Members: The UK.

Mr Flanagan: No, Europe. In the west and the south, more than 10.7% of start-up businesses grow to over £1 million turnover within three years. Start-ups are hugely successful, but that does not cover the political problems that we have. It is clearly an electioneering strategy, and it is both irresponsible and a selfish approach to doing politics, particularly when we are trying to deal with something that is as fundamental to our future as the growth of the economy.

The inquiry calls for the Executive to articulate a shared, rolling 20-year vision for the economy. I do not think anyone could have a problem with that. Some people seem to think that it exists, and some people seem to think that it does not exist. Whether it exists or not, there seems to be consensus that we need one. The economic strategy that the Minister referred to talks about a vision for 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. It states that that is a vision for 2030.

The Government in any economy would be concerned if they were not growing the private sector, increasing exports and growing employment in most years between now and 2030, but we need to be much more visionary than that. It is important to remember that the Minister took the opportunity to highlight the good work that he believes is being done, rather than addressing the important concerns expressed to the Committee by businesses. One of those is that, despite the fact that he referenced exports a considerable number of times, he failed to accept the fact that export targets are not being met, which is a serious problem for many of our businesses. I suppose we can now put those challenges down to a weak euro and things like that, but it is a serious problem that needs to be addressed.

If we are going to achieve that vision, which is a radical, rolling 20-year vision, we need to have the right leadership, including input from the business, skills and community sectors, but it really needs to be driven at a political level if we are going to get there. That means having the right structures in place to ensure that we can deliver a vibrant economy right across the North. We also need to recognise the contribution that business representatives can make to developing a vision and a strategy. We have businesspeople of great ability and confidence, and the contribution that they can make can be immense, as Máirtín Ó Muilleoir said. We have to involve them more in the decision-making process. In the end, as William Humphrey said, it is about providing job security and financial certainty for our people.

In relation to economic development and employment, the Committee has called for robust, accurate, complete, timely and appropriate economic data. Hopefully there will not be as many adjectives in any future report on economic data, but that is what the Committee wants, and that is hopefully what the Committee will get. It has

called for plans and strategies relating to the economy to consider the relationship with the rest of Ireland. It has called for full evaluation of the enterprise concept, with a view to rolling enterprise zones out across the North. We also want to see an evaluation of the competence centre concept to see how those can be rolled out to other sectors. The Committee wants to see improvements in linkages between Invest NI, Enterprise NI, local councils and local business communities in order to streamline services to support and advise businesses and to develop firm commitments to subregional economic growth and job creation.

That was another minor point of contention that the Committee had. Some of us want to see the Executive and Invest NI set subregional targets to encourage and incentivise Invest NI to do much more to bring investment into areas west of the Bann, along the border corridor and into parts of north and west Belfast that have not seen the same uplift. Other Members want to see the council set those targets, which would not be binding, but, in the end, I think we found a form of words that nobody really understands and can agree or disagree with.

There was consistent evidence from the business community on what is considered unnecessary bureaucracy. That was especially the case on the transposition of EU legislation, where many members of the business community feel that it is imposed here differently from other member states across Europe. I suppose that one of the things that the business community wants is not so much a relaxation of the regulation; it is consistency across Europe so that it will know that it is being treated fairly with regard to its competitors in the rest of Europe.

Consideration was given to infrastructure and the need for appropriate infrastructure to be in place, as well as the requirements for growing and sustaining an economy. That is true for roads, public transport, telecoms, broadband and utilities such as water, gas and electricity. The Committee listened to the business community during the last two sessions and produced three reports on electricity pricing, security of supply and grid connections. During the inquiry, the business community came back and said that things are just as bad. Many large businesses continue to pay the highest prices in Europe. They keep telling the Committee that the prices are unsustainable, yet it appears that nothing is being done by the Department to look at how the burden on business can be eased.

Paul Frew informed the House that energy was central to all issues for business. He said that the cost of energy needed to be reduced to realise benefits for business. I do not think that any of us could argue with that. Anna Lo, speaking as Chair of the Environment Committee, highlighted the need for improved business regulation to streamline the regulatory system. She outlined the slow nature of decision-making in government and gave the example of how the strategic planning policy had been much slower than anticipated and was not as transparent or accountable as she would wish.

Transport infrastructure is a vital element of the economy across the region, as Mr Humphrey mentioned. Máirtín Ó Muilleoir commented on the need for new investments in road infrastructure in and to the north-west and for improved rail links between Dublin and Belfast, highlighting that the Dublin-Belfast economic corridor is

important if we are to achieve a step change in business performance across this island. That was very much to the fore about 20 years ago, and it needs to be put back on the political agenda. William Humphrey also highlighted the importance of tourism to the economy. Transport infrastructure is important to maximise the potential of our many world-renowned visitor attractions.

With regard to education and skills, the Committee welcomed the new employer-led apprenticeship strategy and called for future apprenticeships to focus on skills that lead to sustainable employment. The strategy will have to be promoted and driven to raise awareness. The Committee also wants to see a structured mechanism put in place for collaboration at a strategic level between the higher and further education sectors and Invest NI to ensure the best alignment between skills and current and future investment.

Gordon Dunne commented on the excellent skills base across various sectors but acknowledged that there was a considerable skills gap that needed to be addressed, especially in STEM subjects. That was also mentioned by Fearghal McKinney, who said that the Ulster University was cutting back on STEM subjects and language provision. Paul Frew touched on schools and the need for education at that level to be in touch with the needs of employers and for businesses to have greater involvement with local schools.

Finally, the Committee's report calls for something that is by no means easy. It is highly complex and will be difficult to achieve.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): The Member will bring his remarks to a close.

Mr Flanagan: As Leslie Cree stated, it will be highly challenging for the Executive, but the first step to achieving the economy that we would like to see is to recognise and accept that we are not going to achieve it if we just keep doing what we have been doing. Go raibh maith agat.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly approves the 'Opportunities for Excellence' report of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment on its inquiry into growing the economy and creating jobs with lower corporation tax; and calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, in conjunction with his Executive colleagues, to implement the recommendations contained in the report.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): Members will take their ease while we change the top Table.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Private Members' Business

Murder of Gerard Davison and Kevin McGuigan

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.

Before we commence the debate, I remind Members that, although I am satisfied that there is no question of the motion being sub judice, there have been arrests in relation to the subject matter and I urge Members to take care with their words. If I feel that Members are contravening Standing Order 73, I will ask them to resume their seat.

4.30 pm

Mr Allister: On a point of order. Surely, in relation to criminal matters, sub judice arises only when someone is charged.

Mr Speaker: I am aware of that, and I did draw attention to that matter. There have been arrests. There may well be charges. I ask Members to be very prudent in their language and not to assume that their remarks would not be regarded as prejudicial to any legal or judicial processes that may ensue. A common-sense approach is all that is required. I am in no way at all trying to constrain Members from fully participating in the debate, but let us have a certain amount of judgement and common sense as we approach this matter.

Mr G Kelly: I beg to move

That this Assembly condemns the murder of Gerard Davison and Kevin McGuigan; extends its condolences to their families; and calls on anyone with information to bring it forward to assist the ongoing PSNI investigation so those responsible can face due process.

Before the Assembly gets into the process of disagreement, let me start the debate on what I believe is absolutely agreed by all, and that is the entirety of the motion. At the centre of the debate today, there are two grieving families who will be listening carefully and hoping that the Assembly will assist them in seeking justice and bring them to a path of some closure.

While those who carried out these brutal killings are the only ones to blame for the huge grief and suffering brought to the families, it was politicians cherry-picking phrases from the PSNI press conference who first triggered the political crisis, or pseudo-crisis, which all of us now face in this institution. Sinn Féin does not agree with the Chief Constable's assessment that the IRA exists, even in the benign way that he states. The IRA left the stage in 2005 and it is not coming back. Other political parties and agencies agree with the PSNI claim, and that is their prerogative.

However, it is worth examining what the Chief Constable actually said in his press conference and later repeated to the Policing Board on Thursday last. He said that the PSNI was:

"currently not in possession of information that indicates that Provisional IRA involvement was sanctioned or directed at a senior or organisational level within the Provisional IRA or the broader Republican movement".

He went on to state that, while he believes that the IRA exists, the PSNI:

"assess that in the organisational sense the Provisional IRA does not exist for paramilitary purposes ... Our assessment indicates that a primary focus of the Provisional IRA is now promoting a peaceful, political Republican agenda. It is our assessment that the Provisional IRA is committed to following a political path and is no longer engaged in terrorism ... We have no information to suggest that violence, as seen in the murder of Kevin McGuigan, was sanctioned or directed at a senior level in the Republican movement ... we assess that the continuing existence and cohesion of the Provisional IRA hierarchy has enabled the leadership to move the organisation forward within the peace process".

He went on to further describe Action Against Drugs as:

"an independent group that is not part of, or a cover name for the Provisional IRA".

ACC Will Kerr reinforced the Chief Constable's position by telling the Policing Board that the IRA's active service units do not now exist.

So, what is the difference in the assessments of the PSNI and Sinn Féin? Essentially, one says that the IRA has gone and is therefore not active and the other states that it still exists but is not active in any negative way. It is important to point out this difference of opinion because any non-partisan observer must surely wonder where there can be a crisis between these two positions.

We are told that one line of enquiry of the PSNI investigation is that members or ex-members of the IRA may have been involved in the murders. Let me deal directly with that. Whoever was involved in these killings, whatever connection they may claim to Irish republicanism, they are criminals who have been involved in murder, and everyone and anyone with information must bring it to the police so that the perpetrators will be brought to justice through the courts.

It is my contention that this so-called crisis is, in fact, a crisis manufactured by political unionism. At its core, is party political electioneering. It was not until they saw the political opportunity presented by the press conference that they pursued this issue with any energy at all. Mike Nesbitt, in particular, has been living on sound bites from at least as far back as the Haass talks, when unionism refused to close the deal. Last year, when all the parties were, again, around the table trying to come to agreement, unionism walked out, over a single short section of an Orange Order parade, to stand shoulder to shoulder with representatives of loyalist paramilitaries, who are involved in continuous criminality, including murder.

In the Stormont House Agreement, the UUP has had one foot in and one foot out of the talks. At some of the regular implementation meetings, they have declared that they are there only to observe or to ask questions. While the victims and survivors' community wait hopefully for the legacy architecture to be legislated for, the UUP commit themselves to nothing but stroke politics. Even in one of his latest utterances, Mike Nesbitt has said that he will join the talks process only if he is satisfied with those who are involved. Who appointed him as an arbiter?

Sinn Féin and republicans, including the IRA, have taken a series of historic initiatives to create the opportunity for peace, to sustain the process in difficult times and to overcome obstacles. The Sinn Féin leadership has worked hard to find imaginative and innovative ways to resolve problems, but this problem is not of our making. Sinn Féin has no responsibility whatsoever for those who killed Kevin McGuigan or Gerard 'Jock' Davison. The response of the other political parties to those killings has been self-serving and short-sighted. There is no basis for the charges made against Sinn Féin by our political opponents. Sinn Féin will not allow ourselves or, more importantly, our electorate to be demonised or marginalised over matters that have nothing to do with us.

Last year, the people of Ireland, in free votes in the European and local government elections, gave Sinn Féin the largest vote of any party on the island. They voted for Sinn Féin because we provide a real alternative to the politics of austerity now being forced on the people of this island by the present British and Irish Governments.

I think that that is what really worries the political parties, North and South, who rush to attack Sinn Féin. The political institutions here are already in considerable difficulty. Important elements of the Stormont House Agreement have not been implemented. There are major budgetary difficulties and an ongoing effort by London to impose austerity policies on the Assembly. There are also the ongoing and unanswered questions about the sell-off of NAMA's loan book in the North and the allegation that some politicians and associates have benefited from that. Despite that building scandal, there is no speculation of the kind that is now in full flow around Sinn Féin's worthiness as a political party.

Over the last few weeks, there has been huge hypocrisy from some sitting on the Benches. They should avoid lecturing republicans, especially when they share platforms with the leaders of loyalist paramilitary groups, despite the shooting of east Belfast woman Jemma McGrath, the murder of Bobby Moffett, the killing of Brian McIlhagga earlier this year, and the nailing of a man's hands to a table in the Shankill area last month.

Sinn Féin will enter these talks on our electoral mandate and our commitment to democracy and peace, which is clearly demonstrated by our record in the House and outside. We want to achieve the full implementation of the Stormont House Agreement and on the issues of welfare protections, and to address the legacy of all parties to the conflict, including state forces. We have also been clear that the biggest threat to the stability of the political institutions remains the ongoing Tory austerity cuts to the Executive's Budget, which is impacting on our ability to deliver front-line public services. What is required now from everyone involved in these talks, including the British and Irish Governments, is leadership and a commitment to

come to an agreement, as a matter of urgency. I commend the motion to the Assembly.

Lord Morrow: I suspect that there are some who, until now, naively believed that the days for debating IRA atrocities were in the past, but I suspect that it is only a naive person who would have believed that. However, we have come to a crucial moment and, I believe, a watershed in the history of Northern Ireland. Indeed, it is a time when the future of the Northern Ireland Assembly and its workings are in doubt. Some might say that they will not survive.

Let us deal with the motion before us today. We have the Chief Constable telling us that the IRA has not gone away. Indeed, Gerry Adams, in a moment of truth, said something similar. He assured us all:

"They haven't gone away, you know."

We never take Gerry Adams's word for very much, but we now have the Chief Constable telling us that, in fact, Adams was telling the truth on this occasion: that it had not gone away. Therefore, it reminds us all of the starkness and the seriousness of the situation that confronts us from this day forth.

No one inside or, indeed, outside the House needs any reminding of the ruthlessness of the Provisional IRA. It was the most ruthless killing machine in the whole of the Western World, and, of course, it made great brag about that. It turned its guns and ruthlessness on one section of the community, and it was not beyond turning on its own community either. When it is expedient to do that, it will do it, and, of course, it has done so.

This is not the first murder but one of four in recent times, excluding those who have gone before that. We had the killing of Robert McCartney and Paul Quinn, and now we have Gerard Davison and Kevin McGuigan. I do not think that anyone, except perhaps those opposite me today, is in any doubt that the Provisional IRA was involved in all four killings. Only those who do not want to face up to reality believe that the Provisional IRA was not involved.

It should be noted that while it is relatively early days in the investigations into the most recent killings — that is Davison and McGuigan — it should be noted that for the two previous killings — namely Robert McCartney and Paul Quinn — no one has, as yet, been brought before the courts and made answerable for those heinous crimes. One of the reasons why that is the case, dare I say it, is that it is only in recent times that the SDLP has found the courage to support the NCA. I say to it and to the House today that had it found its courage earlier and come to a position where it could and would support the NCA, it might just be possible that Mr Davison and Mr McGuigan would still be alive. That may be a real possibility. However, we are where we are, and we now find ourselves in a very desperate situation indeed.

We get repeated denials from Sinn Féin that the IRA was involved. We got the same denial from Gerry Adams that the IRA was not involved in the Northern Bank robbery when the small sum of £26 million was taken. Not one individual in that big world out there — not one — believed that. Of course, we know that to be a downright lie. It was involved.

Now it tells us that it was not involved in the murder of Mr McGuigan. Well, we know the truth in that matter. The Chief Constable has said quite unequivocally that it was involved. We did not need the Chief Constable to tell us, but we applaud him for doing so and for exposing those who are engaged in such activities. It has also been confirmed that Mr Davison and Mr McGuigan were members of the IRA.

Mr Speaker: Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Lord Morrow: So the question that the public are asking today is this: since they were aware that those two men were in the IRA, why were they at loose? Why were they not rounded up?

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Lord Morrow: We look forward to that happening in cases where they are aware of other members of the IRA who are still at loose.

Mr A Maginness: Before I get into the substance of my address, I wish to say on behalf of the SDLP and, indeed, everyone here that we should think of the families of those who have been so cruelly put to death. They still have a terrible grief and sorrow to carry, and they will carry that for the rest of their lives.

4.45 pm

I listened very carefully to what Mr Kelly said about the situation. In summary, he said that this is a pseudo crisis that has been manufactured by political unionism and that, by the way, the IRA left the stage in 2005. Maybe I should sit down and simply accept that, but there are a number of uncomfortable material facts that Mr Kelly did not deal with. Those material facts, as established by the Chief Constable, are that the Provisional IRA is still extant and that members of Action Against Drugs and members of the Provisional IRA were involved in the murder of Mr McGuigan. Those are facts established by the head of the PSNI. You cannot simply just ignore those facts as presented to the public by the Chief Constable. In addition to that, he said — it might be by way of some sort of amelioration of the situation — that the PSNI cannot yet establish whether those members of the Provisional IRA were ordered to carry out that murder by the IRA at large as an organisation.

There has to be more than simple denial by Sinn Féin on this issue. The mere existence of the IRA as a “withering husk”, which was the term used by Michael McDowell, does not pose a threat, but what does pose a threat to these political institutions is the murder of a man by the Provisional IRA membership. That fact has to be addressed. It is all very well for Sinn Féin simply to deny and deny and deny, but it cannot continue to do that. I refer Members to the Taoiseach's speech in Cambridge at the weekend. He said, as Minister Flanagan also said:

“Statements to the effect that the IRA have gone away or have left the stage are simply not credible. Let me be clear. It is the responsibility of Sinn Féin, and in particular its leadership, to address these issues and to help restore the trust that has been lost. We have become used to incredible statements, be they about past activity, current activity, murder, robbery, child abuse. There may have been a time when living with

constructive ambiguity helped the peace process. But that time is now past.”

He went on to say:

“Paramilitarism and all its vestiges must be removed. They are incompatible with democracy and the hopes and demands of democrats ... We need clear lines, not blurred lines, between constitutional politics and criminality ... No shared platforms or strategies. No shady grey areas between right and wrong. The peace we have now was built by the people of these islands, through their commitment to non-violence and reconciliation.”

I appeal to Sinn Féin to review its position. It can deny all it wants, but nobody outside its own ranks and maybe some within them believes what it is saying about that. There needs to be frankness, which would be helpful in resolving the problems that we have at the moment and in strengthening this institution and the other institutions under the Good Friday Agreement. I believe that that is Sinn Féin's political duty.

Mr Nesbitt: Be in no doubt: I am sure that society wants us to get to the day when we can all unequivocally accept, approve and work with the words of this motion, but we are not there yet. Why not? It is because Sinn Féin's credibility in these matters has been undermined by its previous stance and statement on these matters.

This time, they cherry-pick the Chief Constable's words. They deny that the IRA exists, that it has a command structure and that it operates at a senior level. Instead, they trot out the same tired old single transferable speech of denial. It is threadbare: it has worn a hole in the fabric of the agreement, and it needs mended.

Mr Kelly accuses me of political expediency. I do not know whether, over the past 30 years, he has had a moment to study the musings of his party leader in ‘The Politics of Irish Freedom’, printed by Brandon Press in 1986. Thirty years ago, Gerry Adams accused the British of cynically exploiting IRA mistakes — and, for the avoidance of doubt, a “mistake” is a murder. Thirty years on, they have not changed their tune.

The speech of denial goes back even further. Jean McConville, mother of nine, was abducted by the IRA, tortured by the IRA, murdered by the IRA, and, in the ultimate obscenity, her body was hidden and disappeared, denying the family the Christian rite of mourning and burial, and yet — denied. The murder of Frank Kerr in Newry — denied. Paul Quinn — denied. Robert McCartney — denied, and on and on and on it goes.

There is a further problem for Sinn Féin, and it is its stance on terrorist violence. For us, it is an absolute, as in absolutely wrong. Once you move off that ground, you open a Pandora's box that cannot be closed again.

In the past, members of Sinn Féin always justified the IRA campaign by saying that the conditions justified it. The problem is that that is not objective. That is subjective. That is your view. Now, we come to a position where your view is that the conditions no longer justify, but your erstwhile friends in the republican movement disagree. They say that the conditions still justify, and, therefore, they continue their terrorism. Sinn Féin must take some responsibility for that position.

I understand that Gerry Kelly will say, "Terrorism? I wasn't a terrorist. I did not commit an act of terrorism." That, of course, is why they were able to say that the so-called peace-building and conflict resolution centre at the Maze would not be a terrorist shrine: because they were not terrorists. Some people were duped into supporting it, but wiser unionist voices prevailed at the end of the day.

The bottom line is this: Sinn Féin and the Police Service of Northern Ireland need to be on the same page about the condition of the IRA in 2015. Otherwise, there is no confidence, there is no trust, there is no credibility.

Mr Kelly admonishes me for the people with whom I have shared a platform. Does he forget the Hume/Adams dialogue? Does he not understand that he would not be here today if democrats had not decided to talk to Gerry Adams, even though the IRA campaign was in full flow? Does he not remember that his leader here in the House, Mr McGuinness, decries dissident republicans for not talking to him? We have to resolve this, and I believe that we will begin tomorrow, when we will see you at Stormont House.

I wish to be clear: the Ulster Unionist Party condemns both murders. However, this debate and this motion are a political ploy, and we will not vote.

Mr Lunn: My first observation is that the motion could have come from any party in the Assembly. It is a condemnation of murder, condolences to bereaved relatives and a call for anyone to contact the PSNI if they have information that could lead to a conviction.

Mr McGuigan has left behind nine children. They were not involved; they are innocent victims, just as Jock Davison, Bobby Moffett, Paul Quinn, Robert McCartney, Jim Gray, Denis Donaldson, Kevin McDaid and many more have left behind grieving relatives since 2005. Murder can never be justified —

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Member for giving way. He mentioned the murder of Bobby Moffett, who was publicly executed on the Shankill Road. That public execution is not far removed from the methodology used in the murder of Kevin McGuigan.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Lunn: I thank Mr Maginness for his intervention. It is not actually removed at all; it is exactly the same methodology and the same summary justice. It is just being done by a different illegal organisation, apparently.

I do not know as much about Mr Davison as Kevin McGuigan. I wonder why. I will tell you why: it is because there was not as much of a furore about Mr Davison's killing as Mr McGuigan's. It did not threaten to bring down Stormont. Paul Quinn's dreadful death prompted much outrage at the time and since but, again, there was no threat to the institutions, no resignations, no withdrawal from the Executive, no adjournments, no exclusion motions and no threat of suspension. So, what is the difference? The PSNI statistics record 94 shootings and assaults in 2014-15. That is only the tip of the iceberg, but it is the official figure. There were 70 in 2013-14, and 127, for example, in 2009-2010. Those were by paramilitaries of all shades. So, why, suddenly, do we see the reaction from my left when another murder occurs, evidently as probably some sort of internal feud or drugs dispute? Clearly, it hinges on the comments of the Chief Constable.

I have a lot of faith in the Chief Constable and I think he has played this with a straight bat. He has given his assessment that members of the Provisional IRA were probably involved, with others, in this murder. He does not believe that the murder was ordered by a central command or that anything beyond a skeleton structure still exists. His assessment is that the IRA is now involved in "peaceful and democratic means." Those are his words. Sorry; they are the words of the Assistant Chief Constable at the Policing Board just last Thursday. He said that there is no terrorist threat or threat to national security. He also confirmed that the PSNI will bring the perpetrators to justice if possible, and we are content to await the outcome before considering any action consequent upon that outcome.

I have every confidence in the ability of the Chief Constable to act with his usual honesty and integrity, and to tell it as he sees it, without political bias. If there is a link to a political party, which is what this is really about, he will say so. In the meantime, it is regrettable that some of our colleagues here have taken precipitate actions in advance of the facts emerging. We do not advance the image and status of this country by boycott. Just the opposite.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for giving way. Has he ever heard of a political tipping point and, if so, does the Alliance Party have one or is it, "Hold on to your Ministries at any cost."?

Mr Lunn: Obviously, there can be a tipping point, but that would be provided by a conviction, firm evidence or a firm conclusion of the Chief Constable. We are content to wait for that. You were not content to wait.

Dr Farry: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lunn: Yes.

Dr Farry: Does the Member concur with the remarks of the current MP for South Antrim, who suggested that this was still very much a case of waiting to see how things develop?

Mr Lunn: My party colleague is pointing up the difference of opinion within one of the parties to my left, which does not surprise me in the least. I hope that the unionist parties will think again about this, and not take this any further at least until the facts are more clear. Ideally, that would be when there is a conviction and the Chief Constable can point with confidence to what actually happened. If there is a link, the Chief Constable will say so.

Mr Speaker: Members, as this is the first debate in which Mr Gordon Lyons will speak, I remind the House that it is the convention that a maiden speech is made without interruption. I welcome you very much, Mr Lyons, to the Assembly, and I call you to make your contribution.

5.00 pm

Mr Lyons: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I welcome the opportunity to take part in this debate and to make my maiden speech. I consider it a great honour and, indeed, a privilege to be able to represent East Antrim in this place.

Before I move on to speak to the subject on the Order Paper, I want to pay tribute to my predecessor, Mr Sammy Wilson. He had served in this place since 1998, and I was able to see at first hand his commitment and dedication towards the people whom he represented. In the constituency, he worked very hard on the issues that

matter to people there. In ministerial office, he served all the people of Northern Ireland. In this Chamber, he robustly represented the views of his constituents in his trademark way, which was forthright and not short on humour or passion. On these Benches, we very much want to thank him for his service and for all that he has done in this place, and to wish him well as he continues to serve the people of East Antrim at Westminster.

It gives me no pleasure to speak on this matter today. I wish that we did not have to. I wish that murders like these were a thing of the past. I was born in 1986. I have very few memories of the bombs, the violence and the bloodshed that was all too common here for those who were born in the decades before me. Thankfully, that which was commonplace is now much rarer. However, the murders of these two men demonstrate that it has not been eradicated.

I have read with interest the motion that Sinn Féin Members have tabled. I believe that they think that, in tabling the motion, they are displaying leadership, but in fact I think that the motion highlights their failure to demonstrate leadership on these issues. Let us look at the three aspects of the motion. The first is:

"That this Assembly condemns the murders of Gerard Davison and Kevin McGuigan".

That should go without saying. I am willing to stand here and condemn all murders, whether they happened in the 1970s, the 1990s or 2015. It does not matter; they were wrong and are still wrong. Here is where we see a failure in the leadership of Sinn Féin, because it fails to condemn the IRA. The IRA did not discriminate when it came to murder. Adult or child: that did not matter. Protestant or Catholic: that did not matter either. Civilian or a member of the security forces: none of those things mattered. Where is the condemnation of those murders? Yes, we have the condemnation now, but where is the condemnation of those murders and the condemnation of the IRA? If that were to take place, that would show real leadership.

What does the motion say next? That Sinn Féin wants to extend its condolences to the families. That would seem like a compassionate thing to do if it were not for the fact that they have continued to compound grief and sorrow by failing to tell the truth about what has happened in the past.

Finally, the motion calls on people to go to the police. Again, that only highlights Sinn Féin's failure to provide information to the police. Where is Sinn Féin's willingness to provide information on what its members have done and on the atrocities that they carried out during the Troubles? Where there is the justice that they seem to be so interested in in this motion?

I hope that, in the future, the House will not need to meet to condemn murder by paramilitary organisations. I hope that they will all be consigned to the past and that justice will be done. That will allow us to move forward and create the type of society that we want to live in —

Mr Speaker: Thank you.

Mr Lyons: — and that we want to see.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Éirím chun tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún seo. I rise to support the motion.

Ba mhaith liom comhbhrón a dhéanamh le teaghlach Gerard Davison and Kevin McGuigan. I begin, in the first instance and in the tone of the motion, by condemning the murders of Gerard Davison and Kevin McGuigan. I extend my sympathy and solidarity to their families, ever mindful that they continue to carry their loss even as we speak. I put on the record the need for people with any information relating to both murders to come forward and assist the PSNI in its investigation. Those who carried out the murders have no regard for the grief that they have visited upon those families.

Some have tried to suggest that those who carried out the murders were somehow motivated by republican ideals or could be called republicans. Nothing could be further from the truth. The murders were carried out for narrow self-interest. They were wanton violence and, therefore, criminal acts that were carried out by criminals. As someone who, along with many others, has fought any attempt to criminalise republicans, let there be no doubt as to the strength and the import of this condemnation.

In proposing the motion, Gerry Kelly outlined in great detail how the murders have been used by some for party political interest and who have seized on the comments of George Hamilton. I fundamentally disagree with George Hamilton's assertion that the IRA exists. The IRA made its intentions known in 2005. It has left the stage. Sin é, as they say. It is finished, gone and not coming back.

There is no doubt that political parties have used the killings for political advantage. With the prospect of an election, perhaps in May 2016, unionism is scrapping for advantage with a couple of seats up for grabs. When it suits their interests, as it did in relation to the Chief Constable's statement, one would think that he made single-sentence statements. The rest is never referred to and, indeed, is ignored. Why? Simply because it suits, and, after all, there are a few seats up for grabs and perhaps a few seats to secure. Alban Maginness mentioned Enda Kenny. Let me remind him that there is an election coming in that state too and that politicians are not beyond electioneering.

Let me again state on behalf of Sinn Féin in clear and unambiguous terms that we are totally committed to the peace process and to peaceful and democratic means of achieving all political goals and objectives. That is the platform that we stand on and that is the mandate that we are given by those whose vote we seek and attain. No one, be it an individual, a party or a Government will be permitted to undermine or undervalue that.

On behalf of Sinn Féin, Martin McGuinness has demonstrated that commitment time out of number, both by word and deed. He was not found wanting when he shared platforms with Chief Constables and other political leaders to condemn the actions of so-named dissident republicans. So, it is very difficult to take lectures from those who, to this very day, share platforms and issue joint declarations with the negative and destructive forces within unionism. Be it by the threat of graduated responses or a third force, they are all designed to serve and promote narrow political views and, very often, self-interest.

Mr Nesbitt: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCartney: No. Over many years and, indeed, many instances, that, of course, was business as usual.

In conclusion, I want to reaffirm Sinn Féin's total commitment to the political and peace processes and all that comes with them. There are no ifs and no buts. It is a total and absolute commitment. With the motion very much in mind, it was very noticeable that a number of those who spoke today made no reference to the Davison or McGuigan families. We pledge our continuing support to them as they seek justice and to the PSNI in its ongoing investigation. Sin é.

Mr McKinney: It is highly regrettable that we find ourselves here to debate an issue that has caused an immense deal of suffering and that, as a consequence, has injected further political instability.

From the outset, I express my sympathy and that of the SDLP to the families and friends of Kevin McGuigan and Gerard Davison.

In many ways, the political developments and fallout may have lost sight of that point. Regardless of those men's past, their cold-blooded murder was absolutely barbaric, and the perpetrators of such must be brought to justice.

The SDLP remains committed to peace and is unequivocally opposed to all forms of violence. Among other things, the Good Friday Agreement did two things. It rejected our violent past and envisaged a better future for us all — Jock Davison and Kevin McGuigan included. That paramilitary groups, loyalist and republican, have been allowed to operate and threaten our peace and stability is because we have not pursued the agreement's ambition sufficiently to starve them of oxygen and control. If there ever was any currency in creative ambiguity, there is none now. We need certainty, not ambiguity, and that is the responsibility of us all.

We believe that the PSNI must be allowed to follow all evidential leads in the McGuigan murder and that Sinn Féin should be forthright and frank about all the details that its members may know in relation to both murders. We also believe that an Garda Síochána, along with the PSNI, should be allowed to carry out a full assessment of the operations and capacity of the Provisional IRA and that the NCA should similarly be allowed to look at not just its activities but its assets.

The extreme response of some and the deniability of others have made a difficult situation worse. That is why we call today on Sinn Féin to divulge whatever information it may have on those recent killings. We are all very aware that, by denying knowledge, Sinn Féin raises questions about itself and its commitment to pursue justice. Deniability is the order of the day, and we have heard it repeated here: deniability around Paul Quinn; denial around the murder of Robert McCartney; and denial in the case of Máiría Cahill and many others. There is denial while, in the background, the name of anyone who may cause embarrassment or has been a victim in those circumstances is blackened.

There are now calls for the re-establishment of the Independent Monitoring Commission. I think that it is important that we look back at some of its words from 2008. It said:

"PIRA's commitment to following the political path has been further reinforced in the period under review with a number of people making the transition to positions

in Sinn Féin and thereby engagement in democratic politics."

That would be OK had the IRA been shut down, but we know that that is not the case. Mr Speaker, people here are not stupid. They know that someone in Sinn Féin knows who is responsible, and those responsible must be brought to justice and a clear message put forward that such acts have no place in our society. There is a shadow, and it darkens the sky. If you stand back far enough, you can see the shadow, literally, of a gunman, and it hangs round the neck of the talks. Mr Kelly referred to NAMA; can I refer to assets?

In stark contrast to the underplayed reaction of Sinn Féin, we have the UUP on the opposite Benches moving prematurely in a blatant electioneering attempt, removing its Minister from office and threatening the very existence of the institutions. That only plays into the hands of those who thrive in a vacuum. We cannot continue on a path of letting the past govern our future or even become our future again. We must recognise that all this is now our responsibility. By virtue of our mandate, it is our responsibility to keep the political system together, to keep our institutions intact and to best deliver for our people.

I said a few moments ago that we should have delivered a better future, even for those with a past. The only way that we can fill the vacuum is with a renewed focus on our economic future. We had a debate earlier that focused on that — jobs with a focus on tackling, once and for all, the deprivation and long-term unemployment that holds so many communities back and allows malevolent forces to prevail. The debate that we concluded earlier underscores that. It says that we do not have an economic vision or strategy and, worse, that we do not recognise that the problem exists. It does exist, and it needs a resolution. The price that we are paying for doing nothing is already too high.

Mr Hussey: I, too, begin by passing my condolences to the Davison and McGuigan families. Reference has been made to the murder of Mr McGuigan, and we all know that it was not a murder; it was a cold act of execution carried out by a terrorist. I stand by the assessment that it was a terrorist, because whoever did it certainly terrorised that community.

5.15 pm

Mr Kelly referred to a "pseudo crisis" created by unionism. I am sure, Mr Kelly, you will agree that it was not an Ulster Unionist who shot Mr McGuigan. It was somebody from his own community. But let us see how much faith I put in you and your colleagues and the deniability of members of the IRA, because when is a Provo not a Provo? When it suits Sinn Féin. Following the death of Robert McCartney in 2005 Gerry Adams, president of Sinn Féin, urged witnesses to come forward to:

"the family, a solicitor, or any other authoritative or reputable person or body".

Adams continued:

"I want to make it absolutely clear that no one involved acted as a republican or on behalf of republicans."

He then suspended 12 members of Sinn Féin.

On 16 February 2005, the IRA issued a statement denying all involvement in the murder and called on the

perpetrators to take responsibility. On 8 March 2005, the IRA issued an unprecedented statement saying that four people were directly involved in the murder, that the IRA knew their identities, that two were IRA volunteers and that the IRA had offered to the McCartney family to shoot the people directly involved. Of course, Sinn Féin does not believe that republicans could actually kill people.

We heard recently on radio from the family of Brian Stack, a prison officer in the Republic of Ireland murdered in cold blood by the IRA. "Oh no, he wasn't, because Sinn Féin says he wasn't." Then, the IRA admits that it carried out the murder, and who takes the Stack family to meet the IRA but Gerry Adams, the man whose every word uttered is believed by every Member of this House.

We then look at the Máiría Cahill affair. "She is lying. She didn't tell him this; she didn't tell him that." The rotten core of Sinn Féin and the IRA unravels. "Let's distance ourselves from it. It wasn't us: it must have been someone else. Mr Adams is whiter than white."

Mr Adams tells us that Sinn Féin and the IRA are not associated; they have left the stage. That is absolute nonsense. Tell that to the Quinn family. Paul Quinn was murdered by the Provisional IRA in October 2007. Why? Because he had a run-in with members of PIRA. PIRA does not exist, and yet its members can take that young man out and kill him in the most horrific way. That is no way to deal with a falling-out; but if you are a member of the Provisional IRA, you can do as you will, because those who serve with you in that disreputable organisation will deny liability.

In 2007 following the murder of Paul Quinn, the report of the Independent Monitoring Commission stated that:

"We do believe that those involved... included people who are members or former members, or have associations with members or former members, of the Provisional IRA."

They haven't gone away, you know.

The Chief Constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland said that members of the Provisional IRA were involved in this murder. Whether they are acting as the Provisional IRA, they are members of the Provisional IRA. There is a command structure within the Provisional IRA, believed to be up to brigade level.

You sit over there and totally deny it. You do not seem to understand what you have created for us. We do not trust a word you say. Why? Because you have lied in the past, you will lie in the future, and you are lying now. There is a direct link between the IRA and this murder, but you cannot be seen to agree with that, because it will bring your whole rotten house down on top of you. The IRA was involved in this murder, but if it is proved that they are IRA men, they are no longer IRA men. Back to the question: "When is an IRA man not an IRA man?" The answer is this: when he is caught.

I am proud to be a member of the Ulster Unionist Party. We were right to withdraw from the Executive, because Sinn Féin cannot be trusted.

Mr Speaker: Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Mr Hussey: My final comment relates to the Stormont House Agreement. The agreement was made by yourselves and the DUP. You walked out. You reneged. The whole thing falls on your head.

Dr Farry: We are content to support the motion. Obviously, it is important that we condemn the murders and call for support for the investigation, but of course they are only part of a much wider political crisis that is facing us.

A lot that could and perhaps should be said lies outside the immediate context and content of the motion. It is important to stress that we are still in the context of a live police investigation. What we have is an assessment from the police of the state of that investigation. That is a useful set of comments, but it opens up a whole layer of other questions that, quite rightly, MLAs and the wider public want to see resolved as soon as possible. However, we need to be very cautious about drawing firm conclusions. I am afraid that Mr Hussey fell into that trap in the previous speech. The assessment — it is important that we read it very carefully — talking about members of the IRA potentially being involved in that murder —

Mr Hussey: Will the Member give way?

Dr Farry: Yes.

Mr Hussey: You will have to excuse me for not standing up, because, unfortunately, I cannot. I am sure you agree that the Chief Constable, the most senior officer in the Police Service of Northern Ireland, believes that members of the IRA were involved. Are you going to join Sinn Féin and decide that these people are no longer members of the IRA because it suits for them not to be?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Dr Farry: Let me be very clear. Had the Member listened to what I said, he would have heard that the Chief Constable said that, in his assessment, members of the IRA were involved in that murder. That is on the public record from the police. Mr Hussey went on to talk about a brigade-level structure existing in the IRA. That may or may not be true, but one thing that I can say with certainty is that Mr Hussey has not been briefed by anyone in a position of authority who has conclusively said that to him. That is speculation, and that is why I am warning that we should be extremely cautious in what we say at this stage.

Let me be very clear. If there is clear, compelling evidence that there is an organisational structure, or that there is a link between the political party and any structure involved in the murder, the Alliance Party will not be wanting in doing its duty under its responsibilities under the Northern Ireland Act and in ensuring that we have integrity in these institutions. We have history in this because we brought allegations and charges against various parties during the multi-party talks leading up to the Good Friday Agreement.

Mr Nesbitt: Will the Member give way?

Dr Farry: Indeed, we saw Sinn Féin and the UDP temporarily suspended from those talks.

I will give way to the Member.

Mr Nesbitt: Can the Member explain why his party leader said on 'Good Morning Ulster' that they had two ministries in the Northern Ireland Executive because of the votes of the people of Northern Ireland, when the fact is that they are entitled to only one seat? If they are the party of

integrity, why did they take two seats? Why not sit on your hands after you got Justice and d'Hondt was run, because you were only entitled to one?

Dr Farry: I am rather surprised that Mr Nesbitt is worried about who is in the Executive at all, given that he has just walked out of it. Leaving that aside — obviously, one Minister was determined through the d'Hondt system and the other was determined through the votes of this House on a cross-community basis. Everyone in this House is here due to a mandate from the public. So there you go; that is the answer to that question.

Mr Nesbitt: So your party leader was wrong earlier?

Dr Farry: The party leader was correct — I have just explained it.

Secondly, we should remind Mr Nesbitt that we also took charges against the Ulster Unionist Party and the DUP around some of their antics in relation to associations with the Drumcree protests in 1997 and how that undermined the integrity of the talks as well. I am rather afraid that it is not just allegations against parties connected to paramilitaries: there are others who have been in breach of their duties around the Mitchell principles and the subsequent principles that we are guided by.

We need to reflect much further on the basis of what has occurred over the summer months. Clearly, we have one particular case that may or may not lead to action in due course, based on the investigation. Leaving that aside, this has exposed some wider problems around the rule of law and the continued activity of paramilitary organisations within our society. That has to be addressed in one way or another.

There are probably three or four things that we need to turn our minds to. First, we have a range of different definitions as to what is the accepted bar in terms of an end to paramilitary activity, full adherence to peaceful and democratic means and support for the rule of law. We have the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Act 1998, which says one thing, and the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which says a different thing. We have the Pledge of Office, which applies to Ministers but does not relate them to the activities of any associated organisations. We need to standardise that and tidy it up to the highest possible standards. We also have the situation where, under any potential exclusion, a party can veto its exclusion, even where there is compelling objective evidence and everyone says that it points to a major breach of principles. Again, that is not tenable. We need safeguards to protect any party from arbitrary dismissal due to political whims, but that has to be tightened up.

We also need to consider some alternative to the IMC of before. Something similar to that needs to be considered for our current circumstances. Finally, we need a strategy to challenge the legacy of paramilitarism and the control that paramilitaries have in communities across Northern Ireland, loyalist and republican, and ensure that we finally eradicate that and that we see the proper disbandment of paramilitaries —

Mr Speaker: Thank you.

Dr Farry: — 15 years on from the Good Friday Agreement.

Mr Kennedy: Mr Speaker, thank you for calling me in this important debate. At the outset, with your indulgence, because this is the first occasion since my resignation as

Minister for Regional Development, I simply want to pay tribute and put on record my appreciation to all the officials who helped and assisted me during my period as Regional Development Minister. There is linkage; it was the recent murders of Mr Davison and Mr McGuigan that ultimately led the Ulster Unionist Party to the correct decision to leave the Executive. I believe that to be a correct course of action. I also believe that it has now given, at long last, a proper focus on the problems of the Executive and the Assembly. That, hopefully, will serve well as we seek to resolve all those issues.

The resignation came on foot of the very cruel and dastardly murders. I condemn those murders. It is worth reminding ourselves of the assessment of the Chief Constable and his senior command: the IRA still exists, it is still a structured organisation, and it is clearly linked to the murder of Mr McGuigan. The truth is that, after all these years and after all the denials from the republican movement, the IRA is still casting a long dark shadow over the political process. The denials that the IRA still exists and the claims of Sinn Féin that the IRA was not involved are words that, yet again, ring hollow; they continue to justify and, in some way, allow the IRA to contaminate the entire political process. Surely it is not just the Ulster Unionist Party, as a party in the Assembly entitled to seats in the Executive, that cannot tolerate this situation. Surely the law-abiding population might have expected others to follow our lead. It is astonishing that there has been no response in respect of this from the DUP, the SDLP or the Alliance Party. Of course, the hope is that, even at this late stage, they will provide leadership and show some appropriate political courage.

The same, of course, can be said for the Secretary of State and Her Majesty's Government, who seem unwilling and unable to face up to their responsibilities. Perhaps they are afraid of the consequences for the peace and political processes. It stinks, and everybody knows that it stinks. What is more, the vast majority of the population knows that it stinks. This is the first day back after summer recess. Look at how many people are interested in events here at Stormont. Very few are in the Public Gallery showing any interest; the people are completely sickened and disaffected.

5.30 pm

We do not need Saatchi and Saatchi to tell us that Stormont is not working. Stormont is not only damaged but broken. Trust is broken, and it needs major surgery to fix it. It needs the republican movement to prove by its words and, most importantly, its actions that it is on the same page not only as the Chief Constable but as the rest of us and that the IRA has finally left not only the political stage but the military and community stages.

Mr Allister: These were undoubtedly gruesome murders. Like all terrorist murders, it is hard to describe them otherwise. I do not intend to waste much time on the weasel words of Sinn Féin, which come from consciences that have been seared by excusing Provo violence for years. I do not believe a word from them. I did not believe them — some did — when they told us that the IRA had gone away; I did not believe them — some did — when they said they had decommissioned; I did not believe them when they told us that the criminal empires in south Armagh were totally dissociated from the IRA, although

some did; and I do not believe them today. It is quite clear from what the Chief Constable said that among the murderers of Mr McGuigan are members currently of the Provisional IRA.

This morning on 'The Stephen Nolan Show', Arlene Foster, the Finance Minister, made a strategically very important statement. She said that Sinn Féin and the IRA — that is the IRA that killed Mr McGuigan — are inextricably linked. If that is right, we have to face the fact that the political wing of a republican movement that has killed again is at the top and heart of government. The people who particularly have to face that fact are those who sustain and keep them there. I direct my remarks particularly to the DUP on this occasion.

There is no point in throwing up your hands in dismay at another killing by the IRA and then deciding that the answer is to stay inextricably linked yourself, and be the only unionists to be inextricably linked, to the political wing of the republican movement, which the Chief Constable says carried out that murder. That is how stark it is. To do that is to continue to turn a blind eye to murder. In fact, it licenses the IRA to kill again because, if it gets away with it this time, as it did with Paul Quinn — action should have been taken then, but it was not — it is another green light to kill again.

Little wonder that Mr Kelly thinks that it is a pseudo crisis. He does not believe that the DUP will ever do anything about it. That is why it is pseudo as a crisis. He believes that this can happen again because there will be huff and puff, and that will be it. Today we were to see a huge revelation of earth-shattering proportions from the DUP reaction to this IRA murder. What did we get? The Executive, which do not deliver anything for anyone anyhow, are not going to meet for a month. So what? They once did not meet for six or nine months, and nobody noticed.

I say this to the DUP: you have a solemn choice to make. You know the truth of what Arlene Foster said about the inextricable link. If you believe what the Chief Constable said, it is indeed time that you come out from among those who are inextricably linked to that killing. It is bigger than not wanting to be humiliated by being outmanoeuvred by the Ulster Unionists.

Mr Speaker: Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Mr Allister: It is a much bigger issue than that, and you need to be big enough to face it, rather than simply sending four Members onto a battlefield to lurk on the Back Benches with nothing to say about the matter.

Mr Agnew: I condemn the murders of Gerard Davison and Kevin McGuigan and extend my condolences to their families. Whatever their past, they are victims of terrible murders. It is regrettable that such murders still take place in Northern Ireland. They are not acceptable today, and they never were acceptable. Indeed, it is regrettable that that type of violence persists. It is true that it is not just in republican communities. In my constituency, loyalism still holds a grip of terror on communities. That is deeply regrettable, and we must continue to strive to address and change it.

Of course, there are political ramifications of that murder because of the statement that members of the IRA were involved in it. I am consistently asked three questions, which I need answers to in order to make my assessment

of what this means for our politics and our peace process. Does the IRA still exist? If so, are they engaged in criminality and/or terrorism? If so, are they still inextricably linked to Sinn Féin?

The first question is whether they still exist. The Police Service of Northern Ireland says that they still exist, the Garda Síochána says that they still exist and the Secretary of State says that the IRA still exists. Sinn Féin denies it, but other sources seem to be unanimous in that assessment. What does that mean? Are they engaged in criminality? Are they engaged in killing? It has certainly been strongly stated by the Chief Constable that members of the IRA were involved in this murder, but there are questions about whether the organisation itself was. We have had mixed signals: the Chief Constable said that he believes that the IRA is on a purely peaceful path; the Garda Síochána has suggested that the IRA is still engaged in criminality. Those are questions that we need answers to, and we need evidence and definite conclusions.

For many, it is taken as read that, if the IRA exists, it is still inextricably linked to Sinn Féin. We also need an independent assessment of that because, if Sinn Féin says that the IRA does not exist, it cannot say whether it is linked to that organisation. I believe that we need an independent evaluation, whether it is the re-establishment of the IMC or another body. We need something that the community can have confidence in and that can bring together the evidence of the PSNI and an Garda Síochána and, indeed, any information available to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, because it is only on facts and evidence that we can make an assessment of what state our political process is in and whether the institutions can continue as they currently exist.

As I said, if the answer to the three questions is yes — if the IRA still exists, if it is engaged in criminality and/or terrorism and if it is inextricably linked to Sinn Féin — we have to question the role of that party in our government.

I will meet the Chief Constable later this week. I have sought to meet the Secretary of State and I will seek answers to those questions, but it is clear that we need evidence. We need calm heads, but we also need — reference was made to it — a tipping point. We need to say what is acceptable and what is not acceptable in our society. It is clear that the gun must be out of Northern Ireland politics. We cannot continue on any other basis.

Ms Ni Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. It is regrettable that this debate is an example whereby some politicians have ignored the bits that did not fit with their narrative and have jumped on George Hamilton's claims that the IRA still exists and, indeed, ratcheted up a political crisis.

I want to deal with the facts, even though some here do not. The fact is that the IRA has gone and it is not coming back. Republicans have taken a series of historic initiatives to create opportunities for peace. They have also taken initiatives to sustain the process —

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Ms Ni Chuilín: I will not.

— in very difficult times to overcome obstacles. The Sinn Féin leadership has worked hard to find imaginative ways to resolve problems, but let me be clear that this problem is not of our making. Sinn Féin has no responsibility

whatsoever for those who killed Kevin McGuigan or Gerard Davison. The response from some of the other political parties here today to these killings, frankly, has been self-serving, short-sighted and deeply cynical. So, again, let me be clear: anyone, regardless of who they are, who breaks the law should be held accountable by the justice and policing agencies.

There is no basis for the charges made by some here today against Sinn Féin. Indeed, if what Lord Morrow has foretold comes to light and it descends into a full-blown political crisis, in my opinion it will be as a direct result of a lack of political leadership and total political opportunism. Indeed, given the manner in which the debate has descended into personalised attacks against some Members from my party, it is hard to know how any of the parties, particularly Mike Nesbitt's — he is pointing there — hope to sort the crisis out.

In relation to our credibility, Sinn Féin will not allow ourselves and, more importantly, our electorate to be demonised or marginalised over matters that have nothing to do with us. I firmly believe, and I agree with the words of my party president, that there is nothing more that we can do.

I think that there is a lack of leadership by some parties in this Assembly. Look at what Martin McGuinness has done in the past. I will tell you now. Martin McGuinness, unlike your party, stood shoulder to shoulder with people, condemning all attacks and actions of the past, and faced down threats from within his own community.

Lord Morrow: Will the Member give way?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I will not.

He has challenged criminality and threats to the peace process, no matter what quarter they have originated from, and he will continue to do so. Others need to show the same leadership to oppose all efforts to undermine the peace process. That is what needs to prevail. Sinn Féin wants to achieve the full implementation of the Stormont House Agreement and deal with the issues in all our constituencies, particularly around legacies of the past, welfare protections, the impact of the conflict, including the impact on families who have been bereaved through state forces as well. We all must ensure that that happens.

5.45 pm

Very few parties here actually mean what they say when they talk about opposing ongoing Tory austerity. I believe that what is required from everybody here is to get involved in initiatives that bring us all back to the place where we need to be in terms of resolution. How can you be involved in resolution when your instincts are to walk away? As Gerry Kelly said in his opening remarks, Mike Nesbitt was nearly there during Haass but decided to go. He was in and out of the Stormont House Agreement, but decided to go because of an Orange parade in north Belfast. Again, when talking about dealing with the legacy of the past, particularly in relation to the Stormont House Agreement and, indeed, the narrative around victims and survivors and mental health services, what did Mike Nesbitt do? He sent someone in to observe. To me, that is not about leadership; it is just stroke politics.

I will not go through all the bits and pieces that people said today. I want to finish where Gerry Kelly started, not

like people who mentioned Kevin McGuigan and Gerard Davison to get it over with and then said what they had to say. There was a lot of that in the House today. I want to finish off where Gerry Kelly started: there are two grieving families at the centre of this. I have no doubt that those families will have been listening very carefully in the hope that the Assembly would assist them. As Trevor Lunn pointed out, this motion should have united everybody. These families want assistance in bringing people to justice. They need and deserve that. While those who carried out these brutal killings are to blame for the grief and suffering brought to the families and to the communities to which the two men belonged, I believe that the populism shown around this is nothing short of cowardice.

I call on everybody here to support the motion. It is something that we all need to do. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly condemns the murder of Gerard Davison and Kevin McGuigan; extends its condolences to their families; and calls on anyone with information to bring it forward to assist the ongoing PSNI investigation so those responsible can face due process.

Adjourned at 5.47 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 8 September 2015

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Speaker: Members, I understand that there are a quite a few members of the public here today, so I will give them a few moments to populate the Gallery.

Public Petition: Helicopter Emergency Medical Service in Northern Ireland

Mr Speaker: Mr Jim Allister 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 Allister: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Seldom does the mere announcement of the presentation of a petition provoke a welcome ministerial response before the petition is even presented, but that is the happy situation today. So, the focus now of the petition is very much to secure the timely and full implementation of the commitments made to fill the deficit that exists in relation to emergency medical service in Northern Ireland, we being the only part of the United Kingdom without a fully equipped air ambulance service.

Of course, presenting this petition in support of that call — a petition that has the backing in written form of 16,000 signatures and 65,000 online indications of support, a total of 81,000 — is tinged with sadness because the great champion of this cause, Dr John Hinds, sadly is no longer with us. It was Dr John's vision and passion for the need to deliver a proper air ambulance service to Northern Ireland that started this campaign, invigorated it and which inspires those who have taken the trouble of gathering the petition to ensure that his legacy is secured in the provision of that for which he long campaigned.

You could not meet Dr John without yourself being enthused with his passion and his tremendous knowledge on this subject. I know that, when I took him to see the Minister back in June, the Minister was well impressed with the infectious enthusiasm that he had for the subject. Of course, he was a man who, through his skill and expertise as a trauma specialist of great, considerable note, has saved the lives of many people.

It is, I know, the lasting ambition of his family and loved ones that the cause that was so dear to his heart and which he espoused so strongly might reach fruition with the full provision of an air ambulance service. I have to say to the Minister that he has made the right start, but there needs to be fuller commitment than a mere £200,000 a year. The Department should show its bona fides by capital funding the acquisition and equipping of the helicopter. That would show an example to charitable organisations, which are more than willing to help in the continual running of the

service. So, I trust that the Department will rise to the challenge and that this petition will encourage them to do that in a timely and expeditious manner.

Mr Allister moved forward and laid the petition on the Table.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. I will forward the petition to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and send a copy to the Committee.

Executive Committee Business

Justice (No. 2) Bill: Second Stage

Mr Speaker: I call the Minister of Justice to move the Second Stage of the Justice (No. 2) Bill and open the debate on the Bill.

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): I beg to move

That the Second Stage of the Justice (No. 2) Bill [NIA Bill 57/11-16] be agreed.

As I have said on previous occasions, my intention is to reform our justice process into a better system for all concerned. The Bill before the Assembly today is another step forward in that reform programme, which is being delivered with pace and commitment by my Department and partners across the justice system. I introduced the Bill on 30 June, just one day after the Final Stage of my previous Bill, which you announced yesterday is now the Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2015. Finishing one piece of legislation and immediately following it with another is a demonstration of that commitment to improve the effectiveness of our justice system.

As we approach the end of the first full Assembly mandate for the Department of Justice, it is worth recalling that much has been achieved in the field of criminal justice legislation. As an Assembly in this mandate, we have already enacted four major pieces of legislation. The Criminal Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2013 improved sex offender monitoring and notification arrangements and created a new fingerprint and DNA retention framework. The Legal Aid and Coroners' Courts Act (Northern Ireland) 2014 opened a new chapter in the management of legal aid through the creation of the Legal Services Agency. The Justice Act 2015 improved services for victims and witnesses of crime and introduced a number of measures to speed up the justice system and to make it more efficient and effective. Of course, Members will recall that my Department also worked extremely closely with Lord Morrow on the development and progression of the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015.

The devolution of justice powers and the ability of a devolved Justice Minister to deliver local solutions to local problems has been a major achievement of the Assembly, with Minister, Department, arm's-length bodies, NGOs and the Committee all working together. We have a much improved criminal justice system today as a result of devolution.

The principles behind the Justice (No. 2) Bill are a much improved fine collection process for all concerned; the freeing up of valuable police and prison time and resources; better options for courts and, indeed, offenders; and better inspection and accountability mechanisms. As a consequence, the Bill will deliver a more effective and efficient justice system, which will be a fairer and better justice system for all.

As I have already indicated, the Bill is about transforming our justice system, particularly in one key area: how we collect and enforce financial penalties set by the courts. The current law on fine collection and enforcement has been in existence, unreformed, for many years, largely since 1981 but in some instances as far back as the 1940s. There is a long-standing problem with significant levels of non-payment leading to increasing levels of default

and a historical problem of people ending up in prison for short periods, when providing other ways in which to avoid default would be much better for them, their families and the justice system.

I have said on numerous occasions in the House and elsewhere that the current system represents a dreadful misuse of police time and a waste of costly prison resources, which brings the credibility of the fine — a mainstay of court sentencing — into disrepute. Reform has been, and will continue to be, a major task for us. It is important that we get it right, and I believe that the Bill delivers a better and fairer system for all concerned.

Part 1 of the Bill creates a completely new approach to the collection and enforcement of financial penalties. It reforms the collection process, increases options for offenders to manage and pay their fines, and increases the opportunities for service in the community instead of imprisonment when people do not pay their fine. The provisions, of course, will apply to more than fines. Financial penalties coming within the scope of the scheme will include compensation orders, the offender levy, costs and unpaid fixed penalties that are registered in court. The Bill also increases the payment options available to those being fined as well as the collection options available to the court and the collection officer to secure payment.

An important feature of the new collection scheme will be the prioritisation that must be followed when the court, or the collection officer, is considering its options. If needed, voluntary arrangements will be adopted first by the granting of additional time to pay or by payment by instalments. Following that, a deductions order arrangement can be made, voluntarily in the first instance. If those are unsuccessful, the supervised activity order can be used by the court to require community-based work instead.

The Bill therefore provides considerable assistance to those who are sometimes described as the "can't-pays", but there are also more stringent options built in for the "won't-pays". For the more wilful defaulter, who has the ability to pay but does not, the collection officer will refer the case back to the court, where other options will be available. The court can consider direct access to a bank account and in certain circumstances can even order the seizure of a vehicle. The last resort of the court should be committal to custody. However, the package as proposed will see those numbers reduce to only a residual level. A much wider range of options will be available at first instance and at the default hearing if an offender is referred back to the court for non-payment. The benefits of that system will be seen in the freeing-up of police and prison resources, in the focus on collecting money rather than immediate punishment for non-payment and in helping offenders themselves deal with their fines and avoid imprisonment.

A small but key feature of the Bill will see an important change to the law for children and the payment of fines. I do not think that this has ever happened, but, in law, it is still technically possible for a child to go into custody purely for not paying a fine. Even that legal possibility is unacceptable, and the Bill will remove that option from the law. In future, only non-custodial options will be available, including additional time to pay, payment by instalments and the use of the attendance centre order as a community option.

Parts 2 and 3 of the Bill make two key improvements to our prison services. They create in statute a Prison Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and provide a scheme whereby certain prisoners liable for deportation at the end of their sentence can opt for early removal from the United Kingdom, before the end of their sentence. Placing the Prison Ombudsman on a statutory footing has been a goal of mine for a number of years, and I am pleased to give it effect in the Bill. The Bill sets out in law the main functions of the ombudsman, which are to deal with complaints, death in custody investigations and those investigations requested by my Department. Some of those functions are currently carried out on a non-statutory basis, but the Bill now enshrines those in statute and removes any grounds for misconception about the Prison Ombudsman's independence from the Prison Service. There will be a duty on parties to an investigation to cooperate with the ombudsman's investigation, which must also produce a report after an investigation. The ombudsman will have a right of entry to prison premises and the juvenile justice centre, as well as powers of access to documents needed for his investigations.

I view the placing of the office on a statutory footing as an important public signal in reinforcing the independent nature of the post.

10.45 am

The Bill provides for a voluntary scheme to allow foreign national prisoners who are already subject to compulsory removal from the UK to have their sentence reduced to facilitate that removal. Schemes that allow for the early removal of foreign national prisoners have been established in Scotland since 2011 and in England and Wales since 2004. They reflect national government policy to remove a financial burden on the taxpayer by returning foreign criminals to their home country earlier than would otherwise be the case. That generates savings in custody costs and frees up valuable cell and bed space.

I must emphasise that this scheme, as set out in clauses 43 and 44, will not introduce deportation or removal. It will simply allow that process to be accelerated by providing for the early removal of foreign nationals whom the sentencing court has already determined should be removed on completion of their sentence or whom the Home Office's immigration service has decided have breached the conditions of their leave to remain in the UK.

The scheme relates to determinate-sentenced prisoners only. A prisoner must be serving a sentence of at least six months and have served at least one half of the requisite custodial period before removal can take place. The maximum time a prisoner may be removed early is 135 days, although removal can take place at any time between then and the end of the sentence.

Crucially, and this is a change to the scheme as originally envisaged, removal can take place only with the agreement of the prisoner, and this mirrors the position in Scotland. A prisoner so released who returns to Northern Ireland before his original sentence expiry date will be detained for a period equal in length to the outstanding custodial period or until his sentence expiry date, whichever is sooner. Those returning after the original sentence expiry date will be the responsibility of the Home Office's immigration service.

Part 3 expands the scope of lay visitor inspections of police stations. Currently, only stations designated by the Chief Constable are so inspected in law, designated stations being those that have custody suites. A number of stations have custody cells that may be used occasionally, and even though they are already inspected by lay visitors, they are not designated in law. The Bill will place that in statute, and all will be visited on the same basis.

Part 3 also enhances current legislation aimed at tackling sexual offending by extending the scope of the current offence of possessing extreme pornographic material. Under the proposed provision, those possessing an image that depicts rape or other non-consensual sexual acts will be committing an offence. The change will strengthen the law in this area, thereby providing better public protection, and it will put our law on the same footing as that in the rest of the United Kingdom, where similar provision has already been made to deal with this category of extreme pornographic image.

Part 4 provides for ancillary matters, regulations and orders and commencement arrangements. It is probably worth my saying a few words about two particular provisions in this Part: clause 45, "Ancillary provision", and clause 46, "Regulations and orders". Members, particularly those who are members of the Justice Committee, will remember the debate on the supplementary, incidental, consequential and transitional provisions in the previous Justice Bill and, in particular, the order-making powers of what was clause 86, which the Committee thought were too broadly drafted. Clauses 45 and 46 in this Bill raise similar issues.

Recognising the Committee's concerns, I intend to put forward an amendment at Consideration Stage to reflect the agreed way forward that was secured for the previous Bill. Unfortunately, the timings of the two Bills meant that it was not possible to reflect that revised wording in this Bill before approval to introduce. However, the Committee need not have concerns, as we will engage with it and discuss that issue from the beginning.

For completeness, I should flag other amendments and further provisions that, with Executive approval, I intend to put forward in due course. Currently, the fine default hearing process, under which offenders can be returned to court to have their default reviewed, can be frustrated by defaulters simply not turning up for the hearing. If the court is not satisfied that notice has been served, the case must sit in abeyance. As drafted, the Bill will strengthen this process by moving from a notice to attend procedure to a summons procedure.

To further strengthen attendance at fine default hearings, I propose that courts have a power to issue an arrest warrant for police to use in certain circumstances of non-attendance. Where police then encounter a person who is in default, they will be able to arrest them and release them on court bail for a future default hearing appearance. Coming at the end of the new collection process, which will already have seen a series of collection options considered, the number of non-attenders at fine default hearings should be low, but I feel that an additional power of arrest should be available to police to maintain the integrity of the fine collection and default hearing process as a deterrent to those who might seek to ignore the call back to the court.

I am also looking at the need for provision on information sharing in support of the provisions in the Bill that require offenders to provide the necessary earnings and income information to collection officers so that the correct collection option can be chosen. If an offender does not provide the information to the collection officer, he commits an offence that can result in further prosecution. To avoid the situation whereby a collection officer can be frustrated by non-compliance in his attempts to secure income details, I propose to enhance the Bill's approach to information access and sharing in that area. I intend to bring forward an amendment to allow collection officers to better identify and pursue those who simply do not comply. By way of my proposed amendment, collection officers will have access to employment, earnings or benefits information where an offender refuses to cooperate with the process.

Members will remember that, as part of the previous Justice Bill, I also gave commitments to bring forward amendments to firearms legislation in this Bill. The detail of those changes is still being finalised, but I intend to introduce a system to enable firearms dealers to exchange a firearm for a licence holder within a band. There will be bands or groups of firearms, such as air rifles, small quarry rimfire rifles, fox calibre centrefire rifles and larger centrefire calibre deer rifles, and a holder will be able to trade in a rifle in a band for another in that band as long as certain conditions are met. I also intend to introduce a provision on the age at which a young person can use a shotgun. The amendment will permit a person of 12 years of age or older to be in possession of a shotgun in a police-approved clay target range while under the supervision of a person who has held a shotgun on certificate for at least five years. Further to that, I intend to permit a person, from the age of 16, to engage in all shotgun activities — sporting and vermin uses — under existing supervision requirements. Finally, in respect of firearms, I will bring forward an amendment to deal with a small number of fee types in the Bill, and a larger body of work on reforming current fees will be taken forward by secondary legislation.

I believe that my Department and the Committee for Justice have a good record of working in partnership. I would like to thank Committee members for their interest and support for the Bill. With less than a full session remaining, their support to date and ongoing commitment to deliver this important legislation has been greatly appreciated. There will, I am sure, be a need for additional amendments to be taken forward in light of the Committee's scrutiny of the Bill, and my officials and I look forward to working with the Committee to further improve the Bill as it progresses through the Assembly.

In conclusion, let me remind the House of what I said at the beginning. This is a Bill that will provide a much improved fine collection process for all concerned; the freeing up of valuable police and prison time and resources; better options for courts and, indeed, offenders; and better inspection and accountability mechanisms. As a piece, it will have strategic significance and operational importance for the justice system in Northern Ireland. The Bill is designed to deliver a justice system that is more effective and efficient and is fairer and better. It will be another important step forward in my programme of criminal justice reform. I commend the Bill to the House.

Mr Ross (The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice): I am pleased, as Chairman of the Committee, to speak briefly on behalf of the Committee during the Second Stage of the Justice (No. 2) Bill. As the Minister said, it comes hot on the heels of passing the Justice (No. 1) Bill. The Minister may be accused of many things, but coming up with catchy titles for his legislation cannot be one of them.

As the Minister outlined, the Bill is designed to address a range of key areas, including fine default and the system of collecting financial penalties. Whilst much of the attention may be further down the hill, this is important legislation that the Committee has been calling for for some time. It can have a real impact in the community and be reforming legislation as well.

The Justice Committee is well aware of the problems associated with the current fine default and collection scheme.

In its report, published in January, on the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service trust statement for the year ended 31 March 2013, the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) highlighted that the value of unpaid financial penalties was significant and the Comptroller and Auditor General had raised concerns about the fine collection and enforcement measures and the system for dealing with fine defaulters. The PAC found that, despite the significant levels of outstanding debt, the Department of Justice had failed to coordinate a joined-up approach to fine collection and that, as a result, governance arrangements were unacceptable. That has contributed to a number of failings including 6,682 paper warrants with a value of £1.1 million going missing and suspected fraud. The Committee has also requested and considered regular updates on developments following the judgement delivered by the Divisional Court in five judicial reviews relating to the arrangements for imposing and enforcing fines and other monetary penalties.

Figures provided by the Department to the Committee earlier this year indicated that the total outstanding debt at 31 March 2014 was £22.684 million, of which, it estimated, £7.335 million was impaired and unlikely to be collected. In these times of financial constraint, those are wasted funds that could be put to very good use, and that is totally unacceptable. The Committee meets many groups from across different communities in Northern Ireland and hears of their struggles to get funding and of funding being cut. We have heard pleas from NIACRO about the Drug Arrest Referral and Harm Reduction Service and from the Probation Board, the Youth Justice Agency and the Safety Centre Alliance's Risk Avoidance and Danger Awareness Resource (RADAR). All those areas need funding and have been unable to get it. That £7.335 million of outstanding money, whilst it would not cover all those issues, could at least help out some of those projects.

The costs associated with enforcing the current system are also significant. It takes up substantial police time and results in a large number of very short terms of imprisonment with the associated costs to the prison system. That is an issue that I have raised in recent weeks.

As I have illustrated, it is clear that urgent reform of the fine enforcement and collection mechanisms is required and, indeed, is long overdue. Having received written and oral briefings on proposals to change the system as far back as

2011, the Committee welcomes the Bill. We will, however, wish to scrutinise the provisions in detail, particularly those in relation to fine collection and enforcement. Areas that the Committee explored in this regard with departmental officials during a briefing on the principles of the Bill included the estimated cost savings of the proposed new system; the estimated cost of the civilian-based collection service; the potential difficulties for fine collection officers in accessing relevant information and how that could be addressed; how the proposed system of deductions from benefits would work in practice; and the standard of proof required in determining whether a person is wilfully or deliberately defaulting on a fine. I have no doubt that we will wish to return to those issues and discuss them with key stakeholders during Committee Stage.

The Committee has considered a research paper on the fine enforcement mechanisms in other common law jurisdictions to assist its scrutiny of that part of the Bill, and we are interested in exploring further the possibility of providing some offenders with the opportunity of satisfying a fine by undertaking appropriate treatment, such as mental health, drug or alcohol treatment, as an alternative to community service or unpaid work. Indeed, the whole area of problem-solving courts is something that I have mentioned in recent weeks, and I know that the Committee will explore that in our justice innovation seminars in the coming months.

I turn briefly to some of the other provisions. The Committee has received written and oral briefings and has had the opportunity to consider the key policy content of those provisions. Putting the Prisoner Ombudsman on a statutory footing is something that the Minister mentioned in his opening speech. The practical outworkings of that may not be significant, but I think that it will assist him in fulfilling his key functions. The Committee will also welcome the provision to extend the offence of possession of extreme pornography to include depictions of rape. As the Minister said, the proposed change will provide the same protection in law in Northern Ireland as is the case in England and Wales and Scotland.

I do, however, want to express some concern regarding the open nature of the Bill and the fact that it covers a mix and match of policy areas. My view, which is shared by other members of the Committee, is that, if the Minister wanted to avoid the often unhelpful situation in which MLAs can table amendments on a range of issues that are not particularly related to the content of the Bill, due to its wide scope, he should perhaps have considered tabling two separate Bills rather than including everything in what is effectively a miscellaneous provisions Bill. I accept that it perhaps provides an opportunity to mop up some other areas towards the end of a mandate. Indeed, in the last Bill, the Minister brought forward provisions regarding human trafficking legislation, and if he intends to bring forward some amendments on firearms issues in this Bill, Members will welcome that. However, I think that, towards the end of a mandate, a Bill such as this attracts Members from all parties, including my own, who table amendments that he may consider unhelpful.

11.00 am

Given the pressing need to improve the system of fine enforcement and collection and the limited time available until the end of the mandate, the Committee has agreed

to make the scrutiny of the Bill and the completion of Committee Stage, assuming it passes Second Stage today, a priority in our forward work programme. We will, however, wish to take the necessary time to ensure that the legislative proposals for a new fines collection system fully address the deficiencies that have been identified.

In conclusion, I also welcome the fact that the Minister has given a commitment this morning to propose an amendment on what has commonly been referred to as the clause 86 issue. The Committee can take some heart from the fact that the Department has clearly received the message that it was given by the Committee that we want to ensure that we have maximum scrutiny of legislation and that such clauses are unhelpful in that scrutiny process. I welcome the fact that the Minister has committed to do that.

On behalf of the Committee, I support the principles of the Bill and look forward to getting into the detail of it at Committee Stage.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the fact that we have now reached the Second Stage of the Justice (No. 2) Bill. We look forward to it passing through to Committee Stage, where much of the scrutiny and detail will come to the fore.

I have a number of brief observations. We broadly support the principles relating to fine default in Part 1. We have seen over a long number of years, particularly in Committee, how that issue seems not to go away and has posed particular problems for those who are left to collect fines. It has never really been properly tackled. In principle, we welcome the idea of the way in which the Department seeks to do this. There are some issues, and we flagged those up with the officials when they were at the Committee. In particular, they are about how deductions will come from benefits, and we need to see the detail of that and the freezing of assets. If someone is deemed to have to pay a fine, whatever benefits are deducted — if they have to be deducted, and we have reservations about that that we will come to in time — other family members should not be punished unnecessarily for the misdemeanour of someone else. We like the idea that those in default of paying a fine would, where possible, be “punished” by community-based projects rather than the collection process. We will certainly explore that. I welcome the fact that the Minister has proposed that no child will end up going to prison as a result of not paying a fine. When the Prison Service has been before the Committee, it has flagged up, for a long number of years, the large number of people who find themselves in prison for not paying fines, the cost to the system, how it fragments the system and all the other valuable work on rehabilitation that is sometimes curtailed as a result of that. The idea of ensuring that no one is in prison as a result of fine default is very welcome.

With Part 2, the Minister is aware that we have supported the idea of ensuring that the Prison Ombudsman is placed on a statutory footing. It is laid out very clearly how we will progress that through the Bill. There may be some issues, but the detail of that will come out. When there is a criminal investigation or a health and safety aspect, we want the protocols for the circumstances in which the ombudsman would defer and how he could reinitiate an investigation on how a family or the prison administration would be made aware of that.

There are other aspects that I will not go into today because we broadly support the Bill in principle. The Chair outlined the concerns on what is now called “clause 86” and the steps that the Minister is taking to protect himself from that in the future. I will allay the Minister’s fears, in case he thinks that that happens only with his Bills: there has already been a discussion at the Ad Hoc Committee about the joint Bill, which has similar provisions. I am sure that, as we take that Bill forward, there will be some discussion on that.

Again, I echo the comments of the Chair on the open nature of the Bill. The Minister will be well aware that we have been critical of Members using, legitimately, the openness of justice Bills to bring in amendments that were not part of the general outline of the Bill, and, in many ways, took the focus away from the original intention. Where possible, we should try and avoid that.

The Chair said that sometimes there is a mop-up at the end of a mandate. That is understandable in these circumstances. As we go forward, we are certainly hoping, and ready, for the scrutiny required at Committee Stage.

Mr A Maginness: I support, in the main, the principles of the Bill. I congratulate the Minister on bringing forward this piece of legislation dealing with a number of issues, in particular the vexed issue of fine defaulters, which has concentrated the minds of not just the Minister and the Department but the Committee for quite a number of years. It has also concentrated the minds of those who are trying to manage the Prison Service, because the unwelcome, though brief, incarceration of fine defaulters has tended to undermine the effective and efficient administration of the Prison Service, causing difficulties in management and unnecessary expenditure that might usefully be saved and invested into other prison services. This is a vexed, and not a minor, issue. It is an issue that has troubled many for quite some time, not just in this jurisdiction. Hundreds, if not thousands, going to prison each year for fine defaulting tends to clog up the system. Therefore, there needs to be a comprehensive and effective way of dealing with fine defaulters.

I believe that, contained in this Bill, there is the hope and promise of remedying this problem by putting in place an effective and modern system for dealing with fine defaulters. The Minister has brought forward proposals that, as far as I can see, deal as comprehensively as possible with the issue of fine defaulting. He has struck a balance between creating voluntary arrangements with fine defaulters and dealing much more directly with those who refuse to cooperate with the system. The balance that the Minister has established in the clauses he has presented before us is a good one. We in the Committee will analyse and scrutinise the clauses in detail in due course.

We have to be mindful of those who, because of their financial and social circumstances, find it difficult to pay fines. We must be humane, considerate and understand the plight of people in such circumstances. Our approach has to be balanced, whether that be through an attachment of earnings or through deductions from social security or other benefits. We have to consider very carefully the circumstances that people find themselves in. My colleague Mr McGlone and I will approach the issue very carefully. We do not want to exacerbate the plight of people who find themselves having serious difficulty in managing their lives. We have to consider that people are like that, and we have to be compassionate. At the same

time, it is right and proper that powers are given to the state to deal effectively with fine defaulting.

Of course, it is not simply about defaulting on fines. It is also about compensation orders and so forth. It is unfair that victims of crime who receive compensation orders are deprived of the benefit of those orders by people defaulting. It is, therefore, right and proper that we make arrangements in relation to that as well.

The Minister’s division between “can’t pay” and “won’t pay” is a useful one and will be a useful guide and benchmark for the Committee in considering the clauses before us. I do not believe that any child has been incarcerated as a result of fine defaulting, but the very fact that that could technically be done, according to the statute book, is offensive, and that power ought to be removed.

I will move on to the Prisoner Ombudsman, and I say that deliberately, because we have a Prisoner Ombudsman; not a Prison Ombudsman. That may be a fine point of detail, and it may be irritating to nitpick about the title, but I am not entirely convinced that it would be correct to change the title from Prisoner Ombudsman to Prison Ombudsman. The purpose of the ombudsman’s office, as I understand it — I might be wrong on this — is to deal with maladministration in relation to prisoners and not in relation to the prison. Maybe I am wrong; maybe I have a narrower view of the purpose of the ombudsman’s office, but I think that we should carefully consider the title. It may, in practice, be a meaningless distinction to make, but I would prefer the term “Prisoner Ombudsman” at this time. However, I am open to persuasion. Can the Minister explain why he prefers “Prison Ombudsman”? Unless there is a considerable change in the substance of the remit of the Prisoner Ombudsman, I would have to be convinced that the change in title is appropriate.

I welcome what the Minister is doing in relation to the Prisoner Ombudsman, because a number of ombudsmen have sought to have that office exist on a statutory basis.

It gives greater independence to that office, and that is something that we should congratulate the Minister on doing. I look forward to looking at the detail of that.

11.15 am

I was a little concerned about clause 38, “Guidance to Ombudsman in relation to matters connected with national security”. When I see “national security”, alarm bells go off in my ears, and I begin to think, “What is happening here?”. I was listening this morning to the report on the radio about the fishermen who encountered a British submarine and were dragged back by it. In fact, their boat nearly capsized, which, of course, would have imperilled the lives of the fishermen and crew. The circumstances were such that there was a denial by the British navy that there was any involvement of a British naval vessel. That went on for at least three months, until, eventually, they owned up and said, “Yes, we were involved. We’re very sorry, and we want to compensate you for that”. There was a wall of silence from the naval authorities — effectively, the state. It was not just a wall of silence but silence about their responsibility and at least one denial, if not more, of involvement. Happily, that incident has been resolved, in so far as the naval authorities have admitted involvement and so forth.

It could be that, in such circumstances, the state and the Ministry of Defence could say, "Well, it's a national security matter. Therefore, we don't reveal anything". That was a minor incident in some respects but a major incident for the people who were involved. When we talk about national security in relation to the ombudsman's work, particularly deaths in custody, which the ombudsman will investigate under the Bill — he already has powers to do that — we should be extremely careful. There should be maximum transparency. Yes, there may be a need for some residual protection, but we have to look at the guidance, as it is called, very carefully to ensure that we are not in some way tying the hands of the Prisoner Ombudsman. I raise that issue, and we will come to it and consider it. I know that the issues are politically very sensitive, but we have a history and an experience here that has been rather tragic and regrettable and we should not simply give a blank cheque for issues involving national security.

There are provisions concerning the transfer of foreign prisoners. That is a right and proper thing to do in the circumstances. My understanding, if the Minister will confirm it, is that that is a voluntary procedure on foot of what the —

Mr Ford: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: Yes.

Mr Ford: I am happy to confirm that it is a voluntary procedure, as is the case in Scotland at present.

Mr A Maginness: I was going to make a further point, although it is probably academic, given that it is an entirely voluntary procedure. I was wondering whether EU citizens came under this provision. I was not sure from reading the Bill whether that was the case. Is a distinction made in the Bill between foreign prisoners and EU prisoners? Certainly, transfer is a right and proper way of proceeding, and I have no problems in principle with that.

I was not aware that lay visitors could not visit all police premises. The Bill fills that gap, which is welcome. I welcome the provision in relation to sexual offences; it is a right and proper protection. The possession of pornographic images of rape and assault by penetration is, quite properly, covered, which everybody in the House and indeed outside it would welcome.

The Bill is to be welcomed. We look forward to the Committee's work in scrutinising it. I am sure that issues that we have not yet detected in these proceedings will occur during the Committee's scrutiny. The Committee takes its work extremely seriously. We are blessed with good leadership from the Chairperson and, indeed, the Deputy Chairperson, if I might say so, and people take their work seriously. The work will be conducted on a very serious basis. I will finish by saying that the Minister's approach to reforming the system of justice is a proper one and one that is now bearing fruit.

Mr Speaker: As this is the first debate in which the Assembly will hear from Mr Neil Somerville, I remind the House that it is the convention that a maiden speech is made without interruption. Mr Somerville, you were present yesterday during another maiden speech, so you are aware that there is a health warning attached.

Mr Somerville: Thank you, Mr Speaker. It is a great honour and privilege to participate in the debate on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party. This is my maiden speech,

and, as is customary, I pay tribute to my predecessor, Tom Elliott MP, and the constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone. I know all too well that Tom was a tireless worker for the people of the constituency. From Dungannon to Belleek, he was held in high esteem because of the work he put in and the results he delivered on behalf of all sides of the community. Tom received his reward in May when the voters returned him to Westminster as their Member of Parliament. I place on record how much I look forward to working with Tom and my council colleagues on behalf of all the people of Fermanagh and South Tyrone.

I was born and bred in Aughnacloy. I was educated there and have spent most of my working life between Fermanagh and south Tyrone. I will continue to work for and represent that constituency, the most westerly in the United Kingdom. In Fermanagh and South Tyrone, we have some of the finest scenery in the British Isles: we have the lakes of Fermanagh and the rolling hills of the Clogher valley. It is a rural constituency where agriculture and the agrifood industry play key roles in the local economy. In Dungannon, the ancient capital of Ulster, and Enniskillen, we have two of the finest county towns in Northern Ireland. I promise to be a firm advocate for the constituency and all its people.

Having read through the Bill and listened to other speakers' comments, I am pleased to say that I can see that there is much here that is common sense that, if implemented, would improve the administration of justice in Northern Ireland. The Bill affects four areas. First, it aims to improve current arrangements for the collection and enforcement of financial penalties. Secondly, it aims to improve the provision of prison services in Northern Ireland. Thirdly, it aims to improve upon current statutory provisions in relation to sex offending. Fourthly, it aims to improve lay-visiting arrangements in police stations.

I am a firm believer that punishments must fit the crime, and I am certainly not a supporter of soft options in sentencing. For me, punishment and deterrence are key aspects of the sentencing policy. That having been said, it is clear that our justice system has had to deal with a significant number of people who have failed to pay fines, and it is not cost-effective to see them jailed for short periods. I understand that, over the three-year period from 2010 to 2012, over 6,000 people went to prison for the non-payment of fines. Most of those were what is termed relatively minor offences, for example, motoring convictions, and the average time spent in prison was four days. In addition, the police were tasked with executing up to 30,000 warrants a year. Quite clearly, there is a case to be made that that is not a good use of police time or prison capacity. I am content that the consultation process has resulted in provisions in the Bill relating to an expanding use of community supervision and a civilian-based system for collection of fines, largely removing the police from their current enforcement role. However, I seek assurances that non-custodial sentences are not seen as a soft option and that meaningful punishment is the order of the day. That is important to maintain deterrence.

I am broadly content with the proposal to create a statutory office of prison ombudsman. I am acutely aware of the difficult job that we have asked our prison officers to do. Ordinary rank-and-file officers have great concerns about staff morale, manning levels and staff safety. I appeal to the Minister that the ombudsman does not become

an instrument for prisoners and ex-prisoners to conduct witch-hunts or petty grievance cases against a brave body of men and women who are charged with doing a difficult job that few of us wish to do ourselves.

With regard to early removal of prisoners who are foreign nationals, I am content that Northern Ireland should adhere as closely as possible to the arrangements and operations in the rest of the United Kingdom. It is, however, important that sentences should be seen as appropriate punishments and of sufficient severity to deter others. People who have committed offences should have their liberty removed and their lives disrupted. Northern Ireland should not be seen as a soft prison regime. The provision for lay visiting is non-contentious, having already been agreed with the Policing Board. Therefore, I have no desire to reopen that debate.

I wholeheartedly agree with the provisions regarding the possession of extreme pornographic material. It will extend the existing offence of possession of extreme pornographic images to include the possession of extreme images of rape or other non-consensual acts. It is an offence that exists in England and Wales and that the Justice Committee has asked to be brought forward to Northern Ireland. I imagine that the entire House will be happy to support that proposal.

I look forward to playing my part on the Justice Committee, and I am content to support the Justice (No. 2) Bill.

Mr Dickson: I welcome the introduction of the Bill and the detail that we have gained about it today, which I believe is very useful.

It might be useful to suggest that history will perhaps judge the Assembly rather harshly for its work rate, but I do not think that it will judge the Minister harshly, because he has an immense work rate when it comes to delivering justice and legislation on justice for all the citizens of Northern Ireland, looking to the previous Bill and at the way in which he worked with Lord Morrow on crafting the legislation on the Human Trafficking Bill.

11.30 am

The Bill, if we get the time and space to progress it, will tackle important issues in the delivery of a fair and efficient justice system. It will be another step forward in the delivery of criminal justice reform that I genuinely believe the Minister and the Assembly can be proud of. It may indeed be one of the few lasting legacies of the Assembly, if and when it is enacted.

Many of the provisions have already been gone through in detail, and I do not think it is necessary for me to rehearse them again. I see sighs of relief around the Chamber. Obviously, I will support the Minister on the Bill, but it is equally important that the Committee has an opportunity to scrutinise the provisions as and when appropriate changes, ideas and suggestions come forward. Working with the Department is an important aspect of what the Committee does. I genuinely do not think that you will get a better example of a Committee working with a Department than the Justice Department and Justice Committee.

Members have referred to the reform of fine collection. Having said that I do not want to go through each item in the Bill, I genuinely believe that that is one of the key areas in respect of it and it is important that we look at that. The

Minister's description of the "can't-pays" versus the "won't-pays" is an important area for us. When it comes to the Committee's scrutiny of the legislation, I predict that that will be the one area that many outside bodies will want to come and speak to the Committee about, as well as about the mechanisms involved in dealing with that.

In previous legislation the Committee has had a number of innovative ways of dealing with issues that perhaps attract a lot of attention. We have done that on the basis of bringing a number of people together to listen to what they say. That has also improved both the Committee's scrutiny and the timetabling of its work.

All of the elements of the Bill are important to us. I wish the Minister and the Department well, and I know that the Committee, under its Chair, Mr Ross, will do its job in delivering its critique of the Bill and working with the Department to deliver that for everyone. Those positive relationships that exist between the Department and the Committee will take the Bill through.

I share some of the caution in respect of how we deal with amendments to a Bill that comes to us not only at the end of a mandate but of a mandate that is coming to an end in very difficult circumstances. However, I believe that, given a fair wind and the level of cooperation that has been clearly demonstrated by the Minister and the Committee in the past, we can have a successful Justice (No. 2) Bill.

Mr Douglas: I am pleased to welcome the Second Stage of the Bill. We will be looking at a range of issues, but, first of all, I welcome and wish the very best to the new Member, Neil Somerville. I thought that he gave an excellent speech. He mentioned all of the good, wonderful and noble things about Fermanagh, but he forgot to mention two major assets in Fermanagh. One is Minister Arlene Foster and the other one — probably more importantly to me today — is Kyle Lafferty, who scored a wonderful goal last night at Windsor Park. Excuse me; my voice is a wee bit hoarse this morning. When he scored that goal, he ran up to the stand in front of me, and I just wish that I had been able to reach out and hug him. What a night for Northern Ireland.

I certainly agree with the Minister that much has been achieved in this mandate. There has been a very good relationship between the Minister, the Department and the Committee. I echo the sentiments of other Members on our Chair and Deputy Chair. I think they have provided excellent leadership in the Justice Committee. For me, it shows what can be done when we work together. We have our own opinions and difficulties, but we can put the good of justice in Northern Ireland right to the forefront and work together.

I believe that we are on the right road to transforming justice. Reform is needed, and the Minister outlined that. One thing that we have been involved in — we have mentioned it before — is that our Chair, Alastair Ross, has introduced innovation seminars to look at new ways to do justice better and more humanely in many ways and to look at reducing costs, which affect all of us right across not just Northern Ireland but the United Kingdom and Europe.

I will briefly mention Part 1, which relates to fine collection and enforcement. There is a television programme that I am sure most of us have watched, 'Can't Cook, Won't Cook'; I fit into both those categories. The Minister talked about "can't-pays" and "won't-pays", which is a very good description. I agree with Alban Maginness that, with this

aspect, we really need to remember where many of the people who cannot pay are coming from. In my office, I very often see people who are struggling with life itself and paying bills. Let us have a real sense of openness, awareness and grace when we look at those people who definitely cannot pay. The last thing that we want is for people to end up incarcerated. We all know what prison can do to people. Often, people go into prison and get involved in a range of activities and associations, and they come out worse than they went in.

As the Minister said, there are schemes that benefit the community. In my constituency of East Belfast, the Probation Board for Northern Ireland has introduced excellent schemes in which people are participating. We often think that those people are young or middle-aged, but I have met elderly people who have been on those schemes, which have helped them.

At the moment, there are cuts right across Northern Ireland, including in the community and voluntary sector, and there is an opportunity to try to support those groups with their long-term sustainability because many of them have had funding withdrawn. We all know about Peace money and that many of those groups struggle with other aspects of funding. I look forward to consultation with many of those groups and stakeholders, who have been very helpful to us.

I agree with the Minister that the Bill addresses issues of concern. The costs associated with people who fail to pay and do not want to pay have been raised a number of times. We all know the financial pressures that our prisons are under and that they are under-resourced. I was in Maghaberry prison earlier this week, and the staff there are doing a wonderful job, but they are struggling with sickness and pressures. The principles will definitely free up prisoners, staff and resources.

I support the principles of the Bill and look forward to working with the Committee, the stakeholders, the Minister and his officials.

Mr B McCrea: There has been some discussion about the miscellaneous nature of the Bill. A number of commentators have spoken about it, and I intend to address the issue.

Some may be wondering why somebody who is not on the Justice Committee is sitting and taking an interest in these proceedings, given that it is not exactly a packed House. I think, as some Members mentioned, that other activity may be taking place elsewhere. Nevertheless, I wish to raise a number of points at this stage and give notice that I intend to follow the proceedings of the Committee in some detail. This comes, of course, of my having had four years' service on the Northern Ireland Policing Board and some time on the Justice Committee itself. So, I am still particularly interested in this.

I will deal first with the issue of community service. I am, in principle, interested in finding different ways of seeing justice delivered, particularly in a more humane process. It is not right that you send people to prison for what are relatively minor offences; there must be some better way of dealing with these issues. I am not saying that I have a solution for it just now, but we need to examine how we convince the public that this is not a soft issue or a soft solution — a point that Mr Somerville made in his maiden speech, which I congratulate him on. We have to persuade

the public that we are not going soft on issues and are trying to find the best way forward.

The Chair would like to intervene.

Mr Ross: I thank the Member for giving way. It is not an attack in any way on him personally, but perhaps one of the issues in justice, and I have said this before in my justice innovation seminars, is that perhaps we always frame justice issues on whether we are seen as being soft or tough on crime. How we should actually frame these discussions is on what works and does not work.

Particularly in this area of alternatives to short prison sentences, look at the example in the United States, particularly around New York, where they have introduced problem-solving courts. We can see quite clearly that this benefits the community because it reduces reoffending and makes a positive difference. That is particularly so in areas around those who cannot pay, which some Members have mentioned. Others may spend their money on feeding other habits. Unless we also address the cause of where they are spending their money or the cause of the crime as well as punishment, they will inevitably reoffend. So, I take his point, but it is important that we frame discussions about justice on what works and does not work, have evidence-based proposals and very much focus on the delivery of positive outcomes.

Mr B McCrea: I am grateful to Mr Ross for the explanation. In his contribution, Mr Maginness was very generous in praising the exemplary leadership provided by you and the Deputy Chair.

Since we are in a spirit of togetherness on this, I will say that I am sympathetic to, and understanding of, the point that the Chair has raised. I think that it is a debate, though, that we should not be afraid to have. We should be able to explain it to people. At the risk of raising a thorny issue, it is something that we will have to look at. There are issues about community service and about whether, to use a tabloid headline, we have "name-and-shame" type provisions or whether this is something that is best done in a more anonymous manner. We need to address these matters. One of the issues that victims of crime have with the justice system is that it seems to take a very long time for anything to happen, and then nobody really remembers that there was any form of punishment. So, there is a balance about the right way forward that needs to be considered properly by the Committee. I am not prejudging it; I am saying only that there is an issue about community service that I think we will want to deal with.

The more substantive bit that I want to mention in this contribution is the miscellaneous nature of the Bill, which has been raised a number of times by a number of people. The Chair, the Deputy Chair and even the Alliance Party have said, "Listen, we need to be careful about making this a little wider". The reason why I am here talking at this stage in the Bill is that there is an issue that I think we need to address. It is an issue of public concern. It is an issue that many people have talked about.

In fact, they talk about it incessantly, and I think that we should take the opportunity to deal with it. It is the absence of any replacement for the 1954 legislation on flags and emblems. As you will know, this legislation was repealed in, I think, 1986.

11.45 am

One of the things that I find really distressing is when I see flags flying from lamp posts like tattered rags. You see them all around the place. Now, if we are going to deal with certain other provisions in this Bill, I think that this is also something that we should deal with. You asked the question of whether it is a necessary piece of legislation. Well, I can quote the PSNI's Chief Superintendent Nigel Grimshaw, who said that clearer legislation on flags is needed. He went on:

"Our job is to keep people safe and we will do that, but what I am also making clear is that the legislation around this is ... not specific. In fact, we have to draw on a range of pieces of legislation which are not particularly designed to deal with the issues of flags."

So, although some Members around here have indicated that they want to try to keep this a little tighter, I am giving notice that I intend to introduce amendments on the issue of flying flags from public lamp posts and in other areas. This is an area that I think we will find some support on. I heard the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party say, when he made his great announcement in the Hall, that he would not be averse to their taking down their paramilitary flags and other flags, so we might expect some support there. I will also mention the Alliance councillor Emmet McDonough-Brown, who said that constituents in his area wanted to know why the police appeared to have reversed last year's policy and had not stopped the erection of flags that week — this is around the Belfast area. So I am quite sure that the Alliance Party will be interested in some amendments and might discuss the matter properly. I will also say to my —

Mr Speaker: You have indicated something that you are drawing to our attention. This is not the opportunity to advocate it. This is a discussion about the principles of the Bill. I can say that I am satisfied that you have made that linkage, but this is not the point at which you advocate your argument. You will have that opportunity subsequently if you decide to follow through on that action.

Mr B McCrea: I am happy to take your direction as ever, Mr Speaker, though I thought that I was talking about the general principles. In any case, I will take your direction. The point that I really want to address is that I understand the legislative constraints and that this is a miscellaneous-type Bill. It has been mentioned by the Chair, the Deputy Chair and a member of the Alliance Party —

Mr Speaker: You have already said that, and I accept that.

Mr B McCrea: — so I think that it is legitimate that I say it. I would just like to get support. I think that it is an issue that we would like to deal with, and, of course, I will make the arguments when we come to the appropriate stage.

I will just conclude on the issues that are actually in the Bill. I was aware from the Policing Board of the issue of the extension to the investigation beyond designated police stations. I think that it is right and proper that we should do that. I also think that it is appropriate that we should find an ombudsman for prisons. I am not sure whether it would be for prisoners or prisons, and I will look at the point that Mr Maginness has made. However, in general terms, I am satisfied and supportive of this Bill going through, and I hope that we have —

Mr Douglas: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: Yes.

Mr Douglas: The Member has mentioned flags and emblems. For me, what the Minister is proposing to do is very ambitious given the time constraints. At our last Committee meeting, our Clerk told us that we have 24 weeks. Maybe the Minister could answer this question, although I do not know whether he will be able to answer it or not: where do we draw the line? I am not talking only about this. If someone else or two or three other people come in with amendments, where do we draw the line and say, "Enough is enough, we just do not have the time in this mandate"?

Mr B McCrea: I will address that issue. There is a legislative principle about whether this is a single-purpose or a multipurpose Bill. That is the point that has been raised. It has been established that this is a multiple-purpose Bill and, therefore, it is appropriate for me, as a Member, to bring such amendments as I feel fit. I hope that we will get support for this; I think that it is a matter that we can discuss sensibly and find some sort of resolution to.

Through you, Mr Speaker, I am aware that the Member who raised the point is on record as taking a very liberal, positive and progressive stance on the issue of flags, and I am sure that his record will stand up to scrutiny when we have a discussion on the matter. I hope that he will support dealing with what is a very vexatious issue for many of us. However, the Speaker has asked me not to carry on with this point and I will respect his wishes. I will say, however, that I intend to do this properly and formally. I would like to work with the Minister and his Department, in the same way that he worked with Lord Morrow in detail on his issues, to see that we get a resolution on this. In response to his Alliance Party colleague's statement about whether we are being seen to deliver, I can tell you that many of the issues in the Bill are important but will not catch the public's imagination. The amendment that I will be proposing will certainly say to the public, "We are dealing with an issue that is of concern to you."

Mr Ford: I will start, as I customarily do at Second Stage — it may be slightly different by Consideration Stage — by thanking all those who contributed, particularly for the welcome that has universally been given to the Bill around the Chamber, with a few slight gradations. In particular, I thank Members for the consistent expectations that I have of positive engagement with those who have been on the Committee for some time. I welcome Neil Somerville to his first debate in the Chamber on a Justice Bill and I look forward to working with him. I also welcome the fact that Basil McCrea was the one Member not on the Justice Committee who chose to come and involve himself in this morning's discussion.

I will respond to some of the points, although, as you have just reminded us all, Mr Speaker, the debate is on the general principles of the Bill. I suspect that there was actually very little debate on the principles of the Bill; we are merely looking at how we work things through.

On the first point, a number of contributions were made on the issues of fines and enforcement. Certainly, I think that pretty nearly every Member who spoke referred to finding a proper balance. There is a genuine and entirely reasonable issue about ensuring that families do not suffer over the enforcement of fines, but the reality is, of course,

that, once fines are levied, there will potentially be an effect on the families and dependants of those who are suffering, whether through financial penalties or whether they go to prison over the issue, as they have in the past. I believe that we have the balance right. I am grateful for the fact that a number of people welcomed the general initiatives around what I shorten to the concept of the “can’t-pays”, but there will continue to be the issue of the “won’t-pays”, and that has to be addressed.

A number of Members referred to the unfortunate effects that sending people to prison has on the individual, their family and the Prison Service. If we go back a few years, before the court challenges which put a temporary end to the practice, there were anything up to 2,000 people per year involved. Mr Maginness talked about hundreds, possibly thousands, but around 2,000 people per year were committed to prison for non-payment of fines. The number in prison on any one night was, of course, a very small proportion of the prison population, but the fact that they had to be admitted, all that work had to be done and then they were discharged a few days later was not good for them or the Prison Service. It actually did nothing for their victims in cases that involved things like compensation payments.

I have to differ slightly with the Chair on one point — it is always good to have some slight point of difference to emphasise these things — when he talked, quite reasonably, about the cost of uncollected fines and what we could do with the money. I remind him that fines go into the Consolidated Fund. The Treasury get its hands on it and it does not go to the DOJ. Would that it did; we would certainly put it to better use but, unfortunately, it does not come directly to us.

I also think, as has been highlighted just recently when we look at the good work done by the Probation Service on community service orders, that we have good reason to believe that its work on supervised activity orders in the case of fine default is likely to produce positive benefits for the community, the individuals and voluntary groups that benefit from the work that is done, as well as the individual.

In that context, we are not into southern Alabama, gangs in orange suits and chain mail cleaning the streets. We are talking about giving people positive options, which increase their reparation and their sense of worth, to encourage them not to reoffend. So, we are not talking about naming and shaming; we are talking about ensuring that people get something positive to do.

I also welcome the fact that has been highlighted on the issue of court processes, which are probably at their zenith at the moment in New York city. The concept of case management by judges and more regular engagement with offenders is certainly being seen by some of our district judges at low levels. That is to be welcomed.

I believe that, overall, that package around fines is one that we can look at. I welcome the fact that even Stewart Dickson says he is going to scrutinise my proposals in detail, but the Committee will certainly have a role to play, and, as usual, the Department will engage with the Committee as we fine-tune the detail to ensure that we get what we all want out of that.

I move now to the second key issue. I certainly welcome the general welcome for putting the Prison Ombudsman on a statutory footing. I note with interest that Mr Maginness

effectively said, “What’s in a name?”, and then said, “Maybe there is something in a name” over the question of whether it is the “Prison” or “Prisoner” Ombudsman. Given that, I think, 90% of society believes that the organisation headed by Brendan McGuigan is the criminal justice inspectorate and not the Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland, I sometimes wonder whether the name matters. I refer Alban Maginness to clause 34, which talks about investigations requested by the Department into “any custody-related matter”. That, I think, is why we are talking about a “Prison” Ombudsman and not a “Prisoner” Ombudsman. Frankly, however, if the Committee felt otherwise, I do not think my officials or I would be dying in a ditch over those two letters.

Mr Maginness also referred to the issue of national security, which is in clause 38. We should, of course, remember that there are already in prison rules matters relating to national security, because the Secretary of State has certain roles in decisions over admissions to separated conditions in Maghaberry prison, for example. Although the Prison Service is part of the DOJ, there are powers for the Secretary of State outside that. I think that that is simply a replication of the existing arrangements, but I have no doubt that some members of the Committee — perhaps, not just Mr Maginness — may wish to probe that when we come to Committee Stage. The vice chair is smiling to prove my point.

An issue was raised about the deportation of prisoners from the EU. I stand to be corrected, and we will ensure that details are provided to the Committee, but my understanding is that deportation arrangements can apply to those convicted of certain offences who come from elsewhere in the EU. That can be looked at when the Committee is considering those proposals in detail. Similarly, a point was raised, briefly, about lay visitors to police stations. My understanding is that right of access has always been given to lay visitors to all police stations. The important issue is that this places the inspection of all police station custody facilities on a clear statutory footing. I suspect that Members will welcome that generally, as indeed they will welcome the likes of ensuring that children do not go into custody for non-payment of a fine. As I said, that has not happened, but we want to ensure it does not happen.

There was a rather interesting debate around the openness of the Bill and the possibility for amendments, and, of course, we had to resurrect clause 86, just to prove that this is a justice Bill. The Committee is going to keep me on my toes. In mitigation, I will point out that the clause 86 issue did not first arise on the last Justice Bill; it has been a feature of many Bills from many Departments, including those sponsored by Ministers from political parties whose members on the Committee have attacked me most over the issue. However, I have made it clear that we are looking to address that in the same way as we addressed the matter in the last Bill. So, we can all have a smile and agree that we will work together.

There is a wider issue about amendments to the Bill and the openness of the Bill. In fairness, the reality is that it is not just the last Bill in a mandate which tends to end up, as a Justice Bill, as something of a miscellaneous provisions Bill. That seems to have been the pattern, and it is the pattern not just in this place; it is the pattern elsewhere. Certainly, I would be very happy to send the Committee seven or eight Bills every year, each of which

covered one small, discrete topic and, therefore, could not be ambushed in the Chamber to considerable difficulties, regardless of whether the issue is one on which I tend to, perhaps, agree with the proposer, such as Mr McCrea, or one where I have had difficulties with proposers.

12.00 noon

I was slightly amused when the Chair said that those unhelpful amendments came from all parties, including his own. I think that the word, rather than “including”, should have been “particularly”. With due deference to the Chair, I remind you, Mr Speaker, that amendments are allowed at your discretion and that, with the exception of the issues that I highlighted as likely to come up from previous work, the Chair and the Deputy Chair seem to be encouraging you not to allow additional amendments to come forward. One might make an exception for Mr McCrea, who at least flagged it up at considerable length this morning.

Mr B McCrea: Flagged it up.

Mr Ford: You got the pun.

It might be reasonable to say that having greater discretion in ensuring that amendments are slightly more consistent with what has already been raised in the Chamber would not displease the Department, although that is at your discretion entirely, Mr Speaker, and I will accept your decisions whatever they be on this Bill, as with any other.

Certainly, there is a fundamental question as to how we handle Bills. If the Committee is up to handling lots of small Bills rather than a small number of large Bills in the future, that is no problem to the Department, and, as part of our ongoing positive engagement, we might do that.

I note that we have not yet been here for an hour and a half discussing what is actually very significant legislation. I do not need to repeat the points that I made at the beginning or the points made by other Members around the Chamber. Sometimes I think that the time that we spend in the Chamber on issues is inversely proportional to their importance. On that basis, given the importance of this Bill, I commend it to the House, and I will sit down.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Justice (No. 2) Bill [NIA Bill 57/11-16] be agreed.

Mr Speaker: The Justice (No. 2) Bill will be further debated at its subsequent stages.

I ask Members to take their ease for a moment while we change the top Table.

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

Committee Business

Shared and Integrated Education: Committee Report

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to two hours for the debate. The proposer will have 15 minutes in which to propose the motion and 15 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Weir (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education): I beg to move

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee for Education on its inquiry into shared and integrated education [NIA 194/11-16]; and calls on the Minister of Education to implement the recommendations contained in the report.

I was briefly worried that the Minister might be playing truant, but I see that he has arrived for the start of the debate.

The Committee began its inquiry into shared and integrated education over one year ago. That was two Chairpersons and one Deputy Chairperson ago. Unlike with the previous report, I have at least been the Chair for the latter stages of this one. It sometimes feels as though I am taking credit for another colleague’s homework, but at least I had the opportunity to write a few notes in the margin for this report.

I begin by thanking my Committee colleagues, past and present, for their contribution to this important work, particularly my two predecessors as Chair, Mervyn Storey and Michelle McIlveen.

It is the case that Education Committee members always enjoy visiting schools, listening to teachers and finding out at first hand what is happening at what used to be called the chalkface but, I suppose, is more an interactive white board nowadays. This inquiry was no exception.

At the start of the debate, I would like to take time to thank sincerely the schools that hosted our meetings and the teachers and principals who took time out to attend our evidence sessions. In particular, I thank the schoolchildren who participated in our focus groups and the other informal evidence events.

The Committee values and enjoys its interactions with representative groups. These are generally very useful and provide an invaluable perspective for the Committee’s deliberations. In respect of this inquiry, I would like to thank the very large number of organisations, totalling over 80, that responded and provided their views. It is also worth mentioning that the subject of the inquiry provoked some strong feelings and terse exchanges. We are used to terse exchanges across the Chamber, but, on this occasion, it was generally between stakeholders rather than between Committee members, and, more often than not, in the press as well.

The education of our children is an important subject, and it touches on issues of identity that can be sensitive for all communities in Northern Ireland. The Committee

recognised this in its evidence-taking and in its recommendations and report, and, hopefully, the rest of the House will be cognisant of this in today's debate.

I want to deal first with shared education, but the question is this: where to begin? There are a very large number of programmes and initiatives with shared education in the title, and there are lots of sharing activities across our schools, some of which appear to date back for decades. What is missing from this picture, which is dealt with in the report, is, of course, a definition of shared education. The Committee agreed that policy clarity is always a good idea and that for this policy area it was of particular importance.

Members were impressed by the experience of the centre for shared education at Queen's University and its argument that the focus should be on educational improvement for the pupils of the participating schools. The Committee felt that important though societal or reconciliation objectives are — everyone would agree that they are very important — shared education should be primarily about improving attainment and the life chances of all our children. That said, the Committee also felt that shared education should, of course, promote attitudinal improvement and meaningful contact involving children and young people from different section 75 groups. Here, Members noted recent reviews that showed the very positive impact of the community relations, equality and diversity (CRED) policy on attitudes among children and young people.

The Committee has been asked on a number of occasions to support statutory obligations in respect of shared education. We have always demurred a little in the past, but, as a Committee, we are generally happy to do so now on the basis of the clear definitions that we have set out in the report. The Committee agreed with the Department about the importance of strong connections between schools and their communities. Members noted what might be termed a certain coyness from officials when witnesses raised concerns about cultural certainty or equality of identity. The Committee felt that addressing the concerns of communities was essential in order to support the involvement of all schools in meaningful, non-tokenistic shared education, particularly in the 25% or so of schools that are not directly involved in sharing at present.

The Committee visited Moy and heard from schools in Brookeborough that are engaged in sharing projects and are planning closer alignment between their schools. The Committee felt that, although there might be other more cost-effective solutions for these communities, the actions taken in both instances were very positive, would improve community relations and had been badly misrepresented by some stakeholders. The Committee felt that there should be more consistent support for innovative cooperation between schools in rural and other areas.

During the inquiry, there appeared to be some wrangling among stakeholders about which sector was the best, which was the most open and inclusive and which was the most inclined to respect a Christian ethos etc. The Committee was impressed by examples of an inclusive and welcoming ethos, by the respect for diversity and religious tolerance in a wide range of schools and by every teacher, principal and schoolchild whom we met. I felt that this was particularly evident in our special schools. Other members identified equally good measures in other sectors and phases, and I am sure that they will say that

today and bring more detail to the debate on that front.

The Committee hopes that the Department will do more to disseminate this good practice in all our schools. There is an interesting contrast between the tolerant attitudes, openness and obvious intelligence of our teachers and principals — and even of our schoolchildren — and some of the exchanges between some of the representative groups that gave evidence to the inquiry. I think that members drew from that an important conclusion about where barriers to greater cooperation in our school system may occur.

I would like to turn to the last few recommendations in the report, which deal with integrated education. As the House is aware, the Department has long-standing legal obligations in respect of integrated education. Notwithstanding that, uptake remains low. The reasons for that sparked an energetic debate among stakeholders. Quite a lot of sound, heat and newsprint was generated, but, as is sometimes the case, not a lot of light was shed on the subject.

Clearly, there is a demand for this form of education, but the extent of that demand and the reasons underpinning it are disputed by stakeholders. The extent to which the Department lives up to its legal obligations in this regard was also disputed. There is equal disagreement about how and whether integrated education might be facilitated and encouraged.

The sector itself challenged what it felt was the narrow definition of an integrated school, calling into question the validity of the measurement of the minority community representation in the school. In that regard, the Committee noted practices whereby a growing number of parents designate their children as neither Protestant nor Catholic. If true, that would seem to support at least a re-examination of the rules regarding the definition of an integrated school.

The House will not be surprised to learn that the Education Committee could not resolve all the issues relating to integrated education. Given that, members wisely agreed that more thought was needed and recommended a strategic departmental review, setting out the suggested terms of reference accordingly.

Members also noted with interest the level of what might be described as natural mixing in our schools. We can think of examples in different constituencies where children attend a school whose parents would not necessarily identify with that sector. There is in my constituency, for example, the situation of St Columbanus, where many Protestant children attend a Catholic maintained school, or Methodist College, where Catholic children attend a school with a Methodist ethos or interdenominational schools.

These are sometimes referred to as super-mixed schools, and there are relatively few examples of them in Northern Ireland. The Committee was surprised that the Department had not studied in detail the motivation behind that practice or how it might encourage more mixing.

During the inquiry, the Department produced a circular relating to jointly managed Church schools. Members initially struggled to appreciate the material differences between such a school and a controlled integrated school. The Committee agreed, however, that the Department should consider amending its home-to-school transport policy to ensure equality of access for children attending

jointly managed Church schools as compared with the integrated sector.

This was a lengthy inquiry. The report includes three volumes of evidence. I understand that this will be the last occasion in the Assembly when we have a fully printed copy available to us as opposed to the more environmentally friendly email versions. If this is the swansong of the printed page in relation to inquiries, it is a substantive swansong, with three volumes of evidence.

I thank the Department for attending quite a few of the evidence sessions and, where we had queries, providing clarification on a large number of issues.

I think that the inquiry has helped the Committee — and will, hopefully, help the House and Northern Ireland as a whole — to come to a greater appreciation of shared and integrated education and the positive, inclusive practices in many of our schools.

I believe that this report and the Minister's answers will help us all as we deal with potential legislation that is coming forward on this subject and other related policy issues. Therefore, as Chair I commend to the House the Committee's report on shared and integrated education.

In the few moments left to me, I want to make a few brief remarks as a DUP MLA. For any of us looking at the wide variety of sectors in education in Northern Ireland and the multiplicity of the schools estate, it is undoubtedly the case that if we were starting today with a completely blank page to design a system for our schools, we would not arrive at the system that we have today.

However, there is no point pretending that we have that blank page. We have constraints on what is there and, indeed, have to consider the desires of parents and the different pressures in the sectors.

12.15 pm

However, rather than dealing with the negative, this is an opportunity for shared education to embrace the positive. We cannot change things overnight, but there are a number of positive developments that we need to embrace. First of all, with the creation of the Education Authority, the various sectors are, probably for the first time, all represented on a fair basis around the table at the same time. That gives an opportunity but also places a great responsibility on the Education Authority. Secondly, we need to see a strong commitment to shared education coming directly from the Department as well. With the legislation, there are indications that that is the case. As has been indicated, we have to celebrate the positive of the wide range of shared education opportunities such as integrated education, joint projects between the schools, sharing of various natures, jointly managed church schools potentially and the super-mixed schools. There is a wide range. It is my belief that, as we move forward with shared education, we need to embrace that flexibility. We need to ensure that we have a definition that can help ground this but one that also embraces the various alternatives rather than having a single focus on one particular aspect of that.

The legislation is likely to be quite framework in nature, but, as we move beyond that, the key point will be the implementation of that. Above all, as has been identified in the report, we need to look at where we can incentivise shared education and where we can try to remove the

barriers to shared education, but we also need to see commitment from schools themselves. To that extent, the Committee's recommendation is that it should be done on a full school basis. The focus on the contribution towards the curriculum and education is vital. It is crucial, particularly if financial support is available, that schools do not approach this in a tokenistic fashion and do not do something that simply ticks the box to ensure that they can qualify for shared education. We should see this as a real and meaningful experience that enriches the lives of all our children. To that end, there are clearly two aspects of this in the community relations and societal benefits that I think everyone would accept, but we also need to embrace the educational opportunities that arise with shared education. In particular, we have to look beyond the relationships between the two communities and embrace the various section 75 groups. For example, there should be a recognition of the wide number of pupils who now either come from outside Northern Ireland or whose families do not identify with either community, and we should try to establish help and support across some of the social divides there. I think that the contribution of shared education will also go across the socio-economic barrier. That is important as well.

Mr Deputy Speaker, time is running out. I believe that, if grasped, there is a great opportunity to make real progress and give real advantage to our society and to our children's education, and I believe that shared education can play a very large part in that. As Chair, I look forward to the rest of the debate.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I speak as a member of the Education Committee. As the Chair outlined, the Committee took a lot of evidence and had a lot of discussion on this very important issue. I want to acknowledge the role that the staff and, indeed, everybody played in this work. I think that in the region of 80 organisations gave evidence to the Committee, and I commend them for sharing their wealth of experience and views.

It is very apparent that there is widespread support for shared education and increasingly a discussion around the need for a definition of what shared education is. Quite often, the conversations at Committee were, "When does integrated start? Is integrated simply the continuum of a shared education process?"

I will start by commenting that there are many solid and robust examples of sharing and cooperation across our society, in many sectors across the North and, indeed, across the island.

The Committee also felt — the Chair referred to this point, and I want to re-emphasise it — that societal objectives are important and would need to extend beyond the reconciliation of both of the largest communities to incorporate fully all section 75 groups. In short, we cannot truly impact on positive outcomes from shared education if we fail to place issues like equality at the heart of the process. We cannot share or integrate in a meaningful way if we ignore the root causes of challenges in our society like poverty, deprivation and objective need.

I want to reference that, on Friday, I participated in the Derry and Strabane community planning process. That meeting specifically looked at education and skills. The very stark fact from that conversation was that 23·8% of

over-16s from the city that I come from leave school with no qualifications. I will be an optimist and say that the report provides us not only with an opportunity but with an opportunity to look at shared and integrated education in a meaningful way, but that will have little impact if it is not targeted at the areas where need most exists.

The Committee recommends that there be a:

“statutory obligation to encourage, facilitate and promote Shared Education [which] should be extended to the Department and ... its ... Arms Length Bodies.”

There are 11 recommendations in total, but I want to concentrate my remarks on two. The first is recommendation 6, which states:

“the Department should give consideration to a wide range of agreed, objective impact measures ... based on educational improvement ... and societal reconciliation [which] should be published regularly by the Department.”

It is important that we have robust measures in place to assess outcomes. It is critical for shared or integrated education, or, indeed, both, that we can measure and demonstrate positive outcomes. I look forward to the Minister's thoughts or comments on how that can be taken forward.

Recommendation 9 suggests that the Department should:

“undertake a strategic review of ... Integrated Education”.

It is only proper that we pre-plan and future plan for integrated education. I again look forward to the views of the Minister and the Department.

Much work has been done, to which the Chair referred. There has been a clear commitment from the Education Minister —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Would the Member draw her remarks to a close?

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: — about shared education. It is important that we monitor those implementation processes and develop the opportunities that exist.

Mr Rogers: I am glad to see the report coming to the House after a year's work. I thank the Committee staff for their work in bringing the report together. I am sure that it will provide a useful insight into the state of shared and integrated education in the North and will also be useful for the Shared Education Bill.

Education provides the building blocks of individuals' lives and the society that they live in. Parents should have a wide choice of schools, but one thing that all schools should have is a commitment to high-quality education. Most recently, the Scottish First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, said that improving educational attainment was a priority in her Programme for Government. We have similar ambitions here, but they have to be linked to a strong emphasis on shared education.

We have a rich and varied educational landscape. The focus of shared education should encompass early childhood services through primary and post-primary education, further education and special education. Education is the key way in which we can promote

reconciliation in our society, and it is vital that shared education is done right.

Like other Members, I have experienced many examples where it works really well. One that comes to mind was a sharing languages project organised by Shimna Integrated College in Newcastle, where the Spanish teacher delivered a weekly language programme in the primary schools to children from different backgrounds. The project even got the backing of the First Minister when he attended prize-giving. Unfortunately, like many other excellent schemes, the project ended once the initial funding ran out.

On a similar note, perhaps the Minister, in his reply, will address the apparent linking of shared education funding to Key Stage 2/Key Stage 3 statutory assessment. I suppose that I am asking this question: why do schools that are part of the Delivering Social Change shared education programme have their letter of offer rescinded because there are issues with the Key Stage 2/Key Stage 3 assessment in their school?

Shared and integrated education should not be limited to Catholics and Protestants; it should include children of non-Christian religions and no religion and children of different socio-economic backgrounds and of different races. Giving children the opportunity to interact with children beyond their immediate community benefits them and promotes harmonious relationships between communities. Children who are exposed to a diverse range of backgrounds, traditions and cultures will see difference for what it is: natural and something to be celebrated.

I welcome the direction of the Shared Education Bill, but the Bill will not suffice on its own. Shared education has to be embedded in our curriculum. Schools must be encouraged and supported to adopt shared education. Two schools coming together for an annual hockey match or a football match is not really shared education. Shared education needs embedment. The language project that I mentioned is just one example. Shared education can itself be viewed as part of a solution to other challenges faced by schools. Take, for example, the shortage of STEM provision in primary schools. That could be addressed by a post-primary science department and three or four primary schools from both sides of the community coming together to plan and deliver the primary science programme. Such an innovative programme would be a win-win for STEM, for primary and post-primary links, for teachers' continuing professional development and, above all, for embedding shared education. That is just one example. We could do the same with literacy and numeracy and so on.

Rather than becoming an additional bureaucratic burden, shared education should be seen as a natural extension of relationships between schools. It is not a threat to an individual school or school sector but an opportunity to complement it. Many of the recommendations allude to the fact that shared education can become embedded in schools only through the development of strong curricular links and a strong focus —

Mr Lunn: I thank Mr Rogers for giving way. This is a report on shared and integrated education, and you have now mentioned shared education about 35 times. When are you going to get to integrated education, or do you not intend to comment?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Rogers: It is just as well that I have that extra minute. Mr Lunn must have been counting the times that I used the word “shared”. Did you notice that I talked about Shimna College, a really good integrated school in my constituency? Its improving languages project really brought schools together from different communities and, to me, embedding it in the curriculum is the way that we take this forward. It is not shared for shared sake, but something that is really embedded in the curriculum. The development of those strong curricular links is key, along with keeping a strong focus on school improvement, as other Members have mentioned.

Mr Somerville: I am pleased to speak on the debate on the Education Committee’s inquiry into shared and integrated education. Like many others, I have been following the debate on the subject, which should be of interest to all MLAs and the wider public. Today in Northern Ireland, progress towards a shared future seems slow and far from assured. Official figures from the school census show that almost half of our school-age children attend schools where 95% of the pupils are from the same community or religious background. That is the background to the Committee’s inquiry.

12.30 pm

During the evidence-gathering session, one could not fail to notice a rather major difference of opinion between the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) and the integrated education lobby. In its submission to the inquiry, CCMS called on the Department to dispense with the statutory duty to encourage and facilitate integrated education, a stance that, interestingly, has since been adopted by the DUP. That dispute gets to the heart of the shared/integrated education issue.

“Shared education” is a phrase that has come into vogue since the Bain report of 2006, in parallel with the lexicon of a shared future. The Ulster Unionist Party has been very positive towards the idea of shared education, and we have applauded efforts to progress it through the shared education programme, the shared campuses programme and other initiatives. Nevertheless, this inquiry report suggests that hard questions still have to be faced up to and answered. The question is this: what do you mean by “shared education”. If it is a flexible system whereby all education sectors go on a journey to a single state system of common schools in Northern Ireland, the Ulster Unionist Party will wholeheartedly sign up for it. It would be in fulfilment of the vision of Lord Londonderry, the first Education Minister for Northern Ireland, 90 years ago, and the last Ulster Unionist Education Minister, Basil McIvor, in 1974. However, as has become clear, that vision, albeit long-term, is not what everyone has in mind.

As I said, during the inquiry it was clear that there was no consensus about the direction of travel for the education system in Northern Ireland. To see that, you need only review the Hansard report of the debates on teacher training before the summer recess. For some, shared education is not a staging post to a fully integrated system; it is an end in itself, a way to deliver the entitlement curriculum with some shared classes while preserving separate parallel systems for controlled, maintained, integrated and other schools. Quite frankly, that looks to me like a thin Elastoplast over a deeply segregated school system.

There is some useful commentary in the evidence-gathering part of the report, and all 11 recommendations are fine as far as they go, but it is an inconvenient truth that there is no consensus across the political spectrum. Unless we as an Assembly come to an agreement on what precisely we mean by “shared” and what we mean by “integrated” education, we run the risk that an enormous amount of scarce public money will be poured into a vague concept called “shared education” that might not make a difference in the longer run. There is a danger that shared education may turn out to be a continuation of “shared-out education”, with limited interaction between firmly separated school sectors.

The so-called Stormont House Agreement announced a £500 million capital investment in shared and integrated education. In the current climate of non-implementation of Stormont House, where will the money to support shared education come from? Option 4 in the business plan for shared education would cost £44 million annually, which, after four years, will apparently be absorbed into the mainstream school budget. Is this realistic or sustainable?

To sum up, while I welcome the Committee report, its worth is found in the evidence-gathering sessions rather than in the recommendations.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I remind Members that the Business Committee has agreed that we will continue to 1.00 pm.

Mr Lunn: When I suggested this review, I did not expect it to go on quite so long or that it would gobble up the time of three Chairpersons. Everyone on the Committee contributed very well to the report, even those who clearly do not agree with me on certain issues. We have always managed to conduct our deliberations in a thoughtful and constructive way, and I thank the present Chair for continuing that approach.

What are the conclusions of the report? The report leans heavily in the direction of shared education. This is the current buzzword. To a lot of people, it seems to be the way forward and the answer to most of our problems in the education system.

One or two people mentioned curriculum delivery. I have no argument there; that is fine. Schools have been sharing with the intention of delivering the curriculum and making it easier to run small classes since long before this initiative ever saw the light of day. I fancy that this initiative — that is what I see it as — might be relatively long-term, but where will we be at the end of it, when the money runs out? There are massive amounts available for shared education programmes at the moment, although some of us think that even they have been set up in a most peculiar way in terms of who is eligible and who is not.

I cannot help but think that, five or 10 years down the line, we will not be any further on. In his evidence, Sir Bob Salisbury indicated that he would like to see a proper measurement, particularly of curriculum delivery, but also of societal benefit of these programmes at various stages. I think that would be interesting, because there is not much evidence, if any, that there is a measurable societal benefit from the shared education programmes that have been running so far. But time will tell.

The whole thing has been quite heavily slanted towards shared education; maybe that was inevitable. I wonder

what it is about the integrated model and sector that seems to terrify people and make them think that this is not the way to go. I think that it was Maeve McLaughlin who said that integrated education is seen by some as the end point or ambition of shared education programmes. If that were the case, I would welcome it, but I do not see it. I do not see why, in the right circumstances, we should not bypass the shared programme and go straight for an integrated solution if that is the best way forward.

Inevitably, I have to mention the situation in the Moy, where two small schools were convinced of the need to come together. But what have we done? The Department's plan is to build a new school to encompass two schools. We will have two schools under one roof, with separate uniforms and separate assemblies just to make sure that they do not, what, contaminate each other? It is an absolutely unreal situation and only in Northern Ireland could we have come up with such a solution. I hope it is not too late and that it might be reconsidered. It just defies belief; it is emphasising separation.

What is it about integration that scares people? Two learned professors came to the Committee, Professor Knox and Professor Borooah, and indicated that they thought the results coming out of integrated schools were not as good as equivalent schools in other sectors. Complete nonsense. No harm to the two professors, but it is absolute nonsense. There is a variation in attainment levels, but there is a variation in attainment levels across all our sectors. There is nothing unusual about the integrated model.

The Chairman mentioned the designation of religious background. There is definitely something to be looked at there, because the reason why people do not designate a religious background is because, frankly, in this day and age, so many of them do not have one. That is the problem.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

Mr Lunn: Mr Deputy Speaker, this is a two-hour debate, and I really wish that I had 20 minutes instead of five, but I can see what the clock is doing, so, unless somebody intervenes quickly —

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lunn: Yes.

Mr B McCrea: I would just like to give the Member an extra minute.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Lunn: I do not often thank Mr McCrea.

I believe that the Minister has tacitly agreed — perhaps he can confirm it today — that he is prepared to undertake a strategic review of the integrated model and sector. That would be very welcome and is very much overdue, because there are questions to ask about how the integrated sector has been facilitated and encouraged. We cannot use the word “promoted” because the Assembly turned that down, but they applied it to shared education. I think that a proper review of his Department's actions and attitudes down the years, long before he came along, and of whether it has tried to stifle or encourage the integrated sector, might come up with some interesting answers.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member's time is almost up.

Mr Lunn: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Newton: I welcome the report and pay tribute to Peter McCallion and his dedicated staff, who carried out their duties not only in a very professional way but in a pleasant manner, which made it extremely easy to work with them. I also welcome the new addition to his staff, Paul Stitt.

I say to Mr Somerville that the work of the Committee was carried out in a very professional manner. The interests of education, the schools, the pupils, the parents and the teaching staff were at the heart of the deliberations of the Committee at all stages. That is evidenced by the fact that we had such a major response to the evidence sessions: there were over 100 written submissions; there was a keenness to give evidence during informal sessions; and there were 24 formal evidence sessions, five school visits and a number of research papers commissioned by the Committee. That indicates the importance of this subject to the future well-being of education in Northern Ireland.

Like other parts of the world, education can be an extremely emotive area. It raises concerns; the bringing together of children for education has to be treated in a sensitive and thoughtful manner. Much effort has been put into the subject matter. It is difficult to say whether there is a subject that demands more time of the Assembly than education and the future of our children. It is so because it is the future of the children, the economy and the well-being of this whole society. As such, it should demand our time.

Mr Lunn has a passion for integrated education. That is fine, but his passion is not shared by the vast majority of parents in Northern Ireland.

Mr Lunn: Will the Member give way?

Mr Newton: I am happy to give way.

Mr Lunn: I refer him to the various polls and tests of attitude that have taken place down the years from time immemorial, particularly in the ‘Belfast Telegraph’. The figures are well known.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Newton: I understand what he is saying, but the evidence of pupils enrolling and parents approaching and wanting to be in the schools has not stretched beyond 7%. That is the real evidence.

There are very good examples of where there is a desire to see a sharing of education. They have been referred to; I will mention only three. Two schools in Ballycastle saw it in the best interests of the pupils, the parents and the educational system to come together and work together, sharing education. The Moy was referred to. Trevor was speaking in not the glowing terms that I would have spoken about the two schools in the Moy that recognised the difficulties and addressed them as best they could, despite very intensive lobbying from one sector in particular against them taking the two schools onto one site. Methodist College is a school that I hold dear. It has, for generations, without being coaxed or cajoled or having any other form of encouragement, stood up and integrated the children together; it has shared the education. It has taken steps to make sure that children who may not come from such a privileged background as some others are able to

take advantage of that. Shared education, this report and its recommendations will take us forward.

I will dwell on only one aspect. All of the 11 recommendations are important. Recommendation 5 is drafted in such a way so as to encourage educationalists and the Minister to address the teachers' concerns, the parents' concerns, the concerns of the children and, above all, perhaps, the concerns of the communities in which the schools are situated.

If we do not take the communities along with us, we will have done the report a disservice.

12.45 pm

Mr Agnew: The reality, which this report seeks to hide, is that shared education is a meaningless concept. It has no definition yet and very little to recommend it. If we were being honest, we would admit that it is nothing but a repackaged and marketed reform of our segregated system.

A problem with falling enrolment numbers and classrooms with empty desks was identified, and there were two possible solutions. One was to take two schools in the one area that were both undersubscribed and make one school. In many areas, that would have meant one integrated school. Instead, we chose to propose, and this has been promoted in the Programme for Government and by many of the parties in the Assembly, taking the two schools and housing them in one building or on one campus, thereby saving money in capital costs but maintaining our failing system of segregation.

We hear the word "shared" being used, and it is a clever tool. Any PR firm would congratulate the Executive on using it, because it sounds like "integrated" and sounds as though we are tackling the historical divisions in Northern Ireland society. Shared education can equally mean two Catholic schools sharing a single building. What societal benefit does that have other than to save the two schools money? It saves on capital costs and running costs, but it does not achieve the societal objective of educating our children together.

Integrated education is about more than just Protestant and Catholic children coming up together. It is about children of all faiths being educated in one school and teaching them that, although they may have different religions and cultural backgrounds, those differences are not a barrier and that, in education, there is no difference between them. It is not, as some presume, a secular system, although I would challenge that and say that perhaps it should be. At the heart of integrated schools is much of the religious ethos that runs through other schools.

Integrated education is all-ability, which is often missed when people talk about the performance of integrated schools. Integrated schools take pupils of all abilities —

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr Agnew: I will give way.

Mr Weir: Although I agree that it is the case that the bulk of integrated schools are probably all-ability, there are some integrated schools that are taking a streamed approach and reserving a certain number of places on the basis of academic selection. There is a concern from some of the schools in the integrated sector that, as all-ability schools, they are being measured against some schools that are

ring-fencing a percentage of their pupils on the basis of ability. Therefore, it is not the case that all integrated schools are all-ability.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Member for his intervention. The point is that the integrated sector has to operate in a system in which there is selection, and different schools have made different decisions on how they approach that. The point is that the children go to the same school: there may be streams in those schools, but we do not set up different schools with different headmasters and different assemblies to deal with children from different religious backgrounds or with different academic abilities.

Integrated schools take pupils from all socio-economic backgrounds and incorporate the full breadth of society in one building and under one head teacher and ethos. I go back to the point that Mr Newton made that parents are ultimately not choosing integrated education. To say that parents in Northern Ireland do not choose integrated education is like saying that people in Northern Ireland do not choose sunshine: it is not a choice for many parents. There are now 64, I think, integrated schools of 1,200. Not every parent who sends their child to school has the option of sending their child to an integrated school, and, indeed, many of our integrated schools are oversubscribed, so even parents who are choosing integrated education where there appears to be a choice are being denied that choice. Until every parent has that option equal to each other ethos of education available, that claim cannot be made. As Mr Lunn pointed out, poll after poll has shown that parents want integrated education, and it is the politicians who are putting the barriers in place. We have to remove those barriers. Today, NICIE has called for an independent review of our education system, and I think that we need to consider that because there are political reasons that are putting barriers up to the progress of integrated education in Northern Ireland.

Mr B McCrea: I had a chance to look at the report only today, and, interestingly, not much has changed since I was last on the Education Committee. I start off with the premise that says that the future of our part of the world depends on the absolute integration of our children. If you were to ask where you want to be in 20 or 30 years' time, you would say that you want everybody to share some form of common identity. It would not be exclusive to any other identity that they might have, but we must find some way of working and living together. I start off with that premise, and I say that I am for integrated education.

I then look at some of the practical issues, which I think that we do have to address. Maeve McLaughlin was talking about areas in her part of the world. How do you deal with integrated education where you have deeply polarised communities and societies? What are you going to do? Will you bus people from one side of the city to another? I am not for bussing. Where there is a natural integration of a population, I am for saying that they should go to a common school.

One of the things that I find quite strange coming from the Department and the Minister is how, for people who are so adamant about having no selective education, they cannot turn around and say that they want integrated education. Surely, the premise should be that, if you live in a particular

area, you go to a local school and that all schools should be equal and should all deliver the same level of attainment. Is that not the goal? You can argue that, and there was a bit of a discussion coming up before about whether you are for selective education or not. That is a different issue, but the principle is that, where you have common populations living together, they should go to school together. I am instructed in this by some experience in Magherafelt, and I look at the really good work that Rainey Endowed, St Mary's and other schools do in the area about how they work together. It is my opinion that —

Mr Dallat: I thank Mr McCrea for giving way, and I am glad that he made some reference to Magherafelt. Of course, there are many examples across Northern Ireland where schools work together. Will he find it important to put on record that the controlled and integrated schools in this country were not responsible for bringing this country to its knees? Indeed, on every occasion, they provided an oasis of peace for those children who found themselves beleaguered by the violence outside. Will he agree that very little effort has been made to pay tribute to the teachers, boards of governors and pupils of those schools who performed a heroic duty during the darkest days of the Troubles?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr B McCrea: I am grateful to the Member for his contribution. In fact, I also want to say that I was quite taken by the contribution of his colleague Mr Rogers. I thought that that was quite well argued and thought out. This is where I have a bit of a dilemma. Can you move directly to integrated education, as Mr Lunn was advocating, given that, in certain areas, you have deeply polarised communities? This is a challenge for us. I think that Mr Somerville mentioned that 50% of our pupils go to schools that are made up from 95% of one side or the other. There is a certain issue there that we have to address, but I have to say that I feel strongly that the motion of travel should be some discrete form of integration.

It is something that we should actively do. I think that the real problem in all of this is that education is a political battlefield. The reason education is different from employment and learning — I moved to the different Committee — is that it is accepted in further and higher education that people mix. We do not have a Catholic university and a Protestant university. We have a university — or maybe I should say “an”. No; is it “a” university? I will just make sure that, in an education debate, I get it right. The issue is whether we can find a way forward.

Mr Agnew: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: I will if you are quick.

Mr Agnew: I will be very quick. The Member made the point that we have integrated further and higher education. Does that not challenge his point that our society is so polarised that integration cannot happen?

Mr B McCrea: I do not think that it does challenge the point, because, if you look at a primary school, you can see that the geographical catchment area is much smaller than it is for a secondary school, and for a secondary school it is smaller than it is for a university. The point is that we are leaving it too late if the first time that you get to meet people from the opposite tradition is at third-

level education. Where you have a population that would like to do integrated education, I think that it should not be prevented. What I see is that there are areas where integrated education is capped. I do not think that that is right. I think that the numbers should be released. I understand that the Minister will have difficulties in trying to manage his estate. Populations move, and, therefore, there must be some constraints in that, but, really, look at where we are going to be in 20 to 30 years' time. Are we still going to be in segregated education? Are we still going to have us and them? If we are, I think that we will not make much in the way of political progress.

Mr McCallister: I would like to welcome the Committee's report. It is always useful to have reference to an amendment that I pushed for when the Education Authority Bill was going through. That was the reason. I believe that shared education can be that vehicle, although I accept others' arguments about integrated education. The fact is that we are still at only around 6% or 7%, despite poll after poll showing that there is a need. We have to look at where our education system is now. Why are so many parents opting for a faith-ethos education? You have Mr McCrea's point that in some of our towns and cities it would actually be very difficult to have a fully integrated system. That is the case in places at the edge of my own constituency in Newry city. You would have difficulty doing that, as you might have in delivering a fully integrated model in parts of Lisburn, Newtownards or Bangor.

How do we get from where we are today to where we would like to be? I see shared education as the vehicle to do that. I see it as the vehicle because it gives parental choice. It protects faith-ethos education, which I want to see protected. It gives you the choice of having, at times, much more organic integration. Some of the figures — I accept that it is a survey from a couple of years ago — show that, in Down High, an estimated 60% of the pupils were from a Protestant background, 24% were from a Catholic background and 16% were from either other or none. Belfast Royal Academy (BRA) was 56% Protestant, 25% Catholic and 18% other or none. You have actually built into some of those schools — Mr Newton cited Methodist College — a very organic level of integration that works. How do we use those models? How do we hold the excellence that we have in schools? How do we extend that ethos base?

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCallister: Certainly.

Mr Weir: I agree with the Member in relation to that. In some of those cases that has been simply organic. It has also sometimes been helped along the way in organic qualities. It comes back to the Education Committee looking at one of the options on the table in terms of some of the super-mix schools and how those schools have arrived at the position they have arrived at. On some occasions, it has also been because of particular, deliberate decisions.

1.00 pm

Mention was made of a number in the maintained sector. St Columbanus' College is a Catholic maintained school; however, a majority of its pupils come from the Catholic community and a minority come from what has been identified as the Protestant community, but it has very

deliberately taken action to try to ensure that it has that mix. For example — and, to be fair, I think that the Department accommodated this — when there were caps on numbers, the impact would have been to skew the figures against that sort of mixing, and I think that it successfully argued in relation to that. So, it is about being organic but trying to drill down into why those schools have reached that and what lessons can be learned from the wider education community.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I remind Members that interventions should be brief. The Member has an extra minute and he will probably need it.

Mr McCallister: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am grateful to Mr Weir for his brief intervention. I agree with the premise that we need to look at it. The report usefully talked about the evidence that was collated from that super-mix model, as it has been referred to. It will be important for the Minister to respond today on where his Bill is on shared education. Is he hoping to get it through in this mandate? He is rapidly running out of time to give it the type of scrutiny that I think it will require. The definition that he will put in will be very important.

On Mr Weir's point about how you use that super-mix model and what has worked well in those schools and what has not worked so well, we also need to extend that not just to schools but to boards of governors to look at shared ethos. I welcome the Minister's statement from a number of months ago about joint-faith schools. I think that is important. To almost tackle the elephant in the room, the biggest challenges in sectoral terms is probably to the maintained sector. Those who want to maintain a faith-ethos education have to get on board with shared education. Mr Agnew went over it very briefly and talked about moving to some sort of secular system, and I know that some people might favour that, but the challenge is for those who, like me, want to maintain a faith-based ethos in our education system. That challenge comes to the CCMS as well as to the transferors to ask how do we build on the best that is in our education system, share it, use it and make sure that we can have joint-ethos schools, joint-faith schools, with boards of governors and teachers right across the board? How do we share and maximise the benefits of shared education?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately after the lunchtime suspension. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The debate will continue after the lunchtime suspension, when the next speaker will be the Minister of Education.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 1.03 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Assembly Business

Standing Order 20(1): Suspension

Mr Speaker: Order. As I announced yesterday, the Minister for Regional Development resigned his position at midnight on Wednesday 2 September. As the position remains vacant, in accordance with Assembly convention, questions listed for oral answer will fall. I also advise Members that, until another Minister is appointed, questions for written answer will not be accepted. Unanswered questions submitted before the Minister's resignation will be answered when the vacancy has been filled.

Questions to Social Development will commence at 2.45 pm, and allowing us to continue the debate in the meantime requires the suspension of Standing Orders.

Mr Ramsey: I beg to move

That Standing Order 20(1) be suspended for 8 September 2015.

Mr Speaker: Before we proceed to 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 8 September 2015. — [Mr Ramsey.]

Committee Business

Shared and Integrated Education: Committee Report

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee for Education on its inquiry into shared and integrated education [NIA 194/11-16]; and calls on the Minister of Education to implement the recommendations contained in the report. — [Mr Weir (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education).]

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh thuarascáil an Choiste Oideachais ar an oideachas chomhroinnte agus imeasctha. Is léir go bhfuil tacaíocht fhorleathan pholaitíochta agus phobail ann do chóras oideachais níos cuimsithí. I welcome the Education Committee's report on shared and integrated education. It is clear that there is now widespread political and community support for a more inclusive education system. I also thank the Committee for the work that it has undertaken and the time that it has given not only to listen to many different perspectives but to visit schools and hear from pupils themselves.

Public and political attitudes have evolved. Society is changing rapidly, and we must respond to that change to best meet the needs of our children and young people. Today I want to articulate a coherent vision for a future where ever-increasing numbers of children and young people from different community backgrounds are educated together. Just as importantly, I would like to set out what we still need to agree on to achieve that vision.

Our education system mirrors the historical divisions in our society, yet there has been a long history of community relations work in schools. For over 30 years, integrated schools, controlled schools, maintained schools and many other categories of school have provided an alternative to education separated on largely religious lines. Within the past number of decades, the work of the integrated sector has complemented the work of the other sectors and, indeed, ensured that children have an opportunity for integrated education in many, many different parts of our society. Within the past decade, shared education has provided new opportunities for young people from different community backgrounds to learn together in a sustained and ongoing manner.

So where do we go from here? The vision for shared education is set out in the shared education report and a number of other reports. That is the main focus of the Committee's report. My vision is for vibrant, self-improving shared education communities, delivering educational benefits to learners, promoting good relations and encouraging the effective use of resources.

My Department's shared education policy, which I will publish in the near future, provides a coherent framework to achieve this vision. The policy builds on the research, consultation and recommendations of the ministerial advisory group. It will fund, develop and embed sharing throughout the system. I am delighted that the majority of the Committee's recommendations are mirrored in the policy and, indeed, are already being implemented through the shared education signature project, which will provide

£25 million of funding over the next four years. There is a common focus on incentivising participation in shared education, bringing together young people from all section 75 groups, promoting an inclusive ethos in all our schools, providing training, disseminating good practice and measuring the impact of shared education.

Much has been done, and much progress has been made. The signature project has already received applications from over 300 schools. There is much to celebrate, and I pay tribute to those schools that have pioneered working together. There is much that we all agree on and many areas where the next steps are clear. However, having reflected on the Committee's report and from listening to today's debate, I know that there are areas where there is less agreement: first, on agreeing a definition of shared education and, secondly, on the inclusion of single schools in the shared education programme. Ar an gcéad dul síos, ag aontú sainmhíniú ar oideachas comhroinnte agus, sa dara cás, ar scoileanna aonair a chuimsiú sa chláir oideachais comhroinnte. I will turn to these for a moment as we must find agreement to achieve our vision of a more inclusive education system.

Evidence heard by the Education Committee confirms that, while there is widespread support for shared education, there is also a pressing need for a clear and common definition, which my Bill will provide. Whilst I have studied with interest the Committee's proposed definition, I note that it does not reference collaboration between providers. Consequently, it could encompass the majority of in-school activity in certain schools. I warmly welcome the Committee's emphasis on bringing together children and young people from all section 75 groups. That mirrors my detailed description of how shared education should work in practice. However, specifying in legislation a requirement for the participation of all section 75 groups would set very challenging demands on the mix of pupils that schools are required to achieve, a requirement that many rural partnerships simply could not achieve.

My Bill references the minimum requirements for shared education and education providers cooperating to bring together those of different religious belief, including reasonable numbers of Protestant and Roman Catholic young people, and those who are experiencing socio-economic deprivation and those who are not. This is a common-sense definition that allows flexibility to consider proposals on a case-by-case basis. It also reflects the essential nature of shared education projects to date.

I turn now to the Committee's recommendation that individual schools should be included in shared education programmes. Schools that achieve a balanced cross-community intake, whether formally integrated or not, are to be commended. They have important learning to share as we continue to embed an inclusive ethos throughout our education system. We need, however, to distinguish clearly between highly commendable cross-community engagement under one roof and the aim of shared education to facilitate school-to-school collaboration to achieve educational as well as reconciliation outcomes.

What are we funding single schools for? Shared education funding is targeted at the additional costs of sharing between schools — costs such as transporting pupils or substitute cover for joint planning. These simply do not apply to a single school. We want to encourage integrated and so-called super-mix schools to share their knowledge,

experience and good practice with others. I find it difficult to understand what benefit the Committee sees in incentivising these schools to operate independently.

I ask Members to consider and reflect on these issues as we move forward.

Turning to integrated education, I reiterate my commitment to the proactive implementation of my Department's statutory duty to encourage and facilitate the development of integrated education. It is not a question of either/ or as regards the promotion of shared education or integrated education. Both have key roles in contributing to the development of a more tolerant, diverse, pluralist and shared society here. In line with the Committee's recommendation, I have agreed to commission a review of the future planning and development of integrated education. It will examine how to support the effective growth and development of the integrated education sector into the 21st century and that review will be developing further in the weeks ahead.

To conclude, I am content to support the motion and, no doubt, given the debate, the majority of Members in the Chamber will do likewise. There is clearly much welcome agreement on the issues. By learning from international and local evidence and by helping schools to collaborate and share aspects of practice, we can give every child, from any background, the opportunity to make the most of their talents.

Mrs Overend: On behalf of the Committee, I would like to thank all those who contributed to the debate. I particularly thank the Minister for coming along and providing his response. The Committee did a lot of work and gathered a lot of evidence from a large number of contributors, and I would like to reiterate the Chairman's earlier words of appreciation to the witnesses and to the Department for its help in putting together the inquiry report. I would also like to add my thanks to the Committee Clerk and the officials of the Committee for their sterling work on this report. It is the Committee's hope that, even if the Department disagrees with some or all of the recommendations in the report, it will nonetheless study its content and find some of the information useful and enlightening.

Before highlighting the key themes in the debate, I would like to briefly remind the House about why the Committee undertook this piece of work. As the Chairperson said earlier, the way in which we educate our children in this jurisdiction rightly or wrongly in many ways defines our identity. If we seek to improve on that, it is critical that there is both clarity and clear objectives in respect of an important policy area like shared education.

At the start of this inquiry, there were a great many questions about how shared education would impact on the integrated sector. I believe that the inquiry, by endeavouring to define the former, and today's debate have provided some answers and perhaps some surety in that regard.

I felt that there were a number of key things that Members raised during the debate. First, in respect of shared education itself, some Members — the Chairperson, Maeve McLaughlin, Robin Newton and others — mentioned the opportunity which the Department has, with the establishment of the Education Authority, to support a range of enhanced sharing activities which are curricular and whole-school and which should have

a measurable impact, in reconciliation and education improvement. Those Members generally indicated that shared education should extend to all section 75 groups, not just to the two largest communities in Northern Ireland. However, while highlighting positive sharing examples involving schools from different sectors across Northern Ireland, some Members, including Seán Rogers, indicated concerns about the validity and appropriateness of some of those measures, including levels of progression. Other Members, including my colleague Neil Somerville, also referenced worries about how shared education was to be funded particularly if the support agreed in the Stormont House Agreement was not forthcoming.

The second theme in today's debate related to integrated education. Trevor Lunn and Steven Agnew set out a robust defence of integrated education, challenging the choices made in Moy, the assertions made in respect of the reported poor attainment of integrated schools, and the ability of shared education to actually tackle the real divisions in society. Mr Agnew highlighted the all-ability, all-socio-economic-background nature of integrated education and argued that parents faced a dearth of integrated provision. Those Members supported an independent review of integrated education. Members also commended natural mixing or organic integration. I think that there was general support in the Chamber, including from Basil McCrea and John McCallister, for further study of super-mixed schools, with a view to determining the factors which promote these kinds of choices.

2.15 pm

I turn now to the contributions from the Education Minister. We look forward to the Minister bringing forward the shared education Bill and the Committee having the time to scrutinise and analyse its detail. The Minister talked about the vision for the shared education sector. He agreed with what the Committee said about it being about education and good relations and, at the same time, making use of resources that are available. He also referred to the recommendations that the Committee made in its report. He said that they were already happening within the signature projects, but I feel that more can be done, looking forward. That is the challenge that is set to the Education Minister. It is a difficult road to travel and, certainly, it might be challenging, but we must push ahead with that.

I will add a few points as an Ulster Unionist MLA and the Ulster Unionist education spokesperson. I joined the Education Committee shortly after the Committee began this inquiry. I certainly was forced to hit the ground running. Significant in my eyes is the fact that many of Northern Ireland's schools would not be so easily categorised if they did not already have a label. Many controlled schools are already integrated, some integrated schools are less about sharing but more about a particular ethos, and some in the Catholic maintained sector have students of other religions enrolled there. So I am pleased to note that there is already a good variety of sharing in schools across Northern Ireland, but we also realise that different schools share in different ways and that there are various levels of cooperation. The Ulster Unionist Party's view is that we need to encourage a process of integration whereby we support shared facilities and shared classes between schools. The goal is to have children from

different community backgrounds being educated together in the same classroom as a matter of course.

We have always been supportive of the idea of shared education, but only if it is part of a road map to a more unified, less religiously segregated school system in Northern Ireland. It must be a process, not an end in itself. We do not and will not support a costly exercise in token inter-school contact, especially at a time when we learn that there is not enough money in the budget to carry out basic repairs in our schools across Northern Ireland.

In his opening remarks, the Chairman of the Committee made a coy reference to the row between CCMS and the integrated sector over the former's submission to the inquiry. That row, however, is not confined to some sort of intra-sectoral spat; it reflects the lack of consensus across the political class of where we need to go as a society. As my colleague Neil Somerville pointed out, there is a suspicion that a large element of the political class is going along with shared education as the way to copper-fasten shared-out education. The minimalist recommendations in the report reflect the reality that, at present, there is no consensus on this important issue, and that is a problem that must be faced up to. Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee for Education on its inquiry into shared and integrated education [NIA 194/11-16]; and calls on the Minister of Education to implement the recommendations contained in the report.

Private Members' Business

Housing Executive Structures

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 in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr F McCann: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Social Development to instruct the chairperson of the Housing Executive to cease immediately the dismantling of Housing Executive structures until full political debate has been held on the future of housing.

Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I rise to propose the motion and to ask that the House unites in sending a message that any decision around the future structures of social housing delivery and the delivery of housing services be a political decision. The motion proposes that the Assembly calls on the Minister for Social Development to instruct the chairperson of the Housing Executive to cease immediately the dismantling of the Housing Executive structures until full political debate has taken place on the future of social housing.

We have seen the introduction of the social housing reform programme, which is a departmental strategy that is meant to develop debate around a number of themes, including a tenant participation strategy, a new regulatory framework, a social housing rent programme, principles for local government engagement and options for the future delivery of social housing. The vision put forward by the Department says:

"We want to create 'Housing structures that support the provision of social and affordable homes, in successful communities where people are proud to live.'"

There is nothing wrong with that. In fact, the Department has done some good work and has provided thought-provoking papers for discussion. I may not agree with everything that it has suggested, but that work will create a debate to widen people's understanding of where this is taking us.

The Department has been in front of the Social Development Committee to give briefings on numerous occasions, not least last week when it gave a briefing on the social housing reform programme. It says that the programme's aims are to create a sector that is tenant focused, provides quality homes, is sustainable, increases investment in social housing, is fit for the future and allows landlords to be creative and play a positive role in the services they provide. Most of the information is gathered in the form of putting that out for consultation. I have raised concerns in the past about how these consultations have been conducted. In fairness, the most recent consultation went some way to gather a wider opinion from citizens than had previously been the case. I have also been concerned that consultations are produced and advertised but, in the end, you get the usual suspects answering without getting the wider opinion that is essential to the final strategy.

Running through all these briefings and discussions and in questions that I have put to the Department has been that any decision on the future structures will be a political decision taken by Members of this House. I have been concerned that changes contained in the social housing reform programme are already being implemented by the chair of the Housing Executive. I have also been concerned that those changes will be that far along the road that the Housing Executive we know will no longer exist, thus removing any political input into the final structures. I believe that we need to get this right because we are dealing with the future housing of our citizens, including the most vulnerable in our society. Any changes will have to survive the pace of time over the next 30 or 40 years.

The present chair comes with a housing association agenda. In the past, he has made it quite clear that the Housing Executive was not fit for purpose. He has set about making changes that will change the Housing Executive beyond recognition. I understand that problems existed in the Housing Executive. I still try to work out where everything went wrong, and I have no doubt that much of it stemmed from the information provided for the Minister for Social Development on an overspend of £18 million to contractors. The Minister brought that to the House and made serious accusations about contractors carrying out work for the Housing Executive. Yet, a short time before that, PricewaterhouseCoopers carried out a review of the Housing Executive on the instruction of the former Minister Alex Attwood. Its report was completed on 24 June 2011. It is interesting to read what PricewaterhouseCoopers had to say about the Housing Executive.

In that report, it said:

"NIHE is one of the success stories from [the North's] recent history. Since its introduction nearly 40 years ago, it has delivered significant social benefits throughout [the North], with the quality of the housing stock having moved from one of the worst in Western Europe to what is now regarded as the best-quality stock. It is rightly regarded nationally and internationally as a leading authority on 'best practice' on both housing management and community building, with an unrivalled track record of cohesion and safety initiatives."

It continued:

"Perhaps uniquely for such a large organisation that works across [the North], which has also had some direct input into some of the most disadvantaged and sensitive areas, the Housing Executive has also managed to maintain the confidence of all sides of the community."

PricewaterhouseCoopers went on to make a number of recommendations for consideration, which many believe would have formed part of the backdrop for a future strategy on housing across the North. So, where did it all go wrong? How did it become a barrel of rotten apples, as was said?

I have worked with the Housing Executive over the past 30 years on behalf of my community. Like many in the House, I have had huge arguments with it on a wide range of matters, but I have found it professional in its approach and dealings on matters of housing. It has

built an understanding of its tenants and a service that is second to none, but that is changing. Change has already taken place that has huge implications for the Housing Executive's structures. The division of regional and landlord services that has taken place effectively makes them two separate organisations. Internal changes have also changed how the Housing Executive works on a daily basis, such as in the delivery of homelessness services. That is going through huge change, and the new working name is "housing solutions".

Last week, we had another briefing on the social reform programme. During that meeting, the Department's representatives re-emphasised that making any changes to structures is a political decision. However, there have been huge changes in the way that district offices are run. If you look at how maintenance is being delivered, you see huge changes there. The major changes that have been made to the senior structures in the Housing Executive have implications.

Homelessness provision, which is one of the most sensitive areas, has been removed from local offices into a more central operation. As I said earlier, its title has been changed. Local officers, who have built a lifetime's experience, will no longer have any connection with people who declare themselves homeless, many of whom have mental health problems and other difficulties.

I believe that people have laid out visions for the future of housing. There are problems that can be overcome. If we work together, we can bring that vision to fruition. However, that can only be done by political parties coming together; it cannot be done by an organisational structure that is changing.

I have had occasion, especially more recently, to speak to quite a number of people who have spent a lifetime working in the Housing Executive and who have told me that the Housing Executive is being hollowed out from within. This creates some serious difficulties. On the one hand, we are being told that it is a political decision, but on the other hand, those decisions are being removed from us. As an Assembly, we need to claw that back and put it on the record that we are not happy. We also need to ensure that we take control of the direction of social housing over the next 30 or 40 years.

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Can you advise the House whether there is to be a ministerial response to this debate?

Mr Speaker: As you can see, the Order Paper, which was agreed by the Business Committee, reflects the fact that there will not be a ministerial response. That explanation was offered at the appropriate level and is reflected in the order of business today.

Mr Douglas: I will start off by outlining my view of the Housing Executive and my experience, like the Member before me, of working with the organisation for over 30 years. The Minister for Social Development, Mervyn Storey, spoke at a Housing Executive conference over the summer, and he was very well received. I spoke to some of the people who were there, who said that they were re-envisioned by his contribution and had a real sense again of what they were about. He encouraged them to keep on working in very difficult circumstances.

In 2008, in my constituency, the then Castlereagh Borough Council awarded the freedom of the borough to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. I was one of those who encouraged the council to do that, because my experience of working with the Housing Executive in the Castlereagh area was excellent. It did a tremendous job. I am here to say that I am a huge supporter of the Housing Executive and understand many of the difficulties that it has gone through.

2.30 pm

The protocol here is to welcome the Member's contribution today, but to be honest, I was involved with the Committee for Social Development and I stepped down for a while. I came here today and thought, "Is this déjà vu?" because I honestly do not know why this motion has been brought three years later. Three years ago, I think it was, when we debated this. We had consultations and talked to stakeholders. I thought that this was signed, sealed and delivered. Maybe I missed something in the intervening years. The Member talked about ceasing immediately and a need for full political debate. Am I wrong, but I think that we had that, to be quite honest?

I would be the first to say that we need reform. A few hours ago, I was on the Justice Committee where we talked about the reform of justice in Northern Ireland because the finances are not there and the prisons are struggling. I believe in reform that protects jobs and provides a reasonable service.

The Member stated that, at our Committee meeting last week, we had officials from the Department who talked about the issues that they faced, one of which was being highly dependent on the public purse. We are struggling at the moment with the public purse. What will it be like when David Cameron introduces the £12 billion of cuts right across the United Kingdom? Struggling at the moment? We ain't seen nothing yet, to be quite honest.

We all know that there are huge problems at the Housing Executive with a lack of maintenance in many areas. Part of the reason for that is a lack of finance. I heard officials talk about segregated housing on a number of occasions. The figures bandied about were something like 95% of social housing was Protestant or Catholic — totally segregated.

Those are some of the issues that we will have to deal with if we are dealing with the legacy of the problems of Northern Ireland.

I honestly think that this motion is three years out of date. Maybe the Member could address some of those issues.

Mr F McCann: Will the Member give way?

Mr Douglas: Go ahead.

Mr F McCann: This motion has been floating about for a considerable time. It was put on the agenda today because we have not effectively dealt with some of the major changes that are going on.

You rightly talk about some of the stuff that is going on in east Belfast, but, through it all, we have been told that any new structures that will be put in place will be a political decision. That has effectively been denied us because of the continuing changes that are going on. The separation

of regional and landlord services is a classic example of that because they are now two separate organisations.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Douglas: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank the Member for his intervention.

I am shocked to think that we are still talking about these issues two or three years later; I seriously thought that they had definitely been put to bed. If today's debate was about innovation, how we could do things better, improve maintenance, get better housing and deal with the homeless, I would be happy enough to get stuck in and have a debate about those issues.

I see people with homelessness difficulties in my constituency office weekly. I was talking to a colleague earlier, and that is a big issue. I am happy to deal with those issues, but this motion is out of date, and I, for one, will certainly be opposing it.

Mr Attwood: I want to recognise one point of unanimity in the Chamber on the basis of what Mr Douglas and my colleague from west Belfast said, and that is that, contrary to some voices in the DUP, there appears to be an acceptance not just of the significant role of the Housing Executive over the years but of its historic role in addressing housing need and disadvantage in all parts of Belfast and across Northern Ireland.

There are occasions, especially involving elements in the DUP, when you wonder — this is very true of the Minister for Social Development before Mr Storey — if the scale and achievement of the Housing Executive is fully recognised, so I welcome Mr Douglas's unambiguous comments in that regard and the reference to the awarding of the freedom of Castlereagh borough to the Housing Executive.

When I was Minister for Social Development — this was referred to in one of the previous contributions — it was time for a regular review of the Housing Executive, and, contrary to the advice of the officials, which is very often the measure of a Minister, I decided that there was a need for a fundamental review of the Housing Executive in order to recognise its enormous achievement and to recognise that, beyond its responsibility for 90,000 properties and its landlord function, it had developed a multitude of other functions and roles in housing policy, housing new build, community interventions and support of people, especially those in need. That is the report that was referred to and was concluded in June 2011. The problem — I think that this is behind the motion — was that that report was being used, it seems to me, by certain vested interests to beat up on the Housing Executive rather than to recognise that the Housing Executive achieved greatly and that, because of a lot of issues, some of which were public at the time, it was now time for a process of reform.

It seems to me that the suspicion that informs the content of the motion arises from the fact that, after the 2011 report, there were people who went about their business to damage the Housing Executive, including, in my view, at a ministerial level. The comments referred to in respect of Mr McCausland's statement to the House and his conduct around Red Sky and all the rest of it created a sense of worst fears rather than what was necessary, as was touched on by the proposer of the motion, which was a multilateral conversation to scope where the

Housing Executive should go on the far side of the June 2011 report. What happened was that somebody began to behave unilaterally when it was necessary, not least because of the charged nature of housing in the past and at the time and not least because it required a multilateral and multiparty approach.

Mr Douglas might be right in saying that, because of the advice of the Office for National Statistics and the Department of Finance and Personnel in April 2011, there was, for budgetary and statistical purposes, a split in the Housing Executive between regional services and landlord services. That is true, but that is far different from the fears that inform the content of this motion, namely that there is a much more fundamental reform going on above the heads of the political authorities that are needed to conclude the matter.

I will listen to the debate before we decide whether to support the motion, although we understand the fears and anxieties that have formed it. What is required is a multilateral and multiparty approach. What is required is a political conversation, not an imposition by one party or one individual about the future of the Housing Executive. What is required is a full conversation with the unions and the staff, given the scale of their interest in the matter. What is required is that people do not crash on and bring housing back into a controversial political environment. If we can be judged by those standards, Mervyn Storey might do something that his predecessor singularly failed to do.

Mr Beggs: I, too, commence by paying tribute to the work of the Housing Executive over the past number of decades. It has brought about great improvements, and I have personally seen constructive work by local managers to improve communities in my constituency. That is not to say that there are no problems. Indeed, there have been many problems, particularly at the higher levels of management. Look at the failure to manage the maintenance contracts properly, including the Red Sky debacle, when quality work was not being carried out on Housing Executive stock and, indeed, payment was often over the odds. I have to say that I am bemused by the motion, which has the wording:

“to cease immediately the dismantling of Housing Executive structures”.

In some ways, that sums up all that is wrong with Sinn Féin's attitude and all that is wrong with the partners in the Northern Ireland Executive and their Programme for Government, which is bringing about change.

All this change really started to get rolling with the 2011 PwC report, which highlighted the pressures on public housing. A debate started at that point, which was four years ago. It highlighted the need to refocus and adapt the current situation and to look at how the Housing Executive was organised. It also highlighted that there were insufficient funds to generate, renew and maintain Housing Executive properties over the next 30 years. There have been numerous consultations by the Department for Social Development, which has allowed a dialogue to happen.

One of the PwC recommendations was that there should be clear separation of the strategic and regulatory functions. The landlord function commenced in the restructuring from April 2014. I can see that there is a logic to that; there are clear lines of responsibility and

accountability. There is now a quasi-public authority — an arm's-length body — acting as landlord.

What does Sinn Féin want to do? They want to hold everything. I wonder whether that is for four more years or for longer. The debate has been going on for four years. I would be very interested if they had come with concrete proposals in their motion, but the motion wants to hold everything to talk about it. They are not suggesting in detail what needs to be changed and how they will solve the problem. It is easier to put the handbrake on and just sit there. Let us be very straight about the situation: doing nothing creates problems; doing nothing does not solve the pressures; and doing nothing creates more problems. That has to be factored in by those who decide to do nothing.

Let us remember that the Assembly has brought about change affecting the Housing Executive. We have had the reorganisation of local government. The community planning role has now been transferred to local government, and I understand that, all being well, town centre regeneration and community development will transfer by 1 April 2016. Change is afoot. The Assembly is bringing about change, and the Housing Executive cannot sit with its previous set-up. Like every other public body, the Assembly has required that savings be made so that more money will be able to achieve more. More money should get to the coalface and should be spent on tenants, rather than on burdensome management systems. As with welfare reform, Sinn Féin wants to avoid any change and to avoid taking any decisions, even though this situation is not acceptable. We want money to be spent where it benefits tenants, not on bureaucratic structures.

There are other pressures. New social houses need to be built, and there is insufficient stock. Change has to be looked at to enable that to happen, and we need to be open to new models. I am not aware of any decisions on that, but there have to be discussions and decisions. It is disappointing that there is an insufficient number of new social housing houses being built under the Programme for Government.

That is not to say that everything is rosy and perfect, but we have opportunities to question the Minister, when he is with us. We have Question Time. We can pose questions to the Housing Executive management, and the board members of the Housing Executive can hold their chief executive —

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

Mr Beggs: —and officers to account.

I am concerned by the increasing numbers of level 8 and 9 staff. Level 8 staff numbers have increased from 36 to, I think, 66 over the last three years —

Mr Speaker: Thank you.

Mr Beggs: — with an average salary of almost £48,000. Clearly, we need to hold them to account, but to do nothing is not a proper approach.

Mr Speaker: As Question Time begins at 2.45 pm — I see that the Minister has joined us — I suggest that the House takes it ease until then. The debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be Mr Stewart Dickson.

2.45 pm

(Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Newton] in the Chair)

Oral Answers to Questions

Social Development

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Minister has given notice to the Business Committee that he will be out of the country and not available for questions. The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety will, therefore, respond to questions on his behalf today.

Bungalows: Disabled Residents

1. **Mr Ramsey** asked the Minister for Social Development for his assessment of the number of bungalows available in housing association stock in relation to the demand for them by disabled residents. (AQO 8594/11-16)

Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I advise the Member that, as at March 2014, housing associations had 3,901 bungalows in their stock.

The Department for Social Development has been carrying out analytical work to identify whether the current level of stock is sufficient to meet need. That has identified two issues. The first centres on the need to make better use of the wheelchair standard accommodation already available, and the second is to reduce the time taken to provide new wheelchair standard stock where it is needed.

Work to address both those issues is well advanced. An accessible housing register is being developed to identify the type and location of all current adapted and wheelchair accessible social housing. In addition, the Housing Executive is examining its allocation processes to ensure that best use is made of existing stock to meet need.

The Department for Social Development and the Housing Executive are reviewing the specification, standards and processes for new wheelchair standard accommodation for new homes. Work is well advanced on that, and a business case for changes to the approach is being prepared.

Mr Ramsey: I thank the Minister for his very detailed response. Clearly, the subject is getting some traction in the Department. Given the concerns, particularly in new build, from disabled people, older people and groups representing them, I think that it is time that the Department took affirmative action. Of the most recent scheme in my constituency, almost 130 houses are not yet completed, and we have just one bungalow. That does not meet the needs of the community and the constituency that I represent. In the absence of Mervyn Storey, can I ask for a meeting with those representing disabled and older people to discuss the subject matter?

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his question. I suppose that I can commit the Minister to all sorts of things in his absence. It is his own fault for not being here. I am sure that the Minister would be very interested in taking forward that invitation. Like me, he probably has a very open-door policy to those things and would be prepared to listen to anybody who brings any representations to him.

You are right in that you have identified that there is at least some work going on in the Department on this issue. While I am not responsible for the Department, I understand some of the concerns that the Member expressed. Indeed, I am sure that other Members around the Chamber would express such concerns from their own experience in their constituencies. It has been identified not so much that there is not sufficient capacity but that part of the problem is that we do not know where the capacity is. That is why, a couple of years ago, the working group recommended putting an accessible housing register in place as being a good way to identify where the specifically purpose-built bungalows might be and also the accommodation that has been adapted.

Part of the problem — I have experienced this through constituency work — is that homes that have been adapted for disabled needs are allocated to people who perhaps do not have disability needs. While that is a good house for that person, it is not an appropriate house, perhaps, and is not the best use of the investment that has been made out of the public purse in previous years. Having that register in place will assist the Housing Executive and the Department to know where appropriate stock is, which will hopefully allow it to better allocate people into appropriate housing in the future.

There is also an awareness of the slowness of the process in bringing forward accommodation to meet specific needs in communities. It is something that is very much under review by the Department and that the Department is taking very seriously.

Mr Douglas: I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. Could he outline how new social housing is being built to meet the needs of wheelchair users?

Mr Hamilton: Accommodation is being built to meet the needs of wheelchair users in a couple of different ways. The Member will be aware, I am sure, from his own constituency that all new-build social housing is now built to lifetime homes standards, which involves trying to remove the barriers to accessibility that are often present in dwellings. The aim is to have a more flexible design to enable the housing to wrap around the needs of the person over time, including better access to the house and approaches to the property and better circulation and accessibility within the house.

In my response to Mr Ramsey, I touched on cases where an applicant requires a very particular wheelchair accessible home for medical reasons and where their existing home cannot be adapted or a suitable alternative housing solution through existing accommodation does not exist. In those circumstances, a bespoke home is commissioned specifically for that individual or family. Unfortunately, that can lead to a delay of sometimes months or even years in getting that person suitable permanent accommodation. I am sure that the Member and the whole House will agree that this is not a satisfactory way of doing business and is not something we want to see continue. The Department is working with the Housing Executive and others to develop improved processes to meet that need in a more speedy fashion so that people can get the permanent accommodation that they need.

Social Housing: Omagh

2. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister for Social Development to outline his plans for building social housing in Omagh. (AQO 8595/11-16)

Mr Hamilton: I have been advised by the Housing Executive that, as of June 2015, there were 1,330 applications on the waiting list in the West Tyrone parliamentary constituency, which, of course, includes the former Strabane and Omagh districts. Of these, 498 applicants are deemed to be in housing stress. The 2014 to 2019 housing need assessment indicated that there is no requirement for the provision of new general-need social housing in the Omagh area. However, Apex Housing has plans to develop an 8-unit, new-build scheme in Woodside Avenue for young people leaving care, which is planned to start in late 2016. There are also two social housing schemes currently on site in the Omagh area, a 16-unit Apex housing reimprovement scheme for clients with learning disabilities at Railway Court, scheduled for completion in February next year, and a single unit suitable for a physically disabled person is being delivered by Habinteg on former Housing Executive land at Lammy Crescent, which is due for completion in March of next year.

Mr McElduff: I thank the Minister for his answer. Given the ageing population and the higher numbers with mobility problems, there is a greater need for single-storey dwellings from either the Housing Executive or the housing associations. Can the Minister intervene with his colleague to ensure, particularly in the Omagh area, the greater availability of single-storey dwellings, specifically for people with mobility problems and for our ageing population?

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his question. First, I know that it does not matter whether it is social development, health or finance questions — the Member will always find a way to ask a specific question about the Omagh area.

My answer follows on somewhat from Mr Ramsey's question about single-storey accommodation. We are always looking to find homes for people in suitable accommodation, whether to meet their disability needs or, as I said in my response to Mr Douglas, to meet lifetime homes standards, so that the house can be adapted as their needs unfold over a lifetime. The Member is right and has hit on the challenge facing us, which is an ageing population. It is very good news that we are all living longer and, generally, healthier and happier lives.

However, there are many who live longer with one or sometimes more than one chronic condition. I know that well from my current ministerial responsibilities. That impacts on a range of public services, not just health; it clearly impacts on housing as well.

Given that an increasing percentage of the population is single, which the Minister, the Housing Executive and the Department are aware of, investments need to be made over time to adapt the accommodation that we provide through the social sector to ensure that it meets all housing needs. That means family needs and couples, but also singles as well. That is a huge challenge given the profile of the housing stock, but it is a challenge that we are aware of and that we are all trying to address.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Will he state whether people in private rented accommodation are included in the assessment of social housing need? Many families in private rented accommodation have no security of tenure, which is a constant worry and problem for them. They often have to face increased rates without due consideration of their circumstances.

Mr Hamilton: I do not know how many of the people in Omagh or the wider west Tyrone area who are on the waiting lists, particularly those who are in housing stress, are in private rented accommodation. I am not even sure that the Department would be able to provide those figures. If they are accessible, I am sure that the Department will provide them to you.

I accept the point absolutely: the housing waiting list will include people who are in private rented accommodation; it will also include owner-occupiers. A range of tenancy types is contained in those numbers. I am sure that the Minister accepts that it does not matter whether people are currently in social rented accommodation, in private rented accommodation or are owner-occupiers. There is housing need across all of those sectors, and that will be reflected in the numbers before us, whether they relate to Omagh, West Tyrone as a whole or Northern Ireland.

Mr Anderson: I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. How is land identified for the development of social housing so that social housing is supplied where it is most in need?

Mr Hamilton: The Member will know from work in his constituency that, although it may have eased in more recent times, it has been quite difficult for housing associations to identify appropriate land in their constituencies in the past number of years. During the property bubble times around five or six years ago, housing associations had great difficulty in that they were often outbid when they went for sites. That pushed them onto sites that were much smaller and more difficult to develop, where they were not able to build as many new-build properties as that area might have needed. As I understand it, that process has not particularly changed over that time.

The Housing Executive undertakes a needs assessment on an annual basis at a district level, which is what produced the figures that I read out to Mr McElduff in respect of the West Tyrone constituency. Once that work is done and the need is identified, housing associations are encouraged to find potential sites for development on land in that district. In that sense, the process has not changed. The housing association will then register that site on the Housing Executive's social housing development programme with a group within the Housing Executive. That then goes through a process of due diligence and, subject to funding from the public sector and the availability of funds to the housing association, that land will be developed in due course.

The process has not fundamentally changed. There have probably been some tweaks and changes down through the years, but it is still there. I hope that, given that the market has somewhat eased in more recent times — it is not as bad as it was — we will start to see more housing associations develop across Northern Ireland with the greater availability of land. Of course, the public sector is getting rid of some land as well — I have seen it in my

constituency — and public sector land that is not required is being developed by housing associations, which is a good thing.

Welfare Reform

3. Mr Nesbitt asked the Minister for Social Development what discussions he and his senior officials have had with other political parties on welfare reform since June 2015. (AQO 8596/11-16)

Mr Hamilton: Neither the Minister nor senior officials have had any discussions with other political parties on welfare reform since June 2015. In June, a meeting was held with Executive parties in the Hilton Hotel in Belfast to brief them on the progress of universal credit payment flexibilities, social sector size criteria, the supplementary payment scheme and the disability protection scheme. The meeting was to ensure that there was a full understanding amongst political parties of how the schemes were developing and to provide parties with an opportunity to engage further on all elements of the schemes. Following the meetings, the papers on the remaining schemes agreed at Stormont Castle were issued to all political parties to consider. Since then, there has been only one enquiry from one political party.

3.00 pm

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Minister for the answer. I think that the last real engagement, as he said, was on 10 June in Belfast city centre, which was 13 weeks ago or, to put it another way, £27 million of penalties ago. As we prepare to go into further talks, will the Minister assure us that, this time, unlike Stormont House, there will be no twin track, that all five parties will be involved and that there will be no side deals or side discussions, such as at Belfast City Airport?

Mr Hamilton: I was going to say that we are looking forward to the talks process; that is probably the wrong way to describe it. We are imminently entering a talks process to resolve a range of issues. We are looking forward — I think that is the right term — to the Member coming forward with his cunning plan to resolve the issue of welfare reform. I thought that he believed that issue had been resolved at Stormont House. Of course, we are all mindful of the fact that welfare reform is a policy that he and his party supported in 2010. He ran on a manifesto to introduce the form of welfare reform that is happening in Great Britain right now.

The Member criticises the time that there has been since discussions with the Minister for Social Development. As I pointed out in my response, yes, there were discussions back in June. The Minister for Social Development provided papers to all the Executive parties — the parties that were Executive parties at the time — in June. I would have assumed that, once the Minister has presented parties with papers, the ball is very much in the court of the other parties to come back with any queries that there might be, any questions that they have or any suggestions that they might have for improvement. Since June — in those 13 weeks, as the Member helpfully points out — only one party has come back with any queries, suggestions, solutions or whatever it might be, and, funnily enough, it is not the Member's party. In those 13 weeks, there has not been a single enquiry or question. Nothing has come

back from the Member's party, yet he seeks to criticise the Minister.

Mr Agnew: There has certainly been some commentary in the media that suggests that we are some way towards an agreement on welfare. Given the public interest and in the interests of transparency, can the Minister shed some light on what that agreement might look like?

Mr Hamilton: I think that we all listened with interest to what the Secretary of State said in her speech in, I think, Cambridge on Saturday evening. She has also made a statement in the House of Commons in the last few hours. She has indicated that, as a last resort, to paraphrase her, she is prepared for the Government to step in and legislate for welfare reform. We ought to welcome that, given the circumstances that we find ourselves in.

Some may huff and puff about what the Secretary of State has said. If we do not proceed with welfare reform quickly through a decision that we have taken — the Stormont Castle and Stormont House agreements will form the basis of that; we enter a talks process not to renegotiate the detail of that and certainly not to renegotiate the size of the financial package associated with welfare reform — and there is no agreement between the local parties, we face the very real prospect that, early in the next financial year, over 600,000 people in Northern Ireland who receive social security benefits and tax credits will not receive those because we will not have a functioning IT system in place. That does not take account of the impact that not proceeding has on the Executive's finances and the impact that it might have on jobs in the Social Security Agency here in Belfast and in the north-west.

I am glad that the Secretary of State has come forward and brought clarity to the whole process. We will enter into the talks and, if there are cunning plans or other ideas or thoughts that might come forward, that is fine, but there has been that very clear indication from the Secretary of State that the Government will legislate if no agreement can be reached between the parties, and I welcome that.

Mr Attwood: Could the Minister be less coy and at least confirm that the SDLP has gone back to the Minister for Social Development since the meetings in June and has sought to meet with him in relation to a number of matters?

Given the scale of the Chancellor's 8 July Budget and its proposals on working tax credit, given that there are 160,000 people in Northern Ireland on working tax credit, which brings an income of £1 billion into Northern Ireland every year, and given that those proposals are going to impact adversely upon many of his own constituents as well as constituents of every MLA, does he not accept that, in order to deal with the welfare issue, the issue of working tax credits and its adverse impact on Northern Ireland has to be part of the negotiations that are meant to commence at 5.00 pm?

Mr Hamilton: I am not sure whether I should seek to embarrass the Member and his party or not, but, according to the information that I have, the Member's party did not come back with any response. Nor did the Green Party. I am not sure whether there have been other lines of communication, but there certainly have not been any officially through the Minister and the Department.

On the issue of tax credits, nobody would demur from the Member's analysis of the impact that the changes that

the Chancellor announced in July will have on society in Northern Ireland. The impact will be similar to the impact that there would be from the unadulterated version of welfare reform that there is in Great Britain instead of the version that has tweaks, changes and flexibilities adapted for Northern Ireland.

Mr Campbell: No money.

Mr Hamilton: The point that my friend and colleague makes from a sedentary position is a relevant one in this debate. The Secretary of State and the Government have made it clear that there is no more money. That puts it on this Executive, with the finite resources that we have, which are under considerable pressure, to find resources to ameliorate something that is not within our direct control, namely tax credits.

From the talks process before Christmas, I remember listening to the Member's party colleague Mark Durkan, the MP for Foyle, talk about seeking to deal with the problems that we were facing with this package of welfare reform whilst understanding that we could not do this forever and a day simply because the Executive could not afford to.

Those points are worth bearing in mind, but that does not take away from the analysis that the Member provided: the changes that the Chancellor put forward in his Budget in July will have a negative impact on people in Northern Ireland.

Mill House, Ballymena

4. **Mr Swann** asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the current situation in Mill House Hostel in Ballymena. (AQO 8597/11-16)

Mr Hamilton: The Housing Executive initiated an investigation into the Mill House hostel in Ballymena once concerns were brought to its attention by the Simon Community. An action plan to implement the recommendations from the investigation is being implemented by the Simon Community. The Housing Executive has not suspended funding. However, it continues to monitor improvements to the service, as agreed in the action plan. New intakes to the facility have been suspended.

The Department has, more recently, been made aware of further concerns at Mill House, including allegations that relate to criminal activity. Officials have passed those allegations to the PSNI. In addition, the Department has referred the concerns to the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland, which has a regulatory role over registered charities in Northern Ireland. The Department is liaising closely with the Charity Commission as a result.

Mr Swann: I thank the Minister for his detailed answer. Concerns over Mill House were raised with me by some of the residents. There were quotes that the conditions inside it were Third World and that you would not keep a dog in it. That was where we were placing the most vulnerable in our society. It is right that the Department has called in the Charity Commission and is looking at the practices that were going on in Mill House.

Can the Minister give us some clarification on what will happen to the Simon Community? There is a planning application for a new hostel in Ballymena. What can he do to assuage the concerns of the residents of Ballymena?

Mr Hamilton: I am not aware of the application for a new facility, and I am sure that the Department will come back to the Member on that in due course. This is an issue that I became aware of through press coverage. As I alluded to in my substantive answer, there were two different and separate types of press coverage.

It is concerning, and that is why the Department responded as it did and called for an investigation. I think that the initial story that was run in the local press was about what the Member said about the conditions and the standard of accommodation. Whilst that was rebutted and refuted by the Simon Community, an action plan has been put in place, as I said. That aimed to address all the outstanding issues that were raised as a result of that initial inquiry and the investigation that followed from it. All those remedial actions, which I think will include the standard of accommodation, are to be dealt with and completed by 1 November. The Department will then further review that with the Housing Executive once all investigations have concluded to make sure that the action plan has been lived up to.

I agree, and I am sure that the Minister will similarly agree, that accommodation for vulnerable people and homeless people in our society should be of the highest possible standard and that people who are in need of such care should be looked after appropriately, whether it is by the statutory sector or, in this case, by a charity that is doing that work on our behalf.

Mr Allister: The Department says that it is aware of these disturbing allegations. What assurance is there that there will be no witch-hunt against people who probably qualify as whistle-blowers in respect of this establishment? There have certainly been some suggestions that they may not be receiving the protection that they should.

Mr Hamilton: If that is the case, it is the sort of thing that would concern me. I am sure that it would concern the Minister similarly if it is the case. If the Member has any information, I encourage him to pass it on to the Minister for Social Development. I can assure him that it will be appropriately dealt with. It does not matter whether it is accommodation of this nature or whatever else it may be or whether it is being operated by the Department for Social Development, my Department or whatever Department it might be. If there are people who think that the standard is not appropriate and that there is illegal or unlawful behaviour or criminality, it should be reported through the proper ways. I encourage anybody to do that, and, if the Member wishes to pass on any information that he has or which has been passed to him, I encourage him to do that.

Mr Campbell: Given the further serious allegations that the Minister alluded to, can the Minister outline what options are open to the Department post the November timeline that he has indicated, looking forward to 2016?

Mr Hamilton: The Member is right: these are incredibly serious allegations, and they are being properly investigated, just as the original allegations were investigated thoroughly and an action plan was put in place. Given that the investigation has been going on and that information has been passed to the police, it is an important and relevant point to say that it is too early for us to jump to any conclusion about possible outcomes.

Irrespective of what goes on and what is found in the investigation, the Housing Executive has a range of options that it can put in place if a provider of Supporting People accommodation such as this is in breach of its contractual obligations. That can range from amending the terms of a contract to suspending the services through a contract or even terminating a contract. Obviously, as you would expect, the Minister will take appropriate actions on the basis of the conclusions that are brought forward, notwithstanding the fact that there is a need for this type of accommodation in the Ballymena area, just as there is in other parts of Northern Ireland.

Housing Executive: Salary Costs

5. **Mrs Overend** asked the Minister for Social Development for his assessment of the salary costs of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. (AQO 8598/11-16)

Mr Hamilton: Salaries of the staff in the Northern Ireland Housing Executive are in line with the terms and conditions of the National Joint Council salaries scheme used by local authorities.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Minister for that scant detail. I understand that the Northern Ireland Housing Executive has gone through its own voluntary early release scheme, releasing 149 staff over the last six months at a cost of over £5 million. Can the Minister explain why, with fewer social houses and significant powers due to be released to local government, the number of high-paid level-9 staff has increased from 23 to 28 over the past two years and numbers of level-8 staff have almost doubled over the past two years, both costing over £1,200,000? Is the Minister simply replacing lower-level staff with high-level management?

3.15 pm

Mr Hamilton: I am aware of some queries. Actually, I think Mr Beggs mentioned level-8 staff in the previous debate, just as I arrived into the Chamber. The Member is right that there has been an increase from 36 to 66 level-8 staff — that is the information that I have — from 2013-15. The reasons given to me as to why that is the case are that, first, in 2014, the increase from 36-51 was principally around a restructuring of the landlord services section in the Housing Executive to a three-region structure, which was to better reflect the reform of public administration and the new council structures. In order to properly realign with the RPA, the stock and staffing size of the new area significantly increased, which led to the appointment of more level-8 area managers.

In 2014-15, the increases were principally related to restructuring within the Housing Executive's corporate services division, which included a move to a HR business partnering model, the establishment of a corporate strategy and planning office and a temporary transformation team, as well as a regrading exercise, which resulted from a request for job re-evaluation on the part of the Housing Executive's team of solicitors, so there are a range of reasons that the Minister would offer as to why the number of level 8s has gone up. Whether the Member is satisfied with that or not, she can take it up with the Minister. If she or her colleagues have not taken it forward in the debate, I am sure that she can take it up in writing with the Minister.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That ends the period for listed questions. We will now move to topical questions.

Social Development: Budget Pressures

T1. **Mrs Dobson** asked the Minister whether he is aware of any inescapable pressures developing in the 2015-16 DSD budget, no doubt similar to pressures on his budget. (AQT 2791/11-16)

Mr Hamilton: We could talk for much longer than the two minutes that I have about the pressures in my own Department, as the Member will be well aware. I am not aware of any particular pressures that the Minister for Social Development is facing in his budget, but I am sure that, if his Department is anything like mine — although, having been Minister in two Departments, I am not sure if there are any other Departments quite like the Department of Health — he will be facing a range of pressures and will have to make very difficult judgement calls as to where to use the finite limited resources that he has at his disposal.

Mrs Dobson: I thank the Minister for his answer. Can he provide an update on any indication the Department may have received from DFP — as you know, you have experience of that one — about the potential for in-year cuts to departmental budgets?

Mr Hamilton: Obviously, the Finance Minister, when she was bringing forward her Budget towards the end of the last session, pointed out the financial realities that we were facing at that stage as a result of not moving forward with welfare reform. Her concerns — as they were my concerns when I was Finance Minister, and they remain my concerns in my current position — were on the failure or inability of us to move forward with a voluntary exit scheme (VES). Obviously there has been good news in that respect in the last number of days, when the Secretary of State, following her speech at the British-Irish Association, has made it clear that she is willing to let that funding be released.

I think that the Finance Minister confirmed yesterday that the first tranche of people exiting the service will go ahead at the end of this month. That will relieve pressure in the Department for Social Development. I know that it was seeking to exit one of the biggest numbers of staff from the Civil Service. If those people could not leave at the end of September it would create severe strain on the DSD budget in-year, and I do not think that the Department would have been able to live within its budget in-year, much as many other Departments would not have been able to live within their budget in-year, because they were relying on those savings coming forward.

The ability to move forward on the VES, which I very much welcome, will not solve all of the budget problems that all of the Departments, including DSD, have, but it will offer them some relief. More importantly, it has given certainty to those staff who were waiting to exit and who had notice given to them. They will now be able to exit the Civil Service. I am sure that they will be greatly relieved that they have that confirmed and do not have to live in limbo any more.

Voluntary and Community Sector Support: Strangford

T2. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the Minister, at the risk of being accused of being parochial, for his assessment of the

effectiveness of the support given to the voluntary and community sector by the Department for Social Development in the Strangford constituency, which they both have the honour of serving. (AQT 2792/11-16)

Mr Hamilton: I would never accuse anybody who raises issues about the Strangford constituency of being parochial by any means.

Mr Nesbitt: Barry McElduff.

Mr Hamilton: I am well used to Barry McElduff, as is everybody in the House, and parochial does not quite describe it.

The Department obviously has a role, remit and responsibility for the community and voluntary sector, which is, I suppose, underpinned by the concordat that has been in place for a great number of years. I think that the relationship between the community and voluntary sector and the Department or Executive as a whole will always be one of assistance and challenge. So, in that respect, I think that a healthy relationship has existed. I know from my current posting that there is a good, healthy relationship between my Department and the community and voluntary sector, and it is one where we are more than able to work together to resolve issues and problems as they arise, hopefully in a mutually beneficial way.

The Member and I know the Strangford area well. We are very fortunate to have in our constituency quite a large number of very good community organisations that are supported by a range of different networking organisations that provide good support and capacity and continued development and training in the constituency. I am sure that through his mailbag, emails and telephone, he is contacted by the same sort of people who I am contacted by. It is not perfect by any means, but, on the whole, from experience, I think that we have a very good relationship between the statutory sector and community and voluntary organisations in the Strangford constituency.

Mr Nesbitt: I am sure that the Minister is aware of the difficulties with 12-month funding, which lead too often to an annual hiatus in service delivery and staff retention. On that basis, will he join with me in welcoming and endorsing the recommendation in the newly published Heenan-Anderson commission that states that where community groups are delivering positive outcomes, they should receive a minimum of three-year funding agreements?

Mr Hamilton: This is one of those conundrums that I can see in my Department, and I am sure that the Department for Social Development will have the same issues. I recall it very clearly from my time in DFP. It is one of those things where doing that is obviously the right thing. It does not matter whether it is the community and voluntary sector; it can be in the statutory sector as well. If you are trying to have long-term sustainable impacts on social problems, health problems or whatever it might be, having security of funding over a long time is self-evidently the best way to go about it. It is quite difficult to deliver in the public financial system that we have in this part of the world. It throws up particular challenges in years like the year that we are in. That is not just because this year is one where we are challenged by the resources available to us but because it is a year with a one-year Budget. There is not the certainty for Departments to be able to do that, particularly in an environment where we are expecting further cuts to resource expenditure, especially in the years to come.

It is very hard for Departments to give that degree of certainty to community and voluntary organisations or, indeed, to any organisations and even some units in their Departments about future spending. That does not always produce the best outcomes, and it does not allow you to tackle with any degree of certainty those long-standing ingrained problems that there can be in our society.

So, I accept the point that has been raised. I have not seen the newly published report, although I was aware that it was being published today. I have not seen that recommendation or, indeed, any of the recommendations. It is a sensible proposal to put forward, but it is a little bit more difficult to execute in reality, in my experience.

Welfare Reform: Secretary of State's Comments

T3. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister whether he agrees that, following the Secretary of State's speech on Saturday, which referred to welfare reform, Northern Ireland is now being forced either to accept full-throated Tory welfare cuts or to act responsibly by ensuring that we implement what was agreed at Stormont House. (AQT 2793/11-16)

Mr Hamilton: I agree entirely with the Member. I could not have put it better myself. He is absolutely right. I was going to say, "we have", but I do not think that my party or the Member's party has this choice to make; it is for others to make this choice. We agreed a way forward on welfare reform at Stormont Castle and Stormont House. That was being faithfully honoured until Sinn Féin, aided and abetted by the SDLP, walked away from those commitments. To be fair, the SDLP backed away from them much quicker than Sinn Féin did, and we are now faced with that choice.

The Secretary of State has said what she has said, and I think that it is a game changer. I think that it has unlocked the situation and has made the negotiations that we are entering into not easy but perhaps a little less difficult on this issue. It is up to others to make that decision. Do they want welfare reform as it is in Great Britain? We are all hearing various stories about how difficult it is to implement there and its painful impact on people. Or do we want our own version in Northern Ireland? We have the template in the Stormont House Agreement and Stormont Castle agreement. It is up to others to show some responsibility and maturity and to live up to the commitments that they made last year.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for his response, and I totally agree. Will he agree with me that the refusal of those to sign up to or to agree to what they did agree to at Stormont House will affect the most vulnerable? We hear so much about the most vulnerable in our society, and those will be the people most directly affected. If things go as we do not want them to, does he agree that we will all end up being worse off and on the receiving end of the new Tory Government's wrath by them making sure that we accept welfare reform?

Mr Hamilton: I again agree with the Member's analysis. Let us not forget that we are already seeing an impact on vulnerable people in Northern Ireland as a result of the failure of Sinn Féin and the SDLP to show some maturity and to live up to the commitments that they made last Christmas. The impact of their backing-off on welfare reform and failing to let welfare reform legislation pass through the House is seen nowhere more starkly than

in the Department of Health, where the £9.5 million a month that we are losing could pay for a lot of hip and knee operations. It could take many people — to use the Member's phrase, very vulnerable people — off waiting lists on which they have been for a very long time.

Some now have a choice to make on whether or not to live up to their commitments and responsibilities by moving forward with a form of welfare reform that is more suitable to the needs of the people of Northern Ireland. We have the opportunity, through devolution, to be able to fashion welfare reform — at a cost, yes, but it is an opportunity to fashion welfare reform in a way that better suits our citizens. That choice is still there for those who, up until now, have not shown any maturity or responsibility. That choice is there for them, and I hope that they grasp that opportunity in the coming days and that we move forward with sensible, good, sound welfare reform proposals that help put the Executive's finances back on an even keel and allow us to move forward and make some progress.

Poverty: 'Households Below Average Income' Report

T4. **Mrs McKeivitt** asked the Minister how he and his colleagues — who, unfortunately, are not meeting — will work to decrease the figures given in the 'Households Below Average Income' report for Northern Ireland for 2013-14, which was published at the beginning of September, containing a number of worrying statistics, including one that one fifth of the population is living in relative poverty. (AQT 2794/11-16)

Mr Hamilton: I am not aware of the report that the Member refers to, although I am happy to take a look at it, and I am sure that the Minister and Department will be aware of it and will have a look at it. I will ensure that they respond to you with specific comments around the report and its recommendations and on what the Department is doing to deal with it.

I think that we all accept that there are serious and significant poverty issues in Northern Ireland. Our region has gone through very difficult economic times in the past number of years that will have only served to exacerbate existing issues and problems around poverty, particularly child poverty. That is why I have long supported, and will continue to support, not just the range and package of support that the Minister for Social Development's Department, or, indeed, the Department of Health or other Departments, puts forward to support vulnerable people and those in need but my colleague the Minister for the economy in trying to grow our economy in Northern Ireland and increase our competitiveness.

We may have many disagreements in the House about welfare reform and other issues, but I think that we are all in agreement that the best way out of poverty is to give people a job, to get them back into the workforce and to encourage them to earn money and contribute to society. That is the best answer to poverty, and it is a better answer than anything that the Minister for Social Development can do under his remit.

Mrs McKeivitt: Through media reports, I have noted that the Social Development Minister has visited some food banks and taken a great interest in them. The same reports state that a quarter of individuals in families with a disabled person are living in relative poverty. The same

was reported in 2013 and 2014. I wonder whether the research that was carried out by the Department into the use of food banks contained any data on people with disabilities needing to use food banks. When you report back to the Minister, perhaps that can be included in his answer.

3.30 pm

Mr Hamilton: I will make sure that that is done. Now that food banks have been mentioned, it is probably worthwhile putting something on the record again. I remember a debate that Mr Douglas, who is still behind us, and I brought to the House some years ago. Our motion praised what was, at that stage, the very early work being done by food banks across Northern Ireland. Obviously and unfortunately, that work has had to increase out of necessity in recent times. We should always take time to praise those who, in many cases, volunteer for the work that they do and to thank those who have provided food banks with food and other materials that can be given to people in need across our Province. I think that it has been a good and appropriate response, particularly from those in the faith-based community, to problems that they see in the communities that they live in. It is worth taking time to praise them for the work that they do.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Time is up. Before we return to the debate on the Housing Executive —

Mr Dallat: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. You are aware that the Assembly was prevented from asking questions to the Ulster Unionist Minister for Regional Development today, yet his party leader and three of his colleagues turned up to ask questions on Social Development. Will you please investigate whether this is an infringement of the rules of the House that makes us the laughing stock of the Western World?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I will bring your remarks to the attention of the Speaker.

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. Will you clarify this in case there is some misunderstanding: is there an Ulster Unionist member of the Executive?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I will bring your remarks to the attention of the Speaker. [Laughter.] Time is up. Before we return to the debate on Housing Executive structures, I ask Members to take their ease while we change the top Table.

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

Private Members' Business

Housing Executive Structures

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Social Development to instruct the chairperson of the Housing Executive to cease immediately the dismantling of Housing Executive structures until full political debate has been held on the future of housing.
— [Mr F McCann.]

Mr Dickson: Like others, I am somewhat at a loss to understand the nature of the motion, although I understand the sentiments around it. I would like to start by saying that I started my married life as a tenant of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. It housed me at a time when it was appropriate for it to do so, and I was able to move on when it was equally appropriate for me to do so. I value the work done and the role played by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive over the many years since its inception.

I have to express some surprise and concern at the nature and content of the motion. The call on the Assembly to ask the Minister to “instruct” the chair of the Housing Executive certainly rings some alarm bells with me. The call for an instruction implies that something has gone wrong in a fundamental area of governance. As a member of the Committee and in my time in the Assembly, I have had concerns about how many organisations operate, but I do not think that I share the concern that would require an instruction to a chairperson of an arm’s-length organisation funded by the Department.

We are all aware that reforms of the Housing Executive remain in discussion. They are important and sometimes contentious issues, and, from that perspective, Sinn Féin is right. There are areas that need serious debate, but the nature and tenor of the motion is premature. It is important that we have that discussion and that the new Minister — not so new now — comes to us when he is available, and we have a genuine opportunity to go through all the issues that have been raised and continue to need to be raised on how we deliver quality public-sector and social housing for all those citizens who require it today and in the future. I do not think that a motion like this will advance the cause of that debate in any direction at all.

Inevitably, there are very serious issues when it comes to the situation in which the Northern Ireland Housing Executive finds itself. We were told at a Committee meeting last week that some £1.5 billion will be required for repairs and maintenance over the next five years. The challenge is: from where will the funds come? On the one hand, we have housing associations that have a much more modern housing stock; on the other hand, we have a Housing Executive that has a decreasing quality of stock because it is ageing. That requires innovative ways forward, whether stock transfers or increases in rent. However, the party that is proposing the motion does not want anybody to spend any more on anything or give any more money towards how we take things forward. Expressing concerns that the Minister should take this matter up directly with the Housing Executive rings alarm bells with me.

I welcome the steps taken to address the issue in Committee. I believe that the Committee will see housing as its key focus in the remaining days of this mandate, however short or long that will be. However, I have to say that the fundamental message that the Alliance Party and I want to send out today is that we support the Housing Executive and its work. We are opposed to its wholesale dismantling or change for change’s sake, but, like all organisations in the public sector, it needs to meet the challenges of change and those of delivering in this day and age. We cannot look back through rose-tinted glasses at what the Housing Executive has done through its many achievements. There have been many achievements, but, equally, there have been many failures. It is important that the Housing Executive is supported in its changing and evolving role, but I do not believe that today’s motion aids that situation at all, and I encourage the Member to reflect on what he is asking the House to do. That debate should continue, as it has done since 2013, in Committee.

Ms P Bradley: Along with other Members, I am somewhat bemused as to why the motion has been brought forward at this time, albeit I understand a lot of the sentiments that lie behind it. I know that it was recognised, even in the last mandate of the Assembly, that the Northern Ireland Housing Executive was going to face huge financial challenges over the years ahead if some reform did not take place. Mr McCann, along with others, spoke about the 2011 PwC report and its review of the Housing Executive.

I am sorry to see that Mr Attwood has disappeared from the Chamber because I join my colleague, along with other Members, in commending the Housing Executive. It worked in Northern Ireland for over 40 years, during the most difficult times. No other part of the United Kingdom or, indeed, the Republic of Ireland has had to face the same pressures as our Housing Executive. Mr Attwood tried to paint a picture that all members of the DUP are against the Housing Executive, and he was quite surprised by my colleague Mr Douglas’s comments. I find Mr Attwood’s assertion quite unbelievable because I would also make such comments. Like Mr Dickson, I grew up on a housing estate. I am very proud to say that and very proud of my roots in living in that housing estate, so I have a connection.

Over the years, we have come to recognise that there is a need for significant change not only in how the Housing Executive is structured and but in the delivery of our social housing programme.

It was over two and a half years ago that the then Minister, Nelson McCausland, addressed the Assembly with a statement in which he outlined the changes in structure that were required for a more sustainable social housing market that would benefit tenants and taxpayers. In a statement at that time, he made it very clear that the Housing Executive reform was not about abolishing the Northern Ireland Housing Executive but was about improvement in the delivery of its functions.

I believe that the Social Development Committee works very well together when it is discussing issues that affect our constituents. When proposing the motion, Mr McCann talked about working together. I think that we have that within the Committee; we work together on many things. There are things that we will, maybe, never see eye to eye on, but we do work together. I understand. He brought up issues, some of which are very close to my heart. He

talked about homelessness and how the new structures are going to affect that. Yes, I believe that we, as a Committee, need to scrutinise and look at that further, because I believe that we still have a big black hole in our plans when it comes to homelessness. One of the first decisions the Social Development Minister made when he was appointed to his position was to ring-fence Supporting People, although I do not believe that that goes far enough in supporting our homeless in Northern Ireland. Maybe we need to look at something a little bit more innovative.

I picked up different points from Members. In bringing forward the motion, there do not seem to be any strong proposals on what Members want us to put in place. As a constituency MLA, I, along with everyone else in the Chamber, know about the situation. There is no party or person in the Chamber who does not represent the vulnerable in their community. I think Mr Douglas brought up the point. Daily, or, at least, weekly, someone enters our offices with a housing problem. The majority of those who come into my office are homeless and are having to present as homeless. So, we know the level of need that is out there for good, sustainable, effective housing for the people we represent.

I understand the issues. In his proposal, Mr McCann also said that the changes taking place within the Housing Executive should be politically driven. I believe that we, as an Assembly, have worked hard to get to the stage we are at with the reform and restructuring of the Housing Executive. I believe there is still a role for the Committee to look further at faults that have occurred, to recognise those faults and to do something about them, but I do not think that we should be calling for the motion as it sits today.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh an díospóireacht thábhachtach seo. I welcome the debate on this important motion. From speaking to people, I know that there is a widening and growing concern about the proposed governance arrangements within the housing sector. I, at my most optimistic, remain to be convinced that the dismantling of the Housing Executive is the best way to deal with this situation. I strongly believe that politicians need to show a lead on the issue and build consensus on the way forward. I do not think that these decisions can be taken without political consensus and political support behind them. It is largely for that reason that we have brought the motion forward.

We need to see increased levels of accountability and transparency in how housing is delivered across the North. The current governance arrangements within housing associations are not good enough. From sitting on the Public Accounts Committee with you, Mr Deputy Speaker, it is clear to see that there is a serious difference between how the Housing Executive and housing associations are treated when providing transparency and accountability to the Department and to those of us who are elected to the House to hold them to account. I believe that a mechanism such as the Housing Executive is a much better way of doing it than having a third-party agency, such as a housing association, running it. These are the types of debates that we need to be having to ensure that there is cross-party consensus on any future arrangements.

Many Members have spoken about the PwC report, and there has been considerable commentary on some of its

findings, but it is important to remember that one of the things that it said was that the Housing Executive:

"is one of the success stories from [the North's] recent history... it has delivered significant social benefits throughout [the North], with the quality of the housing stock having moved from one of the worst in Western Europe to what is now regarded as the best-quality stock."

3.45 pm

So, like other Members, I pay tribute to the Housing Executive for the work that it has done since its foundation and will hopefully continue to do. It has dealt with what is a very sensitive issue in our community. The rationale for the establishment of the Housing Executive has not gone away. Very many people believe that some politicians cannot be trusted to allocate houses and that we still need the Housing Executive for at least that purpose, if not much more. It is not simply about allocating houses; it is about deciding where houses are based. For that reason, I do not think that we are at a stage yet where there is consensus about the delivery of social housing.

From my point of view, one of the greatest strengths of the Housing Executive is its ability to command respect and support from right across all sections of our community.

Mr Campbell: Will the Member give way?

Mr Flanagan: I will certainly, Gregory.

Mr Campbell: I presume that the Member was talking about the past when he talked about politicians being trusted to allocate properties. Now he is talking about the Housing Executive being trusted as an institution. He has not at any time during his contribution in the debate lamented or even referred to the notorious under-representation of Protestants amongst the workforce in the Housing Executive that has prevailed for over 30 years.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Flanagan: I thank the Member for his contribution, but it is my understanding that positions at all levels in the Housing Executive are awarded purely on merit. Maybe the Member wants to see a different process, but it is my understanding that, in the Housing Executive, places both for houses and for employment are offered on merit, and that is the way it should stay.

To conclude, a decision of this nature should not take place without a substantial level of political debate, political oversight and consensus. That is why we are asking the Minister to stall progressing this move. We think that there needs to be consensus. There needs to be a much broader debate and much more agreement amongst political parties before such a drastic move of dismantling the Housing Executive proceeds any further.

Mr Allister: I share some of the puzzlement as to the timing and purpose of the motion, because this process began many years ago with the PwC report. Indeed, some time ago, when I quizzed some officials in the Committee, they said that the process of "reform" in the Housing Executive might continue for another 10 or 12 years, so the purpose and timing of this particular call is not immediately clear to me.

I regret that we do not have the Minister here to reply to the debate, because I think that it would have been important to hear from him about the current sense of direction within his vision. Undoubtedly, his predecessor, when he came to the House in, I think, January 2013 almost in crusading spirit, seemed to have a very distinct agenda about overhaul if not dissolution of the Housing Executive.

The sense that I have from the current Minister is that he is tamer in those matters and not as exercised as his predecessor, but one would have liked to have got a sense of direction from him about the future, particularly in circumstances where we pass through a process called transformation in the Housing Executive. We had all sorts of staff recruited, and a director of transformation was brought in who was going to — I do not know what she was going to do, but she was going to transform things pretty mightily. Then she was chief executive, and then she was gone as quickly as she arrived. Yet, last year, the transformation staff in the Housing Executive cost us three quarters of a million pounds. I would have liked to have probed and to have heard just what the import of Mags Lightbody was to that transformation, where it has left, where it is now headed and whether there is any really purposeful direction to what is happening in that regard.

I would also like to comment on the fact that, well in advance of any other voluntary exit scheme, we have had a voluntary exit scheme in the Housing Executive targeting some 500 staff, of whom, I think, 149 have already gone at a cost of £5 million, it seems. Given that, as I understand it, the age profile of most of those who have gone was 60-plus, one asks whether there was a value-for-money approach to the voluntary exit scheme in the Housing Executive. There are certainly issues there to be explored.

At the same time, a developing part of the Housing Executive, in consequence of the collapse of Red Sky and other companies, has been a huge increase in the direct labour force. I would like to have heard from the Minister what is the sense of direction about the future of the direct labour force and whether they will be properly integrated with the resulting benefits, which they deserve, or kept as some sort of adjunct in the Housing Executive.

There are many issues in flux in the Housing Executive that it is right to identify and discuss, but the focus of the motion does not seem to be on those issues. It seems, rather, to be driven by some sort of ideology that I question the relevance of. I regret that it has not focused on what would have been more pertinent issues.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. First, I thank Fra McCann for tabling the motion and all the Members who participated in the debate. I want to clear up a couple of points. Obviously, on reflection, one could have rephrased the motion but, having listened to the Members' contributions, I note that everyone, to one degree or another, usually quite positively and strongly, has given support to the Housing Executive and commended it for the great work that it has done over many years, albeit that every one of us, me included, would add caveats around the Housing Executive's failures over the years. However, it is heart-warming to hear all the Members who spoke express confidence in the Housing Executive to some degree or another. That vindicates us in tabling the motion, albeit, as I said, that we could have, perhaps, reflected on the use of the words.

It is important to say also that I would benchmark this against the appointment of the current Minister, Mervyn Storey. I have no doubt — I have personal experience of it — that this Minister has made very important efforts to stabilise uncertainties not only in the Housing Executive but in the broader housing sector. Our motion reflects a long period when people inside the Housing Executive and people outside it involved in housing provision have had a concern that there was, initially, an agenda essentially to get rid of the Housing Executive. I have heard that expressed to me by people who should have known better. I am talking about people who were, in some way or other, involved in the development of policy around the Housing Executive. Clearly, there were proposals on the table that would have got rid of the Housing Executive and dismantled it into a landlord body, with all the social housing transferred to a number of housing associations. We would then have had a regional housing authority that would have dealt with other issues including homelessness, supporting housing and a raft of other important policies, a number of which Members have addressed this afternoon.

People in the Housing Executive were witnessing those things and expressing concerns about them. Those concerns have been raised in the Committee for Social Development but also directly in public and in private with Members. People see that there was an effort made. Amid all the other turmoil of the past couple of years, concerns were expressed to us and others by people in the Housing Executive — senior people at that — that what was not being delivered by way of political agreement and consensus was being delivered by stealth. In other words, important policies and delivery mechanisms were being taken away from the Housing Executive. That is where the motion stems from. It is about addressing the fear that many in the Housing Executive and the wider housing body have expressed. Those people have been expressing concern that, while we have not ultimately agreed on what we are going to do on social housing provision, there are things happening now to the Housing Executive that are significantly damaging that organisation's ability to do that which we have all commended it for doing and that which it has done well for a number of years. I apologise if people think that the motion is unclear or uncertain, but it is clearly designed to say, "Let's get political agreement on the social housing structures to be delivered". That has to reflect the best of what was the Housing Executive, which everybody has praised this afternoon. Any efforts that may be ongoing to take away some existing functions from the Housing Executive really should not proceed until we get the political agreement.

I speak as a political representative today and not on behalf of the Committee for Social Development, but I am very pleased that, as those of us who are members of that Committee are aware, we have adopted housing as a priority piece of work for the Committee for the next weeks and months, however long that takes. We will do that in conjunction with the Department and Minister on a constructive basis. The social housing reform programme has been reporting to the Committee on everything from rental policy to allocations, procurements, funding for social housing and so on. I hope that that programme and those reports can, as part of that prioritisation by the Committee for Social Development, be accelerated to make sure that we can, hopefully, get political agreement,

before the end of the mandate, on the future delivery of social housing.

A feature of the housing sector for the past two or three years has been a terrible uncertainty and instability among providers. Clearly, when the Housing Executive was losing senior managers at the rate of nearly one a week for a time, and there was a lack of leadership and a loss of leadership and key managers for a variety of reasons, a lot of staff in the organisation, who were working hard every day to deliver social housing and working with tenants to deliver on their needs, were worried about their future. There was instability in the Housing Executive and the broader housing field because a lot of people in the housing associations, for example, were saying, "Are we going to have to pick up the pieces? Will we be getting some of those houses transferred to us? Where are we all on this?". I am certainly much more confident following the appointment of Mervyn Storey as the Minister for Social Development that we can have a constructive debate and good dialogue. I believe that the Minister is well up for that, and he has expressed that to me. I know that he has gone to great lengths to talk to people in the housing sector to explain that he wants housing need met on behalf of all the people we collectively represent and in a way that avails itself of structures that are modernised and improved.

Mr Douglas: I thank the Member for giving way. The motion states:

"cease immediately the dismantling of Housing Executive structures".

We all know that, with economic appraisals, the first option is to do nothing. Is that what this motion is about? If we are talking about doing nothing, there is very often a cost. Has this been costed? Will it cost the Assembly money if we just stop what we are doing?

Mr Maskey: No, this has nothing to do with doing nothing. This is simply to say that people have a fear that there are things happening in the Housing Executive that should not happen until we have agreement. We all agree that what has been best for housing has been the formation of the Housing Executive and the work that it has been involved in for many years, albeit there is no doubt that there were failings. What we are up for is to properly consider the options that are on the table.

As people here will know, the social housing reform programme officers have presented to the Social Development Committee on a number of occasions. As far as I am concerned, this Minister is up for a proper early discussion on what structures we now need to modernise the Housing Executive. Our party's point of view is that it has to be what I have often referred to as the Housing Executive mark 2 with whatever sufficient reforms are required, because we need to get money into the system so that we can build more houses to meet the needs of people; we need to find the finance to update, repair and modernise houses that need it; we need to look at the allocation systems; we need to look at how need is met right across the board. So, we are saying that this is not about —

4.00 pm

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Maskey: Sorry, I cannot give way, Mr Beggs, because I am running out of time.

We are simply saying that there has been a lot of uncertainty, particularly from within the Housing Executive. We are saying that there are people in there who believe that there are measures being taken in the Housing Executive. There may not be that many more measures being delivered at the moment. So, the motion may be slightly out of date, but it is very well intended. It is simply saying that, if things are done in there that undermine the Housing Executive's ability to deliver, they need to stop. We are asking the Minister to do that. That may simply require a conversation between the Minister, senior officials and the Housing Executive. Even the Housing Executive senior management is still going through change management, and that means that uncertainty can be created.

This is not a do-nothing option but is saying, "Let us look urgently with the Minister and the Department at the social housing reform programme and accelerate that work, particularly in the Social Development Committee". It is a matter for that Committee and the Minister to agree on, but I believe that an acceleration and intensification of the discussions on the social housing reform programme will make the Assembly a greater success, especially if we can agree on the new structures required for the provision of social housing before the end of the current mandate.

Question put.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 31; Noes 51.

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Attwood, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Byrne, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Ms Hanna, Mr G Kelly, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKeivitt, Mr McKinney, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr Ó Muilleoir, Mr O'Dowd, Mr Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Maskey and Mr F McCann.

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Beggs, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mrs Cameron, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mr Cree, Mr Dickson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyons, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCallister, Mr McCarthy, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr McGimpsey, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Somerville, Mr Spratt, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Noes: Ms P Bradley and Mr Douglas

Question accordingly negatived.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): I suggest that the House take its ease while we change the top Table.

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

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Beggs].]

4.15 pm

Adjournment

Dalriada Hospital

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes, and all other Members who are called to speak will on this occasion have only four minutes, as there has been quite an interest in speaking in the debate.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I rise in the knowledge that this is the first debate on the Dalriada Hospital since November of last year, and a lot has happened since then. It is important first to place on record our thanks and appreciation to the “Save the Dal” campaign, which in the end, or in the most recent financial year anyway, saved the Dal. I thank the campaign’s committee, its volunteers, the social media activists, the tractor drivers who campaigned in rallies around the town and the public, who turned out in their hundreds at meetings in Bushmills, Ballycastle, Cushendall and elsewhere.

I will never forget the first meeting that we had in the Sheskburn in Ballycastle. There was no standing room, and we had to set up other rooms for members of the public. For Tony Stevens, who had only recently come into post at the trust, it was very much a baptism of fire. As I said, a lot has happened since then. Thankfully, the trust changed its position, and Philomena McKay was successful in her legal challenge, which saw the High Court overturn the non-admissions policy. At the time, the Assembly backed the reinstatement and continuation of services at Dalriada. I hope that that remains the case, because the motion was brought forward by my constituency colleague Mr Swann, and the House unanimously supported it. The House supports the Dalriada and the retention of services there, and we need to ensure that that remains the case.

In February of this year, the old Moyle Council commissioned a report on the future of Dalriada Hospital. The Dal currently has 20 intermediate beds, 12 MS respite beds and a range of clinics and outpatient services. The report takes a holistic approach to the Dal, and it was very frustrating last year when the trust focused on short-term savings without looking at the concept of value for money and at how rural-based services can save the taxpayer money by preventing things such as bed-blocking in acute hospitals; namely, Antrim Area Hospital, the Causeway and Altnagelvin. It is very frustrating, because the Dal works. It has a high demand for beds, and occupancy figures remain in excess of 90%.

A report by Colin Stutt Consulting and Seamus Carey demonstrates to the trust that there is opportunity: opportunity to innovate; opportunity to save money; and opportunity to improve the health of the community. I know that the Minister wants all of these things. I know, from his time as Finance Minister, that he was big on

innovation, and I believe that this is a big opportunity for innovation and public-sector reform. Dr George O’Neill made comments along similar lines last week. He said that there needs to be leadership and innovation in the health service. The Minister has asked for that to be brought forward, and this is an example.

There is emerging evidence of new approaches to addressing the needs of elderly populations. One example was a pilot scheme in Newquay in Cornwall, which is being rolled out across seven locations in England, including Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, with up to 1,000 patients covered in each case. Early results show significant improvements in well-being and substantial savings through reduced hospital admissions. Early figures include a reduction in all acute hospital costs of 41%; a reduction in all non-elective hospital costs of 61%; a reduction in inpatient hospital activity of 43%; a reduction in emergency department activity of 36%; and a reduction in total social care costs of 8%.

As the new Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council has already stated, the population currently served by Dalriada is perfectly suitable for a pilot of this new approach. It could be a hub for outreach, support and care services for the frail, elderly and the vulnerable in Ballycastle and its surrounding area, villages and hamlets. This could be a pilot for the rest of the Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council area and much farther afield across the North.

It is nearly a year on from the proposal to close, in effect, Dalriada Hospital, and I do not want the same thing to happen this year. I do not want any sudden announcements or anything that will send the community into a spin, as it did last year. That community has character, that community has resolve, and that community demonstrated how to stand up and give your community a voice. It gave an example of volunteerism the likes of which we have never seen in north Antrim. I commend those people again for that.

Why would we like an assurance? I believe that it is because the report shows that, despite the outright opposition to the trust’s proposal last year, the community listened and responded to the trust, taking into account the financial difficulties and issues that it faces. In June, Minister, you stated:

“there have been a lot of opinions expressed by people about diagnosing the problems, but not a lot of suggestions as to what the exact treatment should be.”

This model is called the Dalriada pathfinder. It is innovation in healthcare. It will lead to better outcomes in health, and it will lead to greater savings at a time when money is scarcer. This deserves your support.

Mr Frew: I commend the Member across the way for securing the Adjournment debate at a very timely juncture. We recall the campaign that was led last year by the Save the Dal group, and I have worked with other like-minded MLAs who fought hard for the Dalriada Hospital and worked closely with the people involved in the group.

I saw straight away that it was not just a normal campaign that people fight when things close. There was method in it, and a strategy was put in place. It is easy to fight for things to remain open. It is easy to do the polar opposite of a government agency or the trust. It is harder when you try to justify it or to get rationale and arguments for keeping

something open and enhancing it. The Save the Dal group did that tremendously well. Not only did it have a coherent strategy of motivating and mobilising the community — it also did that very well — but it had a strategy and tangible plans in place not only to save the Dal but to enhance it.

Save the Dal is probably not the most appropriate name for the group; it should be Enhance the Dal because it is doing what it said it would and putting practice into play. It produced a report on the Dalriada pathfinder pilot. I have had a look at it, and I agree with my colleague across the way: this could be the way to go. It seems to be getting a reasonable hearing from movers and shakers in the trust and in the Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council. It has merit and should be looked at. I ask everyone, and I plead with the Minister, to look at the report to see what can be done by using it.

We fight this endless battle with the trust. Every time I meet the chief executive and everyone else below him, I keep pleading with them to stop delivering messages to the population, to MLAs and to the Minister in a piecemeal and negative way. We are sick to the back teeth of hearing about the closure of this and the closure of that. Let us see a holistic approach and a plan for the whole Northern Trust area. That may be the logic and rationale needed when decisions have to be taken. I am not saying that hard decisions should not be taken; they should be. However, simply deciding one month to close this part of the health service and then to close another part of the health service the next month is wrong. It is unreasonable to suggest that people should go with that. There could be a holistic approach, whereby the trust lays down where everything should be and the whole jigsaw can be viewed by the population at the one time.

I know what it feels like when a town loses its hospital. I still get it on the doors — every single week, I knock doors — about losing the hospital in Ballymena and how we have suffered since. The trust would admit that a mistake was made: Antrim Area Hospital was put in the wrong place, which meant that the Causeway Hospital had to be put in the wrong place. That shows you that one error impacts on another, and so on. It should not make the same mistake in the future.

We are told that we have sufficient bed space in Ballymena and that we do not need Pinewood. When I write to the Minister or the trust on behalf of constituents who need a bed in the Ballymena area, they are given a list of beds, but not one of them is in Ballymena. That is wrong. That is why I want a holistic approach by the trust and Dalriada —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

Mr Frew: — being part of that plan.

Mr Dallat: I am pleased to take part in this debate as I was involved in the campaign. I have to express disappointment that we have not moved forward, but I am encouraged by the contributions to date.

I became involved with the Dal many years ago in quite an unusual way. A good friend of mine had MS, and he was looked after in Peter Stott Martin House in Cullybackey. Of course, he was devastated when that closed. An undertaking was given that the same quality of service or better would be provided at the Dal, and it certainly lived up to that. It must be devastating for MS sufferers to find that, for the second time, they have been let down.

4.30 pm

The closure does not only affect MS sufferers; it is in complete contradiction to Transforming Your Care. These cuts and closures are not consistent with the community-focused ambition of TYC, which aims to shift healthcare from centralised institutions into the community to facilitate people better and closer to their homes. The decision to close community facilities will have a devastating effect on patients and their families.

Some reference has been made to the overstay of patients in the Causeway Hospital and Antrim Area Hospital. A GP told me the other day that the problem is very clearly the lack of intermediary care, which, of course, the Dal was providing. As Paul Frew pointed out, it is not just about saving the Dal, it is about planning for a future that meets the needs of the people. We are blessed that we have two excellent hospitals, but they have problems with bed-blocking and looking after patients who are not quite ready for home but could be looked after for a short time in the Dal.

Some reference has been made to the Save the Dal group's July 2015 report. The recommendations in the report are encouraging and include piloting the Living Well approach in the Ballycastle area and working in partnership with the trust, the council, the local community and the community and voluntary sector. The Living Well approach would turn the Dal into a hub for outreach, support and care for the frail, the elderly and the vulnerable in Ballycastle and beyond. It is worth noting that those proposals have not yet been formally presented to the Northern Health and Social Care Trust. Therefore, the debate may be premature. I do not know.

It is a real pity that this Assembly is again in doubt and that the ordinary bread-and-butter issues that we are discussing may not be adequately addressed. That would be a shame. Let us hope that, in the next few weeks, the negotiations will bear in mind that there are very serious issues relating to health that have not been addressed. Those issues must be addressed in an ever-changing world.

I have the highest praise for my hospital in Coleraine. The Dal, as an outreach, performs a vital service to that hospital to make it viable and part of the future. So, we are not just talking about saving the Dal, we are talking about retaining and enhancing a facility that will give essential support to our two main hospitals.

Mr Swann: I thank Mr McKay for tabling this topic for the Adjournment debate. On reflection, this has been the most debated Adjournment topic concerning North Antrim in my time here. On every occasion, there has been cross-party support.

In opening the debate, Mr McKay mentioned Tony Stevens appearing at the first public meeting in Glenshesk, at which there were hundreds of activists and community people. It is one of the few occasions on which me, Daithí, Mervyn Storey, Jim Allister and Donal Cunningham shared a platform on the same message, and it was also the last time that Tony Stevens was seen in public. Fearghal came to one of the later meetings in Bushmills: I saw him indicating, so I wanted to acknowledge him. That demonstrates the seriousness of the Save the Dal campaign. It was never about saving a building; it was about preserving and enhancing the service that was there. Members who spoke previously indicated that that was where the campaign started: trying to keep what was already there.

Having had a chance to look in detail at the Dalriada pathfinder pilot, I think it is a tremendous piece of work for any community group to undertake, outside of any structured body or trust, to bring a development proposal forward to this degree of detail, with the research and structure that was behind it. I think that they have to be commended, but I think that Mr Dallat is right. Maybe we are pre-empting the presentation of that pilot project to the Northern Health and Social Care Trust. That is where the decision will be made, and maybe we should wait to see its reaction to the pilot project. Hopefully, the Minister's reaction to the pilot project — and to what the Dalriada pathfinder is about delivering — here today to the Members who have debated this and brought this forward will be an indication as to how he thinks the Northern Health and Social Care Trust can possibly take it forward.

I think that there will not be disagreement from any Member here today that the Save the Dal campaign has worked. The Dalriada pathfinder pilot project is another step on the road for retaining that vital service that has been delivering for the community in the Causeway coast and glens area for a number of years. As Mr McKay said, it received the support of Moyle Council, and it has also received unanimous backing from the Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council. There is a strong feeling that this is a way to go as a pilot project.

Mr D McIlveen: I certainly welcome the opportunity to speak on this matter. It is something that I think is close to the hearts of not just the people of North Antrim but the people of other constituencies. We can see from the other constituencies represented in the debate that it has certainly had an impact on many, many people.

The sense of community involvement from this campaign has been astonishing, and I think that it has shown just how much this place means to the people in the area. As Robin Swann has just said, it is not just about a building. I think that an over-sentimentality with buildings sometimes exists, particularly hospitals, where there have been births and good memories that have come from those buildings. This is absolutely not about that. It is about a unique service that other people have tried to replicate. There have been patients who, for various reasons, have not been able to have, for example, respite in the Dalriada Hospital and who have gone to other places. Unfortunately, the level of care on every other occasion has been found wanting in the private sector. Therefore, I can understand why the community has worked so hard to try to come up with an alternative to keep the Dalriada Hospital functioning in whatever capacity it possibly can.

The Minister also worked hard, and the current Minister's predecessor did visit the hospital during the campaign. I think that it was one of the most amusing things that I have seen, as Minister Wells attempted to inconspicuously leave the premises through a side door as he had another engagement to go to. The look on his face as 200 supporters bounded towards his car, led by Ian Paisley, was a look of terror that I will never forget. I hope that that in some way helped to convince Jim Wells that keeping the Dalriada open was important.

So the Minister worked hard, and the MPs and MLAs have worked hard. Why did we do that? I think that it is very simple. There are two categories, as far as the people in this area are concerned. There are things that people care about, and there are things that people do not care

about in this area. What they care about is the Dalriada continuing to deliver good outcomes for patients. That is absolutely head and shoulders the outcome that is required for people living in the area. Secondly, they care about a good level of care, and, as I have mentioned, there have been occasions where, unfortunately, alternative care arrangements outside of Dalriada have been found wanting. I know that that is something that the Minister and the trust will want to ensure does not happen in the future. Thirdly, I think that people care about a secure future for the Dalriada, because this crisis management approach, year to year, with the fear or the threat of partial or full closure, is something that drains the life out of people. It drains their energy, and that constant feeling of a threat upon it is something that I believe people care deeply about and want to see something done about.

What people do not care about is who funds it. That is why I believe that the work that has been done — the Dalriada pathfinder document — is worthy of consideration. It takes a lot of the financial responsibility away from the trust and the Department and brings in other stakeholders that also have a vested interest in this. I think it is right. We all regularly talk in this place about cross-departmental thinking and how we can do things differently, and this document undoubtedly provides a way in which to do that, so it is right to consider it. Dalriada should be considered as a pilot for this project.

I know, having worked closely with him in his days in the Department of Finance, that the Minister loves to quote people. He has quoted everybody from Gandhi to John Lennon. I will quote Mark Twain in finishing and say that doing the right thing:

“will gratify some people and astonish the rest.”

Mr Allister: I am grateful for the opportunity to speak again in support of the Dal. I commend the tenacity of the Save the Dal campaign, which did not shrink from taking on the trust and the Department and, for its tenacity and the common sense that was on its side, saw a significant victory for people power over the trust and the Department. That was very welcome. It is also good to note that, not prepared to leave it there, they then embarked on a self-help initiative, producing the Colin Stutt report. It certainly makes for a very interesting read, with some positive proposals in it. For me, one of the most important things that it says about moving forward is that, drawing on the lesson of the attempt by the trust and Department to ram something down the community's throat, there has to be a partnership approach to moving forward. It cannot be a top-down dictatorship again, simply handing down the solution as seen by some.

If a future is to be moulded that meets the needs of all interests, it has to be done in partnership. As the report reflects, it has to be one that is itself reflective of the particular composition of that locality, with its higher than average number of senior citizens. Therefore, there has to be what the report refers to as a “strong fit” between the needs of the area and the outcomes for the area. That is key to all of this. It has to be a wholesale systems approach so that there is that tight fit between what the community needs and what the outcomes will be.

If I have one reservation about the thrust of the conclusions of the Stutt report, it is in the realm of the lack of a clear focus on the future of the MS facility. It seems to me that it

was a bit light in that department, yet that is a vital facility for that area and the wider area. However, holistically, I think it tracks a potential future approach that has much to recommend it and is certainly far preferable to the cul-de-sac that the trust and the Department previously wanted to lead us into. I trust that the spirit and vision that motivated the Save the Dal campaign will continue to the final delivery of that which fits the needs of that region.

4.45 pm

Mr McKinney: I too welcome the opportunity to take part in today's Adjournment debate. I do so because, as SDLP health spokesperson, I recognise the important role that Dalriada plays in the local community. I commend Mr McKay for bringing the debate to the Chamber. I also commend all those who have been involved in the Save the Dal campaign. At the start, they adopted an emotional approach to it, but, very quickly, as has been reflected in the debate today, they moved on to the strategic approach, which, I think, has been very welcome.

Mr Allister referred to the MS unit. It is important to recognise the extent to which that illness puts severe pressure and demands on individuals and families, and respite provision is all the more important, as is — I think that this is what you were reflecting — the need for a centre of excellence. Other trusts need to avail themselves of that service to make it, too, as viable as possible.

If we look back over the decisions and events of the last months, we can see how important local hospitals are to communities and the strength of a community coming together in force. I was delighted, as others have clearly reflected here today, to see the strength of that support and the fact that it resulted in 20,000 signatures being brought here to Stormont, as well as numerous debates and rallies, and I welcomed the opportunity of being invited to Bushmills. It became clear very quickly just how prized and valued the Dalriada facility was in the local community and, importantly, that it had local cross-party political backing.

For me, to get down to the nuts and bolts of it, the decision lays bare the lack of strategic direction, with the Department looking for cuts and then foisting cuts on trusts that make them without a strategic context. In fact, the excuse comes back from the trusts that it is counter-strategic. We all know that the health service is under severe financial pressure, and, as Mr Frew said, we have to be mature about that, but it is how cuts are administered that is important. The House will be aware — I have reminded it many times, as the Minister will be aware — of the importance of TYC at the heart of the health service and how that plan has not been funded properly. Therefore, major cuts have emerged as a result and those impositions of contingency plans are counter-strategic. It is important to state to the House that the Dalriada closure was not a strategic cut; it was a short-term cut. The previous Health Minister had to admit that in this very Chamber, and I welcome the fact that the courts took the right decision on it.

Mr Frew wants a holistic approach. I want a holistic approach, and I think that the Chamber, as reflected here today, wants a holistic approach. That is what TYC was supposed to be about. It was supposed to identify the elements in a community that could be dealt with to keep people away from the expensive side of the health service. It is supposed to be a mixed market, if you like, in that sense, and, if anything represented that, it would

be a centre of excellence for MS, as Mr Allister has talked about, a step-down facility in the local community, married to further and better services being delivered out into the community, which prevents people having to come up to the very expensive side of health, be it in Causeway, Antrim or, indeed, Belfast. We have not got that, and I will make a plea once again for us to return to the principles of that and let us start jointly finding some mechanism to achieve that.

I refer to the report as well. It makes some clear recommendations on how Dalriada Hospital could be retained and reconfigured, and I am struck by the figures.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Can you bring your remarks to a close, please?

Mr McKinney: Of course, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am struck by the figures. There could be savings in this. I have more to say, but time has beaten me. I support the motion.

Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I begin by thanking Mr McKay for proposing today's Adjournment debate. I have been impressed by the considered, thoughtful and valuable contributions that have been made in the Chamber this afternoon, and I hope to respond, in the remarks that I make, to most of the points that have been raised.

It is clear to me that the Dalriada Hospital and the services that it provides are held in the highest regard by the people of the community that it serves. As we have heard today from virtually every Member who has spoken, Dalriada Hospital provides a range of non-acute community hospital services, including intermediate care beds and a multiple sclerosis respite unit, along with outpatient and allied health professional clinics and a GP health centre.

We are all well aware of the background to this debate; if we were not, we have been familiarised with it during today's Adjournment debate. It is the decision last year by the Northern Health and Social Care Trust to temporarily close the intermediate care beds and the MS respite unit beds followed by the restoration of the status quo as a result of the court's interim relief ruling in December 2014.

That cannot be and is not the end of the story. The pressures and service trends that lay behind the Northern Trust's decision are very much still with us. I think that we are all familiar with the pressures facing our health and social care services, which include a rise in chronic conditions driven by both our ageing population and unhealthy lifestyle habits; increasing demand and over-reliance on hospital services; growing expectations of our population; fast-moving opportunities in technology and medical interventions; workforce challenges; and, of course, the financial pressures that we face. The Northern Trust has not been immune to those challenges, and I want to talk a little bit about the Northern Trust if I can.

I acknowledge that there have been problems in the past, and it would be foolish to think that there will not be difficulties in the future. However, this trust is transforming. I am determined that the lessons learned from the turnaround process will be carried forward and become embedded as this organisation continues to improve.

It is important to set the context of what care the Northern Trust delivers on a day-to-day basis and the environment in which it operates. The Northern Trust area has a population of 440,000 people, the largest resident population in Northern Ireland. In common with the rest of

Northern Ireland, the demand for health and social care in the Northern Trust area grows annually by approximately 6%. That includes demographic growth, resulting in more older people with complex health needs and co-morbidities and increased referrals. In 2014-15, the trust had 50,625 people admitted to hospital care and 26,581 day cases. Some 2.6 million hours of domiciliary care were provided through the trust and the independent sector, which equates to care for 4,600 people.

Despite the scale of the challenges that the trust has faced and overcome, it has also performed well. Performance in unscheduled care has improved remarkably. In 2014-15, across the trust, there was a 35% reduction in patients waiting more than 12 hours to be assessed, treated and either discharged or admitted to hospital. That improvement builds on the 50% reduction the previous year. In addition, the Northern Trust's acute hospital network has been recognised among the 40 top hospitals in the UK for 2014. The 40 top awards are based on the evaluation of 22 indicators covering safety, clinical effectiveness, health outcomes, efficiency, patient experience and quality of care.

It is a trust that is doing well. This is an indication that it is focused on the task in hand, which is to deliver high-quality safe and effective care in the most efficient manner possible. I would like to pay tribute to the hard-working staff in the hospitals and those delivering health and social care services in the community for their service to the local area and their commitment to delivering high-quality health services. I wish to pay tribute to the leadership of the trust as well.

When I took up post in May, I set out my vision for a world-class health and social care system in Northern Ireland building on the many world-class services that we already have. Delivering that vision requires innovation, change and reform across our health and social services. In the next number of weeks, I intend to come forward with my vision for the future of health and social care in Northern Ireland and how we intend to take forward the recommendations in the Donaldson report and future commissioning and the reform of the administration of the health and social care system in our country. That is a huge undertaking of major reform, but it is much needed reform. When you look at the range of challenges that our health system and social care system faces, you see that these are not decisions that we can continually push down the line. We need to take decisions, and we need to get political consensus on them.

Our current pattern of health and social care services is not sustainable and needs to change. Transforming Your Care and the Donaldson report both make important points about the need for a mature debate on our overall hospital-based services. They need to shift from hospital-based care, and they need to ensure that our finite resources are maximised to provide the best value for money for patients and the services provided for them. The challenge for us today is to sustain and further develop the best in health and social care while embracing innovation. As Mr McKay pointed out, I am supportive of innovation across the public sector.

There is much evidence of innovation in the health and social care sectors. I have been pleasantly surprised by the evidence of innovation right across them since taking up post. Of course, embracing innovation, as I have been encouraged to do by Mr McKay, involves challenges for us all because new ways of working, which maximise the

considerable but also limited resources that are available to Health and Social Care, sometimes mean doing things differently. That can cause concern but, if the outcomes are better, I think it is well worth pursuing that path. Being innovative means taking decisions about how and where we deliver services to maximise the quality of care for patients, deliver the very best outcomes and ensure that patient safety is maintained.

What does that all mean for the future of Dalriada Hospital? I know that Members wish to have a commitment from me today that intermediate care and MS respite services at Dalriada Hospital will remain unchanged indefinitely, forever and a day; but that is not something which I can give. Decisions about the provision of services at Dalriada Hospital are, and should always be, in the first instance, matters for the Northern Trust to consider. In this, as in lots of other issues, I look to trusts, commissions and others for their expert advice on quality and, particularly, safety of services. To that end, the Northern Trust has been reviewing the range of services available across the trust area in relation to intermediate care and is developing a long-term vision, predicated on the need to maintain people at home for as long as possible and to provide services at home, or as close to home, as possible. It is its intention to engage with a range of stakeholders later this autumn.

The trust has worked closely with MS service users to capture their views and requirements in relation to respite care at Dalriada, what is available and how to access it. At the request of service users, the trust has developed a leaflet to highlight the range of respite care options available. At present, the majority of users do not want hospital-based respite.

I am aware, and it was referenced in virtually every contribution this evening, that the old Moyle District Council — now part of the Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council — commissioned a report to support the case for a continued role for Dalriada Hospital. I have taken a look at the report; I think it is excellent. It recognises the need for a changing role for small local hospitals like the Dalriada. The particular recommendation for its future — as a hub for outreach, support and care for the frail, elderly and vulnerable people in general in the area — is an interesting proposition and one worth carefully considering. I will ensure that consideration is given to it by the trust. It represents change, but I think it is positive change to the service, and it is something worth studying more carefully. I will ensure that the trust does that.

In conclusion, I have no doubt that this report will make a valuable contribution to the discussions which the trust will have with the council and other stakeholders as the future of these services is discussed and shaped over the coming months. I can assure you all this evening that the Northern Health and Social Care Trust will engage fully with the people who use the services, the staff who deliver them, and the wider community in discussing the future of the Dalriada Hospital.

Adjourned at 4.58 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 14 September 2015

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Speaker: Before we proceed, I acknowledge that I am sure there is a full range of concerns and questions from all sides of the House about the current situation. I understand that, and I have allowed a Matter of the Day from Ms Sugden this afternoon to allow the House a brief opportunity to express views on the current situation. My role is to oversee our procedures and to ensure we carry out our business as best we can until we get to easier times. That includes upholding the standards of respect and courtesy in debate, which I reminded Members about last week. Heightened temperatures in the Chamber are not going to produce any greater clarity or bring a resolution. Ultimately, these are issues that are going to be resolved only in cross-party talks, and that is a place where I encourage Members and parties to engage.

Ministerial Resignations: Mr Jonathan Bell, Mr Simon Hamilton, Miss Michelle McIlveen and Mr Mervyn Storey

Mr Speaker: Can I make some announcements about developments before we proceed to the organised agenda for today? I advise the House that I have received notification of the resignations of Mr Jonathan Bell as Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment; Mr Simon Hamilton as Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety; Miss Michelle McIlveen as junior Minister; and Mr Mervyn Storey as Minister for Social Development. Their resignations took effect from Thursday 10 September 2015.

Committee Deputy Chairperson Appointments

Mr Speaker: I also advise the House that the nominating officer of Sinn Féin has informed me that Mr Fra McCann has been appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development, with effect from 8 September 2015 and that Mr Conor Murphy has been appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, with effect from 10 September 2015. I am satisfied that the requirements of Standing Orders have been met.

Matter of the Day

Future of the Northern Ireland Political Institutions

Mr Speaker: The first item in the Order Paper is a motion regarding Committee membership. As with other similar motions, it will be treated as a business motion, and there will be no debate.

I apologise to Ms Sugden. The Matter of the Day is not in my electronic copy, but, as I announced earlier, you have been given leave to make a statement on the future of the Northern Ireland political institutions, 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 called will have up to 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 this item of business has been finished.

Ms Sugden: Mr Speaker, thank you for the opportunity to speak on this matter. I will begin by saying how privileged I feel to stand here and represent East Londonderry in the Northern Ireland Assembly. Whilst we find ourselves in exceptional circumstances, I will continue to do the job that I was entrusted with while I can. The 100,000 constituents I work for expect me to represent them 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. I am concerned because we have much to lose, not just in the message that Northern Ireland has failed but with the prospect of being governed by people who do not know us, who are, understandably, quite fed up with us and who will not fight for the people or sell our country for the potential that it has as we can.

The events that unfolded on Thursday make me very sad. My constituent Mr Watton — I know that he will not mind me saying his name — has been waiting for a disabled parking bay for over six months. Mr Watton is very ill. It takes all his strength to walk several feet, and he is certainly entitled to a space. He is entitled to a public service that will make his life that little bit easier while he focuses on his strength and his day-to-day struggles. He will not get that disabled parking bay because the Minister and the Committee have to sign it off, and the former does not exist any more.

Mr Watton is only a small piece of the puzzle of Northern Ireland, but when one piece is missing, the bigger picture is ruined. The collapse of our institutions is being felt from the people up. Politics are being played badly from the

top down. The events that have unfolded since the death of Mr McGuigan are really quite unbelievable. A lot of big decisions have been made on "What if?" To go further, in my belief, many who sit in the House are not fit for the job. Yes, I appreciate that they were given a mandate, but I really do not think that the people expected this nonsense when they trusted you with their vote.

My interpretation of what really is happening here is deflection and election. There are people bleeding this country dry, and the current events are providing a very convenient smokescreen. I see it in my constituency, where we have a drug problem that is often hidden by raising contentious issues. These people will be caught, and I look forward to that day, because the people of Northern Ireland deserve better, and I trust that they will realise that come the next election. Whether it is in a month or next May, we will have an election. There is nothing wrong with electioneering, but it should begin the day after you earn the mandate that you were given, not in a panic to get one over on your competitor.

As an independent, I probably have more to lose than anyone in the House, but it is not about me. It is about the people whom I represent. If losing my seat and never speaking a word in the Chamber again will help us to move forward positively, by all means, bring it on, but it will not do so, because, I believe, Northern Ireland will only truly move on when the people who were involved in the Troubles are no longer in politics.

Mr Speaker: Will the Member bring her remarks to a close?

Ms Sugden: So for the good of the people you claim to represent, move on — step aside, if you will — and encourage young politicians like Gary Middleton, Steven Agnew, Chris Lyttle, Claire Hanna, Megan Fearon, Sandra Overend and me to be the future of Northern Ireland and these institutions.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. The Member's time is well up. You have had three minutes.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ms Sugden brought this matter to the House today, and you, Mr Speaker, have advised Members to be mindful of the remarks that they might want to make and to keep those remarks and the intentions behind them for the talks themselves. Clearly, the talks are due to begin today, so we will see how today pans out and what we are facing at the end of the day when the parties have had their various bilaterals and trilaterals and so on.

From our party's point of view, in the talks beginning today, there needs to be the political will, between all parties and all participants, for a successful outcome. As far as Sinn Féin is concerned, there can be only two outcomes: either we have a successful conclusion to the talks or we go straight into elections and let the people have their say on all the various parties.

In that respect, I am calling on both unionist parties to end their sham fight and have the political will to go into the talks today with the serious intent of getting successful outcomes in respect of all the outstanding matters, not least the current crisis but, indeed, the matters that have been inflicted on this Assembly for a long time, particularly in respect of cuts imposed by London.

I am asking both unionist parties to demonstrate the political will to end their sham fight. Keep your sham fight for

Scarva. There is no question that both parties need to ask themselves the real question: whose interests or agenda will be best served by the collapse of these institutions or with the continuing political uncertainty that there is today? It is certainly not the agenda of those of us who are trying to demonstrate to the wider public that politics actually works. It is certainly not in the interests of people who want first-class public services at their disposal. We have heard a litany of examples of people being frightened or anxious and angry about the prospects of non-delivery of public services when Ministers are no longer at the wheel and in charge of their Departments. People want parties here who are working on their behalf and championing against the kinds of cuts that are being imposed from London. We are seeing in British politics the potential of a hopeful period when there are people now in civic society who are trying to challenge the status quo around the austerity agenda of cuts and attacks on public services and on people who are vulnerable and on benefits.

As far as our party is concerned, it is essential for these institutions not only to remain in place but, more importantly, to work in the interests of all the people the parties in the Chamber represent. In the context of the continuing instability and uncertainty, there is an imperative to intensify the work of these institutions, including the Assembly and the North/South institutional bodies.

Mrs D Kelly: It is with great regret that I find myself having to speak on behalf of my party on such a topic. The political institutions here came about, if Members need reminded, as a result of a vote and the overwhelming desire of the people here in the North and across the island of Ireland. People voted for three main institutions and they wanted to see delivery on economic and social agendas. We wanted to build a reconciled and shared society, but what we have had, very clearly, are the shenanigans that have been going on over the last number of years. This crisis did not emerge over the last number of weeks. It has been heightened over the last number of weeks but we were heading into a political storm in October anyway because we have not agreed a Budget and we have no shared agenda. We have not agreed what the people wanted us to agree on.

I have spoken to people over the weekend and they are out of their minds and cannot believe that we are in this crisis. They want us to get on with it. They are saying, "For God's sake, get on with the job and create a better future. Get the nurses their pay rise. Get the hospital waiting lists down. Get the schools built." Others are just saying, "We're fed up with the whole lot of you." It does not matter who the guilty parties are; goodness knows there are parties that bear more of the blame than others. When the people voted in 1998, they voted for an absolute end to all violence and to take the gun out of Irish politics. That, clearly, has not happened in the way in which the people had hoped.

On the other hand, there were people believing in and voting for a shared future so that my children and their children could live in a peaceful society in which they did not see their neighbours being shot and murdered or discriminated against in jobs and housing. They voted for a better, peaceful way of doing business. It is they who have been betrayed. It is not about each of us who sit in the Chamber proudly representing each of our constituencies being in or out of a job; it is about the hope and ambition of all the people who willed us, who voted for us, to be here.

Over the last number of months, there has been outcry after outcry over the failure of the two main parties in this Government to deliver on simple things like an anti-poverty strategy, a domestic and sexual violence strategy or on racial equality. This institution was built on the promise of equality and the same playing field for all our citizens. That, clearly, has not happened.

12.15 pm

We have seen tit-for-tat politics over the last seven years. There have been plenty of photo opportunities but no real, meaningful collaboration across government that puts the people at the heart of government. It is the people's desire that these institutions remain and that we get ourselves sorted out this time once and for all.

Mr Nesbitt: The Ulster Unionist Party stretched itself almost to breaking point to bring forward the agreement of 1998, and we are ready to stretch ourselves again in these talks because I believe these talks will kill or cure devolution.

I hope that the result is a cure and that we refocus on what we envisaged 17 years ago — a truly peaceful and prosperous Northern Ireland, measured by three outcomes. Could we deliver mutual respect for each other's traditions? Could we bring on a peace dividend that would deliver that prosperity? Would we convince the electorate that we could deliver government better than direct rule? If we are honest and look into our own hearts, today the answers are no, no and no. We have not delivered.

Peter Robinson summarised the last mandate as one where the outcome was survival. He went on to say that this mandate had to be about more than survival; it had to be about delivery. Have we delivered? Hospital waiting lists are longer than they have been for 15 years, £37.5 million of £80 million of social investment money remains unspent after four years and £12 million of childcare money is largely unspent after four years.

So, after eight years of DUP/Sinn Féin rule at the heart of government, it is clear that we are not delivering positive outcomes for our people. This is our challenge: to recognise that what we are delivering is broken and needs to be fixed. We have to return to values. A key value is going to be credibility, and, frankly, as the Taoiseach said, the stance Sinn Féin is taking on the existence of the IRA in 2015 is "incredible".

I hear what Mr Maskey says to me about a sham fight between unionist parties. I question whether he hears what I say, which is that Sinn Féin cannot be "ourselves alone" in a coalition government. You cannot be yourselves alone in the face of what the Chief Constable says about the IRA, what the Secretary of State says about the IRA, what the Prime Minister says about the IRA and what the Taoiseach says about the IRA. You cannot turn a blind eye to what is going on. You cannot build a proper peaceful and political process by turning a blind eye.

Where we agree with Sinn Féin is that there is criminality on our streets, so let us all join forces and for once say that we want an end to all organised crime, fuel laundering and the rest by republicans and loyalists. That is what we called for when we met the Secretary of State today to start these critical talks about our future. Truth is not a bargaining chip.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Dr Farry: Quite clearly, as we meet this afternoon, we are in a very difficult situation. The latest point in this deterioration in the sustainability of devolution is that we have only just over half the Government in place. That is not a tenable situation and not one that is really going to be at all credible with the public, even on a short-term basis, never mind a long-term basis.

So, something will have to give over the coming weeks, one way or another. We are going to see the collapse of devolution and elections or suspension with the return of direct rule or, indeed, some form of joint authority, or we will see some refreshed version of devolution where we have the opportunity for a fresh start with the people of Northern Ireland, where we can reflect on what has gone wrong over the past number of years and set that right, begin to fully deliver for the people of Northern Ireland and seize the opportunities that are out there for us.

I think it is important that we bear in mind the importance of devolution and what it offers to the people of Northern Ireland. At times, people are rightly cynical about where we are today. Devolution is the forum through which we bring reconciliation together at a political level. It is the forum at which the different political traditions in Northern Ireland can share power together.

It is also the focal point for local decision-making and accountability, which are incredibly important. We are also able to deliver different outcomes from those in other parts of the United Kingdom, on other parts of the island of Ireland and, indeed, in other parts of Europe and the world. There is one small example today that is worth reflecting on. In Westminster, some very draconian legislation on trade unions is being moved forward. Employment law is devolved in Northern Ireland. We are able to say that we are not entertaining that type of reform here, and I have taken that decision as a devolved Minister. That is just one tangible outcome of what we have under devolution.

We have many challenges ahead. We clearly have a rule-of-law challenge that involves not just the fallout from a particular murder but a situation in which paramilitarism is a cancer in our society and has a degree of social control across many communities. That is not just about what happens with organised crime but about the relationships that build up between different people who take on the guise of gatekeepers in communities and about how political parties and the state respond to them.

We have a challenge with the Stormont House Agreement, particularly in the implementation of welfare reform and budgets. In some respects, power-sharing has broken down because the normal give and take, compromise and the sense of reality about the framework in which we operate have been lost. We have to reflect on that. It is why trust and confidence have broken down between parties. That has been magnified by our structures, and we are moving from one crisis to another. Let us get it fixed properly this time.

Mr Allister: What we are witnessing all about us is not just the catastrophic failure of government in Northern Ireland but the catastrophic failure of the system of government, and it is that reality that all these other parties wish to dodge. The reality is that mandatory coalition has failed. That should be no surprise to anyone because it defies the basic tenets of democracy.

Look across the world. Apart from totalitarian states, any Government that is durable and any system that works is built out of respect for the fundamental tenets of democracy and the idea that the electorate has the right to change the Government, vote a party out of government and have an opposition. The only place where we deny those basic democratic rights is here in Northern Ireland, and then people are surprised that the system of government crumbles and fails. When it defies the dynamics of the essence of democracy, of course it will fail. That is despite its being propped up for years by all the false promises and all the false hopes and the peddling of those false hopes that the IRA had gone away. Now those who peddled those hopes and lies and who went into government on the basis of that can have suddenly discovered that the IRA still exists and is still killing. That has been the catalyst that has brought us to this point.

It is now time to sweep away the debris of failure that these institutions represent. Let us build a system of government as you would build it anywhere else in the democratic world: if no party is big enough to form a Government on its own, you build it on the basis of voluntary coalition with a weighted majority, if need be, to ensure cross-community involvement. It should also be built on the principle of an opposition. The urge of so many, because of the vested interest that comes with it, is simply to get the sticky plaster out and patch up failure. Sadly, the vision of some is to get back to the charter of failure: the Belfast Agreement example of devolution. It is time that we swept away the debris of failure. It is time that we had an election. The DUP is running away from an election, which is why the First Minister did not resign and tip Sinn Féin out of government as it deserved. It is time that we had an election. Of course, the DUP does not even —

Mr Speaker: Thank you. Time is up.

Mr Allister: — come into this battlefield for debate.

Mr Agnew: Urgent talks are being convened again today involving the same parties, the same issues and even in the same venue as they were last winter. Those who caused the crisis are being entrusted to resolve it. It strikes me that that is an example of doing the same thing repeatedly and expecting a different result, which, as we know, is the definition of madness.

We need a compromise, but we need to recognise the failures of Haass and the original Stormont House talks. Why did those talks fail? In both cases, a document was produced and a compromise was reached, and, in both cases, the negotiators could not sell those proposals to their parties. We have had parties constantly watching their backs for fear of being outflanked; that, should they support a compromise, the opposing parties within their communities will somehow steal a march on them. We need to get a way around that. How did we do that before? What was the success of the Good Friday Agreement? Whatever failures there have been, it created these institutions and, for a period, it provided peace and relative stability in Northern Ireland.

What has been different about the recent talks? They have all been behind closed doors, they have been party political and there has been no engagement with the general public. The Good Friday Agreement was agreed after a referendum. The parties who reached those compromises had the legitimacy of saying that they made

those compromises and they were tough compromises but the people of Northern Ireland accepted them. The failure of Haass and Stormont House is that the negotiators asked their parties to support them; they never asked the people. Until we do that, we will not get an agreement. Until we go back to the people of Northern Ireland and say that this is the next stage in their peace process and the next step of the people's agreement and ask them whether they support that step and us, as parties, taking that step, we will not get a sustainable solution.

We need a referendum in Northern Ireland. Whatever the outcome of the talks, a compromise should be proposed, and it should be put to the people. We saw the level of engagement in Scotland and how, when people are asked a question, they engage intelligently and respond. That was the same in the Republic of Ireland with the equal marriage referendum. The people of Northern Ireland deserve better and deserve to have their voice heard.

Mr B McCrea: I congratulate Ms Sugden on a brilliant piece of politics in bringing the Matter of the Day before the Assembly. I say that as one of only six people in the House who are not party to the talks. The only thing that I did not like about her speech was that I think that she ran out of time before she mentioned my name in the list of people going forward, but it is — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Kennedy: No, she did not. *[Laughter.]*

Mr B McCrea: I can only assume that that is what happened.

I want to come on to tone. Mr Maskey told her off. He reminded her, in senatorial terms, about the tone that she might use and the damage that she might do to the talks or whatever. He then went off and had a chat about sham fights with unionists and used a tone that was not particularly constructive himself. I have to say to you, Mr Maskey, through you, Mr Speaker, that I do not think that your tone is appropriate. We should all be listened to in the Assembly, and that is where I agree with Mr Agnew. We should not be having the talks behind closed doors; we should be having them on the Floor of the Assembly.

Mr Nesbitt mentioned a few points. He said that it was make or break, that we will or will not get it sorted out. I do not believe that we will get it sorted out. We will get some sort of fudge — we always get a fudge — and some way of staggering on through, but we will not sort out the basic problems.

The dispute is not about the IRA. Did anybody here seriously think that the IRA had gone away? Did they really think that it had gone away? I do not think that that is the case. You can turn blind eyes or whatever. It was not part of the agreement. The dispute is about the inability of the parties of Government to get on with one another, to find some common goal and some way of doing something.

Mr Allister has pointed fingers around the Chamber. He said that there is nowhere else in the world where a democracy or a Government works without an opposition.

Well, if memory serves me, he was a member of the European Parliament for quite a period of time. There are areas where it is not the right way forward, and we agreed by referendum and through the Good Friday Agreement that we would set up this type of arrangement. That is what the people voted for; that is what they want.

12.30 pm

If you want to get a change to that, I do not think that you will be able to rush it through in four or five weeks. There is the idea that we are going to pull it all together, put bygones behind us —

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

Mr B McCrea: — fix the whole thing and move forward. Frankly, you should know from the six of us here that people are looking and they are not impressed.

Mr McCallister: I hope that, once my Bill has cleared legal advice, it will, very shortly, come to the Floor of the House and give each and every Member of the Assembly a chance to form an opposition and look at how we can change the way we do our politics here. I have often made the argument that we have almost too much peace process and too little government here. We need to get on with the business of government. Those who are charged with that, the Executive Ministers, need to get on and make decisions, work in a collective way and present a collective Programme for Government that has the best interests of all our people at its heart. We have Ministers who can sue each other and take each other to court. We have Ministers who want to do things but are blocked and we have the politics of the mutual veto. All of that leads to a very dysfunctional system.

I congratulate Ms Sugden on bringing forward this Matter of the Day. I detect from many people in my constituency that, while they are frustrated with these institutions and the speed of decision-making, they desperately want to see it working, and they want to see everyone putting their shoulder to the wheel and making it work. That is the difficulty with the talks process and knowing when something is agreed. We saw that last year with the Stormont House Agreement; it was agreed and then, suddenly, parties were barely out the door until some people were not happy with it and others objected to it.

We need to get a collective agreement and get on with the business of governing and delivering for people. That will happen when you normalise politics and bring forward the issues that are important to people — jobs, schools, hospitals; all of those things — instead of always going for the lowest common denominator in politics. A Government and opposition helps to provide that as it creates scrutiny of the Government, provides choice for the electorate and normalises politics when we start to debate issues. It is not a matter of who can jockey for position more impressively than the other. That is why it is important and why my Bill will, I hope, make a contribution.

Mr Eastwood: I might be a bit of a renegade for saying this, but I actually have some hope that we can solve these problems, because history tells us that we can solve our problems here if we all collectively decide to try to do it. We at least need to be determined to find a solution. I am not detecting determination from every part of the House, and that needs to change. We need to protect these institutions. We do not protect them by trying to destabilise them. We do not protect them by threatening them. We do not protect them by walking out one week and walking in the next. We also have to rid the politics of Ireland of paramilitarism and the finances that they have built up over the years.

I come from a constituency with the highest unemployment levels of any Westminster constituency across Britain or the North. The people I represent have more reason than most to be cynical about the lack of delivery of this place. However, in my conversations with people in the last couple of weeks, I have met nobody more determined to make sure that this place works, and works better, than those in my constituency. People are, of course, fed up with the type of politics that we have and the lack of delivery, but they are determined to make it work, and they think that we are nowhere near as far forward as we should be in that regard.

The constituency that I come from also has a level of latent dissident activity. If we think that pulling down the institutions and continuing with the type of politics that we have seen over the last couple of weeks will do anything to cement democracy or progress, we are absolutely wrong. All that we will be doing is playing into the hands of those dissident republicans who want to put young people in jail or the cemetery. We need to be determined to fight against and change that.

We have heard talk this afternoon of refreshing devolution. We are absolutely, 100% in favour of devolution but only devolution with power-sharing, equality and protection for minorities at its heart. We are not interested one bit in renegotiating what was long and hard fought for and voted for by the people of Ireland. That is our bottom line, Mr Speaker. We are happy to see some changes in order to help this place work, but we will not stand over any changes to the fundamental principles of the institutions: power-sharing; equality; and human rights.

Mr Speaker: That concludes that item of business.

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. At the beginning of business, you identified to us that various Ministers had resigned. You made no mention of the office of First Minister. Media reports suggest that we now have something called an "acting First Minister". Is that the case, and is there recognition in the House of the office of acting First Minister? Who is the First Minister?

Mr Speaker: There is provision under the Act for the First Minister to step aside. Of course, it is not the first time that it has happened. We have not had a resignation of the First Minister.

I ask Members to take their ease while we change the top Table.

(Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Newton] in the Chair)

Assembly Business

Committee Membership

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: As with similar motions, the motions on Committee membership will be treated as business motions. There will therefore be no debate.

Resolved:

That Mr Danny Kennedy replace Mr Ross Hussey as a member of the Committee for Education; and that Mr Danny Kennedy replace Mr Robin Swann as a member of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee. — [Mr Swann.]

Resolved:

That Mr Phil Flanagan be appointed a member of the Committee for Social Development; that Mr Conor Murphy replace Mr Daithí McKay as a member of the Public Accounts Committee; that Mr Daithí McKay be appointed a member of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety; that Ms Bronwyn McGahan replace Mr Chris Hazzard as a member of the Committee for Justice; and that Mr Chris Hazzard replace Ms Bronwyn McGahan as a member of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. — [Ms Ruane.]

Ministerial Statement

Dairy Sector: Action to Address the Current Crisis

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to make a statement on the current crisis in a number of farm sectors, particularly the dairy sector.

We share a common concern about the fall in prices in the dairy sector and across a number of other key sectors; how that translates into prices below the cost of production; the effect on business profitability; and the direct impact that it is having on farmers and their families. I am doing everything that I can to support the industry through the current crisis so that it can survive and ultimately realise its growth potential.

I would like to outline to Members the actions that I have taken to date to support our farmers, as well as the next steps. I have always been a champion of the agrifood sector here. I have promoted the world-class, safe and traceable food that we produce. I recognise that the agrifood sector is the bedrock of our economy and a key force in shaping our natural environment, culture and society. Agrifood continues to be a significant growth sector for the local economy, with recent statistics showing turnover in the food and drinks industry heading towards £5 billion. The statistics also show an increase in employment of 5% as well as increased exports of more than 7%. The figures indicate that the trend for growth in the food and drinks sector over the last 10 years is continuing and that the sector is continuing to make a valuable contribution to the wider economy as a whole.

The dairy sector makes a particularly important contribution to the local economy. In 2014, it accounted for 41% of gross agricultural output, whereas the EU equivalent figure is 15%. It provides employment on over 3,000 farms, has a gross turnover of about £1 billion and employs over 2,000 people in the processing sector. Milk production in the North in 2014 was 9.4% higher than in 2013, and, in 2014, 2.2 billion litres of milk were produced. We have a good track record and a good dairy farming reputation. Our farmers have continuously invested for growth. The overall structure and efficiency of our dairy farms is good, and better than the EU average. Since 1990, the average herd size has more than doubled from 39 cows to 82 cows, and the yield per cow has increased from 4,900 litres per cow to 7,200 litres per cow. That compares with 29 cows in the EU with an average yield of 6,900 litres per cow. The processing sector has also made significant investments to improve its overall efficiency and the mix of dairy products.

Of course, those positive figures are very much overshadowed by the current financial crisis affecting farmers, particularly in the dairy sector. That is my main focus at the moment. Clearly, we will not continue to have a thriving food sector if we do not have a thriving farm sector. That is a challenge for us all, going forward. Our dairy industry is facing a unique and extreme set of circumstances. The dairy sector in the North is very directly exposed to commodity markets and is vulnerable to the currency exposure that brings because of the nature of our market. We do not have the same large domestic

market for our liquid milk as other EU countries, and our producer price is closely linked to global commodity prices. In 2014, liquid milk in the EU accounted for 21% of volume, compared with only 10% in the North. Also, as the North exports around 85% of the milk we produce, currency fluctuations have compounded our difficulties. Our milk prices have therefore fallen considerably more over the last 18 months than is the case in Britain. Our prices are 22% below those in Britain. Milk prices in the North fell to 18.87 pence per litre in July 2015. That is a drop of 36% on the average price in 2014, and many industry stakeholders feel that there is worse yet to come.

The current crisis has been caused largely by a range of global factors outside our control, including increased milk production in several countries, the Russian ban on food imports, reduced demand from key markets such as China, and a weak euro. As those factors are outside our control, it points to the need for an effective EU action to address the very damaging consequences of the situation. That action must be immediate; any further delay will see many farmers going out of business. Local industry and political representatives alike are all agreed that this crisis cannot be solved at a local level alone. It needs concerted action, with everyone working together to a common aim, playing their part and making a contribution.

I have done and will continue to do everything that I can at a local level to address this problem. Given the challenges that the wider farming sector is facing, we also need additional EU support. Our aim should be to make much needed money available quickly to our farmers to ease the cash flow situation and tide them over until the market recovers. Our local industry representatives throughout the dairy supply chain have called for a significant increase in the intervention price. I have strenuously supported that call.

We need to examine the intervention system and assess whether it adequately fulfils the role of providing an effective safety net. It was, after all, set 12 years ago at the 2003 CAP reform, and it urgently needs to be reviewed. In the interim, there has been a substantial increase in production and marketing costs. The support threshold is, therefore, outdated. To be meaningful, it needs to be set at a higher level. I cannot see the point in having a safety net if it does not reflect the current market realities. That view has been supported by the recent report on the prospects for the EU dairy sector, which was agreed by the European Parliament on 6 July. Lessons also need to be learned from the crisis in the dairy sector in 2008-09, when prices fell at the end of 2008 and remained low until the autumn of 2009. The €300 million made available at that time is widely regarded as being too little, too late.

12.45 pm

I have been working with industry and political stakeholders, particularly in relation to the dairy sector, for more than year. I have been engaging regularly with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to emphasise our unique circumstances in the North of Ireland, and I have pressed her to support our case for effective and timely EU action. In particular, I have been pushing for a review of the intervention threshold rates and immediate help for the dairy sector. I have also highlighted the plight of our other farm sectors.

I have also been liaising with our MEPs, my opposite numbers in Scotland and Wales and Minister Coveney

in the South. I have taken our case directly to Brussels. I met European Commissioner Phil Hogan in late March and took the opportunity to impress on him the importance of the dairy sector for the North, our particular exposure to global market volatility and the potentially dire consequences of the growing problems in milk prices. I subsequently wrote to the Commissioner and sought an urgent meeting with him ahead of the special meeting of the Agriculture and Fisheries Council on 7 September.

On 1 September, I took our case to the heart of Europe, securing an unprecedented meeting with Commissioner Hogan and his senior officials. I brought a strong delegation of local industry and political representatives with me, including our MEPs and the Chair of the Agriculture Committee, William Irwin MLA. I am grateful to the members of the delegation for their support. We presented a united front to the Commission and worked collectively to present a convincing case to Mr Hogan that there is an urgent need for action from Europe on intervention prices and for effective support for the dairy industry and the other sectors. As a result of that meeting, I felt reassured that Commissioner Hogan had a better grasp of our unique circumstances, the particular vulnerability of our industry and the difficulties it faces because of our high dependence on exports, poor exchange rates and extreme market conditions. I emphasised the need for immediate action to put money into farmers' pockets and pressed him very hard on reviewing the intervention threshold.

On Monday 7 September, I attended a special meeting of the Agriculture and Fisheries Council in Brussels. Ahead of that meeting, I had a further round of useful meetings with representatives of the farming unions, DEFRA and the devolved Administrations and Minister Coveney. I continued to argue the case for farmers in the North with our counterparts in DEFRA, Scotland and Wales.

I have also been engaging with my Executive colleagues to bring their attention to the difficulties faced across the farming industry. I have highlighted the extreme price volatility to which the agrifood industry is exposed. I have encouraged them to assist where they can, for example by ensuring that local businesses are able to bid for public-sector contracts and encouraging them to engage with the British Treasury on the scope for any further flexibility on taxation.

On a practical level, my Department's dairy advisers have, throughout the spring and summer, held workshops and training events that have detailed the specific issues of cost control, technical efficiency, benchmarking and business management. A series of press releases was followed up with technical articles and radio interviews. I have had a number of meetings with the banks and the feed merchants, which have all been constructive. I have encouraged them to be proactive, sympathetic and flexible where possible. I am also engaging with the retail sector. My Department will continue to offer that practical support. I am also committed to making direct payments to as many farmers as possible in December 2015.

Prior to the special meeting of the Agriculture and Fisheries Council, Commissioner Hogan held a press conference at which he promised to bring forward a comprehensive package of measures to address the difficulties in the farming sector. At the Council meeting on 7 September, we learned that there was little new thinking behind that package. The Commission announced a

€500 million package of proposals that was aimed at the cash flow difficulties facing farmers, the functioning of the supply chain and stabilising markets. That includes to all member states to support the dairy sector, permitting up to 70% of direct payments to be made in advance, advancing certain rural development payments, providing for financial instruments and further use of the income stabilisation tool under rural development programme.

The Commission also proposed a new private storage aid scheme for milk powder and pigmeat, increasing the budget for promotion programmes, strengthening the Milk Market Observatory and opening up new markets. To tackle supply chain challenges, the Commission will establish a new high-level group to focus on clearly defined issues, such as futures markets. The Commission will also seek to finalise negotiations on the school milk scheme.

While confirmation of targeted financial aid is welcome, we need to see much more detail on exactly what is being proposed, how it will be targeted to those farmers most in need and when it will reach our farmers. In addition, I have real concerns that the €500 million will not go very far across 28 member states. I am also concerned about the scope for differentiated aid for the North of Ireland as it is within a member state.

In summary, the Commission package raises more questions than answers, and I have written to Commissioner Hogan seeking urgent clarification on how it will support our farmers. I remain very concerned about the impact of the current crisis on farmers and their families and about the future of the wider agrifood industry.

As Members will no doubt be aware, the special meeting of the Agriculture and Fisheries Council was preceded by mass demonstrations by farmers from France, Germany, Belgium and, indeed, the North of Ireland, which almost brought Brussels and the European Quarter to a standstill.

Closer to home, the Ulster Farmers' Union coordinated a demonstration here at Stormont on 4 September, where representatives from across the agrifood supply chain and local politicians came out in force to show their support and express their concern for the industry. To me, the numbers involved in those demonstrations and the depth of farmers' concerns send a powerful message to the European Commission that we are not prepared to stand by and watch our most important industry collapse. We need effective action from Europe now to ensure that we have a sustainable industry for the future. Europe cannot ignore the plight of farmers here.

We know that the next few months will be crucial for the industry. We will continue to press the Commission hard for swift and effective support for our most important industry. I will continue to work closely with our industry on the implications of the Commission's announcement at the Council meeting on 7 September. I will continue to fight to get the best deal for our hard-pressed industry. There will be further examination of the proposed package at the informal meeting of Agriculture Ministers in Luxembourg tomorrow. I will continue to urge the Commission not only to use the full range of tools at its disposal but to ensure that these are fit for purpose by committing to a review of intervention thresholds in line with article 7.2 of the CMO regulation. I will continue to work with colleagues across these islands and with industry to explore mechanisms to

support a sustainable and profitable agrifood industry into the medium and longer term.

As I announced recently, support for knowledge transfer, innovation, cooperation and capital investment will be available under the rural development programme, including the proposed farm business improvement scheme. Following the approval of our RDP by the European Commission, I plan to open the first phase of the farm business improvement scheme measures later this year. This will include the establishment of business development groups and training for farmers, including farm safety and business planning, with the other schemes to follow in a coordinated manner. I am committed to supporting greater fairness, transparency and communication in the supply chain, and I have tasked the Agri-Food Strategy Board with developing proposals to take this forward. I am pleased that the first supply chain forum event is scheduled to take place in October. My Department will continue to support the industry's growth ambitions, as set out in the Agri-Food Strategy Board's report 'Going for Growth', through the provision of education, training, technical support and research to help to improve efficiency, competitiveness and innovation. I will also continue to work hard to stimulate export growth and open up new markets.

I remain optimistic for the future. Whilst dairy farmers face a very difficult time at present, I believe that, with a growing world population, the longer-term outlook for the industry is good. My priority now is to do all that I can to ensure that the dairy industry is still in place and that it is healthy so that it can seize on those opportunities when the global markets and prices improve.

Mr Byrne (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development):

I thank the Minister for making the statement today. It is very timely and important, given the serious condition that the farming industry has been in for the last three or four months. First, what support can the Minister give to the farming community generally and the dairy sector in particular at present to help with the cash flow crisis that many farmers are experiencing? Secondly, will DARD be able to administer an upfront 70% payment of this year's single farm payment in October, as signalled by the EU Agriculture Commissioner's office, given that cash flow is the biggest crisis facing most farmers?

Mrs O'Neill: I absolutely agree with the Member that the crisis that we face in the farming industry is a cash flow crisis. Why are we in this position? It has been building up for some time. We have consistently made the argument with the European Commission that it needs to review the intervention price. Given the nature of the market, even to have signalled that action would have created a floor in the market, which would have allowed the market to recover naturally by itself. However, Phil Hogan has chosen to turn his face to that approach. Unfortunately, we did not have support from DEFRA on that approach because the British Treasury's position is not to look at intervention prices. That is unfortunate because that would have helped the market to recover naturally. I fear that the Commission has taken the same stance and repeated exactly the same actions; anything that it has brought forward has been too little, too late. Exactly the same happened in 2008 and 2009, when the Commission stood back and took too long to act, and it took the market a very long time to

recover. However, a package of measures has been put on the table. It creates a €500 million package to deal with cash flow, but it remains to be seen what that looks like for our farming industry. When that is distributed across 28 member states, I suspect that it will not amount to an awful lot of money for farmers. However, every little helps, particularly given the situation that we are in.

As I said, we are scoping out with the Commission and our MEPs more of the detail of the package that was put on the table on 7 September. Alongside that, over the last year I have been working closely with the banks on the action they are taking and asking them to be proactive and to work with the farming industry, to be flexible and sympathetic and to work with farmers on business planning. I am making the point that the longer-term prospects for the industry are good but, if we do not help farmers to get through this crisis now, they will not be there to produce.

Alongside the work with the banks, the Grain Trade Association and the farming unions, as well as working collectively, we have been making sure that we try to cover all the bases in any supports that have been brought forward. My Department has increased the number of workshops that it has done. It has been disseminating information about feed and working with farmers on cash flow. We have certainly seen an increase in the number of farmers coming forward and asking for that support. We have Rural Support on the ground providing excellent advice and support for farmers who really are at the end of their tether. That is right across all the farming sectors.

On your last point about single farm payments or the basic payment scheme, as it is now referred to, the Commission announced that, as part of its package, there is an opportunity to look towards advancing payments. We will not be in a position to make advance payments. The Member will know what my priority has been over the last number of years: I have improved the situation year-on-year, and this year I intend to match that. I have made sure that I have prioritised the work in the Department. My priority has been to make sure that we pay the maximum number of people in that first week in December. That is still the intention. We need to see farmers receiving the money as quickly as possible. It is certainly my intention to make sure that we achieve that. As I said, there have been improvements year-on-year, and this year I expect to match that.

If I was in a position to make part payments or to advance the payments, I would certainly do that. You know that I am trying to make sure that the Department reaches that position. However, there have been massive changes as a result of the common agricultural policy this year, and we are moving from one single farm payment to three separate payments, as well as getting the IT system, making sure that we do all that work and dealing with new entrants and young farmers. All those things have compounded the difficulties with being able to make part payments, even though the Commission has now indicated that it will allow some work and some advance in that.

My message to the farming industry is this: I am doing absolutely everything that I can. I will continue to press the Commission. I still believe that it needs to take a review of intervention prices. The current price is outdated. The other assurance that I will give the industry is that my Department has prioritised making sure that the maximum number of farmers are paid in that first week in December.

Mr McAleer: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Can the Minister tell us what focus she has placed on developing new markets?

Mrs O'Neill: There has been a lot of focus on that, because I think that, given the global market conditions that we work within, one of the best ways that we can help to guard against the volatility in the marketplace is by going out and targeting new markets. The more opportunities we create for our industry, obviously, the more potential there is to get into new markets, achieve a good price and be competitive in those markets. I am quite enthused by a lot of the work that has been done in getting into markets. Obviously there has been a reduction in the demand from the Chinese market. However, we are running hard to try to get into the Chinese market, particularly for pork. Alongside that, we have inspection visits from the US and Australia later this year, and we are working with the Philippines. So, quite a number of new markets are being targeted. I am quite enthused by the opportunities that are there. One of the best ways that we can help to protect the industry is to look for those new markets and opportunities. That is at the core of Going for Growth, the strategy for the industry, which is on increasing our exports. That will help to grow the markets. We are seriously taking on board all those opportunities, and we are working with industry to get into all the new markets that we can.

Mrs Dobson: I also thank the Minister for her statement, although there is little in it that will actually reassure farmers or deliver any meaningful support.

The Minister rightly talks about the size and importance of our local agrifood industry, but does she accept — this is a point that has been raised with all of us so many times over the summer during the protests — that her main priority must be to stabilise the industry and keep the farmers that we have in business? Many face financial ruin, as you know, Minister, and the mental anguish associated with that. We have to protect the farmers we have at the moment, as well as getting that balance of seeking to expand.

1.00 pm

Mrs O'Neill: Yes, and I think that what I outlined is exactly what we have been doing. I have said consistently — I say this publicly on every opportunity that I have — that if this is a cash-flow issue and we do not support the industry to get through this crisis, we will not have farmers to produce and avail themselves of the potential opportunities that we are trying to open up for the future. So, I agree with everything that you said. What I tabled and outlined today are all the measures that I have taken to date, all the steps that I have taken to date, what we are working on and what we will continue to work on in the future.

I believe that we have a fantastic product to offer. I believe that we have a fantastic industry and that we can go confidently around the world to get into new markets and say that we have a very clean, green image and a very wholesome product. So, we need to be able to support our sector to get into the opportunities that are there. That includes getting every sector through this immediate crisis. I clearly set out everything that I am doing, but the situation that we are facing is obviously because of global market conditions.

The tool and mechanism to help the industry was very clearly needed at a European level. Unfortunately, the

Commission has not gone as far as I want to see it go — I might add that that includes other member states — but there is something on the table now. We will work with that and work out the detail of it. I will continue to make my voice heard about why we are unique, compared with even Scotland, Wales and England. We export more product. We export 85% of everything that we produce, so we are more susceptible to market conditions. I will certainly argue that, to reflect the nature of our export industry, we are entitled to receive a fair share of any support that comes.

Mr McCarthy: I also thank the Minister for her detailed statement. There is no doubt that she is fully committed to seeing our farmers fully rewarded for the work that they do.

I am concerned, however, that her statement says that unless “immediate” action is taken a number of our farmers will go out of business. That is the last thing we want to see. What is the difference between the €500 million package that has been on offer and the prospects of intervention if the commissioner was to go down that road? What is the difference between that €500m million and the intervention prices that we have been asking for so that the farming and agriculture industry is progressive and remains stable?

Mrs O’Neill: Given the nature of the dairy sector — I will use the 2008-09 example — there are going to be peaks and troughs in the market. So, we will continue to come back to this point so that we can help the industry to get through this difficulty now. The European Commission’s proposal is to throw an aid package on the table. I believe that that is not a very long-term outlook. I believe that it should intervene and review the intervention price. People trade in milk product in a global market. Speculators do not buy, because they are waiting and waiting for the price to come down. If the Commission reviewed the intervention price and set a floor below which the price cannot fall, the market would start to correct itself.

The free market does not work. So, although I welcome the approach of the European Commission as being of some help — there is some initiative there, and every bit obviously helps when the industry is in difficulty — we will be back in the same position making the exact same arguments in a number of years’ time. I think that it is a very short-sighted approach, and it puts a sticking plaster over the problem rather than deals with it. That is the main difference, I believe, with the intervention price. I have not given up on that, and I am quite encouraged that other member states have also not given up on it. I think we need to still push it, because, given the nature of the dairy market, we will keep coming back to this position time and again unless a proper long-term view and approach is taken to it.

Mr Milne: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I also welcome the statement and thank the Minister for presenting it to us this afternoon. How beneficial will the Commission’s focus on tackling the supply chain challenges be for the local industry?

Mrs O’Neill: I welcome the signal from the industry that it will have a high-level group that will look at supply chain issues. I have always said that it is central, even to our own local strategy around Going for Growth, that we have one supply chain. I welcome any mechanisms that will work towards and signal that there needs to be that fairness, and I welcome that it will be coming from a European level.

As I said, I have always been an advocate for greater fairness in the supply chain, because that is the element of it that is continually pushed when it comes to trying to bring prices down.

I will feed into the European Commission’s review. I have also been speaking to DEFRA in England and the Scottish and Welsh Ministers on what else can be done closer to home. I have asked the Agri-Food Strategy Board to establish a supply chain forum. I am delighted that its first meeting will be in mid-October, which will be the start of a local approach. We are coming at it from a number of angles. The fact that the European Commission has signalled an intention to bring something forward at a European level is to be welcomed.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for bringing the statement to the House today. It shows the Minister’s commitment to the farming industry and farmers. She promised that she would do all that she can, and the statement sets out exactly what she has done. The agriculture industry has a leader at the front. We have seen that in everything that the Minister has done. The future for the farming industry is good, and we have a strong leader. What will the targeted aid package provide to the industry?

Mrs O’Neill: What was most unfortunate was that there were very high expectations. Thousands of farmers came to protest outside the Commission as the Agriculture Council sat. It is fair to say that expectations for the detail of any proposed package were very high. We had the headline figure of €500 million, but, unfortunately, when you break that down across 28 member states, and it is then decided how that will be distributed within member states and what sectors will benefit, it does not amount to an awful lot of funding.

We have asked for further clarification on the detail. The industry is obviously looking on keenly at what it means for individual farmers. I want to make sure that that aid is targeted and that we work closely with the industry in how we distribute it and how we can do that as quickly as possible. We are working with the Commission. As I said, there is a meeting of Ministers tomorrow, which will thrash out more of the detail. We will work with the Commission on getting the detail and making sure that we can get the funding distributed. Although it may end up being a small amount, we will get it distributed as quickly as possible.

Mr Rogers: Thanks for your statement, Minister. Following on from your last answer, when do you expect that payments from the €500 million European package will come? What fraction do you expect to get, bearing in mind our unique position, particularly, as you mentioned, with milk prices here being 22% below what they are in Britain?

Mrs O’Neill: We still do not have confirmation on when the funding is coming. That is what we are working on with the Commission. In the aftermath of the council meeting, I said that the most disappointing element of the meeting was that, while headlines were given, there was no detail as to when and how the funding will come. We are working our way through that as we speak. You could give a rough estimate. Britain and the North of Ireland represent about 10% of the dairy output. If you were as crass as to use that to make a very blunt calculation, you would be talking about some €50 million. However, that remains to be

seen. A contribution will go to DEFRA, and we will have to fight our corner. To date, we have been very successful in arguing why we are unique and different. I will deploy those arguments again when it comes to the actual distribution of the funding within the member states.

Mr Swann: I thank the Minister for bringing a statement on this crucial issue to the House. Let her be reassured that we will not run away from her and that we will use our mandate to stay in the Chamber to question her and seek clarification on her statements.

Minister, point 41 states that the Commission has brought forward little new thinking behind the package. Will the Minister indicate what new thinking she has brought to the agriculture industry in Northern Ireland in the 63 points in the statement?

Mrs O'Neill: The Member has listened to me relay my statement. I have very clearly set out all the initiatives that I have been involved with. I have been very proactive on the issue. The crisis in the farming industry is a result of global market conditions. Despite the Member's view, at the rallies that I have attended, we have always said that we need to work together to help the industry. This should not be used as a political stick to try to beat each other with. For me, we need to come at this from a collective point of view.

The industry needs the Executive, the Assembly and every political party in the Chamber to work together to help it to get through the crisis; it does not need bickering, unionist party rivalry or unionist party electioneering. It wants to see action. I have clearly set out all the initiatives with which I have been involved, all the things that I am doing and all the things that I intend to do. I have clearly shown leadership on the issue and will continue to do so for the industry.

From the moment I took up ministerial position, I have said that this is an economic Department. The agrifood industry is crucial to the overall economy of the North of Ireland. I will continue to champion the rights and benefits of that industry and the rights of farmers in the supply chain. I have consistently shown leadership and will continue to do so. I have set out all the practical things that I can be involved with and will continue to do that. Because global market factors have contributed to the crisis that the farming industry is in, we needed the European Commission to take action. Unfortunately, I do not believe that it has gone far enough, and I have said so publicly. I will continue to challenge the Commission on what it is doing, but I will not be found wanting in my action to support the industry.

Mr Dallat: I was somewhat comforted by the assurance from Mr Swann that the unionists will not run away from this crisis, but one could be forgiven for wondering why there were so many empty seats across the Chamber when this critical statement was delivered.

I ask the Minister what progress, if any, has been made by the Commission to introduce or finalise negotiations for the school milk scheme. I ask that question in all sincerity because, as the Minister knows, last week there were new figures on child poverty. Primary schools are finding it increasingly difficult to fund breakfast clubs. We all know that, among the people who really depend on the Assembly, there are many children from a background in which they get their nutritious meals in the morning in school.

Mrs O'Neill: I agree with the Member on the benefits of the scheme coming forward. As he says rightly, it may be the only milk that a child gets in a day. As I said, the Commission very much went down the road of using headlines at the Council meeting, so we do not have much detail about how it will take the scheme forward. At a local level, there is uptake of the scheme by some schools; however, for various reasons, not all schools participate. Some find it too hard to administer etc. This is an opportunity for fresh thinking on whether there is anything else that we can do to encourage schools. I have written to Ministers to highlight that.

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Minister for her statement. Clearly, these are serious times not only for the dairy sector but for everyone involved in the agriculture industry in Northern Ireland, including a great many people in my constituency, Newry and Armagh. The Minister made reference to her engagement with the banks and the retail sectors. What concrete proposals and specific measures has she been able to agree with the banks and the retail sector to provide some measure of comfort to hard-pressed families as the crisis moves forward?

Mrs O'Neill: As I have said, this crisis has been building for some time; it is not something that we just arrived at overnight. To go back as far as December last year, I met the banks and put the proposal to them that they should be proactive in contacting all their customers. That was in relation to the dairy sector alone. Obviously, however, given the problems that face all the other sectors, throughout the past year, I have engaged on quite a number of occasions with the banks. They took that proactive approach and contacted their customers and went out and talked to them. We offered support from our advisers in the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE). I thought that it would be of benefit to the industry to widen out that meeting, which we did. We then invited representatives of the feed industry and the farming unions to talk collectively about what practical steps we could take. It was really about flexibility from the banks. It was about everybody having an opportunity to identify the challenges that face each element, because when farmers are affected the wider rural community is affected, in that there is a knock-on effect in paying for feed and making payments to banks. Collectively, we decided to continue to work together. Over the last couple of months, particularly over the summer, we had two meetings where we had all the players round the table. Again, the whole focus has been on how we work together proactively. I am pleased to say that the banks actually took that on.

1.15 pm

Because we had everybody, including the farming unions, round the table, we were also able to point to examples where maybe we felt that banks were not doing the job that they should be doing or had suggested that they were doing. We had the opportunity to challenge them about what they were doing. That is an invaluable area of work. I have said that I will continue to do that and meet again regularly as we go through this difficult time.

Mr Allister: Given the Commission's rejection of the lifeline of intervention, which would have put a bottom in the market and given essential confidence to allow the market to recover, and instead its paltry and meaningless

package, does the Minister agree that the EU has let our farmers down and will drive some of our dairy farmers to the wall?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes, I agree that the Commission proposals do not go far enough. To say that it was a disappointment that it did not work towards reviewing the intervention price is an understatement. As I said, the Commission has not learnt the lessons from previous experience. It has made the same mistake again and has waited too long. What it has put on the table is not worth much. We will be back in this position again over the next number of years, time and time again. To continue to throw a few pounds of aid at the problem will not tackle it at source. The only way to do that and the only opportunity to allow the market to actually recover itself is to review the intervention price. I do not understand — I put this point very clearly to Phil Hogan — what the fear is in reviewing the intervention price. When the Commission stepped in previously, it actually made money. It is nonsense. I do not understand the rationale for why it has not reviewed the intervention price.

As I said, I welcome the fact that there is something on the table, but, for me, a lot of the initiatives are a rehash of things that were already happening. They are certainly more of a medium- to longer-term approach to the issue, but the core problem remains that, if we do not get farmers through this immediate crisis, we will not have farmers to avail themselves of the new opportunities that we see in the longer term.

Mr McCallister: I welcome the Minister's statement. Looking round the Chamber, I did not realise that abstentionism was so contagious.

In her answers to Mr Byrne and Mr Kennedy, the Minister acknowledged that cash flow was tremendously important. Sorry, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker; I should declare my interest or draw Members' attention to the fact that I am a farmer, a recipient of single farm payment and a member of the Ulster Farmers' Union. In terms of cash flow and the discussions that she had with the banks, which she mentioned in her reply to Mr Kennedy, were there specific discussions about capital holidays for farmers? Is that an idea? I know that the farmers' unions have certainly pressed the idea. Is it one that would garner her support? If so, will she continue to make that point? It would be an easy way to reduce the pressures on farmers' cash flow.

Mrs O'Neill: I am glad that the Member is here to ask the question. I am here to make a statement on all the actions that I have taken; that is what I am here to do. I am sure that the farming industry will be disappointed to know that other unionist parties have decided not to take part during what is one of the most challenging and difficult economic times for farmers across all sectors.

Capital holidays for farmers is certainly a matter of ongoing discussion with the banks. Some are offering them and some are not. The approach that we need to take is that, whilst we continue to push banks on making capital holidays available — I believe that the majority of the main banks make them available — it is not perhaps the best solution for every farmer. The point that we have made consistently and that I have made along with the unions to the banks is that, if there were a range or suite of measures that farmers could avail themselves of, they could work on a case-by-case basis and try to suit the individual needs of each farmer.

Private Members' Business

Civil Service (Special Advisers) (Amendment) Bill: First Stage

Mr Allister: I beg to introduce the Civil Service (Special Advisers) (Amendment) Bill [NIA 61/11-16], which is a Bill to amend sections 7 and 8 of the Civil Service (Special Advisers) Act (Northern Ireland) 2013 and article 3 of the Civil Service Commissioners (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 in relation to special advisers in the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Multiple Deprivation Indicators

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

Mr McAleer: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises that the current multiple deprivation indicators do not accurately identify the extent of poverty and deprivation in rural areas; and calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to review this urgently.

The overriding reason why we decided to table the motion calling for a review of multiple deprivation measures (MDM) is the impact that they have on rural communities, particularly government policies for rural areas and associated funding streams.

In the aftermath of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development's review of rural poverty, which included an analysis of the deprivation measures and during which we took evidence from expert witnesses from NISRA and others, we felt that now was an appropriate time to bring such a motion to the Chamber to open it out to wider discussion. In the course of our deliberations and meetings with various rural stakeholders, we found that there is a very strong view among those stakeholders that the current method used by government to assess deprivation in rural areas underestimates its full extent. That theme was expressed during the Agriculture Committee's recent review, and it was discussed at a seminar that was held last year — 'Poverty Amongst Plenty?' — which I co-hosted with MLAs from other parties. The seminar was addressed by NISRA and other representatives. We heard some very compelling evidence from organisations such as the Ulster Farmers' Union, the Rural Development Council (RDC) and the Rural Community Network (RCN).

A recurring theme during any deliberation on the issue or with any lobbying is the view that the model that is used in the North is a spatial model. It focuses mostly on small areas of concentrations of deprivation, and they are more easily identified in urban areas than in rural areas. When you use a spatial model, it is more difficult to target individuals, and that makes it extremely difficult. Indeed, the completion of the Committee's report and the current scrutiny of the Rural Proofing Bill makes now a good time for this motion.

We looked at some of the inadequacies in the current measures. Income and expenditure are two of the key domains that are looked at. They count for 50% of the overall MDM score and account for 25% each in how it is weighted. The income level domain is quite rightly focused on, but, from a rural perspective, it does not look at expenditure. There is a great deal of evidence from organisations such as the Joseph Rowntree Foundation that it costs more to live in a rural area, where the cost of living is higher. They estimate that it could cost up to 20% more to live in a rural area. If you live in a rural area, you have to own, for example, at least one car if not two, and more travel time is needed to get to shops and childcare services. That is compounded by a less than adequate public transport system compared with urban areas.

The other domain that is looked at is employment, which accounts for 25% of the overall score. However, the MDM does not take account of the fact that a lot of people emigrate from rural areas to work in urban areas, or, in the case of my constituency of West Tyrone, go across the water or down South to work.

In the overall MDM score for super output areas across the North, of which there are 890, proximity to services is weighted at 10% of the overall score.

There is concern among an awful lot of rural stakeholder organisations, particularly the RCN and the RDC, that there is not enough weighting afforded to proximity to services.

A lot of work has been carried out on this across the water in Scotland. The Church of Scotland commissioned a study to compare the experiences of its rural and urban congregations, and that was carried out by Geddes and Houston in 2011. They found that there was huge deprivation in access to services in rural areas, and that can have a negative impact on people's lives in terms of employment, medical care, participation in social activities and, indeed, travel times, which are up to 10 times greater in isolated rural areas.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr McAleer: Yes, of course.

Mr Beggs: Coming from a rural area, I have a degree of sympathy for the Member in wanting a review, but can he indicate which other deprivation indices he wishes to reduce in order to increase proximity to services?

Mr McAleer: I thank the Member for his intervention. It is important to look across all the domains to see whether it is possible to take a little bit off some domains to increase access to basic services. We look forward to NISRA coming back to us with its recommendations and to seeing what it suggests. The evidence that we heard from NISRA indicates that there is guidance for rural areas, but it is not 100% content that they are being focused on; there is more focus on the overall score. Obviously, we look forward to NISRA coming back with some recommendations.

Studies found that the lower weighting given to proximity to services has a huge impact on underestimating deprivation in rural areas. We found it astounding that not a single rural super output area features in the top 10% most deprived areas across the North. Obviously, that will have implications for anti-poverty initiatives. Rural organisations are very concerned that policy-makers and funders may focus on the top 10% to 20%, even though there is rural guidance on how best to use those measures. I think that it is alarming that there is not one rural area in the top 10% of the 890 in the North. Indeed, the closest we have is Castleterry in the West Tyrone constituency, which ranks ninety-seventh. That is all in the context of the DSD family resources survey, which indicates that 24% of people in rural areas live in poverty.

Given that the current measure is a spatial index of deprivation, it is very important that we focus on how to capture deprivation when it is widely dispersed. The Ulster Farmers' Union made that point very clear when it addressed the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development during the inquiry. It said that it would like to see a method that will pinpoint deprivation in rural areas and that, unlike urban areas, which are more socially

segregated, people of all socio-economic backgrounds live side by side in rural areas.

To use its own words, it said:

“One person could be in poverty and the person down the road could be in relative affluence. We are not sure that the MDM takes that into account at present.”

As for some of the other stakeholder organisations that we routinely meet at the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, and as MLAs, the Rural Community Network and the Rural Development Council strongly feel that urban areas are socially segregated, whereas, in rural areas, deprivation exists amongst relative affluence, and there must be a change in the current measures to ensure that they capture the extent of rural deprivation. Their fear is that that distortion can impact on Government policies and spending in rural areas. Indeed, when Mr Trutz Haase came to a seminar recently, he referred to what he termed the prevalence of opportunity deprivation in rural areas being caused by lack of access to centres of decision, key services and career opportunities.

In conclusion, there is a great deal of consensus among rural interest groups that the current system does not accurately measure poverty and deprivation in rural areas. At the very least, unlike in urban areas, rural deprivation — I spoke about a couple of these key issues during my opening speech — is not concentrated in any particular area; it is very widely dispersed. The proximity to services domain has a very low weighting, and that affects the overall MDM score.

I thank Members for coming here today for this important motion and I look forward to hearing their contributions.

1.30 pm

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá áthas orm bheith ag labhairt ar an rún tábhachtach seo inniu. I dtús báire ba mhaith liom a rá go bhfuil mé i bhfabhar an rúin agus tá roinnt moltaí de mo chuid féin agam i leith an rúin. At the outset, it is important to be clear about what deprivation is. Deprivation is usually taken to refer to unmet needs across a number of areas or domains.

The most recent Northern Ireland multiple deprivation measure was in 2010, five years ago. It provided a relative measure of deprivation in small areas across Northern Ireland. It was constructed from around 52 different indicators relating to seven separate types of deprivation; income, employment, health, education, proximity to services, living environment, and crime and disorder. According to NISRA in 2010, approximately one third of the super-output areas were classified as rural and two thirds were classified as urban. The average size of the urban areas was 2.1 square kilometres compared to rural areas, where the average size was 45.1 square kilometres.

The 2011-15 DARD tackling rural poverty and social isolation (TRPSI) framework found some very startling figures when looking at rural deprivation. The rural west, for example, had some of the highest proportion of households scoring on each of the deprivation indicators. These indicators included not being in a position to save at least £10 a month, not being able to replace worn-out household items such as furniture, not being able to keep accommodation sufficiently warm and not being able to meet household bills and so on. Rural regions have

the highest proportion of people with Post Office card accounts. The rural west, however, is more likely to have people with no savings; that figure is 53%. Rural areas also had the highest percentage of households, 8%, that were behind in one or more household bills. This rose to 10% in the rural west compared to 6% in urban areas.

I do not think it is as clear in the Northern Ireland multiple deprivation measures as it could be. There are changes to the system of measurement which could be made to improve the identification of multiple deprivation areas in the rural region. These include the measures used in the Republic of Ireland — the Pobal HP method — which are designed to remove, or minimise, these issues, and measures used in Wales that were developed specifically as rural multiple deprivation measures.

The motion calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to review this urgently. I believe that it should be urgently reviewed so that we can learn the full extent of deprivation. However, I believe that there should be a cross-departmental approach with responsibility on all Northern Ireland Executive Ministers as opposed to focusing solely on DFP. Deprivation is the responsibility of many Departments, not least DSD and DARD. Whereas, obviously, the Department of Finance and Personnel could lead the approach, it is important to include other Departments that also have an interest in rural affairs.

I note a question that was asked of OFMDFM around nine months ago on what work that Department was doing, along with other Departments, to address multiple deprivation indicators in rural areas. To date, that question has not been answered, so I hope that is not an indication of the interest that that Department has. In conclusion —

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

Mr D Bradley: In conclusion, we support the motion and commend it to the House, with the proposals that I made in my speech. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Cree: Several key questions are raised by the motion. First of all, what exactly are the current multiple deprivation indicators? Secondly, what is wrong with them in their operation in rural areas for measuring poverty and deprivation? Thirdly, what alternatives to them exist that would be more accurate?

The Northern Ireland multiple deprivation measures 2010 are made up of a total of 52 indicators relating mostly to the period 2007 to 2009. They are grouped into seven types or domains of deprivation and relate to income; employment; health; education, skills and training; proximity to services; living environment and crime and disorder.

Many of them appear to be obvious ways to measure deprivation, such as adults and children in income support, jobseeker's allowance households, incapacity benefit claimants, and the proportion of working-age adults aged 22 to 59 with no or low levels of qualifications. Information was aggregated and broken down into small geographical areas known as output areas and special output areas.

There are 5,022 output areas, each with a population of approximately 350 people. There are 890 special output areas, each with a population of approximately 2,000. Approximately one third of the special output areas were classified as rural, with the other two thirds classified as urban. It is important to remember that not all deprived

people live in deprived areas. The deprivation measures will identify areas with large concentrations of deprived people, but those deprived people living in areas where only a small proportion of the population is deprived will be excluded from a solely spatially based policy.

What is wrong with the measures in their operation in rural areas for measuring poverty and deprivation? In the past, NISRA acknowledged and addressed concerns from representatives from the rural community in the 2005 and 2010 research. Although special output areas were designed to have special population sizes of approximately 2,000 to aid comparison across Northern Ireland, due to the smaller geographical size and similar socio-economic characteristics of the population in urban areas compared with rural areas, small area concentrations of deprivation are more readily identifiable in urban than rural areas.

In the geographically larger rural areas, the socio-economic characteristics of the population vary to a great extent. Clusters of deprived households or concentrations of deprivation are, therefore, identified less often in rural special output areas. When one looks at the most deprived rural super output areas and compares the difference between 2005 and 2010, one sees that 10 of the areas have either worsened or seen a very minor improvement. The other 10 that did see an improvement are still in the bottom 20, which tells a tale of how effective the Executive have been in alleviating deprivation.

The situation is even worse for urban super output areas. Of the bottom 20 urban areas in 2010, 19 were in Belfast and one was in Londonderry. Fifteen of the areas that were in the bottom 20 in 2005 were still there in 2010. From the NISRA statistics, it would appear that the Executive's ability to alleviate urban deprivation is as ineffective in urban areas as it is in rural areas.

What alternatives exist to the measures that would be more accurate? We recognise that the indicators are five years old and are based on information that is even older. We also believe that reform and re-evaluation should be constantly ongoing in virtually every walk of life so that lessons can be learned and improvements made. Therefore, we would not be opposed to looking at alternatives that might deliver a more accurate or equitable outcome. However, we must take care to ensure that any changes we might propose are not only an improvement on what is there already but that they hold up to rigorous academic scrutiny.

The Northern Ireland multiple deprivation measures 2010 are based on the same methodology developed by the social disadvantage research centre at the University of Oxford and used in the surveys of 2001 and 2005, as well as for multiple deprivation measures in England, Scotland and Wales.

If we are seriously talking about moving away from this, we need to be very clear about what measures we propose to remove and ensure that the alternatives that we propose are capable of standing up to robust scrutiny.

We support the motion and point out the dangers of deviating from common practice in the rest of the UK.

Mr McCarthy: I welcome the opportunity to participate in the debate and fully support the motion to review the multiple deprivation indicators. However, it is worthwhile pointing out that, although I support the urgent review of

the indicators, they have served a purpose over the past five years.

The 'Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure', as was mentioned by other Members, was published in May 2010 and replaced the 2005 report. Five years have passed, and the context that the people of Northern Ireland face is dramatically different from before. Accordingly, from the outset, it is clear that the indicators must be reviewed to update their effectiveness for the purpose that they were created for, namely, challenging poverty and deprivation right across Northern Ireland. The 2010 report published by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) presented key indicators that it felt could best be used by Departments to tackle deprivation in Northern Ireland. However, tackling deprivation is complex, given the many interrelated forms that it can take, and the 2010 report attempted to recognise that through the seven general indicator areas that it chose. However, a key and recurring word throughout the 2010 report was "relative" — that is to say that it should not be taken as absolute and applicable to every context.

That brings us to the debate today on the challenges that rural areas are facing in tackling poverty and deprivation. Statistics show us that, in rural areas throughout Northern Ireland, food and fuel poverty rates are higher and access to employment and housing significantly more difficult than in urban areas. Despite that, rural areas are not ranked higher in the index table, even though affluent rural areas have been shown to contain those living in poverty or deprivation. Those individuals and their families are being overlooked when it comes to support from the Assembly because of the nature of the indicators as they stand, and it is one of the reasons why my party colleagues and I have called for their urgent review.

Moreover, I would like to see an improvement in the indicators through the recognition of opportunity deprivation, which could be highly eye-opening, given that it could be argued that application of the current index does not accurately represent our rural communities and thus is leading to a vicious circle of poverty and migration from these areas. Access to public services, education and, therefore, the opportunity to improve oneself is vital. A 1000-mile journey begins with one step, and the current indicators should not be seen as failures in the struggle against poverty and deprivation. Rather, they should be seen as positive steps towards recognising a complex issue in our drive to realise our objective of defeating poverty and deprivation in rural areas.

In conclusion, I fully support the motion and call on the Minister to review the indicators used as soon as possible as we move into an uncertain and concerning 2016. Indeed, issues such as this should serve as a reminder of how essential the work of the Assembly is and why the Executive are so vital to the people of Northern Ireland. It is a real pity and shame that the Chamber is not full of Members, including the Minister, to discuss and debate fully the important issues in the motion. However, the Alliance Party is content to support it.

Mr Milne: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I begin by acknowledging the work that the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development has conducted to date as part of the TRPSI review. I found the presentations and discussions that followed very

informative indeed. I also record my thanks to the research team for preparing the pack in preparation for the debate.

1.45 pm

It is generally accepted among rural stakeholders that the methodology used for measuring deprivation does not accurately assess the extent of deprivation in rural areas. Urban and rural areas are not directly comparable. Rural areas are not populated in the same manner; rural communities are often dispersed, with affluent people and those who are less well off living side by side; the day-to-day difficulties that rural dwellers face are not the same as those faced by those who live in urban settings; and the level and depth of poverty are not as easily identified. Rural dwellers are also not as likely to take up benefit entitlements, and farmers, in particular, often have no access to benefits due to having family land or buildings despite having no or little income.

Deprivation can come in different forms, such as a lack of access to opportunities. Rural dwellers have to travel to attend higher education, to increase their employment prospects, to access health care and to socialise. The multiple deprivation measures disproportionately focus on income level and employment as domains but do not consider the higher cost of living in the countryside.

As has been stated by Members who have spoken, a lack of public transport makes it a requirement for most rural householders to own at least one car. Added to that are the running costs and the travel time that is lost each day by getting to and from work, appointments, childcare providers and shops. As has been stated, a 2010 study by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation on the minimum income standard concluded that rural dwellers need to spend 10% to 20% more on everyday requirements than their urban counterparts. No allowance is made for that in the multiple deprivation measures. Additionally, those factors impact on who can avail of employment opportunities and increase the likelihood of young people emigrating or moving to urban areas.

Another concern that has been voiced is the weighting afforded to the proximity to services domain in the current methodology. The fact that there is a lower weighting of 10% means that rural areas are unlikely to feature in the top 10% or 20% of the most deprived areas across the North, which has implications for funding and anti-poverty programmes. That is further compounded by the fact that proximity to services is not the same as access to services. The ability to access services has huge implications for the elderly, the disabled and people on low incomes. It becomes irrelevant how far leisure centres or hospitals are if you do not have the ability to get there.

That is evidenced by the fact that no rural areas ranked in the top 10% most deprived of the 890 super output areas across the North. That was despite a survey by End Poverty Now in 2013, which estimated that 35% of children in Maghera, a small town in the constituency that I come from, are growing up in poverty and a recent claim by the Trades Union Congress that female part-time workers in Mid Ulster, a predominantly rural constituency, are the worst paid in the North.

Despite explanations from NISRA in relation to how the MDM figures should be read in a rural context, that does not appear to be the reality. There is perhaps a lack of

understanding in Departments and the public sector about the guidance for rural areas, but that could be remedied by moving forward with the review and changing the method of capturing and presenting data. The MDM statistics are regularly used when addressing social need. Therefore, if we are to tackle poverty and disadvantage effectively, we need to look at how it is measured.

I am encouraged by the work of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development to date and the acknowledgement from NISRA when it completed the 2010 review that further work needed to be undertaken to identify rural deprivation.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to bring his remarks to a conclusion.

Mr Milne: Whilst agreement has still to be reached on a preferred methodology, there is widespread consensus among interested rural groups that the current system is not accurately measuring poverty and deprivation in rural areas. I join my party colleagues in calling on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to bring forward the review as a matter of urgency.

Mrs D Kelly: As someone who lives in the townland of the Montiaghs, I am acutely aware of the paucity of service provision and access to public services experienced by rural communities. However, I am sure that many people are prepared to pay some price in lack of access so that they can enjoy the beauty of the Irish countryside. Twenty-first century statistics continue to show that the level of unfit houses that people have to live in across rural Northern Ireland is quite mind-boggling. I think that Fermanagh still experiences the highest level of unfitness.

Increasingly, the private sector is providing domiciliary care in the form of home helps, and I have to deal with that issue in my constituency. However, that sector says that it does not particularly want to do that business. It has stopped paying its staff the mileage to and from homes and it cannot recruit staff. I had to intervene in a case where a person had gone into hospital and was then put into respite care. The family wanted their mother home so that they could care for her, but the trust was unable to provide the home help, or domiciliary care provision, to allow that person to be discharged.

The indices that others have referred to during their contributions this afternoon have a real and meaningful impact on how services are provided. Rural people seldom ask for help. As others have said, there is great community support and people do not like to complain. Sometimes, people do not like to complain because they think that, if they complain about the services not being great, they will not even get to keep the service that is not so great that they are already getting. There is a greater need for people to look at the reality of service provision and at the definition of necessity versus luxury. Having two cars at a rural home is a necessity. It is half a mile from my house to the nearest school bus stop, and, quite often, the children walked that distance. That is a reality not just for my kids but for many other children.

As others have said, a high level of fuel poverty is also experienced by many people. New challenges have been set by DSD, for example, in how the affordable warmth scheme is being delivered. Based on research commissioned by Queen's, I think, local authorities now go out and knock doors and ask people whether they are

living in rural poverty and whether they need some help with boiler installation etc. I am not saying that that is the case, but it would be tempting for those officers to hit a hotspot in an urban area, where they could run up and down the street and do about 10 houses in the space of an hour, whereas it would take them two or three hours to cover a rural area.

I would like to see some realism injected into the outworkings of NISRA's definition of deprivation and the poverty indicators. I would like to see greater cohesion across the Executive table. It is with great regret that I note that the Executive, and OFMDFM in particular, were taken to court by the Committee on the Administration of Justice over their failure to deliver an anti-poverty strategy. You would think that it is something that would be uncontroversial. If we were all putting the needs of the most vulnerable at the heart of our decision-making, we would resolve and collaborate on those issues very quickly.

It is not just the Finance Minister who needs to look at how some of the indices are calculated. A former principal of my local primary school told me that free school meals were not a good indicator, as many families are too embarrassed to take them. The uptake of school uniforms would be a much truer reflection of poverty in these areas. There is a job of work to be done —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to bring her remarks to a close.

Mrs D Kelly: — by not only the Finance Minister but the whole Executive.

Mr Beggs: First, I recognise the professional manner in which the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency collects statistics to ensure that they are robust. This research was carried out in a very professional manner, which means that we are working with figures that are as accurate as possible.

When I look through the 52 indicators, I see a degree of validity in each one of them: a reason why it has been included. I do not think that there is a need for vast change, although there may be a need for tweaking. Certainly, like my colleague, I am open to taking a good look at and re-evaluating them. However, any change will need to stand up to scrutiny, not only from rural communities but from those in need in urban communities.

I note from the information pack provided to us by the Library, for which I am grateful, that, in the past, the statistics were produced using methodology developed by the Social Disadvantage Research Centre at the University of Oxford. They follow a methodology similar to those used to produce multiple deprivation figures for England, Scotland and Wales. It is important that we know what the need in Northern Ireland is relative to other parts of the United Kingdom.

There is wide recognition that not all deprived people lived in a deprived area, and, similarly, not all people in a deprived area are deprived. There is no perfect indicator: once you get away from the individual or the household to spatial areas, you lose a degree of accuracy. The most accurate measurement is of individuals and individual households: for example, in my constituency, Glenfield estate in Carrickfergus has been widely recognised over the years as an area of need, but its need has been masked by its location in an otherwise relatively affluent

area — certainly, more affluent areas neighbour the estate. There are problems with whatever method is used.

When I tried to read up on this, I noted something in the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development's position paper on DARD's anti-poverty and social inclusion programme. NISRA has told the Committee that Wales has just provided an update and advised that it is waiting for — guess who? — OFMDFM and the statistics coordinating group, which is a cross-departmental group, to give direction on the way forward. The motion criticises the wrong group. NISRA appears to be saying that it is not holding anything up: it is the politicians in OFMDFM. We cannot criticise the statisticians when the political direction has not been given. Those who tabled the motion should have been aware of that, and, rather than criticising statisticians, recognised that the failing is in OFMDFM.

Going forward, local councils will play an increasing role in this area as they take a wider interest in community planning. I hope that that will be the case. There are particular challenges in rural communities at present. There is an obvious additional cost to every individual and every family living in a rural community when they have to travel, no matter what they do. Whether they travel on the limited public transport available, hire a taxi or use vehicles that families are forced to keep on the road as the only means of getting to their local town or village.

There is also the issue of heating. Gas is widely recognised as the most efficient method of heating, but it is not available in every rural household. That is just an outworking of the practicalities of gas supply. There are undoubtedly additional costs to living in rural communities.

I commend the MARA project for the work it has carried out over the years in trying to identify those in need who may not have taken up all their benefit entitlement and trying to give them help and advice. That has been a worthwhile project, and there will be a need for it going forward, particularly at this time —

2.00 pm

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

Mr Beggs: — given the difficulties that exist in the rural community and the current financial situation in agriculture.

I am open to looking at change, and I support the motion.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: As Question Time begins at 2.00 pm, I suggest that the House takes its ease until then. This debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be Mr Oliver McMullan to conclude and wind on the debate.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Oral Answers to Questions

Agriculture and Rural Development

Farm Payments: Young Farmers

1. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the value of the young farmer top-up to the basic farm payment. (AQO 8603/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The overall young farmer payment is capped at 2% of the overall fund, which equates to approximately €6.5 million. Assessment of the young farmer applications received is still ongoing, therefore the actual payment value cannot be calculated at this time. The value will be set once the number of eligible applications is established.

Mr Nesbitt: The Minister will remember that I asked for this clarification back in May, when she told the House that she needed to work out how many people had applied. Five months later, it is very disappointing that she is not able to provide that clarity for young farmers and their businesses. Is it simply the case that the Minister did not have enough staff in place to process this year's applications?

Mrs O'Neill: No, that is not the case.

Mr Byrne: Following on from the previous question, will the Minister indicate what timescale will be required before we know the number of young farmers who may qualify for the scheme? What is the average grant aid addition that they might get from such a scheme?

Mrs O'Neill: The young farmers, new entrants and those who were prevented from being allocated payment entitlements as a result of force majeure or exceptional circumstances may be given an allocation of payment entitlements or have the value of their existing payment entitlements increased to the regional average from the regional reserve. To date, we have received 2,082 young farmer registration applications, and we are working our way through those as we speak. A dedicated administration team with technical support will take the final decisions on some issues of clarity around whether you qualify for the young farmer scheme. That is all work in hand.

In terms of the top-up when it comes to grant aid, we are talking about an additional 10% for young farmers in regard to the farm business improvement scheme.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat. How optimistic is the Minister that payments will be made in December?

Mrs O'Neill: This is an area that I have prioritised. Obviously, all sectors are feeling the pinch and pain at the moment, so I have prioritised this area of work to make sure that we continue to build on the positive work that I have been able to bring forward over the last two years, where we have seen an increase year on year in the number of people paid. My determination and priority is again to have the maximum number of farmers paid in that first week in December. I have prioritised staff to deal with that.

Rural Crime

2. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline how her Department and its statutory authorities are addressing the issue of rural crime. (AQO 8604/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: I am very aware of the real concerns that the levels of crime are causing amongst the farming community. I have met the PSNI Chief Constable and the Minister of Justice on a number of occasions and made them aware of my concerns. Responsibility for tackling rural crime lies primarily with the PSNI, but DARD's veterinary service enforcement branch assists and advises the PSNI on a regular basis concerning agricultural crime. DARD continues to work with the PSNI, the Department of Justice and representatives of the farming community on a number of joint initiatives including the Farm Watch scheme, the freeze-branding initiative and the Crimestoppers campaign.

Veterinary service represents DARD on the steering group of a dedicated rural crime unit that was set up by the PSNI. The unit is jointly funded by the Department of Justice and NFU Mutual. It is focusing on a range of issues from the identification of trends and patterns to the delivery of targeted initiatives. The multi-agency approach has led to the recovery of stolen animals and successful prosecutions in the North and the South. The veterinary service's enforcement branch assists in particular with the detection, tracing, recovery and identification of stolen livestock and has been using sophisticated DNA profiling techniques to verify the ownership of recovered animals. I am pleased to note that the PSNI's latest quarterly updates on agricultural and rural crime show that the number of offences relating to agricultural activity has decreased significantly in the last year.

I encourage farmers to participate in these initiatives and do all they can to help secure their properties. Anyone who has information that might help us to combat the threat to rural businesses should report their suspicions to DARD, the PSNI, the Garda Síochána or the investigations division of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for her detailed reply. I agree with her that, in the efforts to combat crime, the whole issue of Farm Watch is very important. Leaving that for a moment and looking at how crime has developed, there is a North/South dimension. There is a cross-border trade in goods, equipment, farm machinery and livestock that has been stolen. Would it not be appropriate, therefore, for the Minister to embark on an intensive North/South programme to combat agricultural crime?

Mrs O'Neill: I agree that that is an approach that we need to take, and it is one that we have been taking. I have outlined some of the initiatives that we have been involved with, particularly around joining up the efforts of all the agencies, including the PSNI and the Garda Síochána. So, there is a North/South area of work. At a recent North/South Ministerial Council meeting, I had quite a lengthy discussion with Minister Simon Coveney on other actions that we can take, particularly on smuggling, fuel laundering and things like that in border areas.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. Will the Minister elaborate on the discussions that have taken place at North/South Ministerial Council level to address rural crime?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes, we had an extensive discussion on cross-border smuggling and fuel laundering, which are issues that I had raised previously at a plenary meeting and that had also been raised at a recent NSMC environment, agriculture and transport meeting. Ministers noted the ongoing efforts in both jurisdictions to tackle the serious issues and the introduction of a new fuel marker that will help to address smuggling and fuel laundering. We also noted the concern at an EU level, and the Commissioner for the Environment, Maritime Affairs and Fisheries has been in correspondence with Environment Ministers, both North and South, concerning the latest developments and actions taken to address the issue. This is an ongoing issue for us to deal with at NSMC level, and maybe a standing item on the agenda should be to look at how we can work together and cooperate on sharing information about practical steps. That is happening in the approaches of the PSNI and the Garda Síochána, but it is something that we need to continually review.

Mr Swann: The Minister is still fully aware that smuggling is a real issue in regard to rural crime. Can she provide the House with any update on what actions have been taken since I last raised the issue, when over 9,000 cattle had been stolen in Northern Ireland in a three-year period? This is an organised crime, so is it time for the National Crime Agency (NCA) to be called in?

Mrs O'Neill: Smuggling is a serious issue. As I said, it was one of the hot topics of conversation at the recent NSMC meeting. The responsibility for tackling crime — smuggling is crime — is the PSNI's. However, my Department will play its role where it can assist, particularly through its veterinary and enforcement staff. We have been very proactive in that work. Taking on organised crime gangs is absolutely something that needs to be done. We need to make sure we remove any barriers, particularly in relation to food that has illegally entered the food chain, which needs to be removed as it jeopardises the first-class reputation that we have in food promotion and our reputation for traceability in our food systems. In any initiatives that tackle that, I am fully committed to making sure that my Department plays its role. I will continue to engage with the PSNI and the Garda Síochána on the actions that they are taking. I will make sure that we work together where we can, and I will hold them to account when they need to do what they should do, which is tackle crime.

Rural Development Programme: LEADER

3. **Mr Lynch** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the community-led local development (LEADER) element of the rural development programme. (AQO 8605/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: As you will be aware, the European Commission approved the rural development programme for 2014 to 2020 on 25 August. That has allowed my officials to issue interim local rural development strategy templates to local action groups, moving them into the final stage of the appointment process.

My Department has set a return date of 31 December; however, officials will work at the pace of the fastest, and any of the 10 local action groups (LAGs) submitting a strategy before that date that meets the required standard will be eligible to receive a contract to deliver LEADER on behalf of the Department. That will cut some 18

months off the set-up time compared with the previous programme. LEADER was extremely successful during the 2007-2013 programme, achieving 100% project spend and creating 996 rural jobs. That is why job creation is a key objective of the economic theme of the LEADER element of the programme going forward, and there is an overall job creation target of 700 jobs. LEADER has made a difference on the ground, and I have every expectation that it will continue to do so in the time ahead as we open up the new scheme.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for her answer. I held a very successful small business seminar in the county recently, and there was much interest in it. Can I ask the Minister which schemes will open first?

Mrs O'Neill: The rural business investment scheme should be the first scheme to open in each area, following a period of the LAGs working with potential applicants on the ground. That is called animation. This time around, more work is being done at the pre-application stage to increase the number of successful applications that come forward. Access to basic services, village renewal and broadband will open shortly after that.

Mrs D Kelly: Minister, the rural development programme has been a very successful programme. Can you perhaps outline the socio-economic benefits of ensuring that not only are businesses helped but that there is that community and social infrastructure? For example, assisting with childcare might be a feature of it. You may be able to tell us a bit more about some of the aspirations of the programme that is coming in.

Mrs O'Neill: Obviously, the programme is about helping to create sustainable, thriving rural communities. That is taking in all the issues and looking at the challenges. From my experience of being out and about and visiting projects that have benefited through all the different measures over the last number of years, I have very clearly seen the community benefits right across, whether that be in basic services in a rural village for a community hall or having a local business that is able to create jobs. As I said, the current programme has created about 1,000 jobs, and, obviously, we want to see a lot more of that in the time ahead. Childcare, broadband and all the different challenges are there for rural communities. We set the parameters around the six broad themes for each area, but it will be individual LAGs that decide the priorities in each area.

There is no doubt about it: the benefit of this programme is second to none. One of the beauties of it is that it is the community asking for help to fund something that it identifies as a need as opposed to a Department telling a community that it is what it needs. I look forward to getting the scheme opened. We received our European Commission sign-off in the summer, which, obviously, is fantastic. It allows us to support rural communities, farmers, farm businesses, rural businesses, the environment and, obviously, the community and voluntary sector in all that. I look forward to getting the scheme opened as quickly as possible.

Rural Proofing Bill

4. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the rural proofing Bill. (AQO 8606/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department undertook a public consultation exercise earlier this year on my proposals to enhance the rural proofing process by placing it on a statutory footing. The responses received indicated broad support for the proposals. These proposals are designed to promote a fair and inclusive rural society by introducing a duty on government and councils to consider the needs of our rural dwellers when they are developing their policies and delivering public services.

My final policy proposals for a rural proofing Bill were agreed by the Executive on 7 July, and since then, my officials have been working with the Office of the Legislative Counsel to produce a draft Bill that will give effect to these proposals. I hope to bring that Bill to the Executive as soon as possible prior to its introduction to the Assembly. I will be working hard to ensure that this new legislation can be introduced in this Assembly and can complete its passage within the current Assembly mandate.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I commend the Minister and her Department for the excellent work on the rural proofing Bill so far. Can the Minister further outline what powers and provisions will be in the Bill?

Mrs O'Neill: The Bill is aimed at ensuring fair and equitable treatment of rural communities in the policymaking process, and it will build upon the existing arrangements that are already in place, particularly on statutory rural proofing.

2.15 pm

It is proposed that the Bill will contain a number of provisions, including the following: a duty on Departments and district councils to consider the needs of people living in rural areas when they are developing their policies and delivering services; a duty on DARD to promote and encourage Departments and district councils to consider the needs of people living in rural areas; a duty on DARD to produce regular monitoring reports to be laid before the Assembly; provision for Departments and district councils to make arrangements for cooperation and collaboration to help to ensure a more consistent and cohesive approach to addressing the needs of rural dwellers; power for DARD to support rural proofing and the implementation of the Bill through the provision of training, advice and guidance; and power to make regulations to extend the Bill to non-departmental public bodies as may well be specified in such regulations.

Mr Dickson: Thank you, Minister, for your answers so far. Will you tell the House what plans you have for the Bill and how you intend to include shared future proofing in it, particularly given the number of hidden sectarian interfaces in rural areas?

Mrs O'Neill: As I have outlined, the purpose of the Bill is to make sure that we put Departments' responsibilities for assisting rural communities on a statutory footing to make sure that, when it comes to policy decisions and strategies being developed at both central government and local council level, they consider the needs of rural dwellers.

We are not suggesting for one minute that that means that there has to be a hospital on every corner or that there have to be all those services. However, we are saying that rural people deserve to have equality in access to services and that they may need to reconfigure how services are rolled out to make sure that they meet the needs of rural dwellers. Obviously that is something that assists all members of every walk of life. Everybody in the community will benefit from improved rural proofing when it comes to policy and strategic decisions from Departments.

Mr McKinney: I thank the Minister for her answers thus far. While we welcome the July sign-off, will the Minister reflect on the speed with which other Departments are moving in the direction of rural proofing, particularly the Department of Health?

Mrs O'Neill: There was an Executive commitment, going back as far as 2002, that all Departments have responsibility to rural-proof their policies. I do not believe that it is consistent enough right across the board or across all Departments. I do not believe that the veracity or rigour that could be applied is always applied across all Departments, so the Bill is an attempt to make sure that it is consistent so that, no matter what Department is looking at whatever policy, it has to have a duty to rural dwellers and the impact that it will have on them. It puts it on a statutory footing. It also allows us to lay a report before the Chamber, which will be for debate, obviously, and that will allow us to scrutinise the work of each individual Department. I believe that it will lead to a situation where we have improved access to services for rural dwellers and an improved response from Departments in the decisions that they take.

Mrs Overend: Can the Minister provide us with an update on her engagement with the Education Minister with regard to the definition of rural schools? Until that definition changes, it completely weakens the prospect of genuinely rural proofing changes to our schools estate.

Mrs O'Neill: Rural schools are like any other policy decision that any Minister will take. When the legislation comes into effect it will mean that all decisions have to be policy proofed. I have previously informed the Member that I have met the Minister of Education to discuss rural schools and their importance to communities. They are often the only central meeting point for rural communities, which is why the Minister has very strong criteria that look at the viability of schools not purely on a numbers basis but on the basis of all of the other benefits. There are six criteria that he applies, and links to the community is obviously a strong criterion in any decisions that he takes.

Mr Speaker: Mr Conor Murphy is not in his place.

Farm Price Difficulties

6. **Mr Rogers** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline any recent discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the European Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development in relation to current farm price difficulties. (AQO 8608/11-16)

13. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the action she is taking to address the difficulties facing farmers in relation to farm-gate prices. (AQO 8615/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 6 and 13 together.

I am acutely aware of the difficulties facing a number of farming sectors at present. I am very concerned about the impact on individual farmers, their families and, indeed, the wider industry. It is clear that the current crisis has been caused largely by a range of global factors that are outside our control, including the Russian ban on food imports, reduced demand from key markets, and a weak euro. It cannot be solved at a local level alone.

Over the past year, I have been engaging regularly with the DEFRA Secretary of State to emphasise our unique circumstances in the North and to press her to support our case for effective and timely EU action. In particular, I have been pushing for a review of intervention threshold rates and immediate help for the dairy sector, but I have also highlighted the plight of other sectors.

I have also been liaising with our MEPs, my opposite numbers in Scotland and Wales and with Minister Coveney in the South. I have taken our case directly to Brussels and led a strong delegation of political and industry representatives, including our local MEPs and the Chair of the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee, to meet Agriculture Commissioner, Phil Hogan, on 1 September.

On 7 September, I attended the extraordinary EU Agriculture Council meeting in Brussels. Although there was welcome recognition of the particular difficulties facing our local farmers, I am disappointed at the lack of detail in the package of proposals that has been brought forward by the Commission. I will continue to work closely with our industry on the implications of the Commission's package and press for swift and effective support for our most important industry.

Mr Rogers: I thank the Minister for her answer and for her efforts. When we visit our supermarkets, we find Fairtrade coffee, bananas and so on, and, although this area is not a developing country, it is certainly at the mercy of ruthless traders. What efforts will you make to have fair trade for our agricultural produce?

Mrs O'Neill: I have always been consistent on the need for fairness in supply chains. That means that our farmers should not be — as they feel and as the evidence sometimes suggests — the element of the supply chain that is continually pushed and squeezed to make savings. We have concrete plans and a strategy in place for the economic vision for the agrifood industry. I have always said that, if we are to be successful in achieving that, we need to see fairness in the supply chain. We need every element of that supply chain protected, respected and treated fairly.

I have asked the Agri-Food Strategy Board to convene a supply chain forum, which, I am glad to say, will meet in mid-October. That will bring together the farmers, processors, retail associations and all the players in the supply chain to start to open communication and have forward planning, so that farmers are not continually surprised when retailers decide that they will have a different ask this year compared with last year. We have a good opportunity to strengthen the supply chain and make sure that farmers have fair representation and conversation with that whole supply chain.

Alongside that, there is an ongoing conversation with retailers about buying local. That is a promotion that we can be involved with. I have written to all Ministers asking them to ensure that, for example, where Departments have opportunities to tender for the supply of food, they look towards and try to facilitate local businesses where possible within European rules. We can do a lot more work around promoting local product and encouraging people to buy it where they can.

Mrs D Kelly: Minister, you detailed a number of meetings and conversations that you have had. Can you perhaps give us some insight into the product and achievements arising from those discussions and meetings? I appreciate the difficulties. It may be helpful if you refer particularly to the dairy farmers and the help available to them.

Mrs O'Neill: As I said in my earlier statement to the House, this crisis has been building in the farming sector for some time; it is not something that we have arrived at overnight. Going back as far as last year, I have been meeting the banks, the feed merchants and the farming unions around how we can collectively tackle what is effectively a global market crisis. Many of the factors are outside our control: the strength of sterling against the euro, the Russian food ban, China not buying so much and the oversupply of milk in the market. All those factors have led to the price that our farmers receive being far below the cost of production.

In dealing with DEFRA in England, I have been very active in highlighting the fact that we are unique — our sector is unique. We export 85% of everything that we produce. I have been consistently clear in lobbying the EU Commission on the need to review intervention prices. Unfortunately, what the Commission put on the table at the 7 September meeting fell far short of what we wanted to see. It has now announced that there is to be a €500 million package for farmers, but, when you distribute that to 28 member states, it will not equate to a large portion of funding.

The European Commission's approach is wrong. It could have decided to review intervention prices, which would have helped the market to recover by itself. The sticking plaster that it has put on the issue means that in years to come we will be back having this conversation around the future of the dairy sector. It happened in 2008-09; it has happened again now; and it will happen again. Without the Commission taking that action, the proposals on the table fall short. Every little helps, particularly in trying to get some cash flow into the sector, but it fell short of what we expected to see. However, I have not given up on that. Other member states are also supportive, and we continue to push the Commission to review intervention prices. Alongside that is all the practical work that we are doing on the ground, where our CAFRE advisers are out working with farmers. We will have a farm business improvement scheme of up to £250 million to help farmers to modernise and to help them with their farms.

Mr Speaker: That was a very important question that needed a detailed answer, but I remind the Minister of the two-minute rule.

Mrs Dobson: The Minister has just touched on my point about the €500 million package. It appears attractive at face value, but, as you say, once it is divided across the 28 member states, it certainly declines quickly. The UK's allocation is subdivided into the four regions: can the

Minister provide an update on what discussions she and her senior officials have had with DEFRA about Northern Ireland's allocation?

Mrs O'Neill: I have consistently raised with the EFRA Minister the issue of why we are different, particularly when you compare us with Scotland, Wales and even England. Given that we export 85% of everything that we produce, we are obviously a lot more susceptible to market forces and volatility. I have been successful in getting the other regions to recognise that we are unique. I would like to think that that will play out in the discussions.

We still do not know what the allocation from Europe will be. I will use a rough calculation, which is that Britain and the North of Ireland produce about 10% of the EU milk product. If you use that for a very crass calculation, you are talking about €50 million, which would obviously then have to be distributed between Scotland, England, Wales and us. I have written to the EFRA Minister on the back of the EU Commission meeting. I have also written to the commissioner to establish exactly what our allocation will be. I will not be found wanting in making our case. I believe that we are different. I believe that we should receive an allocation that is proportionate to the fact that we export so much product, and I will certainly make that case. As I said, I have written to both the commissioner and DEFRA. I will have that discussion with Liz Truss, the EFRA Minister, again in the weeks ahead.

Farm Business Improvement Scheme

7. **Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the farm business improvement scheme. (AQO 8609/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: The farm business improvement scheme is designed to help to drive competitiveness in our agrifood sector and will be an important part of the North's new rural development programme for 2014-2020. The scheme will be a package of measures aimed at knowledge transfer, innovation, cooperation and capital investment that will help to support sustainable growth in the sector. It will have a budget of up to £250 million and include business development groups, farm family key skills, European innovation partnership groups, an innovation and technology demonstration scheme, farm exchange visits, an agrifood producer cooperation scheme and a business investment scheme.

We plan to roll out the farm business improvement scheme package in a phased way. With the approval of the rural development programme by the European Commission last month, my officials continue to work hard to open the first phase of the scheme's measures later this year. The first phase will include the establishment of the business development groups for farmers. This will encourage farmers to learn about and enhance their knowledge of business management, new technologies and innovative ways of working, which will assist them to think clearly about their farm, their income and their future. We are also planning farm family key skills training schemes, including farm safety and business planning, in the initial phase. These knowledge transfer measures will help farmers to think carefully about their business plans and help to prepare the way for the proposed business investment scheme capital programme that is planned for next year.

Mr Gardiner: I thank the Minister for her response. Can the Minister provide some comfort for farmers that, if the Assembly were to be suspended, the farm business improvement scheme would still be available? Is she confident of that?

Mrs O'Neill: I do not think that we should have that kind of defeatist attitude. We are all elected to show leadership and work together. The talks process has now opened, and we all need to show leadership and work together to find a way forward to represent the needs of the people who elected us.

I am committed to making sure that the scheme opens up. We have a lot of work to do. We have been working hard over the last number of years to get to this position. The fact that we now have European sign-off is obviously very welcome. I want to work with farmers to help them to improve their efficiency and productivity when we open the scheme later this year.

2.30 pm

Ash Dieback

8. **Mr Attwood** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of the current extent of ash dieback disease in local forests. (AQO 8610/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: Surveillance and testing for ash dieback has been undertaken since the first confirmed findings of the disease in recently planted ash trees here, in November 2012. In the North, as of 7 September 2015, the number of positive sites confirmed is 93, including: 64 in forestry plantations, three in nursery/trade, nine in urban amenity settings, three on roadsides, 10 in private gardens and four in hedgerows. Current scientific understanding suggests that the conditions for spread in the wider environment exist on the island of Ireland. To date, there is no evidence of spread to mature ash trees locally, which is, obviously, something that will be welcomed.

Mr Attwood: I appreciate that. Given the pressure on indigenous wood production and supply, the scale of other countries' exports coming into the country, and the fact that all the estimates show that, very quickly, we will become more and more dependent on imports of hardwood, will the Minister outline — given the nature of the disease — the strategy to replant in order to reduce dependency on imports of hardwood?

Mrs O'Neill: A forestry scheme will come forward under the new rural development programme, which will allow us to bring forward a grant scheme to help farmers to plant trees. Hopefully, working with Forest Service, they will plant trees that are less susceptible to disease.

Mr Speaker: That brings us to the end of the period allocated for listed questions. Members listed for topical questions 2, 3, 7, 8 and 10 have withdrawn their names.

DARD HQ: Decentralisation to Ballykelly

T1. **Mr Eastwood** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she remains confident of achieving the decentralisation of DARD HQ to Ballykelly as soon as possible, given the current political circumstances. (AQT 2801/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: Yes, I am fully committed to that project. We have done a lot of work on it over the last number of years in developing outline cases and doing all the groundwork. Staff are very keen to move. Obviously, there is quite a demand in the public sector among people who want to work in the north-west. This will be of tremendous benefit to those people. Record numbers of staff indicated willingness to move. It means that there will be more opportunities and a fairer distribution of public-sector jobs. The Member knows that I am very committed to the project. I hope to be able to go to tender with the actual contract over the next number of months.

Mr Eastwood: I thank the Minister for that answer. She knows well the numbers of people who get the 6.00 am bus from Foyle Street in Derry. Will she support an Executive-wide decentralisation programme, whereby all Departments would be asked, and, hopefully, would be able to deliver, a level of decentralisation to the north-west and other areas of high unemployment?

Mrs O'Neill: I would support that. The facts that I have moved forestry to Fermanagh, Rivers Agency to Loughry in Cookstown, fisheries to Down and that headquarters is going to Ballykelly, show that I am absolutely committed to delivering on the decentralisation of public-sector jobs. We have to see more of that. This will be the first Department to move completely out of the greater Belfast area, and I want other Departments to also consider such a move when it comes to potential changes in the future. It is only right and proper that there is a fairer distribution of public-sector jobs and that rural communities get to avail themselves of the benefits of the increased footfall of people in their area, the potential construction jobs and the ongoing servicing of buildings. All those benefits should be felt and enjoyed by people right across the North, no matter where they live.

Forestry: Development Proposals

T4. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what proposals she has, in conjunction with the Forestry Service, to develop, in number and quality, a sufficient amount of trees and forest and to outline her view of the development of forestry in Northern Ireland, which is a little bit of a personal obsession, given his great interest in the development of forestry in Northern Ireland. (AQT 2804/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: Forest Service has very clear targets for the planting that we want to see until 2020. There is a strategic vision set out in a document, and I refer the Member to the DARD website where he can see a link to it. The document very clearly sets out the Department's priorities and the areas that we are looking at. As I said earlier, we have an opportunity in the new rural development programme to look at grant aid for planting. I know that many farmers are looking with interest at that scheme coming forward. Forest Service does quite a significant body of work. I refer the Member to its strategic business plan, which is on the Department's website.

Mr A Maginness: I hear what the Minister says. Obviously, there is a business plan there, but given the fact that our economy is developing and the construction industry is developing and growing — perhaps not at the pace that we would like, but growing nonetheless — does she believe that, in fact, there is sufficient timber production

that will meet and serve the needs of the economy here in Northern Ireland?

Mrs O'Neill: That is not a concern that has been raised with me. Forest Service works closely with the industry, the mills and other stakeholders on developing a strategy and looking towards the future. That issue is not being highlighted as a concern. However, in moving forward, you have to be able to adapt to changing circumstances. You have your strategy, your vision and your targets in place, but obviously you have to be able to be adaptable to the local economy and its needs. If the Member has any particular concerns which he wants to write to me about outside of this, I will be very happy to receive them.

Hunting with Dogs: Ban

T5. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she supports a ban on hunting with dogs. (AQT 2805/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: Our position has been very clear that we continue to oppose blood sports. That includes dogfighting, badger-baiting, cockfighting and bullfighting. However, in acknowledgement of the support in rural Ireland for initiatives such as hare coursing, my party's position is that hare-coursing practices should be regulated to ensure sustainable wildlife management and to minimise any sort of unnecessary suffering. We are absolutely opposed to blood sports. That is my position.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for her response. Does she agree that hunting with dogs is indeed a cruel, inhumane and ineffective approach to wildlife management and animal welfare? Will she bring forward legislation on that issue to be debated in the Assembly?

Mrs O'Neill: The Member will be very aware that I have brought forward some of the strongest animal welfare legislation, both that which was started by my predecessor, Michelle Gildernew, and by me. We brought forward some of the most stringent legislation. We actually committed to reviewing it to ensure that where there was bad practice and incidence of any form of animal cruelty, there would be action and that agencies would have the ability to step in and take action. I have previously responded to a debate in this House, which I think the Member possibly brought forward, where we discussed a review of the legislation. I have done that. We are bringing forward an interim report. I think that there are opportunities to strengthen the legislation that we have even though it is very strong, particularly when compared with legislation anywhere else in our neighbouring islands.

Better Regulation and Simplification Review

T6. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the targets that her Department has reached in the better regulation and simplification review to reduce red tape. (AQT 2806/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: I do not have those figures with me, but I am very happy to provide them to the Member in writing.

Mrs D Kelly: It is hard to ask to a supplementary question on that, except to welcome the update. Will the Minister, in providing the update, give some insight as to the amount of money, or indeed the time and effort by farmers, that could be saved by reductions in red tape?

Mrs O'Neill: We are always looking for areas where we can improve things, make them simpler and remove any bureaucracy that is there. One recent example is the fact that we are now brucellosis free. That allows us to relax the testing regime, which has a saving of £7 million to the industry. Obviously, that is very significant. As I said, I will write to the Member about the targets and where we are at in achieving them.

Ardglass Trawler: Navy Incident

T9. **Ms McCorley** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her view of the recent admission by the British navy that it was involved in an incident with a fishing trawler from Ardglass in April, something which was denied at the time. (AQT 2809/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: The fishermen involved were very fortunate to survive that incident. After such strong initial denials by the British navy, I am appalled that it has taken it five months to admit its responsibility. When the incident happened, I visited the trawler, the owner and the skipper to see for myself the damage that was caused to the boat. Subsequently, I wrote to the Secretary of State and the Minister for Transport, requesting that the matter be fully investigated in order that we can prevent any further potential incidents.

With the admission, as recently as 7 September, I issued a press release calling on the Ministry of Defence (MoD) to explain why denials were issued and to explain its evasiveness. I do not think that it is good enough that it sat for five months, knowing what had happened. How was the industry able to protect itself against it happening again? I have severe questions for the British MoD on its approach to this and why it left our fishing industry susceptible to something like this happening again and, potentially, a fatality, because the incident of five months ago was quite severe. There are questions to be asked, and I am determined to make sure that I ask those questions and that we get to the bottom of this and make sure that it does not happen again.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a cuid freagraí. I thank the Minister for her answer. Will she elaborate on the further action that she is prepared to take to ensure that such incidents do not happen again?

Mrs O'Neill: I have written to the British Minister for the Armed Forces seeking a full report. I asked why submarines are operating submerged on the fishing grounds. To build confidence in the fishing fleet, I have requested that fishing industry representatives be fully engaged in changes to the submarine protocol. Furthermore, I fully expect that the navy will address the issue of compensation to the Wills family, the fishing family that was impacted at the time. We need answers, we need a full report, and we need guarantees that this will not happen again.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Minister. That brings us to the end of topical questions. As the next period of questions does not begin until 2.45 pm, I suggest that the House take its ease until then.

2.45 pm

Culture, Arts and Leisure

Mr Speaker: We now move to questions to the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure. Question 12 has been withdrawn.

Disability Sport NI: Funding Cuts

1. **Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for her assessment of the impact of cuts to Disability Sport NI's funding on the legacy of Northern Ireland's performance at the 2015 Special Olympics World Summer Games. (AQO 8617/11-16)

Ms Ni Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Member for her question.

I can advise Members that the funding allocation to Disability Sport NI has no direct impact on the activities of Special Olympics Ireland, which is a completely separate organisation.

I can confirm that, as part of a £2.3 million cross-departmental package, which also included funding from colleagues in OFMDFM, DHSSPS, DSD and DE, DCAL provided £459,000 of core funding to Special Olympics Ireland for the four-year period from 2011-15. The package was extended by a further £545,000 for the 2015-16 period. The funding package has enabled the organisation to expand its activities throughout the North and to extend its reach in providing sports training and competition opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities. It included support for the athletes from here who represented Ireland in this year's Special Olympics World Games in Los Angeles.

The Special Olympics team had one of the most successful games ever, with athletes from the North making a significant contribution to the medals won at the games. I am delighted to report that the team did exceptionally well, securing 82 medals. I am also proud of the achievements of the 12 athletes from the North, who secured 19 medals, including five gold, nine silver and five bronze.

Ms Sugden: I thank the Minister for her response. I welcome the fact that there will be no direct impact on the Special Olympics. Coming from a successful Olympic town, as Coleraine is, with Sean Campbell winning silver in the recent Special Olympics, I feel that it is important that the Minister acknowledges the part that disabled-bodied people have to play in sport. Does she have any plans to introduce further money into the sector?

Ms Ni Chuilín: I thank the Member for her supplementary question. Indeed, Coleraine has a great heritage of Olympians, Paralympians and Special Olympians. There are greater numbers participating in sport generally across the board. There are clear increases there.

The answer is yes. At the minute, we are working with colleagues in Sport NI. I recently met Special Olympics Ireland as well. I will have meetings with Disability Sport NI to ensure, particularly when we are looking at the next CSR, that business cases are not only refreshed but try to reflect the increase in participation numbers among athletes. It is really important that we do that, given that,

based on their successes in competitions, it is not only about participation but the athletes' achievements, which have been enjoyed by us all.

Mrs McKeivitt: Will the Minister outline how her Department and Sport NI will support athletes preparing for the 2016 Olympics and Paralympics? A bit of investment has been put in, and you can see that through the medals that have been won. However, what further advice and money can her Department give to those preparing for the Olympics?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for her question. She will remember the build-up to the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games. In particular, the work of the families and the governing bodies ensured that the athletes were able to go over to London and perform. It is that sort of spirit that we are hoping to capture for the 2016 games, but that will not happen on its own without support, particularly from Sport NI to the governing bodies. I know that, as we speak, Sport NI is actively meeting all the local governing bodies about the athletes' performance programme and the other supports that we can give them in preparation for the 2016 games.

Mrs Overend: It is recognised that the Minister's budget is limited, but is she prepared to reconsider her existing allocations to the disability sports' legacy?

Ms Ní Chuilín: We need to look at protections for disability sports, particularly in the arm's-length bodies. As I said in response to Mrs McKeivitt, we are working with Sport NI, Disability Sport NI and, indeed, some of the other governing bodies that provide opportunities for people with disabilities.

We certainly need to ensure that, if we receive additional moneys, we target those who are in most need.

Art and Culture Strategy

2. **Ms Ruane** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on the new strategy for art and culture, including any proposed public consultation. (AQO 8618/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Gabh mo leithscéal. I thank the Member for her question. I am currently developing an arts and cultural strategy to ensure that recognition is given to the value that arts and culture have in enriching the lives of individuals, building capacity in our communities, growing our economy and creating a more inclusive society. I firmly believe that the arts and culture deserve a central place, given their importance in contributing to positive health and well-being and in developing skills and confidence on individual levels as well as in communities.

Arts and culture are also inspirational drivers for our creative industries. They make a significant contribution to creating a cohesive society, and they certainly help with promoting tourism. In conjunction with the ministerial arts advisory forum that I established, DCAL is finalising a consultation document that I propose to launch before Christmas. Through this consultation, we will listen to the views of the public, and I intend to bring forward an arts and cultural strategy that will have a focus on delivering to the public and promoting equality. I totally believe in the value of arts and culture and all that they can bring to everyone. I think that it is vital that the best opportunities to enjoy arts and culture are made available to everyone. I hope that an aspiration can be shared and achieved by

delivering a successful, engaging consultation that will inform future policy direction.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. Could you outline some details about when the consultation will begin and how long will it last?

Ms Ní Chuilín: As I indicated in my primary answer, I anticipate that the consultation will be brought forward before Christmas. I actually hope that it will be around November. I would like it to last for no less than 12 weeks, but I am looking at the possibility of it being for 20 weeks. This is the first time that there has been an overarching cross-departmental strategy for arts and culture. We have one for sports. It is the right thing to do, and it will be for at least 10 years. I would like as many people as possible to engage in this consultation, because it is not just about people participating; it is a good economic driver. I think that that is what is missing, particularly when people talk about the arts. It is also about creating job opportunities and apprenticeships in the arts. When we look at our film and television industry, we can see that there are trends in the economy that are not getting the attention that they deserve.

Ms Lo: I certainly welcome the Minister's initiative for consultation, but given the haphazard way that arts funding has been cut — there was a nearly 20% cut to the Arts Council this year — how can she provide us with any reassurance that the arts sector is not going to be decimated?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The concern that the Member has highlighted is one of the main reasons why we need to ensure that there is a cross-departmental strategy for arts and culture. The situation that we are all in, in not having budgets secured, is completely unsatisfactory. It is crucial that we get cross-departmental and cross-Executive buy-in to a robust strategy for arts and culture. It needs to be properly costed and consulted on. I have a focus on the economy, and I know that the Member raised concerns about intercultural arts strategies, which impact on various Departments. For me, it is about embedding the arts in government spend from here on in. This is about future-proofing. I completely agree with the Member: we need to have better security, particularly around the arts.

Football Stadiums

3. **Mr McGimpsey** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on the development of subregional football stadiums. (AQO 8619/11-16)

6. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure when football clubs will benefit from the subregional stadium development for football fund. (AQO 8622/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: With the Speaker's permission, I will take questions 3 and 6 together.

I thank the Member for his question. My Department has been developing the subregional programme for soccer. A strategic outline business case has been developed with DFP, and approval was received in June this year. Programme-specific details in terms of criteria, funding strands and funding limits are being finalised. Plans for formal public consultation with stakeholders are under way, and I hope to commence a consultation shortly.

Following that public consultation, it is envisaged that the subregional programme will be formally launched in 2016. A step-through of the assessment process, including the various audits of need, competitions and business cases, is planned for 2016, with capital delivery to be undertaken in the financial years 2016-18.

The forthcoming process for the allocation of funding will be fair, open and transparent and based on an evidenced approach to demonstrating need and investment. Award recommendations will be made on the basis of criteria and projects attaining a high assessment score. I will approve all award decisions.

Mr McGimpsey: I thank the Minister for that answer. Could she indicate, while she is still in the planning process, what notional budget she plans to allocate to the programme? Can she confirm the number of grounds she anticipates will benefit, and when does she expect moneys reaching the clubs and organisations to be spent on the ground?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member will be aware that it is the remainder of the regional stadium money, which is £36 million. In terms of the number of clubs, I cannot say at this stage because it all depends on their eligibility and, indeed, the criteria. I have made my intentions known. I would like a phase 2 of subregional development for the three sports. There is a big need for it.

In this first subregional phase, it would be anticipated that as many clubs as possible that are in a state of readiness will bring their plans forward. I am aware that many have been doing that for at least a year, and I welcome that. I am delighted that I received DFP approval in June. We are in the final stages of preparing the public consultation. I expect the programme to be delivered from the beginning of 2016, in this financial year, through to 2018 and into the next mandate.

Mr Dallat: I thank the Minister for her comprehensive answer. She will be aware that some football clubs are better organised than others and have greater resources. What additional help is available to clubs that are, perhaps, not as au fait with making applications for funding? Can she assure us that the money will be dispersed across the region?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I appreciate the Member's question. It is a concern that I have had for some time, not just within sport but within the arts, that, when it comes to some of the big, well-organised organisations, those who shout the loudest get. That is not where I want to be. In fact, that is not where most Members want to be. To that end, I have asked my officials to take responsibility for the programme. As part of the consultation, along with the IFA, they and others will be out and about. We have had engagement with some of the new councils, but it is important that clubs can come forward in their own right, and they will be supported in doing so.

My officials already know that some areas and clubs are better organised than others, so, in the first instance, everybody will be given the same information. However, there will be an assessment of how we anticipate clubs being able to proceed. If we get a sense that a club might have all the needs and tick all the boxes but cannot progress because of its own capacity, we will need to identify some support.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her

answers. What form will the consultation on subregional facilities take?

Ms Ní Chuilín: It is important that we do not just stick to the usual, such as just look at the website or maybe you might see it in a box somewhere in a local paper some night or whatever. It is important that I, as Minister and as the lead for this, and my Department go out and explain to people as much as possible. We will do it with the IFA and others, but I want to ensure that as many people as possible have an opportunity to feed into the consultation. In response to Mr Dallat's question and Mr McGimpsey's question, while this is the first phase of the subregional, I anticipate perhaps phases two and three for the other two partners in the regional stadia programme.

It is important that we get a good profile of where the need is.

3.00 pm

Dungiven: Capital Investment

4. **Mr Ó hOisín** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on capital investment for Dungiven as part of the City of Culture legacy for the north-west. (AQO 8620/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. I am committed to seeking to secure £2.5 million for the development of a community sports facility in Dungiven as part of the legacy of the City of Culture for the north-west. That commitment, like all major capital investment, is subject to budget availability and to the approval of a business case that will include confirmation of any necessary partnership funding for the project.

I understand that the Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council has completed a consultation exercise on plans for sporting provision in Dungiven and is progressing with the development of a business case and detailed designs. Officials from DCAL and Sport NI are working very closely with the council to provide support and advice on the business case. In addition, under the boxing investment programme, Sport NI has issued an indicative letter of offer to St Canice's amateur boxing club in Dungiven, and that club also received boxing equipment with a total value of £1,600. In the last financial year, DCAL has also provided £12,000 for a range of digital equipment for the cultural hub at the Benbradagh community association through the north-west social and economic development plan.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a freagra. The Minister knows well my personal interest not only in this but in the North Coast Sports Village, which, of course, was the partner project. Can the Minister give me an idea of a completion date for the community sports project in Dungiven?

Ms Ní Chuilín: In anticipation of your question, I checked with officials, and things are very well progressed. I have made very public commitments at every opportunity about the investment in the Dungiven area, but there are governance issues that we need to cover, not due diligence. We need to complete the business case and ensure that the security of the additional funding that is needed is there and that it has the approval of council. The Member will be aware, particularly with the new super-councils, that there are new criteria. All that is in a good

place, and, like the Member, I look forward to making a public announcement of when the programme can be delivered.

Mr McKinney: The Minister has touched on my question. Can she detail the extent of partnership funding required for the project?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I mentioned that in response to Cathal Ó hOisín; the Member referred to that. We are working very closely with the council. It is a very positive experience in that people want to see the programme delivered in the same way that the programme and the sports facilities were delivered for Coleraine. It is part of that package. There is a process to make sure that the committees and the full council have ratified the money, but, as well as that, that the questions and queries, now in their final stages, in the business cases are completed before a final announcement is made. I have no reason or indication to believe that any of that is impossible. In fact, I am very optimistic that we can announce it fairly soon.

Mr Beggs: Can the Minister justify to the arts sector, particularly to those groups that have suffered 20% cuts, why they have had to endure reduced funding this year or even had funding withdrawn in-year while she is able to find additional capital funding for the Dungiven area related to the Londonderry City of Culture? What measure of sustainability is being used to ensure that, in the future, money will be available for all groups?

Ms Ní Chuilín: One is a capital programme, and one is a resource programme. That has been organised and developed for at least a year and a half. That is why good progress has been made. In terms of the resource, that is the difference between the capital and the resource: further money for the Arts Council. The budgets have not been confirmed yet.

I absolutely can justify it. Even though the Member lives in the east of County Antrim, he will know that, particularly in that whole swathe of the shoreline and in the north-west and particularly west of the Bann, investment of this nature has not been what it should have been for decades. He may be happy enough or content with that, but I am certainly not. I am also certainly not content with a lack of support and value, particularly around the arts. Given the seriousness of that, perhaps people will now see the need to support an overarching all-departmental strategy for culture and arts.

Casement Park

5. **Mr Cree** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the procedures followed in selecting a team from KSS Design Group to provide detailed technical support to the review team carrying out the project assessment review of the redevelopment of Casement Park. (AQO 8621/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. A shortlist of eight companies that could provide expert advice was identified by the Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) using the RIBA database, and that list was reduced to three. Three companies were immediately ruled out as they were already directly involved in the regional stadia programme and projects, another was ruled out as it was not available during the period of the

review, and a further company did not respond to CPD's request.

Of the remaining three companies, KSS was deemed to be the most suitable and was, therefore, engaged by CPD. As part of the process to engage the independent technical expert advisers for the review team, CPD specifically sought appropriate conflict-of-interest assurances from the eligible companies to ensure that any company that had previously worked on the regional stadia programme or any of its constituent projects would be ruled not eligible to advise the review team.

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister for her full response. Is she not concerned that the design group that was selected had a direct connection to the contractors that were appointed to carry out the work at Casement?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member raised something similar when I was in front of the Committee, and he will be aware that we are dealing with a very small pool of companies. The connection with that company is with one of the partners that is developing the stadia. They are connected and involved in developing stadia across Britain and, indeed, even other parts of Ireland.

I do not think that there is a conflict of interest and neither does CPD. As the Member will be aware, I deliberately sent the PAR to another Department to look at it, and I asked for the assurance of CPD. It sought assurances and was assured by the response that it got. I do not believe that it is the direct conflict of interest that the Member perhaps perceives it to be.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Minister tell us what authority she thinks that the Sports Grounds Safety Authority has?

Ms Ní Chuilín: That is not related to the question at all. However, with the authority and respect that the Sports Grounds Safety Authority has, many people look to it for feedback and guidance. If the Member wishes to ask a relevant question, I will try to answer it.

Irish Language Bill

7. **Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on the Irish language Bill. (AQO 8623/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: As a member of the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee, the Member will be aware that my officials will brief the Committee, in its role as a super consultee, on the findings of the Bill consultation on 1 October. I will consider all comments that the Committee wishes to make regarding the content of the Bill and will publish the report of the consultation after the briefing.

I remain committed to an Acht na Gaeilge, and the consultation shows, once again, that there are huge levels of support for an Acht. Nearly 13,000 people responded to the consultation, and 95% of those support legislation for the Irish language.

I am determined to progress the Bill as far as possible, and I call on all sides of the House to show their support.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagra. Is fada muintir na Gaeilge anseo sa Tuaisceart ag fanacht le reachtaíocht chúf a thabharfadh a gcearta dóibh. Tá súil agam go mbeidh deis againn an iarraidh seo reachtaíocht

a thabhairt faoi bhráid an Tionóil agus cearta a thabhairt do phobal na Gaeilge.

The Irish language community in this region has been waiting for legislation that would give it the rights that it so richly deserves. I hope that the process that the Minister has initiated will eventually bear fruit and bring it that legislation. How does the Minister intend to proceed post-consultation?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member will be aware that many people have been waiting for an Acht na Gaeilge because it is very important for language rights. As part of the consultation process, I met extensively with people in that sector and different sectors. It is incumbent upon me that I receive cross-party support to bring this to the Executive. I have told people who are lobbying for this that my door is wide open, and it always has been. I am one of the advocates for this. Perhaps people — I am not suggesting that the Member does this — who have yet to be persuaded of the need for an Acht na Gaeilge could talk to the people whose parties are in the Executive about trying to convince them to support this. People would certainly see it as a sign that people have moved on politically and recognised that the language does not belong to one section of the community; it belongs to us all. I believe that an Irish language Act is well overdue. For the generations who are waiting for language rights, it would definitely be a sign that this place was moving in the right direction.

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Ba mhaith liom tráslú le Dominic as gach rud ar dhúirt sé ansin. Ach an cheist ba mhaith liom a chur ar an Aire is é go raibh mé ar Bhóthar Bhaile Nua na hArdá inné agus bhí taispeántas ann i gceantar aontachtach ar chúrsaí Gaeilge. Cad é na hiarrachtaí atá déanta aici le tacaíocht a fháil ón phobal eile? I agree with Mr Bradley. The Minister talked about trying to achieve support from across the community. I was in a church community centre on the Lower Newtownards Road yesterday, where there was an exhibition on the Irish language, and we welcome that. What steps is the Minister taking to try to achieve support, right across the board, for an Irish language Act?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member rightly points out that the language is cherished, supported and enjoyed by members across the community, and that goes throughout the communities, including the different Churches. There is an unhealthy assumption that, once people hear of a percentage in support of an Acht na Gaeilge, they assume that they are all from one side of the community. I can tell the Member that responses to the consultation for an Acht na Gaeilge come from right across the community. That gave me heart because, at times, the Irish language, particularly in this place, has been the subject of some very offensive comments. Right across the community and the Churches, people are saying that an Irish language Act threatens no one; the language belongs to everybody. Within that 95%, I know that there is overwhelming support from everybody in the community for this to be brought forward. When the report is published, people will see the responses to the consultation themselves.

Boxing: Funding Criteria

8. **Mr Maskey** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether the criteria for funding for local boxing clubs will include affiliation to the Irish Amateur Boxing Association. (AQO 8624/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. The recent success of boxers from the North at major competitions once again highlights the strength of the sport. I take this opportunity to congratulate Paddy Barnes, Michael Conlan, Carl Frampton and many others on their recent successes.

Moving on to the criteria for funding, I can confirm that affiliation to an internationally recognised governing body is a standard requirement for the majority of Sport NI's funding programmes. That ensures that a club's activities are independently regulated and adhere to clear and consistent standards of safety, coaching and child protection. The importance of that has been demonstrated in the criteria for the recent boxing investment programme, which stated that clubs must be affiliated to the Irish Amateur Boxing Association at the time of the award, that is upon receipt of the final letter of offer. The aim of the programme, which received lottery funding of £3.27 million, is to help boxing to address the needs of local clubs: development, sustainability and the provision of suitable facilities and boxing equipment.

3.15 pm

Mr Speaker: That is the end of the period for listed questions. We now move on to topical questions. I inform Members that questions 3, 4, 5, 7 and 10 have been withdrawn.

Team GB: Affiliation Pathway

T1. **Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the pathway that will enable a young Northern Irish athlete who aspires to represent Team GB to do that, given the sporting affiliation regime that she supports and which currently prevails in Northern Ireland. (AQT 2811/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: In the 2012 Olympics, the team was called GB and Northern Ireland. That was the official title. However, it is up to the governing bodies to put forward and recommend athletes for those competitions. The governing body of boxing in Ireland is the Irish Amateur Boxing Association. There are corresponding bodies for England, Scotland and Wales. I assume that the Member is talking about boxing. That is the pathway for putting forward athletes.

Mr Allister: I assure the Minister that I was not talking just about boxing, although boxing illustrates my point. All these young athletes are told that, under the Belfast Agreement, of which the Member is now a proponent, they have the right to express their Britishness or their Irishness, but, by virtue of this affiliation requirement to, say, the Irish Amateur Boxing Association, the only way a young local boxer can box internationally is to wrap himself in an Irish tricolour. Why does the Minister sustain that discrimination?

Ms Ní Chuilín: First, I have reminded the Member on several occasions that I completely refute his allegation that I would discriminate against any child or young person. He hides behind parliamentary privilege and will not say that outside.

He is wrong. The Good Friday Agreement, which I supported from its inception, promotes a person's right to identify as British, Irish or both. People are entitled

to do that. It is the governing body of each sport, not the Good Friday Agreement, that sets the rules. Those governing bodies are, in turn, governed by world-renowned organisations. The Member insists on providing information that is factually incorrect. I suggest that he needs to ensure that he gives the proper information to the families who come to him for support.

Commonwealth Youth Games: NI Bid

T2. **Mr B McCrea** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, while acknowledging her generosity in her press release about the athletes from the Commonwealth Youth Games and stating that it is admirable that, even though there are some political issues, she congratulated them, to state whether her Department is in any way involved in the preparation of the bid to bring the Commonwealth Youth Games to Northern Ireland and, if so, to update the House. (AQT 2812/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: First, since coming into this Department, my position has been very clear and consistent: athletes, regardless of how they describe their national identity, have my support. If they are from here, they have my support. How they describe their religious or political affiliation is, for me, academic. I believe that most people in the House are like that.

I have supported the Commonwealth Youth Games bid. I have met the council on several occasions. To be frank, the difficulty for me is — I am sure that the Member is aware of this — that it is in the gift of DETI to promote major sporting events. I understand that the ETI Minister gave his support for this event before he resigned. I know that officials are talking to one other about trying to ensure that the bid happens, and I am certainly keen to support what I believe will be a great opportunity for children and young people.

Mr B McCrea: I acknowledge the Minister's even-handedness in this, and I wanted to put that on the record. I realise that it is primarily DETI that is taking the lead on the matter.

Is she aware that there is concern from the Commonwealth Youth Council that failure to agree a bid by the Northern Ireland Executive by the end of September means that we may lose this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity? Will she write to Departments to encourage them to support games that everyone thinks are a good thing?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Absolutely. That is already in progress: we are writing to the acting First Minister and the Minister of Finance and Personnel. As well as that, we are working with officials in those Departments. I am totally uncomfortable with this. We all looked the Commonwealth Youth Council in the face and said, "We'll do our best". I can put my hand on my heart and say that I am doing my best. I will ensure that not only will I do my best, but I will go that bit further. If the bid is successful, everybody will claim the credit, but if it is not I want to ensure that I did everything that I could to get as much support, resource and attention as possible. We are not there yet. Hopefully, we will have this concluded within a week or so.

Another aspect is that it would need to be cleared under urgent procedure because, as the Member is aware, there are no Executive meetings happening. This is an

example of children and young people being penalised for something that is well beyond any of their doing.

Decade of Centenaries: Update

T6. **Mr McMullan** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on the progress of the decade of centenaries. (AQT 2816/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: In March 2012, there was an announcement that we — the Executive — would bring forward a decade of centenaries covering 1912 to 1922. Within that, we are looking at areas like the First World War, the battle of the Somme, the 1916 rising, the signing of the covenant, limited suffrage for women, the Irish Volunteers. There are many issues that we will cover. The important thing is that it is not open to interpretation and is based on historical fact.

I can only speak for DCAL, but I am working with some of my arm's-length bodies and great advocates in the Heritage Lottery Fund to bring forward a suite of activities and initiatives that will give honour and inclusivity to people who want to celebrate the different events as part of that decade of centenaries.

Mr McMullan: I thank the Minister for her answer. Can she explore the potential for exhibitions in PRONI, libraries and museums on the 1916 period?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I can. PRONI is leading, particularly on some of the documentation. It has an archive, and there are people working there who have excellent skills that are second to none across this island. In the DCAL family, we are working very closely with museums and extremely closely with libraries. Libraries are based in most communities, and it is important that, if there is a possibility of having exhibitions in libraries, we exploit it. That may engender conversation and inclusivity, particularly among young people and people who are not so young who want to hear what people have to say and look at the historical facts. Other such events have been used to create good relations, particularly in communities that have been hard-pressed.

Sport NI: Stewardship Update

Mrs McKevitt: The question that I had prepared about the Commonwealth Games has already been answered.

T8. **Mrs McKevitt** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on the stewardship of Sport NI. (AQT 2818/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for her question. The interim chief executive, his team and the auditors are still working through some of the grievances that were brought forward. The Member sits on the CAL Committee, and, as she will be aware, I brought the initial report to the Committee and gave a commitment to come back. That process is still under way. The Member will also be aware that, of the three processes that are under way in relation to Casement and everything else but certainly the grievances that arose from this, the Audit Office is dealing with this. Sport NI is still working through it. I am really keen that it is given the time, latitude and space to get through that, because some of the issues that were brought to my attention are very serious indeed.

Mrs McKeivitt: I am sure that the Minister agrees that, until the situation is resolved, a lot of our sporting bodies and volunteers who are involved in sport are the big losers in all of this. Is the Minister in a position to enlighten the House on where the board sits at the minute and what responsibilities the likes of the volunteers are losing out on?

Ms Ní Chuilín: First, I have not had any indication that anybody has been impacted in terms of support as a result of this. I have asked that question. If anything, Sport NI enjoys a lot of loyalty and support from throughout the community, so no group has been impacted at all by this internal matter for Sport NI. In a sense, that is a good thing. However, public confidence in Sport NI has been tested, but I think that people were assured by the action that I initiated, certainly in the short term. The board members who did not resign have remained, and fair play to them. Indeed, credit to the people who resigned, who gave at least eight to 10 years of their volunteering time to the development of sport and Sport NI. I genuinely thank them for that. I am looking at a process to add to the board because I believe that the board needs support. I am delighted at the overwhelming response, including from within the Civil Service, for people to volunteer in the short term until we go to a full public appointments process. With regard to the Member's concern, I have asked the governing bodies whether there has been any direct impact on delivery as a result of what is going on in Sport NI, and the answer has been no.

Community and Amateur Sports Clubs: Registration

T9. **Mr Swann** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to look into the registration of community and amateur sports clubs to see whether either she or Sport NI has any responsibility for it, given that she will be aware of his questions for written answer and, in her answers, she has stated that it is the responsibility of Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, but, when he checked the legislation, it states that Sport NI has a role in recognising the governing bodies. (AQT 2819/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I certainly will. As the Member has pointed out, he has corresponded with me on the issue. As the Member will be aware, it happens across the board that I get questions about sports delivery in a constituency. When I give the answer, I quote the Recreation Order, which deals with councils. I do not want to be passing the buck. I will endeavour to find out where my responsibility starts and stops and where someone else's starts and stops and try to get a bit of clarity around this.

Mr Swann: I thank the Minister very much for that guarantee. When she is doing that, can she especially look at homing pigeons and racing societies? Because of that definition, that is one of the organisations that falls outside the amateur sports clubs regulations in all spheres of funding, grants and all the rest of it.

Ms Ní Chuilín: In the first instance, I will try to get the definition, and then I will come back to the Member specifically about pigeons.

Mr Speaker: Short and sweet. Time is up, and, before we return to the debate —

Mr Swann: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Under Standing Order 20A(1), topical questions are allowed to be

15 minutes. If, in future, we get to a stage where that 15 minutes has not been utilised but there are still Members remaining in the Chamber, can you look to draw them either from Members standing in their place or from a rotation in some other fashion?

Mr Speaker: I think that the current procedures do not allow that, but you have raised a question that we can explore to see whether there is any flexibility. If topical questions finished early, I had intended to move straight to the debate that we have already started so that we would not lose any time, but we have almost landed on it precisely, so take your ease until we change the top Table.

3.30 pm

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

Private Members' Business

Multiple Deprivation Indicators

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly recognises that the current multiple deprivation indicators do not accurately identify the extent of poverty and deprivation in rural areas; and calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to review this urgently. — [Mr McAleer.]

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat. The Noble indices, as they are at present, work against the rural dweller in quite a lot of cases. Therefore, it is time to look at how we arrived at the present system. I believe that, instead of looking at the difference in urban and rural, we must now look at the difference between urban and urban and rural and rural and not be judged by urban against rural and vice versa. To look at how we deliver better values and systems for the rural dweller, we need part of the rural-proofing Bill to be in place now. That would enable rural dwellers to compete in business and to avail themselves of suitably skilled staff. At present, small rural businesses find it extremely hard to compete because of the lack of skilled staff, training facilities, transport and communication. They also lack the ability to offer fuel to firms that want to come in and set up. That adds to the problems of all those small rural businesses.

Employment figures show that more of the male population in rural areas travel longer distances for employment. That will entail the use of the family transport, while mothers, who may have high qualifications, tend to take employment closer to home. That is because of inadequate childcare facilities and poor access to public transport. Quite a lot of the time, the employment that they do take is for low pay — far lower than their grade of education would stipulate.

Housing poverty and fuel poverty go hand in hand. Fuel poverty is defined as a family having to spend more than 10% of its income on fuel to heat its home. Prices for fuel are higher in rural areas than in urban areas. That is compounded by the total lack of piped gas in most places in rural areas.

Housing is a sector that has not kept pace with demand. At present, the Housing Executive has a total stock of 87,219 houses, of which 72,315 are urban and 14,904 are rural. Housing associations stated that their latest stock in March this year is 35,858, of which 32,855 are urban, leaving only 3,003 that are rural. Those figures clearly show the vast difference between urban and rural. They also tell us that more and more young people are leaving the rural environment not only to get housing but to get work. The fallout of that is that quite a lot of them do not return, so we are losing more and more of our young people because of a lack of housing and employment.

On health, hospital appointments are continuing to create problems. Those are not being dealt with and are the same problems that have been there year-on-year. With little public transport in my area of the glens, it takes three buses to get to Antrim hospital. Therefore, a return journey

would mean that you are out all day until 7.00 pm and sometimes longer.

If that carries on, what does it tell us about the rural dweller? How can we compare ourselves with the urban dweller? From the age of four, children with special needs spend an average of four hours per day travelling to school. I hear other people complaining about having to travel half an hour each way or three quarters of an hour each way. These children are bussed out from the age of four until they finish their education at 18, travelling four hours per day on a bus. That is way above the average that anybody would expect "normal" — I do not like using that word — children to do. There would be more of a public outcry if we were to have our children spend that length of time on a bus. Some of these children have to travel in taxis. We have not yet figured out that problem.

On the issue of social isolation, the MARA project clearly sets out the barriers to meeting the everyday needs of the older population. The present population suffers from restrictive public transport, which leaves older people facing financial and logistical barriers. Only for the MARA project that was brought in by the Minister of Agriculture, we would still not have a clue what was going on with older people in rural areas and the problems they face. We have found out from the MARA project that a lot of these older people could have been availing themselves of grants and money from social services, but, because of their isolation, they were not able to look into this. Therefore, the MARA project has been a lifeline for that. However, MARA cannot be a report that sits on the shelf. It must now be used by all public bodies to see how they can improve the livelihood and life of anybody living in a rural area.

Transport is another big problem in the isolation of the older generation. Transport is a lifeline to communicate with people in other areas. We had local transport, which the previous Minister withdrew. So, we do not have anything there to help older people to communicate. People with special needs and disabilities are still suffering because of the lack of transport. They cannot get out and communicate either. They cannot even take part in training for the Special Olympics because the only place that they can go from my area of the glens is to the Antrim Forum, a round journey of nearly 70 miles.

I will comment on some of the things that Members said. Mr Declan McAleer was the architect of this private Member's motion, and I have to congratulate him on his hard work and the hours that he spent putting it together. He stated that poverty is widely dispersed and the present system cannot cope with it.

Dominic Bradley said that we should be looking to the examples of the Republic of Ireland and Wales. Indeed, he supported the motion. Leslie Cree supported the motion, as did Kieran McCarthy, who said that the present indices have served their purpose but must be reviewed urgently. I agree with him. Ian Milne said that the current method does not show the depth of poverty faced by rural dwellers. Dolores Kelly stated that she had to intervene on behalf of a patient who needed domiciliary care. Rural people are hesitant about coming forward to ask for help.

Roy Beggs mentioned that gas is available to rural villages. Am I correct? Did I take that up right? [*Interruption.*] Oh, it is not available.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr McMullan: Yes.

Mr Beggs: I had hoped that the Member would know that gas is not available to most villages and towns.

Mr McMullan: That is OK. I did not hear what you said at the end, and I take that as done.

To finish up here, we have the farming community and all their families involved in it. In this dispersed rural area, the farming community are the last people to come forward when they have health problems or any problems at all. That drives more and more of the farming community into having suicidal thoughts and committing suicide. That is recognised by farmers, the farmers' unions and all. We must take a real look at what goes on in the rural area. It is not the same as the urban area. We keep centralising services. In reality, when we centralise services, we are leaving the rural dweller having to travel further and further to get treatment.

I am quite saddened by today. In this debate, as with the Minister's statement earlier, we should all be supporting the farming community and the rural dweller. It is sad to see the empty seats across the way. They speak publicly about supporting the farming industry and the rural dweller, but that has certainly not been shown today. I ask everybody here to support the motion.

Question put.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 50; Noes 36.

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Attwood, Mr Beggs, Mr D Bradley, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Cree, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Gardiner, Ms Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Mr B McCrea, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKevitt, Mr McKinney, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr Milne, Mr Murphy, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr Ó Muilleoir, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mrs Overend, Mr Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan, Mr Swann.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr McAleer and Mr McMullan.

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mrs Cameron, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Mr McCallister, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr McQuillan and Mr G Robinson.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises that the current multiple deprivation indicators do not accurately identify the extent of poverty and deprivation in rural areas; and calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to review this urgently.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): I ask Members to take their ease while we change the top Table.

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

Childcare

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): 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 in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

Mr McGlone: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the 2014 Employers For Childcare survey that indicated that 46% of parents in Northern Ireland reduced their working hours or left work due to a lack of affordable childcare; recognises that greater childcare provision would be a key catalyst in bolstering the economy, retaining a skilled workforce and improving the lives of working families; further notes that the Childcare Bill announced in the Chancellor of the Exchequer's July Budget will increase free preschool childcare entitlement for three- and four-year-olds to 30 hours a week in England; and calls for the establishment of an equal 30 hours of free childcare locally as part of a move towards the establishment of a universal childcare model.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle, as an deis an rún seo a chur os comhair an Tionóil inniu. Thanks very much, Mr Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to bring the motion to the House along with my SDLP colleagues.

The issue of childcare has been at the fore of our thinking for many months, and, as we will hear today, the situation is becoming worse for parents who want to work and contribute to our economy but simply cannot afford to return to work promptly and fully because of the rising cost of childcare. The SDLP has prepared a research policy paper on childcare. I will relay it to the House later today as we explore many of the statistics we uncovered while talking to stakeholders, parents, providers and academics about childcare, its impact and the current situation in the North.

Let us look at the biggest barrier for parents, especially mothers, who wish to return to work when their child reaches the age of three or four: cost. The cost of childcare for parents who want to return to work is a considerable burden, and I, like many others in the Chamber, have received representations from many constituents. I am sure that many in the Chamber have personal experiences of that. In Northern Ireland, the average full-time — 50 hours — private childcare place costs £162 a week; the average child-minding place costs £157 a week; and a day nursery place averages at £155 a week for a child who is younger than two years of age and £154 for a child over two. Action needs to be taken to help working families, given that the average wage in Northern Ireland is not commensurate with the rising costs of childcare. In fact, the 2014 childcare cost survey report found that average full-time formal childcare costs equate to 44% of the average salary. Over half — 55% — of respondents to that survey stated that childcare costs were over half of their or their partner's take-home pay. It also suggests that one fifth of parents use financial support to meet costs. That includes bank loans and credit cards, and 4% even use payday loans.

Those facts become more relevant when we consider the economic performance of Northern Ireland within the

UK. PwC reported that, in 2015, economic growth would remain the lowest of all the 12 regions. In the context of an increase in population, overall employment levels in Northern Ireland have decreased; part-time working, the majority of which is carried out by female workers, has increased; and female employment rates/economic activity levels are significantly lower than in England. The list keeps going. The economic inactivity rate for those aged 16 to 64 in the North stands at 26.8%.

4.00 pm

The evidence suggests that income in Northern Ireland does not match current childcare costs. Families here face huge difficulties, first, sourcing appropriate preschool childcare and, secondly, paying for it whilst balancing the costs of daily life. It is difficult to incentivise parents to return to work when the financial pressures of childcare might push them into in-work poverty. Research carried out by OFMDFM further emphasises that point. A 2014 research survey found that more than half of our parents saw costs as the main barrier to using childcare. Many parents stated that the cost of childcare prevented them either from using registered childcare services at all or from using those services as much or as often as they would want.

Of course, there are wider economic and social impacts at play when considering childcare. Let us look at what Sir Christopher Pissarides, the Nobel laureate economist at the London School of Economics, has said. Through the greater provision of good childcare, there is a direct impact on productivity and growth in the economy. In his exposition of childcare and cost, he found that the one job of child caring sustains two other jobs in the economy. Pissarides observes that, when working parents have children in countries with minimal daytime childcare provision, one partner frequently stops working because the cost of childcare is so high. His estimate is that the average cost is the equivalent of working 40 hours — too high a cost for working families. The mere act of having a baby reduces household income by turning a two-earner home into a one-earner home, and no childcare worker is employed because of the cost disincentive. In providing subsidised childcare, there is an economic multiplier effect: both parents continue working, and a third worker, in childcare, is added to the labour force. All of them pay taxes. Without childcare, two workers are turned into one, and both labour productivity and the tax base shrink by the same.

There are, of course, wider societal benefits, as noted by the European Commission:

“In recent decades, childcare services have become a matter of serious public concern. Affordable and good-quality childcare services may improve the reconciliation of work and family life and thus foster labour market participation and gender equality.”

When you speak, especially to young mothers, about the overall advancement of females in the workplace, the glass ceiling, as it is referred to, and the attempts to rectify it are talked about on numerous occasions. That glass ceiling, which inhibits the advancement of capable young mums in the workforce is fast becoming the “childcare ceiling”.

There is a further consideration when debating childcare, and that is the effect that it has on our workforce. As well as inhibiting the advancement of young mums, because

they have to remove themselves from the labour market, we are losing their skills. Many businesses in the North are concerned that they will not be able to recruit enough highly skilled workers to succeed in the future, according to the 2015 CBI/Pearson education and skills survey. Can we really afford to lose that mostly female and skilled workforce? I contend that we cannot. If parents here cannot return to full-time work or, indeed, cannot be incentivised to remove themselves from benefits to go into full-time work, because of the rising costs of childcare as outlined, the labour market in Northern Ireland will pay the price.

In Northern Ireland, funded preschool childcare is available in nursery schools, primary schools with nursery classes, some voluntary and private playgroup settings and day nurseries through the preschool education expansion programme. The programme is targeted at all children in the year immediately before they enter P1. Places are available for two and a half hours a day, five days a week, for at least 38 weeks a year. In England currently, each child is entitled to receive a maximum of 15 hours a week over no fewer than 38 weeks a year, up to a maximum of 570 hours a year.

The Conservative Government in England have committed to passing legislation through the Childcare Bill to increase the entitlement to free preschool childcare for three-year-olds and four-year-olds to 30 hours a week. For this reason, the pre-existing inadequacies in childcare in Northern Ireland will be further highlighted by a changing UK context — indeed, it has exacerbated the disparities between the two — while the Northern Ireland Executive continue to consult on a childcare strategy. If no action is taken, a greater inequality will begin to emerge, as parents and employees in Northern Ireland face a reduction in in-work tax credits, which last year supported 89,000 working parents. Barnardo's estimate that the average single parent working full-time on the minimum wage will face an annual loss of £1,200 when the Chancellor's changes are introduced in 2016, thereby placing further and increasing pressures on working families.

Given the legislative change by the Conservative Government as outlined above, we ask that we are treated equally here so that an inequality does not arise whereby access to childcare in work for families in England is much easier than access to childcare in work for families here. That is an integral part of it. We have spent a huge amount of time trying to reconcile the issues around welfare reform but we need to step it up a pace and change it to welfare and work reform, particularly for those working families who are fast becoming the working poor.

Mr Lyttle: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGlone: I do not have enough time. The funded childcare allowance here should be increased to 30 hours a week on a par with what will become available in England. This change can then be used as a platform to work towards a universal childcare model and the effective implementation of a childcare strategy for Northern Ireland.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member must bring his remarks to a close.

Mr McGlone: Essentially, we are asking for an equal footing to help stimulate our economy. We have seen the introduction of 30 hours —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member's time is up.

Mr McGlone: OK. Thank you.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I do not want to nitpick the motion because I support the sentiments behind it. However, by focusing primarily on working families and on three-year-olds and four-year-olds, it does not go far enough. Childcare and the development of children and young people should not be a service for the labour market and the workforce. It should be because it is the right thing to do to provide care for children and aid in their development.

It should be the aim of all of us to develop an integrated approach to providing positive experiences and the promotion of opportunities that will enhance the quality of early care and education services to improve outcomes for all our children, not just three-year-olds and four-year-olds, allowing each to fulfil their potential and enhance their life chances.

It is important that early care and education initiatives are designed with the best interests of the child in mind. Provision should focus on the developmental needs of the child and, as such, should not simply be seen as a babysitting service to allow participation in the labour force. All children should be able to access early care and education services that are appropriate to their age and stage of development, which would help them to develop improved cognitive, social and emotional skills.

As such, we are proposing a model that is publicly subsidised, high quality and universal. In fact, there is growing scientific, neurological and economic knowledge that validates our view that investment in the early years of a child's life leads to greater economic, social and emotional benefits later on, at an individual as well as a societal level, as it can counter the effects of disadvantage and deprivation.

Unfortunately, there is currently a lack of cohesion in policy for and provision of early care and education services, with a range of Departments being responsible for different aspects of policy and provision. This manifests itself in the form of different registration and inspection processes, different curriculum and quality standards, different staff:child ratios and different funding levels. As long as we have that lack of cohesion, we are always going to have a difficulty with the provision of excellent childcare and education.

If the Stormont House Agreement is ever implemented, there are opportunities there with the reduction in the number of Departments, with many, if not most, of OFMDFM's functions relating to children and young people transferring to the Department of Education. That situation, along with the recent establishment of the Education Authority, affords an ideal opportunity to review the range of early childhood care and education services, with a view to getting a consolidated policy framework.

A new early years model is achievable if childcare is treated as a public service and receives investment accordingly. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mrs Overend: I welcome the opportunity to participate in this debate, as childcare is an important issue to many parents and should be an important issue to the Assembly. Having three children myself, I know only too well the difficulties, some of which are outlined in an article in today's 'Belfast Telegraph' by a constituent from Mid Ulster who pays £2,640 per month for childcare for her five children.

Questions and problems that parents face when looking for childcare include: can I find childcare close to my home or on my way to work; is childcare close to the child's school; can my children get transport to the childminder after school; is childcare available for all my kids in the one facility; and do the working hours of my childminder coincide with mine? Those are questions that we ask after the usual worries about the quality of childcare and its suitability for my child's needs, especially if they have additional care needs etc.

It is clear from the Northern Ireland childcare cost survey 2014, carried out by the Employers for Childcare Charitable Group, that families requiring childcare face a major financial headache. Mr McGlone referred to the costs of various types of childcare, which I will not regurgitate. Suffice it to say that in the 2014 childcare cost survey, 48% of parents stated that childcare consumed around half of their partner's or their own pay, and 27% of respondents said that their childcare bill exceeded their mortgage or rent payments.

Many of us depend on grandparents to help with childcare, usually because of unusual working hours or the ad hoc nature of care needed. Only 45% of parents in the survey used only formal childcare. We can conclude that the impact of childcare costs on families across Northern Ireland is significant, impacting on living standards and career progression. That sentence is key to this debate: it is impacting on living standards and career progression.

Affordable and accessible childcare is a key commitment of the Programme for Government. However, the sad reality is that the huge cost of childcare means that many parents who want to work simply cannot afford to. Those, surely, are the type of people whom we want and need in Northern Ireland's workforce.

Let me tell you, it is not easy leaving your children behind to go into the workplace, only to be told, in an indirect way, of course, "Well, you brought the children into the world, so you should pay for them and look after them yourself". By not prioritising childcare, that is exactly what the Government are telling them to do.

Parents, be it the mother or father, have a contribution to make to society and to the economy. The skills that working parents have are needed to bolster the economy and must be retained in the workforce. Therefore, I support measures to keep working parents in the workforce, like Mrs McKeown featured in the 'Belfast Telegraph' today. It just does not make good sense that someone working and contributing to society and to the economy should be forced onto benefits because of the high costs of childcare.

Just last week, following a question to OFMDFM, I found it incredible that, from a budget of £12 million set aside for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for childcare, just £3.4 million has been spent since 2011.

When I questioned the Department last week, the junior Minister attempted to deflect the blame towards the Westminster Government, yet was unable to give any reason for such a significant underspend. That is yet another example of budget mismanagement by a dysfunctional Department at the head of a failing Executive, and it is letting down families across Northern Ireland. It is one thing to come up with great ideas and strategies but it is quite another to actually deliver on them.

The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has a reputation for promising much but failing to deliver.

4.15 pm

In conclusion, in recognising the Childcare Bill that was announced in the July Budget, I join calls for the establishment of a universal childcare model. The advantage of devolved government is the ability to prioritise certain issues. I share the proposer of the motion's disappointment at failing to deliver on putting childcare to the fore in their priorities.

Mr Lyttle: I welcome the opportunity to debate childcare at the Assembly. It is regrettable that not all parties appear to be represented here today. This is precisely the type of issue that the Assembly should be dealing with on behalf of the people of Northern Ireland, and I thank the proposers of the motion for bringing it forward. I think that I overheard someone saying that I will attempt to pick holes in it, so I will flip that on its head and try to be as positive as I can, because this is an important issue and some important points have been put forward.

I welcome the opportunity to discuss the Employers For Childcare cost of childcare survey 2014, not least because I sponsored its launch at the Assembly. As people have said, it is an extremely important piece of work. It gives evidence that 51% of parents in Northern Ireland reduced their working hours or left work due to a lack of affordable childcare, and it goes into a raft of other startling details on the impact of childcare on families in Northern Ireland. Forty-four per cent of earnings are allocated to childcare. After housing costs, the childcare bill is the largest outgoing for families. Fifty-eight per cent of parents struggle with childcare costs throughout the year. Twenty-seven per cent of respondents said that their childcare bill exceeded their rent or mortgage payments and, indeed, 49% of parents were unsure if they were claiming all the family benefits and entitlements that are available to help them with those extreme childcare costs. I will be sponsoring the launch of the Employers For Childcare cost of childcare survey 2015 on 9 February, and I have no doubt that those issues will be as stark as ever.

It brings into stark contrast, therefore, the approximately £8 million underspend of a £12 million childcare budget for 2011-15 in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. That is a startling fact given the scale of the challenge for families in our community.

Mr McCarthy: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. Given the figures that you have just spoken about, has the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister given any reason why that deficit remains?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Member for his intervention. The explanations so far have been vague at best. We have to recognise that OFMDFM, under the DUP and Sinn Féin, has brought forward Bright Start, which has key actions in relation to childcare. Indeed, there is a childcare strategy out for consultation, but it is long overdue. Other parties that held the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister previously need to take responsibility and work collectively with parties in the Assembly to address the long overdue nature of that improved provision, and today's motion is hopefully a start in doing so.

Any response to the childcare challenge faced by families in Northern Ireland has to recognise the need for a comprehensive strategy based on improving accessibility, affordability, quality for parents and for childhood development. We also need a high-profile public awareness campaign to promote the take-up of existing financial assistance that is available to families and employers, such as the childcare voucher scheme, and to explain how the proposed childcare subsidy announced in the 2014-15 UK Budget might be implemented in Northern Ireland.

Approximately 11,000 parents in Northern Ireland and 1,400 local employers benefit from the childcare voucher scheme, making savings of around £13 million per year through tax and National Insurance savings on that salary sacrifice scheme. Employers — large, private companies and public-sector organisations — are saving around £4 million per year in total, and parents are delivering collective savings of around £9 million per year. However, that leaves a huge number of families and employers who are not availing themselves of that scheme. That could be anywhere in the region of 200,000 families. They, employers and the Northern Ireland economy are all missing out on millions of pounds worth of savings.

The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has been presented with proposals for public awareness campaigns on a regular basis. Indeed, Employers for Childcare stepped in when that Department failed to raise awareness of that type of assistance and had to conduct its own awareness campaign. I think that is an indictment on that Department, given the scale of savings that could be available from that provision for extremely hard-pushed families.

I agree with the motion that improved childcare provision would be good for the economy, access to skills development and working families. The motion also proposes an increase in the free childcare provision that is available here to a level that is equal to or in line with the proposals for 30 hours a week in England. We are not necessarily comparing apples with apples, and I think that the proposer of the motion alluded to that. Some key questions remain to be asked on that, particularly about whether we wish to follow the English model of flexible childcare, where it can be taken up in a preschool-based setting or through a strictly childcare-based approach, or whether we want to maintain our model of —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

Mr Lyttle: — set times each day in nursery classrooms, as has been suggested.

Those are issues that we want to see worked out. I encourage people to get involved with the childcare consultation to ensure that we drastically improve provision in that vital area for families in Northern Ireland.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate. It is important, and I think that there are few in society who would not advocate an increase in childcare provision.

The motion calls for what the Member who spoke previously referred to as the:

“equal 30 hours of free childcare locally as part of ... the establishment of a universal childcare model.”

Again, I think there are very few in society who would not advocate that kind of approach. It is important to reflect on the fact that it needs to be much more than that and much more than an approach simply to childcare provision. In my view, child development must be the concept and, indeed, child poverty must be the starting point. It seems to me and to many that a cheap, safe or convenient, almost child-parking, facility might suffice to free up parents to go to work but would do very little to meet the developmental needs of the child. At times, those two policy directions, if you like, might conflict.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for giving way. As someone who has had to work all her married life, I find your comment about “child parking” most offensive. I find it offensive as a working mother, and I am sure that other working mothers in the Chamber and, indeed, parents would also find it offensive. I ask you to reflect on that remark and to withdraw it.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has an extra minute.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Member for her intervention. Had the Member reflected properly on the comments initially, she would have realised that I was outlining that that is not what our model should become. I am very clear. Whilst we look at a move to increase childcare provision, which is right and proper, we cannot do so in the absence of addressing the developmental needs of the child. Whilst it is right and proper to look at increasing provision that will free up our people in society, male and female, to go back to work, we cannot do that in the absence of dealing with the challenges that exist in society through the developmental needs of the child. Particularly at a time when public funds are limited, in my view, the developmental needs of the child need to carry much more weight and be of a higher priority.

Poverty must be the starting point. The DSD figures show the stark reality of a growing population of children living in poverty.

We also need to make available robust data on affordability. We need statistically reliable survey data, with proper sampling, to show robust analysis for smaller vulnerable groups. In essence, what childcare are they obtaining, what is it costing and how does it affect the remaining disposable income? Any strategy claiming to be affordable but lacking monitoring data for groups in need does not make sense. We need that longer-term approach to be taken to plan for population increases and shifts and to respond to increased needs in a coordinated and strategic way, not piecemeal. How childcare is made accessible and affordable to those on minimum or low wage is critical, and any action on that should also be proofed to make sure that it does not disincentivise women from returning to work after having children.

I want to reflect on the Department of Health for a minute. When we look at the whole area of childcare and early child development, we need to look at having a better interface and, in fact, a formal duty of cooperation between the two Departments. In 2012-13, family and childcare expenditure was £196 million; in 2013-14, it was £200 million. The World Health Organization has told us that early intervention must be in and around 6% of the overall

budget. My understanding is that it is currently in and around 3%.

In conclusion, I want to reflect on a number of comments that may validate the child development approach. The Early Intervention Strategic Partnership that I am involved in in my constituency is very clear. It is not only about children being in accessible and affordable childcare. We must see that as part of the nurturing and development of children, and we must have quality assurance of the kind of childcare that they receive as a continuum leading into preschool. If we look at an early intervention model, it is critical that we look at the nought-to-three age group — even before children hit preschool. There is a strong theoretical argument for stimulating and engaging the care of babies in particular to increase their cognitive and emotional skills for life. Therefore, the quality of childcare matters. I support the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): This is the first debate in which the Assembly will hear from Ms Claire Hanna, so I remind the House of the convention that a maiden speech should be made without interruption.

Ms Hanna: Childcare and its impact on social and economic well-being, gender equality and childhood development is exactly the sort of thing that the Assembly should be discussing, and I will come back to that in a moment. This is my maiden speech, and, last week, I thought that I might not be making it. However, as a member of the SDLP for 15 years and a mum of two young children, I thought that the opportunity to speak for five minutes uninterrupted was something that I could not pass up.

In making my speech, I am helped by the admirable tradition that you refer to your predecessor and to your constituency. As well as paying tribute to Alasdair McDonnell, I thank him for the opportunity that I have had to contribute to Assembly politics at a challenging time and to the renewal of the SDLP. I am very proud of the SDLP's history, its origin in the civil rights movement and its commitment to non-violence, good governance and the rule of law. Respectful as I am of our past, I know that we need to talk a bit more about our future. We are a party comfortable in Irishness and confident in inclusive civic social democracy and the absolute rights of others to their Britishness. We are committed to making this place work and to getting rid of the real and artificial divisions, while making our case for a peaceful and agreed change in constitutional status. I was 17 when the Good Friday Agreement was signed, and I still remember the hope, the possibility and the generosity around that time. That creative possibility is not something that I feel in this Building these days, and I hope that that can be changed.

4.30 pm

Alasdair McDonnell and other SDLP representatives have laid out clearly how the South Belfast constituency is an exemplar of how Northern Ireland can and, I hope, will be. It is well integrated, ethnically diverse, vibrant, respectful of tradition, forward-thinking and, mostly, doing OK economically. I feel very fortunate to have grown up in and to live still in South Belfast, and protecting those values will be my focus in my time in the Assembly.

More broadly, the focus of the SDLP will be on protecting those most exposed to a stagnant economy. It will be on supporting excellent public services and rewarding

enterprise and work. Those are the fundamental tenets of social democracy. That is why the proposals outlined in our strategy "A Better Deal for Working Parents" are inextricably linked to reform of work. That reform is about more work, better calibre work, better working conditions and better pay. That is why we as a party led the campaign for a living wage and why we support measures such as enhanced childcare provision, which will increase equality of opportunity and social cohesion as well.

My colleague outlined the transformative effect that universal childcare would have on those trying to balance their work and home life, the impact that it would have on educational outcomes and equality in the workplace and the net economic benefit of having more parents in the labour market. As a mum of two children under four, I understand acutely the challenges people face in finding quality, convenient childcare. Two hundred pounds per week per child is not unusual, and many parents get to Wednesday or Thursday in the working week before they have paid their childcare bill. For many people working is not economically viable, although it maintains their skills and their foothold in the jobs market.

As well as the investment that we have outlined, families need choice and flexibility. Every family is different, and people will use a mix of private care, voluntary family support and after-school care. Traditionally, many stayed at home to raise their family, as many still do — that should be celebrated and supported as well — but most people, however, accept that childcare is a privilege and a duty for mums and dads and that working parents can absolutely still develop warm and secure relationships with their children. Whether the mother works outside the home can have a major impact on the world view of children, particularly on the aspirations of young girls and their knowledge of the options available to them.

Many parents will want to work part time and flexibly, and more must be done to encourage employers to facilitate that and to allow the childcare system to pick that up. Fulfilling and stimulating work for parents is about much more than financial remuneration, and, similarly, while the focused and structured learning through play provided in childcare is vital for development and has a lifetime impact, childcare is about supporting the parents as well. We know, too, that the patience, understanding and love that a child gets at home are the strongest guarantee that he or she will flourish.

Mr Deputy Speaker, if we are to use these institutions to do anything more than process the peace, we have to take the opportunity to strengthen —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I invite the Member to draw her remarks to a close.

Ms Hanna: — our economy and empower the young families who are its future. Childcare is a sound financial investment, and, if we fund it, we will see benefits for years to come.

Mr McCallister: In this Building, a week is a long time in politics, never mind a few months. It seems strange that, after all the warnings about George Osborne's Budget, it is now held up almost as an example. Our difficulty, of course, is that this is set against the backdrop of all the other issues that our Executive have to face. There is no decision yet on welfare and no decision — not even any real debate — about things like tuition fees, water

charges or prescriptions, and yet we are looking at asking for more money or increasing our share of the Barnett consequential. If we got that money, what would we use it for? Would we make these decisions, or would we continue to pay penalties on welfare? These are all things that we have to face.

So far in this debate we have largely talked about all the benefits this policy might bring, without any sense of realism about where we are and what we face, the difficult decisions on welfare that we have not wanted to face up to or to take.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCallister: Certainly.

Mrs D Kelly: Mrs Overend made the point that over £8 million of the childcare moneys available to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister remain unspent, so it is not a case of the money not being there.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr McCallister: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am grateful to Mrs Kelly for that point. Looking at that and the social investment fund, we can see that our Executive are not exactly great at spending or being in control of what they have.

I remind colleagues that, in Westminster terms, the Institute for Fiscal Studies looked at this policy. It stated:

“Amongst the small number of women whose youngest child went to preschool for the first time as a result of this policy, around one quarter moved into work. For the remaining families, the policy effectively gave parents a discount on preschool education they would have paid for anyway. Offering free preschool places to all three-year-olds is thus an expensive way to move a small number of women into work.”

Even when the House of Lords Committee looked at the issue, it found that reprioritising spending on early intervention and childcare to focus on disadvantaged children had a bigger impact on moving parents back into the workplace. That comes back to some of the points that Miss McLaughlin made about early intervention, and she quoted the figure of 6% of spend. That is exactly the point that I made in the welfare debate: we ignore all of the early intervention best practice from around the world. That is why I was so critical of some of the mitigation measures: early intervention is what we need to be doing. Right across government, whether in health or education, early intervention is where we can make a difference.

We can tailor the policies to intervene early. Miss McLaughlin mentioned nought-to-three years, but many studies say that you might start intervening and helping women and families as early as 20 weeks of pregnancy. That way, you are working with families and identifying those who need the support. That is what we should be looking at. At a time when money is tight and we are not facing up to the difficult decisions, we need to look at that. When you set it in the context of the challenges that we face, the families who suffer most from the scourge of poverty and paramilitarism are from many of our working-class communities. To tackle educational underachievement in Protestant and Catholic working-

class communities, we need to be intervening early across the board and looking at tailoring this policy.

I support the broad principles of the policy. As pointed out, and I know this from having three young children under the age of five, the cost of childcare is pretty enormous. At the end of the month, it is the biggest bill that we face. How do we tailor this so that it gets to the families whom it will impact on the most, namely, the more vulnerable, the lower paid and those who need support in developing as best they can? That is vital as we look at what the policy should do and at where we spend the money of the Executive.

Mr Rogers: I thank all those who contributed to the debate. The bottom line is that childcare costs £600 per child per month. Others mentioned the 2014 childcare costs survey, in which over half of the respondents stated that childcare costs took up over half of their partner's take-home pay. That is difficult to manage. If you bring the economy in along with that, you see that, in UK terms, our economy is underperforming. PwC reported that economic growth would remain the lowest of the 12 UK regions in 2015. In that context, overall employment levels in Northern Ireland have decreased. Part-time working, the majority of which is carried out by female workers, has increased, and female employment rates and economic activity levels are significantly lower than in England.

OFMDFM research from 2014 found that more than half of parents saw cost as the main barrier to using childcare services. Many parents stated that the cost of childcare prevents them either from using registered childcare services at all or from using them as much and as often as they would prefer. The SDLP realises the impact that the rising costs of childcare are having on families here, and not just on mothers. We have stay-at-home fathers as well. It is having an impact on mothers and fathers who wish to return to the workplace. They need to be supported so that, if they wish, they can return to work without fear of crippling childcare costs.

There has been quite a bit of talk today about the advantages to the child of early intervention. In 2012, an analysis on maternal employment rates and their correlation with child poverty and found out that those OECD countries with the highest maternal employment rates tend to have the lowest rates of child poverty. A greater investment in childcare in Northern Ireland should not be viewed as a primary benefit to parents in monetary costs only. High maternal employment rates and affordable, high-quality childcare not only helps families financially but helps with the development of the child. Maeve McLaughlin focused very much on the development of the child.

As other Members said, not every parent will choose childcare. One or other parent may decide to stay at home and rear their children, but for many that is not an option. It is of necessity that many have to go out to work. A number of studies, some of which included control groups, indicated that childcare provision, especially when targeted towards groups that might otherwise be characterised by various social problems, has the potential to produce favourable social and educational outcomes, especially over the long term.

Mr McGlone: Will the Member give way?

Mr Rogers: Yes, I will.

Mr McGlone: On that very point, I know that quite a bit of research has been done in the United States and Canada to show that childcare is longer term in the development of the child when it comes to reducing problematic issues in the education system and more widely in society. Childcare has been proved to be a societal investment, with good returns further down the line.

Mr Rogers: Thanks for that intervention. If we can give our children the right start, they can reach their potential and make a positive contribution to society. Not alone can we deliver social change but economic change through better childcare provision.

Other Members talked about the Northern Ireland/England divide and explained the differences between the Northern Ireland and the English systems. The Conservative Government in England have committed to passing legislation to increase entitlement to preschool childcare for three- and four-year-olds to 30 hours a week. This change is planned for England only and will not replace the current preschool education expansion programme here in Northern Ireland. For this reason, pre-existing inadequacies in childcare here will be further highlighted by a changing UK context whilst the Northern Ireland Executive continue to consult on a childcare strategy. The Secretary of State, Theresa Villiers, said in another context recently that you will not get anything better here than you have in England. We just want the same with childcare provision.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he acknowledge that childcare is a devolved provision in Northern Ireland and that to introduce additional provision, notwithstanding underspends that have rightly been referred to already, there may be a need to generate additional revenue to meet that increase in provision, given that it is not a direct transfer?

Mr Rogers: There are a couple of things on that. As I think I said earlier, childcare and provision for our young people are fundamental to the building of our economy. It is something that can be looked into under the Barnett consequentials anyhow.

4.45 pm

We propose that, given legislative changes by the Conservative Government as outlined above, we ask that we are treated equally on this so that inequality does not arise with access to childcare and work for families in England. It is much the same as what we want here.

Mr McCallister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Rogers: I will give way once more.

Mr McCallister: I will be very quick. I am grateful to the Member. I absolutely agree that we should get it if England gets it, but should the same not apply to welfare?

Mr Rogers: You are speaking from the heart here, Mr McCallister, as a parent of young children and so on, but this is fundamental to the development of our children and our economy, so I will not take that any further.

We talk about contributions from people today. Mr Sheehan felt that our motion did not go far enough, but he did not want to nitpick. Perhaps if an amendment had been tabled, we would have looked quite favourably at it in how it could be developed even further to make it a more substantial debate.

He talked about how it should not be a service for a labour market. It is about improvements for all. It is not a babysitting service. Mr Sheehan also talked about the lack of cohesion. That is quite a familiar word at the minute, with the lack of cohesion of the Assembly. If we could get the Assembly working together — and other people have referred to the lack of representation from the Bench opposite in developing this very important area of childcare for our children, for this generation and for future generations.

Mrs Overend spoke passionately as a mother of three on how you balance work and childcare. She reminded us of the Programme for Government and affordable childcare for all. I suppose you could sum up OFMDFM as “Could do much better”. Chris Lyttle talked about 51% of parents reducing their work because of lack of childcare. He also mentioned OFMDFM. It needs to do a lot better.

I mentioned Maeve McLaughlin earlier. She talked about the whole area of developing needs and that we also need to get that long-term approach. That came across from a lot of people today — the cohesion or cooperation between Departments. Those of us in the Education Committee know about the lack of cohesion, particularly between health and education and that early intervention.

My colleague Claire gave her maiden speech, and I congratulate her for it. It was a passionate performance by a young mother of two. All I could think of was that Carmel Hanna had a good strategy for rearing her children. The product is here today. Claire talked about the link between childcare and work. The reform of work is central to that. She mentioned — and it is very important — the balance between home and work. More must be done to allow mums to work part time.

We have another parent to my left with a young family. John McCallister said that this must be the backdrop to many other decisions that the Assembly needs to take. There needs to be a dose of realism, certainly around the Assembly. It does not seem to have got home, because we do not have a great turnout here today. The emphasis is again on early intervention and lack of cohesion. We want cohesion all the way here.

As for my party colleague, I congratulate Patsy for organising his conference.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

Mr Rogers: The one thing that struck me recently was when I heard a young mother who pays over £30,000 a year in childcare. The introduction of 30 hours of subsidised childcare would provide an appropriate platform on which to build the Executive's childcare strategy and move towards universal childcare in Northern Ireland as a more permanent step to supporting working families here.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member's time is up.

Mr Rogers: Did you not give me an extra minute?

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the 2014 Employers for Childcare survey that indicated that 46% of parents in Northern Ireland reduced their working hours or left work due to a lack of affordable childcare; recognises that greater childcare provision would be a key

catalyst in bolstering the economy, retaining a skilled workforce and improving the lives of working families; further notes that the Childcare Bill announced in the Chancellor of the Exchequer's July Budget will increase free preschool childcare entitlement for three- and four-year-olds to 30 hours a week in England; and calls for the establishment of an equal 30 hours of free childcare locally as part of a move towards the establishment of a universal childcare model.

Adjourned at 4.50 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 15 September 2015

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

First Minister: Functions of Office

Mr Speaker: Before we commence today's business, I would like to clarify that, further to the ministerial resignations that I announced yesterday, I have received notification from the First Minister that, pursuant to section 16A(11) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, he has designated Arlene Foster, Minister of Finance and Personnel, to exercise the functions of the First Minister, effective from 10 September 2015. Mr Allister raised an issue in respect of that yesterday. I am sorry; it just was not obvious to me that that was the point you were making. I think it is important to get that on the record, so thank you for drawing attention to that matter.

Ministerial Statement

Higher Education Big Conversation

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): I wish to inform the Assembly that I am today launching the first stage of the Higher Education Big Conversation. The Big Conversation is an innovative and experimental approach to engaging with people about an incredibly important issue in Northern Ireland, namely the sustainability and the future of our higher education system. It will run from today until 23 October. The process is going to be iterative, exploring a range of weekly themes across two main stages, and building up to address some of the most critical issues now facing our higher education system.

The first stage, which will run from 15 September to 2 October, is designed to inform or remind people about why higher education is so important and how it is delivered and funded. It will also explore the challenges that our higher education system is facing and draw on the ways in which higher education is delivered and funded in other parts of the world. The second stage, to run from 5 October to 23 October, will invite people to have their say about the future of our higher education system.

Provision of higher education provides economic and societal benefits. As we continue to grow our knowledge economy, all our skills forecasts indicate a clear and growing demand for higher-level skills, not only at degree level and above, offered, in the main, through our universities and university colleges, but through our new system of apprenticeships, with a focus on higher-level provision, plus sub-degree levels, in which our further education colleges specialise.

The demand for higher-level skills will not only come from growing indigenous companies but from new investors. Northern Ireland is already the leading UK region for attracting inward investment outside of London and, time and again, companies cite our highly skilled workforce and the strength of our higher education system as integral in their decisions to invest in this region.

Our higher education system and the highly skilled workforce that it supports is now therefore one of the most crucial components of our investment narrative, and its role will become even more important under a potentially lower rate of corporation tax in the future. Indeed, the forecasts are clear that even current levels of supply will not be enough. We need to expand our skills base, not merely protect what we have.

Beyond the provision of skills, our universities and colleges make significant contributions to our economy

as businesses in their own right. Each year, they support thousands of jobs and generate billions of pounds of spending in our economy, not only through their own activities but through multiplier effects, which stimulate other businesses and industries. Their research and innovation attracts investment from all over the world, they help businesses innovate and grow through their commercial interactions and knowledge-exchange activities, and they generate hundreds of successful spin-out companies, each with their own unique contributions to make.

Our higher education system does more than fuel our economy. Our universities and colleges are open to everyone with the ability and will to learn, whatever their background and circumstances.

Skills and qualifications are one of the surest ways for people to improve their life opportunities and employment prospects. Almost half of our young people are now entering higher education and a higher proportion of them are coming from disadvantaged backgrounds than in any other part of the UK. This is testament to the inclusivity of our higher education system and the ability of our people.

Higher education is one of our most important enablers of social mobility, social cohesion and social change. Unfortunately, the financial sustainability of our higher education system has come under serious pressure over the last number of years, putting all these benefits at risk.

In Northern Ireland, higher education is funded through a wide variety of sources, public and private. Public investment comes, in the main, through grants from my Department, which currently account for nearly 40% of our higher education institutions' incomes, but our universities can also attract funding from a wide range of other public sources, for example from Research Councils UK.

Private investment can also come from a variety of sources, including industry partners. The largest source of private investment comes from students themselves in the form of their tuition fees, which account for about 30% of our higher education institutions' incomes. The majority of students pay their tuition fees through student loans, which are financed and heavily subsidised by the wider taxpayer, so the dynamic between public and private funding is far from clear cut.

In 2011, the Executive decided to freeze tuition fees for local students studying in Northern Ireland, subject only to inflationary uplifts, and that commitment is written into our Programme for Government. While tuition fees have remained frozen, the level of public funding that is made available for higher education through my Department has decreased, year on year. The rate of this disinvestment has intensified significantly this year.

In the current financial year, my Department's baseline budget has been reduced by some 8.4%. My budget is almost exclusively used to enhance our skills base and to help people into employment. About one half of it is used to fund higher education. All other options for savings were explored before, regrettably, I had to turn to higher education. There has been an almost unavoidable impact on our universities and colleges.

This academic year, our universities and university colleges will be taking cuts of over £16 million and our further education colleges about £12 million, with an

obvious impact on their higher education provision. As a consequence, we are witnessing a very real impact on student places and staff posts. Queen's and Ulster University, our two largest universities, are taking over 500 fewer local students this year, rising to nearly 2,000 over the next few years.

More students will now likely go to study in Great Britain. Northern Ireland is already the only net exporter of students in the UK, with almost a third of our young people choosing to go to England, Scotland or Wales every year, and far fewer coming the other way. When those students leave, they take with them a whole host of socio-economic benefits, and the figures show that about two thirds of them do not return to Northern Ireland for employment. More regrettably than that, others who do not gain a place here might simply decide not to enter higher education. The evidence suggests that people from disadvantaged backgrounds will be affected most of all.

The picture becomes even bleaker when we consider that, compared with other parts of the UK, our higher education system has already been significantly underfunded for some time. Even last year, our universities were underfunded by between £1,000 and £2,500 per student compared with their English counterparts, depending on their subject areas. We are now the only region in the UK actively disinvesting in higher education, at a time when it has never been more intrinsic to our success. As time goes on, our continued disinvestment will compromise not only the size of our higher education system but the quality of its provision. It will stifle the ability of our providers to compete with their closest competitors and on an international stage. It will hinder our economic growth and jeopardise our proud record of participation and fair access.

That is the context in which I am launching the Big Conversation. Over the next couple of months, my Department will work in cooperation with a range of stakeholders to engage with people about those challenges and to encourage a wider discussion about potential solutions. That staged approach is to ensure that the discussions we have during the Big Conversation, and the decisions that we make thereafter, are as informed as possible. That is precisely why matters such as higher education are devolved: to allow us to make our own decisions about what is best for Northern Ireland.

The first stage will focus on informing people about why higher education is important, how we deliver and fund it and the challenges that we face. My Department will run informative "Did you know?" surveys online, distributing information through a wide range of channels and organising various events. In this first week, we will demonstrate to people exactly why we need higher education by showing them the various benefits that we accrue from it as an economy, as a society and at an individual level. People are, for example, often aware of the benefits that higher education can bring for individuals, mainly the improved employment outcomes, but, often, the wider economic benefits of skills provision, job and wealth creation, and the attraction of investment and so on are not fully appreciated.

In next week's theme, we will show people how we deliver and fund higher education in Northern Ireland. Often, when people talk about higher education, they do not look beyond traditional full-time study at our universities, but there is a wide range of delivery models available

beyond the traditional routes. Under my Department's new apprenticeship model, for example, more people than ever before will be able to earn while they learn, combining higher-level study through our universities and colleges with sustained and related employment. Similarly, it often goes unappreciated that most universities are autonomous bodies responsible for their own affairs and able to access significant sources of funding beyond those provided through public sources. Previous discussions about higher education funding have focused quite narrowly on public grants and tuition fees, but those two sources combined account for only about two thirds of our higher education institutions' income sources.

In the final week of stage 1, we will have built up to some of the most pressing challenges that we face now, with a special focus on our skills and funding challenges. We will also look at different funding systems in place for higher education in other parts of the world, not just the UK, and think about the lessons that we can learn from them.

In the second stage of the Big Conversation, equipped with the knowledge gained in stage 1, people will be invited to tell us what they think about some of our most critical issues and how they think that we should deal with them. My Department and other stakeholders will hold a number of events to encourage people to get involved in the discussion. The second stage will also be themed across three weeks. The first week's theme will be economy and skills, the second week's will be quality and accessibility, and the stage will conclude with sustainability in the third week.

Across the world, countries and regions approach higher education in different ways, with different combinations of public and individual financing for core teaching, different profiles in attracting external finance and different approaches to the provision of the high-level skills demanded by modern economies.

In recent years, the higher education landscape, including the funding landscape, has changed dramatically in every other part of the UK, with different regions taking very different approaches to ensure that their systems remain sustainable. The sustainability of the English funding system now rests on higher tuition fees, but, in Scotland, they have gone in the opposite direction, with free tuition for local students, and they rely instead on high levels of public investment. Now it is our turn to find our unique solution. We all need to be involved in that process. It is time that we had a discussion about what alternatives might work for us here in Northern Ireland.

During this process, I will not be advocating any one solution or another. If I were to do so, it would invariably narrow the scope of the debate and undermine the entire process. Our discussions should be as broad as possible. No options should be off the table, and we will doubtless hear a wide range of views from different groups, organisations and individuals.

10.45 am

One thing that most people do agree on is that our higher education system is a worthy investment, regardless of where that investment comes from. During this process, I hope that we can strengthen that sentiment, particularly as we begin to think about our priorities moving into the next comprehensive spending review period.

After this process is completed, I will be taking stock of the options available to us and presenting them to the Executive.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Robin Swann, Chairperson of the enterprise and learning Committee.

Mr Swann (The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. Minister, in your statement, you seemed to contradict yourself. When you set the background, you said:

"companies cite our highly skilled workforce and the strength of our higher education system as integral in their decisions to invest in this region."

Later, you went on to say:

"We are now the only region in the UK actively disinvesting in higher education, at a time when it has never been more intrinsic to our success."

How will the Big Conversation address that contradiction?

Can I also seek reassurance from the Minister that, in this Big Conversation, he will actively seek and listen to the voices of students, university staff and the unions? Those voices feel that they have not been listened to in the recent cuts made by the two universities.

Dr Farry: Starting from the second point and moving backwards, I can very much give the Committee Chair that reassurance. This is meant to be an interactive and participative process. We are trying to move beyond the traditional model of public consultation to try to reach quarters that maybe do not normally engage in public policymaking processes. All the interest groups that the Chair references are very much part of our target audiences, and we will be working with them. There may be some events that are tailored to some of those groups in particular. I know that the universities themselves are very keen to engage in the process as well because they appreciate the magnitude of this.

With respect to the Chair's first point, there is not a contradiction in this. The point that I have to make very clearly is that we have been and continue to be very successful, based upon what we have done in higher education up to now. However — at this point, I need to be extremely clear and direct — we are in danger of undermining our ability to attract investment into Northern Ireland if we continue down the road of disinvesting in what we are doing around higher education. This process is incredibly important not just for our universities but for the future of the Northern Ireland economy, because we depend very much upon the skills of our people; that is the only natural resource that we have. Those skills come from those who go through the universities. There are other pathways as well through higher-level apprenticeships, and we can talk about how we can diversify and develop those high-level skills. However, if we find — this is particularly true if we move to a lower level of corporation tax in the next couple of years — that, on one hand, we are putting out there a very attractive offer but are, at the same time, undermining our ability to deliver, what we will be doing is, potentially, extremely counterproductive. So, it is important that we get this right and that we have a very wide-ranging and important discussion to make sure that we, as an

Executive, make the right investments through whichever option ultimately finds the widest consensus.

Mr Speaker: Before I call the next Member to speak, I wish to make it clear that I was addressing you as the Chairperson of the Employment and Learning Committee. I did not redesignate your Committee arbitrarily.

Mr Swann: Not yet. *[Laughter.]*

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his statement. Has he given any consideration to what steps he can take to protect people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds who will be affected by this disinvestment in higher education?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for her question. It is very good to see that the Speaker is ahead of the curve on the eventual merger of Departments and Committees.

The Member identifies a very core point. Our universities have been very good and have a better track record than their counterparts elsewhere in the UK in attracting people from a range of backgrounds, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds. As we well know, as well as benefiting our economy, investing in people's skills enables them to access a wider range of employment opportunities. The difficulty we have, in the context of disinvesting, is that we are seeing fewer places, and that will have a disproportionate impact on those who come from more disadvantaged backgrounds.

We see a situation where, shall we say, those who tend to come from more affluent backgrounds can more readily access university through their qualifications. When that competition becomes ever tighter, those who may have not done so well in their academic qualifications hitherto may struggle to get in. That is not a reflection on their ability because, once people get into university, they will progress along different pathways. However, when we have existing patterns of disadvantage and different patterns of primary and secondary education provision, we have different types of outcomes and pathways that feed into our university system.

Whenever we see a cut in the number of places, those people affected, who are disproportionately disadvantaged, will either be forced to consider going to Great Britain and will have to pay higher fees or will not have the opportunity to go at all, and their life opportunities will be sorely missed. I appreciate that there are wider discussions to be had around our Budget and on welfare, but it is important that we have a reality check on what we are doing. If we have a singular focus on transfer payments to people, we will have a good system for those who are on welfare, but we will not be sufficiently investing in the ladder that allows people to escape from dependency and have the life opportunities that they deserve. It is important that we have a balanced approach to tackling problems of disadvantage in our society.

Mr Ramsey: I thank the Minister for the statement. He is never short of a few words when it comes to it, and he has not disappointed us today. The big conversation in Northern Ireland at the moment is about the loss of jobs, capacity and courses and particularly the downward trend in student numbers. Following on from Bronwyn McGahan's question, the major concern is that the big impact in cities across Northern Ireland will be that young people will not go across to England. The widening

participation strategy, which was highly complimented in the universities and by the Minister and the Committee for Employment and Learning, will fail drastically because our young people will now have nowhere to go. They will leave education and become part of the NEET bracket. Will he ensure that the widening participation strategy is a key part of the Big Conversation that he is going to have?

Dr Farry: I am happy to assure the Member that widening participation will be a key theme in taking this process forward. It will be useful to break this down into two different components in order to be very clear about what is happening. We have what the universities do around widening participation in their engagement and their policies. We are not seeing any deterioration in the level of engagement. Members will be aware that we have taken a decision to deregulate, to an extent, how the universities manage their commitments around widening participation. That gives them more freedom and allows some money to be freed up, and that has avoided even worse cuts to the number of places.

In that context, however, the universities are very clear that they will maintain the current standards. Distinct from that, we have the situation where we are seeing a net loss of places. That loss will disproportionately impact on those who are coming from disadvantaged backgrounds. In that context, in the wider funding for higher education, there is a threat to widening participation outcomes, and it is important that we are very clear in that regard.

That leads to the issue of funding. I am very clearly saying that the current course that we are going down in Northern Ireland in higher education is simply not sustainable. Something has to give, one way or another. This process is designed to be iterative, where we work out a range of options or, indeed, reach a consensus around one particular option as to what we are going to do in Northern Ireland. However, we cannot continue down our current path; we need to make a decision. There are models in these islands and elsewhere in the world that we can look to and use to inform the decision that we take, but we have to take a decision one way or another, including as early as the comprehensive spending review that is coming up later this autumn, about how we are going to take this forward. We cannot go on the way we are going.

Ms Lo: I congratulate the Minister and his team on the very innovative approach to addressing the major issue of funding HE. In his statement, he mentioned that there is a wide range of delivery models in HE. Will he set out the potential for universities to engage with the new apprenticeships strategy?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for her comments about the concept that we are launching. This is to be different from the traditional approach to public consultation, as we are trying to engage more with stakeholders and have ongoing dialogue as people work their way through the evidence to find the particular solution for Northern Ireland.

One thing that we do need to be conscious of, as the Member alluded to, is how we attain high-level skills in our economy. We see evidence from other countries of different mixes between universities — the traditional academic route — and developed vocational pathways. The Germanic countries are a case in point.

We also have an opportunity for universities to engage on apprenticeships or types of learning akin to the

apprenticeship model. We launched the strategy in June 2014 and are well under way on pilot work. We are in advanced discussions with the universities on having almost degree-level apprenticeship pilots when students would be in employment and also part-time students on an apprenticeship framework. That is an area that we want to see developed much more over the coming months and years.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh ráiteas an Aire, agus an Comhrá Mór á chur i bhfeidhm aige inniu. I declare an interest as a current higher education student with the Ulster University.

I share the Minister's concerns, as most people do, about the impact of disinvestment in our further and higher education sector. I welcome that he will look for innovative and imaginative solutions, but I do not think that increasing tuition fees is a solution, and you would expect me to say that.

Given that one of the biggest costs facing students from a rural area in accessing higher education is housing when they have to go to an urban area, will this Conversation include the potential for additional quarters to be provided in rural areas such as the South West College campus in Enniskillen?

Dr Farry: Well done for being the first person to mention the word "fees". We got through five Members before getting to that point.

Let me say clearly that this is not a consultation about whether we do or do not have fees. Of course, all options have to be on the table, and fees are one of many options, but it is important that we do not knee-jerk into this becoming a bipolar discussion about whether people are in favour of fees or not. If we look to models outside these islands, we will see different mixes of funding in different European countries and elsewhere. There may well be lessons that we want to pick up from those models.

In terms of student support beyond fees, we have very good systems in maintenance grants and loans. The Member will be aware of changes in that area happening in England, and the Assembly will have to get its head around that as well, given the impact that we will see in a negative Barnett consequential to our block grant arising from that. That will be a separate challenge.

The final point that the Member made was on rural provision. That is not to be directly addressed as part of the Big Conversation process. However, that is, I believe, project number 10 in our higher education strategy, and work is well advanced in discussions, including with the South West College, on the outcomes that the Member alluded to. Hopefully, there will be announcements to be made on that in the near future.

Mrs D Kelly: Whilst I accept that the level of cuts suffered by your Department, Minister, is extremely high and quite draconian, can you assure the House that the university councils are ensuring that front-line services are, as far as possible, protected and that the luxuries enjoyed by senior academic staff are targeted first in efficiency savings?

Dr Farry: Our universities are autonomous institutions, and government is a major funder of those bodies. We already talked about the sources of that funding, and 37% of funding comes directly from the state, but it is not for me as Minister to micro-manage how money is spent in the universities. However, we have had discussions with them

at a high strategic level on how they would approach the cuts. In the past couple of weeks, we have received a lot of detail from Ulster University on how it is approaching the issue.

We have made requests, and the response from the universities has been very focused on the maximisation of what we can do in front-line provision. That includes, most clearly, the number of student places, but it also means that we should do what we can in research, which is also a key driver of our economy. We are in a constant process of encouraging universities to be as efficient as possible, but they also understand that they need to be efficient because their resource base is shrinking. They will have to make the assessments themselves on value for money and decide what to do in the delivery of their business and operational plans.

11.00 am

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. It was interesting, and I am happy that he intends to move beyond the usual groups that normally apply to consultations. I ask him to ensure that, when doing that, he includes in the process the many education projects dealing with deprivation in areas such as west Belfast; the likes of alternative education projects that encourage people into further education; and community-based education projects that do the same but experience blocks and blockages.

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his request. This is very much designed to reach out to all constituencies in Northern Ireland: geographically, different sections of the community and people at different stages of their education. It is important that we encourage progression pathways that allow people to reach their full potential. For some, that will be progression through to university. In other cases, it will be through further education or through to apprenticeships.

We are developing a suite of provision, including the new apprenticeship strategy and the youth training strategy — the new system that we announced in June 2015 — and that provides a range of different opportunities. It is important that we have good, strong careers advice that will assist people to find the pathway most suitable for them. We want to make sure, particularly on the theme of widening participation, that those who wish to access higher education will continue to have that opportunity. That is why it is so important that we get the funding right and that we are able to offer the full range of opportunities across the board.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Minister for his statement. Will the Minister seek the views of part-time higher education stakeholders during the Big Conversation, particularly on the place of flexible/distance learning, which meets the needs of the economy, the people and the communities right across Northern Ireland?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for the question. Absolutely. It is important that we get away from the traditional assumption that all students who go through our higher education system are full-time undergraduates below the age of 21 or 22. We have great diversity in higher education provision already, and, at present, just under 40% of provision is part-time. We have a good mix already.

It is important that we seek to consolidate and build upon that very strong footprint, because that diversification will be more in line with the future needs of the economy. In some respects, it overlaps with what we propose for higher-level apprenticeships, and that necessitates a degree of part-time provision in university access, insofar as the apprenticeship framework is delivered at the appropriate level. The Member will also be aware that, in parallel with this, we have just closed a public consultation on a number of options for better support for part-time and postgraduate students, and we hope that we will be able to make policy decisions on the preferred options within the next couple of weeks.

Mr Dickson: I thank the Minister for his statement and for the innovative way in which the consultation process will take place. It will clearly get to places that other consultations do not get to. I acknowledge that higher education is one of the routes out of deprivation and out of benefits. Will the Minister tell us how universities will be able to encourage students to become socially mobile once they have completed their courses?

It is important that we acknowledge that higher education delivers a clear route out of deprivation for many citizens in Northern Ireland.

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question and recognition of the approach that we are trying to take. It is worth stressing again the importance of higher education and the investment in high-level skills in general as a means of encouraging social mobility.

Particularly at a time when there is a lot of focus on how we address most effectively those who are disadvantaged in Northern Ireland, it is important to bear in mind that it is through investment in employment opportunities and schemes through to what we do in further and higher education that we will provide the ladder for people to access new opportunities.

I rather fear that the impact of the cuts and an almost very singular approach to raiding public spending for other purposes leaves us in a situation in which the rungs in the ladder are breaking or falling away. We are in real danger of losing sight of what we are trying to do. We are not trying to keep people in poverty and keep pumping money into that system. It has to be about investing in such things as public health, early years education and, indeed, further and higher education, which we invest in to change people's lives and provide opportunities.

Mr Cochrane-Watson: Minister, the drastic cutbacks in HE have also been delivered in the FE sector and throughout the colleges. Will you outline the discussions that have taken place between DEL and DETI? It must be very difficult to sell Northern Ireland throughout the world when its greatest asset, its young people, are being forced to seek third-level education in GB and when, by your admission, two-thirds of them will not return to the Province. Will you give an overview of the discussions that are taking place?

Dr Farry: I am grateful to the Member for his question. There is an awareness across the three legs of the stool — my Department, DETI and Invest Northern Ireland — of the importance of skills to our ability to attract jobs into Northern Ireland. There is a growing recognition that it has to be turned around. It will not just be turned around by pumping in more money; more money has to go in on a strategic basis to make sure that we get the most out of

the investments that we make. That means more and more targeted investments in the areas that are most relevant to the economy.

The Member also referred to further education being impacted. I suppose that, on that basis, it is a useful opportunity to reinforce that when we talk about higher education, we are not simply talking about our three universities and our university colleges — the teacher-training colleges — but all six of our further education colleges. People may not appreciate that almost 20% of higher-level qualifications are delivered through the FE sector, so there is a very big further education footprint there. The colleges are going through their own pressures on the back of cuts. We are asking them to be as focused as they can on the strategic needs of the economy, and they are seeking to see what they can do about protecting the higher education provision that they offer. They also face the same funding challenges as the universities.

Mr Allister: It would be naive to think that it will be a directionless conversation, and I suspect that the Minister has a very clear idea of where he wants the conversation to lead. Is it, in fact, a softening-up process of the public and politicians to advance an increase in tuition fees?

Dr Farry: Mr Allister has given me the opportunity, so let me be very clear: this is not a done deal or a process in which we are trying to convince people of the benefits of higher tuition fees in Northern Ireland. Let me honestly say that I am approaching it with an open mind. We do not have a blueprint of what we are trying to reach on the far side. It has to be a genuine iterative process in which, hopefully, we reach a consensus within this society as to where we want to go. The timing of this, in the current political context, is not ideal, but, nonetheless, it is imperative given the funding situation that our universities face plus the onset of the forthcoming spending round.

When we look to future funding, it is important that we acknowledge that there is a range of options. Often the debate is focused by reference to what is happening in England, with the assumption that we will more or less follow what is happening there. If we look at what is happening in Scotland, we see that the Scottish Government have almost written it in stone — they have literally written it in stone — that they will not increase tuition fees. They have free tuition for their local students, never mind the £3,500 that our students have to pay in Northern Ireland. So, even within these islands, we see two very different models. There are some drawbacks to the Scottish model. The level of public investment probably does not keep up with the level of investment that comes from the mix of public and private funding that universities receive in England. For those societies or regions that want to go down the route along the lines of the Scottish model, there are challenges of having a realistic assessment of what is required to make sure that that model is successful. We also see different models elsewhere in Europe. Obviously, the Nordic countries have a very strong focus around free higher education. Fees are charged in other countries around the world, for example the United States and, more recently, Australia. Other countries have mixed models.

There are questions around the size of our higher education footprint and whether we achieve higher-level skills through a different mix of vocational and academic provision, or whether we retain the current approach,

which is heavily skewed towards academic. There is a whole range of different options, and it is important that we find the one that is most appropriate for our particular circumstances in Northern Ireland. That is why devolution is important. As I am coming to the end of this question time, I want to say that we should appreciate that devolution allows us to make these choices and, given the current context, that is very much in doubt. If we want to have control of our own destiny around higher education, it is important that we have devolution.

Mr B McCrea: I suspect that this Big Conversation is with the wrong people. Higher education is in crisis, the financial funding of it is unsustainable, and we are the only region in the United Kingdom to actively disinvest. The Minister chided, I think, Mr Flanagan for being the first person to bring up the issue of fees. Actually, apart from Mr Allister, nobody else has talked about it. This Assembly voted to cap fees. This Assembly said that it would make up the shortfall to the universities that that led to. This Assembly did not do that. It cut the funding. This is a stark choice; you have to get off the rhetoric. The big question that I want to ask the Minister is this: when is he going to have a big conversation with the MLAs around this Chamber who make these decisions, because that is where this decision needs to be taken?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. His analysis is consistent with what we have set out already in today's statement. The Big Conversation is meant to include everyone, and that includes MLAs. As the process moves towards the final stages, the audience becomes the Executive. Strictly speaking, the Assembly has not taken a vote on the freezing of tuition fees; it was a decision taken in the Executive. Obviously, given the make-up of the Assembly, that decision was supported by all of the five parties represented on the Executive and, of course, in the Assembly.

Let me be very clear that this is not about a bipolar choice between having fees or not having fees. Those are options, and it is important to acknowledge that all options have to be on the table, but there are other ways in which we can do this. What is important is to realise that the current situation is not sustainable; it is broken. We need to find an alternative that works for Northern Ireland, and we need to find that alternative within the next number of months as we look ahead to the next funding review. It is important that we have that discussion.

I encourage MLAs to engage in the process. We will be discussing the matter with the Employment and Learning Committee tomorrow. I will be back to make a further statement at the conclusion of stage 1 as we move into stage 2, and, again, there will be opportunities for Members to engage further at that point. In between, I welcome Members engaging through the various social media channels, using the citizen space portal that will be used as part of this Big Conversation and engaging in other media-type conversations. It is important that we try to reach a consensus.

Given the nature of our government, it is important that we do not have one party going off on its own, making decisions. This is so fundamental that there has to be a consensus that we can sustain over a number of different Assembly terms.

11.15 am

Executive Committee Business

Credit Unions and Co-operative and Community Benefit Societies Bill: Second Stage

Mr Speaker: This item of business is listed in the name of the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. As the ministerial office is vacant, the item of business cannot be moved.

Insolvency (Amendment) Bill: Further Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: This item of business is listed in the name of the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. As the ministerial office is vacant, the item of business cannot be moved.

Private Members' Business

Waiting Lists Crisis

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 wind. One amendment has been selected and is published in the Marshalled List. The proposer will have 10 minutes to propose the amendment and five minutes to wind. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mrs Dobson: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes that, in June 2015, there were 373,000 people waiting for a first outpatient appointment, a diagnostic test or inpatient treatment at hospitals in Northern Ireland and that this is equivalent to over 20% of the entire population; expresses concern that waiting times are now worse than at any time in recent history and that far too many people are having to wait in pain and under emotional distress for far too long; 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 calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to work with each of the health and social care trusts to identify and resolve the causes of the delays.

I welcome the opportunity to move the motion. In the midst of yet another crisis facing the institutions, we must not forget the thousands on hospital waiting lists. Many are growing increasingly frustrated, and who in the Chamber could blame them? I can only imagine how exasperating it must be for people to be told that they could wait for months, if not years, for a crucial appointment, and then turn on the television in the evening and watch the farcical scenes here. The whole thing would be funny, if it were not so deadly serious. The intention of the motion is neither to make party political points nor apportion blame; it is to remind all Ministers and all parties that the longer the uncertainty about the future of the Assembly exists, and as we continue to fall deeper into our financial black hole, the longer ordinary people are left reeling from the consequences.

Let us remember the scale of the current problem. As the motion says, in June 2015, some 373,000 people were waiting for a first outpatient appointment, diagnostic test or inpatient treatment at hospitals in Northern Ireland — that is equivalent to over 20% of our entire population. Just think about that for a moment. The total number waiting for a first outpatient appointment is over 212,000, a 46% increase on the 145,500 waiting in the same period last year. Of all those waiting, 86,000 — or 40% — have been doing so for more than 18 weeks, even though the target is, of course, that no one should wait for longer than 18 weeks. In the words of the Department's publication:

"Northern Ireland, as a whole, did not meet either element of the waiting time target, nor did any of the individual trusts".

These delays are affecting a range of specialities, but a stark illustration is that 50,000 people are waiting for surgical appointments, often in debilitating pain and with increasing anger. Over 20,000 have been waiting for

either trauma and orthopaedic (T&O) surgery or general surgery longer than the maximum 18-week waiting time. A frightening range of specialities is reporting immense pressures and worsening service provision, including trauma and orthopaedics, general surgery, urology, ears nose and throat (ENT) and pain management. Older people, young people, men, women, the rich, and especially the poor, are left living in pain and in fear about the state of their health.

I know, through my constituency office, that many of those who approach me about waiting times are also living in fear for their job prospects. This is a very real concern that is often overlooked in the debate about waiting times. There are a number of factors that, collectively, are contributing to the crisis in our waiting times. The most significant, however, was the decision to suspend referring patients to the independent sector. I understand the growing alarm at the spiralling cost of using independent providers; indeed, I remember joining others in speaking out against those rising costs. However, by taking such a conclusive stance and freezing all that work, it was inevitable that lists would take a nosedive. Unfortunately, that decision has had a major and undesirable consequence.

People who go through their GPs and are referred to a hospital or specialist now face one of two choices: they can either wait the six, 12 or 18 months, which is becoming the norm, or they can go private. Of course, not everyone can afford to do that. For instance, the price of a primary knee replacement only a few years ago was over £7,000, and the equivalent price on the NHS was only £2,000. Many people simply cannot afford those costs and are therefore left with no choice but to wait, often in excruciating pain. As they are waiting, visits to their GP are regular and their prescriptions are never ending, all the time costing money that would not need to be spent if only they could be seen within a reasonable time.

The consequence of lengthening waiting times is a truly vicious and painful cycle. The longer the current situation rolls on, the more uneven and unequal access to healthcare in Northern Ireland becomes. Take our A&E attendances, for instance. During 2014-15, only 73.8% of people attending the main emergency care departments were treated and discharged or admitted within four hours of their arrival, despite the target being 95%. Indeed, even in my local hospital, Craigavon Area Hospital, where the pressures are by no means as severe as they are in some areas, only 78.3% of patients were seen within four hours. Almost 17,000 people had to wait longer.

It is often said that how our A&E departments are performing is a barometer for the wider state of the NHS. Last year's performance, which was a deterioration on that of the year before, demonstrates that the crisis facing our hospitals is continuing to worsen.

Another area is the diagnosis and treatment of cancer. The official target for an urgent referral for suspected cancer is that 95% of patients should begin their treatment within 62 days. Yet figures earlier this year revealed that only 72% of patients were seen within that time frame. In addition, the target waiting time for a first assessment with the breast cancer specialist is 14 days, so all urgent breast cancer referrals should be seen within that time. However, only 82% were. Whilst those figures may sound alarming, breast cancer diagnosis and treatment is not one of the

worst performing areas. There are a range of other areas, not least urology, facing very serious delays.

Another contributory factor affecting diagnosis rates is the significant deterioration over the past five years in the average number of weeks that patients are waiting for either a CT or MRI scan. For instance, the average wait for a CT scan has jumped from 4.1 weeks to seven weeks in Belfast and from nine weeks to 16 weeks in the Southern Health Trust.

Only a few people should expect to wait more than four hours in A&E. Only the slightest ailment should deserve a waiting time of six or 12 months to be seen by a specialist. Cancer rips the heart out of our families and shows no mercy whatsoever. The fact that right now, as we stand here today, people are having their health compromised should be enough to shame the Health Department and the Health and Social Care Board into action. Indeed, earlier this year, in a leaked document from the Health and Social Care Board, there was a direct warning:

“increased waiting times for assessment may result in delayed diagnosis of a serious or life-threatening condition with reduced likelihood of a successful outcome”.

We are dealing with matters of life and death, but the most frustrating thing is that we are simply being asked to accept it.

Try telling that to the young woman who is facing delay with her breast cancer treatment or the grandfather watching his grandchildren, knowing that he may not be around to see them grow up. I am in no doubt that every MLA in the House will be coming down with case files of absolutely desperate constituents who have been told that they have to wait for what seems like an unbelievable length of time. I know that I am. These cases tug at our heartstrings as they are shocking and appear completely irrational. I also continue to receive contact from health service staff who find spiralling waiting times totally unconscionable. If we do nothing, waiting times will only grow and grow, and patient safety will become further compromised. We need to ensure that the workforce planning is working as it should, especially so that major consultant posts are not lying vacant through lack of forward planning. We need to ensure that the service exists to primary-level care so that people are showing up at hospitals only when they absolutely need to. I know that that can be difficult, but we must work on those issues.

In conclusion, NHS health staff who have been left completely emotionally drained and demoralised are not to blame for the current problems. In fact, I believe that they are the last remaining defence against total collapse. These pressures, combined with the cavalier attitude of the former Minister, the board and some of the trusts, are contributing to worse morale. I urge the next Minister —

Mr Speaker: Time is up, I am afraid.

Mrs Dobson: — to meet and organise and do it for the public good as soon as possible.

Mr McKinney: I beg to move the following amendment:

Insert at end

“; and further calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to take immediate action to

alleviate current pressures and to fully implement and fund the Transforming Your Care plan to ameliorate future pressures.”.

As SDLP health spokesperson, I welcome the opportunity to bring the amendment to the House. I just wish that my gratefulness to the House to debate this important issue was matched by a DUP Health Minister who would have welcomed the opportunity to respond to reflect to the Assembly, and to the wider public, that he has a plan to deal with the waiting list crisis that is perhaps the worst in health service history here for many years. But, no; the Minister has chosen not to be here. I urge all of you in the Chamber, in the Gallery, and even those outside the Chamber, to focus during this debate on that empty chair and, indeed, empty chairs right across the Benches opposite. That is the answer that the DUP has given to the debate on this unprecedented waiting list crisis. Absolutely nothing. I will touch further on its impotence over health service change later in my contribution.

The DUP has put huge public concern over this issue second to its own narrow political interests, which are in favour of a spat between it and the Ulster Unionists. Good luck to them. I hope that the public responds in kind and that that public remembers that, in their hour of need, the Health Minister ran away.

At the outset, I want to acknowledge that today's debate is a very important one. In every debate that I have participated in, I have acknowledged the dedicated professional approach of the nearly 55,000 staff employed by the health service here. I have applauded their commitment, their energy and compassion, and I do so again today. The pressures on our elective care waiting lists are as much a strain on them as on the public and those in need. The figures have been rehearsed over and over in the public domain among health professionals and also in the Assembly Chamber. They are disgraceful, and action is called for, not retreat. Waiting lists are the worst that they have been in 15 years. We have seen outpatient waiting lists swelling by 46% in the past year alone. That is creating great difficulty for many patients at the worst end, even contributing to deaths caused by system stress or the frail and the elderly being humiliated and neglected. I know this first-hand. My constituency office, like those of other Members, has been inundated over the last years. I have heard harrowing stories. Many of those suffering are in agony, with no end in sight as to when they will receive treatment. In the twenty-first century, that is simply unforgivable. This morning, we will hear more stories similar to those.

These are important contributions, but, ultimately, their resolution — and future resolutions — will not be mitigated until there is a proper strategic focus at the heart of our health service, followed by implementation. Strangely enough, there is one. It is just that it has not been implemented. I should know, because I have spent the last two years constantly asking questions about its implementation, only to be fobbed off with obfuscation.

11.30 am

First, there was reassurance that it was all being implemented and that there were targets in the Transforming Your Care (TYC) plan. Then, as the questions piled up, the evidence began to disappear, and, in the end, we had another review, which basically called

it as it was: failure of leadership; failure in commissioning; failure to deliver. Of course, there were bits of movement here and there, but you tell the public, who watch in disbelief as the crisis piles up, that that is improvement and they have real cause not to believe you.

The present crisis in elective care was always going to happen. The reason is that the health service cut the budget on elective care surgery. The reason for that was that they needed resources to plough into the system to prevent the accident and emergency crisis that dominated the headlines for two years. The reason for that was that the health service was not properly budgeted for and a plan that they came up with was not implemented. Moving money and staff did prevent the A&E crisis, but the elective care waiting list just grew and grew.

Mr McCarthy: I am very grateful to the Member for giving way. As a member of the Health Committee, he will know that some time ago we were informed that a bid for £89 million had been put in to the Executive in the June monitoring round in order to overcome those problems. That June monitoring round has not even been spoken about and £89 million has not gone towards the health service, so, therefore, we are going further into the red as far as treatment is concerned.

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

Mr McKinney: Absolutely, and what would you have welcomed today? A Health Minister, or even some Health Committee members from the Benches opposite, to potentially explain your point. The process has been a sticking-plaster approach. Short-termism. Historically, the Department of Health relied on the private sector to effectively pick up the slack in addressing the elective care backlog, but, again, due to financial and strategic mismanagement, that funding is no longer available. The Department has consistently bid for that extra funding in monitoring round, as my colleague helpfully mentioned. When the money ran out and the focus was on the other big crisis, the route to the next crisis was fixed.

Mr Cochrane-Watson: Will the Member give way?

Mr McKinney: Very briefly.

Mr Cochrane-Watson: The Member has made reference, and I have to agree with him, to the absence of our in/out Health Minister today and his colleague who was formerly Health Minister; but I make it clear that, no matter what spat within unionism the Member made a comment on, the Ulster Unionist Party is here today because we care. I agree entirely with the comments made by my colleague. We care about our constituents who are in our offices day in, day out. The picture from today is of the absent seats to my left.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): Order. I remind Members that interventions are supposed to be brief and relative to the point.

Mr McKinney: Perhaps I would have bought that point had the Regional Development Minister not resigned. Is it entirely appropriate that he reflects that when he does not care about our roads system? Anyway, it is unsustainable.

The situation was foreseen. Over four years ago, authors of the TYC plan considered future demand and present stresses. They consulted, and I will tell you what they said in 2011. I will read it to you. They stated that demand would

rise by 4%, that that would lead to an increase of 50,000 outpatient appointments in 2015, and that a failure to act:

“would quite simply fail the population as the system struggled to cope.”

By any measure, the population here has been failed. Here we are in September 2015 with no Health Minister to address an issue that is impacting on one in five people here. The public are rightly angered.

I said at the outset that I would address one of the core issues at the heart of the problem. It is leadership at the highest level. The House and the public are right to ask why a queue of DUP Ministers has failed them so badly in health. First Edwin Poots, who attracted more publicity over conscience issues than health, failed to implement the plan and failed to secure sufficient budgets to run the system. His exit bought the DUP more time to attempt to explain away their failure with a new Minister, Jim Wells, who used up that vital time dithering and focusing on conscience issues. All the time queues were growing as the public were ill-served. Maybe we will have the absentee Minister in for an hour or so at some stage next week, until he resigns again.

Here we have the man with a disappearing plan —

A Member: Will the Member give way?

Mr McKinney: No, I cannot give way any further.

He would sooner resign his Ministry than confront the issues that affect so many people here.

There — right there — is his empty seat. That is his response.

Mr D Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mr McKinney: Very briefly.

Mr D Bradley: Does the Member agree that the real renegade and roguish Ministers in this House are those who are absent today, especially, in this context, the Health Minister?

Mr McKinney: I thank the Member for his helpful intervention: I could not agree more.

It is not only that the DUP has no answers; the reality is that it is to blame. It has had its chance; it has failed and failed miserably. There is still a chance; it lies in the concepts and strategic thoughts around TYC, which, at its core, saw the strain on the health service, as I have reflected. All of this stands in stark contrast to how TYC systems were introduced, for example, in Australia, and where the transformational change in Canterbury, for example, reduced strain on the expensive end of the hospital. That worked very well.

To the Ulster Unionists, who may be thinking of not supporting the amendment, we say quite clearly that we need to take immediate action to alleviate current pressures. By that, we mean that the money must be found now to treat the patients now and action must be married to a further strategic TYC plan. I urge its support for our amendment in that context.

The picture is very clear: it is one of failure and one of no response. The public is rightly disappointed. I urge the House to support the amendment.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak on this hugely significant issue for many people across all sections of our society.

I share the frustration of some Members who have spoken, and I share the anger of the wider public that, as we debate this hugely important issue for society, the DUP Health Minister, instead of treating this issue with the accountability, leadership and direction it requires, has treated the issue with contempt by being neither at his desk to take decisions nor in this Chamber to outline his response to these criticisms today and to this very important debate in a way that delivers for the people who elected him to deliver and show leadership.

I support the motion and the amendment. It is stark when we reflect that, in June 2013, there were 373,000 people waiting for their first outpatient appointment. As the motion states, that is equivalent to 20% of the population in the North. The Health Committee recently concluded a review into waiting times for elective care. We brought five recommendations directly to the door of the Minister. Today, that door is closed in our face. It is impossible for us as elected representatives, for people in the Public Gallery or for the people outside this Chamber to even get a sense of how those recommendations are being acted on or will be implemented.

We took evidence from Scotland, Portugal, England, New Zealand, the Twenty-six Counties and Scandinavia, and whilst we can all reflect on the constraints that exist in the system and many other systems, it seems to me that a practical way to deal with our waiting times is the use of a referral-to-treatment target. We have heard much evidence about this, and, in my view, it would ultimately lead to a more efficient spend on elective care.

It would, however, mean, as I said earlier, having leadership and decision-making processes; it would need to be accompanied by new arrangements for managing the performance of trusts against those targets. That system is used in Scotland and in England, where the target is that patients should expect to wait 18 weeks between being referred by a GP for an outpatient appointment and beginning treatment. Denmark also operates that type of target. Indeed Portugal is looking to move towards that system.

So, what do we have here? We had a Department of Health and a Minister who indicated that a move to a target-based approach was highly desirable. We do not know today, by the empty chair that has been referred to, whether it is still highly desirable or will, indeed, be actioned. They recognised that it would provide better patient experience, something that we all want to strive towards, and it is regarded as international best practice. It also removes the potential perverse incentives for delays at all stages of the journey.

In conclusion, I want to refer to the costing of such a scheme. We hear much about constraints in the system. The real debate in our health service is clearly the lack of a Health Minister to take decisions, but, equally, where our spend goes. We need to reflect on the fact that, every year, between £55 million and £65 million goes to the private sector for elective care. Surely, some of that money could assist with the establishment —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): The Member's time is up.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: — of referral-to-treatment times. I support the motion and the amendment.

Mr McCarthy: On behalf of the Alliance Party, I support the motion and the amendment. At the outset, I have to say that the waiting time figures are a total and absolute disgrace and unacceptable, given that our Health Department preaches prevention and early detection. Yet, when patients adhere to these directions, they are subjected to inordinate delays in getting an early appointment with a consultant. This is surely shameful and must be put right immediately by our Health Department. It is also shameful, as others have said, that Simon Hamilton, the former Health Minister, has thrown in the towel and left this very important Ministry, which will undoubtedly mean that more people will continue to suffer. I am disappointed that Simon Hamilton has given way to the pressures — the shenanigans — that have gone on in other places.

I am a member of the Health Committee, which, as the Chairman indicated, carried out a comprehensive review of waiting times to assess the effectiveness of the Department's approach to reducing waiting times, to see how other regions have successfully reduced their waiting times, and how that could be applied locally. The Committee heard from a number of important people from various places and produced five recommendations that we considered essential for our health service to implement to get on top of the problem of excessive waiting times for all our patients. A referral-to-treatment time target was one important recommendation, which our Chairperson mentioned.

Our report was debated in the Chamber on 3 November 2014, with the Minister present, and it was unanimously agreed that the Minister should prioritise and tackle the issue. I have to say how disappointed I am that, despite all our efforts, the number of our constituents waiting for operations etc continues to rise. That means that such patients continue to live in pain and suffering, simply because our system falls far short of what is expected. As the Assembly mandate runs out at the end of March next year, or perhaps earlier, it is also a disgrace that those at the head of running the Assembly are already engaged in electioneering and point-scoring whilst our constituents continue to suffer. I say to those leaders, "Wise up. Accept your responsibilities and work for everyone in this community now".

11.45 am

A few years back, we were presented with a document, 'Transforming Your Care'; our colleague Fearghal McKinney mentioned it. It was a plan for major improvements right across the health service. Why oh why has this not been delivered? The reality is that our constituents continue to experience very lengthy waiting times, even to get a first outpatient appointment. This is and must be totally unacceptable. Our Health Minister — probably the permanent secretary now — the board and the trusts simply have got to come up with something to implement those five recommendations from our Committee report. That would be a start. Look at the other regions that have introduced new measures that would ensure better waiting times for everyone in Northern Ireland.

I have to congratulate assistant librarian Kristine Gillespie for her excellent information pack, which gives us all the information regarding the crisis in waiting times. The

first few pages of that document contain news releases from the Health Department on waiting list statistics. The figures are very depressing indeed. Our Committee has expressed real concerns at the number of missed hospital appointments both by hospitals and by patients who simply fail to turn up for their appointments. The Department revealed that, in 2014-15, a total of 168,555 appointments were cancelled by hospitals in the five trusts, and a total of 147,536 patients failed to turn up, costing the health service £16 million. Those are staggering figures. Something has to be done to get on top of this totally unnecessary waste of time and money.

The Assembly has a bounden duty to everyone in Northern Ireland to provide good health provision. I say to everyone, outside or inside the Assembly: let us get on with it.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion and the amendment. As I take up my place on the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety this week, I really wish to join others in expressing concern that there is no one at the helm of our health service. At a time when the health service is clearly heading towards the rocks, the captain has jumped ship. I think that we are within our rights and that it is our duty to labour this point today, because nothing is more important than people's health.

My son was in hospital a couple of weeks ago. I thank the ambulance staff, nurses and consultants who all helped him. At that moment when you have a relative or friend in hospital, that is the number one priority in your life. It is absolutely shameful that there is no one here from the DUP to respond to any of these issues.

It is also important to remember that the gatekeeper who has been referred to has been left in the Executive to look after issues and to fend off the rogues and the renegades. The DUP needed to keep somebody in the Finance Department because it is so important, but the Health Department is also important. Why is there no gatekeeper to look out for the needs of those in A&E, the terminally ill or the 373,000 people on waiting lists? I argue that the Health Department is the one Department in which you do not leave a vacant seat at the head.

Kieran McCarthy has rightly commended the Assembly's Research and Information Service. We do not do that enough. There are some fantastic figures to assist Members. The number of patients who were first seen within 14 days following an urgent referral for suspected breast cancer has dropped by 12.2%. That means that 212 women were waiting too long for a referral for suspected breast cancer. The information pack also states that only 72% of patients begin treatment within 62 days of an urgent referral. That is a crisis in itself, never mind the totality of the figure. It also states that the number of people who wait more than nine weeks for a first outpatient appointment has soared from under 40,000 to 107,000. That is shameful, a LeasCheann Comhairle. This is a huge number of people: 373,000 people; 373,000 families. A lot of them are in pain; a lot of them are under stress; and a lot of them are enduring weeks and months of uncertainty after uncertainty.

It is little wonder that the health service is in the state that it is. DUP Health Ministers who have gone before have been more focused on homophobic agendas than on people's health and well-being. They have had their wee

pet projects that they have pursued and about which they have gone on the airwaves, week after week. The only thing that they should have been concerned about was people's health. So, we need to see more —

Mr Swann: Will the Member give way?

Mr McKay: I will; yes.

Mr Swann: It was the Health Minister who was able to step in and help save the Dal in our constituency. Does the Member agree that, without a Health Minister, the Dal, the Roddens care home in Ballymoney and the Pinewood care home in Ballymena are back under threat, because it is now over to the trust and civil servants to make those decisions and take them forward?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr McKay: I fully agree with the Member. We are stuck in limbo with regard to the health service. As a republican, I do not like direct rule, but I can tell you this: the public like to see local politicians make decisions regarding health; less so, they like to see direct rule Ministers make decisions regarding health; but, worse than both those scenarios, is an empty chair.

This may be some tactic from the DUP. The former Minister put out a press statement saying that the DUP will use the best tactics to get the right outcome. The health service is not a tactic or something to be used for political advantage, because that is what this is about. At the end of the day, the crisis in the health service is more important than the crisis in the DUP, the crisis over unionist voters and the crisis over the next election. That is what it is; it is about party politics. This is not about the health service. So, I ask the DUP, when they are resigning next week and the week after that to, perhaps, consider putting in a gatekeeper not only for finance but to look after people's health and those in our community who are suffering.

The former Minister Simon Hamilton is probably sitting in his office upstairs; he might even be watching this on screen. He should come down here and answer these questions. He disrespects the House; he disrespects patients who rely on him; and he disrespects the staff of the NHS.

Ms Hanna: I also welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate on such an important issue. I rise in support of the amendment and the substantive motion. It is unacceptable that 373,000 people are waiting for a first outpatient appointment, a diagnostic test or an inpatient treatment at some of Northern Ireland's hospitals. My colleague has outlined that that includes over 212,000 patients who are awaiting a first outpatient appointment, that 86,000 have been waiting beyond the Department's 18-week target, and that the outpatient waiting lists have swollen by 46%. As others have said, the DUP's response is not only the standing down of the Health Minister, but, as we have been told by the former First Minister, that this is a strategy that is going to continue for six weeks. We do not have anybody steering the ship now, and we will not have for at least a month and a half. What leadership.

A few weeks ago, the Assembly was told that we could expect a world-class plan for a world-class health service. With respect to them, when it comes to debating, we have two Members left minding the shop and nobody taking in the information. If ever there was a need for leadership

and strategic direction in the health service, it is now, and, instead, we have ploys for electoral gains. At least the party to my right is upfront about its abstentionist policy before an election.

I probably do not need to reiterate them, but all Members will have heard stories from their constituents about the impact that the continued wait for elective care has on their daily lives and, indeed, on their ability to work. With one in five people in Northern Ireland on a waiting list, it is probable that every Member has a family member affected. Members will also have heard about the heartache and stress that those strains are placing on health service workers, many of whom, of course, will be on waiting lists. We cannot ignore the impact of the health service crisis on our workforce and wider economy.

Waiting times are not new — we know that — but the party across the Chamber, never mind the current empty chair, has had four years but has failed to get a grip on this and steer a course through what is, I think everybody accepts, a perfect storm of health failure. There has been colossal financial mismanagement, as well as a downward spiral of contingency plans and escalation measures. As my colleague outlined comprehensively, there has also been a failure to implement and properly fund the one big ticket strategy that has been sold as the solution: Transforming Your Care.

We know that focusing all the ills of elective care on monitoring rounds does not address the issue. We have consistently made it clear — Fearghal outlined this again — that we cannot keep going for a sticking plaster and not a strategy. Budget considerations are the excuse that we always hear, but waiting lists have to be the priority. Yes, we need to address peripheral issues like appointments cancelled by patients and by doctors, but we are locked into a vicious reinforcing cycle, with conditions impacting on patients and, of course, on budgets. As my colleague stated, there is meant to be a plan in place, but a plan has not been delivered here, and there is no Minister to account for that. We need to properly fund TYC, and we need strategic leadership and not these sporadic short-term interventions.

I think that the public could understand it — people understand the pressures of an ageing population and all sorts of health considerations — if the Minister was in a meeting health trusts, answering urgent questions or meeting lobby groups, but people will not buy the fact that, for the next six weeks, he will be in a DUP back room writing electoral strategy while all of us and our constituents suffer from this health crisis. I urge support for the amendment and the motion.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Éirim chun tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún agus don leasú. I support the motion and the amendment. There is absolutely no doubt that this is a critical issue. I think that all of us would agree — other Members referred to this — that we spend a lot of time in our constituency offices trying to address waiting times.

In her opening remarks, Jo-Anne Dobson rightly pointed out that the absence of the Health Minister here today spoke for itself. She is right: the health service and all its related services are without the person responsible for providing that type of leadership. It goes without saying that it is an issue for any service or Department to be left

without leadership on a day-to-day basis, particularly one as critical as the health service, which deals with the well-being of patients, people and staff, and it is obviously worth reminding people of that. However, I do not think that the Ulster Unionist Party can absolve itself from that by simply saying that the DUP Minister is not here today, because it has a responsibility that it should address. It failed in its responsibility, because there is no Minister for Regional Development, and that set off what many commentators and, indeed, many people out there say is the beginning of an electoral contest. We are without the DUP Health Minister today and a number of other DUP Ministers, but we are also without the Minister for Regional Development.

It is very clear to most people that the Assembly election has begun. The grab for seats within unionism has begun, and I do not think that any of us are stupid enough to believe anything different. None of us can ever talk with any certainty. Most people say it is either the knave or the unwise person who tries to predict the future, never mind the political future, but I think that we can say with a degree of certainty that there will be no electoral pact in unionism in this election. Beyond that, no doubt they will come up with a pact to keep the rogues and the renegades at the door. You can go to Google Translate to get a good definition of what “rogue” and “renegade” mean. I know that in our community it was very clear that it was a throwback to Lord Brookeborough: in other words, keep the Fenians where the Fenians belong — outside the front door. Thankfully, those days are long, long gone and are never coming back.

12.00 noon

I raised the issue of waiting times, and other Members made the point very well. Most of us would accept that it is not a new problem; it has been a problem in the health service for many years. That is not to say that jurisdictions in other countries have not faced similar problems and circumstances, but they have found a solution, as we should do here, for a better approach and a better way. That better way is out there for us to see, and Maeve McLaughlin referred to other countries that have carried that out.

In fairness to the Health Committee, it identified that there was a problem, and it went about it in a very strategic way. It was not an exercise in trying, if you like, to bash the Minister. The Committee was saying to everybody, particularly to the people whom we represent, that waiting times are an issue to which we have to find a solution. The review that the Committee undertook, in my opinion, put forward very practical steps based on the experience of other people who had found themselves in the same situation and found a way out of it.

There may be no Democratic Unionist Party people speaking today, but I am sure that they would accept that waiting times are an issue that can be addressed. The solution lies in front of us, and the motion and the amendment point to a way forward. We should support that to ensure that those who find themselves waiting unnecessarily are provided with a solution to alleviate that. We will support that as we go forward.

Mr Beggs: I support the motion. There are 375,000 people waiting. These are citizens who are in ill health and may well be suffering along with their family. That represents

20% of the population, which is quite stark when you think about it in those terms. This would not be tolerated in England, Scotland or Wales, so why do we tolerate it in Northern Ireland?

The DUP, which controls the Health and Finance Departments, is exposed for its underfunding of the health service and failure to act on the warnings that were given by Michael McGimpsey when he indicated what lay ahead with the Budget that was approved by many who are now complaining. I recall a clinician talking recently about the situation in the health service, and he compared it to an airport where the aeroplanes were being parked on the grass or on the tarmac and were not being allowed to take off. Essentially, we manage our health service in Northern Ireland by parking patients in not just one queue but multiple queues. There are 212,000 people in the queue to get a first appointment, which is up almost 46% on a year ago. That must be of concern to everybody. There are 10,000 patients in the queue for an integrated clinical assessment and treatment (ICAS) and diagnosis. There are almost 90,000 people, up 11% on the previous year, in the queue for the specialist diagnostic service, which provides clinicians with additional information to get to the root of the problem. In July 2015, 30,000 people were waiting for nine weeks or more. After that, you have to wait for your diagnostic report to come through. I see that 95% are completed within two weeks, but that is still a time delay. Ninety-nine per cent must wait for four weeks, so there is a section of people waiting even longer.

The next queue is the inpatient admission queue, in which there are 60,000 people who have been assessed as needing treatment and needing to be admitted to hospital. That is up 20% on the previous year. Almost half of those people have been waiting for more than 13 weeks, and a quarter more than 26 weeks. It is queue after queue after queue, and, as my colleague Jo-Anne Dobson highlighted, delays cause concern to patients and their families, but, worse than that, their conditions can often deteriorate. That is what is obviously happening here. Let us be very clinical about this: that is causing more treatment in the NHS because people's conditions are worsening and more money has to be spent trying to put the problem right once the patient gets to the front of the multiple queues.

I think of the simple example of diabetes, an issue that arose when I was on the Health Committee. Insufficient money was being put into providing the advice and support service so that diabetics could better look after themselves. What has been the net result? Our failure to invest in that service has meant that we have higher levels of amputations than other places. Particularly at that time, the Northern Health and Social Care Trust, which covers my area, had a higher number of amputations. There was a higher likelihood of having a limb amputated in the Northern Trust area than in any other part of Northern Ireland because of the then inadequacy of the service. I believe that the situation has improved a bit since then, but we need to do lots of smart things to ensure that people are treated quickly.

How do we compare to other parts of the National Health Service? I had a look at the NHS England publication that came out around the same time — July 2015 — to see how it has been doing. As the Chair of the Health Committee said, England, Scotland and Wales do not operate with multiple queues and waiting times that are frequently

breached. They have a referral time that is not to the next queue but to treatment. The important thing to a patient is this: when am I going to be treated? That is a very sensible measurement, which forces all the various cogs in the health service to work together to find solutions to get the patient treated quicker.

At this time, we have this fragmented service, where everybody gets parked in a different queue, and somebody then blames somebody else. Everybody needs to work together to get solutions and to get treatment faster. With that faster treatment will come more efficient systems and more patients treated in a better manner.

I was astounded when I read that report from England. It tells us that 1.9% of patients wait more than six weeks for a diagnostic test —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): The Member's time is almost up.

Mr Beggs: — and that 92.9% are seen and treated within 18 weeks. We need to change our system. We need better value for money and decisions to be made so that our constituents are better served.

Mr Allister: I commend Mrs Dobson for bringing the motion to the House. I will also comment on her restraint, in the context of the relentless vilification of the Ulster Unionist Health Minister, Mr Michael McGimpsey, by the DUP for four years when he was in office. We then discover that three successive DUP Ministers have presided over a system that has got a lot worse and that waiting times are at an all-time high. Given that context, Mrs Dobson was very restrained in how she presented the matter.

Mrs Dobson: I thank the Member for giving way and for his comments. I was restrained, you are right, but my focus was primarily on waiting times. The fact that we have had three successive Ministers and the waiting times are at such a crisis point speaks volumes.

Mr Allister: Indeed. In dealing with issues of waiting times, we all have our own experiences. I think back to last Friday and my surgery in Ballymoney. A man came in whom I had seen at the start of the summer. In May, he had been diagnosed with Parkinson's. I could see, and I am not a medical person, a vast deterioration in him over the summer months, yet that man came to talk to me about the fact that he was waiting for a neurological scan at the Causeway Hospital and could not get a date for it.

It is pretty clear to me that, if a neurological scan cannot be provided for somebody diagnosed with Parkinson's disease, and he cannot even be given a date and is deteriorating before one's eyes, there is something radically wrong with the system.

I can think of other examples. I think of a man who has been in with me who has been told that he needs a heart bypass but is going to have to wait maybe six months. I think of a man with severe back pain who has been waiting 71 weeks for an appointment at Musgrave Park Hospital. I can think of another gentleman with acute gastro problems who has been waiting 12 months for a routine appointment. Those are the sort of stories that you would expect to hear in some sort of Third World country, not in this part of the United Kingdom, and they are a badge of the failure of devolution to make anything better in those terms in Northern Ireland. It is a rebuke to the Ministers who have held those portfolios that things have deteriorated rather

than improved. We should not have to deal with these situations.

Of course, matters are now compounded by the political situation in which we find ourselves. I must say this to Sinn Féin: you need to get off your high moral horse as if none of this had anything to do with you, because it was IRA bullets into a man in recent weeks that were the catalyst for the terminal failure of these institutions that we are witnessing.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): Order, please. I am trying to be as flexible as I can and allow the cut and thrust of politics, but I believe that the Member is well wide of the motion.

Mr Allister: I am making a point that circumstances that put a man beyond the help of any health service are a contributor to the situation. I must also say to the SDLP, which laments the sparsity of spending for health, that it is a contributor to the fact that the Executive are losing £10 million a month out of public funding because of the penalties that have to be paid on welfare because of its intransigence, with Sinn Féin, on that. There are some points —

Mr McKinney: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: Certainly.

Mr McKinney: Will the Member accept that, while welfare reform issues have dominated, all the issues relate back to budgetary allocation and that, in fact, health service spend was ring-fenced, outside of the welfare issue?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): I remind the Member that he had already qualified for an additional minute.

Mr Allister: I appreciate that. Yes, but to further bleed the public funds of £10 million a month means that there is £10 million less per month to spread over the essential needs of Northern Ireland. Whatever way you cut it, that is the reality.

The matters that we are discussing are evidence of the failure of this system of government, which is now on life support. This system of government is not serving the interests of anyone — patient or anyone else — and the sooner we put this system of government —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): The Member's time is up.

Mr Allister: — out of its misery, the better.

Mr B McCrea: The proposer of the motion has brought a very serious situation to our attention, and she deserves credit for that. I am less sure about the arguments that have flowed from it about who is to blame and who should be here in the Chamber. Does it really matter that the Minister is not here today in his place and does it matter who is responsible for why he is not here? The waiting lists will not change just because Simon Hamilton is not here or whatever. This has been an ongoing issue. The real reason behind it is that the challenges on our health budget increase 6% year on year and yet our income increases by 1%. There is a deficit that the Assembly has not been able to bridge. So, it is not correct to simply point the finger at commissioners, trusts and board members.

This institution will not take the decisions to implement Donaldson. It will not face the fact that we have seven hospitals when, in a region of our size, we might have three.

12.15 pm

When you look at who is to blame for the Minister not being here, it was rather leading with the chin when a UUP Minister is not taking his ministerial seat. In fact, there are some who would say that that action precipitated the entire crisis. That may be something that the UUP wishes to take credit for, but I do not think that that is a good plan. It is interesting to see them all here en masse —

Mrs Dobson: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: No, I will not give way, thank you. *[Interruption.] They are all here en masse — [Interruption.]*

Mr McGimpsey: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Earlier, you ruled that Mr Allister was off the mark when he talked on this subject. Is Mr McCrea not also off the mark with his totally inaccurate remarks on a separate issue?

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): I am sure that Mr McGimpsey will appreciate that, in acting as the Deputy Speaker, I have to wait to see whether the Member will relate his remarks to the motion. That is what I was doing. I thank the Member for his help.

Mr B McCrea: Mr Deputy Speaker, I am always grateful for your direction. You will be aware that I am responding to points raised around the Chamber. This is a debate. Do you know what, Mr Deputy Speaker? If the UUP cannot take a debate, it should not start an argument in the first place. *[Interruption.]* I can tell you, as somebody — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): Order. On this occasion, I believe that the Member is now wandering desperately away from the motion. *[Laughter.]*

Mr B McCrea: Mr Deputy Speaker, I think that —

A Member: Keep wandering. *[Interruption.]*

Mr B McCrea: Mr Deputy Speaker, remarks are being made from a sedentary position, which if we are going to be very precise —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): Order. I remind the Member that I am charged with the responsibility of dealing with people who make remarks from a sedentary position. I do not need his help.

Mr B McCrea: People in the Chamber have made certain statements during the debate. Members from Sinn Féin have pointed the finger at why the Minister is not here. I respond by saying that their failure to address welfare reform was part and parcel of the funding deficit that means that we cannot address the waiting lists highlighted in the motion. That is a point that I wish to make.

I heard Members from the Alliance Party say that it is a disgrace that there is no Minister here. Was it not the party that was going to vote for some form of suspension so that we would not have been here for four or five weeks? What would have happened to waiting lists then?

I remember being in the Chamber when I was in the UUP and was one of the very few people who would rise to defend the then Minister of Health. The rest of them scattered the minute there was any attack from the DUP. Let me tell you this: I am quite happy to stand my ground — *[Interruption.]* — but this motion, when we come to it —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): Order. I thought that Members might have picked up that I would deal with people speaking from a sedentary position. I have noted a number of Members who are doing it and would advise them not to do it again.

Mr B McCrea: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. The crisis in waiting times is important, but it will not be resolved by finger-pointing. Everybody in here has a role to play. That is in getting around a table and making a meaningful contribution. Even Mr Allister in his contribution — *[Interruption.]* Even he has a contribution to make. I would like him to be a little bit more welcoming of the institutions and not revel in the fact that they are not working. Let us find a way of making —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): The Member's time is almost up.

Mr B McCrea: Let us find a way of making them work. I am quite pleased — I am really pleased — that I have had the opportunity to make some really important points that I hope the wider public will listen to.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): The Member's time is up. I call Mr Dominic Bradley to make a winding-up speech on the amendment. I am sure that you will all listen carefully to his contribution and will not make remarks from sedentary positions.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. It has been an interesting debate. I regret the fact that it was reduced to a spat between Mr McCrea and the Ulster Unionist Party. Mr McCrea made the point several times that the issue would not be resolved by finger-pointing, but that was after he had pointed the finger at almost everyone in the House.

We have heard the statistics, the figures and so on, and people have pointed out that there are long periods of waiting: there is a waiting time even to see your GP; there is the time between seeing the GP and the commencement of tests; there is the time waiting for specialist referral from the GP; and there is the time between seeing the specialist and the start of a treatment. We are also aware that we need 110 newly trained GPs annually in Northern Ireland, but we are training only 65 annually. That means that there is an annual shortfall of 45 GPs. Anyone who has spoken to general practitioners and their representatives will tell you that this spells more trouble in the future. Unless that situation for GP services is corrected, a serious train wreck lies ahead.

The SDLP's amendment calls on the Minister of Health

“to take immediate action to alleviate current pressures and to fully implement and fund the Transforming Your Care plan to ameliorate future pressures.”

The SDLP has proposed a short-term solution and a longer-term solution. Transforming Your Care recognised the issue of waiting times and said that waiting lists would lengthen if changes were not made. The issue has not been dealt with and, not surprisingly, waiting lists and waiting times have increased. Previously, the Department used the private sector to alleviate such waiting lists and, even then, they increased on a year-on-year basis. The decision of the Minister to cut that funding has put more and more pressure on the public sector and, therefore, waiting lists have increased again.

We believe that we need a system that can deal with the demand from within effectively and efficiently without relying on the private sector. The motion calls on the Minister to identify and resolve the causes of the delays in appointments, and the amendment calls on the Minister to take immediate action to alleviate the current pressures. The absentee Minister of Health has been negligent in abandoning his role at this time of crisis in the health sector. He has left large waiting lists in his wake and has walked. He has been highly irresponsible and put the Northern Ireland health system under even greater pressure. In turn, he has put many people at risk with no end in sight. As I said earlier, this is the behaviour of a renegade, and this is the behaviour of a rogue who has deserted those in our society who are most in need.

In conclusion, we in the SDLP want to see a Health Minister in the Northern Ireland Executive, and we want that Minister to do everything in his power to tackle the huge issue of waiting times in Northern Ireland. I am sure that, like me, nearly every Member, if not every Member, in the House has had representations made to them from patients who were in dire need of procedures, and I have had a number recently. One person has been awaiting an orthopaedic procedure at Musgrave Park.

His condition has deteriorated over the last two years to the extent —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): The Member's time is up.

Mr D Bradley: — that he now requires a wheelchair.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): The Member's time is up. Please.

Mr D Bradley: They are the facts behind the waiting lists, and those people should be at the heart of this debate.

Mr McGimpsey: I thank my party colleague Mrs Dobson and all those who have taken part in this debate. We recognise this for the important issue it is. It is a part, although by no means all, of the problem that the health service is facing. The solution proposed by Mr McKinney — the full implementation of TYC — is a part, but not all, of the solution. I say that because full implementation of TYC would include charging for domiciliary care and closing statutory residential homes, which I have an issue with, and, as Minister, I resisted those types of measures. Much of TYC — I called it “shift left” in my day — is a good idea. It is about taking care into the community and supporting the community; but it needs major investment, and that major investment is not available, which is why we do not have it.

The other key element as we look forward is the Donaldson plan to rationalise the acute sector. Many Members have some difficulties with that, not least Dominic Bradley, who is bringing forward a debate about the A&E at Daisy Hill. That is an example of where change is inevitable, and the attitude shown in that debate can help the Minister for Health, whoever it is, make the decisions he has to make. I remember that when I took decisions on the health service, general hysteria broke out in this Chamber among all parties.

The waiting times now are as bad as they have been at any time in the last 15 years. When I took over in 2007, something like 200,000 people were on the waiting lists, and we got that down. To do that, certain steps have to be taken. We brought surgical teams in from England to work

nights and weekends to address the needs of patients, because patients who are not seen in a timely manner are in pain and distress, and many come to harm. The waiting times for cardiology and for cancer mean that our patients are coming to harm.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGimpsey: Yes.

Mr Beggs: Does the Member accept that when patients are not treated in a timely fashion, many end up at A&E and contribute to the growing waiting lists there? I notice that, for example, in Antrim this July only 61.3% of patients were seen within four hours, and that is not in the middle of winter pressures.

Mr McGimpsey: I agree: 95% within four hours is the target. Recently, we were there or thereabouts throughout our A&Es. All waiting times have slipped, and if you are not being seen in a timely manner, you are liable to come to harm. That is the issue. Cradle-to-grave healthcare, free at the point of delivery, is what we are here to provide. If we are not prepared to face up to that, we need to be honest with our constituents.

At the last Budget I dealt with, in 2011, this House was not prepared to face up to the bill to run the health service. I said that, based on the money that was offered, I needed an extra £200 million a year for three years and another £150 million in year 4 — £750 million — just to keep the health service stable, and where we were then was an awful lot better than where we are now. This House voted against that. The DUP did not believe me; Sinn Féin did not believe me; the Alliance Party did not believe me. Those three parties streamed through the lobby and voted for a Budget that was inadequate. I actually predicted these consequences if we did not properly fund the health service. We all share the blame. All the parties that voted for that Budget share the blame. They need not stand and wag their fingers now, because they are the architects of this situation.

There are certain things that you have to do for the health service. You have to invest in your buildings, your equipment and your people; you have to be efficient — in my time we produced £700 million of efficiencies over three years; and you have to engage with the public about their health, and I set up the Public Health Agency to do exactly that. Of course, the DUP voted against it, but that is neither here nor there.

12.30 pm

The fact is that we have an urgent problem. Fully implementing TYC and Donaldson's recommendations will not fix this; we now need emergency measures to fix the problem. The Belfast Trust, for example, abandoned elective spinal care at the end of last year. Imagine the number of patients who are sitting in extreme pain and distress. Although 100% of urgent breast cancer referrals should be seen within 14 days, we are down to 80% being seen within that time, so a number of women who are in trouble are not being seen in a timely manner.

It is the same with cardiac surgery. When I was there, there was a demand for 1,300 open-heart surgery operations in Northern Ireland, but we had the capacity for 1,000. Ms McLaughlin talked about the private sector, but I make no apologies for buying operations wherever I

could get them to make sure that those 300 patients were properly dealt with. If I had not done that, a number of them would have come to harm.

We are in an extreme situation, and we are not prepared to face up to it. As I said, I support TYC, with the two caveats that I outlined, but it will not fix the problem. I support much of what Donaldson said — perhaps not all of it — but his recommendations will not fix the problem now. This is an emergency.

Mr McKinney: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGimpsey: Go on.

Mr McKinney: Our amendment is consistent with what you are saying. It calls for immediate action to alleviate current pressures. That should be the voice of the Assembly. The important point is that, when the Minister and the Department worked with the trusts on these issues over Christmas last year, it led to cuts. The contingency plans led to cuts like those to the Dalriada Hospital, the Armagh minor injuries unit and Bangor Community Hospital, although the DUP was able to argue narrowly on that point in that constituency. Your proposal could lead to a cuts charter.

Mr McGimpsey: I still do not understand the logic of your saying that our proposal will lead to cuts. You can only pay for the service that you fund, and we are not funding the service that is required. The Member is right that, under the last Minister, Bangor Community Hospital shut. One of the key elements of TYC is step-down beds, GP beds and intermediate beds. So the idea should have been to take folks out of the Ulster Hospital, where they were receiving acute care, and, if they were not fit to go home or into a nursing home, they are provided with good nursing care that is overseen by GPs. However, Bangor Community Hospital has been shut, despite promises to the contrary. I agree that that type of convoluted approach is wholly contradictory. I have an issue with domiciliary care charging and the statutory residential care home closures.

We have a major problem. There were clever remarks about DRD: our Minister resigned to go into opposition, and the fact that nobody has been nominated to replace him is not down to us. That is not our fault, and you should think about that. We have this huge problem, and we are talking about it and saying that we will fix it with TYC or Donaldson's recommendations. We are getting esoteric and philosophical, and we are saying that we should not have any more private money and all the rest of it. We must have a plan of action right now — I called for this in the Health Committee many months ago, and I am still calling for it — to address the issue. We are not seeing a plan, and, as long as that is the case, we are looking at patients coming to harm and being in trouble.

If we are prepared to address that problem, it can be fixed. This is not something that cannot be done: we did it before. I took over from Paul Goggins in 2007. He had begun a process, and, in the three years that I was Health Minister — I am by no means saying that it was all down to me — we put a system in place to fix this problem, but we have to provide the wherewithal and the means for that.

Let me give you another example. You talked about shortages. I found the money to train an extra 70 doctors a year in the Queen's medical school. I had to take the money off the wards, because, of course, the money for training doctors does not come from DEL or the

Department of Education but directly from the Department of Health.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): The Member's time is almost up.

Mr McGimpsey: Last year, 50 of them went off to Australia and Canada, and that is an issue.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes that, in June 2015, there were 373,000 people waiting for a first outpatient appointment, a diagnostic test or inpatient treatment at hospitals in Northern Ireland and that this is equivalent to over 20% of the entire population; expresses concern that waiting times are now worse than at any time in recent history and that far too many people are having to wait in pain and under emotional distress for far too long; 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 calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to work with each of the health and social care trusts to identify and resolve the causes of the delays; and further calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to take immediate action to alleviate current pressures and to fully implement and fund the Transforming Your Care plan to ameliorate future pressures.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately after the lunchtime suspension. 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 sitting was suspended at 12.36 pm.

On resuming (Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Newton] in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Education

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I have to inform the House that question 7 has been withdrawn.

Free School Meals

1. **Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister of Education what consideration has been given to the expansion of free school meal provision for all younger school children. (AQO 8631/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): Free school meals ensure that pupils from families most in need have access to a healthy and nutritious cooked meal during the day. A free school meal also provides support to low-income families that face financial barriers when their children are seeking to access and remain in school. The focus of my policy on free school meals is to ensure that they are targeted at children from families most in need. In recent years, I have extended the eligibility criteria to include not only families with no income but working families on benefits and low incomes. This resulted in over 34,000 pupils becoming eligible for free school meals in 2014-15. In 2014-15, nearly 98,000 children, which represents approximately 30% of the school population, benefited from the current policy on free school meals. This cost the Department of Education approximately £40 million. Given the current difficult financial climate, I have no plans to further extend free school meals to all younger school children irrespective of need.

Mr Gardiner: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does the Minister agree with the recent report from the British Medical Association (BMA) that recommends that schools in Northern Ireland start offering free school meals to all pupils from the age of four to seven?

Mr O'Dowd: That would be the ideal position to be in, but, unfortunately, we do not have the finances to follow up on the BMA report. Given previous decisions made in England on free school meals entitlement, and the Barnett consequential that flowed from that to the Executive, the Executive made a decision to use that money in various Departments, including Health. I am not arguing against that decision because, as every Member knows, Health also faces significant pressures. I would like to be in the ideal position where we provide free school meals to all children, but we currently do not have the finances to back that up.

Ms Hanna: Can the Minister outline what steps have been taken to promote uptake and ensure that all children who are eligible are accessing and availing themselves of a nutritious school meal?

Mr O'Dowd: I issued several statements over the summer to encourage parents whose children are eligible for free school meals to take them up. Information is distributed through the schools. As the Member will be aware, there

are also regular discussions in the media and elsewhere on free school meals and several other items on free school meal entitlement. It is important to point out to parents that there is no stigma attached to their child receiving free school meals. It is an entitlement. There is no stigma attached in the school, as it is no longer the case that children on free school meals have a different coloured ticket or different coloured pass. In many schools, there are now processes in place whereby no one knows who is paying or who is not paying directly for school meals. I encourage every parent to ensure that their children are receiving all the entitlements that they are entitled to in our schools, and I reassure every parent that there is no stigma attached to free school meals.

GCSE/A-level Results: 2014-15

2. **Mrs Overend** asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of GCSE and A-level results for the 2014-15 academic year. (AQO 8632/11-16)

13. **Mr McCartney** asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of this year's GCSE and A-level results. (AQO 8643/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: With your permission, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 2 and 13 together.

There continues to be a very strong performance by pupils here in GCSEs and A levels. It is important that we celebrate and acknowledge their achievements across the North. We should not forget the teachers and parents who have supported those children to reach this stage in their education.

At GCSE, there was an increase in A* grade from 8.9% to 9%. Grades A* to A also show an increase to 28.6%, and grades A* to C increased to 78.7%. At A level, 83% of entries here achieved grades A* to C. The overall pass rate remained much the same as last year, rising slightly to 98.2% of grades awarded A* to E. Some 7.6%, previously 7.3%, of grades were awarded at A*.

One of my top priorities as Education Minister continues to be raising standards. I am particularly pleased that we are seeing improvements in two key areas: the performance of young men at GCSE level and the upward trend seen in the proportion of entries in STEM — science, technology, engineering and maths — subjects at GCSE and A level. Those results are very encouraging, but we cannot become complacent. There remain unacceptable achievement gaps at all levels in our system, and I intend to do all that I can to tackle them.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Minister for his response. I, too, congratulate all those students across Northern Ireland who received excellent results, as the Minister has outlined. Does the Minister agree that, whilst it is heartening that Northern Ireland pupils maintain a healthy lead in achieving grades A* to C at A level and five or more GCSEs compared to England and Wales, if we continue to diverge from the rest of the UK in the way that the exams are delivered, comparisons will be impossible in a short few years? Does he share my concerns that local pupils may find it harder to gain university places if we do not maintain parity with the rest of the country?

Mr O'Dowd: Education is a devolved matter, and it is a matter for the various devolved institutions as to how they set out their education policies. The Member will be aware that Wales has taken a different decision from that

of Westminster, and Scotland has a completely different exam system. It has not proven impossible for young people from Scotland to travel to England, and back and forth, over many generations. It certainly has not proven impossible for young people to travel from Southern Ireland to England and vice versa in relation to university, employment etc and have their grades recognised. Indeed, many universities in Britain take students from across the globe, and they are perfectly capable of comparing international exams with their local exams. So, I have no concerns in relation to ensuring that our young people will have portable, respected qualifications moving forward.

I have not taken any decision in relation to the exams that we currently hold without first establishing an expert group on the matter, allowing it to consult and report back to me, and I have accepted every recommendation that that expert group has brought forward. So, I have taken my time in relation to any changes proposed to our exam system. I have listened to the experts in the field. I have consulted, and I will not make any further changes unless I do the same programme again; but we should not be sending out any stories or concerns from the Chamber that our young people's qualifications will not be valid and valued across these islands.

In relation to comparisons, while it is useful to compare to England and Wales, we have to ensure now that our young people are compared against international best standards. That is where we have to set our targets. I always ensure and monitor our comparisons with England and Wales, and it has nothing to do with politics with a small "p" or a capital "P". I am more interested in how our young people are comparing in the international field than I am in any small geographical network.

Mr A Maginness: Arising out of the Minister's answer to Mrs Overend, will the Minister outline any trends that there might be in relation to students here in Northern Ireland undertaking GCSEs or A levels under the English or Welsh education authorities?

Mr O'Dowd: We operate an open market here in our qualification system. The vast majority of qualifications in our schools fall under the CCEA remit, but there is a market there, and the Welsh and English examination boards operate here. I have met them, I have had discussions with them and my officials have had discussions with them as well. My message to them is clear: I am prepared to keep an open market as long as their examinations do not corrupt our curriculum. They understand my position and I understand theirs, and we continue to monitor that situation. So, as long as there is no corruption of our curriculum, I am more than happy to keep an open market running at this time.

School Capacity Calculations

3. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister of Education what plans his Department has to review school capacity calculations. (AQO 8633/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: The Department is considering whether the Manhattan database, which is used by the Education Authority for estate management purposes, could be used to provide updated information on the capacity of each school.

Mrs D Kelly: Minister, in calculating school capacity, does the Department use its own figures — that is, designated

teaching space — or does it use education and library board figures that include space with the potential for dual use, such as assembly halls?

Mr O'Dowd: We use our own figures. That was the subject of discussion in a recent Audit Office report, and I am aware that that report comes before the Public Accounts Committee in November. The Chair of the Public Accounts Committee is sitting behind me, so I have no wish to pre-empt what will happen in that Committee's inquiry and the forthcoming report and recommendations that it will make. At this stage, I am aware that the old boards used the Manhattan system, and now the Education Authority uses it. My Department has another way of measuring teaching space etc. However, I believe that the Audit Office report, which flows from the Public Accounts Committee, and my Department's work will be able to merge into one system.

Schools: Minor Works Schemes

4. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of Education what action he has taken to secure a workable budget to allow all school minor works schemes that are listed as category 1 to proceed. (AQO 8634/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: The contractual commitments for minor works from the 2014-15 financial year, together with the substantial reduction in capital budget from 2015-16 onwards, means that the capital budget for 2015-16 is fully committed. I have endeavoured, and will continue to endeavour, to reallocate funding where possible to minor works and to bid for additional funding at each monitoring round throughout the year. That is the current position. Later in this financial year, I hope to develop a programme of minor works and to progress the most urgent projects. Should it not be possible to secure additional funding in the 2015-16 financial year, it is anticipated that the highest priority works will be released for delivery in the first half of the 2016-17 financial year, subject to budget availability.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister is aware of my strong interest in three schools in the Omagh district, for which I have been lobbying over the summer months. They are: Dean Maguirc College, Carrickmore; St. Scire's Primary School, Trillick; and All Saints Primary School, Tattysallagh. Is there any way in which the Westminster Government can be persuaded to give the Minister's Department a workable budget to make sure that schools in category 1 can proceed without delay?

Mr O'Dowd: I am aware of the Member's strong lobbying on those schools and a number of others in his constituency. Other Members have also raised their genuine concerns about minor works programmes in the schools estate with reference to their constituencies.

The Member makes a very valid point. We require a working budget that is capable of delivering the basic necessities of education. When the global figure of £1.5 billion of cuts to the Executive's Budget over this last number of years is thrown around, the reality, when it comes down to ground level, is that minor works to the schools that he refers to cannot go ahead. Other programmes of work in education cannot go ahead, and there is a responsibility on the British Government to ensure that the Executive and the Department of Education have a workable budget.

I give the Member some stark figures. The initial capital budget for education for 2015-16 is £147 million, which is significantly below the 2014-15 figure, which was £183.4 million. Due to tight budgetary constraints, which I have outlined, the total budget available for minor works programmes in the current financial year is £34 million, compared to £123 million in 2014-15. The difference between those figures means that I cannot progress work in the schools that he has outlined, and I cannot progress work in other areas and schools that require it.

I will continue to work with my Executive colleagues — those who are in their Executive positions — and to engage with my party and others around the Chamber to ensure that, when we get talks and discussions off the ground and parties come into the Chamber and into those talks, high on the agenda is a workable budget for all Departments in this institution.

2.15 pm

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle, Mo bhuíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagraí go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for his answers up until now. In relation to the schools enhancement scheme, how many of the projects initially approved have, in fact, been completed or are nearing completion?

Mr O'Dowd: Mo bhuíochas leis an Chomhalta as a cheist. Currently, 22 of the original released projects are now on-site. I released an additional six schemes in July, and they should be on-site by November, bringing the total number of school enhancement schemes to 28. There are a further 11 projects at pre-tender stage. When budget becomes available, I will release them. Budget can become available in a number of ways. There can be slippage in other spends. That is what happened in July, when I released the six other schemes. There was slippage in spend in a number of other schemes across the capital works programme. My officials and I, in fairness, intervened immediately and ensured that another six projects got off the ground. If there is slippage in other capital schemes as we move forward, I will release the other 11 projects. As I said to Mr McElduff, I will continue to lobby those Executive Ministers who are in post and others to ensure that we have a workable budget.

Mr Beggs: The Minister has commissioned capital expenditure on a post-primary school for 14 pupils, rather than those children continuing to be educated in specialist Irish language units at existing post-primary schools. Does he not understand that, when he spends money in new schools, there is less money available for capital expenditure to maintain the existing schools with specialist Irish language units?

Mr O'Dowd: You can cloud your concern about the capital budget with the issue of finance, but you cannot cloud the fact that, in this instance, you are not concerned about the capital budget. You are concerned about Irish-medium education and its facilitation. That is your concern, so why do you not just come out and say it bluntly? Say, "Minister, I don't like the idea of you providing Irish-medium education to young people and I'd rather you stopped it", instead of coming in with, "By the way, Minister, you haven't got a great capital budget. Would you try and use it in a different way?" Just be straight and honest about the fact, and come out and say, "Minister, I don't like the fact that you're facilitating Irish-medium education".

I will continue to facilitate Irish-medium education. First, because I have a statutory duty to do so. Secondly, because I believe that it is the right thing to do, and, thirdly, because those young people who are benefiting from Irish-medium education have a right to have capital funds spent on them. It is not up to you or someone else to decide that, because people are taught in the Irish-medium sector, we should not provide capital funds and that we should put them somewhere else — and you referred to units. A development proposal process went through in relation to Coláiste Dhoire. I approved it. The school is now functioning and I wish it all the best for the future.

Schools: Intake Figures

5. **Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Education to outline the schools in respect of which he has approved or refused increases in intake figures for 2015-16 for both year 1 in primary schools and year 8 in post-primary schools. (AQO 8635/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: The Department sets admissions numbers for schools to determine the number of children they can accept in year 1 or, for post-primary schools, year 8. The Department also has the authority to grant additional places in a school by way of a temporary variation to the school's admissions number, which is for one year only. Temporary variations are used to address short-term demographic pressures in an area and are not about meeting parental preferences for a particular school. Permanent increases to schools' admissions and enrolments can happen only in the context of the overall area plan through the development proposal process.

The Member's question, as posed, requests a significant amount of information, and it would not be practical to answer it in detail verbally. Therefore I will arrange for the Member to receive the information and for it to be placed in the Assembly Library.

Overall, however, I can advise that 90 primary schools were permitted a temporary variation to increase their admissions number for 2015-16, while 20 were refused any increase. For post-primary schools, 15 were permitted an increase, while six were refused any increase.

Mr Allister: I look forward to perusing the detail, but can I raise with the Minister some of the heartless decisions taken by his Department in relation to very obvious need for temporary variations?

I think of a young child who wanted to attend Culcrow Primary School. He is the eldest child in his family, it is the nearest primary school, and there were no obvious means of getting anywhere else, yet he was refused because places were filled by students from much further afield, even though the school was not their nearest primary school. However, when the Department was asked to allow a single increase, which would have kept the composite class at only 28, the Minister refused. Why is there such a heartless attitude to young children in the system?

Mr O'Dowd: I am reluctant to discuss an issue on which I do not have the details. However, perhaps the Member answered his own question, in that he said that the school accepted pupils who had travelled past their nearest school. I suggest that the Member go away and look at the specific school's entry criteria. The board of governors sets the entry criteria for any school.

The Member may have a valid point, and I will look into the matter further after Question Time, but I point him in the direction of looking at the school's entry criteria in this instance.

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Minister for his answers. Will he outline in how many and in which cases he personally intervened in order to grant additional places to a school via the temporary variation process, in doing so overturning the recommendations of his own officials?

Mr O'Dowd: The Member used to be a Minister, and he will therefore be aware that an official's role is to give the Minister advice. Perhaps his officials ran DRD. However, looking at some cases, I suspect that that would not have been so, because officials would have had more experience and been able to achieve more than the Minister achieved in his time there.

I am more than happy to provide the information that the Member requests. I do not have it to hand, but I will provide it.

Teacher Absences

6. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of Education how his Department is addressing the growing levels of teacher absences through stress. (AQO 8636/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: The level of stress-related illness among teachers is higher than I, as Minister of Education, want to see. I therefore take the issue extremely seriously. My Department in conjunction with employing authorities and the teaching unions, through the teachers' negotiating committee, continue to work together to tackle the issue.

Examples of what we are doing on a practical level include a strategy for teacher health and well-being; a policy statement on tackling violence and abuse against teachers; a workload agreement; a teacher attendance procedure, which includes a new provision for the recording of incidences of work-related stress; a flexible working scheme; a job-share scheme; a career-break scheme; a temporary variation of contract; and a policy statement on planning, preparation and assessment time.

However, it is also important to recognise that what is reported as stress-related illness is not necessarily as a result of the work environment. To set the context, 21% of all sickness absence in 2014-15 was reported as being stress-related, and 3.7% of that was reported as being work-related stress. Those figures notwithstanding, I assure Members that it is a matter of the utmost importance to me and my Department. Most recently, I have personally endorsed the reinvigoration of the teachers' health and well-being working group, where work-related stress absence is the prime issue.

Mr Dallat: I thank the Minister for his answer. Is the health and well-being project being pursued? Perhaps more importantly, is he aware that teachers who stay in the profession until they are in their 60s have a remarkably short life expectancy and no longer have the opportunity to retire earlier, as they may have done in the past? Is the Department taking that issue seriously, given that those people dedicated their whole life to the teaching profession?

Mr O'Dowd: First, I have reinvigorated the health and well-being working group. I want to see product flowing from that group, and I will continue to monitor its progress. The

Member will be aware that teaching is a very rewarding profession in many different ways, but there are levels of associated stress. Our job, my job as Minister and the job of employers is to ensure that the level of stress is managed and that it does not affect the overall health and well-being of the teacher. That is what we are attempting to do.

Retirement age has been much debated in the Chamber and elsewhere, and changes made to it have put severe restrictions on the ability of the Executive to mitigate it. We are talking about significant amounts of money for the Department of Education or, indeed, other Departments to bring in an alternative scheme. However, I am looking at alternatives. I am investigating the use of funds to see whether we can facilitate earlier retirement for some of our teaching colleagues who may want that to be the case. I am going through those details with my officials. I will have to bring the matter to DFP, as would be the usual case — it has nothing to do with any new gatekeeping role that people have been self-appointed to. I will also then have to bring it to the Executive, but I assure the Member that I am investigating alternatives.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Can I ask the Minister what actions his Department has taken to tackle the bullying and harassment of teachers?

Mr O'Dowd: Again, that is primarily the responsibility of the employing authorities and the employers of the teacher. However, in 2011, my Department, in collaboration with employing authorities and teachers' unions, agreed a teachers' health and well-being strategy. That strategy has been recently reviewed, and I am aware that recommendations related to it are being considered through the teachers' negotiating committee, at which my Department and employees are obviously represented. Most recently, as I said to Mr Dallat, I have reinvigorated the teachers' health and well-being working group, and as I said, I want to see product flowing from that as well.

School Attendance Costs

8. **Mr Flanagan** asked the Minister of Education, given that the recent report by the Irish League of Credit Unions indicated that 74 % of parents feel schools are not doing enough to support them in keeping costs down, what action his Department plans to take to address the cost of sending children to school. (AQO 8638/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: The Irish League of Credit Unions recently published a report that highlights the cost to parents of sending children to school. In particular, it suggests that school uniforms are the most expensive items to purchase. To assist parents with sending children to school, my Department provides significant funding through a range of supporting measures; for example, free school meals, the clothing or uniform allowance scheme and providing assistance with transport.

At this time of year, I recognise that school uniform costs are of particular concern to parents. Whilst my Department provides assistance, allocating over £5 million of funding through the clothing allowance scheme, I believe that some schools could do more to ensure that their uniform policy is fair and reasonable in practical and financial terms. My Department has issued guidance to schools on school uniform policy. That guidance makes it very clear

that DE expects boards of governors to give a high priority to cost considerations when deciding on what uniform their pupils should wear. I therefore encourage schools to consider whether their current arrangements are in the best interests of children and their family circumstances and to change them if they are not.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. I thank the Minister for his answer. He will be aware of the growing concern that many people have about the cost of sending their children back to school, particularly with uniforms. However, some schools in my area are also charging up to £100 for a voluntary contribution to send their child to a school. Can I ask the Minister for his Department's position on those voluntary contributions, which add to the growing financial pressures that parents have in sending their children back to school?

Mr O'Dowd: Under current legislation, all schools may seek a voluntary contribution from parents for the benefit of the school or in support of activities organised by the school. However, the Department requires that any request from the school for a voluntary contribution must make it clear that there is no obligation for parents to make a contribution and that pupils will not be treated differently according to whether their parents have made the contribution. The clue is in the title; it is voluntary. Parents do not have to make the contribution. I appreciate that schools raise funds in many different ways. There are pressures on schools' budgets, but there are also pressures on family budgets. So, I ask any school that seeks voluntary contributions to think about it carefully and the level it is setting it at and to ensure that parents know that it is a voluntary contribution.

Special Educational Needs: Statements

9. **Mr McKinney** asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the provision of special educational needs statutory statements for children with autism spectrum disorder and other learning difficulties. (AQO 8639/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: I am content that the statementing process is designed to meet the individual special educational needs of children, including those with autism spectrum disorder. The process is child-centred to ensure that children have access to an appropriate education that affords them the opportunity to achieve their personal potential in terms of age and ability, aptitude and any special educational needs they may have. 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 process in no more than 26 weeks, subject to valid exceptions. This period allows for a detailed assessment to be undertaken with input commissioned from the child's parents or guardians and a range of education and health professionals if appropriate.

All of the former education and library boards have recently reported that, in the majority of cases, the statutory target is being met, subject to valid exceptions. I will continue to closely monitor the Education Authority's performance in this regard. The Member will also be aware

of the ongoing review of special educational needs and inclusion which proposes to reduce the statementing time frame from 26 weeks to 20 weeks.

2.30 pm

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That ends the period for listed questions. We now move on to topical questions. The Members listed for topical questions 2 and 7 have withdrawn their names.

Early Intervention: Good Practice

T1. **Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister of Education what examples of good practice in early intervention have been identified by his Department. (AQT 2821/11-16)

Mr D Bradley: Ba mhaith liom ceist a chur ar an Aire faoi na samplaí de dhea-chleachtas sa luath-chúnamh atá aitheanta ag an Roinn s'aige.

Mr O'Dowd: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as an cheist.

Early intervention is such a wide topic in the sense of the area or stage that it occurs in a child's development. Working with our colleagues in the Health Department, such as the health visitor in the earliest days of a child's life, right through to when that child is ready to go into nursery school, we have programmes in place. We have recently completed pilot programmes in and around preschools from which we want to learn best practice to develop as we move forward with the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Bill, which I referred to in a previous answer. There are numerous examples of good intervention as early as possible. As I say, the pilot schemes are in place from which we also want to learn examples.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat arís, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an méid atá ráite aige ina fhreagra.

I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he agree with me that one of the key aspects of ensuring that children with autism develop to their fullest potential is early intervention and that that means early diagnosis and early statementing? Will he undertake today to do everything possible, as soon as possible, to ensure that those two processes are expedited?

Mr O'Dowd: I fully agree with the Member: early diagnosis, early statementing and early intervention are, without doubt, crucial and key to that. The best way in which I can answer the Member's question is in practical terms through the SEND Bill. It is vital that the SEND Bill progresses through Committee Stage, comes back to the Floor of the Assembly, is debated and amended as the Assembly sees fit and we then move forward to ensure that we have legislation that modernises special educational needs interventions and services and ensures that they are fit for the 21st century. That is the most practical way in which I, as Minister, can respond to the Member: we have draft legislation there; it needs to work its way through the Committee; and the Assembly needs to do its business. We need to ensure that that draft legislation becomes an Act and we start making those practical changes to our special educational needs services.

Shared and Integrated Education: Committee Recommendations

T3. **Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the recommendations in the Committee report on shared and integrated education. (AQT 2823/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: I outlined my responses to the Committee report during the debate, I think, this day last week. I agree with the vast majority of the recommendations. The Committee has carried out a very good piece of work that will allow us to ensure that the debate around shared education moves from debate to practical policy positions — I will be in a position to make an announcement on policy in the next day or so; that we then move to the legislation, which is currently with a number of Executive parties; that we move that legislation, again, to the Floor of the House; and that we produce a shared education Act.

Mr Gardiner: Does the Minister agree that, if we are to make meaningful progress in shared education, he needs to ensure that the restrictive barriers to fair employment across the sectors, such as the RE certificates, are removed?

Mr O'Dowd: I do not think that it is a barrier to shared education in that sense. Measures are in place. We have had this discussion, particularly during Question Time, several times now, with your party colleagues in particular. I do not think that it is a barrier, but we have to ensure that we remove the barriers to anyone who wishes to obtain the certificate and we make access to the certificate much easier. It is a duty on the Department and the employing authorities to ensure that our colleges and teacher training colleges have the facilities to do so. Shared education can move on regardless of what happens next to the certificate.

Teachers: Professional Development

T4. **Mr B McCrea** asked the Minister of Education to outline his views on the professional development of teachers. (AQT 2824/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: It is clearly a worthwhile programme of work. Significant investment goes into the continuous professional development of our teaching workforce. The Member may or may not be aware that, as a profession, teachers have 10 dedicated training days a year.

Mr B McCrea: Is the Minister aware that the Regional Training Unit (RTU) previously held a summer camp that was attended by over 2,000 teachers but was cancelled this year because of funding constraints and that teachers went ahead and organised it themselves? Do you think that that was a worthwhile exercise?

Mr O'Dowd: The innovation of our teaching workforce in this instance proves that they are willing and want to continue to be involved in continuous professional development. I am aware that the RTU cancelled the summer scheme. It has a budget, and it decides how it spends that budget. The RTU decides on those matters. However, as I said, continuous professional development is delivered in many ways. The 10 dedicated days throughout the year are there for teacher training, whole-school training and so on. I congratulate the teachers who went ahead with the training programme over the summer.

Shared Education/Integrated Education: Relationship

T5. **Ms Lo** asked the Minister of Education to explain the relationship between shared education and integrated education. (AQT 2825/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: Integrated education is a stand-alone sector. I have a statutory obligation to facilitate and grow that sector, which we have been doing over the past number of years. I have said this many times: it is not a case of either/or. Shared education will be a development that will grow over the next number of years in connection with the policy that I hope to publish in the next number of days and the legislation that we want to bring to the Floor. There may be shared education projects that evolve into fully fledged integrated schools, there may be others that do not, but it is about ensuring that we have avenues in our education system and society that allow greater cooperation and greater learning from and about each other and ensure that our young people understand the complexities of our society and help to change those complexities.

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for his response. Why is he so reluctant to accept that the fundamental principle of sharing is sharing that happens within one school rather than between schools, in exchanges in the playground or when meeting for certain subjects?

Mr O'Dowd: It is not a case of the Minister fundamentally refusing to accept that. The integrated sector has not convinced all parents of it. As far as I am aware, all parties in the Chamber support parental preference, so parents have the right to make a preference about which school and which sector they send their children. I have reacted to the demand in the growth of the integrated sector when proven cases have been brought forward to me that will allow the integrated sector to develop in a sustainable way. The integrated sector should not be looking over its shoulder at shared education and seeing it as a threat. It is actually a complement to all our education sectors.

It is worth noting — this has been said before — that, during the worst days of the conflict, many of our schools were safe havens for our young people. They ensured that our young people did not end up in conflict-related matters. Those schools, whatever their category — maintained, controlled or whatever — also played a significant part in trying to reconcile our communities.

Secondary Schools: Mission Statement

T6. **Mr McNarry** asked the Minister of Education to sum up his mission statement for our secondary schools relating to future employment. (AQT 2826/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: I am not sure whether I have picked up the Member's question right or the direction he wishes me to go in. The mission statement for our secondary schools on the employment of the young people they are in charge of is about ensuring that they are prepared for the economy of the 21st century. The economy of the 21st century is rapidly developing and changing. We have to ensure that our young people have the skill sets that allow them to adapt to and change with that economy. I welcome that — I mentioned this in a previous Question Time — there has been a rise in the number of young people, particularly young women, taking STEM subjects in our schools.

Mr McNarry: I thank the Minister for fully understanding my question and for giving an appropriate answer. To develop that, is he in a position to explain to the House what improvements could be made to those direct links to employment that have been identified as being needed in the economy and the wider United Kingdom economy?

Mr O'Dowd: One of the areas that I have been working on — indeed, I see Minister Farry in the Chamber — is our careers advisory programme, which we have reviewed. Over the last number of years, I have been reaching out to employers — I know that Mr Farry has done so as well; it is his remit, in a sense — and engaging with them on what they expect from our post-primary schools and education system in the areas that I am responsible for and on the changes that have taken place in education over the last number of years that they may be unfamiliar with. I think that conversation has been very interesting, because many of our employers who left school a number of years ago do not recognise the changes in our education system and curriculum or the opportunities in the curriculum for young people to develop.

I have also put a challenge out to the business sector. It has to become involved in our schools and has to join the boards of governors. It has to be in and out of our schools and make itself familiar to them. I am talking not just about the usual suspects but about the schools in areas where there is social deprivation and high levels of employment. It is up to businesses to be in those schools and to provide leadership.

Schools: Technology Investment

T8. **Mr McCartney** asked the Minister of Education, while welcoming his announcement of £7 million investment in technology in schools, to outline how the technology will be employed, particularly by teachers, school librarians and pupils. (AQT 2828/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: Over the last number of years, it became evident that the ICT available to our teaching staff and librarians was outdated. In many cases, it was not working at all and, in other instances, it was not compatible with the new systems that we were putting into our schools. Teachers and teachers' unions lobbied me very strongly to replace the equipment, but I did not have the finances to do that. However, in the January monitoring round, we had an opportunity to access around £4.5 million of capital, which allowed us to purchase around 1,500 new tablets, computers and laptops for our teachers. That allows them access inside and outside the classroom and to prepare teaching plans etc. We also invested quite significantly in the new Alice system for our libraries. So there has been quite significant investment in our schools over the last number of months.

2.45 pm

Employment and Learning

Long-term Unemployed: Support

1. **Mr F McCann** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what new initiatives he plans to support people who are classified as long-term unemployed. (AQO 8645/11-16)

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning):

In light of the current budgetary position, my Department does not have funding for any new initiatives to support the long-term unemployed. That said, there is already a range of provision in place to assist the long-term unemployed. In the first instance, a jobseeker will receive assistance from staff in our front-line offices. Enhancements have been made to this service, including additional training for front-line staff to assist clients and improve their job search skills and completion of application forms as well as developing work readiness.

In addition, at the point a jobseeker becomes long-term unemployed, they are eligible for participation on the Steps 2 Success programme. Steps 2 Success contractors agree a progression to employment plan with each participant that identifies how they will work together to find and sustain employment for the individual. Participants will be on the programme for an initial period of 12 or 18 months, depending on the client group. Participants who remain unemployed at that point will avail themselves of a further six-month period of front-line support followed by another 12 months on Steps 2 Success. I can confirm that my officials continuously review the provision in place to support all clients, including the long-term unemployed.

Mr F McCann: I thank the Minister for his answer but does he not accept that his current solutions are not delivering for those who are in long-term unemployment but are merely handing significant sums of money to companies to deliver schemes that are often of no benefit to the individuals?

Dr Farry: Let me break that down into two elements. I understand that the second half of what he is saying is an allusion to the Steps 2 Success programme. In that regard, it is important to bear in mind that they are there to provide a function on behalf of the economy in Northern Ireland and our wider society by helping the long-term unemployed back into employment. They have been set some very challenging targets, and we are looking to see a step up to a good level of performance from the Steps to Work programme. That will be assessed in due course once we have a critical mass of people going through to allow us to draw conclusions as to how that programme is working.

Just because the contractors may come from outside Northern Ireland is not a reason for dismissing their ability. If anything, they are bringing their experience from other jurisdictions to bear in the Northern Ireland situation. However, the model we are applying in Northern Ireland has been shaped to meet our own particular circumstances.

In response to the first part of the Member's question, I, absolutely, want to do more for the long-term unemployed. While we are seeing our claimant count situation improve, the percentage of people within that who are falling into the long-term unemployed category is increasing and that is, absolutely, of concern to me. I am further concerned that I do not have access to resources at present for us to invest in this type of intervention, due to the budgetary impasse and the ongoing problems around a lack of agreement on welfare reform. Once again, we are seeing money being, very sadly, stripped out of schemes and projects that can help people gain a foothold in employment because of a very single-minded approach to handling these issues.

Mr Eastwood: Maybe the Minister could answer this question without mentioning welfare reform. *[Laughter.]* What work is he doing with other Departments and Ministers to tackle areas, such as mine in the Foyle constituency, that are specifically and particularly affected by long-term unemployment and any other measure of unemployment?

Dr Farry: I hear laughter coming from the SDLP Benches on the notion of not mentioning welfare reform, but let us mention welfare reform because it is there and it is a reality. The fact that we are now years into this current impasse is bleeding the Executive dry, and the money is not there for us to invest in helping the vulnerable people of Northern Ireland. It is time that we moved from the blinkered approach we have had from some parties and started doing sensible things that will help people across this society.

There are things that I would like to do, including on a geographical basis. Let me give you one clear example. We have an economic inactivity strategy that was agreed by the Executive in April 2015 but work on that has not commenced because there is no budget available for it. Had the situation been different in relation to our public finances, that would be moving ahead. We know that we not only have higher levels of unemployment in the north-west but some of the highest levels of economic inactivity in the United Kingdom.

Pilots were going to take place on a geographical basis, and that obviously means a lot of pilots concentrated in the north-west. That work has not commenced because of the wrangles around budgets and, yes, again, the welfare reform impasse.

Mr Cochrane-Watson: At 27.4%, the percentage of the Northern Ireland population deemed to be economically inactive is the highest of any region in the United Kingdom. That compares with 27% in 2007, when devolution was reinstated. Why has the Minister finally published the economic inactivity strategy that was promised in the Programme for Government? Why has it taken him until April of this year to publish it, and why was it not brought forward as we now approach the end of the mandate?

Dr Farry: First of all, I welcome the Member to the House. However, I also remind him that his party sat in my Department for a full four-year period without doing anything about economic inactivity — indeed, at a time of relative plenty in the resources available to us.

The economic inactivity figures have been bouncing around in the same zone for the past 30 years. We have had a structural problem of economic inactivity in the region of 27% since the mid-1980s. That has persisted, irrespective of the ups and downs of the business cycle, through the boom times of prosperity about 10 years ago and the difficulties with the recent recession and downturn.

This is a major structural problem. It was identified in the Programme for Government, and we have worked diligently to produce the strategy. We are now, very sadly, as I just mentioned, at the stage where we have a strategy in place, but, due to other factors, there is no money available to invest in it.

Ulster University: Veterinary School

2. **Ms Sugden** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on the submission of a business case regarding proposals to establish a Veterinary School at Ulster University. (AQO 8646/11-16)

Dr Farry: The Ulster University first proposed establishing a veterinary school in 2013 and commenced the preparation of a business case to support it. However, a full business case has not been presented to my Department. There have been no discussions with the university on this matter since June 2014.

Veterinary science is one of the highest-cost courses to fund, and there is no shortfall forecast in the number of vets until at least 2020. In the current financial climate, when funding for higher education institutions has been reduced and undergraduate places withdrawn, it is very unlikely that funding will be made available for veterinary science courses in the short to medium term.

Ms Sugden: I thank the Minister for his response. Will he confirm whether the Ulster University is moving towards establishing centres of excellence in each campus, and that a veterinary school in Coleraine would be a perfect fit for what it is planning?

Dr Farry: In terms of the first aspect of what the Member says, as part of the response to the challenging funding situation, the university has responded in a strategic way by trying to create an identity for each of its campuses. The Coleraine campus has been identified in terms of life and biological sciences. In principle, what the Member says would be consistent with that vision.

However, I stress to her the high cost involved in veterinary places. If it was decided to redirect resources in that direction, that would have a disproportionate impact on the provision of other courses. In a crude sense, for every veterinary place you put in place you may have to sacrifice almost two other types of subject places, so we have to be conscious of the emerging needs of our economy. No doubt, universities are also doing that in how they plan and work their way through a challenging situation.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht an fhreagra sin. What discussions may the Minister have had with DARD on the provision of a veterinary school at Ulster University?

Dr Farry: My officials and I have had discussions about that with our counterparts in DARD over the years, although it has not been a live issue on our agenda for the past 12 to 18 months. That reflects the sad financial reality in which we sit.

The Member can take from my answer that, while some work has been done in this area, it is not currently being taken forward. In the context of facing cutbacks, an investment of that type is not deemed affordable.

Ulster University: Cuts

3. **Mr Swann** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what consultation he had with the Ulster University prior to the announcement it was reducing course, staff and student provision. (AQO 8647/11-16)

13. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the business case for the recent Ulster University redundancies at the Coleraine and Magee campuses. (AQO 8657/11-16)

Dr Farry: Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, with your permission, I wish to group questions 3 and 13 and would like to request an additional minute for the answer.

Following publication of the Executive's draft budget in November 2014, my Department published a consultation outlining the possible impact on a wide range of functions and services across the Department as well as the potential impact on the universities and colleges, including a likely reduction in student places and staff numbers. Following that consultation, efforts were made to mitigate the cuts to the higher education sector. The cuts to the universities were the last resort to balance the overall budget.

I have had ongoing discussions with Ulster University on the possible implications of those substantial budget reductions. While my Department provides funding and sets the strategic direction for the higher education sector, universities are autonomous bodies and are responsible for their own course provision and staffing levels. During the discussions, I highlighted the need to reflect the ambitions of the Executive and the objectives of the Department, including the protection of narrow STEM subjects. To provide the university with some flexibility and to help mitigate the impact of the budget reduction, I have reduced the minimum requirement for direct expenditure on widening participation to 10% of the additional student fee income. That reinvestment of student fee income is undertaken to promote widening participation through outreach activities and support to less advantaged students.

I understand that the university will rationalise its offerings across its campuses, with Coleraine specialising in biosciences and Magee in computing, engineering and Irish history. The university has already indicated the scale of the job losses and the loss of places in the current academic year and over future years. The size of the cuts is a clear indication of the severity of the budget reductions faced by my Department, the university and the higher education sector.

Before making decisions on course provision and staffing levels, the universities take a number of factors into account, including my Department's priorities, the needs of the economy and student demand. Reviewing course provision is part of the normal annual cycle and is good business practice. It is a reflection of the current budget position that this has led Ulster University to close some courses and to consolidate others. In relation to the business case for staff redundancies, my Department does not have a role in approving business cases for redundancies at Coleraine, Magee or indeed any other Ulster University campus.

Mr Swann: I thank the Minister for his very detailed answer. The question that I asked was actually about what consultation you had with the Ulster University prior to the announcement. You are fully aware of and you detailed the cuts that were coming, and, at some stage, there surely should have been input from the Minister or the Department with both universities to make sure that there was still provision for the likes of languages in Northern Ireland. That has now been completely lost to our graduates.

Dr Farry: First of all, let me stress that there have been ongoing discussions between me and senior officials in both universities and at official level on how we plan for the cuts. The decision has not been taken in a vacuum. In particular, there were a number of aspects of those discussions. We have focused on the desire to protect narrow STEM subjects, which are the science, technology, engineering and mathematics subjects. We have also had discussions about how we can give the universities some ability to free up how they use their resources with a view to maximising the number of student places that are retained. It was in that context that we reduced the minimum requirement of spend of additional fee income on widening participation from 25% to 10%. That action alone has probably managed to save a couple of hundred places in each of Queen's University and Ulster University.

Ultimately, the decisions to be made are for the university to make based on a number of factors. I am certainly conscious that they have approached this in a strategic manner. Obviously, a number of course closures will spark a reaction. Indeed, all course closures should spark a reaction, but it is important that what lies beneath those decisions is analysed in greater depth, such as the factors around things like enrolment levels and where students are coming from.

Mr Dallat: I listened very carefully to the Minister. I am absolutely delighted that he is here today despite his party's best efforts to collapse the Assembly through its support for adjournment. Now that he is here, can he tell us this: is the Ulster University now at variance with our economic strategy, which aims to educate young people to a standard where they are capable of attracting new inward investment — that is, of course, a main argument for dealing with corporation tax — or, as I suspect, is the Minister sitting on his hands?

Dr Farry: First, I would have thought that a very experienced Deputy Speaker would know the rules about supplementary questions being relevant to the original question. However, given that he has mentioned the wider political scene, let me address that. The actions taken by my party were about creating stability to allow the context for talks to occur, and the fact that we are currently having talks about talks vindicates that in some respects. The situation that we face is one of huge uncertainty. That said, I continue in my role as Minister, and I am fully committed to delivering on my responsibilities in all my functions on skills and employability. I am certainly not sitting on my hands today or, indeed, any other day.

3.00 pm

Let me be very clear: we are in difficulties with how we ensure that we live up to the ambitions of the agreed economic strategy of the Executive. We know that skills are the key driver behind the transformation of the economy that we want to see, and, very sadly, we are de-investing in our skills offer across a range of fronts. Any loss of university places means that we are offering fewer locally provided higher-level skills, and that is detrimental to our economy.

We will act strategically to try to protect the areas that are most relevant to the needs of our economy, and it is in that context that we made the request to the universities to protect the narrow STEM subjects, given that those have been particularly cited by local companies and investors.

There is a particular issue with modern languages, and we need to see what other provision can be made, particularly how we can use the academy model that we devised under our Assured Skills programme to see whether we can address some of the very particular business requirements for languages that companies have identified.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. I declare an interest as a current student of the Ulster University.

Given the launch of his Big Conversation this morning, will the Minister indicate what help his Department can provide to the Ulster University to help it to increase the private investment that it gets from students and companies without looking directly at increasing tuition fees?

Dr Farry: First, I welcome Sinn Féin's conversion to the free market. The best way that the universities can prosper is not through state funding; they need to go out and find money from the private sector. Of course, there has to be a balance between a range of funding sources, including the state, and greater access to private funding. We see that happening in areas such as knowledge transfer through programmes such as Connected and the Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF). It is also worth noting that the business community interaction of our local universities is, proportionally, well in excess of our population share in the United Kingdom. That is an area in which our universities have been very proactive.

There is scope for improvement in our ability to access research funding from the UK research councils. We are also looking to see what we can do to draw more money down from Horizon 2020. The Member will know that we have a contact point in place in conjunction with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. We have dedicated people to assist with applications to the European Union and are seeing some very positive developments in that regard. Those are some of the things that are happening across the universities. Ultimately, if people think that simply passing it on to the private sector to fill the void will somehow allow us to duck the fundamental challenge of resolving how the state interacts with the universities, they are deluding themselves. That is the core issue and where the key aspect needs to be addressed.

Mr B McCrea: On the financial stability of the university sector, given what you know, do you anticipate further redundancies in following financial years unless action is taken?

Dr Farry: At this stage, the announcements that have been made are in the context of the cuts that have made. As those cuts are in the baseline of the Department, the universities will project that ahead. As we meet today, it is worth noting that we are literally only a matter of weeks away from decisions having to be made by the Executive on a draft Budget for the 2016-17 financial year, although that is presupposing that we get through the issues about managing the existing 2015-16 Budget, which, as Members will know, is considerably out of balance. Within that, it remains to be seen what direction we will take for funding for higher education. In the context that decisions deteriorate ever further and have an impact on funding, there may be a further impact on student places and the ability to retain staff.

Mr Agnew: The Minister spoke about the independence of the university. What strategic role does he have in those decisions; for example, the decision to close the school of modern languages, leaving us in Northern Ireland without third-level education in German? That seems to be counter-strategic, given his aims. What influence can he bring to bear?

Dr Farry: Universities are autonomous bodies; they are not NDPBs. There is the false assumption that they operate under a similar governance structure to a range of other public bodies. However, the state provides them with considerable funding. We interact with them through a number of areas. With regard to their funding each year, a funding letter sets out a number of expectations, and within that we have focused on the protection of STEM, how they can interact with the apprenticeship strategy and our expectations on widening participation. We also have in place Graduating to Success, a higher education strategy that was published in April 2012. That remains a live document, and it was devised in cooperation with all our higher education institutions. That is being implemented, and, notwithstanding the current challenges with budget, we are still working through those projects. Indeed, a number of those projects have now been concluded.

Ms Sugden: I asked this question as a priority, but the Minister is late in answering it, so I am happy for him to answer me now. Has he received an HR 1 about the loss of the school and the subsequent redundancies from the Ulster University?

Dr Farry: No, not at this stage. We would not necessarily expect to see one, because this will be in effect from the 2016-17 academic year. There are discussions ongoing in the university about exactly how it handles this.

European Social Fund: Money Owed

4. **Ms Hanna** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how much is owed to community and voluntary sector groups from previous European social fund programmes. (AQO 8648/11-16)

Dr Farry: There were 84 community and voluntary sector projects funded through the European social fund programme. The projects could submit their claims on either a monthly or quarterly basis, resulting in up to 1,000 claims for each year of the programme. Funding for the community and voluntary sector over the last four years of the programme was almost £102 million, equating to just over £25 million annually. Of the £102 million, my officials have processed financial claims with a value of nearly £91 million to date.

My Department is in receipt of and processing claims received from the community and voluntary sector with a potential value of just under £9 million. There are also a number of outstanding claims with a potential value of £2.15 million for those organisations. My Department wrote to those organisations on 12 August encouraging them to submit their outstanding claims. That will enable my Department to process and pay those claims to the organisations as soon as possible.

In July 2015, my Department released £4.51 million in advance partial payments to ESF project promoters to help ease the financial pressures being incurred by the organisations. My Department is in the closure phase

of the programme, which ended in March 2015, and is, therefore, committed to having the claims processed as quickly as possible.

Ms Hanna: Does the Minister agree that the delays may have acted as a deterrent for future rounds, particularly to grass-roots organisations? Can you outline the steps that will be taken to minimise disruption and for repayment in future?

Dr Farry: I do not think that the delays in themselves have had an impact on future provision because, in essence, we had two parallel processes in operation: one was the incoming programme for 2014-2020, and the second was the closure of the 2007-2013 programme. Decisions were made on the incoming programme at the end of March this year. Obviously, there have been delays in the closure of the programme, and I have been frustrated with a number of issues in the performance of my Department. One of the things that we did in response to that, mindful of the impact that was being felt by a number of organisations, was to put in place the system of accelerated payments. That means that, rather than waiting for the full vouching of claims to have occurred, at a risk being borne by my Department, partial accelerated payments were made to ensure that they had cash flow.

Mr Cree: The junior Ministers were tasked with bringing forward a strategy to help the voluntary and community sector. Is the Minister aware of the status of that work, and was he involved in it?

Dr Farry: At the moment, I am not even sure of the status of OFMDFM, never mind what it is doing on any work on how it can assist the community and voluntary sector.

That will probably also suffer from the current political impasse. I am, however, aware of discussions in the Executive in slightly happier times a few months ago about how the Executive could be more proactive in assisting the community and voluntary sector in a coordinated way. In particular, there was concern that Departments, as they tried to manage a very challenging situation, should not simply dump cuts on the community and voluntary sector, and we took a strategic approach to that.

For my part, I want to make a couple of points very clear. First, I fully endorse and respect the role the community and voluntary sector plays in assisting government to deliver a range of services. In some areas, the sector is better placed than the state to produce outcomes. Secondly, we have not made cuts to the European social fund programme that have impacted community and voluntary groups on the ground. The programme that we unveiled for 2014-2020 is bigger than the outgoing programme. Thirdly, concerns have been expressed about match funding and whether groups will be able to access match funding from a range of sources, given the impact of budget cuts. As a Department, we have tried to plug as many gaps as we can and are actually spending more on match funding this time than previously, including moving from the 25% that we traditionally funded for the European social fund to meeting, when we received applications, some claims for a share of 35% of programme costs.

Ms Lo: What impact will the ESF have on our economy and society?

Dr Farry: It is important that we recognise that the European social fund is a great asset to Northern

Ireland. It is a positive reflection on our membership of the European Union and allows us to do things that we could not do otherwise. It allows us to go further in bringing people closer to the labour market and promoting social inclusion. There is a particular focus on things like economic inactivity, working with young people who are not in education, employment and training and also working with people with disabilities. We have a reach and an ability to deliver under the European social fund that we would not have otherwise. It also allows my Department to support further our work on apprenticeships and on youth training. It has supported our ApprenticeshipsNI programme and Training for Success, and, as we look to our new systems under the new strategies for apprenticeships and youth training, the European social fund, as set out in the operational programme, will be there to provide assistance for them as well.

Students: Cross-border Mobility

5. **Mr Sheehan** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what progress is being made on increasing student cross-border mobility on the island of Ireland. (AQO 8649/11-16)

Dr Farry: I am committed to improving cross-border student mobility. In accordance with EU treaty obligations, my Department funds further and higher education provision in Northern Ireland for all EU-domiciled students. The Department also contributes to the UK-wide promotion of the ERASMUS+ programme, which encourages the mobility of information, skills and people across the educational sectors in Northern Ireland and our European neighbours. Our further and higher education sectors have an excellent record in securing funding for mobility through this avenue.

The project group, which was established as part of my Department's higher education strategy to facilitate cross-border cooperation in teaching and learning and student mobility, continues to make progress in a number of areas. To help to improve learner information, careers teachers and advisers have received additional training on the higher education opportunities available in the Republic of Ireland and on the Central Applications Office processes. Extensive information on Northern Ireland's higher education sector is now available through the NI Direct portal.

The Irish Universities Association recently announced changes to the Central Applications Office points system to improve access for A-level students studying three subjects.

My officials have been working with officials in the Department of Education and Skills to research and analyse cross-border student flows. A joint report was published on 15 June that shows, amongst other things, that applications from Northern Ireland students to Irish institutions have been increasing since 2010. The report will be used to inform future policy development.

My officials and I continue to work closely with our counterparts in the South on this and other cross-border issues.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. Will this issue feature in the Minister's Big Conversation on the future of higher education?

Dr Farry: One aspect that will feature in the Big Conversation is the funding model that exists in the Republic of Ireland. Again, in that model, there is mixed reliance on contributions from students and contributions from the state. The balance there is probably closer to our existing model in Northern Ireland, even though that model is not sustainable, in contrast to what we are seeing in Scotland and England.

3.15 pm

There are other forms in which we are looking at student flows. Ultimately, the solution lies in trying to encourage a better two-way flow on the island. Indeed, we may well see a greater specialisation by universities around some of their relevant strengths and the development of a more natural, larger market for students, allowing a better use of resources in both jurisdictions.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Time is up for listed questions. We now move to topical questions. The Members listed for topical questions 1, 8 and 9 have withdrawn their names.

Horizon 2020

T2. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many projects his Department has helped and the quantifiable amount of money that they have facilitated to be realised through Horizon 2020, which is a valuable project and something that, with the Irish Government and the project predecessor, FP7, has been highly successful in realising funding for research, innovation and development. (AQT 2832/11-16)

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I, too, am glad that the Minister is here to answer questions.

Dr Farry: As the Member will appreciate, it is still early days with the new Horizon 2020 programme. As I mentioned earlier, we have put in place a framework of Northern Ireland contact points across my Department, DETI, Invest Northern Ireland, DARD, the Department of Justice and possibly the Department of the Environment — although I stand to be corrected — to ensure that we are maximising the potential to draw down funds.

I am particularly conscious that our universities have, historically, been the main source of the drawdown in previous rounds, including FP7, and that is the situation at present. We have drawn down just over €15 million, of which about €11 million can be identified with the universities. There are a number of other large projects in the mix, and, hopefully, there will be some very positive announcements made in the near future in that regard.

Mr McGlone: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for that response. What level of collaboration or cooperation has there been with the relevant Irish Government Department or agencies to facilitate that drawdown? DETI had been working on that level of cooperation to facilitate a good working relationship and, more importantly, maximise the drawdown of funding from this very important EU programme.

Dr Farry: There are a number of different forms in which that type of cooperation is taking place. Obviously, InterTradeIreland can be a focal point in that regard. Specific to my responsibilities, we have an existing

network where we have a new partnership between my Department and Science Foundation Ireland in the funding of research programmes. That is outside the context of Horizon 2020, but that type of collaboration provides us with a very solid foundation on which we can facilitate potential bids to Horizon 2020 from universities from both jurisdictions on a North/South basis. We also have the US-Ireland Research Alliance, which is a tripartite agreement between Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and the State Department of the United States. That supports collaborative research across the three jurisdictions. So, both of those provide us with very strong platforms from which we can encourage further bids to Horizon 2020.

Trade Union Bill

T3. **Mr Eastwood** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for a cast-iron guarantee that the draconian and ideologically driven provisions in the Tory Trade Union Bill will not find their way into law in this part of the world. (AQT 2833/11-16)

Dr Farry: I am happy to assure the Member that I have no plans to introduce any similar legislation in Northern Ireland. That said, let me make a couple of things clear. First, what is happening in Great Britain is disproportionate to the problem, or perceived problem, with industrial action. Whatever problems may exist in Great Britain, they are not mirrored in Northern Ireland, where, by and large, we have good industrial relations.

At times, I certainly get frustrated when strike action, particularly in the public sector, takes place, especially when that is aimed not at what is happening in the workplace in particular but at wider issues around complaints about government policy. At the same time, I respect that the trade unions are part of our civic society. We have long fought for and won rights on the ability to organise, and they play a very active role in other aspects of civic society through protests around a number of very worthy causes and, indeed, what they have done to support the peace process. Secondly, I do not think that there would be any prospect of agreement on such legislation in any event, even if I were predisposed to a different outcome, given the viewpoints of parties in the Assembly and the Executive.

Mr Eastwood: I very much welcome the Minister's commitment in that regard. When are we likely to see his employment Bill come before the House?

Dr Farry: I am afraid that that is a much sadder story in the sense that it is currently in the Executive system and has been for a little while. Efforts are ongoing to see whether we can find some agreement to allow that to come to the Floor of the Assembly. Let me stress that there is nothing in that that would threaten anyone's interests. It is about positive reform of our employment law, particularly around how we can introduce stronger forms of alternative dispute resolution to make the system work better for employees who have grievances that need to be addressed and for employers, who will have a much more streamlined approach through which these issues can be resolved to everyone's satisfaction.

Queen's University: Global Ranking

T4. **Mr Kennedy** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his reaction to today's news that Queen's University Belfast has slipped 12 places in the 2015-16 global university rankings. (AQT 2834/11-16)

Dr Farry: Let me respond to the Member in two respects on that. First, it is important that we take account of the international context in which our universities operate, and they will be judged against their peers. Without repeating all of the points that I made, it is a further reason why it is important that we invest fully in our higher education system, particularly in research, which often informs these surveys. Secondly, we should have a bit of caution around surveys. As the Member will know from his tenure many years ago as my predecessor as Minister for Employment and Learning, a number of surveys are published, and they use different factors and different weightings of those factors to reach their outcomes. A university that may claim to be number 1 in one survey may not find itself in the top 10 in a different survey, so there is a slight health warning around those surveys. However, for sure, we do not have any room for complacency in the international context in which our universities operate.

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Minister for his answer. I remind him that this is not a survey; these are world rankings. The Minister will know that the QS world rankings are based on a number of factors, including evaluating research, teaching, academic reputation, staff-to-student ratio and the number of international staff and students. Will the Minister take all necessary steps in engaging with Queen's University and the University of Ulster to ensure that the worldwide reputation of the local universities can be maintained and protected?

Dr Farry: I am very committed to doing that. Even at the margins this year, for example around teacher training, where we could have made a bad situation just a little better, we have had opportunities for the universities. It is in this context that we are having the Big Conversation, because we know that there is a situation where the funding context for higher education is simply not sustainable, so we have to do all that we can. That involves, for example, coming to agreements around budgets and welfare reform and ensuring that we seek to invest in our higher education system and not simply have a standstill situation as we look to future financial years.

I want to stress to the Member that there is a range of factors in these rankings, and different mixes of rankings and different weightings given to factors in the rankings will lead to different outputs. The fact that we have a drop is something that we need to take account of. That could be as much about other universities making further investments and leapfrogging ahead of Queen's as about a deterioration in where Queen's stands. However, we are aware that, in the main, the big challenge is how we preserve the international context in which we operate. Our universities in Northern Ireland are not there simply to serve a local population; they have to be genuine international actors in their own right. Whenever we reach those heights, we are able to deliver inward investment for Northern Ireland. Our universities are recognised and praised throughout the world for the quality of their graduates. It is important that we are able to consolidate

and build on the success that we have rather than let that erode.

Higher Education: Student Numbers

T5. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to state the number of students who will attend local higher education courses and the number of students who have been forced to travel elsewhere, albeit while congratulating those new students who are about to embark on their higher education courses this autumn and encouraging others to take up other forms of lifelong learning. (AQT 2835/11-16)

Dr Farry: It will probably be towards December that we will get the full picture of admissions in the academic year that is about to commence. We will make sure that the Member gets a full copy of that. We have been moving slowly in the direction of increases. We have been making incremental progress in increasing local provision. Obviously, that is now under threat, and we are going in the opposite direction, with fewer places. Clearly, that will have an impact, with some people being displaced to Great Britain and others simply opting not to go to university at all and either having to consider other provision or simply not engaging in any further education or training. That would be a major loss to our economy as well as having an impact on their personal life opportunities. It is also important to bear it in mind that a number of factors, such as demographics, will influence those outcomes. It is important that people are fully aware of the full context when they see those figures when they are published in due course.

Mr Beggs: I declare an interest, in that I have a son attending a local university and a daughter at a GB university. Regarding new students selecting their university, is the Minister aware of the differences in tuition fees between Northern Ireland and GB encouraging more people to come here? I think that the annual tuition fees in Northern Ireland are £3,805 as opposed to £9,000 in GB. Is there any evidence of students from elsewhere coming to Northern Ireland and ultimately displacing some of our students, who as a result may not be able to attend courses here and may be forced to attend courses elsewhere, paying £9,000, as well as the additional costs associated with studying further away from home?

Dr Farry: We are seeing some increased interest from other parts of the UK in studying in Northern Ireland, and that interest is based on the quality of courses. However, I should say to the Member that universities are able to charge up to £9,000 in fees for students who are not domiciled in Northern Ireland. That was part of the wider Executive agreement on tuition fees in 2011. That was done on the basis that we have to protect the local market for local students. If they are crowded out through displacement by students from Great Britain, we will see our students leaving and not coming back on an even greater scale than happens at present. The approach that we have taken in Northern Ireland is similar to the approach that Scotland has taken in relation to the rest of the UK.

Success Through Skills: Update

T6. **Mr Somerville** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on the success of the skills strategy for Northern Ireland. (AQT 2836/11-16)

Dr Farry: The skills strategy is a 10-year strategy running through to 2020. There are indicators around, for example, the number of people in work who will reach a level 2 qualification, those reaching level 3, those reaching level 4 and the percentage who are engaging in STEM areas. The biggest leap that we are seeing is in STEM. I am pleased to see success in that regard. We are seeing good progress in level 4 qualifications. More work probably needs to be done on the level 2 and level 3 interventions. Obviously, the challenges that we have around budgets will create difficulties as we look ahead to the next five years through to the end of the strategy.

Mr Somerville: Thank you for that answer, Minister. Have there been developments with the South West College in Fermanagh delivering more apprenticeship-based courses?

Dr Farry: Yes. As the Member may appreciate, against the wider trend, my Department received £7.5 million of funding as part of the change fund from the current year's budget.

That is there to resource a number of pilots in relation to the apprenticeship strategy and the youth training strategy. A number of those were announced earlier this month, and work is under way to get them up and running. Indeed, South West College has been successful in a number of respects in that regard, and it has always been very proactive in seeking out new and innovative ways to invest in the future of the Northern Ireland workforce.

3.30 pm

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Time is up. Before we move to the Adjournment debate, Members will take their ease while we change the top Table.

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

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Beggs.]

Adjournment

Childcare: Fermanagh/South Tyrone

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes and all other Members who speak will have approximately seven minutes.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat.

“In today’s economy, when having both parents in the workforce is an economic necessity for many families, we need affordable, high-quality childcare more than ever.

It’s not a nice-to-have — it’s a must-have. So it’s time we stop treating childcare as a side issue, or as a women’s issue, and treat it like the national economic priority that it is for all of us.”

Those are not the words of a militant feminist; they are the words of President Obama in his State of the Union address at the start of this year. His words are also applicable to our society and especially to those of us living in rural communities.

At the outset of my contribution on this important issue, I would like to place on record my deep appreciation at being given the opportunity to shine a particular spotlight on rural childcare provision in the Fermanagh and South Tyrone constituency.

We are only too aware of the benefits that quality, affordable and reliable childcare bring to rural communities. It is no less important to rural parents and children than those in towns. As a mother who has raised her daughter in a rural community, I am only too aware of the challenges faced when trying to source quality childcare locally.

Childcare has an important role to play in helping to sustain rural communities. Parents need access to childcare so that they can make the most of the opportunities for employment, training or helping to support voluntary or community activities. Employers need childcare so that they can attract and retain a skilled and committed workforce. Children need facilities that help them to develop and integrate in a pleasant and safe environment, but the positive effects on all of society are that first-class provision of childcare helps parents into work and moves families out of poverty by helping to break the cycle of intergenerational deprivation.

When I put questions to our Minister of Agriculture, Michelle O’Neill, in relation to the progression of Bright Start actions in my constituency, she said:

“Good childcare that provides positive experiences and promotes children’s opportunities to develop is an essential building block for a stable and prosperous future for all.”

The Minister further added:

“Bright Start is central in helping to grow the economy and tackle disadvantage”.

Access to high-quality childcare and early education not only promotes a child’s development but gives much-needed support to parents who are struggling to balance work and family obligations. A safe environment that enriches children’s development is critical to working families and is one of the best investments that we can make in our economy. Ensuring that children have access to high-quality and affordable early childhood programmes can help children to prepare for school and succeed in later life, while strengthening the parents’ ability to go to work, advance their careers and increase their earning potential. International research shows that money spent on young children is an effective investment, yielding benefits immediately to parents and, for many decades to come, to the children.

Parents who work in low-paid jobs can face real difficulties in affording quality childcare. Without help, many families can face untenable choices of not working or leaving their children in unsafe, unstable or poor-quality arrangements. Affordable, quality childcare can help parents so that they can go to work to support their family.

Learning begins at birth, and the earliest years in a child’s life are the most critical for building foundational cognitive, social and emotional skills and patterns of engagement in school and learning. Studies show that children who attend high-quality early-learning programmes, including high-quality childcare, are more likely to do well in school, find good jobs, have fewer interactions with the justice system and have greater earnings as adults than those who do not.

In a response to a recent Assembly research question that I placed, I was informed that, in the majority of communities in south Tyrone, there are between 574 and 1,484 persons aged nought to 15 years, the age bracket that would avail itself of childcare. However, from constituents’ experience, the childcare provision in place is far from adequate to cater for that number. A report carried out in 2014 revealed that, whilst there are 60,621 under-15-year-olds in the Western Trust area, there are only 632 registered childcare providers. That leaves 96 children per childminder. The Southern Trust area is worse again, with 76,342 under-15-year-olds, which leaves the number of children per childminder at a staggering 129. In south Tyrone, there is a grand total of at least one crèche, if not two, five out-of-school programmes and three two-year-old programmes. There is also a limited number of playgroups, amounting to just 20. For a sizeable area, that is astounding, and how it is feasible has to be questioned.

Drilling down further, and based on information provided by NICMA and forwarded to me by a childcare practitioner who works in this field in the Clogher Valley district — and who was in correspondence with me, the local MLA, over recent days — I have been informed that there has been a total loss of 65 places across all five wards. This equates to the loss of 31 under-five-year-old and 34 over-five-year-old places in Augher, Clogher, Fivemiletown, Ballygawley and Aughnacloy. That, coupled with the fact that no new childminders are coming on board, has presented a worrying trend in that rural area.

In the 2014 report, the area of provision where there was the greatest level of unmet need was after-school care. Some 21% of all parents interviewed stated that they would like greater access to after-school care, and, on average, they would like to use it for nine hours per week, compared to an average current usage of six hours per week. From research that I have obtained, it is apparent that there is considerable lack of after-school care in south Tyrone; yet it is estimated that, if 19% of all children in the North of Ireland aged four to 14 were provided with a place in after-school care, over 6,000 jobs would be created in the childcare sector.

With all of this in mind, I call on the First Minister, the deputy First Minister and the junior Ministers, as well as the Ministers of Education, Agriculture and Health to work together with relevant networks and organisations to examine ways in which provision could be improved in the Fermanagh and South Tyrone constituency and similar areas. They must explore existing facilities and activities for children and increase accessibility and affordability. Again, I commit to working with all the Ministers in examining this important matter further. The provision of rural childcare must be central to the OFMDFM childcare strategy that is out for consultation, and the draft strategy must address the gap in nought-to-four-year-old provision. We cannot ignore it.

I conclude my comments by calling on all citizens to study the proposals contained in the proposed childcare strategy and make submissions. In particular, I call on rural dwellers to study the strategy and make their concerns known in their responses.

For parents living in rural communities, accessibility to first-class childcare provision is an important issue, just as affordability is. Rural childcare provision must be central to any OFMDFM strategy being rolled out, and there need to be specific targets.

Mr Somerville: As a father of four, I am aware of the issues regarding childcare provision in Fermanagh and South Tyrone as well as in wider Northern Ireland. While I am fortunate enough in that my children are of an age at which they are not reliant on full-time formal childcare arrangements, it was not that long ago that they were, and I can remember all too well the issues associated with the provision of childcare in rural areas. Being a parent is a tough and demanding job. Little credit is given to parents who decide to stay at home to raise their children. To me, that is wrong. Those parents are delivering a vital service for their children in nurturing and developing them so that they become valued members of their community and society. Studies have shown that children who are looked after by their parent on a full-time basis often have better speech and learning development than children who have been in a nursery environment between the ages of naught and five years. That is not to demean the work that nursery staff do but merely to highlight the vital role of parents as sole care providers.

In the current economic climate, the choice to stay at home and look after your child until primary-school age is a luxury that most families cannot afford. They are faced with the dilemma of finding suitable childcare, whilst, on the other hand, there are parents who have worked hard to establish a career and are aware that, if they do not go back to work, they will miss promotions that they deserve. Some families are fortunate in that they have grandparents

or other family members who can assist with childcare, allowing parents to go back to work. Others are reliant on third-party childminders or a nursery-type arrangement. That raises questions about where to send their children, with associated costs.

The 'Northern Ireland Childcare Cost Survey 2014' showed that a full-time nursery place costs, on average, £162 per week, and a full-time childminding session costs £167 per week on average. For 59% of families surveyed, formal childcare costs amounted to half of their partner's or their own take-home pay.

Good-quality, affordable, flexible and reliable childcare is essential to the sustainability and development of rural communities. In Fermanagh and South Tyrone, the provision of better childcare does not just benefit families with young children; it benefits the wider community. Rural childcare in Fermanagh and South Tyrone is not something that can be addressed or solved through a one-size-fits-all approach. There is a wide range of childcare options available. What is important, and what should be addressed, is each family's ability to access a range of childcare options in their community so that they may avail themselves of the option that best suits them and their child, whether that is a registered childminder or a nursery.

There should also be a more flexible approach in the times offered to parents for childcare. That is especially relevant for members of the hospitality and healthcare sectors, for example, where their work pattern is not a Monday-to-Friday, 9.00 am-to-5.00 pm arrangement.

The other main concern regarding childcare in Fermanagh and South Tyrone is the cost. More can and should be done to ensure that those families where both parents work do not have the second salary subsumed by childcare costs.

That is unsustainable, as it will ultimately result in one of the parents having to stay at home to fulfil the childcare responsibilities. The quality of childcare offered must be of a level that will help to develop well-rounded youngsters with the ability to do well in school and in later life. The impact of childcare costs on families across Northern Ireland is significant. It has a negative impact on living standards and career progression; it also has an effect on the older generation who are called on to provide childcare for their grandchildren.

I welcome the proposal in the childcare strategy, and I look forward to the consultation with parents on what can be done to address those issues. I feel that the proposals to make childcare more flexible and to highlight financial assistance already available to parents are sensible strategies to deal with issues of childcare in rural and urban areas.

3.45 pm

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Childcare provision in rural areas is a huge issue, as I know from having listened to my colleague Bronwyn McGahan. I take this opportunity to thank her for bringing the topic to the Chamber today.

With rising prices, market costs and a weak job market, many families in our constituency are experiencing financial hardship and many find it difficult to make ends meet. High childcare costs place additional pressure on an

already stretched budget, and the lack of affordable local provision is a significant barrier to employment, especially for lone parents. I know many parents who could not have pursued a livelihood through employment or continued their career had they not had helpful family members. However, the reality is that many did not have such a supportive structure and therefore struggled to balance work with raising a family.

Rural childcare provision must be at the heart of the OFMDFM strategy, and we must welcome the fact that it is currently out for consultation. That progress is also to be welcomed in the context that we do not have a proper infrastructure and lack good, accessible and affordable childcare, something that has been documented by Barnardo's. We need integrated work between Departments to ensure that childcare is suitably addressed. I commend the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, Michelle O'Neill, who is here with us today, for her Department's initiatives to address the issue under the rural childcare programme. I know some parents who have availed themselves of that scheme and returned to employment to the great satisfaction of their family.

A new rural development programme has recently been signed off in Europe. I recently held a rural business seminar in my area. It was attended by some 140 people, and I hope that the new scheme will provide opportunities for rural communities to address childcare and welfare issues for those living in such areas. We all meet parents from day to day in our constituency offices who tell us that the choice of local jobs available is currently limited, and many parents, particularly those on very low wages, ask themselves whether it pays to work.

In the North, as the previous Member said, the average cost of a full-time childcare place is approximately £156 a week, with some parents spending 44% of their weekly income on childcare for one child. That is a considerable amount. Furthermore, weekly childcare support for families has been reduced. We also have the welfare Bill, which, if implemented, will impact on families, particularly lone parents. That is why Sinn Féin argues that the less well-off and the disadvantaged must be protected as part of any changes to welfare.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I commend Bronwyn for securing the debate. The lack of childcare is one of the biggest barriers facing parents across Fermanagh and South Tyrone in entering or re-entering the workplace after having children. That is particularly so in dispersed rural communities, where the number of children is not always there to justify financially a private enterprise opening a childcare centre and making a profit. It is clear that what they call the "market" has failed. We need to see government intervention to make sure that it is not people who live in dispersed rural communities who suffer. Just because there are not thousands of children living within a mile or two of one another does not mean that the people we represent do not deserve access to affordable and accessible childcare close to their home.

In many rural areas, because there is no alternative, there is a complete over-reliance on family members and friends to deal with childcare. Many people want to go out to work, but some choose to raise their children. Some people do not have that choice: they cannot access childcare, so they stay at home, even though they may want to be

out working. There is complete over-reliance on family and friends to allow people to get out into the workplace, whether that is to return to a job that they held previously or to take up new employment.

One of the confounding things in Fermanagh is the complete absence of highly paid jobs, so, even if somebody could access childcare close to their home in a setting that was of a high standard and with people whom they could trust, very many people could not afford it. That is because you are looking at significant sums of money to pay for childcare. Economies of scale are not there because there are not significant enough numbers of children to do that. You then have the added problem that people are working for very low wages, often the minimum wage — if they are lucky enough to get it in some cases — which makes it very difficult for them to justify or sustain the cost of childcare.

As well as the problem of low-paid jobs, there is also a problem with the number of people in Fermanagh who have to travel outside the county to access employment, particularly in the public sector. So many people have to travel to places like greater Belfast to access senior roles in the Civil Service. That presents them with the challenge of commuting a considerable distance. They may leave home at 6.30 am to arrive in Belfast at around 9.00 am to do a day's work. That means that they must access childcare from very early in the morning to very late in the evening. Not only does that present accessibility challenges in finding a childcare provider flexible enough to cover those long hours but the cost invariably increases with a longer day. It also means that parents are kept away from their children for much longer, whereas they would prefer to work closer to home, but that is an issue that is not related to childcare; it is to do with access to employment in Fermanagh and South Tyrone.

When you compare the current reality in urban areas with rural areas, you see that there is a complete difference. People in rural areas face complete inequality, and I suppose most MLAs here who represent a rural constituency would stand over that statement. Certainly, parents of children in a rural area will tell you that it is much harder to get childcare there than in an urban setting. That is why it is particularly welcome to see the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development here, because, since 2007, the Department has taken steps to increase and support childcare providers across the North, and I know that a couple of them were in Fermanagh and South Tyrone. In future, that needs to be supported and expanded through European funding schemes, through the rural development programme and other funding streams. I am hopeful that the Minister will give us some positive indications when she speaks at the end of the debate.

The absence of employment options as well as childcare in a place like Fermanagh and South Tyrone has a serious long-term effect on our society. We see young people leaving our county to go to Belfast, Dublin or England to access university, and so many of them do not come back, because the basic services are not there to sustain them. Whether it is access to employment, high-speed Internet or mobile phone coverage, things like that just are not there, and childcare is just another issue on the list for them to consider. Many people do not come back to a rural area to start a family, and that is a serious problem because it has a knock-on impact on how we sustain our

rural communities. Who will look after our older people? Who will take up the places in our schools? Who will look after the needs of a rural society and play for and sustain our football teams?

This is not just a short-term economic problem; it is a long-term social problem that the Executive and all of us with leadership roles in our society have to grapple with. It is not good enough for us to continue going the way we are, because the gap between urban and rural areas is getting worse. We need to see much more corrective action taken to address the problem.

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I start by thanking Bronwyn McGahan for securing the debate and the other Members who have contributed to it.

You will be aware that OFMDFM is leading on the Executive's draft childcare strategy. I am fully supportive of the draft strategy, and my officials are working closely with OFMDFM to ensure that the specific needs of rural communities are taken into account as the strategy develops. In the difficult economic times we live in today, which Members have alluded to, many parents are working very long hours and taking on additional responsibilities at work just to make ends meet. Many want to train or further their education to improve their future employment prospects, as employment is the best path out of disadvantage and poverty. However, parents can find themselves hampered through not only the high costs of childcare, which can act as a barrier to economic participation, but a lack of adequate childcare provision. The situation is often exacerbated in rural areas like Fermanagh and South Tyrone, where geographical disparity can be an additional barrier for rural families. I welcome the fact that the strategy will aim to focus any additional childcare places created in areas where there is currently little or no provision, meeting the needs of disadvantaged communities and rural communities in particular.

I will continue to promote rural issues across government. Childcare is one of a number of services where rural areas are often seen as the poor relation.

Many other services, such as transport, mental-health provision and broadband connectivity, are limited or non-existent in some rural areas. To ensure that rural areas remain not only sustainable but vibrant places to live, work and invest in, I am bringing forward legislation on rural proofing that will support the equitable treatment of rural dwellers by requiring their needs and the impact on rural communities to be considered in the development and delivery of policy and public services. That will place an onus, enshrined in legislation, on Departments and councils to consider the needs of rural dwellers and, I expect, will help to ensure better service provision throughout our rural communities.

The provision of quality, affordable childcare is no less important to rural parents and children than to those in towns. I know only too well about the challenges faced when trying to source childcare locally. Childcare has an important role to play in helping to sustain rural communities. There are unique challenges that face rural childcare provision, such as small, scattered populations, long distances to travel and isolation. Those challenges

make childcare services more difficult to deliver and hinder access to the services for parents.

Parents need access to childcare so that they can make the most of the opportunities for employment and training or for helping to support voluntary or community activities. Employers need childcare so that they can attract and retain a skilled and committed workforce. Children need facilities that help them to develop and integrate in a pleasant and safe environment.

In addition to the economic benefits that quality childcare can bring to the labour market, it has a key long-term benefit in what it delivers for our children. Providing quality affordable childcare not only offers children a better start in life but provides parents with opportunities through education, training and employment. As a society, we want to help people get into work or back into work, providing them with the assurance that their children are being cared for in a safe and caring environment.

Quality childcare provides positive experiences and developmental opportunities to nurture and promote lifelong achievement. It can help to break intergenerational economic inactivity and is a proven path out of disadvantage towards a more prosperous future for individuals, families and communities.

Difficulties in childcare are not unique to the North. The greatest social driver of childcare in Europe has been the quest to reduce poverty and increase employability. That is along with the benefits that childcare for children aged nought-to-three years from disadvantaged areas has for raising their ability to benefit from education and learning over the long term, as well as for reducing crime, unemployment and healthcare costs.

The European Commission sees one of its greatest immediate challenges as the formation of a clear, long-term vision of its aims for the future of childcare services in Europe. It believes that the provision of more childcare services will support its economic and social agendas; that is, the eradication of child poverty, the pursuit of gender equality in the labour market and an increase in labour participation, economic output and productivity. Those are also issues that the Executive struggle with and are a driving factor in bringing forward childcare solutions to meet the needs of families.

Access to childcare is critical to help parents into work, move families out of poverty and break the cycle of intergenerational deprivation. Good-quality childcare is an essential building block for a stable and prosperous future for all. It can help to grow the economy and tackle disadvantage. I welcome the aim of the strategy that is out to consultation, and I join Bronwyn McGahan in encouraging all people to respond to it. I welcome the proposed areas of development for moving this complex issue forward. In rural areas, affordability has been identified as a bigger problem than the availability of childminding services.

Therefore, I support the proposal in the strategy to look at the needs and rationale of progressing either the centre-based childminding hub or the childminding-network approach to support the needs of rural families and to consider developing a pilot in rural areas. That is in addition to the mainstreaming of rural needs across the range of proposed actions in the strategy. Until that process has been completed, it is too early to say how

actions will be progressed in Fermanagh and South Tyrone specifically. However, under the key first actions, the aim is to initially sustain 70 childcare places for school-age children in Fermanagh and South Tyrone and to subsequently create an additional 82 places.

Under the Department's anti-poverty and social exclusion programme, I delivered the rural childcare programme. The aim of that programme was to address the difficulties faced by rural communities regarding access to and provision of quality and affordable childcare facilities. In total, 19 rural childcare providers were funded and 134 rural childminders registered, creating a minimum of 402 additional places. Furthermore, £1.13 million was spent across the North. As well as the social benefits, the economic benefits arising from my Department's previous childcare programmes include opportunities for employment for those benefiting from the scheme, where 199 parents and guardians returned to work, as well as opportunities for employment within the projects, where 157.5 permanent and 16.5 temporary full-time equivalent jobs were created in the childcare industry.

4.00 pm

Projects supported in Fermanagh and South Tyrone under that programme included the refurbishment of the former Eglisk Primary School as a new day-care centre, with facilities for breakfast and after-school clubs, and the creation of an outdoor play facility in Glendurragh, Kesh.

Assessing current levels of childcare demand and supply is complex. It is hampered by the absence of monitoring of robust data in the sector and by considerable unknowns. Added to that is the network of informal childcare support that is particularly prevalent in rural communities. Others have picked up on the fact that, in most cases, families, particularly grandparents, help out and provide support to parents in order to meet their childcare needs. It is hard to get a true picture of the need.

Under the current rural development programme, over £325,000 has been spent improving childcare facilities in Fermanagh and South Tyrone, and that has benefited in the region of 160 children. Under the new RDP recently approved by the EU Commission, the LEADER measures may be able to provide support for rural childcare projects under the rural business investment scheme. It will provide support for private and social economy-type business start-ups and business expansion in rural areas. Support may also be available for access to basic services or improvements in social infrastructure to improve welfare and access to basic services where there is a clear gap in provision for those living in rural areas. Those schemes will be delivered on behalf of DARD by the 10 LAGs. They will hold pre-funding workshops to inform potential applicants of the scheme requirements in advance of opening the call for applications.

I fully support the Executive's vision that every child, parent and family should have access to affordable, integrated and quality childcare, and, crucially, I welcome the fact that rural childcare needs will be mainstreamed across a full range of actions in the draft childcare strategy. That is rural proofing in practice, and it will be reinforced through the legislation that I intend to progress through the Assembly over the coming months.

In conclusion, once again, I thank my colleague Bronwyn McGahan for securing the Adjournment debate and everyone who contributed to it. I hope that I have addressed some of the issues, but, if there is anything outstanding from Bronwyn's contribution, I will be happy to respond. I share the vision for sustainable rural communities, and childcare has an important role to play in achieving that vision for areas such as Fermanagh and South Tyrone and many others. There are unique challenges in providing rural childcare provision, such as small, scattered populations, long distances to travel and isolation, all of which I have covered. However, in supporting families going forward, I believe that we have to look at the unique circumstances in rural communities and at what we can do. It is important, once again, to highlight the fact that we are calling on people to respond to the consultation in order to highlight why we need rural needs to be properly included in the development of the final published childcare strategy.

Adjourned at 4.02 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 21 September 2015

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

New Assembly Member: Andy Allen

Mr Speaker: Before we proceed to today's business, I have some announcements to make.

I wish to advise the House that I have been informed by the Chief Electoral Officer that Mr Andy Allen has been returned as a Member of the Assembly for the East Belfast constituency to fill the vacancy resulting from Mr Michael Copeland's resignation. Mr Allen signed the Roll of Membership and entered his designation in the presence of myself and the Director of Clerking on 17 September 2015. The Member has now taken his seat. I welcome him to the House and wish him every success.

Ministerial Appointments: Mr Bell, Mr Hamilton, Mr Storey

Mr Speaker: I have to advise the House that the Rt Hon Peter Robinson, as nominating officer for the DUP, nominated Mr Jonathan Bell MLA as Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Mr Simon Hamilton MLA as Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and Mr Mervyn Storey MLA as Minister for Social Development. Mr Bell, Mr Hamilton and Mr Storey each accepted the nomination and affirmed the Pledge of Office in the presence of the Principal Deputy Speaker and the Clerk/Chief Executive on Wednesday 16 September 2015.

Ministerial Resignations: Mr Bell, Mr Hamilton, Mr Storey

Mr Speaker: I have to advise the House further that those three Ministers subsequently resigned their offices on 17 September 2015. Standing Order 44(3) provides for a seven-day period during which the party that held those offices can nominate members of their party to replace them and take up office. That period expires at the end of Wednesday 23 September 2015. I am satisfied that the requirements of Standing Orders have been met. Let us move on.

Speaker's Business

Minister for Regional Development: Appointment

Mr Speaker: The first item of business is the appointment of a Minister for Regional Development. I will conduct the process for filling that office in accordance with the procedure in section 18 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and Standing Order 44. I will commence by asking the nominating officer of the political party required by the formula contained in section 18(5) to nominate a person to hold the office of Minister for Regional Development who is a member of his or her party and of the Assembly.

In accordance with Standing Order 44(4), within 15 minutes of my request, the nominating officer must respond and the person nominated must affirm the Pledge of Office and take up the office. An extension to this period may be requested by any Member of the Assembly providing they give a reason, or reasons, and the Assembly approves the extension. If that is clear, we will move on.

I call on the Rt Hon Peter Robinson, as nominating officer of the —

Mr Dickson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I ask you to rule with regard to the appointment of a Minister, given that, in their Pledge of Office, Ministers are required to:

"discharge in good faith all the duties of office".

Can you indicate to the House, in your own time, how someone can discharge those duties given the in/out nature of recent appointments and particularly the appointment to be made this morning?

Mr Speaker: I thank the Member for that point of order. Clearly, these are, I suppose, unusual and quite serious times that we are in. I very much welcome the talks that are about to be convened today and I wish them all possible success. As we stand, I am satisfied that the requirements of Standing Orders have been met. I am alert to the issue you have raised but I am not proposing to take any particular action other than to continue to monitor the situation and review the legislation. Let us move on.

I call the Rt Hon Peter Robinson, as nominating officer of the political party for which the formula laid down in section 18(5) of the Act gives the highest figure, to nominate a person who is a member of his party and of the Assembly to hold the office of Minister for Regional Development.

Mr P Robinson: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I nominate my colleague Michelle McIlveen —

Mr Allister: Courtesy of murder.

Mr P Robinson: — to hold the office of Minister for Regional Development.

Mr Allister: Courtesy of murder.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Campbell: You have some neck on you, a 20-year absentee.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. On behalf of the Assembly, I wish you well, Mr Robinson. It is good to see you in your place. May I now establish whether the nominated person is prepared to confirm that she is willing to take up the office and affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office?

Miss M McIlveen: Yes, Mr Speaker, I am willing to take up the office of Minister for Regional Development —

Mr Allister: Courtesy of murder.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Miss M McIlveen: — and I affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Mr Speaker: If there are any more interruptions of that type, I will take immediate action. I will use my full authority to ensure that there is good order of business in this place. Interrupting people who are on their feet will not be tolerated by me, and that applies to any Member of this House.

Michelle McIlveen is now the Minister for Regional Development.

Ministerial Statements

North/South Ministerial Council: Inland Waterways

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. With your permission, Mr Speaker, and in compliance with section 52 of the NI Act 1998, I wish to make a statement regarding the North/South Ministerial Council inland waterways meeting that was held in Belfast on 10 June 2015.

The Executive were represented by me as Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure and by the former junior Minister Michelle McIlveen from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. The Irish Government were represented by lead Minister Heather Humphreys TD, Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, and Minister Joe McHugh TD, Minister of State with special responsibility for Gaeltacht Affairs. The statement has been agreed with former junior Minister McIlveen and I am making it on behalf of us both.

The meeting dealt with issues relating to inland waterways and the constituent agency, Waterways Ireland. At the meeting, the Council received a progress report from Dawn Livingstone, chief executive of Waterways Ireland on the activities of Waterways Ireland, including the continued management and maintenance of waterways, with over 99% of the waterways remaining open for navigation; capital expenditure focused on major infrastructure repairs, with replacement lock gates installed at Tarmonbarry on the Shannon and bridge repairs on the Grand canal completed and progress on the installation of floating moorings at Galloon and Knockninny on Lough Erne. The Shannon Blueway won the Lakelands and Inland Waterways Sport Tourism Innovation Award at the Shannon Airport Sport Tourism European Summit. In addition, 63 kilometres of canoe trail, with associated cycleways, will be completed by the summer on the Shannon-Erne waterway, and 106 events have been offered support under the 2015 sponsorship programme.

Ministers considered the action plan for the Grand canal dock and Spencer dock and agreed that Waterways Ireland proceed with its implementation, subject to available resources.

The Council noted the progress to date on the restoration of the Ulster canal from Upper Lough Erne to Castle Saunderson in County Cavan. Ministers approved a proposal to facilitate the development of a greenway along the route/linear corridor of the Ulster canal from Castle Saunderson to Charlemont, County Armagh. The Council also agreed to Waterways Ireland undertaking the role of lead partner on that project with the support of relevant councils and other stakeholders.

Ministers noted the update on Waterways Ireland's work to maximise the benefit of EU funding opportunities. The Council approved Waterways Ireland making an order to amend Lough Erne by-laws in order to enhance its ability to manage the navigation effectively and ensure a safer waterway for all users.

Ministers noted that the Waterways Ireland annual report and accounts 2013 were laid before the Assembly and the Houses of the Oireachtas on 11 March 2015. Waterways Ireland's annual report and draft accounts 2014 have been

submitted to the Comptrollers and Auditors General, and, following certification, will be laid before the Assembly and the Houses of the Oireachtas.

The Council consented to a number of property disposals. It agreed to meet again in inland waterways sectoral format in November 2015.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas ansin. Can the Minister provide an estimate of the costs of the restoration of the Upper Lough Erne to Clones section of the Ulster canal, and what is the current cost of the entire restoration project?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The anticipated cost of restoration of the Ulster canal was over €171 million. The Upper Lough Erne to Clones section was over £45 million. That cost is expected to be slightly higher, including the optimism bias.

The Member will remember that at the start the Irish Government indicated that they would bear the full costs, and that was some years ago. This is one of the most active items during the sectoral meetings, particularly the restoration of the Ulster canal. I think it enjoys the support of all parties across this island. I am content that preliminary work has started to try to secure the full restoration of the canal. It is certainly something we are keeping a close eye on.

Mr Cree: I am sorry; I could not hear the Minister. She was speaking away from the microphone. In the same area, what progress has been made on that part of the canal, and is there some idea of the cost of the greenway?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I apologise to the Member if he could not hear. What I said to Mr Ó hOisín — and the Member will also remember — is that some years ago, when the full restoration was announced, the Irish Government said that they would bear the full cost. The economic situation has changed, certainly in terms of the cost. However, preliminary work has started. The project has received full planning permission in both jurisdictions. All county councils and local councils have been involved in work, not only to have the Ulster canal fully restored but, as the Member mentioned, looking at areas of opportunity, including greenways, blue ways and how each council area can maximise opportunities in preparation for the restoration. Work has begun.

My colleague Michelle O'Neill has met officials in the South about getting this advanced. We will work closely with all representatives across this island because, as I said to Mr Ó hOisín, the full restoration of the Ulster canal is one of the very few projects that, regardless of where people are sitting politically, enjoys support from everyone right across this island.

12.15 pm

Ms Lo: It is a pity that the Minister's statements on the Council's work are always so scanty and with so little detail. It is sometimes very difficult to even know what to ask you. Can I request that, in future, there is a bit more detail? They seem to be always just headlines of what is discussed and the title rather than the details. I am very keen to hear more on all the topics discussed.

Can I ask about the EU funding opportunities? You said that you "noted the update", Minister, can you give us a bit more detail on what EU funding opportunities have been

examined? There are plenty of opportunities, and we really need to move up a gear to maximise opportunities for North and South.

Ms Ní Chuilín: First of all, the Member will be aware, as Chair of a Committee, that the statements are really highlights and headlines of the North/South meetings. There is absolutely nothing stopping the Member, in between the sectoral meetings, asking questions on detail that is not there or raising a request to have any of her concerns addressed. There is absolutely no need to wait for the statements on the sectoral meetings to try to ascertain that. That format has been agreed for all the sectoral meetings. I appreciate the Member's interest, particularly in the environment sector and how it impacts on the role of the Environment Committee. The offer is open: if there is any part of the statement that the Member feels is amiss or needs to be filled in, I am happy to try to respond to her.

I can confirm that both sectoral formats that I am responsible for have been fairly active in trying to maximise EU opportunities. They are looking at transitional programmes in terms of INTERREG, LEADER and Horizon. They are looking at the programme for social change and others. Indeed, under INTERREG IV, Waterways Ireland had very successful European bids met and had very good partnerships with other European countries that visited here and visited our waterways. Dawn Livingstone, the chief executive of Waterways Ireland, and her staff have been very active in trying to ensure that we maximise, as well as possible, any opportunities in Europe for funding.

Mr Rogers: Thanks to the Minister for her statement. Minister, what discussions have you had with the Department responsible for trade and industry about developing the full tourist potential of all our canals?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am one of the accompanying Ministers with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, particularly on the sectoral end of it, and that information has been fed into Waterways Ireland and vice versa. Minister Jonathan Bell and I asked that opportunities, particularly for our waterways, are explored and exploited as well as possible, and that has happened. We work very closely with Fáilte Ireland, as does Waterways Ireland, to ensure that we not only provide opportunities for local communities to be involved in marketing and promotion but that some tangible benefits arise from that. I will continue to do that and continue to meet Minister Bell and other Ministers who have responsibility for this to ensure that there are no gaps, because there is really no need for gaps at this stage, particularly four years into a mandate when we are accompanying Ministers for each of our Departments and have that role. We are all very keen to maximise those opportunities, particularly around waterways.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. What are the main priorities for Waterways Ireland, including in the corporate planning period from 2015 to 2016?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. He will have seen, even through the statement, that 99% of the waterways were open for navigation. That, in itself, is extremely good. I suppose that the priority is to manage

and maintain the navigation to make sure that it is open and accessible to the public.

It is also, as I said in response to Seán Rogers, to ensure that the public have opportunities to enjoy the potential recreational activities on the waterways. It is also about unlocking opportunities, maximising our resources and continuing to develop the waterways. Basically, for us and for me, the corporate plan is to ensure that we maximise all the opportunities. Keeping the navigation is one success, but marrying potential opportunities with DCAL, DETI and the tourist boards across the island will help not only local council areas but local residents to ensure that the corporate plan period is met and that we go beyond that and do a bit more.

Mr B McCrea: Paragraph 1(ii) of the Minister's statement, under "Progress report", mentions capital expenditure. The last time that the Committee was down talking to Waterways Ireland, we were told that there was some concern that there was barely enough money in the capital budget to keep the infrastructure open. Is the Minister able to tell us what the forthcoming capital expenditure will be and whether there will be any opportunity on the Northern side, as it were, to do more with that great asset that we have?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. He is right: there has been some concern among all the North/South bodies, particularly on the availability of additional resources, and even among big-spending bodies like Waterways Ireland about the availability of capital.

We have kept marines open, certainly on the North side, and the Member will be aware of some of the preliminary works that we are trying to initiate and keep going on the Ulster canal. I will happily get the most recent update possible and furnish him with that.

The Member and other Members have raised that point before. It is important that we invest, particularly in capital infrastructure that will help to attract tourism and more local people to our waterways. I will meet Dawn, the chief executive of Waterways Ireland, hopefully over the next couple of weeks, to try to get a better sense of what we need to do more of. We obviously have a smaller budget, but we certainly need to try to do a bit more.

North/South Ministerial Council: Language Body

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. With your permission and in compliance with section 52 of the NI Act 1998, I wish to make a statement regarding the North/South Ministerial Council language body meetings, which were held in the Ulster-Scots Agency office in Belfast on 10 June 2015.

The Executive were represented by me as Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure and by former junior Minister Michelle McLveen from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. The Irish Government were represented by lead Minister Joe McHugh TD, Minister of State with special responsibility for Gaeltacht affairs, and Heather Humphreys TD, the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht. This statement has been agreed with former junior Minister McLveen, and I am making it on behalf of both of us.

The meeting dealt with issues relating to the language body and its two constituent agencies. Ministers noted progress reports from the chairpersons and the chief executive officers of Foras na Gaeilge and the Ulster-Scots Agency, which include the following achievements relating to the period November 2014 to May 2015.

Foras na Gaeilge reported on continuing progress on the new funding arrangements, including 12 meetings to date of the partnership forum and three meetings to date of the language development forum, the recruitment of staff and the establishment of offices by the six lead organisations in Belfast, Newry, Dublin, Ráth Chairn, Athenry, Casla, and Dungarvan. It also reported success in securing European funding under the Creative Europe programme, in partnership with four other organisations, to foster creative writing in minority languages; further progress with the new English-Irish dictionary and the design of the app specification, which will be available for the academic year beginning September 2015; and the publication of new guidelines for best practice in serving the Irish language community, which were issued to the new super-councils at a conference that was held in Armagh on 25 March 2015.

The Ulster-Scots Agency reported on the organisation of the Burns Night concert, in partnership with the Ulster Orchestra, in the Belfast Waterfront Hall in January, which was subsequently broadcast on BBC Two. It also reported on the launch of the new Ulster-Scots web portal for visitors, which includes an ever-expanding range of visitor attractions, including Bushmills Distillery, First Derry Presbyterian Church and St Anne's Cathedral, Belfast; the new Ulster-Scots gallery at the North Down Museum, Bangor, which was funded by the agency and opened on 14 May 2015; and the funding provided for the delivery of Ulster-Scots music and dance tuition in 42 primary schools, in addition to the delivery of 24 Ulster-Scots after-school clubs and 11 Ulster-Scots school workshops.

Ministers also noted progress on collaboration between Foras na Gaeilge and the Ulster-Scots Agency: the safeguarding policy and code of practice for funded bodies has been reviewed and updated by external advisers; and, under the joint project for integrated schools, six workshops were delivered to Priory Integrated College in Holywood, County Down during November/December

2014, providing 25 year-8 students with an insight into the Irish language and the Ulster-Scots culture and language. The roll-out of the programme continued with Shimna Integrated College, Ballymena in May/June 2015, and plans are under way for other schools.

The Council noted that the 2013 consolidated language body annual report and accounts were laid in the Houses of the Oireachtas and in the Assembly on 5 June 2015. The Council also noted that the field audits for the 2014 accounts have been completed for the Ulster-Scots Agency and will commence for Foras na Gaeilge in June/July 2015. Ministers noted that the agencies of the language body are continuing to engage in the identification of possible opportunities to maximise the benefits of EU funding.

The Council noted the Ulster-Scots Agency's exploratory discussions with a number of interested parties about the potential for a project relating to entrepreneurship with young people in isolated communities under the Northern Periphery and Arctic programme. Possible partners include Mourne and East Donegal linking with the Scottish Highlands and Norway. The agency is liaising with the transnational/interregional programmes regional contact point at the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) regarding potential funding for the project.

Ministers noted Foras na Gaeilge's success in securing EU funding under the Creative Europe programme for a literary project entitled Other Words, in cooperation with Spain, Slovenia, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Sweden. The project will be launched in July, and it will raise the profile of minority language literature throughout Europe, in the original language and in translation.

The Council welcomed the fact that collaboration between agencies and officials in both jurisdictions can continue to maximise drawdown of EU funding and encouraged officials to continue to seek new opportunities for potential projects that can attract such EU funding.

Ian Crozier, the CEO of the Ulster-Scots Agency, delivered a short presentation outlining the work being progressed by the agency in building capacity and supporting community development through its community impact programme. The programme involves supporting a small number of full-time development posts in an effort to provide more targeted and sustained support to community groups.

The Council approved, within the existing budget, a revised timetable for the English-Irish dictionary project to ensure the provision of a more comprehensive end product, including a choice of print, online and app formats. The Council noted the updated targets, comprising publication of 120,000 sense units in 2015, publication of a further 10,000 sense units in 2016, with particular emphasis on the primary and secondary curricula in both jurisdictions, and the publication of the print version of the dictionary for the start of the academic year in 2017.

The Council agreed to meet again in language body sectoral format in November 2015.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a dara ráiteas anseo inniu. Will the Minister advise what is happening to the

revision of the scéim phobail Gaeilge — the community language officer scheme — funded by Foras na Gaeilge?

Ms Ni Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. Certainly, at the minute, Foras na Gaeilge, as part of its statutory functions, has responsibility, as the Member knows, for bringing those programmes forward. Both Departments are considering proposals submitted by Foras na Gaeilge in relation to revising scéim phobail Gaeilge. I have a big interest, particularly in the revision of such a scheme. I have encouraged, and will encourage, that any revisions will not be detrimental, particularly to the development and protection of language for groups in the North.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an ráiteas a chuir sí os ár gcomhair inniu. Ba mhaith liom cúpla ceist a chur uirthi maidir leis an app don English-Irish dictionary, mar a chuirtear air. An bhfuil an app ar fáil, nó bhí mise ag iarraidh teacht air inné agus ní raibh mé ábalta é a aimsiú.

(Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Newton] in the Chair)

12.30 pm

I have tried to find the app for the English-Irish dictionary. Could the Minister perhaps provide some further detail on how to get it? That is by the way. In regard to securing European funding under the Creative Europe programme in partnership with four other organisations, an dtig leis an Aire cur in iúl dúinn cá mhéad airgead atá ar fáil, agus cá mhéad a chuirfear ar fáil, do na heagraíochtaí sin, agus an bhfuil tionscnaimh úra eile ar bun ag an Roinn le go bhfuigheadh siad tuilleadh airgid ón choiste sin? How much money has been drawn down and are there other projects the Department has in mind for this funding?

Ms Ni Chuilín: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as a cheist. I will provide an update in writing both on money spent so far on Foras na Gaeilge's dictionary project and on how to access the app. Needless to say, Foras na Gaeilge and groups on the ground are actively exploring opportunities for additional funding. I know of one group in Belfast that is not in receipt and is not one of the six lead groups. Other groups have gone over to Europe to try and access funding. Certainly, Foras na Gaeilge, as I said in my statement, is looking at the literary project, at partnerships producing literature for minority languages and at tourism opportunities through the teanga or Irish language.

Musical opportunities are also being explored. I met a group recently — it has yet to go to Foras na Gaeilge — that is trying to protect and enhance the language through music, particularly in schools and through nursery rhymes for preschool children, and is trying to maximise opportunities for European funding. Groups in the community are much more active and robust in trying to source opportunities, and I will ensure that that activity and robustness is reflected by Foras na Gaeilge.

Mr Cree: In relation to the Foras na Gaeilge project report, will the Minister give more detail on the staffing and costs of the six lead organisations in the seven locations?

Ms Ni Chuilín: I am happy to write to the Member on the full costs, but the lead organisations have almost completed, although they are not there yet, in my opinion, in terms of the full complement of staff, particularly in the

North. I know one of the groups; I have met one of the groups that is very active in Conradh na Gailege, which is based in west Belfast. Overall in terms of groups in the North, in the rest of them, in my opinion, too many people are asking too many questions about the services that should be provided across the North, so I have asked for an urgent update on all the groups. I know they have secured premises in Newry and elsewhere, but what I need to know is what staff have been recruited and how they are working with existing groups. Within that urgent update will be included the costs to date.

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for her statement, which contains a lot more information than her previous one. Was an evaluation done of the feedback from students who took part in the workshops in the joint project for integrated schools before it is rolled out?

Ms Ní Chuilín: There was a preliminary evaluation, and one of the things it indicated to me was that the demand for the work of Foras na Gaeilge and the Ulster-Scots Agency within those schools has increased and continues to increase. It has also increased outside the integrated sector, which is very good. I have absolutely no doubt and have full confidence that any additional evaluation of the work of the two agencies will demonstrate that, not only is this project good value for money, but that both groups are providing, as well as good leadership, opportunities for children and young people, in particular, to find out about each other's culture; to debunk some of the myths out there; to learn something new; to have a better appreciation of who we are, where we are from and how we describe our culture; and to get a better understanding of communities. I know that there is increasing demand for Foras na Gailege and the Ulster-Scots Agency to go into schools right across the board.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for her answers. Can she tell us, given the previous delays in publishing the annual reports and accounts, what is being done to speed up the process?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. I am aware, as the House has been aware, that, even since the previous mandate, there has been an ongoing delay in trying to get the accounts and all the subsequent reports brought up to a better level. To that end, we consolidated all of the processes and procedures. We tried to intervene at an earlier stage to try to have the accounts and reports brought before the Assembly and both Houses of the Oireachtas. I am delighted that, even since June of last year, we have had at least six sets of accounts and reports brought up to date. That work has to be commended, particularly the work of staff of agencies and the work of officials in both jurisdictions to help them to do that. It is important, however, that we keep that momentum going to ensure that the gaps that were made in the early 2000s are not made again and that the mistakes made then are not repeated in the future.

Mr Allister: I advise the Minister that, contrary to her statement, Shimna Integrated College is not in Ballymena; I think it is in Newcastle. I thought that the Minister might have known that, but there you are.

The Minister said that she was making the statement on behalf of herself and junior Minister McIlveen. Are we, therefore, to understand that, despite the statement about

disrupting North/South business, the DUP is still endorsing statements on North/South business?

In relation to the accounts that, belatedly, for 2013 have been provided, do they reflect at all the finding in her Department's resource accounts for that year that there was illegal spend to the tune of £8 million by these North/South bodies under her wing because business cases had not been approved? Is that reflected in the business accounts that have been approved in respect of this North/South body?

Ms Ní Chuilín: With your indulgence, Principal Deputy Speaker, I am here to answer questions on my statement and not on Members' statements. Therefore, I am not responding to the first part because I feel that it is overtly political. In fact, it is rubbish. Indeed, the Member is consistent because the second part of his statement and the subsequent questions are also wrong. I have not incurred illegal spend in my Department.

Mr B McCrea: Given that there were some changes in Irish language delivery and planning, can the Minister outline what steps we have been able to take to reassure the entire community that the Irish language will be supported on a cross-community basis and not just for one section of our community?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question, and I also want to put on the record that I thank the Member for the way he has presented his question, not just today but in previous questions around the Irish language. It is important that Members from the other side of the House in particular ask questions about the Irish language in a very respectful manner; so, I pay tribute to the Member for doing that.

The work of Foras na Gaeilge and, indeed, the restructuring of core funding has been a very important step, but it has been a fundamental change in the way that the sector has been organised. That is one aspect. The other aspect is, as the Member will be aware, the Líofa programme that I have progressed in my Department. I know Líofa, and the response that the Member will receive on 1 October in relation to the proposals on the Acht na Gaeilge consultation. I do not want to go into that now because I want to have regard for the Committee, but I know already that there is overwhelming support for an Irish language Act. Within that very high percentage, there is cross-party support for an Irish language Act. Members who are involved with and have signed up for Líofa come from across the community. That is to be welcomed. Members from right across the community are funded by Foras na Gaeilge, as well. That is a mature development, progressed by Foras na Gaeilge and supported by the work of the Ulster-Scots Agency, the two Departments and, more importantly, the community. Whatever is said in here, I have full confidence that the community, on this issue and perhaps others, is well ahead of us.

Executive Committee Business

Housing (Amendment) Bill: Second Stage

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: This item of business is listed in the name of the Minister for Social Development. As that ministerial office is vacant, the item of business cannot be moved.

Houses in Multiple Occupation Bill: Second Stage

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: This item of business is listed in the name of the Minister for Social Development. As that ministerial office is vacant, the item of business cannot be moved.

Committee Business

Health and Social Care (Control of Data Processing) Bill: Extension of Committee Stage

Ms Maeve McLaughlin (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 20 November 2015, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Health and Social Care (Control of Data Processing) Bill [NIA 52/11-16].

Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. The Health and Social Care (Control of Data Processing) Bill was referred to the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety on 30 June for Committee Stage. The Bill should, under Standing Order 33(2), complete its Committee Stage on 6 October. The main objective of the Bill is to provide a statutory framework and safeguards to enable the use of identifiable health and social care information for medical or social care purposes that would improve health and social care or are in the public interest, without the consent of the individuals whose information may be used. At its meeting on 9 September, the Committee considered the 23 written responses to its call for evidence. It also considered the stakeholders from which it wished to take oral evidence.

There are a number of issues of concern in relation to this legislation that need to be explored in much greater detail: issues around public interest, social well-being, safeguards and others. Given the complexity of these issues and the sensitivities around sharing identifiable information without consent, the Committee feels that it is essential that it is afforded the time to exercise its scrutiny powers to the full. I therefore ask on behalf of the Committee that the House supports the motion to extend the Committee Stage of the Bill until 20 November.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 20 November 2015, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Health and Social Care (Control of Data Processing) Bill [NIA 52/11-16].

12.45 pm

Private Members' Business

Agriculture Industry Crisis

Mr Principal Deputy 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 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 and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Irwin: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with concern the crisis facing all sectors of agriculture across Northern Ireland; recognises the need to deliver significant change in the short term and into the future; and calls on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to do more for the industry by ensuring basic payments are issued to farmers in early December 2015, lobbying the EU Agriculture Commissioner, Phil Hogan, to raise dairy intervention prices as a matter of urgency and bringing forward a wider strategy to deal with the immediate challenges facing the industry.

At the outset, I must declare an interest as a dairy farmer. I welcome the opportunity to bring this matter to the Floor of the House today. Whilst we have a significant and very real crisis ongoing in our agrifood production industry, we have an equally serious crisis ongoing in our devolved Administration. The current crisis does not assist in responding to and making a positive impact for the good of the Province's agriculture community.

We need a stable, devolved Assembly without the fear and threat of renewed violence, and we need a Budget agreed by all the parties to allow our Assembly to take the types of decisions that may help in some way to sustain our agriculture industry and help it recover from this current crisis. We have neither of those important elements at the moment, and that makes the challenges facing our agriculture industry much more challenging. It is therefore vital that those parties, namely, Sinn Féin and the SDLP, get to grips with reality, face up to the current difficulties and move positively to address them.

With that being said, I now move my focus to the plight facing our farmers. They all share the same concerns — lack of economic stability, lack of a level playing field in farmgate pricing and a lack of respect from the larger retailers. All sectors, including dairy, meat, vegetable and arable, are experiencing the same difficulties, and the main message that I have heard on my many engagements with farmers around the Province is the need for a rebalancing of the supply chain so that the person at the start of the chain sees a fair return for their efforts.

There have been ongoing protests across the Province at supermarkets and other locations, and we have had a number of demonstrations here at Parliament Buildings. With a lot of media attention surrounding the issue, the wider public are now well aware of the problems facing our agrifood industry. We should capitalise on that support by asking consumers to buy British produce.

A number of factors are contributing to the crisis in our dairy sector, including the Russian import ban, general oversupply of milk across Europe, a weak euro currency and the lack of an appropriate level of intervention in order to assist producers in the immediate term.

As a dairy farmer for many years, I have seen many highs and lows, and, in recent times, there has been a real jagged edge to the pricing graph. The instability in pricing has not assisted our industry, and when a few months of good prices are followed by sustained periods of poor prices, it hinders the growth and sustainability of the sector.

I have taken many calls from concerned farmers on the need to raise dairy intervention prices, and in my meeting with EU Commissioner Hogan in Brussels a few weeks ago, along with other representatives, I took the opportunity to stress to him how that could benefit our dairy sector at this difficult time. I also had useful engagements, organised by my colleague Diane Dodds MEP, with Commission officials to discuss the market trends across Europe and to gauge the condition of the industry Europe-wide. The situation is similar in many states across Europe.

Dairy is obviously only one sector in our wider industry that is under pressure, and it is clear that all sectors are under increasing strain. This is the first time that I have seen a wide range of sectors facing such difficulties at the one time. The current weather is not helping the situation for the arable sector.

All sectors in our agrifood industry need stability to be able to, first, consolidate and, then, look to make progress. To ask any industry to cope with prices well below the cost of production is simply not sustainable.

In order to assist farmers in the shorter term, the package of aid that has been distributed across EU member states must be shared fairly within our own UK region. It is important that Northern Ireland farmers, who have certainly been hit hardest in the current crisis, get the lion's share of the £26 million of aid available to the United Kingdom. I urge the Minister to make every effort and a very strong case for a suitable share of the financial package to come to Northern Ireland. My colleague David Simpson and I met Liz Truss MP a few weeks ago, and we left her in no doubt as to the concerns of the Northern Ireland industry. We provided examples of how Northern Ireland has suffered to a greater extent in this crisis than the rest of the UK.

The motion refers to the need for basic farm payments to be issued in early December. However, there has been a development since we submitted the motion: the EU Commissioner now allows flexibility on the payment of basic farm payments. In the light of that development, I urge the Minister to prepare her Department immediately to enable payment of that vital cash from 16 October. In such financially challenging times, farmers who are under severe and continuing pressure must not be made to wait on their basic farm payments by the Department. Delays are costly for farmers, especially when, across sectors, they are having to cope to shore up their own businesses and continue producing. That situation, as I said, cannot go on much longer. Farmers cannot continue to lose in that way.

The situation facing our industry at present requires a broader response and a collective responsibility from stakeholders to improve the outlook for agrifood production

in Northern Ireland. The issue of pricing from farm gate to plate needs to be addressed, and big retailers need to recognise the importance and value of sourcing locally to produce food at a sustainable price for the farmer. Competition between the big retailers, whilst good for the consumer, is driving down prices and has a knock-on effect down the supply chain in reducing margins dramatically for farmers at the farm gate. Let it be clear: we are not asking consumers for more money but rather that the supply chain distribute the profit more fairly. As an immediate response to the crisis, the big retailers must do more. That is a message that has been repeated many times, and it remains an important part of the response to the crisis. It could not be more straightforward: farmers deserve to receive more money for their product.

As we look at the medium and longer terms, I think that it is clear that we need to find new markets to increase the marketability of Northern Ireland produce. Along with that, there is a growing need for consumers here to buy British to ensure that we are directly supporting our own producers. The banking institutions also have an important role to play, and there needs to be greater recognition by the main banks of the situation that farmers face. Some banks have already shown some leniency in providing more flexible arrangements in light of the current crisis. I have used recent opportunities to continue to consult the banks and press for more leniency from them. Farmers have a tremendous affiliation and connection to the land they farm, and they want their business not only to survive but to succeed. That has been the resilient attitude of farmers in Northern Ireland for many decades. The banking institutions, therefore, must continue to lend a sympathetic ear to farmers and recognise the value of the agriculture industry to the wider economy.

Other measures that will be of assistance include the new rural development programme, which has recently been granted approval. The Minister must ensure that the various strands of support available to farmers, such as those helping them to create greater efficiency in their business, are quickly made ready and open for farmers to apply for. With the previous programme in mind, and some of the issues that plagued the delivery of the rural development programme with red tape and bureaucracy, the Department must look comprehensively at reducing that burden on our farmers. Red tape is a burden not only of time but of finance, especially when farmers have to consult other agencies for assistance in the completion of records and forms. That adds to the overall cost to the farmer.

Agriculture is in a very difficult place, but, despite that, as I mentioned, farmers have shown a lot of resilience right across Northern Ireland. With that in mind, agriculture can and must recover. Despite the very concerning trends at present, there are better days ahead. Let us ensure that those in positions of responsibility step up and help us to make the changes that could bring those better days sooner rather than later.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before I call Mrs Dobson to move the amendment, perhaps Members would take action on the telephone or iPad that is interfering with the recording system. Thank you.

Mrs Dobson: I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out all after the first "industry" and insert

"by availing of the important permission from the European Commission to make up to 70 per cent of advance Basic Payments from October 2015, lobbying the EU Agriculture Commissioner to raise dairy intervention prices as a matter of urgency and bringing forward a specific set of action points to deal with the immediate challenges facing the industry."

I would like to start by declaring that my husband is a beef and cereal farmer. I very much welcome the fact that the motion has been moved and the opportunity to speak to it, although no doubt it will confuse people further as to what exactly the DUP is doing with its games in the Assembly. If they are not games, why did no one contribute to our debate last week on the waiting times that affect one in five of our constituents?

There can be no doubt that the crisis facing all sectors of our farming industry, from vegetable to sheep and from beef to dairy, is the greatest threat and challenge to our rural way of life in Northern Ireland for many decades. I agree with much of what Mr Irwin's motion says. However, I thought it an oversight that he left out the issue of advanced payments. That is why I tabled the amendment in my name and that of Robin Swann. Maybe it was his party's hastiness in submitting the motion, or maybe it is the case that he simply accepts the Minister at her word. Either way, it would be wrong of us not to raise the issue. Let us not forget how significant 70% advance payments from next month could be. They would provide immediate financial support for farmers facing some of the most challenging circumstances of their lifetime.

The Ulster Unionist Party has called for advance payments for many years. However, successive Agriculture Ministers simply said that that could not be delivered because the European Commission would not allow it. Now that the Commission gives us the opportunity on a plate, the Department rejects it. I think that it is shameful that the Minister, who claims to realise the scale of the crisis in the sector, did not even take the time to consider it. There has been no clearer example of how out of touch the current Minister really is with the scale of the problem, and the industry is, understandably, in uproar. On one day, the Minister stands up, pledges full support and promises that every issue will be explored —

Mr McMullan: I thank the Member for giving way. You criticised the Minister by saying that you do not take her word for what she is doing. Perhaps you could tell me what your Minister is doing about the crisis.

Mrs Dobson: I thank the Member for giving way. We do not hold the Agriculture Ministry, but I think that you will find that we have worked hard on the issue.

On the next day, the Minister firmly rejects what is probably the single biggest support measure that could be delivered. Of course, the Minister will no doubt say that she cannot issue advance payments as this year's applications require additional time to process. However, the Department has known for some time that this year's applications would be different, so it clearly failed to plan for them.

Another good example is the fact that, after months have passed since the application deadline, the Minister still refuses to indicate, even approximately, what the young

farmers' top-up rate will be. I would like to focus the remainder of my contribution on the young farmers who will become the next generation of farmers in Northern Ireland, because, during recess, it was a young farmer — Johnny Matthews — who contacted me to raise his grave concerns. That resulted in a meeting in Donaghcloney, which was attended by over 60 farmers from across Northern Ireland, after which Edwin Poots and I requested the Committee's recall.

I do not propose to go over the timeline of meetings, protests, letters and announcements that followed, whether here, in London or in Brussels. However, the measure of all those efforts must be seen in the farmyards, if we are to help farming families and retain the rural way of life for Northern Ireland as we know it. I pay tribute to the farmers who refused to be put off and met those in positions of responsibility to press for that action.

On Friday, I got the opportunity to relay the concerns of local farming families to the Bank of England's chief economist, Andy Haldane. We discussed the potential impact of possible interest rate rises, and his suggestion was that the rate, far from rising, could fall further. That would certainly be welcome news, not only for mortgage holders but for our farming families.

1.00 pm

Mr Haldane was a guest of the Portadown Chamber of Commerce, and I put on record my praise for the chamber for securing the attendance in our constituency of one of the world's 100 most influential people. It is beholden on all of us to use the influence that we have to help our industry through the present crisis.

At Committee last week, Minister, I asked for further clarity on the EU aid package and on what the reality of that announcement will mean to our farmyards. I am sure that Members would welcome any further light that you can shed on that today. Again, Minister, when we met alongside my party colleagues, Tom Elliott MP, Jim Nicholson MEP and Councillor Rosemary Barton, I raised my serious concerns around mental health issues in rural communities. Perhaps your contribution to the debate could also highlight what action you have taken on the issue. I have also been working alongside the chief executive of the Southern Trust on the issue and would welcome an update from the Minister today.

I want once again to focus on young farmers, like Jonny Matthews and James Stewart, who presented to us at Committee. They have come through CAFRE and are waiting in the wings to take over as heads of holding. They need to be given hope for a sustainable and profitable future in farming, now so more than ever.

Minister, we are all aware of your Department's drive towards online documents and forms. However, a short search through the DARD website shows that you do not have a dedicated section of advice and guidance for young farmers: 100-page PDF guides do not work. Will you give a guarantee to look at how your Department provides help and guidance to young farmers? After all, they are the next generation of farmers across Northern Ireland and they deserve support at this time of crisis like never before.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat. The present crisis in the dairy trade is another blow to our agriculture industry. We have seen crisis in the sheep trade, the beef trade,

the pork trade and now dairy. The Russian ban on our agricultural products has added greatly to this. The Chinese are trying to bolster their own domestic market rather than buy milk from Europe, and we now have a glut of milk.

We have special circumstances here, and our Minister has made that very clear to DEFRA in London. We face a unique and extreme set of circumstances. The dairy sector in the North is directly exposed to the commodity markets and vulnerable to currency exposure. At the present time, the difference between euro and sterling means something in the region of 4p and 5p a litre. That gives you an idea of how volatile it is.

We do not have the same large domestic market for our milk as other EU countries, including Britain, so our producer price is closely linked to the global commodities market. From day one of the present crisis, Minister O'Neill has been lobbying DEFRA to make it understand that the problem is here. That is one of the problems facing us: DEFRA did not see a crisis in the industry here. That made the lobbying even harder. That begs a question about DEFRA — to my mind, it is more of a hindrance than a help to the farming industry here, and that makes a stronger case for having an all-Ireland basis for the promotion of our farming products.

Minister O'Neill also went to Europe to lobby Commissioner Hogan. She has taken delegations of people from groups here to Europe. She has spoken to the banks. She has spoken to the producers. She has spoken to everybody she needs to. When nobody else could, she managed to get a meeting with Commissioner Hogan to make the case for the farmer here.

The one thing that all farmers, groups, delegations and even protesters outside have said is that they want to see the political parties here unite in taking the industry forward, and not snipe at each other to score cheap political points. As well as all the meetings she has had, the Minister has been working with the industry, the political stakeholders, particularly in relation to the dairy sector, for more than a year. She has also raised the plight of other parts of the farming industry. She has engaged more regularly with Liz Truss to emphasise circumstances here. She has also been pushing for a review of the intervention threshold rate, which, I believe, was last visited in 2003 and has not been changed since.

She has liaised with all the MEPs, her opposite number in Scotland and Wales and with Minister Coveney in the South. As I said, she has also taken the case directly into Europe. So, this Minister has proved that she is there for the farmer; she is pushing the case forward. We have got to get the intervention level for milk up. The last time that was done, as the Minister has said time and again, it put a floor on the market price and allowed it to recover. At present, Europe is not doing that. We have got money coming in but the problem now is how we are going to spend it and where it will go. By the time that DEFRA sends the money here, there will not be a terrible lot to put round, so we will have to see how we can best place that in the industry without leaving out other parts of the agriculture business.

All I can really say is that, when I look round the Floor today, some of the parties and all the Members who are sitting here, who lecture my party for what it is doing and

what it has not been doing, according to them, should look to themselves —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to bring his remarks to a conclusion.

Mr McMullan: — because some of the other parties' milking parlours are very empty today.

Mr Byrne: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate, as agriculture spokesman for my party, the SDLP. It is an indictment on the Department that we are having a debate on a motion entitled "Agriculture Industry Crisis". This is not a pop-up crisis, nor is it one that is dictated by immediate and pressing factors that can be reversed. Instead, it has been festering for many months. Those in the Chamber, in the Department and farmers have been aware that we would eventually reach this point and, so far, little has been done to address the situation.

Let us look at the factors that have got us to this stage. There has been a growth in milk production in the past two years, because preset EU milk quotas were abolished in April 2015. Before the abolition of the quotas, less milk was produced than is currently the case. We are producing 85% more milk than we consume on the island of Ireland. We need to export. Indeed, that is why we attempted to amend the motion to reflect the need to re-evaluate EU private storage capacity.

The expansion of EU private storage capacity for skimmed milk powder (SMP), butter and cheese is important to help to temporarily adjust the short-term market for dairy products. I welcome movement on this issue that was recently announced by Commissioner Phil Hogan on 7 September, after the EU Council of Ministers meeting. Throughout the second half of 2013 and most of 2014, the world market price for milk was high, and farmers locally were getting over 30p per litre. At present, farmers are getting less than 20p per litre, a 40% drop in 10 months.

The biggest setback came with the Russian import ban on European agriproduce at the end of 2014, coupled with a reduction in Chinese imports of skimmed milk powder in particular. There has also been an expansion in milk production in New Zealand and Australia over the last two years. The reality is that many dairy farmers here expanded their business in that time, and some borrowed heavily. I am aware of many farmers who invested large sums to expand their milk business when the price was over 30p a litre. They were, quite simply, plunged into a cash-flow crisis due to low prevailing farm-gate prices, as low as 18p per litre in some cases. That is why, now, it is the duty of the banks locally, as well as the Department, to be cognisant of that fact. We do not need to write off the moneys owed, but farmers need breathing space so that milk prices can be returned to more normal levels.

The EU Agriculture Commissioner has said that he is in support of the European Investment Bank's soft loan finance for farm business investment for Northern Ireland. The Republic of Ireland has introduced such a scheme, and it is proving beneficial to farmers. Unfortunately, DARD has not pursued a scheme for Northern Ireland so far, particularly within the rural development programme proposals. Why is that so? Farmers need an explanation of that failure.

Over the last six months, another major external factor has been the fall in the euro against sterling. Poland and other

European exporters of agri-produce to Russia in particular are now flooding the market. Resultantly, we have a classic market failure because current supply is outstripping demand in Europe and the market price for milk has fallen dramatically. In Ireland, North and South, 85% of all dairy produce has to be exported and sold in the European and world markets, hence the big disadvantage that the Northern Ireland dairy farmers find themselves in given the current world market situation.

The SDLP said a few weeks ago that the only way that this market crisis can be managed is to have the European Commission introduce intervention mechanisms, coupled with a more sensible baseline threshold price of at least 20 pence sterling per litre to put a bottom on the market. Our Minister went to meet the Minister in DEFRA, but DEFRA was not convinced of the need to lobby the European Council of Ministers for a change in the intervention price. Was that a failure of DARD and our Minister or is it a failure of DEFRA to recognise the situation?

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

Mr Byrne: This crisis has not been fixed. The question is this: what can be done about it? More representation has to be made in London with DEFRA to address —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Time is up.

Mr Byrne: — the matter.

Mr McCarthy: I welcome the opportunity to speak this afternoon on behalf of the Alliance Party and to support the very important motion before us today. For Northern Ireland, our agriculture industry is vital for many reasons. It is the lifeblood of our rural communities, employing thousands of people who, in the main, have to work in very trying circumstances all hours of the day and night. At the moment, they are very poorly rewarded. The produce of the Northern Irish farmer is world-class simply because those working on the farms are dedicated to the work that they are involved in and want to produce only the best. It is unfortunate that, all too often, the work of the farmer is taken for granted and very little appreciation is given to the time and effort put into ensuring that our reputation for first-class food production is maintained.

We are all aware of the extreme difficulties faced by our dairy farmers in recent times. Those of us on the ARD Committee heard from many of those in the dairy industry on the real hardships now being experienced by so many. It is our wish that solutions can be found as soon as possible. I am delighted to see our Agriculture Minister present today in the Assembly to hear the debate. I am sure that Minister O'Neill is as anxious as everyone else to see improvements without delay to get not only the dairy farmer back into a profitable position but everyone engaged in farming and food throughout Northern Ireland, regardless of which sector the farmer is working in.

The motion asks the Minister to get farmers paid in early December, to lobby Commissioner Hogan to raise the dairy intervention prices and to create a wider strategy to tackle the challenges facing the industry at this time. The Minister came to the House only last week and gave us a lengthy statement as to the things that she and her Department are doing and continue to do.

At that meeting of the Assembly last week, I commended the Minister for her work on trying to get solutions to the

serious gaps that exist throughout the entire agriculture industry. The latest support from Brussels was some €500 million. That funding was described as a robust and decisive response to meet cash flow difficulties, stabilise markets and address the functioning of the supply chain. The funding is welcome, but, when broken down and divided throughout the member states, large gaps will remain, and the misery will continue, unfortunately.

1.15 pm

The biggest disappointment for everyone is, I think, the refusal of Commissioner Hogan to increase the intervention prices. Despite the Minister's best endeavours, the commissioner still does not accept the rationale for that request. Everyone on these islands has shown by their submissions and their protest campaigns up and down the country, and through the support from all elected representatives, the farmers and, hopefully, today, the unanimous agreement of all in the Assembly, that, despite our other differences, there is a willingness, when it comes to the livelihood of so many of our constituents, to stand shoulder to shoulder and, once again, make the plea to Brussels bureaucracy: our agriculture industry is on its knees; you have the means to help it survive and prosper. We cannot sit idly by and see local farmers go out of business. Experience has shown that the slowness of Brussels to react previously put many of our farm businesses in jeopardy. That must not be allowed to happen again. Introduce intervention prices now and save our entire farming industry.

I encourage our Minister to keep up the pressure to see a better future for our industry. The Alliance Party is happy to support the amendment this afternoon.

Mr Milne: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I, too, welcome the opportunity to speak on the current crisis within the agriculture industry. I welcome the fact that the motion recognises that it affects all the sectors, not just the dairy sector. The fall in prices and the impact that that is having on farm families and the wider economy has been well documented. I do not want to repeat all that has been said by Members who have already spoken, but I acknowledge the difficulties and challenges that are faced across the sector. I also acknowledge the work that the Minister has done to date, much of which she outlined in her statement to the House last week. That work included a list of engagements with the industry and political stakeholders, and she highlighted our exposure to the global market, high dependency on exports, poor exchange rates, extreme market conditions and price volatility. She also highlighted practical initiatives at a local level and put forward the case for an examination of the intervention system and, crucially, for fighting for additional EU support.

There is a real concern that the proposed €500 million will not stretch across 28 member states in a meaningful way. Out of that, €36 million has to be divided between the North, England, Scotland and Wales, so it is crucial that we continue to fight for the lion's share in line with the unique difficulties that are faced here. Additionally, we have to recognise, continue to lobby for and bring forward initiatives that will help to alleviate the current crisis as quickly as possible. Therefore, I support the motion and the amendment.

Mr Rogers: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. I declare an interest as a sheep farmer. It was interesting to listen to the Chair of the Agriculture Committee make so many political points given that, last week, he was not in the Chamber to respond to the Minister on a very, very important statement.

As the motion notes, there has been a growing crisis across all sectors of agriculture in Northern Ireland, particularly the dairy and beef sectors. It is a crisis that has left farmers' confidence shaken and has significantly undermined the Department of Agriculture in the eyes of farmers across the North. Let there be no doubt of the crisis that we find ourselves in. Certainly, we cannot claim that the current problems are trivial or short term, when we see farmers being forced into protests across the North. Last week, I held a farming focus event. The message must get through that farmers are very concerned about loss of income and the uncertainty of the future. There is also a clear message from farmers: stop playing politics.

The crisis has been caused by multiple factors, and, to be fair to the Minister, it would be unreasonable for any Member to claim that the current situation is solely due to a failure by DARD. We cannot blame the Minister for a Russian import ban and a surprising downturn in the Chinese market. That said, DARD's actions and decisions over the last five years, particularly last year, have not aided the situation. In fact, the failure of DARD to evolve has not only allowed international fluctuations to hit but allowed them to hit much harder. The SDLP has consistently voiced concern that DARD has failed to reform its administrative system to match the needs of farmers and has instead created only more bureaucracy. The failure in the delivery of the single farm payment best represents the ongoing flawed system.

I welcome the Minister's statement last week, her commitment to championing the agri-sector in Northern Ireland and her support for a raised intervention price, although I am slightly concerned about how discussions with DEFRA and the Commission have been going. Last week, I asked the Minister how the discussions were going. Her response was promising, and I hope that further negotiations will be more fruitful. I urge the Minister to negotiate hard because of the unique position our Northern Ireland farmers are in.

As for the relief package, it would be madness to have the same level of aid across GB and Northern Ireland. Farmers in England are getting up to 22% more for their milk. Is it fair that farmers who have a supermarket contract worth 30p a litre get the same aid as Northern Ireland farmers?

In the crisis that we are facing, it is critical that the Minister engages with her counterparts at all levels and that they work together to ensure a solution that contains further damage.

Mr McMullan: I thank the Member for giving way. I agree with what he says. Does he agree that one of the main problems is DEFRA and its inability to grasp the situation in the farming industry here? Day by day, it is showing itself to be more of a hindrance than a help to our agriculture industry. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Rogers: As I said at the beginning, forget about playing politics: we need all political parties to lobby DEFRA to ensure that Northern Ireland gets a fair price.

I regret that the SDLP amendment was not accepted. It had a simple distinct purpose and would have resulted in a positive outcome for farmers. Our amendment called for the upfront delivery of 70% of the basic payment. Think of what that would do for cash flow.

There could be a raise in the intervention dairy milk price and an increase in private storage capacity, in line with Commissioner Phil Hogan's extension of private storage capacity schemes for skimmed milk powder, butter and cheese. Any one of those measures would greatly alleviate the crisis. An increase in private storage capacity, for example, is essential for dealing with the overproduction of milk that has occurred since the abolition of milk quotas earlier this year. As my colleague Joe Byrne noted, we are simply producing more milk than we need on the island of Ireland at a time when we are without proper access to large markets such as Russia or China. Private storage presents the best solution by ensuring that our dairy produce can be kept and distributed effectively to maximise the benefit for our farmers.

The need for cooperation cannot be stressed enough. Northern Ireland needs to take advantage of every opportunity possible to restore farmer confidence and rehabilitate the dairy industry. Historically, Northern Ireland farming has been complex and versatile, and it has always required a level of cooperation from the South, from Britain and from Europe.

I return to the issue of sheep. A great strategy document, 'Going for Growth', was published a year ago, and one of its recommendations for beef and sheep was:

"Producers must be encouraged to place more emphasis on commercial/performance attributes".

We encouraged our sheep farmers to improve their product. Many farmers did that by improving their breeding and introducing better nutrition, increasing their productivity from 1.5 lambs to 1.9 or two lambs per ewe. The figures, however, do not match up. The farmer today is getting £20 less per lamb, so it just does not work.

We have the product and the quality, so all we need is confidence and a Department that will ensure that farmers are given the space to deliver a quality product.

If we are to avail ourselves of the new €500 million relief package and deal with this effectively, we need a flexible and confident joint approach that seeks the best outcomes for our farmers.

Mr Dallat: I have been around the Assembly for a long time. I looked up the Hansard report of a debate in 2000, when there was a crisis in the agriculture industry. I recall the debate getting off to a very bad start when an Ulster Unionist Member queried the syntax: he asked about the omission of the indefinite article and whether it should read "a crisis" or "crises". If the Ulster Unionists were back today, perhaps they would realise that it is serious.

What has happened in the 15 years since that first debate led by the late Dr Paisley? Why is it that, today, farmers are painted into a corner with nowhere to go? Other Members covered the components of the "crisis", but why have we left the industry to the free market and taken a laissez-faire

approach to how business operates? It is a fine mess with no obvious solutions as to what to do about it, other than to sit idly by and allow thousands of farming families to go to the wall. Hopefully, that is not the plan. I am sure that that is over the top. I have no doubt that there are people in our farming industry with vision, aspiration and belief who see better solutions than bankruptcy, bad health and, indeed, suicide.

One lesson that we can learn immediately is not to leave an industry as important or as serious as the agriculture industry to the mercy of private enterprise, certainly not the supermarket chains that are selling milk more cheaply than mineral water with no regard to the long-term outcome of exploiting the dairy industry for short-term gain. That is disgraceful.

Unfortunately, farmers are not their own best friend. When times are better, they buy new plant and machinery. They become the envy of their neighbours, who interpret shiny new tractors as evidence of money in the bank. The neighbours do not realise that those shiny new tractors are all too often bought with bank loans granted on the basis of evidence that income was stable when they were bought.

More recently, we were told by the Chairperson of the Agriculture Committee, who is a farmer — I am glad that he is the Chamber today, along with one other Member of his party — that the problem is global and that a solution does not lie with the Assembly. One wonders, therefore, why the DUP put the motion in the Order Paper today. Is it serious about the crisis — or is it crises? — in the farming industry or is the motion just for the optics, given that an election will certainly come up some time soon, perhaps sooner than some parties want?

In the distant past, when the gombeen men were ripping off the small farmers of Ireland, those farmers took control of the situation and established farming cooperatives in almost every town across the country and began reaping the benefits of their hard work. Regrettably, many of those wonderful cooperatives disappeared or became part of bigger and bigger cooperatives. That changed the whole ethos of the cooperative principles to such an extent that they, too, are victims of global markets that do not give a hoot about the long-term survival of the agriculture industry. Perhaps it is time to look again to the Assembly to encourage the farming industry to take charge of its destiny and create a renaissance of the cooperative principle that works extremely well for credit unions and an increasing number of other activities that we hear hardly anything about.

If we continue to sit on our hands and claim that we can do nothing, the agriculture industry will go to the wall, and its future will be lost for the next generation — the work will be lost, and that does not save our environment, our wildlife or the many services that the public take for granted when they go running to the large supermarkets to buy their cheap milk.

Finally, let us reflect on just how important the farming industry is to our countryside, our tourism, our environment, and, indeed, our basic health. Let us not confine the debate simply to the Lidl's and Asda's of the world, which are exploiting the farmers in the way that they are. I support the motion.

1.30 pm

Mr Allister: Of course, it is right that the Assembly should debate this important issue, but there needs to be recognition of the reality that, above all, our agriculture policy, courtesy of our membership of the EU, is set not by this House, not even by DEFRA, but by the unelected European Commission. It is the Commission that has steered the ship of European agriculture onto the rocks, as far as many of the aspects of this crisis are concerned.

Of course, it was the Commission that was determined not to be turned on the issue of the abolition of milk quotas, as someone else referred to. That, in part, has fuelled the crisis in our industry. It was the European Union that took the big geopolitical decisions that have aggravated the crisis in Russian imports. It was not farmers who decided the geopolitical path that Europe would tread; it was the faceless bureaucrats of Brussels, by and large, who took that path, and now it is the farmers of Europe who are left to pick up the pieces.

It would be remiss not to identify the fact that the European Union, being in control of our policy, has much of the responsibility for the current crisis. Therefore, when its response is to slam the door on the only short-term salvation for the dairy industry, namely an increase in intervention, it makes the situation so much the worse. Every major player in the dairy industry across the world has some mechanism akin to intervention. The United States of America has its margin protection policy, which is there as a safety net. In the EU, we have a safety net, but it is one that has not been serviced since 2003 because there has been no upgrade in the level to make its impact significant and positive. By refusing to take that action, the Commission compounds the crisis.

Of course, intervention would do two things: it would provide an immediate bottom to the market, which is what it needs, but more than that and, long-term, more important than that, it would provide the trader confidence that is lost in the market on which growth and recovery would be built. In addition, it would not be a loss for the European Union because experience of intervention is that, when the market turns on foot of intervention, the people who make the money are the European Commission because it cashes in by selling, at a much higher price, the product that it bought in at an intervention price. It is beyond comprehension, for an agency that has control of our policy, why it is so resistant to helping the industry through this crisis.

Therefore, much of the blame and the responsibility needs to be put where it belongs: on the EU and our membership of it. Yes, DARD could do more. It has sat on its hands, for example, with the capacity for over a year to introduce the October single farm payments. It has done nothing to revise the system to make that possible in the year that that has been approved from elsewhere. DARD, with DETI, puts its hand to 'Going for Growth', which is a fine document in many ways but one that seems to forget that the first priority surely is to protect the producers that we have.

In protecting the producers that we have, we have to adopt policies that are not just —

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

Mr Allister: — this flamboyant, expansive notion that the abolition of milk quotas and everything else feeds into. Then, when the crisis comes, they want to pass the parcel. This parcel of responsibility rests primarily in Brussels.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the motion and thank Members for providing the opportunity to discuss this important issue again. The fact that this is the second week that we have discussed the issue sends a strong message to the industry that the Assembly takes it seriously.

The matters raised today are of extreme importance to me. Indeed, as many Members already know, I have spent much of the past year working to address the crisis in the dairy sector. That work intensified over the summer. I have been focusing on ensuring that there is timely and effective support for the dairy sector and other farming sectors at this difficult time. I agree with much of what was said. I am pleased that there is a shared desire to see immediate, effective help for our hard-pressed industry.

It is clear to all that the crisis facing all sectors of agriculture is largely a global one. Members are aware that it has been caused by a range of factors outside our control, including oversupply in world markets, the Russian ban on imports, reduced demand from important markets such as China and a weak euro. It is important that we remember that this crisis cannot be solved at a local level alone. It needs immediate, additional action at EU level to address the damaging consequences of this situation for our farmers. I know that many of you agree with that sentiment.

I went into considerable detail on the crisis facing farming, especially the dairy sector, when I made my oral statement to the House last Monday. I also took the opportunity at a meeting last Tuesday to update the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development on action to date and the emerging details of the Commission's aid package. Time will not permit me to repeat all that I said on those two occasions. However, I want to pick up on specific points that were made during the debate today.

In relation to the actions taken to date, I remind Members that DARD and I have been involved in practical supports over the last year. In recognition of the cash flow pressures on dairy farms, my Department's dairy advisers held workshops and training events throughout the spring and summer dealing with cost control, technical efficiency, benchmarking and business management. I have continued to meet farmers and processors. I have encouraged retailers, feed merchants and the local banks to engage positively with farmers and support them through this challenging time.

I have been engaging with colleagues on the Executive to bring to their attention the difficulties faced across all farming sectors. I have highlighted the extreme price volatility to which the agrifood industry is exposed. I have encouraged them to assist where they can; for example, in ensuring that local businesses are able to bid for public-sector contracts and to engage with the British Treasury on the scope for any further flexibility on taxation.

Whilst we are very much in crisis mode in terms of the challenges facing the industry, I believe that the longer-term prospects for the agrifood sector remain positive. The sector has the potential to grow and exploit opportunities arising from the predicted expansion in world population.

My overall aim is to help the sector to improve performance in a sustainable way. The Department will continue to support the industry's growth ambitions as set out in the Going for Growth strategy through a range of measures, including education and training, technical support and research to improve efficiency, competitiveness and innovation, and a suite of proposed measures under the next rural development programme.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for giving way, and I recognise what she has done. Would she accept, however, that we will have to have the establishment of a semi-state marketing board to make sure that the agriproduce that is produced here can be sold successfully, branded and marketed at a premium price and command confidence in the market?

Mrs O'Neill: I do think that one area that we really need to focus on is opening up those new markets and new market opportunities. To be successful and consistent in getting into those markets, we need that marketing body. That is one area that is being taken forward through the Agri-Food Strategy Board. Hopefully, we will see more detail on how that is going to roll out in the immediate future.

I will pick up where I left off on the rural development programme. Members know that I recently announced the EU approval of our new rural development programme that will run up to 2020, which will make support for knowledge transfer, innovation, cooperation and capital investment available to farmers, including the proposed farm business improvement scheme. Members will also know that I have tasked the Agri-Food Strategy Board chair with developing proposals to improve the supply chain. I think that we can all agree that we need to tackle the supply chain challenges that are presented to us, and I very much welcome a lot of focus on that. I also welcome the Commission's intention to tackle supply chain challenges by establishing a new high-level group to focus on clearly defined issues such as futures markets.

High animal health status is vital to securing and maintaining trade with existing new markets, and I have officially secured European Commission approval of our case for official brucellosis-free status. That enables me to announce further relaxations to our brucellosis controls in the near future. It is excellent news for the whole industry and will generate further cost savings both for taxpayers and farmers. I recognise that we also need to stimulate export growth and open up new markets, as I have referred to, and we are working very hard on that front, with a measure of success. You will be aware of my efforts to strengthen relationships with the Chinese markets. We are doing all that we can to help farmers survive the current difficulties and seize the opportunities for the future.

Members have all referred during today's debate to the need for a review of intervention prices, and I am still wedded to the view that we need to continue to push the European Commission on that. One Member asked where the failure lies in relation to intervention prices. Unfortunately, the position that DEFRA has adopted is very much a Tory ideological position. I made it very clear to Elizabeth Truss that I knew that her hands were tied in terms of the British Treasury position, but that shows, more than ever before, why these institutions need to work and need to deliver for our local farming industry. The Minister from DEFRA turned her head and her face to the challenges that are facing our local farming industry, so we

need locally elected Ministers who understand the plight of the farmers and the situation that they are facing.

We need locally elected Ministers who can stand up and fight the corner in England with DEFRA, but also at a European level. I clearly did that over the last number of months when I took all the cross-party delegations. That, in itself, showed strength to the industry and showed that there was a willingness here to work together to deliver for the agrifood industry.

As I said, I have raised the issue and made the case to Phil Hogan. I have listened to what Members have said today and I totally agree on why we needed the review of intervention prices. It would have put that floor in the market, which would have allowed the market to correct itself. The reality is that the free market does not work. I stand by that position and am continuing to lobby the EU Commissioner on that. I am pleased that other member states are also continuing to raise that issue.

Many Members referred to basic payments from October and called on me to ensure that those are issued to farmers as soon as possible. Members will be aware that I have consistently, year on year, made improvements in single farm payments and in getting money into farmers' pockets sooner. We have made tremendous improvements in that regard and will continue to do that. The motion calls for payments to be made in early December, and others are pressing for advance payments to be made in October. As I told the House and the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee last week, I have already given my commitment to make full direct payments to as many farmers as possible in December this year, and that remains a priority for me. My Department officials have been instructed in that regard, and we will continue to make sure that we have the maximum number of people paid in December.

It is widely recognised across Europe that this year will be challenging for the administration of direct payments in general, due to the new schemes introduced under CAP reform. The Commission's recent announcement that it will allow advance payments of up to 70% to be paid from October is based on the premise that all checks and controls have been completed and processes are in place to facilitate an advance payment. For many claims, particularly inspection cases, that will not be the case, and no payment will be possible in October. The Commission has advised this week that it will consider a proposal to waive the requirement for all inspections to be completed before advance payments can be made, but my focus has been on ensuring that payments are made to as many farmers as possible in that first week of December. As I said, that is a priority area for me. I want to get to a position where we make part payments and are able to make early payments. We are working our way steadily towards that and have, as I said, made improvements year on year and will continue to do so.

Members are aware that this is a particularly important issue for me. I welcome the fact that we have had across-the-board support and recognition that this needs to be tackled. The issues facing farmers, particularly the dairy sector, need to be tackled at a European level.

1.45 pm

I have set out my stall with what I have done at a local level. That includes the practical supports that I have offered and my engagement with the banks and the grain trade. I will meet the industry again today and will hopefully meet Liz Truss again at some stage this week to discuss our share of the EU package. I will continue to fight the case for our farmers. I have made the case to DEFRA and have highlighted that we are different because we are so dependent on export markets.

The approach of the European Commission is unfortunate. It has put a package on the table, and, whilst we welcome some support, I do not think that it has taken the right approach. It has announced that £420 million will be available for targeted aid. That does not amount to an awful lot across 28 member states. We know what the member state's share is, and my job and focus now is to make sure that we focus DEFRA's attention on why we are different and need additional supports. I have certainly been fighting our corner to make sure that we have the best possible share of that funding. That is ongoing and priority work for me over the next number of days.

I welcome the fact that the House has spent time discussing the issue today, and I think that we should continue to have those discussions. I assure the House that my immediate priority is to ensure that the Commission's package is quickly and effectively implemented and that we get the money into farmers' pockets as quickly as possible. My officials and I are working hard in conjunction with the various stakeholders to achieve that.

I will continue to work with colleagues across these islands and, of course, with the industry to explore mechanisms to support a sustainable and profitable agrifood industry in the medium to longer term. I will continue to work through all the channels that are available to me to support farmers during this very difficult time. I will continue to seek the best deal for our farmers in the North. I will continue to support farmers so that they are able to face the future with confidence. I look to others to continue to play their part also.

Mr Swann: I thank the Minister for her statement and comments today. I have not heard an awful lot that is new since the statement that you gave to the House a couple of days ago, but there is something different today compared to the reassurances that you gave to the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development last Tuesday. I have the Hansard report here. When referring to the Commission's proposal in your statement, you said:

"That includes an envelope of aid to all member states to support the dairy sector, permitting up to 70% of direct payments to be made in advance". — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 107, p100, col 1].

Earlier in your statement, you said that you would everything that you could at a political and practical level to help and support the industry through the current difficulties.

Our amendment to this very important motion is specifically about that 70% and enabling it to come forward earlier. Our amendment states "from October". We are realistic and know that the Department has to put in place a number of things to allow some of those payments to be

made. That is why we have asked for that 70% to come forward earlier.

A year and a half ago, the Department introduced remote sensing. That was meant to facilitate those payments being made earlier. I ask the Minister to look again at that 70% option, to not give up on it and to not let her officials in the Department dictate to her that there are too many processes and procedures in place to allow them to be made. If the will is there, there will be an ability to do it. That 70% advance payment will help all sectors of our industry, not just the milk sector. It will help sheep, beef, arable and potato farmers.

The Minister has committed to doing all that she can. When she moved the amendment, my colleague Jo-Anne Dobson raised the emotional strain that farmers and farm families are under. I ask the Minister to go back and look at her funding of Rural Support. I have heard her refer to that organisation a number of times, but, from the figures that she has supplied to me, I have noted that her Department's financial support of Rural Support has fallen since she took office in 2011. I ask her to go back and look at that. The agriculture industry is in a state of difficulty, the families are in a state of difficulty, and that is where the pressure is really coming from.

The Minister has also talked about working with everybody politically, and Members have made the point about not engaging in political point-scoring. I ask her to have a serious conversation with the Minister of Finance and Personnel. This morning, it was raised with me that a Land and Property Services (LPS) official visited a farm to put pressure on the family to declare all their income. The agricultural rate relief is applicable to 50% of income from agricultural activities, and, because we are looking at a decrease in agricultural income, some families are falling below that 50%. LPS — I will not apologise — is acting like a vulture. It is now coming into some farmhouses and agricultural homes to look at their finances to see whether it can increase the rates take from those families who are already in a difficult financial situation. I ask the Minister to commit to meeting the Finance Minister to address those issues.

There was talk of political point scoring — I noticed that it came from the SDLP as well — and of not going down that line. I ask the SDLP to ask its Minister of the Environment to look at NIEA inspection levels and the same pressures and untoward stress that those inspections, which, in many cases, are undue, are putting on our farmers at this minute. When those inspectors come onto a site, it puts additional pressure on farmers who are already feeling vulnerable.

Minister, I think that a job of work can be done. With regard to the 70% of advance basic payments, when you were in front of the Committee last Tuesday, you said that it could not come forward. By Friday, a departmental spokesperson had given a statement to the 'Farmers Weekly', which was:

"Our focus is on ensuring that farmers are notified of their entitlement in November, with payments being made to as many farmers in December as possible."

That spokesperson is not giving the same commitment to the farmers who are reading that journal as you are today. I ask you to go back and make sure that your Department

and its officials have the same commitment to addressing this current crisis as you and the rest of the House.

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

Mr Swann: Thank you.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Edwin Poots to conclude the debate. The Member has up to 10 minutes, but there are only nine minutes available before we reach the 2.00 pm deadline. The Member can conclude his remarks within that time; otherwise, I will have to cut him off at 2.00 pm.

Mr Poots: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I will endeavour to conclude by 2.00 pm.

I think that I am the youngest Member to speak thus far, aside from the Minister, but I have been in politics since 1996, including during the BSE crisis and all that; I go right back to that time. I am the only Member elected here from 1998 throughout the period, so I have been through a few agriculture crises in my time — Mr Dallat has been here, too — and I have seen how people have responded over the years. During the 1996 BSE crisis, we had many meetings with the then Ministers who were dealing with the issues, and they were generally junior Ministers who were lords. I am hugely disappointed that the response from this Minister is little better than the response that we saw from the lords and baronesses who were over here as direct rule Ministers. That is harsh, but I am afraid that it is factual.

The farming community and I are sick, sore and tired of hearing what cannot be done. We cannot do the single farm payment before December because the European Commission does not allow it. Then the European Commission tells us that it is allowed: 70% of it can happen from October. However, when the Department is told that it can be done, it will not be done. There is a difference between “cannot” and “will not” do something. I am afraid that, at this point, it is more the case of will not do something —

Mr McMullan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Poots: No, I will not give way to Mr McMullan. My time is curtailed, and we have heard quite a bit from him. He has become an apologist for the inaction that has taken place. All that we get from Mr McMullan is constant criticism of DEFRA. Tell me: has DEFRA set the intervention price? Is it a British DEFRA Minister or is it an Irish commissioner in the European Union? Mr McMullan concentrates his political stabbing at the British Minister who is letting us down, but he never actually speaks about the Irish commissioner, who is letting us down more than anybody at this point. Phil Hogan is letting dairy farmers down by not raising the intervention price and by not making the case for the intervention price to be raised.

Consequently, people are suffering, and people will go out of business.

I was out in my constituency, as I am regularly, speaking to farmers. One man asked me, “Edwin, is there nothing that can be done to help us?” In my heart of hearts, I know that things that can be done to help that man — there are things — but they are not being done. The problem that I have with the Minister, the Department, DEFRA and the European Union is that there are things that can be done at every level to help the agriculture community. I am not

referring purely to dairy farmers: many of the farmers in the glens of Antrim whom Mr McMullan is supposed to represent are getting badly punished when selling their lambs this year, and Mr McMullan thinks that Mrs O’Neill is doing a wonderful job.

I am getting plenty of complaints from sheep farmers about the poor prices that they are receiving. Vegetable, potato and cereal farmers are suffering as well. Right across the board, prices for produce are lower than they should be. Mrs O’Neill’s great strategy is to send out dairy advisers. She is sending dairy advisers to farmers who could teach the dairy advisers what to do. When farmers in the top 10% or 15% of producers in the United Kingdom are losing money hand over fist, they do not need a dairy adviser to tell them what to do. They need cash in their pockets — not platitudes, which is what we are getting from Sinn Féin.

Many farmers are at breaking point. Farms that have been in families for generations — generations — could be sold as a consequence of the current agriculture crisis. I expect that farms will be sold on the back of what is happening. Meanwhile, the Minister’s strategy is Going for Growth. It is about moving headquarters, so we will spend £40 million here and we will spend £35 million on a new computer system. That is not all. Let me make this very clear: that is not all capital spend — a considerable amount is recurrent spend, and that is where the money could come from to assist farmers. Money that is being spent recurrently on those things could be going to the farmers.

Where is the market support? Where is the opportunity to delve into hardship payments for farmers? Direct payments in October would help farmers’ cash flow when they face huge bills for conacre and from agricultural contractors. Bills that all have to be settled at that time of year. The European Union is not holding the Minister back from ensuring that farmers’ cash flow is improved by getting that money out earlier.

Mrs O’Neill referred to how they have been handling animal health issues. There has been an absolute failure from this Minister and the previous Minister to deal with the problem of TB — there has been a Sinn Féin Minister throughout — because they have a greater affection for badgers than for the people they are supposed to be serving.

Pig farmers should be selling their offal to China, which would be worth around £3 million a year to Northern Ireland farmers, but that is not happening because a document that was supposed to have been signed off has not been signed off. What work is going on between DEFRA and the Department to ensure that the issue gets over the line?

Enough is enough. People in the farming community need support, and they need it now. They are fed up hearing from this Minister, from her Department and from her party that they are incapable of doing anything. If they are incapable of doing the job, perhaps they should not bother doing the job.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: As Question Time begins at 2.00 pm, I suggest that the House takes its ease until then. Sorry. My apologies.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes with concern the crisis facing all sectors of agriculture across Northern Ireland; recognises the need to deliver significant change in the short term and into the future; and calls on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to do more for the industry by availing of the important permission from the European Commission to make up to 70 per cent of advance Basic Payments from October 2015, lobbying the EU Agriculture Commissioner to raise dairy intervention prices as a matter of urgency and bringing forward a specific set of action points to deal with the immediate challenges facing the industry.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I now return to Question Time beginning at 2.00 pm. I suggest that the House take its ease until then.

2.00 pm

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Oral Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Childcare Strategy: Cost

1. **Mr Agnew** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the work carried out to ascertain the cost of the childcare strategy. (AQO 8659/11-16)

Mrs Foster (The Acting First Minister): The Executive's draft 10-year strategy for affordable and integrated childcare is open for public consultation until 13 November. The draft strategy proposes 22 interventions or areas of development, including the creation of up to 44,000 new childcare places to meet need to give effect to the Executive's vision for childcare that every child, parent and family will have access to affordable, integrated and quality childcare. Preliminary work has been carried out on costing the proposed interventions in the draft childcare strategy. Indicative costs are based on estimates for revenue and capital grants to support new childcare places and the projected costs of grant administration and registration and inspection of new childcare places.

Of the 22 proposed actions, the current school-age childcare grant scheme, expanded to include preschool childcare, is the most ambitious. It aims to create nearly half of the 44,000 places. The grant scheme will also be the most costly of the 22 actions. A key aspect of the evaluation of the current school-age childcare grant scheme will be to estimate the cost of any future interventions and thereby their feasibility in the current economic climate.

Other actions that will carry a cost are community-based childcare, cross-border childcare, assistance for private sector providers, childcare for private firms, capital fund for childcare, flexible childcare and childcare for low-income families. These costs will be offset by a range of social and economic benefits that will be considered more fully in the development of the individual business cases and economic appraisals for each separate intervention. Sustainability is a core objective of the draft childcare strategy.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Acting First Minister for her answer. It is very welcome that these childcare strategy proposals have been brought forward. However, many will feel that, without the finance to back them up, they will be worthy targets without actions to go along with them. Is the Acting First Minister confident that the finance will be made available to fund the strategy?

Mrs Foster: I think that it is very important that that does happen. The costings in the consultation document are based, as I have said, on modelling that was used for the school-age childcare grant scheme. Of course, we should remember that the idea behind these childcare interventions is that they will be sustainable in the longer term. Whilst there may be an initial injection of money from

the Executive, the idea is that, in future, those childcare providers will become sustainable, either through a social economy model or, indeed, through private models as well. The idea is that there will be an injection for a while, but we do not want to get to a situation where we are having to pay out a grant every year, year on year, as that would drag down the market for childcare, which would be the wrong way to move forward. We need to look at how we are putting the intervention in place and make sure that we are getting the best value for money out of it.

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the Acting First Minister for her answers so far. I am sure that the Acting First Minister will be aware that, already, there has been some criticism from the childcare sector, particularly around the issue of regulation, which, at times, does appear to be quite confusing.

Does the Acting First Minister intend to take a look at this? Does she feel that there are any actions that can be taken to address it?

Mrs Foster: As the Member will be aware, regulating and indeed registering and inspecting childcare facilities is the responsibility of the Department of Health, which is represented on the childcare strategy programme board. However, he is right to point out that some complaints have come forward in respect of the relatively new minimum standards and associated regulation. Indeed, a number of private nurseries in my own constituency came to me around some of the ways in which those regulations had been put in place and were being implemented. There is more work to be done between OFMDFM and the Department of Health. I am glad to say that that work continues. We want to be able to make sure when it come to the final issue of the childcare strategy, namely regulation, that the Department of Health and OFMDFM are on the same page — I know that that phrase has been used often recently — so that it is fit for purpose.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. Given that one of the aims of the childcare strategy is to promote the development of children in their own right, how will those of unemployed parents be catered for in the strategy?

Mrs Foster: I am sure that she is aware that people who are disadvantaged in one way or another are already given priority in respect of movement into the early years sector. I am sure that that is a policy that will continue into the future. There is a need for us to address children of all different strata and to make sure that, not only in early years but at school age, they are able to have childcare provided to them in an affordable way. That is important. You will recall that OFMDFM had to step in because there was literally a stand off between the Department of Health and the Department of Education on who had primary responsibility for childcare, and that is why the strategy now sits with OFMDFM.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Acting First Minister for her response. Given that last year's Employers For Childcare survey indicated that the cost of a full-time childcare place has risen to £162 a week, when does the Minister anticipate hard-working families being able to benefit from the childcare strategy?

Mrs Foster: That is right. We do not want to put people out of work because of childcare costs. We want to be able to facilitate them to go into work. That is the whole purpose. As well as the development of the individual children, we

want to be able to free parents up so that they can go into and be active in the area of work. That is why those twin strategic approaches in relation to the strategy have been adopted. It is about developing a child, but it is also very much about freeing parents up to go to work.

Mr Speaker: Before we proceed, I inform Members that questions 5, 6, 9 and 12 have been withdrawn.

Ballykelly Site: Update

2. **Mr Campbell** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the proposed sale of the former Ministry of Defence site at Ballykelly. (AQO 8660/11-16)

Mrs Foster: The Shackleton site is one of massive opportunity. We are determined to maximise the benefits that it can deliver for not just Ballykelly but the wider north-west. To unlock the full potential of the site, we placed approximately 622 acres of it for sale on the open market on 30 June. There has been significant interest in the site, and it will remain on the market until 2 October. A key element of the sale is the creation of jobs. Any potential purchaser will need to demonstrate how their plans will create employment opportunities and deliver community and environmental benefits. Northern Ireland Water has confirmed that it will purchase approximately 85 acres of the site to develop an integrated constructed wetlands to replace the waste water treatment works that currently deals with waste from Ballykelly village. With DARD's relocation plans also well under way, it really is an exciting time for Ballykelly and the north-west.

Mr Campbell: I thank the Acting First Minister for her response, and I am glad to hear that the date of 2 October is just around the corner. When the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister is looking at the development of the site, will it ensure that it is compatible with the surrounding area, that it maximises the potential for economic growth and that some of the projects that are being projected for there reach the full potential of the entire north-west to bring hundreds, if not several thousands, of jobs to the area?

Mrs Foster: The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister very much believes that the sale of what is a huge area of land up in the north-west will act very much as a catalyst for economic development in that region. That is one of the reasons why, when deciding on who should be the purchaser of the site, they have placed weightings in relation to different elements. So, for example, job creation has a weighting of 45% in terms of whether the purchaser should be identified as the correct purchaser. Obviously, they look at the financial offer as well, but they also look at community and environmental benefit to the particular area, so those four elements will be looked at very carefully. We have had over 70 expressions of interest in the site, so there is a lot of interest in it. Obviously, those may not all come forward as bids, but that says to me that there is a lot of interest.

Mr Dallat: I welcome the fact that we have a good-news story coming out of the Assembly today. I fully support the Minister and sing from the same hymn sheet as Mr Campbell on this issue. The Minister said that she was looking at community input. How does the Minister intend to keep the wider community involved and, indeed, those 70 expressions of interest so that the 900-acre site is

absolutely maximised, as Mr Campbell said, not just for Ballykelly but for the entire north-west?

Mrs Foster: The aim is to maximise the potential of the site. That is certainly what has been talked about by officials in OFMDFM and by Ministers. Officials have had a number of meetings, as I am sure the Member is aware, with Ballykelly Community Association to discuss various community benefits from future use of the site. In fact, it will be interesting to see the different proposals in respect of community benefit that come forward from those people who put forward a purchase price, and we may see some new and innovative ideas for the benefit of the community. This is absolutely a good-news story, and we look forward to 2 October when the bids will come in.

Ms Sugden: It is a great thing that there is some positive news coming from Ballykelly, and it just goes to show that this Assembly can do things when we want to. Have any of the stakeholders interested in the site expressed any concern about the current political situation?

Mrs Foster: No. I am not aware of anyone raising any particular issues in relation to the site. Overall, this House is very much aware of the fact that, when we have stability here in Northern Ireland, it is a great enabler to people looking at Northern Ireland for investment. However, I think that the House should be very pleased to hear that over 70 expressions of interest have come forward in respect of Ballykelly, and we look forward to seeing what comes out of those.

Mr McAleer: Will the Minister elaborate on the DARD headquarters and NI Water developments? Go raibh maith agat.

Mrs Foster: In respect of the DARD headquarters, that is probably more of an issue for the Minister of Agriculture, but the relocation of staff, I understand, is expected to be phased, with approximately 350 staff taking up position in 2017 and up to 350 more expected to relocate after phase 2 of the construction when it is completed in 2020. That is in respect of the DARD headquarters.

In respect of the Northern Ireland Water situation, OFMDFM intends to sell approximately 85.8 acres of the site to NI Water to develop. It is a very innovative way of using land that otherwise might not have been used.

NI Water will use it to develop an integrated constructed wetlands, and that will replace the waste water treatment works that has been dealing with Ballykelly village for some time. It is a very innovative way to move forward, as I say, with land that otherwise may not be used.

2.15 pm

Victims and Survivors: Service Improvements

3. **Mrs Hale** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline recent improvements in provision for victims and survivors. (AQO 8661/11-16)

Mrs Foster: We remain committed to ensuring that victims and survivors receive the best services possible. In this financial year, over £14 million has been allocated to victims' services with an opening budget for the Victims and Survivors Service (VSS) of £13.245 million. Following on from the independent review of VSS in 2014, our

Department, in collaboration with the Commission for Victims and Survivors and the VSS itself, continues to improve services to victims. The recruitment of a new Victims' Commissioner and additional members to the VSS board aims to ensure that, going forward, the needs and interests of all victims and survivors are both promoted and safeguarded. In addition, a collaborative design programme has been set up to develop an improved model for service delivery that better meets the needs of all victims and survivors. That programme has already made progress, such as improved monitoring and evaluation for groups and greater flexibility for individuals. Extensive engagement with a range of groups, as well as individual victims and survivors, has provided positive feedback that will provide a useful steer to build on the improvements to services that have occurred in recent months.

A VSS-led pilot in the use of personalised budgets, caseworkers and the assessment process commenced in July 2015. That approach will identify whether changes can be made to current service delivery systems to improve the outcome for victims and survivors in receipt of services through the VSS programmes. Key strands of work are also being taken forward under the Stormont House Agreement in relation to advocacy, a pension and the establishment of a mental trauma service.

Mrs Hale: I thank the Acting First Minister for her answers so far. She will be aware that there have been recent reports that perpetrators will be given an amnesty under the new arrangements of the Stormont House Agreement. Will the Minister confirm that this is absolutely not the case and never will be?

Mrs Foster: I am glad that the Member has brought that up, because there have been a lot of confusing reports in the media recently in relation to amnesty. Of course, there is no proposal for any amnesty for those who come forward to the truth recovery mechanism under the Stormont House Agreement: that is very clear in the Stormont House Agreement. There is no agreement to that. No amnesty has been suggested or discussed by party leaders at the Stormont House implementation group. There is no intention to include it in any legislation that will be progressed at Westminster.

I have to say that the reporting of the matter, which is wholly untrue, has been very upsetting for a wide range of people who suffered during the Troubles. It is very irresponsible and has caused a lot of distress, and we have seen that reported in the media. Those who have reported on an amnesty in that way should look at what they are doing to victims and survivors.

Mr Lyttle: On behalf of parties, I thank the Acting First Minister for her helpful clarification of the issue of amnesty. I ask her to update the Assembly on the progress that is being made on additional advocacy assistance for victims and survivors in helping them to navigate the various avenues of assistance that are available to them.

Mrs Foster: Yes, the Stormont House Agreement stated that, while limited services are in place to provide basic support, there is an urgent need to work collaboratively with victims and survivors and service providers to determine the characteristics of advocacy services provision and associated costs. That is very much something that was agreed by all the parties at Stormont House. A draft paper was presented to the implementation

group on 17 August. Departmental officials continue to research advocacy provision to ensure appropriate and adequate future provision. I believe that that is a very important part of the Stormont House Agreement, and it has been lacking, particularly for individuals who do not want to join the various groups and therefore have no voice when they want to come forward. The advocacy provisions are very important.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for her comments on the matter so far. Does she agree that it is important that, in the current talks, a meaningful and real effort be made to address the fears and apprehensions of victims and survivors, particularly those who have suffered unduly and when we have examples of big atrocities like Loughinisland, Bloody Sunday, Enniskillen and Omagh among others? People feel that this place and the Governments need to address their concerns and fears seriously.

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question and commentary; indeed, it underlies what I have been saying. There is a duty on people who report something as fact when it is not fact. It causes a lot of distress and does a lot of harm. It puts more pressure on the services available to victims and survivors.

There has been a lot of confusion about a draft Bill that has been produced by Amnesty International, the Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ) and others, which outlines a number of provisions. They have brought together a Bill that, to all intents and purposes, looks as if it has been drafted by draftsmen either here or in Westminster, but it is not a government Bill. It is certainly not what was agreed in the Stormont House Agreement and therefore should be seen as a commentary provided by outside bodies.

Mr Allister: How can the Minister talk about an improvement in the lot of victims when one of the parties with responsibility for victims is, in her words, “inextricably linked” to an organisation that is still in the business of victim making?

Mrs Foster: Mr Allister is, of course, talking about an issue that we are talking about in the talks. There is a very real need to deal with the death of Kevin McGuigan and those who killed him and the assessment that then came from the Chief Constable on the issue. I am dealing with the issue, and we are dealing with it in the talks. The way to solve it is through the talks. It will certainly not be solved by standing outside shouting about it.

Social Investment Fund: Upper Bann

4. **Mr Anderson** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on social investment fund projects in Upper Bann. (AQO 8662/11-16)

Mrs Foster: Three projects are at an advanced stage of delivery in the southern zone that will directly benefit those living in the Upper Bann constituency. They are an employment project called Work It, which will launch later this month, and two capital projects, New Directions and Sustaining the Infrastructure. New Directions is a project to redevelop two community premises in Lurgan and Markethill, and it is out to tender for a design team. Sustaining the Infrastructure, a project to redevelop or refurbish 14 community facilities across the zone, has a number of design teams in place. Work is ongoing to

progress the appointment of contractors and the remaining design teams. Both those significant construction projects are being led by Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council.

Three other projects in the southern zone have been prioritised by the steering group. Armagh Harps, a new two-storey build to a GAA facility, was approved for funding, but costs have risen significantly. Work is now ongoing to minimise the increase and impact on affordability. The remaining two projects — the community sports programme, which is focused on capital works to four pitches, and the jobs market employment programme — continue to be considered for funding through the economic appraisal process. Officials are working with promoters to expedite approval, where possible, and move to letter of offer, subject to affordability.

Mr Anderson: I thank the acting First Minister for her response. Will she confirm that everything possible is being done to push those projects in Upper Bann and to get them towards the completion stage as soon as possible, bearing in mind the length of time that they have been waiting and the other projects in Upper Bann that are waiting to see where they sit at this stage?

Mrs Foster: Absolutely. I can appreciate the frustration felt by some of the promoters, but an innovative and progressive strategy was laid out. It has taken some time to get to where we are. We appreciate that a number of projects remain to be approved. That is frustrating for the steering group and the lead partners, but the appraisal process is very robust because we want to ensure not only that we get value for money for the projects but that the projects will be sustainable into the future.

There is little point in building structures across Northern Ireland if they will not be sustainable in the longer term. We have been looking closely at that through the appraisal process. It is frustrating — I accept that — but we want to ensure that there will be a legacy from this programme in the longer term.

Mrs Dobson: Will the Acting First Minister explain why £78 million of the £80 million set aside for the social investment fund is unspent? What is the Minister’s message to the groups that are in limbo and awaiting funding in my constituency of Upper Bann?

Mrs Foster: As at 11 September of this year, the social investment fund has approved 39 projects with associated costs of over £53 million across all nine investment zones.

Mr Campbell: Uh-oh.

Mr Nesbitt: It is unspent.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mrs Foster: I hear some commentary that it is unspent. I hope that it is not being suggested that we should withdraw those projects. If you want us to proceed in Upper Bann and other areas, we have to ensure that it is done in a sustainable way and that it provides value for money. I accept that it is frustrating for project promoters, but, if we work collaboratively, we will make this happen, and there will be a legacy right across Northern Ireland.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her answers. Will she outline whether there are any potential difficulties in any of the zonal budgets or the progression of any projects should

DSD, for example, fail to follow through on its previous funding commitments to SIF projects?

Mrs Foster: There was a pressure in the southern zone of around £2 million. I mentioned the rising cost of some of the capital projects in the substantive answer. That has now been minimised to £1.5 million. With budgets, there will always be pressures carried forward, but we are trying to work with the promoters and the steering groups to push those pressures down and deliver what is sustainable on the ground.

Social Investment Fund: North Belfast

7. **Ms P Bradley** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on applications to the social investment fund from organisations in North Belfast. (AQO 8665/11-16)

Mrs Foster: The Belfast North social investment fund steering group prioritised five projects within the zonal allocation following the area-planning process. Therefore, SIF was not subject to applications from organisations. Rather, it focused on the development and prioritisation of projects to address need. Of the five projects prioritised, two are at an advanced stage. The first, a capital project called Childcare and Family Support will build two community childcare facilities, in Henry Place and Alliance Crescent. Design teams are being procured. The second, called Ethical Investment, is a social economy project aimed at helping community groups set up, support and develop market-ready property-based projects. A service delivery organisation has been appointed and delivery has commenced.

Of the remaining three projects, one capital and one revenue project have been approved for funding. A capital project called Increasing Community Services (Rebuild) will build community facilities at St Enda's in Glengormley; Crusaders FC on the Shore Road; Westland Community Centre; PIPS on the Antrim Road; and Arts for All on the Shore Road. Letters of offer are being finalised. The revenue project, called Employment Fuel Poverty, aims to provide placement for NEETs and a training programme focused on the installation of measures to reduce fuel poverty. Discussions are ongoing to secure a lead partner for the project.

The last remaining project, Increasing Community Services, intends to support refurbishment works to four community facilities. It will be considered for funding through the economic appraisal process. Officials are working with promoters to expedite approval where possible and move to issuing letters of offer subject to affordability.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Acting First Minister for her answer. I welcome the fact that there seem to be advancements in north Belfast. Will the Acting First Minister give a commitment that the money promised by the Executive for the social investment fund will be ring-fenced to bring about that much-needed change in our most disadvantaged communities, not least north Belfast?

Mrs Foster: When people talk about processes, they sometimes forget the reason why the programme was put in place in the first place. The whole idea behind the social investment programme was to help those areas of disadvantage by giving people who had particular needs a hand up and putting in place infrastructure not

previously present. We will continue to work with the project promoters to try to deliver those programmes and capital builds so that they will make a difference to those communities. We think that that will be the legacy of this programme.

2.30 pm

Mr Speaker: Very quickly; I do not think that there will be time for a supplementary. [Laughter.]

Social Investment Fund: North Down

8. **Mr Weir** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on social investment fund projects in North Down. (AQO 8666/11-16)

Mrs Foster: There are five projects prioritised by the steering group in the south-eastern zone that will directly benefit those living in the North Down constituency. Of these, a revenue project called Transitions: Early Intervention has service-delivery organisations appointed and working to begin project delivery across the zone.

The four other projects are being considered for funding through the economic appraisal process. Two revenue projects, one called "employment and training" and another called "youth intervention" will operate across the zone. The community houses project will refurbish eight community houses, six of which are in North Down, and the community-operated sports project includes a proposal to develop a 3G pitch at Kilcooley, alongside two others in Downpatrick and Ballyhornan. Officials are working with promoters to expedite approvals, where possible, and to move to a letter of offer, subject to affordability.

Mr Speaker: That ends the period for listed questions. We move to 15 minutes of topical questions.

Social Investment Fund: Foyle

T1. **Mr Eastwood** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how much money from the social investment fund budget has been spent in the Foyle constituency. (AQT 2841/11-16)

Mrs Foster: I do not have those figures in front of me. I will have them communicated to the Member.

Mr Speaker: It would be good if you can get a supplementary out of that.

Mr Eastwood: I thank the Minister for that answer, I think. Further to that, when will the letter of offer be sent to Derry and Strabane Council to allow work to start on the redevelopment of the Brandywell?

Mrs Foster: Again, I am sure that I could make that letter even longer by ensuring that those details are sent to him as well.

Rogues and Renegades: Damaging Reference

T2. **Mr F McCann** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the Acting First Minister has any appreciation of how damaging her reference to her ministerial colleagues as "rogues and renegades" was. (AQT 2842/11-16)

Mrs Foster: I did not catch that. Can he repeat the question?

Mr Speaker: Can you repeat the question?

Mr F McCann: Does the Acting First Minister have any appreciation of how damaging her reference to her ministerial colleagues as “rogues and renegades” was?

Mrs Foster: You know, Mr Speaker, when I was a student of history at school, I always thought it was important to look at the original source material to find out what was actually said rather than to have it analysed and commented upon by other people. I have noticed that, when I said that I was the gatekeeper who was put in place to prevent the “possibility” of decisions being taken by rogue or renegade Ministers, all of a sudden nationalist Ministers in the Executive immediately identified themselves as such.

I do not know how “possibility” becomes “actuality”, but there we are. I think that people should look at exactly what I said because, of course, there is form in this regard, and they need to remember that there is not a clear record.

Mr F McCann: It seems strange because, if that is her view, she was quite happy to work with the same Ministers over the past eight years.

Mrs Foster: I wonder whether the Member actually listened to what I actually said. I said the “possibility” in relation to these matters. I did say that there was form in this regard, and, of course, we recall that the Minister of Agriculture had to be taken to court in relation to CAP reform. The Minister of the Environment — I cannot hear what the Member is saying because I am answering the question — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mrs Foster: We are awaiting a judgement on the Minister of the Environment in relation to matters that he did not bring to the Executive, where he felt that he could take a decision as well without the consensus of the Executive. I am simply pointing out that, in an Executive made up of a coalition, you are meant to bring decisions to the whole Executive. Given that our Ministers have resigned from their positions, nationalist Ministers remain in place until such time that there is an election. Even were an election to be called, they would stay in place until that election was over. It is important to bear that in mind, and that was the reason for saying what I had to say.

Ministerial Vacancies: Public Disservice

T3. **Ms Ruane** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the Acting First Minister thinks that the fact that there is no Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, no Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and no Minister for Social Development is a disservice to the public, leading to a lack of decision-making in vital Departments. *(AQT 2843/11-16)*

Mrs Foster: It could have been so different. It could have been much more easily dealt with. We put forward a proposal to the Business Committee on 1 September that the Assembly would be adjourned so that we could get on with business on the talks process. We were not supported in that respect; at least, the Alliance Party supported us, but everybody else decided to vote for business as usual in the Assembly. Today, there was meant to be a round-table meeting of the talks at 1.30 pm, but it had to be put off. Do you know why? Because I had to be in this place

answering questions for OFMDFM. It is already having an impact on the intensity of the talks. I regret that. I regret the fact that other parties did not agree to an adjournment so that we could focus exclusively on the talks process.

Ms Ruane: I thank the Minister for her answer. Thankfully, democracy ruled, and, on four occasions, the Business Committee ruled to continue business as usual. I would be interested to know whether the DUP will continue with the tactic of nominating and resigning. Will the newly appointed Minister for Regional Development resign or carry out her duties?

Mrs Foster: Because majority rules in the Business Committee and it has decided that business as usual will continue, it is up to this party to take action to make sure that we point out that it is not business as usual. A man has died. The finger of blame has been pointed at the IRA. Therefore, action needs to be taken. We will ensure that action is taken through the talks process.

OFMDFM Strategies: Update

T4. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the number of strategies awaiting completion, sign off and publication by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. *(AQT 2844/11-16)*

Mrs Foster: I would have thought that, given that the Member is the Chair of the OFMDFM Committee, he would have had a clear view on that matter.

Mr Nesbitt: I welcome the Acting First Minister’s response, which clearly indicates to me that she does not know the answer. The areas you are responsible for include racial equality, sexual equality, age discrimination and childcare. I put it to the Minister that the inability to agree is the definition of normal politics in OFMDFM.

Mrs Foster: If the Member had agreed with us in the Business Committee, we would not even be here discussing business as usual; we would be in the talks dealing with the issues that need to be dealt with. Of course, the twin issues that need to be dealt with are, for the record, the implementation of the Stormont House Agreement and the ongoing presence of paramilitary activity. I see this as an opportunity to deal with those issues once and for all and to get paramilitaries off the backs of the people of Northern Ireland once and for all so that we can move forward into a proper democracy. I look forward to his support in the talks to make sure that that happens.

Mr Speaker: Miss Megan Fearon is not in her place.

Anti-poverty Strategy

T6. **Mr Ó hOisín** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how OFMDFM intends to deliver an anti-poverty strategy based on objective need, as required by the judgement of the judicial review taken by the Committee on the Administration of Justice. *(AQT 2846/11-16)*

Mrs Foster: The High Court found in favour of the Committee on the Administration of Justice in a legal challenge against the Executive for failing to adopt a strategy to tackle poverty, social exclusion and patterns of deprivation on the basis of objective need. We have accepted that judgement by the High Court. It has been made clear, however, by the High Court that there are many current programmes and interventions dealing

with the issues that section 28E of the Northern Ireland Act sought to address. However, the section creates a clear duty to have a particular strategy, and that view will be taken account of. The Department takes its statutory obligations very seriously, so officials will work to make sure that that is dealt with.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for her answer. Given that the judgement has been accepted, does the Minister expect the prompt delivery or development of a strategy?

Mrs Foster: The Department has been focusing on trying to make sure that the actions in the Department are delivered on. We have heard a lot about strategies today. The Chair of the OFMDFM Committee could not tell us how many strategies there were in the Department; I think that that is indicative of the fact that there are quite a few strategies. We should be focused on dealing with outcomes. Certainly, it is my hope that the next Programme for Government, which I have been working on in the Department of Finance and Personnel, will focus more on actions and outcomes than on strategies. We could have as many strategies as you want, but how would that affect the individual on the street? That is where we should be looking.

Mr Speaker: I notice that Oliver McMullan is not in his place, so I call Mr Neil Somerville.

Victims of Terrorism: Compensation

T8. **Mr Somerville** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what engagement OFMDFM has had with Her Majesty's Government in relation to securing compensation for victims of IRA terrorism due to Libyan-supplied weaponry. (AQT 2848/11-16)

Mrs Foster: That question was withdrawn by Mrs Dobson. It was down as question 5 for oral answers to questions, but I will answer it. There have been ongoing discussions, particularly by our party, in relation to Libya. We want to make sure that there is a just settlement on the payment of compensation to the victims of IRA terrorism, particularly in relation to product that has been delivered from Libya over the years. Of course, many victims have suffered at the hands of that sort of product, and therefore we need to push our Government into making sure that compensation is available.

Mr Somerville: Thank you for the answer, Acting First Minister. You will be aware that it was Libya that provided the IRA with the stockpiles of Semtex and that the threat is still very much live, as Semtex was discovered during the police search in west Belfast on Friday. Will the Minister discuss the failure to secure compensation for victims of IRA violence with Libyan-sourced weapons with the Westminster Government and, particularly, the Foreign Office?

Mrs Foster: Yes, we will continue to push the Foreign Office. I welcome the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee hearing, which has been hearing directly from victims of IRA terrorism. Most recently, my good friend Aileen Quinton was able to articulate how it had impacted on her life and how she wanted justice to come in terms of compensation. That is right and proper, and we will certainly do all that we can to support people like Aileen Quinton to get the justice they deserve.

Refugees: Collaborative Approach

T9. **Mr McAleer** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how OFMDFM will ensure a collaborative approach across the Executive in welcoming refugees. (AQT 2849/11-16)

Mrs Foster: I am sure everyone in the House has been moved by the plight of the refugees and the terrible way they have been dealt with over the past period. We are taking a collaborative approach with the Home Office. The Home Office is taking the lead on the matter, and officials are working with the Home Office to ensure that we play our part in the process that was announced by the Prime Minister.

Mr McAleer: Go raibh maith agat; I thank the Acting First Minister for her answer. Does the situation highlight the need for a racial equality strategy to be put in place?

Mrs Foster: The racial equality strategy has finished its 16-week public consultation. I understand that it is currently with Departments for their commentary on it. Once that has been completed — I understand it is very close to that — we can move forward to the next stage.

2.45 pm

Gender Equality Strategy: Update

T10. **Ms Maeve McLaughlin** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on progress on the gender equality strategy. (AQT 2850/11-16)

Mrs Foster: The gender equality strategy is moving forward. As the Member is aware, the new strategy will come into force, we hope, next year, when the old strategy runs out. The committee that has been set up to deal with these matters has met. The junior Ministers attended a meeting of the strategy committee meeting in June in a listening capacity. We are pushing ahead with the strategy because it is needed in Northern Ireland. The old strategy will stay in place until the new strategy comes forward.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Acting First Minister for that. Can she assure me that any new gender equality strategy will take proper account of UN Security Council resolution 1325 and the gender principles for dealing with the legacy of the past?

Mrs Foster: Of course, the UN resolution refers to what happened here over the past 40 years in ways that we may disagree on, but we will endeavour to deliver the principles that lie behind what it speaks about. We hope the strategy will be more focused. It will be more integrated. However, to quote Hillary Clinton:

"You can't be what you can't see."

There is a need to have more women in the public eye and to make sure that we encourage young women — indeed, women of all ages — to become involved in public life.

Mr Speaker: Time is up.

Mr Swann: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Just let me finish dealing with Question Time.

Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Mr Speaker: The next item of business is questions to the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. As there is a vacancy in that ministerial office, Question Time cannot proceed. Did somebody make a point of order?

Assembly Business

Tabled Questions: Clarification

Mr Swann: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In response to Mr Somerville's topical question — topical question 8 — the Acting First Minister referred to Mrs Dobson having withdrawn her tabled question, question 5. Will you investigate that with the Business Office and confirm that it was the Business Office that requested that the question be withdrawn after a request from the Department?

Mr Speaker: I have been informed by the Clerks that you are correct. If you need that formally validated, I suggest you call into the Business Office. That is the information that I was given as well when we were considering it.

Mr Allister: Further to that point of order, can you give some clarification on the capacity of Departments to throw back questions that are tabled to the Business Office because they do not like them and say, "We're not going to answer that"? How have we reached the pass where that is even possible? The question is patently within the remit of the Department, but, because it is too embarrassing or awkward for it to answer, it simply tells the Business Office, "We're not answering". What sort of way is that to do business?

Mr Speaker: There may be issues of detail involved. While Members can ask questions of a Minister, they have to be able to demonstrate and the Minister has to be satisfied that they are within the Minister's remit. There may be issues of detail here that have to be teased out. My understanding is that that is the rationale that was applied. I am unaware of the exact composition of the question, so that is an issue that we will have to come to a conclusion on subsequently.

Adjourned at 2.46 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 22 September 2015

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Ministerial Resignation: Miss McIlveen

Mr Speaker: Before we proceed to today's business, I have an announcement to make. I wish to advise the House that the Minister for Regional Development, Miss Michelle McIlveen, resigned her office on 21 September 2015. *[Interruption.]* Order.

Standing Order 44(3) provides for a seven-day period during which the party that held the office can nominate a member of its party to replace them and take up that office. That period will expire at the end of Sunday 27 September 2015. I am satisfied that the requirements of Standing Orders have been met. Let us move on.

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Can the House be advised whether these 10-minute Ministers are being remunerated and whether, by the recycling of their resignations every seven days, they are maintaining their continuity of service for pension purposes?

Mr Speaker: Those are not matters for the Speaker, as you will know, and they are certainly not matters on which I would have information. I have noted some of the media comments from the people concerned, who have indicated that they are not accepting their salaries. The questions that you raise are not for my office.

Ms Fearon: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I apologise for missing a question to the Acting First Minister yesterday. I will ensure that it will not happen again.

Mr Speaker: I am not sure that you should be smiling when you are making an apology, but I accept your apology.

Executive Committee Business

Pension Schemes Bill: Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: The Consideration Stage of the Pension Schemes Bill is listed in the name of the Minister for Social Development. As that ministerial office is vacant, the item of business cannot be moved.

Private Members' Business

Assembly and Executive Reform (Assembly Opposition) Bill: First Stage

Mr McCallister: I beg to introduce the Assembly and Executive Reform (Assembly Opposition) Bill [NIA62/11-16], which is a Bill to provide for the formation of an Assembly Opposition; to provide for the passing of an Assembly and Executive Reform Motion; to reform the Assembly and the Executive; and to provide that all Northern Ireland Departments are a single legal entity.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Speaker: I am sure that you are very glad to hear that, John.

Syrian Humanitarian Crisis

Mr Speaker: Before we proceed, can I confirm that Ms Anna Lo will propose the following motion? Thank you. 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. All other contributors will have five minutes.

Ms Lo: I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses its despair at the ongoing international humanitarian crisis in Syria; notes the tragic deaths of refugees fleeing to Europe seeking sanctuary and the terrible conditions endured by those refugees in transport to Europe and in refugee camps upon arrival; believes that EU nations have a moral obligation to assist people seeking refuge from war and persecution; further notes the Prime Minister's eventual decision to accept 20,000 refugees; further believes that the UK Government and some other EU Governments have not acted in line with their humanitarian obligations; and calls on the Executive to ensure provisions are in place for Northern Ireland to welcome refugees from Syria.

It has been more than three years since human rights groups confirmed the Syrian Government's use of cluster bombs in an attack that killed innocent people, many of whom were children. So far, 220,000 people have died and four million have been displaced, but it took the image of one dead child lying on the shores that his parents hoped would offer them safety to remind us of our common humanity and the need for action. There seems to be some confusion regarding whether a person is a refugee or an immigrant. Economic migrants are different from refugees fleeing conflict, and we must not conflate the two terms. We cannot let the politics of immigration stop us helping those fleeing violence and persecution.

We are experiencing great political uncertainty at a time when we find it hard to agree on many things. This motion is surely something on which we can all unite. The compassion of Northern Irish people never ceases to amaze me. We have seen rallies, appeals and petitions and even people offering to open up their homes to those in need. In a radio interview three weeks ago, I mentioned that the Alliance Party offices were taking collections for refugees in Calais. To be honest, for a few days it was difficult to move between desks in our premises with all the donations that were received. This is the best of Northern Ireland, and I would like to pay tribute to our generous people whose response has been truly heart-warming.

The UK Government have undoubtedly been generous in aid terms, with 0.7% of our GDP rightly spent on international development. However, we are here today to discuss the adequacy of the overall approach. Since 2011, the UK has granted humanitarian protection to almost 5,000 Syrians through normal asylum procedures. The Prime Minister recently announced that the UK would accept 20,000 Syrian refugees over five years, but 4,000 refugees a year is not enough.

If Northern Ireland takes only 3% of that pro rata, that is 120 refugees per year. When you compare that with the 800,000 welcomed into Germany or the 24,000 into France, you see that it is clear that we could be doing

more. Even Brazil, which is halfway across the world, has taken in 2,000 Syrian refugees.

The crisis is now. We do not know what the situation will be in a few years' time. We should be doing all we can now. I welcome the deputy First Minister's proposal that Northern Ireland could accommodate 2,000 refugees. The public will be there; they want us to help.

We have a moral responsibility to help refugees, and Britain has a proud history of doing just that. At the end of the Vietnam War, Britain took in 19,000 Vietnamese, the so-called boat people, who were fleeing violence and persecution. In fact, I volunteered with the Red Cross then to help Vietnamese families to settle in Craigavon. They not only integrated extremely well but were entrepreneurial in setting up businesses and seeking employment. The Syrian refugees have much to offer our society. There are doctors, engineers and other professionals in those refugee camps who are seeking a better life. Let them seek it here.

However, good sentiments are not enough. We need a plan to ensure that provisions are in place for us to welcome the refugees. That is OFMDFM's responsibility, and I understand that the Department is looking at various ways to help us to play our part and work with the Home Office and other Departments.

The Refugee and Asylum Forum has produced a five-point list of necessary measures to ensure the smooth process of integration for newly arrived refugees. The first is a call for a refugee integration strategy. We are the only region in the UK without a strategy, which is pertinent, given that integration continues to be something of a difficulty in our society.

The Strategic Migration Partnership produced a paper in 2013 outlining what the strategy would look like. A key point was that actions taken by Departments and agencies could not be done in isolation. For the meaningful integration of refugees, the approach must be collaborative. I would like clarification from OFMDFM regarding whether it is seeking to introduce a refugee integration strategy and what interim measures it is planning to take to facilitate integration in the absence of a strategy.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Member for giving way. The Member will be aware that, on 9 September, as Deputy Chair of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, I requested that officials seek an update from OFMDFM on the contact it had with the Home Office and, indeed, on the refugee integration strategy. Would she agree that the people of Northern Ireland deserve a fuller and more formal statement from OFMDFM on these matters as a matter of urgency?

Ms Lo: Absolutely; I totally agree and thank the Member for mentioning it.

The Refugee and Asylum Forum calls for a long-term commitment to welcome refugees, which is important. Our support should last beyond the news cycle and should include the provision of free English classes and housing. The final request is that the Executive work with those in our excellent support sector, some of whom, I am delighted to say, are with us today in our Public Gallery. Those organisations are already on the ground supporting refugees and asylum seekers, and their expertise will be valuable.

One cause for concern is that OFMDFM's track record in delivering is not always the best. Over the years, a

number of organisations and Churches have had to step in to provide support to refugees and asylum seekers in the absence of government support. For example, when OFMDFM announced the introduction of the crisis fund to help the most vulnerable in 2014, it took a year until it was put in place. A small amount of money can make an enormous difference to these people, particularly to destitute asylum seekers who are often left in limbo with very few options and have difficulty accessing services. It is paramount that we ensure that our services are prepared for the refugees whom we will be welcoming. I ask that OFMDFM ensures that generous offers made by the public can be turned into practical assistance, and I look forward to hearing, in the near future, from the Department on the progress made in coordinating our efforts.

10.45 am

The scale of this problem is huge, and there are no quick solutions. However, it is clear that there is a very great need for a coordinated European response. This is not just about taking in refugees but is about dealing with the root causes in conflict areas and tackling the criminal gangs that are preying on vulnerable refugees.

As Members will be aware, I have a particular interest in ending modern slavery, and the unspeakable horrors that refugees face at the hands of traffickers must be dealt with. I welcome the Home Secretary's recent joint declaration with France for new law enforcement collaboration and intelligence sharing. One of the most harrowing stories to emerge is of the 52 people who died in the airless hull of a boat. Those who survived that journey did so only because they could afford to pay to come up on deck to breathe. We cannot allow that to happen again. We must work together.

No one chooses to be a refugee. A person who risks everything, even life itself, in search of a tolerable existence is a person whom we must help. I urge you to support the motion.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank Anna Lo and her party for bringing forward the motion. I absolutely agree with Ms Anna Lo that no one chooses to be a refugee. None of us in the House would choose to be a refugee and leave our homes and our families and bring our children with us for many thousands of miles.

Let us look at the global trends report from 2014. These figures are outdated at this stage. In the world, 59 million people are being forcibly displaced by persecution, conflict, generalised violence and human rights violations. We have 19.5 million refugees and 38.2 million internally displaced persons and asylum seekers.

To put the debate in context, which countries are the top hosts of the refugees? I can tell you that they are not in Europe. They are as follows: Turkey, Pakistan, Lebanon, Iran and Ethiopia. The developing world hosts 86% of the world's refugees. For example, of the four million Syrian refugees, 1.2 million are in Lebanon; that is one fifth of the entire population of Lebanon. Six per cent have sought asylum in Europe. It is paltry and tiny, yet look at how the European Governments, with a few exceptions, are dealing with this.

Look at how many people have died coming to our shores. Look at how many people are on rafts and boats that

are so dangerous for them and are coming from Libya to Italy on the Mediterranean Sea. It is a risky, dangerous journey, and they are fleeing from a war that was not of their making. Men, women and children are leaving their homes because of policies made thousands of miles away in England, the United States, Europe, China and Russia, the bigger superpowers. They are fleeing because of a global crisis, because of deep injustice and because of repression.

The crisis needs a global response. It needs a human-rights-based response. It is not good enough for Europe to say that it will not play its role. It is not good enough for countries like Hungary to build fences to keep people out, a bit like Israel does.

We need a twofold approach. We need conflict resolution. The superpowers need to be challenged. They are the ones who have caused the conflict. As Ms Lo said, we need to look at the root causes of conflict. We need to challenge the superpowers and the arms manufacturers. We also need to provide sanctuary for refugees. Citizens across Europe are ensuring that their voices are heard. We have seen them on this island, in Dublin, Belfast, Newry, Fermanagh and Derry — all over Ireland. Their voices are saying that refugees are welcome — *tá fáilte romhaibh* — to this island. We know what it is like to flee in the coffin ships and the boats. We know what it is like to arrive in a country with nothing but the clothes on our backs. That is what our ancestors did. We need to open up our doors, and our Governments in Ireland and Europe need to follow the citizens. As usual, the citizens are leading from the front.

I put on record and pay tribute to what Martin McGuinness and the deputy First Minister's office are doing. As the proposer of the motion will know, they are meeting NGOs, community-based forums and representatives from councils across the North. Officials from OFMDFM are also involved in a joined-up approach to support refugees who come here. John O'Dowd — I welcome the fact that the Minister is in the House — has tasked his officials with making preparations for children and education. I also pay tribute to the Department of Education, which has been leading from the front. Indeed, during my time, we brought forward the English as an additional language report and Every School a Good School, and extra resources were given to schools for every ethnic minority child that they had so that they could put in place special programmes.

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

Ms Ruane: That will continue. Sinn Féin supports the five key actions that have been developed by the Refugee and Asylum Forum and endorsed by the 16 organisations. We very much welcome the work that they are doing and look forward to ongoing partnership working.

Ms Hanna: I commend the Members for tabling the motion. It is vital that the Assembly continues to give voice to the solidarity, the very clear solidarity, of people here with the millions who are fleeing conflict in Syria and elsewhere. It is also appropriate that we look at the practical support that we can offer.

Members have outlined some of the context of the crisis that has seen several hundred thousand people dead in Syria, half of that country's population displaced and 12 million people, including over five million children, in need of humanitarian assistance. All the indicators are that those numbers will only get worse.

It is vital to preserve the integrity of the word "refugee". Since 2011, life expectancy in Syria has decreased by 13 years, and the country has seen a reversal of all the progress that was made on the millennium development goals, including the numbers of children attending school having halved and a dramatic increase in acute malnutrition among children. The suggestion that people who are crossing the sea in boats, spending days in the back of fridges or literally walking across countries with their children on their shoulders are doing so for a change of scenery or a new job is unconscionable and should not be given the time of day.

All of us in the Chamber and across Europe have been very moved by the images of refugees making those desperate journeys to Europe. As the Member pointed out, we should remember that only a tiny fraction of the numbers are making their way to and arriving in Europe. The vast majority are displaced in Syria, and around four million are in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and other nearby countries. The work that has been done by aid agencies such as Concern, Oxfam, Trócaire and Christian Aid, representatives of some of which are with us today, will literally mean the difference between life and death for people at the very sharp end of the conflict. I know that those organisations are being generously supported by people here.

The UK and Irish Governments have provided substantial financial aid to support the humanitarian needs of the people in those camps in and near Syria. That should continue and be increased, but the EU also has a moral obligation to increase the safe, legal routes into Europe for people who are literally fleeing the total destruction of their countries.

The theory that search and rescue is a pull factor should not be entertained. Search and rescue needs to be increased. We are going into the winter months, when those desperate and dangerous journeys are going to become even more perilous, and that support should be enhanced. If we cannot do that, I think that the European Union will have lost sight of what it was intended to do.

We should also remember, as other Members have pointed out, that most of the people who have made their way to Europe are skilled, educated workers who have a lot to offer here, as have previous economic migrants. They will bring substantial benefits to our economy and our community.

The motion also calls on us:

"to ensure provisions are in place ... to welcome refugees from Syria."

That is, of course, a reserved matter, but it is clear that there are gaps in ensuring the humane treatment of existing refugees and asylum seekers, as well as that of those who will hopefully come from Syria. It is not enough for us to get into an auction about how many we are going to take without ensuring that the response is planned and properly funded. I welcome the guidance given by the Refugee and Asylum Forum on how we can better do that, and our party endorses those proposals.

The key priority is, of course, a refugee integration strategy, as is in place elsewhere. It seems shameful that, at precisely the time that asylum seekers and refugees should be assisted with getting on with their new life here,

they are instead having to navigate complex bureaucratic and legal systems to get what they are entitled to. I understand that each new arriver is having to reinvent the wheel in accessing legal support, education and healthcare. Vital organisations such as the Law Centre, Homeplus and the Northern Ireland Community of Refugees and Asylum Seekers (NICRAS) are providing that support, but a strategy developed by those providing it would make the journey a lot easier. I understand that the racial equality strategy was receptive to it, but, like another load of documents, it has not made its way out of the OFMDFM bunker. Now would be the appropriate time for it to do so, ideally with a central coordinating group — such as the Law Centre — that would allow us to monitor the numbers. That would mean that statistics were not muddied by those seeking to undermine the integration of refugees.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Ms Hanna: Mr Speaker, an open humanitarian response to the crisis is our moral obligation, and it is the will of the people here. We support the motion.

Mr Speaker: This is the first debate in which the Assembly will hear from Mr Andy Allen, so I remind the House that it is the convention that a maiden speech be made without interruption.

Mr Allen: I am honoured to be in the House as a representative of East Belfast, where I was born and bred. First, I pay tribute to Michael Copeland, who, I know at first hand, worked tirelessly and passionately for the people of the constituency. I thank Michael for all his help and assistance in the past and wish him well on what I hope will be a road to recovery. He was totally committed to his role as a public representative who sought to give a voice to people who often felt marginalised, and I promise that I shall do my best to ensure that I continue down that path. I am especially keen to tackle the educational underachievement that has affected too many young people from the east; to tackle housing stress; and to play my part in attracting jobs and investment to an area that was once Northern Ireland's economic powerhouse but is now in need of help to restore its fortunes and to give its people a sense of purpose. I am up for that challenge.

It gives me no pleasure to speak on this motion. On 2 September 2015, the world was shaken by the horrifying images of young Alan Kurdi's lifeless body washed up on a Turkish beach. There is no doubting the enormity of the humanitarian crisis that has emerged from the chaos in the Middle East and north Africa. The Syrian civil war has been raging for four and a half years and has claimed the lives of 200,000 people. As a result of the twin evils of the barbaric Islamic State and the brutality of the Assad regime, each day there are fewer safe places in Syria and, indeed, the region in which it lies. The EU has struggled to cope, and Governments in the Balkans in particular have been forced to make policy on the hoof as border crossings are opened and closed, almost on a whim, as states become overwhelmed.

11.00 am

I do, however, draw a distinction between genuine refugees, who are fleeing persecution and violence, and who have made their way to Europe in search of a place of safety, and economic migrants, who are simply seeking

access to Europe in a search for a better life. We, in Northern Ireland, are not responsible for immigration policy or the granting of asylum, so we must work closely with the UK Government to play our part in alleviating suffering. Our natural sympathy and desire to help fellow human beings in their desperate plight need to be matched by an appreciation of the practicalities of the situation.

The Law Society highlighted a number of key actions that it would like to see delivered for those refugees who are accommodated in Northern Ireland, including a refugee integration strategy and free accredited English language classes for all refugees. I believe that these actions, in particular, are vital if we are to allow those refugees who wish to settle in Northern Ireland the opportunity to fully integrate into society. The Law Society also calls for a commitment to partnership working. I do not believe that this should be restricted to dealing with refugees who arrive in Northern Ireland. This Assembly should develop partnership working between all Departments and agencies as a matter of course. It is not enough to say that we will ensure that those entering Northern Ireland as refugees will receive the best possible support through healthcare, housing and education. That is something this Assembly and Executive should already be committed to delivering for every person in Northern Ireland.

The Ulster Unionist Party fully supports the steps taken by the UK Government, including the spending of £900 million from their foreign aid budget on helping some of the four million refugees who have fled Syria since the war began. The vast majority are in refugee camps in neighbouring Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, and the need for humanitarian aid is constant.

In the longer term, political solutions are a much more effective response to the migrant crisis than opening up another country's borders. Syrian refugees accepted into Europe or the West are a small part of the total need. There are four million Syrian refugees living in bordering countries and another 78 million displaced Syrians living in Government-controlled areas in Syria. Permitting more Syrians to immigrate addresses a symptom but not the root cause. The majority of Syrian refugees do not want to emigrate to Europe or elsewhere. We must work to address the causes of the flight of people from Syria, namely the brutal conflict in the region fuelled by the terrorism of Islamic State. Only then will the people of that region who are currently displaced be able to return home and rebuild their and their families' lives in their own country. Maybe we should pay heed to the words of a young Syrian boy trying to reach Europe. He said:

"Stop the war in Syria, and we will not want to go to Europe."

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Ms Fearon: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Like the previous Member who spoke, I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate. However, we would all rather that such a discussion was not necessary. We would all rather that there was no such suffering in the world, but the heartbreaking images of the pain and suffering of refugees fleeing Syria have brought home to millions the need for urgent humanitarian action. It is worth noting at the outset that, while Syrian is to the fore of people's thoughts regarding this crisis, there are also people fleeing Palestine, Libya, Eritrea, Afghanistan and

Iraq, to name a few. The conflicts in these places are mostly caused or worsened by Western action, so there is also an onus and responsibility on Governments to address these humanitarian issues.

I pay tribute to my friend and colleague Martina Anderson MEP for the amazing work that she has been doing on this issue. She is visiting a refugee camp in Jordan, having visited one in Italy. Her overwhelming passion for this issue is clear to be seen, and there are many more like her. Speaking from Jordan this week, she said:

"These refugees face the choice of dying in the conflict in Syria, drowning in the Mediterranean or starving in refugee camps."

As the motion states, that is the dire situation faced.

The response to the shocking pictures of the body of three-year old Alan Kurdi washed ashore has shown the depth of feeling on this issue. In fact, once again, citizens have proven to be way ahead of the British and Irish Governments by offering to do what they can, as Ms Lo stated earlier, even opening up their own homes. We have not only an international obligation to act but a human one. Alan Kurdi should have been playing on a beach, not washed up on one; but it should not have taken such a picture to wake many up to the reality that these are our brothers and sisters, our fellow human beings.

Do Governments respond with humanity across Europe? No. Instead, they increase coercive measures to keep people out to reinforce "fortress Europe". Thirty thousand men, women and children have drowned in the Mediterranean Sea in a desperate attempt to flee wars and persecution over the last number of years.

The media and certain Governments have a lot to answer for. They have dehumanised refugees and provoked racism and xenophobia throughout Europe, and they need to take responsibility for their actions.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, agus gabhaim buíochas leis an bhall as an urlár a fhágáil fúm. I thank the Member for giving way. Does she agree that we need to stop refugees being destitute and that we can do this by ensuring that there are as few administrative delays as possible so that they are not left without money? Does she also agree that we need a proper strategy for dealing with refugees so that there are plans to coordinate support services in areas such as education, hate crime, jobs and integration?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Ms Fearon: I thank the Member for making that important point. It is important that we offer whatever practical help we can to refugees.

Europe has a responsibility to help these people. This is very much a crisis of European creation. Member states encouraged, started or participated in the wars that these people are fleeing from, but European policy allows member states to shake off their responsibilities. Europe must step up and commit to meaningful action on relocation and resettlement, which will provide a fresh start for many. We need a radical shift of migration and asylum policies across Europe. Indeed, the European Union Charter of Fundamental Rights states that all have the right to dignity, which includes life, and freedoms,

which include liberty, prohibition of all discrimination and, crucially, asylum.

Closer to home, the Irish and British Governments must do more to tackle this humanitarian disaster. The response of the Irish and British Governments should match the scale of the crisis and the generosity of our people, which has, once again, been overwhelming. We can be proud of the response in all our local areas. In my area, solidarity collections and vigils have been held across Newry and south Armagh. I hope that we can find a resolution to this crisis that puts people before politics. One thing that we can all agree on is that the Executive should do everything in their power to help. A humanitarian crisis of this scale must be met with humanity.

I want to finish, perhaps in an unorthodox manner, with an extract from a poem about this crisis called 'Home'. It is very powerful and brings home the reality that these people are facing:

*"you only leave home
when home won't let you stay.
no one leaves home unless home chases you
fire under feet
hot blood in your belly
it's not something you ever thought of doing
until the blade burnt threats into
your neck
and even then you carried the anthem under
your breath
.....
you have to understand,
that no one puts their children in a boat
unless the water is safer than the land".*

Mr Eastwood: Mr Speaker, last night, you, along with our colleague John Dallat, organised and hosted an event about the Great Famine. I commend you for doing that. It is a major event in our history, one that we should never forget. We should not forget it because, in the immediate aftermath of the Great Famine, one million people died. One million people travelled to other parts of the world, many of whom died on coffin ships. Even if they did reach places like America, they received a very hostile reception in a lot of cases. Many others went on and did very well, and, in subsequent generations, their families ended up in very prominent positions in places like Washington DC. We, on the other hand, many years later, have not learned the lesson that we need open and welcoming countries for people who are in deep and real crisis. If America, for example, had been closed to Irish refugees — refugees is what they were — what would have happened to all those people? People were dying in the ocean, and now, in 2015, people are dying in the ocean. It is not good enough.

One of the founding values of the European Union was the protection of human dignity. I am not so sure that the scenes around the borders of Hungary are living up to that founding value. Sanctions need to be placed on EU countries that do not live up to those values because it is a stain on the reputation of the European Union that, instead of opening our arms to people who are fleeing brutal conflict, we close the doors and fire tear gas at them.

I do not think that that is something that we can be proud of at all; it is something that we should be very ashamed of. All of us, as European citizens, need to respond to that. I know that in this city, my city and places all around the North, we have had demonstrations, with people saying that refugees are welcome in their homes. That is an illustration of the character of the people of this place. Even though we all have great difficulties here — there are 4,000 on the waiting list for houses in Derry — people in Derry are still saying, “Come here. We will look after you. We will open our arms to you.” They understand the difficulties that people are going through.

When we had a Matter of the Day on this issue a couple of weeks ago, I was criticised for making a political speech. People told me that it is not about politics and that it is only about a humanitarian crisis. However, these people are not fleeing an earthquake. They are fleeing a manmade crisis, whether it is the evil of Assad's regime, the evil of ISIS or the stupidity of Western Governments and their interventions in places like Iraq. We helped to create this crisis. We need to help to solve the problem as it stands.

About five minutes before I rose to speak on that day, the First Minister, if that is what he still is, made a comment that the Executive would not be meeting. I know that a lot of these issues are reserved, but we in these institutions have a responsibility, in whatever way we need to and have to, to meet as an Executive, to act in whatever way we need to act, and to allow the Executive to make those decisions. However, they cannot take those decisions if they do not even meet as an Executive. The people are calling on the politicians up here, whatever our other difficulties, to act on this issue and to be to the forefront of showing the compassion that is required to meet these refugees with open arms and to ensure that, if they do get this far, they are not living in the destitute conditions that some of our recent refugees are living in at the minute.

This is a political issue. There are many major geopolitical implications to all these things, but right now we have an Executive that are not meeting. We have responsibilities. Our responsibilities are not as large as the UK Government's, the Irish Government's or anybody else's, but we have responsibilities and we cannot meet those responsibilities unless this Executive meet. I encourage the First Minister to change his attitude.

Mr Allister: I begin by congratulating Mr Allen on his maiden speech. Some of those who spoke subsequent to him have obviously forgotten the tradition of congratulating a person on their maiden speech. I do that genuinely. I wish him well, and I look forward to his further contributions.

One would have to be utterly heartless not to be struck and very moved by the sheer devastation that we have seen in Syria. It is a country that has been bombed to a pulp by the various factions, and it is no surprise that, in consequence of that, there is a migration of refugees. We should approach their plight with considerable sympathy, and not just sympathy but by stretching ourselves in terms of material and other support. This is such an emotive subject that, if you dare to ask questions that in other circumstances would be objective and reasonable, you run the risk of being vilified for daring to raise those subjects and being painted as someone who is, in fact, heartless. However, with the spectacle that we are witnessing across Europe, there are questions that have to be asked: are all

those whom we see on our screens truly refugees? There seems to be a great preponderance of young men, which perhaps speaks more of economic migration. I think that we need to distinguish the necessity for our humanitarian response from a genuine refugee situation, which, in international law, is met in the country where the refugee first arrives.

11.15 am

Mr Agnew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: Yes.

Mr Agnew: Is the Member prepared to accept that, in the filtering process to try to separate the deserving from the non-deserving, as he perhaps sees it, we could contribute to human suffering, whereby more people will die, rather than simply having a more humanitarian approach and giving people the benefit of the doubt in the first instance?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute, of course.

Mr Allister: Thank you.

I take the point, but you, and Europe as a whole, cannot give carte blanche. Given all the risks that come to Europe's security, with the possibility of some of those under the cloak of the crowd of refugees being jihadists who come to destroy, not to build, their lives or anyone else's, I think that Europe has to be careful and to approach this thing sensibly.

What I see is a great thrust of people who are determined that they are getting to Germany. That is fine. People may have that aspiration, but is that the first priority of a refugee or is safety the first priority of a refugee? I think that one has to be careful about some of those matters.

I also think the motion is a little unfair to the United Kingdom Government, because it berates the Government for not acting in line with their humanitarian obligations. The United Kingdom Government in the last four years have contributed more than any other European state in humanitarian aid — £920 million. In fact, and I think that this is a point worth making, that is considerably more than many of the neighbouring Arab states in the Middle East, which have contributed paltry amounts in comparison with their wealth. If you take the United Arab Emirates, you see that it has one of the highest GDPs in the world. The United Kingdom has contributed three times what the United Arab Emirates has contributed and almost three times what Saudi Arabia has contributed. So, I think that there is an obligation on the adjacent Arab states that has not been fully and adequately met.

I think that, before we berate our own Government about these matters, we need to recognise the scale of the contribution they have made, which is now approaching and soon to surpass £1 billion. The motion derides that, with no criticism of other countries in Europe. If we take the example of some of the major countries in Europe, such as France, we see that it has contributed £70 million in humanitarian aid, as opposed to the £1 billion of the United Kingdom. So, I reject the notion that the United Kingdom has not lived up to that responsibility.

What is our responsibility in that context? Our responsibility is to take our share of whatever the United Kingdom properly admits as a refugee quota. That is our obligation as a devolved part of the United Kingdom, and I

am sure that we will meet it handsomely. However, it is not for the Assembly, which does not have control over these matters, to set artificial aspirations or to say that we will do things that we know we cannot do. Our obligation is to live within the responsibilities that our nation meets and for our nation to meet its responsibilities. In that way, we approach the thing properly.

Mr Agnew: I echo the comments of Mr Allister in welcoming Mr Allen and congratulating him on his maiden speech.

I think the first thing that everybody has asked in this humanitarian crisis is this: "What can I do?" It is time for the Assembly and these institutions to ask this question: "What can we do?" The public have stepped up. It has been pointed out that people have offered their spare rooms and their homes. They have offered to help, but what they have not seen is public services step in to facilitate the support that they wish to give.

Towards the end of last week, I visited the Northern Ireland Calais Refugee Solidarity group in north Down. It is running out of space to take donations, so the public is stepping up. The group needs the statutory services to do what they can to facilitate the goodwill that is there among our electorate and ensure that those who wish to help can give real help to those who are in a time of need.

The Law Centre has launched its SAFER campaign, calling for a big Northern Ireland welcome for refugees, and it has outlined some practical steps that the Assembly can take. It will need a coordinated response, which will require the Executive to meet and for us to get past our current difficulties and give a real focus to the situation. The SAFER campaign asks us to stop destitution and ensure that refugees, when they come to our shores, have support to ensure that their basic needs are met. It also calls on us to ask the experts. There are those who are expert in the situation faced by refugees and asylum seekers. For example, NICRAS has come out in the media and said: "We have been doing this work for years and we have the expertise, but we need the additional support." Greater numbers are going to come in, and NICRAS will need that support to carry on its excellent work.

The SAFER campaign calls for financial help, which does not have to be direct subsidy which, I know, is almost a bogeyman that is created. It is said that these people come here for the £45 per week or whatever it might be that they can access on benefits. I know that I would not risk my life for that, and I am sure that the people travelling in the boats do not risk their lives in the hope of the great boon of our benefits system. It is about putting support systems in place to ensure that, when we take in refugees with open arms, as our public has demanded, we do so to offer them a better opportunity. The campaign calls for the provision of English classes, to ensure particularly that children entering education have the best hope and an equal opportunity to realise their potential. It calls for a refugee strategy. This is not something new. Refugees have been coming to Northern Ireland, and the support mechanisms probably have not been sufficient. That is being highlighted now through the attention being brought by the current humanitarian crisis which has been created.

The final ask of the Law Centre's campaign is to end the big injustice. That is the assumption, almost, of guilt by those who seek refuge in the UK as a whole. Until we

can process people, we lock them up. Innocent people, including children and families, are held in detention centres. In the past, we have deported people, who have made their lives here and become a part of our community, by coming into their homes in the middle of the night. We should have a humanitarian response to a humanitarian crisis. We should follow the lead of those citizens who have stepped up and said: "I want to help." This Assembly should help.

Mr McNarry: I, too, welcome Andy Allen's contribution in his maiden speech. I also welcome it because I noted the criticism of the EU countries in the debate. I welcome that criticism because it is likely to impact on our exiting the EU in next year's referendum.

In this debate, we enter the realms of a definition. We have been here before with definitions, and here we have the definition of the word "migrant". That is why this motion is highly commendable.

It is an expression of heartfelt human sympathy that, I believe, the House can rise to and unanimously support. How can we feel anything but the deepest humanitarian sympathy for genuine refugees caught up in an appalling war situation, in what, for them, is a no-choice situation? It is a situation characterised by the most appalling levels of violence and brutality that has been visited on ordinary, innocent civilians.

Who would not try to do their best for their families, especially for their children, when deprived of a future by warring savages, who are destroying Syria's past, present and future? It is said that the grass is always greener for those who see, for example, a minimum wage in our country that is nine times the amount they could expect to earn in their own country, and who would fault them? On the other hand, in this debate the question has to be who can afford them?

We must follow the lead of Her Majesty's Government in taking 20,000 genuine refugees over the next four years. Of the 20,000 that the United Kingdom is taking, how many will be allocated to Northern Ireland? Where in Northern Ireland will the planned reception centres be located? Decisions on that will enable the proper level of forward planning. I see an absence of forward planning at this crucial moment, but that is so important in a refugee emergency situation. It is vital that all of those given refugee status are properly assessed so that they know where they stand, and that they are properly catered for and looked after. In that regard, I believe, as I said before, that many Arab countries, particularly rich countries like Saudi Arabia, should do far more to help refugees from Syria. I also believe that the United States — now that, at long last, it came forward yesterday and said that it will take refugees next year and the following year — should be explicit about the numbers that it will take.

My own party leader, Nigel Farage, has drawn attention to the particular plight of Christian refugees from Syria, who stand in the greatest danger from those ISIS fanatics. For Christians, there are no safe camps that they can enter. That is something that a country like ours, with our Christian heritage, should be especially sensitive to.

I remind the House that the mass migration of whole populations from North Africa and the Middle East is a long-term problem. It has been driven by water, by poverty and now by war. It is going to need a great deal more

thought and strategy than the simple but well-meaning humanitarian response that we all share and that the motion rightly calls for. In that regard, I invite Members to attend a talk given by UKIP's immigration spokesperson, Steve Woolfe, in the Skainos Centre on the Newtownards Road on 2 October, where those major issues will be addressed.

Mr Hazzard: I thank the Member for giving way. You talk about party colleagues. Recently, your South Down party colleague made some quite despicable comments about the Syrian refugee crisis. Will you take the opportunity today to distance yourself from those comments? Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr McNarry: Thank you. I have to be precise and tell the Member that I do not have a party colleague in South Down.

As I was saying, it has to be about public perceptions based on accurate facts and proper information. Regrettably, too often misinformation, rumour and gossip have led to action based on ignorance. We have seen it on our streets. We have seen it particularly in Belfast. In that regard, neither this House nor anyone who is active in politics can afford to avoid the issue of resentment. It is something that we, too, will have to deal with appropriately and properly. There is a problem with immigration: the criminals who visit us on the back of it; the benefit tourists; and so on. However, for genuine refugees, the motion has my support.

11.30 am

Mr McAleer: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I regret not being in the Chamber earlier to hear the maiden speech of Andrew Allen.

Mr Speaker: Will you pull the microphone a little bit closer, for the benefit of Hansard?

Mr McAleer: Sorry. I regret not being in for his maiden speech, but he is very welcome.

We will all have been taken by the plight of the Syrian refugees. In local communities, not just in my district but throughout the North and throughout the country, we have seen a huge outpouring of grief from ordinary people who want to do something to help resolve the situation.

I spoke recently to my colleague Martina Anderson MEP. She made the point that, in the small strip of the Mediterranean between Italy and Libya, 30,000 people have drowned in the past 10 years. She said that it is like a floating graveyard. It took the images of the two young children, Galib Kurdi and Alan Kurdi, aged five and three, who were fleeing Syria and had their young bodies wash up on a beach, to make people realise the extent of the plight that those people face. I am the parent of a three-year-old child and that image struck me very sorely. I think that most people connected that image to their own family.

Martina has just come back from visiting a refugee camp in Jordan where there are 80,000 people crammed in together with very little water, no food and very little hope. Unfortunately, most of them have only three choices: they can either die in the conflict; they can drown in a dinghy in the Mediterranean; or they can starve in a refugee camp. This is the huge humanitarian crisis of our time, and I think

that it is important that we take a collaborative approach to dealing with it. Yesterday, I raised the issue with acting First Minister Foster during OFMDFM Question Time, and I was glad to note that a collaborative approach is being planned between the Executive and the British Home Office.

I take the opportunity to commend the huge amount of support and solidarity that I have witnessed, not just in my political role but in my community role, coming from ordinary people throughout the country who want to do something. I pay tribute to Ramona House in Omagh, which has become a focal point for aid for refugees. That work is being headed up by a team of volunteers. Martina Anderson is there today, meeting those volunteers to commend their good work and to brief them on the situation. Although I have cited Omagh, I am conscious that that is happening throughout the country. People in the community are taking the initiative, and that is resulting in a huge level of volunteer effort. I commend them today, because that gives me heart.

It is important to look at all options: at EU level; here in the Executive and the Assembly; and at a community level. All options must be explored in order to resolve this major humanitarian crisis of our time.

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

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom mo leithscéal a ghabháil leat; bhí mé ag cruinniú ar maidin. I apologise, as I was at a meeting of the economy Committee earlier and missed the start of the debate.

I want to make three quick points to echo some of the sentiments that we have heard today and to give Members some background on the work that has gone on to date to help refugees through the crisis and on the work that some of the great volunteer groups in Belfast have been involved in.

It was in December last year that Rev Bill Shaw approached the Executive and asked that we take in some Syrian refugees under the vulnerable persons relocation scheme. At that time, shamefully, the London Government had taken in only a few hundred people, despite the requests from the United Nations refugee agency that they take in many tens of thousands. Through working with Rev Bill Shaw, I have got to meet some exemplary organisations in the city of Belfast. I have heard them speaking in recent days, asking us to respond with big hearts and to give a generous welcome to the refugees who will be coming in.

I want to mention three of those, because the work that they do reflects back to the points that Mr Agnew made about the need for a coherent strategy and consistent help for those who work with asylum seekers and refugees. Mornington is an organisation on the Ormeau Road that runs a food bank and many other community outreach activities. In recent months, it has been pressing society to respond to this global crisis, as it does day and daily. Last week, for example, on Friday morning when it held its food bank, it could not close because people continued to come. Many of those they help are asylum seekers.

I also want to commend our young friend Jasper in Tearfund and the work that he did and it did in visiting refugee camps in the Lebanon during the summer,

raising £50,000 from young people here involved in the faith community and bringing that money to help the refugee crisis. Finally, the third group is the Presbyterian international meeting point on the Lisburn Road. Again, it shows us how we should respond to our brothers and sisters who are in peril and in refugee camps. Every day, they welcome in and educate them — I heard Mr Agnew talk about English classes. They build and try to create a welcoming environment for asylum seekers, to try to get them permanent status, and, when they get that, to try to make sure that they play a full part in our society.

I therefore commend the request and the five points put forward by the Law Society. We should and must unite around those. It is essential that we echo and mirror the response that we have seen from the community. All sides, all parties — even the one party that is not here today — all communities and all sectors of our community want to see refugees being given a welcome that is true to our values as a welcoming people and that reflects the welcome that we have received, whether Scots-Irish, Ulster-Scots or Irish people, when we have travelled the globe.

Ba mhaith liom focal a rá faoinár gcomradaithe in Albain, a bhí chun tosaigh san obair seo. I will finish by mentioning our friends in the Scottish Parliament and Scottish Government, who have always been a bit ahead of the curve on this. They first put it up to Mr Cameron when he refused to respond to the United Nations Refugee Agency's appeal for help. They managed to get together a scheme to bring in hundreds under the vulnerable persons relocation scheme, via London, late last year and early this year. They have set up a task force, led by Minister Humza Yousaf, to look at the practical ways in which they will welcome, integrate and look after the refugees when they arrive. We can learn from that, and, if we are united in this, which I think that we are — despite maybe some discordant voices — as a society and community, let us get this done immediately. Let us put fire under the feet of Mr Cameron. We want to get people released from the terrible conditions and danger that they are in, and welcomed into this society so that they can start to rebuild their lives.

Mr Dickson: I start by thanking every Member who has contributed to the debate. I particularly thank Andy Allen and congratulate him on his maiden speech. He and others have made some challenging points in regard to all of this.

I do not intend to repeat the words that have been well said by individuals around the Chamber. Rather, after thanking all those who have spoken, I would like, first of all, to reference my colleague Anna Lo and to congratulate her for proposing the motion, which, as many will have heard in the speeches here today, is about one of the greatest humanitarian crises that Europe and the world has seen in the post-war era. Therefore, it is vital that she has brought that discussion to the House.

As we have heard, the world is experiencing a humanitarian disaster on a massive scale. For many, that was not truly brought home — others have made reference to this — until we saw the distressing and deeply sad images of that three-year-old child washed up on a beach in Turkey. Born in 2012, Alan Kurdi never knew peace. By the time of his birth, the Syrian war had already begun. His parents sought to change that and to secure a stable life, free from the fear of oppression and death. They sought to reach other members of their family in a prosperous, free and stable Canada. Tragically, as we all know, Alan and

his brother and mother did not make it to Canada. Their story, as we know, is not unique. Since the beginning of the year, thousands have died making similar attempts to reach safety and freedom on the peripheries of Europe. The photographs, however, have focused minds on the injustice and suffering being felt, and they reinforce the fact that, behind the statistics, there are thousands upon thousands of individual human stories. It is incumbent on us, as citizens of the world, to respond to such disasters in a compassionate but also meaningful way. I believe that those words have been stated by every Member in their contributions today.

In the past few weeks, people right across Northern Ireland — I pay tribute to people in east Antrim — have demonstrated such compassion by collecting items and funds for people in Calais and further afield in the Balkans and Italy. However, local voluntary action is not enough. The numbers are so large and the challenges so enormous that it takes —

Mr McKinney: I thank the Member for giving way. I apologise that I was not in for the earlier contributions to the debate. Does the Member accept that Ireland, North and South, knows intimately the pain of emigration? At its height, Ireland's population was close to 9 million. We have significantly less than that now, so we have space.

Mr Dickson: I agree with the Member. It is important — indeed, it is vital — that we have a coordinated intergovernmental approach to dealing with these issues. It is for that reason that, yesterday, I wrote to the Home Secretary, urging the UK Government to rapidly reconsider their position of accepting only 20,000 refugees over the course of the next five years. That, quite simply, is a paltry figure, especially at a time when Germany's Interior Ministry says that it expects to receive more than 800,000 asylum applications by the end of this year.

Furthermore, to ensure that resettlement is as trauma-free as possible, we need rapid Government action to make effective social and financial provision for refugees who will come to the United Kingdom. Of course we need a solution to the problems, the fighting, the wars and the terror gangs that rule Syria at this point in time. I firmly believe that those who are currently refugees, given a stable country, will wish to return there as soon as possible. It is important that we have a strategy that includes refugee integration, assisting people in their new lives if this is where they choose to be and our Government permit them entry, and, to ensure that they do not become isolated, English language classes for those who do not speak English. OFMDFM and the Home Office must act now to prepare such a plan and ensure that the best possible welcome is extended to refugees when they arrive.

Ultimately, this is not only a United Kingdom, German, Greek or European problem; this is a world crisis. Gulf states must certainly step up their support to their neighbours in the region. The fabulously wealthy nations of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the UAE and Qatar have merely stood by while Europe, Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan have shouldered much of the crisis. Some of those states themselves suffer and struggle to feed and support their own citizens. The small state of Lebanon has taken in an estimated 1.1 million refugees. We must provide serious support, both nationally and at EU level, to those states and ultimately seek a long-term, lasting solution to end the

evil that we see in Syria and Iraq in the form of Assad and the group that calls itself Islamic State.

Compassion and action is what is needed to end this crisis. The United Kingdom Government must fulfil their international, legal and moral obligations and accept their fair share of refugees. We must show solidarity with our European neighbours, but, most of all, with the people escaping conflict from wretched regimes that seek to destroy the human spirit and denigrate utterly the value of human life.

It is for those reasons that I know that the House will support the motion.

11.45 am

“No one chooses to be a refugee”

Those are words that were said in the Chamber today, but those who are refugees should be made welcome in the United Kingdom, and in this corner of the United Kingdom.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly expresses its despair at the ongoing international humanitarian crisis in Syria; notes the tragic deaths of refugees fleeing to Europe seeking sanctuary and the terrible conditions endured by those refugees in transport to Europe and in refugee camps upon arrival; believes that EU nations have a moral obligation to assist people seeking refuge from war and persecution; further notes the Prime Minister’s eventual decision to accept 20,000 refugees; further believes that the UK Government and some other EU Governments have not acted in line with their humanitarian obligations; and calls on the Executive to ensure provisions are in place for Northern Ireland to welcome refugees from Syria.

Health: Impact of Ministerial Vacancy

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): 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 in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses grave concern that there is no Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in place given the urgent need to implement speedily Transforming Your Care, to address the important issues of waiting times, workforce planning and the health sector pay review and to provide the essential leadership and policy direction that our health service requires in the current difficult and challenging environment.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to move the motion. However, it is unacceptable that, as we speak, there is no Health Minister at his desk or, indeed, in the House to answer the difficult questions that are required in relation to leadership across the delivery of health and social care, to provide that leadership to the people who elected him to lead, and to the many, many people across many sections of society whose health decisions are literally in his hands. As we have this debate, that is little comfort to the 373,000 people who are waiting for their first outpatient appointment, many of whom are in severe pain.

Health has the biggest budget of all the Departments. It has a budget of £4.6 billion and employs almost 55,000 people. Simply put, it affects all of us in our daily lives. It is false to say that an empty chair or having a Minister for only half an hour is not impacting decisions. The fact that we have a captain who jumped ship — who has put the DUP’s electoral fortunes over his party and over lives of our citizens — is quite shameful.

On 11 May 2015, Simon Hamilton said that he would continue to drive the “momentum for change” across the health service. He said:

“There will be tough decisions ahead, but I will not shy away from doing what’s right.”

On 21 May 2015, the former Minister told us that health and social care could not stand still, that major reform was required and that a strategic leadership group was being established. Last week, the former, former Health Minister described what was happening as “ugly” and not tidy. How is that advancing reform or doing what is right?

It is well documented that our health service needs radical reform. There is duplication in commissioning, a lack of accountability and a lack of clarity in decision-making. The system, as it is configured, means that the Department can say that it wants to protect front-line services, but the same Department allows the trusts to cut the very services needed to provide front-line services. The system, as it is currently configured, moved the former, former Health Minister to say that commissioning was a “barrier to innovation”. That is severe criticism of the system that we have and shows the absolute need for reform.

Over the last 12 days with no Minister at his desk, I have met people from many sectors and individuals who have

depended on ministerial decisions. The all-Ireland network for children's heart services needs investment in the Clark Clinic. The majority of children are still going to England for surgery, and the business case is on his desk, so who is making that decision?

I visited William Street and Rectory Field —

Mr Swann: Will the Member give way?

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: I will indeed.

Mr Swann: The Member is the Chair of the Health Committee, and I have had representations, as has she, from parents who do not know whether the recommendations from the international working group, which would mean a considerable number of our children going to Dublin for heart surgery, have even been considered and, if so, what stage those considerations are at. There is great frustration among the parents of children who need surgery now, because they do not know where their children's care pathways will lie.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: I thank the Member for his intervention. He is absolutely right. Whilst there has been progress on agreeing the Dublin/Belfast model, progress is urgently required to establish the investment needed in the Clark Clinic and to look at the network in Dublin. Again, I stress the urgency of those decisions being taken, because, if we move to a second tier of children facing their operations in England, we will have taken a step backwards. Yes, absolute clarity and action are required on that.

I also visited William Street and Rectory Field care homes in Derry, where one elderly lady had been moved from another home. She was in tears as she asked me about her future.

Lifeline received 92,266 calls in 2013-14. There are huge changes proposed to the delivery of that model. They need clarity on and intervention in the future of that vital resource.

People in my community were on the streets on Friday night, protesting about a cut to the Divert project, which deals with substance misuse and young people. All of those issues need intervention and strategic decision-making.

On Wednesday of last week, I attended the Transforming Your Care policy forum, where a packed room of medical professionals called for leadership and reform of the system. Only last week, GPs referred to the system "heading for the rocks" and demanded 400 training places and reform of the system.

On Friday, I spent some time with a young woman who is in severe pain and faces at least two hip operations but does not know when they will happen. That young woman's life has been on hold since Christmas and whether she will be able to have children in the future is not clear. How is any of that showing strategic leadership or intervention?

Decisions are required on the 1% pay increase for our front-line staff.

The situation has become farcical, but for many patients and others who depend on the health service, it is not farcical; it is a calamity. A system that requires tough decisions now has an empty desk. We need a Minister for health, not a Minister for half an hour. Much has been said about welfare cuts in this debate on health, but is the

former Health Minister saying that we should take money from the most vulnerable and the disabled to pay for our health service? That is shameful.

I call on the DUP's former Health Minister to get back behind his desk to deliver for the people who elected him and for those who are crying out for intervention and decisions.

Mr McKinney: I welcome the opportunity to participate in the debate. I do so as health spokesperson for the SDLP. I do so more in sorrow than in anger, though with a healthy dose of both.

The debate is a very important one. It reflects last week's debate on the motion on waiting times for elective care, which the SDLP successfully amended to call for greater leadership, funding and strategic focus in the health Ministry. Last week, I reflected the genuine concerns of the SDLP, this Chamber and the public at large that, as we continue to witness the biggest crisis that the health service has ever faced, we have no Health Minister to respond. I think that it is important to remind the House of just exactly the scale of work for which the Minister has abdicated responsibility: wastage, which is running into tens of millions of pounds; 360,000 cancelled appointments every year; the elective-care crisis; the A&E crisis; waiting lists at doctors' surgeries; the shortage of doctors; pay increases for nurses and health staff; cancer drugs; and domiciliary care. All of them need strategic answers whether the DUP gets the answers that it claims it wants from others.

Last week, the DUP opted not to be here and not to address the widespread concern of the public and health professionals. Instead, the former Health Minister sought to spin his way out of the problem. Did he come to the House to explain? No, he did not. Did he issue a statement? No. He went to the press to release welcome but limited funding for some newly approved cancer drugs. Remember that his announcement was all about NICE-approved drugs and treatments, which should be routinely available for patients here. These are drugs that have been deemed clinically effective and cost-effective and are readily available in other parts of the UK. I agree that it is a welcome announcement, but does it address the fact that over 40 cancer drugs that are available in England and the rest of the UK are not available here? No, it does not. Does it address the list of issues that I have just articulated? No, it does not. Does it address that widespread concern? It certainly does not. If anything, it exacerbates it. The Minister is not in his seat again today.

All that public concern has not diminished over the last number of years. In fact, it has grown with DUP stewardship of the health service. These are genuine concerns that are compounded by the fact that A&E four- and 12-hour targets are continually breached as a matter of routine while, at the same time, the domiciliary care sector, which is meant to be picking up the slack in the community, particularly for older people, is buckling at the knees. That is unsustainable. These concerns have been rehearsed over and over in the public domain. We believe that it is completely unacceptable that, due to internal unionist wrangling, the Health Minister is not in his post as he continues to be embroiled in party politicking. The DUP calls this escalation over wider political concerns. At least, the grand old Duke of York actually marched his men up the hill. The DUP might pretend differently, but it does not

even know whether it is halfway up or halfway down, for Mr Hamilton was back at his seat, pretending to be resigned and pretending not to be, all within the same half hour. It is appalling. If what is described in the health service was not happening, it might even be funny, but it certainly is not funny because it is happening in the health service.

The motion comes from Sinn Féin, but it, too, has questions to answer. Just as the DUP needs to stop acting like rogue Ministers and honour their commitment to power-sharing and delivering for all the people of Northern Ireland, so, too, does Sinn Féin need to face up to some stark realities, which actually involve something very simple: telling the truth. Tell the truth and stop giving others excuses. Tell the truth about Robert McCartney. Tell the truth about the Northern Bank. Tell the truth about Joe Rafferty. Tell the truth about Paul Quinn and others. Do not tell us to go to the police as some kind of cover: just tell the truth. You have an electoral mandate that entitles you to places in Government. You do not have to keep lying. Tell the truth and set yourselves free —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): Order, please. The Member is now well off the subject.

Mr McKinney: — and, in so doing, all of us.

12.00 noon

Mr Cochrane-Watson: I welcome today's motion to address the fact that we have a hokey-cokey Minister of Health. As was said last week, I hope that the television cameras focus on the empty chair during the debate, because that is what the public will see: no interest, no heart, not caring for the people of Northern Ireland.

What is the debate about? It is about 373,000 people waiting for their first outpatient appointment, a diagnostic test or inpatient treatment in all our hospitals throughout Northern Ireland. That is equivalent to over 20% of the entire population — my and your constituents. It is worse now than at any time in recent history. People have been waiting in pain and under emotional distress for far too long. We are accepting that targets are set in the interest of quality and safety and are being totally ignored by the hokey-cokey Minister. Those people have been waiting for months, if not years, for a crucial appointment. When they turn on their television set tonight, as they did last week, what will they see? They will see the farcical scenes at Stormont.

The total number of people waiting for their first outpatient appointment is over 212,000, which is a 46% increase on the 145,000 waiting during the same period last year. Of all those waiting, 86,000, or 40%, have been doing so for more than 18 weeks, even though the target says that no one should wait more than 18 weeks.

I know that many of those who approach me through my constituency office are also in fear for their job prospects. Long-term sickness may mean long-term unemployment. People who go to a GP and are referred to the hospital or a specialist now face one of two choices. They can either wait the six, 12 or 18 months that it may take, which is now becoming the norm, or they can go private. That is happening under the watch of the absent hokey-cokey Minister.

Take our A&E attendances, for example. During 2014-15, only 73.8% of people attending the main emergency care departments were treated and discharged or admitted within four hours of their arrival. That happened under the

watch of the hokey-cokey Minister. We are dealing with matters of life or death, but the most frustrating thing is that we are simply being asked to accept it. Try telling that to the young woman who is facing breast cancer treatment or the grandfather watching his grandchildren and knowing that he may not be around to see them grow up. I am in no doubt that every MLA in the Chamber cares. Every MLA in the Chamber will be coming down with case files or absolutely desperate constituents who have been told that they have to wait. That is no longer acceptable.

A&E staff have been left completely emotionally drained and demoralised. They are not to blame for the current problems. In fact, I believe that they are our last remaining defence against total collapse. Those pressures, combined with the cavalier attitude of the former, former in-out hokey-cokey Minister — whatever you want to call him — are not going to get any better by the Minister's absence and by his uncaring, heartless attitude.

Mr McKinney: Will the Member give way?

Mr Cochrane-Watson: I will indeed.

Mr McKinney: Will the Member accept that the Chamber probably would probably interpret your remarks somewhat differently if your Minister had not actually resigned his seat and did the hokey, as opposed to the hokey-cokey, and abdicated complete responsibility for roads and important infrastructure?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Cochrane-Watson: I remind the Member that our Minister resigned completely. He stood down and was replaced — for several minutes, that Department had someone at the helm once again.

Our Minister did what he and the Ulster Unionists thought was the right thing for Northern Ireland, which was to not ignore murder on the streets of our capital city, Belfast.

Mr McKinney: Will the Member give way?

Mr Cochrane-Watson: I will indeed.

Mr McKinney: The Member has used the image of the hokey-cokey over and over again: is he telling the House now that the UUP did the "hokey" bit to give the DUP the right to do the "cokey"?

Mr Cochrane-Watson: No, I am reminding the Member that the Ulster Unionist Party did the honourable thing after much debate and consultation to make a stand against those who committed cold murder on the streets of the capital city of Northern Ireland.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): Order. I encourage the Member to return to the motion and forget the hokey-cokey.

Mr Cochrane-Watson: We will forget about the dance lessons. I know that there are more who are better skilled to teach the hokey-cokey in the Chamber than me. We simply need a Minister of Health who will be at his desk —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): The Member must bring his remarks to a close.

Mr Cochrane-Watson: — to make decisions.

Mr McCarthy: The motion gives me the opportunity to express my heartfelt anger and disgust at how the DUP has

turned its back on so many of our constituents who continue to languish on long waiting lists and suffer pain and agony. This is a real bread-and-butter issue, because many of our constituents depend on the health service to provide them with the necessary medicines, scans and operations etc to ensure they get well again and to relieve them of aches and pains at the earliest possible moment. I pay tribute to all our hospitals, surgeries, medical staff and ambulance staff etc for the fantastic work that they do despite the shortage of funding that continues to hamper their work. In this time of health crisis, it is shocking and shameful that the DUP chose to play games with the Assembly and to totally disregard the pain and suffering of so many patients across Northern Ireland. That includes the lack of mental health facilities for so many of our people.

Along with Simon Hamilton, I received an email from a constituent last week that was headed, "Appeal to your good nature". She asked for our help to get rid of the agony in her back, which had endured since the summer of 2012. She needs an operation and now an MRI scan, but she has been told to wait for yet another 38 weeks. I say, for God's sake, Mr Hamilton and the DUP, get back to your desks and help this lady and thousands like her. That is what you are being paid for. Have you no shame at all? Our community is crying out for help, and all you do is sulk in the corner. It is ridiculous and a total and absolute disgrace. What action have you taken as a result of the motion on waiting lists that was debated in the Chamber last week? Today's motion pleads with the Minister to get to grips with these excessive waiting times, workforce planning, the pay review and many other issues. What about Transforming Your Care and the Donaldson report and, indeed, the cry from everyone involved in the health service?

I am a member of the Health Committee, which was told that the Minister's officials had bid for £98 million from the June monitoring round to enable them to provide a better service. Not one pound of that money has been allocated as a result of the June monitoring round. How can Mr Hamilton look people in the eye and say that he is working to provide them with a modern health service? It is simply not true, and the sooner Mr Hamilton and his party acknowledge the pain being suffered by our population and the expectations of the public, the sooner our health service can be improved.

Transforming Your Care is the journey that we are on, but, so far, not enough progress has been made and, certainly, funding has not followed the changes that need to be made. Only last week I chaired a conference dealing with Transforming Your Care, as indeed did the chair of the Health Committee. Speaker after speaker — pharmacists, Age NI, GPs and nurses — expressed the desire to get moving but said they were being hampered by the insufficient support coming from the top. That is you, Minister Hamilton.

The message to the DUP and the Minister is loud and clear: end the hokey-cokey nightmare being waged against the population. Act responsibly and give leadership to the Department, and let the people see that the Assembly can work for the benefit of everyone. I ask the Health Minister, as did his constituent who made the appeal to his good nature, to please, please help that lady and the hundreds on the waiting lists. There is no more room for excuses. Drop the boycott of your Department, and prove that you are worth the office of Health Minister. Our Committee is

going through the Mental Capacity Bill. It needs ministerial engagement: are you prepared to let that Bill slip through the net?

I should also comment on those who tabled the motion and ask them to reflect on their contribution to the current problem in the health service. The financial difficulties in the health service predate the current impasse on welfare reform and the wider budgetary crisis.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): Would the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Mr McCarthy: I appeal to the Minister to listen to what is said in the Assembly today and to get back to serving the constituents.

Mr Allister: Let me assure the House that the Health Minister and all his DUP colleagues will be back. The first fig leaf that comes along will be grasped to get them back into the House. The DUP is a party addicted to power, and the lure of office is irresistible. Of course, what we are witnessing is but a stunt: a stunt to buy time and a stunt to save face. When the IRA brought murder back to our streets, a response was necessary because Mrs Foster told us that Sinn Féin were inextricably linked to the IRA and therefore the DUP had to respond. They had been outmanoeuvred —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): Order, please. I simply express caution that the Member really should stick to the motion before the House.

Mr Allister: That is a matter for your judgement, but I think I am right on message in that I am explaining why the DUP Minister is not today in post.

A response was required. The Ulster Unionist Party, having taken the right and honourable step of departing from government with those so linked, had outmanoeuvred the DUP. Therefore, they had to think up some other stratagem to create the appearance that it was not business as usual and that they were really taking things on and taking on Sinn Féin on the issue. Of course, the real issue was the presence of Sinn Féin in government. By deploying the stunt they deployed, they guaranteed and secured Sinn Féin in government, as opposed to the logical step that had been taken by another of tipping Sinn Féin out of government by resigning. That would have been the consequence of the First Minister resigning, but he did not resign, because he did not want to tip Sinn Féin out of government and he was scared of an election. The DUP has been running away from an election ever since. That is why they came up with this stunt of pretending that it is not business as usual and that they are really taking the battle to Sinn Féin, when they have run away from the battle in respect of the core issue. It is, as I say, nothing short of a stunt.

Mr Swann: Has he any rationale for how the DUP was able to come here yesterday to move a motion on the agriculture crisis but not on the health crisis? Is there maybe a level of crisis in the DUP that they cannot work out?

Mr Allister: It was another face-saving —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): Order, please. Apart from telling the Member that he has an extra minute, I really need to encourage all Members, please, to stick to the motion before us.

Mr Allister: I will answer very briefly: that was another face-saving exercise on the part of that party.

Today we are in the situation where we do not have a Minister.

Whether he is being paid or not, I do not know. Whether coming back every seven days keeps his pension rights intact and whether the special advisers are reappointed every seven days to keep their continuity of service in place, I do not know. I think that the public are entitled to know those things, but, of course, they are concealed from the House. I am absolutely sure, however, that the DUP will be back, because it does not have the bottle to take on the issue that is staring it in the face and prefers to sweep murder under the carpet.

12.15 pm

How many times does this system have to crash before people realise that it is unworkable and unfixable and before they face up to the reality that sticking plasters cannot go on being applied to a system that is incapable of being repaired? It is time that we addressed the issue of getting proper democratic structures in the House, based on a voluntary coalition and a proper opposition, rather than the constant failure of what we have.

As I say, when the first fig leaf comes along, the Minister will be back, because that is the consequence of the DUP being unable to face the reality that it should be facing; namely, that the inextricable link is there and that the consequences need to be faced. Instead, we have this pitiful stunt, as a decoy, to divert attention away from the fact that it is not facing up to the issue and will not face up to the issue.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Baineann an díospóireacht seo le heaspa Aire Sláinte, agus tá go leor imní faoi sin. Today, we are debating the absence of a Health Minister, and there are huge concerns around the issue.

Our health service is in real crisis. Day and daily, we hear about problems relating to TYC, waiting times, emergency departments, workforce planning, the review of health-sector pay and other areas. At a time when those and, indeed, many other elements of the health service are impacting negatively on our population, the Minister prefers to ignore the pain and anguish of people in our community who suffer daily and who sit at home hoping and praying that the appointment that they so badly need will come their way. What does the Minister think? He thinks that it is a good idea to adopt a form of in-and-out political chicanery, which serves only his party political interests and does nothing to alleviate the illness and stresses that are affecting our ailing public.

Only last week, Members reported on the shameful record of our Health Department and how it is failing miserably to deal with waiting times. Agus is fiú dúinn cuimhniú air siúd inniu. It is worth reminding ourselves of the figures today. The Minister's target for 2015-16 was that at least 60% of patients would have a first appointment within nine weeks and that no patient would wait longer than 18 weeks, yet, at the end of June this year, we saw that neither the nine-week target nor the 18-week target was achieved. Le fírinne, bhí 45% de dhaoine ag fanacht 18 seachtain. In fact, 40.5% of people were still waiting at the 18-week point. At a time that patients are waiting in

pain and trauma, we have no Health Minister. Níl Aire Sláinte againn. Added to that is the impact of delays in receiving treatment for diseases and medical conditions. It is well known that early diagnosis is key when it comes to all forms of cancer and other illnesses, so any delay in seeing a specialist could have devastating effects for some people. It is unacceptable that avoidable premature deaths could be happening as a result of the delays in the health system.

Níl mé á rá go bhfuil sé ar chumas an Aire gach rud a athrú. I am not saying that the Minister can change everything, and I know that health is an extremely challenging environment, but it must be tackled. He must accept that, as Minister, he is the one in ultimate control. All the major decisions are his, and it neither helps nor serves anyone when he decides to resign his post when there are so many stresses in the system.

Mr Eastwood: I thank the Member very much for giving way. Does she remember, like I do, that, in previous times when we had no Minister, the practice of the Civil Service here was to basically follow the lead of the English Departments? Does she agree with me that it would be a good idea for the Civil Service, in the week or so that they are free from DUP control, to bring in the pay increase that NHS workers in this part of the world have been denied for far too long?

Ms McCorley: I thank the Member for his comments. I agree that it would be a very good thing if someone could take the decisions that are necessary on the pay review and, indeed, on all the other major health issues that are keeping people in distress. That should happen as soon as possible.

In 2011, TYC was introduced as the new way forward for the delivery of health services. The shift left was broadly welcomed, with agreement that a move towards more community provision and less dependence on hospitalisation was a good thing. Successive Health Ministers received support from all parties for that policy shift. Four years on, there is little confidence in or evidence of what has been achieved; only a fraction of the promised £83 million has been transferred to TYC initiatives.

To drive the agreed policy forward, we need a cast-iron assurance that the development of service models and workforce planning will reflect the requirement to be joined at the hip with the implementation of TYC. What we do not need is an absent Minister. An rud nach bhfuil de dhíth orainn is é Aire atá ar strae. We need a working Minister, who will deal with the health service problems such as residential homes, domiciliary care, the staff pay review, the shortage of GPs and nursing staff, cancer drugs and many more.

Many of the Members who spoke referred to a lot of those issues, and I will mention some of the specific things that people referred to. Fearghal McKinney mentioned the need for a Minister to take the big strategic decisions that I mentioned. That was before he went on a rant against Sinn Féin, calling us liars. I resent that and think that he should take back those remarks. Adrian Cochrane-Watson talked about a hokey-cokey Minister. Kieran McCarthy paid tribute to hospital and ambulance staff for their commitment at a time when the DUP is playing games. Jim Allister called what the DUP is doing a "stunt" to buy time and save face.

I think that all Members are in agreement that the Minister should come back to work. Well, maybe not all, but most Members. With that in mind, glaoim ar an Aire an ceannaireacht a sholáthar atá de dhíth le haghaidh a thabhairt ar na fadhbanna seo agus le gabháil ar ais ar obair gan mhoill. I call on the Minister to provide the leadership that is required to address these issues and get back to work immediately.

Question put.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 48; Noes 31.

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Allen, Mr Attwood, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Byrne, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Cochrane-Watson, Mr Dickson, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Ms Fearon, Mr Gardiner, Ms Hanna, Mr Hazzard, Mr Hussey, Mr G Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr McCallister, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Ms McCorley, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr McKinney, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr Murphy, Mr Nesbitt, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr Ó Muilleoir, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mrs Overend, Mr Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan, Mr Somerville, Mr Swann.

Tellers for the Ayes: Ms McCorley and Ms Maeve McLaughlin.

NOES

Mr Anderson, Ms P Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mrs Cameron, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Mr McCausland, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Mr Middleton, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr G Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr McQuillan and Mr G Robinson.

The following Member voted in both Lobbies and is therefore not counted in the result: Mr Allister

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly expresses grave concern that there is no Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in place given the urgent need to implement speedily Transforming Your Care, to address the important issues of waiting times, workforce planning and the health sector pay review and to provide the essential leadership and policy direction that our health service requires in the current difficult and challenging environment.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): 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.

The sitting was suspended at 12.37 pm.

On resuming (Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Newton] in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Environment

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before we commence, I inform the House that questions 1, 4 and 5 have been withdrawn.

GM Crops

2. **Mr Byrne** asked the Minister of the Environment whether he plans to prohibit the local growing of genetically modified crops. (AQO 8688/11-16)

Mr Durkan (The Minister of the Environment): The European Commission has put in place transitional arrangements to allow member states to opt out of growing approved GM crops. To take advantage of those arrangements, member states must let the Commission know by Friday 2 October. Responsibility for matters relating to the deliberate release of GM material into the environment, including GM crops, rests with me. Accordingly, the Member may be aware that, last night, I announced that I am prohibiting the cultivation of GM crops here.

As I remain unconvinced of their advantages, I considered it prudent to prohibit their cultivation for the foreseeable future. In addition, the pattern of land use here and the relatively small size of many agricultural holdings would create potential difficulties if we were to seek to keep GM and non-GM crops separate. I consider that the costs of doing so could be significant and, in many cases, totally impractical. Furthermore, we are rightly proud of our natural environment and rich biodiversity. We are perceived internationally to have a clean, green image. I am concerned that the growing of GM crops, which is acknowledged to be controversial, could damage that image.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does the Minister accept that there is some concern that there may be some foodstuffs being imported into Northern Ireland that have been genetically modified in their country of origin and that that may happen to animal feedstuffs? Secondly, can the Minister state whether he has had any discussions with his counterparts in the Republic, given that we have a relatively small island and GM is an issue for all in the farming community?

Mr Durkan: I thank Mr Byrne for those supplementaries. I certainly do accept that the agriculture industry as we know it would not be viable without the use of imported GM animal feed. However, I am certainly satisfied that the approved varieties of genetically modified feed pose no risk to either the environment or human health.

As regards conversations or discussions with my counterpart in the Republic, Minister Alan Kelly, there has been ongoing dialogue on this issue at official level over the past month. While no announcement has been made yet by those in Dublin, I anticipate that there will be one soon and that they will make the right choice too. The

Member quite rightly identifies potential issues, should the Republic of Ireland take a different approach to us on this. However, given the similarities between the size of agricultural holdings in the Republic and, indeed, the fact that they, like us, depend so heavily on that clean, green image when it comes to exporting our produce across the world, which we do so well, I am fairly confident that they will agree with me on this issue.

Mrs Overend: There are many questions that could be asked of the Minister on GM crops and, indeed, the importation of meat that has come from animals fed by GM crops. Does the Minister agree that the guiding principles should be to follow science in this perspective? Can the Minister confirm that that was the case with his decision yesterday?

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for that supplementary question. With all these GM questions, I feel like I am on 'GMU'. There is a lot of science out there on this issue. Scientists are like lawyers. Different scientists have different opinions and draw different conclusions on different subjects. There is science out there, and over the past 24 hours I have received criticism and correspondence on my stance from scientists who say that GM crops are great and pose no risk at all. However, there are also scientists out there who take a contrary view.

My guiding principle, when it comes to making decisions, is a precautionary one. I am charged with safeguarding our environment here in the North, and until there is complete and robust scientific evidence that it is safe, I am unable to approve the cultivation of GM crops here. However, we are talking about the current EU Commission's GM-approved list. I have no doubt that, in the future, there will be additions to the list, and while I have made my decision and it is a strong statement of intent, it is not carved in stone. As and when new crops are added to the list, I or a future Minister will have the ability to revisit that position.

Mr Allister: This is patently a controversial and cross-cutting issue, given the Department of Agriculture's interest. Did the Minister take the decision to the Executive, and has he got Executive approval? Has he not, in fact, created an untenable conundrum whereby he acquiesces in the feeding of our livestock with imported GM product but rejects the cultivation of GM-approved products which have passed through the entire sifting process of the EU?

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for that question. As it stands, I can make decisions on what is before me. I was required to make a decision on genetically modified crops by 3 October, and I have done so. I understand the Member's confusion as regards other genetically modified foods, and it is not dissimilar to the point that Joe Byrne raised with regard to GM feedstocks.

Responsibility for the deliberate release of GM material into the environment, including GM crops, rests with me as Minister of the Environment. However, as a courtesy, I wrote to Michelle O'Neill, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, to notify her of my position and my decision.

Sellafield Nuclear Power Plant

3. **Mr Hazzard** asked the Minister of the Environment whether his Department has any involvement in monitoring accidents at, and environmental problems associated with, the Sellafield nuclear power plant. (AQO 8689/11-16)

Mr Durkan: Nuclear energy and nuclear installations are excepted matters under the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and, as such, are not within the remit of the Department of the Environment. Radioactive discharges from the Sellafield site are regulated by the Environment Agency and the Office for Nuclear Regulation. My Department has responsibility for monitoring the environment in Northern Ireland to assess the impact of radioactivity produced elsewhere, including nuclear facilities such as Sellafield.

The Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) has a comprehensive environmental monitoring programme to assess any such impact on the Northern Ireland coastline. The programme includes checks on the radiation levels of the coastline at approximately 50 locations around the North, as well as monitoring the levels of radioactivity in seawater, seaweed, shellfish and fish. The adequacy of the monitoring programme is reviewed regularly and, where appropriate, will take into account any changes in the discharge of radioactivity from Sellafield.

The results of the programme are published annually in a joint report entitled 'Radioactivity in Food and the Environment' produced by the four UK environment agencies, in conjunction with the Food Standards Agency. Results for last year, like those in previous years, indicate that the levels of contamination are negligible in terms of radiological impact on the population of the North.

On average, people in Northern Ireland receive 2,500 microsieverts of radiation a year from all natural and artificial sources. Of that, 50% is due to exposure to radon in the home, 12% is from medical exposure, and less than 0.1% is from nuclear discharges. It should be noted that the lowest yearly dose likely linked to increased cancer risk is 100,000 microsieverts.

In addition to that comprehensive monitoring programme, the UK has a 24/7 nuclear radiation monitoring and emergency response network known as Radioactive Incident Monitoring Network (RIMNET).

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer thus far. In answer to a previous question, the Minister said that he had responsibility for "safeguarding our environment". In the light of that, in connection with the radioactive impact of the plant at Sellafield, in recent months we have had news of British munitions washing up on the south Down beaches in increasing numbers. A lot of them were dumped after the First and Second World Wars, including nerve gas and sarin gas. To what extent does his Department have a responsibility to safeguard the south Down environment and to look at the issue of possible radioactive military materials that were dumped now washing up on our beaches?

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for that supplementary question. Neither I nor my Department are experts when it comes to arms dumps. [Interruption.] The dumps to which the Member refers fall within Scottish waters and are therefore not the direct responsibility of my Department or the Northern Ireland Environment Agency. However, I am aware of the issues raised by the dumps in many areas across the North, in particular and in recent times the south Down coastline. Correspondence on the matter came to my Department before my time as Minister. When something comes ashore, responsibility rests with the local authority, so it would be up to the local council to remove

it. However, given the dangerous nature of the materials, there would be assistance from Britain to do so, and there would be an input from the Northern Ireland Environment Agency as well.

Mr Rogers: Will the Minister outline his assessment of how the Sellafield nuclear power plant impacts on the North's coastal environment communities? Over the years, Eddie McGrady campaigned against Sellafield. Given the major health concerns in south Down and the higher-than normal incidences of cancer in the area, what is his assessment?

Mr Durkan: Since the 1970s, my Department has had a very comprehensive programme in place to assess the impact of radioactive discharges into the Irish Sea on the coastline of Northern Ireland. The results of the programme are published annually in a report titled, as I outlined in an earlier answer, 'Radioactivity in Food and the Environment' which is issued jointly by all the environment agencies on these islands. The report focuses on key information that demonstrates that, in the North, food is safe and the public's exposure to ionising radiation from discharges is insignificant.

The health concerns raised by the Member have been raised before, and there have been long and loud campaigns from South Down elected representatives on behalf of its people over the years. People have concerns about potential impacts on their health, and rightly so, and, although the reports indicate that the effect of discharge from Sellafield and other nuclear plants is negligible, I fully appreciate that those concerns will persist. All that I can do is ensure, as Minister, that my Department and the agency will continue to do everything that they can to monitor the situation.

Regarding other health impacts, questions would probably be better directed to the Minister of Health. There will probably be a 10-minute window next Monday when the Member can do that.

Climate Change Conference

6. **Mr B McCrea** asked the Minister of the Environment whether he, or his departmental officials, will be attending the 2015 United Nations' climate change conference. (AQO 8692/11-16)

Mr Durkan: Although climate change is often and rightly seen as a global issue, we are all too aware of the impacts that it is having at a local level, such as severe weather events that threaten our health, homes, businesses and way of life. That is why I have publicly stated many times my view that we all can and, indeed, must do more to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions.

The main aim of the 2015 United Nations conference in Paris will be to achieve a new international agreement to create the vital framework that the world needs to limit the average global temperature increase to below 2°C. By successfully doing so, we will help to combat climate change effectively, boost the transition towards resilient, low-carbon societies and avoid the worst impacts of climate change.

The Paris conference is, without doubt, an opportunity for the world's leaders to deliver a global climate agreement that is unquestionably in our, and the entire global community's, best interests. We cannot underestimate how critical that is, and that was further underlined

last week when Pope Francis held an unprecedented audience with all the European Environment Ministers and Commissioners and appealed to them to show leadership and push for a long-term decarbonisation goal.

2.15 pm

I have written to the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change, Amber Rudd, indicating that I do intend to go to Paris, where I will make it clear that we should be striving to secure an ambitious international agreement this year and pushing for opportunities to increase the EU emissions reduction target further as a result.

Mr B McCrea: I say to the Minister that I fully support his decision to attend the UN meeting in Paris. My question for him in this environment is this: how many other MLAs in the Chamber do you think would support your concern about climate change? Given that we are in the middle of Environment Week — I know that Ms Lo and the Minister were in attendance last night — what importance do you think that has for Northern Ireland, in a local sense, in tackling climate change?

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for that question. In response to the first part of the question: there are not that many MLAs in the Chamber, but, of those present, I am confident that the vast majority will support me in my efforts to tackle climate change and to secure the international agreement that is required. With regards to the other question, Environment Week did kick off last night and has been extremely successful so far. I encourage all Members to drop into the Long Gallery to participate, or at least to observe events today. I congratulate the Environment Committee for its initiative and the Northern Ireland Environment Link (NIEL) for its work in making the week possible and coordinating events.

I would like to reiterate to the Member my commitment to working across government and with all sectors of our society, as well as all sections within the House, to agree on measures that can help to address both future and current climate change. My Department has already implemented a number of key actions to help reduce greenhouse gas emissions. It is not something that my Department can do alone. We need other Departments to sign up and buy in. There are ongoing cross-departmental working groups and meetings in that regard, and I believe that progress is being made. It may not be being made as quickly or dramatically as we would like, but it is being made. I think that some people in the Chamber and maybe some not in the Chamber at the moment — maybe not in the Chamber anymore — are beginning to accept the impact of climate change and the importance of doing something about it.

Mr Somerville: Can the Minister give his assessment of the emphasis that our new local councils have placed on reducing their emissions?

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for the question, his first to me. I know that he is just fresh out of local government, so hopefully he had some input into his former council's stance on reducing greenhouse gas emissions before coming here. I think that the new councils have an extremely important role to play and that, by and large, councils have embraced that when it comes to tackling climate change. I believe that the opportunities that they have to do so are huge, be it through their community

planning or even through their work on their own local development plans, because it will now become more of a factor when applications come in for planning permission. Factors such as environmental or wider impact around the emission of greenhouse gases and so forth will be taken into consideration when applications are being assessed.

To date, I think that councils have recognised that they have a role to play. They have signed up to play that role, but it is important that we as a Department and we as an Assembly support them in doing so.

Ms Lo: I am delighted that the Minister is going to the Paris conference on behalf of the Northern Ireland Assembly. Does he agree that the lack of a climate change Act for Northern Ireland will hinder our role or any actions in addressing climate change?

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for her question. Unfortunately, my wife does not share Ms Lo's delight that I could be going to Paris in December. Hopefully, a present on my return —

Ms Lo: She should go with you.

Mr Durkan: I do not think that Mr Allister would approve of that. *[Laughter.]* I believe that a climate change Bill and consequent Act is very important for Northern Ireland. I now have a mandate to pursue such a Bill in the Assembly following a vote taken last year on an amendment tabled by Mr Agnew to a motion on an illegal landfill. However, I have to be sure that, if I am going to bring a Bill forward, I will have the support of the whole Assembly in doing so. That is the only way that this can work, and that is why the work that I have been doing to date with other Departments and other sectors — not just the environmental NGOs but, very importantly, industry, those who might perceive that a climate change Act would inhibit or prohibit their growth — is extremely important. We have to bring people along. We also have to explore the opportunities that could be created in our local economy by a climate change Act, through new green energy initiatives and so forth.

In response to an earlier question, I touched on the clean, green image of the North and how that has helped our agrifood industry become so successful. The development of that clean, green image can only help us grow from strength to strength in that regard.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for his answers. I join the Minister in congratulating Northern Ireland Environment Link and the Chair and Deputy Chair of the Environment Committee for promoting Environment Week here. I congratulate the Minister for his participation in that.

Apropos what he said about climate change legislation, does the Minister think that there is any way of building consensus in the Northern Ireland Executive and, indeed, the Assembly in order that we can all go forward together in bringing about an agreed Act? It is essential that we work together and map out an approach that will be beneficial to the whole community.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for his question. I will repeat the point that I made to Ms Lo: collaboration is vital to reaching consensus, and consensus is vital to achieving success in this regard. I have constantly, I think, outlined the need for our own climate change legislation with challenging greenhouse gas emission reduction targets. I believe that that would create greater clarity and

the long-term certainty that business and industry need, even though some members of those sectors feel that climate change legislation would be detrimental to their growth. As I said, I have had some extremely challenging yet extremely productive meetings with representatives of those sectors. There is still a lot more work to do, but I believe that an initiative around prosperity agreements that I launched last year demonstrates clearly to industry and business the benefits of environmental compliance or of going beyond compliance in terms of how successful their business can be. I have established a prosperity panel, composed of local and international experts, to advise me how to turn issues such as climate change around from being a barrier to growth into economic and social opportunities. I am glad that that panel also has representatives of business and industry and, very importantly, the agrifood industry. Again, I cannot emphasise enough the importance of that industry to our economy here in the North.

Environmental Protection

7. **Mr Eastwood** asked the Minister of the Environment, in light of departmental restructuring, to outline his plans to ensure the protection of the environment. (AQO 8693/11-16)

Mr Durkan: Under departmental restructuring, most of my Department's environmental functions would be inherited by a proposed new Department, the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA). I believe that the proposals, as they stand, could create conflicts of priorities and responsibilities within the new DAERA. In short, the present arrangements for environmental governance will become even more out of line with what is regarded as good practice in Ireland, Britain and elsewhere in Europe. Most of these jurisdictions have some form of independent environmental protection agency.

In August 2011, my predecessor, Minister Attwood, published a discussion document on environmental governance in Northern Ireland. Most respondents expressed support for the creation of some form of agency or body within the public sector but operating separately from central government to undertake a range of environmental roles and responsibilities. However, it was recognised that, without sufficient support from other political parties, making such changes to our environmental governance arrangements could not be pursued at the time. With such large changes to our departmental structures being made in the very near future, I believe that now is the right time to revisit this debate.

I have reached the clear conclusion that our present governance models are in need of radical review and need to be replaced quickly. As a first step, I intend to open up a debate in the Assembly and Executive about an independent body so that this can be factored into restructuring plans that are under way. I will do everything that I can to deliver this quickly, but I also need other political parties to give their support and commitment to make this happen.

Mr Eastwood: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he agree with me that any independent body — any independent environmental protection agency — should

be on an all-Ireland basis if we want to protect the environment in the places that it is needed?

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for that supplementary. Ireland's environment knows no borders, therefore I believe that we should ensure that, at this time of great change, our environmental governance arrangements are well aligned with arrangements in the South. In that way, we would be well positioned to build on the collaborative work already carried out under the auspices of the NSMC. In my view, an independent, all-island environment protection agency is the best way forward to allow us to develop collaboration and pool resources. I recognise that officials, North and South, have not yet fully considered the implications of an all-island environmental protection agency, and so, as a first step, I am opening up the debate in the Assembly and in the Executive about an independent body in the North.

Car Parking: George Best Belfast City Airport

8. **Mr Maskey** asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the rationale behind the decision to close the Boal car parking service at George Best Belfast City Airport. (AQO 8694/11-16)

Mr Durkan: The Boal car parking service was an unauthorised car park use that was refused planning permission in December 2013. The refusal was subsequently appealed and comprehensively reviewed by the independent Planning Appeals Commission (PAC). The PAC dismissed the appeal in June 2015. It found that there had been a failure to demonstrate a quantitative need for the car park and that there were sufficient parking areas, including overflow parking areas, to meet the needs of the City Airport. The PAC, in coming to its view, concluded, taking account of all the evidence, that, whilst there might be a demand for cheaper parking, it did not equate to a need for additional parking at the airport. I understand that the car park was closed by the owner of the site following the PAC decision to dismiss the appeal and his receipt of a warning letter from Belfast City Council to cease use of the site.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for that response. Does the Minister not agree that there was no legislative requirement to block this planning application, on the basis that it was a question of demand as opposed to need? Would he not be prepared to work with the Boals, given that the demand speaks for itself? Would it not be worthwhile for the Minister to have some discussion with the Boals to see whether the facility can work?

2.30 pm

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for that question. I agree fully with the Member. When the decision was first reached, the first I heard about it, after its initial refusal in December 2013, was through the media. A refusal had been issued, at which stage nothing really could be done about it. Given how ridiculous it seemed to me at the time, I invited the Boals to appeal, and I was disappointed by the outcome of that appeal. I subsequently met Mr Pat Boal, the owner of the business, along with planners in the Department to discuss the best way forward for him. I fully accept that that gentleman and enterprise tried to do

everything by the book. On that occasion, the system did not work for them, and it is now not allowing them to work.

In the strategic planning policy statement (SPPS), which is still awaiting Executive approval — hopefully, I will be able to get it out soon — greater flexibilities will be afforded to councils, which are now the planning authorities, to make decisions within their areas on what would be deemed sufficient car parking. I very much hope that Belfast City Council, along with Mr Boal, or, potentially, someone else, will be able to work together and that they will know what the need is in their own city or council area.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That ends the period for listed questions. We now move on to topical questions. The Members listed for topical questions 1, 4 and 9 have withdrawn their names.

Northern Area Plan: Implementation

T2. **Mr Swann** asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on how the information his colleagues on the Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council received yesterday, when they were told that the Minister decided last week that the northern area plan would come into effect today, will affect his constituents. (AQT 2852/11-16)

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for that question. While the council may have been informed just last week that the publication of the area plan was imminent, the council and its predecessors have been integral in the formation and formulation of that plan. The publication of the plan is a positive news story for the Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council area, as it will provide certainty to developers, potential inward investors, providers of social housing and communities. It will also be of great benefit to the council as it proceeds with the drawing up of its new local development plan. I have yet to hear any negative rumblings from the council or from constituents in that area about the content of the plan. However, should there be any, I would be more than happy to meet the Member or whoever to discuss them.

Mr Swann: I thank the Minister for his answer. He referred to giving certainty to investors and the community. Will he assure the House that the area plan will ensure that lignite mining and fracking will not proceed in the area?

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for that question. As regards the issues that the Member raises, the area plan does not deal with such things. They are dealt with separately under planning policy. I remind the Member of my view on fracking and lignite mining, which, I hope, will be strengthened following the publication of the SPPS: no such activity should, could or will be carried out in the absence of sound and safe evidence that it is sustainable and is not detrimental to our environment or to human health. Each application will be judged on its own merits. To date, no application has been received anywhere in the North for fracking. If the Member has ongoing concerns about lignite mining, I would be happy to meet him to discuss those at a later date or even later this afternoon.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Oliver McMullan is not in his place. I call Ms Anna Lo.

Environmental Protection Agency

T5. **Ms Lo** asked the Minister of the Environment, while sympathising and sharing his rationale, how, realistically,

he will achieve consensus for his proposed North/South environmental protection agency, which he has referred to during various events relating to Environment Week. (AQT 2855/11-16)

Ms Lo: You called me pretty quickly, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I thank those Members who attended Environment Week yesterday and today. A number of Members spoke of that. Events are still being held in the Long Gallery and outside, and I encourage Members to participate in them.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for that question. Before I answer it, in defence of Mr McMullan, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I had received notification of his question having been withdrawn.

I believe that winning consensus for my proposal or vision will not necessarily be easy, but that certainly will not discourage me from the pursuit of what I believe to be the best outcome for the environment, North and South, of this island. In response to an earlier question, I outlined that the first debate that we have to have, and the first debate that I will need your support in, is on establishing the principle here in Northern Ireland of setting up an independent environmental protection agency. I believe that strong arguments can be made for that. I have yet to hear any compelling argument why we should not have an independent environmental protection agency. Every other jurisdiction in these islands has one, as do the vast majority of countries in Europe. It is seen as best practice there, and it works there. I think we should be looking at models in other countries to see what is good about them and how we could make things better here.

However, like I said, I want to do this quickly. Fortunately, because of the relative recentness of the consultation that was done in 2011 by my predecessor, I do not think we have to start from scratch when we open the debate. There is a template, and we have the views that were expressed at that time. I do not expect all of them, or many of them, to have changed too drastically. There will be views that maybe will have changed, and they may have changed in a way that is more welcoming of an independent environmental protection agency than they maybe were four years ago. This is not something that I want to force down people's throats —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask the Minister to conclude.

Mr Durkan: OK; thank you.

Ms Lo: I think that the Minister is right. Maybe the first step is to look at establishing an independent EPA in Northern Ireland, but, given the short time that we have from now until the end of the mandate and before the merging of the two Departments, what process is the Minister planning to carry out to establish the organisation?

Mr Durkan: I thank Ms Lo for that supplementary question. I believe that it is because of the restructuring, or the amalgamation, of Departments that this is exactly the right time to carry out this piece of work. There are huge concerns across the environmental NGO sector and beyond that it will not be so much an amalgamation of Departments as a takeover of one Department by another, and there is a huge fear that, as a result, the environmental standards or regulations will be compromised. I will do everything I can to allay those fears. I have said many

times in the Chamber that the mantra I have tried to bring to this Ministry is the desire to create a better environment and a stronger economy. I believe that that can be achieved and that it can be achieved with an independent environment agency.

However, we need to convince other parties and sectors of the merits of that. As I said before I got cut off, it is not something I want to ram down the throats of people or groups; it is something that we can make people understand, see the merits of and sign up to.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I thank the Minister for letting us know about Mr McMullan's withdrawal. I feel certain that Mr McMullan's party know the procedure for withdrawing questions.

Dungiven: Nitrogen Dioxide Levels

T6. **Mr Ó hOisín** asked the Minister of the Environment to assure him that all efforts will be made by every means possible to reduce the levels of nitrogen dioxide — NO₂ — in Dungiven, given that he will be aware of the unacceptable and dangerously high levels of NO₂ in the Dungiven area, particularly in the vicinity of the main street, which are some 10 times more than the recommended European level, with a solution to be found only with the construction of the Dungiven bypass. (AQT 2856/11-16)

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for that question. I am aware of the issue of traffic congestion in Dungiven; I encounter it regularly and agree entirely with him that one way of tackling the very high pollution levels in Dungiven will be the creation of a bypass. My party colleague John Dallat has been particularly vociferous in campaigning for such a bypass. However, successive Regional Development Ministers have failed to progress the issue.

Air quality is the responsibility of district councils, under the Environment (Northern Ireland) Order 2002, to periodically review and assess air quality within their areas. Where air quality is poor — and it is very poor in Dungiven — councils must declare an air quality management area, accompanied by an action plan containing measures to improve air quality.

Limavady Borough Council, as it was known then, identified levels of nitrogen dioxide arising from transport emissions to be above the objectives set out in the UK air quality strategy. The council therefore declared an air quality management area in 2008, which encompasses Main Street in Dungiven. Levels reported for Dungiven, as high as they seem to us, are comparable to those in other UK cities. However, you are comparing Dungiven with UK cities that might have the same population as Northern Ireland and have air quality problems related to transport. However, those levels are not the highest. Maybe London and Manchester have higher levels of nitrogen dioxide.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I think that Dungiven should get city status at some time in the future. Will the Minister also address the issue of other chemicals, such as sulphur, and particulates being emitted that may not be covered in the monitoring that is part of the air quality management agreement?

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for that supplementary question. As I have outlined, responsibility for air quality lies with councils. The NIEA works closely with councils

to identify problems in areas and, importantly, identify and seek solutions. I reiterate my commitment to the Member that my Department will work closely with the council on this issue as we all work together on the bypass issue.

Bonfires

T7. **Ms Hanna** asked the Minister of the Environment what is being done about summer bonfire sites, given that he will be aware of the issues with unregulated summer bonfires, the attachment that people have to them and the risk to property and community relations, particularly from those bonfires that are not part of any management programme. (AQT 2857/11-16)

Mr Durkan: I thank Ms Hanna for that question. Every summer, the media coverage of massive bonfires that are in very close proximity to people's homes, and the sectarian burning of effigies on bonfires, does nothing to promote good community relations, nor is it any advertisement for a place that is moving on from the past and is working towards a better shared future.

The legislative position relating to bonfires is extremely complicated and involves a number of public bodies. That makes enforcement less effective, unless there is a joined-up approach. Legally, the ultimate responsibility for bonfires rests with the landowner — often a public body — although those engaged in antisocial and associated activities also carry certain responsibilities.

District councils often take lead responsibility for the overall management of bonfires, and some very good work is being done on that. A number of other bodies have enforcement powers. Those include the PSNI, the Fire and Rescue Service, and the NIEA in my Department. It is likely that none of the major bonfires complies fully with the requirements of existing legislation.

2.45 pm

I think that it is well past the time for hand-wringing about it being too difficult and emotive an issue to tackle. I am prepared to take leadership to try to find workable solutions. I have been discussing the matter with my officials and asked them to consider future options that may have the potential to improve bonfire management and control. It is my intention to bring those options to the Environment Committee in the near future for discussion and consultation on the way forward and then take a paper to the Executive.

Finance and Personnel

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I inform the House that questions 1 and 2 have been withdrawn.

Corporation Tax: Update

3. **Mr Ross** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the devolution of corporation tax powers. (AQO 8702/11-16)

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): We have the Corporation Tax (Northern Ireland) Act 2015, which enables powers to transfer from April 2017. However, that, of course, is subject to the Executive demonstrating that their finances remain on a sustainable

footing for the long term. For my part, I want to see the devolution of those important powers. My officials are engaging with their Whitehall Government counterparts to ensure that appropriate arrangements are in place to realise that ambition.

Mr Ross: First, I commend the Minister for her work in her current and previous roles to help us get to the point at which the devolution of corporation tax powers is a reality. The Minister will know the expectation that there was in the business community and the frustration at the failure of some to implement the Stormont House Agreement, which potentially jeopardised the possibility of getting corporation tax powers. I agree with the Minister that hopefully the talks process that is ongoing at the moment will help us get to the point at which we can realise the potential of lowering the rate of corporation tax.

Can the Minister tell the House whether the cost to devolve corporation tax and of lowering it to the level that we had talked about previously has reduced as a working-out of that Budget announcement on 8 July?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. He will understand that the Azores principle applies to the Northern Ireland block grant. Although the position of corporation tax was in the high twenties, as the main rate, as I call it, in the UK continues to come down, the cost to the Northern Ireland block grant also falls. An initial assessment of the impact of the Budget announcement back on 8 July, whereby the corporation tax rate reduction will be 19% in 2017 and 18% in 2020, means that the cost to our block grant will probably be, on full implementation, in the region of £240 million in 2020-21. That presumes that we set a date and a rate for corporation tax in 2018. Of course, we have not had that agreement as yet, but we are hopeful that we are moving in the right direction.

Voluntary Exit Scheme: Update

4. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the voluntary exit scheme. (AQO 8703/11-16)

Mrs Foster: The Secretary of State has confirmed that funding, as set out in the Stormont House Agreement, will be released to enable public-sector voluntary exit schemes to come into operation as planned. As a result, I have authorised allocations from the transformation fund to allow the first exits under the scheme to progress in accordance with the recommendations of the public sector's restructuring steering group. Executive colleagues were advised of the position on 7 September.

Mr Easton: I thank the Minister for her answer. How many posts will be lost by the 2015-16 period and what are the expected pay bill savings?

Mrs Foster: For the Northern Ireland Civil Service, which has the largest of the public-sector voluntary exit schemes, around 867 staff will leave at the end of this month, with a further 763 scheduled to leave at the end of November.

In total, the first two tranches of exits, which I have just indicated will come to about 1,630 individuals, will deliver a pay bill saving of almost £48 million per annum. Departments have indicated a requirement to exit around 2,700 full-time equivalent posts this financial year, and further offers will be made in due course.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Can the Minister confirm that all Departments will be able to offer a first-class service to all citizens in the wake of the departures?

Mrs Foster: Of course, it is very important that we continue to provide essential public services in the way that our citizens are used to. Therefore, a range of measures have been put in place, including redeployment arrangements in some cases to move staff into essential posts left vacant by staff who leave via the exit scheme at the end of the month and, indeed, in November. Each Department is undertaking an assessment of business continuity and is prioritising its work accordingly, so I can confirm that that is the case.

Mr G Kelly: Ceist a ceathair, le do thoil. Question 4, please. Sorry, question 5. I do beg your pardon.

NAMA Allegations: Impact on Business

5. **Mr G Kelly** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for her assessment of the impact of the allegations in relation to the National Asset Management Agency on international confidence in our business environment. (AQO 8704/11-16)

Mrs Foster: Everybody is confused today.

Many factors impact on the business environment and, crucially, business confidence. Some of the most important include the quality and stability of our political institutions, a supportive business infrastructure and a high-quality education system. Those are areas that the Executive have focused on, not least in delivering their economic strategy, for example.

It is right that any allegations in relation to the sale of NAMA assets are investigated thoroughly by the appropriate authorities. However, I am not aware of any evidence that suggests that they are having a negative impact on international business confidence.

Mr G Kelly: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a cuid freagraí go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for her answers up to now. Does she agree, on the basis of what she said, with Transparency International, which compiles an annual list of corruption with Governments throughout the world to root out robustly embezzlement, fraud etc, so that we do not have our international investment attacked in the way in which, I believe, it is being at the moment?

Mrs Foster: I absolutely agree that we have to have an open and transparent system of government. Indeed, the index that we use in that respect is the global competitive index. That looks at a number of key factors and has a particular focus on the importance of the macroeconomic environment. In that respect, I am sure that everyone in the House will agree with me that the absence of paramilitary activity is a key element of that macroeconomic environment. Therefore, we have to deal with paramilitary activity, if it is proven to be present, and that is a key element for the Stormont House talks, as you are aware, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

Mr I McCrea: The Minister will be aware that the Finance Committee is carrying out an inquiry into the claims around NAMA. Has she any concerns that, if the inquiry gets too close to the wire in certain enquiries or information that it

receives, there may be the potential to cause difficulties for the NCA's investigations?

Mrs Foster: As I said in my original answer, it is important that there is a thorough investigation by the appropriate authorities. I understand that Committee members are to meet representatives of the National Crime Agency in, I think, the coming week. It will be important to listen to the advice that they give them in relation to their inquiry to make sure that there are no issues that prevent the NCA completing its inquiry in the most robust way possible.

NAMA: Project Eagle/PIMCO

6. **Ms Fearon** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what contact her Department has had with the National Asset Management Agency relating to the proposed sale of Project Eagle to PIMCO. (AQO 8705/11-16)

Mrs Foster: My Department routinely engaged with NAMA to discuss a range of issues prior to the sale of the Project Eagle portfolio. The purpose of the discussions was to make representations about any known NAMA actions or plans that might have been detrimental or, indeed, damaging to the recovery of the Northern Ireland economy, including the local property market at that time.

Ms Fearon: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her answer so far. Why has her Department's permanent secretary continued to hide from the Finance Committee's inquiry into the NAMA issue? Is it for party political reasons? I do not know whether anyone really believes the NCA excuse that the DUP is hiding behind.

Mrs Foster: I am sorry; I did not catch the last bit of the question. As regards my permanent secretary, Mr Sterling, hiding from the Committee, he has been to the Committee on two occasions now and has been very helpful to the Committee, as I understand it. I am not sure where the Member is coming from in relation to her question.

Mr Allister: On what basis did the Finance Minister back in January 2014 advise NAMA that the First Minister and the deputy First Minister were both fully engaged with the PIMCO bid? What did that mean? Given the role of her Department in the appointment of Frank Cushnahan to NAMA's Northern Ireland advisory committee, is it part of her anxiety to stay in office and act as a self-professed gatekeeper that she can protect the chronicles of NAMA from vigorous scrutiny?

Mrs Foster: I know that Jim is fond of fiction, and I am sure that he enjoys 'The Chronicles of Narnia' on an ongoing basis.

Mr Allister: It is the chronicles of NAMA that I am concerned about.

Mrs Foster: Yes, well, I think it would do him good to read 'The Chronicles of Narnia' as well, with its Christian basis. In any event, when Minister Wilson —

Mr Allister: It is still a work of fantasy.

Mrs Foster: I am waiting for the Member to finish. Minister Wilson simply responded to a request from the Irish Government to put forward nominations for NAMA's Northern Ireland advisory committee, and Mr Cushnahan was one of those nominees. There is no mystery surrounding that issue. I think that the Member was referring to my colleague Minister Hamilton in relation to

what he had to say: obviously, that is an issue that he will have to take up with Minister Hamilton. I cannot say what was in Minister Hamilton's mind at that time, because I am not Minister Hamilton.

Mr Cochrane-Watson: Can the Minister assure the House that all transactions and discussions involving the Department with regard to NAMA and the subsequent sale have been or will be shared with the House and the relevant Committee?

Mrs Foster: I understand that the documents that the Finance Committee has asked for are currently being gone through. Indeed, we are in discussion with the National Crime Agency to make sure that we do not hinder any investigation that it is involved in. That is where we are at present.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Colum Eastwood is not in his place.

DEL Resource Bids/Surrendered Funds

8. **Mr Hussey** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for her assessment of how the DEL resource bids compared to the surrendered funds in the June monitoring round. (AQO 8707/11-16)

Financial Position 2015-16: Update

10. **Mr Givan** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the Executive 2015-16 financial position. (AQO 8709/11-16)

Budget 2015-16: Pressures

13. **Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for a breakdown of the pressures across the 2015-16 budget. (AQO 8712/11-16)

Mrs Foster: With your permission, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 8, 10 and 13 together.

Failure to implement welfare reform has put at risk the Budget flexibilities negotiated in the Stormont House Agreement, which included the flexibility to repay both the £100 million reserve claim in 2014-15 and the £114 million reduction in our Budget for the non-implementation of welfare reform from capital budgets. In addition to these central pressures, Departments have registered resource departmental expenditure limit (DEL) pressures in the June monitoring round of £234.6 million, with only £10,000 of resource DEL reduced requirements declared by Departments.

Mr Hussey: What is the Minister's best assessment of the amount by which Northern Ireland is likely to exceed this year's resource allocations if it remains on the current trajectory?

Mrs Foster: I am hoping that we do not remain on the current trajectory and that we are able to deal with some of the financial issues from the Stormont House Agreement. We really need to have the flexibilities that were agreed in the initial Stormont House Agreement to allow us to proceed with our Budget. We do not want to breach our control totals at the end of the year because, of course, that would be looked on in a very bad light by the Treasury and might have impacts for us in following years.

We are working hard to deal with those issues, but, as you can see from my substantive answer, there is quite a challenge ahead in dealing with our resource DEL.

3.00 pm

Mr Givan: The Finance Minister would be in a much better position had the parties that reneged on the Stormont House Agreement, which they signed up to last year, implemented it. How much funding will be lost to Northern Ireland if the Stormont House Agreement is not now implemented?

Mrs Foster: In addition to the flexibilities that I referred to, we will lose £150 million over five years to pay for institutions to help us to deal with the past, which is a significant issue that needs to be dealt with, and dealt with quickly; and £500 million over 10 years for capital projects to support shared and integrated education. That is a significant amount, and we really could do with that for capital projects for shared education. I am aware of some of those, and they were very worthy.

Mr Gardiner: Minister, is it possible for the Executive to survive this financial year without an agreement on welfare reform?

Mrs Foster: My view has always been that we need to agree welfare reform to allow us to move forward with the Budget that we agreed at the end of the summer. As you know, that Budget was predicated on welfare reform going ahead. Therefore, we need to have that agreement and, indeed, all the other flexibilities in place so that we do not breach our control totals by the end of the year.

Yesterday, we heard from the deputy First Minister that we should, "Put up or shut up." That applies in many other cases as well.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Fearghal McKinney is not in his place.

NAMA Inquiry: DFP Cooperation

11. **Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether she has instructed her officials to cooperate fully with the Committee for Finance and Personnel's inquiry into the sale of National Asset Management Agency assets in Northern Ireland. (AQO 8710/11-16)

Mrs Foster: As with all business matters, I expect my officials to cooperate fully with the Committee as it continues with its inquiry into the sale of NAMA assets in Northern Ireland.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Does the Minister agree that, if the public or, indeed, Members have the impression that something is being withheld by any party or Department, that creates the impression in the public mind that there is some sort of cover-up? Does she agree with me that there is a necessity in these matters for total transparency?

Mrs Foster: I absolutely agree that there is a need for transparency. There is also a need to respect the ongoing investigation by the National Crime Agency (NCA). I imagine that Mr Bradley, being the Deputy Chairman of the Committee, would appreciate that it is important that that proceeds in the proper way as well. Therefore, there is a need to make sure that we do not directly, indirectly or

inadvertently do something that will cause difficulties for that investigation. That is my sole concern in terms of DFP.

Mr Beggs: I, too, believe that it is important that there is total transparency on this issue. Will the Minister assure the House that she will put into the public domain any involvement that her Department had with NAMA and, in particular, the fees that were part of the sale to Cerberus and Pimco? Will she put all that into the public domain? That does not prejudice anybody; it simply provides transparency for the public.

Mrs Foster: I am not sure whether the Member asking the question has expertise in the NCA inquiry. I hope that he is not suggesting that he has some expertise that the NCA does not have. We have been engaging with the National Crime Agency and are sharing the information — all of the information — that the Department has.

The Member mentioned fees, but I am not sure what he was talking about. Nothing I have seen talks about fees in any one way. We have shared all the information that we have held in order to seek confirmation that its release will not, in the NCA's determination, be prejudicial. Everybody in the House should be concerned that that is the case. They want to ensure that the NCA is able to do its job in the most efficient and effective way possible.

Departmental Spending Audit: Update

12. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the delivery of the independent audit of departmental spending as included in the Stormont House Agreement. (AQO 8711/11-16)

Mrs Foster: I have commissioned the Ulster University's economic policy centre to carry out an independent audit into the costs of division, and I anticipate that a draft report will be available later in this calendar year.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for her update. It is encouraging to hear of progress on that Stormont House Agreement commitment to audit the cost of division to Departments. Given that the Executive have to deal with significant pressure on our public finances, how urgent a priority does she consider the study in order to feed into a reconfiguration of our public-service delivery on a shared rather than on a separate basis?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. I do not think that I am breaching any confidences when I say this, but that issue was raised today at the Stormont House talks. The report is not due to be with us until November, but I will try to have it with me by October if possible so that we can figure it into what we are trying to do around our budgetary processes at the moment. Members are probably aware that the comprehensive spending review is not supposed to kick off until, I think, 25 November. That causes us some difficulties with our draft Budget process, and, therefore, we are trying to get a clearer picture of how we move forward. We have, of course, outlined forecasts for our budgetary process, but it is difficult to be definitive because we do not get the actual figures until the end of November, and that causes us some difficulty. I am trying to have all the other pieces in place before then.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Pat Ramsey is not in his place. Mr Gordon Dunne is not in his place. That ends the period for listed questions.

We will now move on to topical questions. The Members listed for questions 4, 6 and 7 have withdrawn their names.

Volkswagen: Diesel Emissions

T1. **Mr G Kelly** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether she has raised, or intends to raise, with Volkswagen, locally or in Great Britain, the growing scandal around emissions from its diesel engines and the effect that that will have on customers not only in America but here. (AQT 2861/11-16)

Mrs Foster: No, I have not raised that issue. With emissions, there are stricter criteria in the USA than here in Europe, and that is what has caused the difficulty in America. It seems that Volkswagen has taken an innovative approach to try to disguise the emissions from its cars. It will cause the company severe embarrassment, and it looks as if billions of pounds have been wiped off its share price literally overnight because of it. It is a very serious issue, and the question of emissions is probably more for the Environment Minister. It will cause great difficulties in production for Volkswagen.

Mr G Kelly: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. I thank the Minister for her answer and I agree that it is very serious. While there may be a difference in terms of the emissions, I understand that questions about it are already being raised in Europe. I am simply asking the Minister whether it could be raised on behalf of the Assembly and the people who are affected by it in the North. The smart chips that the cars are using could easily be used in other vehicles and by other manufacturers as well. This scandal could be much bigger than it already is. Can we make some effort to make an intervention to see what the story is?

Mrs Foster: I can certainly pass on the Member's concerns about the emissions problem to the Minister of the Environment and to the Executive more widely through correspondence. I think that, in America, they are taking steps to check other vehicles to see whether they have been involved in what will be known as the Volkswagen scandal. There is no doubt that it will cause great difficulties for the company.

Stormont Estate: Public Access

T2. **Mr Lynch** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for a progress report on the opening of the Stormont grounds to the public for leisure and recreation. (AQT 2862/11-16)

Mrs Foster: I agree with the previous Speaker. As you know, he took a very progressive view in relation to opening up Parliament Buildings to the public, and that has continued under the current incumbent. I really welcome that. A lot of people had not visited Parliament Buildings before then, and it is great to see the number of young people who now engage in visits to Parliament Buildings.

We are looking at what we can do with the grounds of Stormont, and the Member will be aware that a number of events have taken place there. Hopefully, we will be able to come forward with proposals and share those with the Committee.

Mr Lynch: I thank the Minister for her answer. She intimated that there are other events and will be aware that there is a run each Sunday morning through the grounds.

Will she make the car parking facilities in Parliament Buildings available to participants of that run?

Mrs Foster: I will have to check whether those car parks are under my control or that of Parliament Buildings and the Commission. That is certainly something that I can come back to the Member on.

Segregated Education System: Cost

T3. **Mr Dickson** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether she believes that spending hundreds of millions of pounds to sustain our segregated education system is tenable and a sensible use of funds in light of the cuts to university places. (AQT 2863/11-16)

Mrs Foster: I was going to say, Mr Dickson, that that is above my pay grade in terms of the different sectors in education. Of course, if we had a clean slate, we would not start from here; that much is very clear. We have a large number of different sectors, and we have to try to deal with what we have.

He may not agree with me on this point, but I have engaged on numerous occasions with the shared education sector. I have seen the work that has been going on between the controlled and maintained sectors in Fermanagh in particular and how that is bringing young people together. It is very impactful for those communities: it not only brings the young people together but brings the parents together in a way that has not happened before.

Mr Dickson: I thank the Minister for her answers so far. The use of public funds to continue segregation, whether in education or other services, distorts our public service obligations in Northern Ireland and how we spend our money. For us to become the first-class region that we all aspire to be, we need to remove those distortions from our budgeting.

Mrs Foster: I say again, we would not start from here on a wide range of issues, but we have to deal with where we are and, therefore, have to have transitional arrangements to do that. I look forward to the report from the University of Ulster — or Ulster University, to give it its proper title. I hope that we can have that sooner rather than later so that we can discuss its findings.

Desertcreat: Treasury Negotiations

T5. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether she has renewed or resumed negotiations with the Treasury in relation to the reinstatement of the moneys for the Desertcreat project outside Cookstown, given that, previously, an estimated £53 million was lost because the project had not been initiated and, on those occasions when the Minister of Justice and his officials appeared before the Justice Committee, they apportioned responsibility for that loss to the Department of Finance and Personnel. (AQT 2865/11-16)

Mrs Foster: I received some recent correspondence from the Minister of Justice in relation to the ongoing work. I am glad that that work is progressing. When we have a definitive figure for the site, we will certainly work with colleagues to make sure that we make as many representations to the Treasury as we can. As the Member knows, the money was ring-fenced at the time, and then it went back to the Treasury. It was never actually ours;

it was ring-fenced in the Treasury. We need to make the case again for Desertcreat, and I am happy to do so along with colleagues.

3.15 pm

Mr McGlone: I appreciate that and thank the Minister for her response. Will she give some indication — it will do later on in writing if she does not have it immediately — of the Executive's present level of financial commitment to the project?

Mrs Foster: I do not have those figures in front of me, so I am happy to write to the Member and give him those figures.

Welfare Reform: Westminster Implementation

T8. **Mr Agnew** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, given that she will be aware that the focus of today's Stormont House talks was to have been on welfare reform and financial issues, with one possible outcome mooted of the UK Government taking back power for welfare reform and legislating, to some extent, over our heads, whether, if that were to happen, there any legislative barriers to Northern Ireland still agreeing its own top-up fund. (AQT 2868/11-16)

Mrs Foster: Let us be clear: we hope that that does not happen and that the parties can finally, finally come to a decision on the implementation of the Stormont House Agreement and welfare reform. If that is not to be the case, the Secretary of State has indicated that she will legislate at Westminster, and it will then depend on what powers she takes to do that and what that will look like. A number of options are open to her, and we will have to wait and see. However, as I said, I hope that we can come to an agreement in Stormont House and that that will not happen.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Minister for her answer. Obviously, it is preferable that we legislate and use the powers that we have available in Northern Ireland. I point to Scotland, where welfare was not devolved, yet it still implemented a fund to negate the impacts of the bedroom tax. Barring failure to political agreement on that, is there any major difference between Westminster legislating and our putting forward the legislative difference? We can still introduce our own top-up fund to mitigate the impacts.

Mrs Foster: I hear what the Member says, but we are concerned that there may be a gap between the primary legislation and the secondary legislation, and, during that gap, what happens to welfare recipients? Will they have to deal with GB instead of having the mitigations that we agreed in the Stormont House Agreement? That is a matter of concern. I note what the Member said about the Scottish system, but you have to remember that Scotland was in the GB system for quite a while before it had the mitigations put in place. As I understand it, the mitigations were agreed only a couple of months ago, and I think that they were of the order of £100 million. Scotland has put that in place.

I am sure that the whole House agrees that it would not be a good situation if we were to have the GB model in place for I do not know how long without the mitigation measures. That would be a problem.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Colum Eastwood is not in his place.

Social Value Legislation

T10. **Ms Fearon** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether she will introduce proposals for the North to have its own social value legislation so that public competition is fairer and goes further to support social enterprises and SMEs. (AQT 2870/11-16)

Mrs Foster: As the Member is probably aware, the Central Procurement Directorate has engaged on that issue quite extensively. If the Member has a particular suggestion about how we should take it forward, I am happy to meet her to discuss the issues. Social clauses have been included in many public-sector procurements. From my experience in DETI, when we were involved in the building of Titanic Belfast, we had a number of social clauses, which worked to great effect. However, if the Member has other suggestions, I am quite happy to look at them.

Ms Fearon: I thank the Minister for her answer. Thanks for the offer, and I am sure that my party colleagues and I will be more than happy to take it up. Does the Minister agree that our focus should be on furthering our Programme for Government commitment to social values?

Mrs Foster: Yes. It is important to look at all our Programme for Government targets and make sure that we deliver on them. I am sure that everybody in the House would agree with that.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Time is now up. Before we move on, during questions to the Minister of the Environment, he made it known that he was aware that Mr Oliver McMullan had withdrawn his question. I indicated to the Minister that Mr McMullan should follow the correct procedure. We now understand that he did follow the correct procedure but that the top Table was not aware of him having done so. We apologise to him.

Members should now take their ease while we change the top Table.

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.]

Adjournment

Daisy Hill Hospital: Emergency Department

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes, and all other Members who wish to speak will have approximately six minutes.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá áthas orm an díospóireacht seo faoin roinn éigeandála in Ospidéal Chnoc na Nóiníní in Iúr Cinn Trá a mholadh. Thank you very much. I am pleased to propose this topic for debate on the emergency department at Daisy Hill Hospital in Newry. I thank those colleagues who have remained behind to participate in the debate. I am aware that Mr Kennedy and Mrs McKeivitt have been in touch to send apologies. They are unable to attend because of other matters.

As you probably know, Daisy Hill is one of the most outstanding hospitals on this island. I begin by placing on record my sincere thanks to, and appreciation of, all the dedicated staff in the hospital for their continuous care, compassion and professionalism as they care for the thousands of patients who pass through the hospital each way. On a personal note, I thank them for the emergency care that they gave recently to a close relative of mine who was admitted in the early hours of the morning and received excellent care — care, I have to say, that saved his life. Whilst I speak here today, I have to say that this is not something that is theoretical to me or to anyone here. It is a life-and-death topic to our constituents and our families in the area.

As I said, Daisy Hill is one of two acute hospitals in the Southern Trust area; the other, of course, being Craigavon Area Hospital. Whilst I raise this issue here today, it is not a question of pitching one hospital against another. Obviously, we need both hospitals, but we need to sustain proper investment on both sites. In recent years, there has been the perception that services have been withdrawn from Daisy Hill and transferred to Craigavon Area Hospital. The most recent decision was that to relocate the stroke unit from Daisy Hill to Craigavon. That incensed the local people, and it is a decision that I am on record as opposing in the House and elsewhere.

Today, I want to raise the issue of the pressures on the emergency department at Daisy Hill Hospital. Obviously, I am bitterly disappointed that there is no Minister here to respond to the speeches made by Members, including me. The members of the public who are viewing today's proceedings and those in our constituency who are interested in the sustainability of the emergency services at Daisy Hill will quite rightly take a very dim view of the Minister's non-attendance.

Obviously, our health service is under great strain. I do not have to leave my constituency to see that for myself. I referred to the decision to withdraw the stroke services from Newry. In south Armagh, we also have extremely poor ambulance response times to the extent that the local community had to get together to form a first responders group. I praise the local

people who had the foresight to do that under circumstances where, because of the terrain, the roads and the location, many people's lives would be in danger in an emergency situation. We also have the trust's proposal to permanently close the minor injuries unit in Armagh.

These may be viewed as different parts of our health service, but, taken together, the picture they paint is not a very good one. In fact, taking these issues together, it is no wonder that the emergency department in Daisy Hill has had increases in attendance of up to 10%. Numbers presenting to the service are continually increasing. People are waiting longer to be seen, and the trust is struggling to recruit the staff required to maintain the 24-hour-a-day, seven-days-a-week service. It is indeed that which has prompted me to take this matter to the House, because there are real and genuine concerns among the hospital staff and in the community at large that this could lead to reduced operating hours.

Earlier, I referred to my personal experience with a close relative. I spoke to ambulance paramedics and the staff in the emergency department that night, and they told me very clearly that, had the emergency department in Newry been closed and had the journey had to be made to Craigavon or elsewhere, that relative would not have survived. That is why I say that it is a very serious matter.

I believe that this restriction of hours, reduction of hours and closure at night cannot be allowed to happen. I do take the word of the trust that it is making every effort to deal with this situation. There is a problem with recruitment of staff at the middle-grade level needed to sustain the service, but I want to see the Minister and his Department at central level lending support and assistance to the trust to ensure that it can recruit the people it needs to keep the emergency department in our hospital open.

I have met the previous chief executive, Mrs McAlinden, and the current acting chief executive, Mrs Clarke, and the executive team. As I said, I appreciate the efforts they are making to address this problem, but, without the help of the Department and the Minister, there is only a certain amount they can do. The Southern Trust has already engaged in recruitment exercises on a continual basis on some 16 separate occasions, yet it has not managed to attract the staff that it needs. In such a situation, there needs to be ministerial involvement in order that attractive packages can be put together to ensure that we are able to attract the level of staff needed.

A detailed action plan has been drawn up by the trust and has been agreed. This will support the continued provision of emergency care overnight, but only on a short-term basis. We want a sustainable service that will continue into the future and which will not be threatened by staff shortages. As I said, we do welcome the efforts that are being made by the trust, but the service remains extremely vulnerable to any further loss of medical staff.

3.30 pm

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Sustaining the service in the medium to long term without the help, support and assistance of the Minister and his departmental team is a significant challenge for the trust. Hopefully, we will not have to continue too long with the "Here today, gone tomorrow" Ministers, who are leaving

the health service in the lurch. I want a Minister here in the House who is answerable and accountable to Members and the public at large. We do not have that at present, so I repeat my appeal to the Department and the Minister, when he returns, to lend the Southern Trust the help, support and assistance that it needs to ensure that it is able to attract the staff that it needs to keep the Daisy Hill emergency department open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. That is what Members want, and it is what the public and the patients want.

Sin a bhfuil le rá agam ar an ábhar seo ag an bhomaite. Mar a dúirt mé, tá mé buíoch go raibh deis agam an t-ábhar tábhachtach seo a ardú sa Teach anseo inniu. Gabhaim buíochas arís leis na Comhaltaí a bhéas ag glacadh páirte sa díospóireacht. Thank you very much, Mr Speaker, for the opportunity to raise this important matter. Once again, I thank the Members who will participate in the debate in due course.

Ms Fearon: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Member for tabling the topic for debate and welcome the opportunity to speak on such a serious and important issue for the people of my area. I have to say at the outset that it is shameful and a disgrace that there is no Health Minister here to respond on such a crucial and critical issue for the people of Newry and Armagh.

Daisy Hill emergency department has an excellent track record, treating over 35,000 patients annually, including over 3,000 from the north Louth area. It is a crucial service for local people, and it is crucial in the cross-border sense to have that service. It is important to note as well that Daisy Hill has the best record for thrombolysis treatment, with many, many lives being saved in the emergency department over the past number of years. What is also unique about the situation at Daisy Hill emergency department is that out-of-hours is located on-site, meaning that patients can be referred directly and that patient care comes first, as it always should.

Recently, Conor Murphy MLA, who will participate in the debate, the MP for Newry and Armagh — Mickey Brady — and I met the Southern Trust to discuss healthcare issues across the area, with Daisy Hill obviously to the fore. We were told that the numbers using the emergency department in Daisy Hill had increased more than those for any other hospital. I am led to believe that, in the past year alone, the increase was over 10% or over 4,200 patients and that that was putting a lot of added pressure on staff. We were assured that the trust would do all in its power to ensure that there was adequate cover and that the service was maintained.

I think that we can all agree that this needs to be treated as a matter of urgency. It is my understanding that posts have been advertised but, although doctors have applied for posts, there have not been any interviews. That process needs to begin as soon as possible. Another point is that there should not be anything stopping emergency department consultants rotating between the two acute hospitals in the Southern Trust area. That happens in other departments in the Southern Trust. We already know that there are some consultants from Craigavon doing shifts as locums in the Daisy Hill emergency department. Joint working to resolve the problem needs to be given serious consideration.

We know that a lot of money has been invested in the emergency department recently, as it has been upgraded and refurbished. However, as Mr Bradley pointed out, there is a huge amount of fear in our area about the future of Daisy Hill, particularly after the decision made on the local stroke unit, so much so that people took to the streets. The huge turnout showed the depth of feeling that there is about our hospital. We hope that the assurances that we received at the meeting around the paediatric centre of excellence, which is expected to be completed by August 2017, indicates the hospital's future viability.

The emergency department is the heart of any hospital, so it is vital that the service in Daisy Hill is protected, particularly for the people of south Armagh, many of whom are outside the recommended ambulance response time. For example, if someone in Cullaville, an area that I represent and the most southern point in the North, takes seriously ill, without a fully functioning and accessible emergency department in Newry they are told that their next closest option is Craigavon. However, even that is not necessarily true, given the state of local roads. The state of the road to Craigavon is not the best for getting there in an emergency, so, realistically, the next port of call is the Royal, which is over an hour away. That would be a disgraceful situation, given that those situations can often be a matter of life or death.

I feel very strongly that the people of south Armagh deserve better than they have been getting from this Health Department, which, in my opinion, is very little. There is an unfolding GP crisis from Crossmaglen to Meigh, totally inadequate ambulance service cover in south Armagh and an inability of the Department to deliver a day-care centre in Crossmaglen, all wrapped up with what appears to be a complete lack of interest by the Health Department. It cannot be overstated how crucial a part Daisy Hill plays in all of this. It must be protected, because the reality is that, if it is not, people will suffer.

Mr Cochrane-Watson: I thank Mr Bradley for bringing the issue forward for debate this afternoon. I speak on behalf of my party colleague Mr Danny Kennedy, who is attending a funeral and sends his apologies.

Danny has asked me to emphasise the value that the hospital has across the community and across Newry and Armagh. It is very highly thought of not only for the treatment that it provides but for the skills of the staff who work in it. Even in the most difficult circumstances, the staff are managing to keep the hospital working very efficiently. Indeed, I note in the publication of the latest A&E figures for waiting times that 89% of people presenting to Daisy Hill are seen within the four-hour standard. That compares very favourably with the performance of my hospital in Antrim, which saw a further deterioration to 61%. That is a credit to the doctors, nurses and entire staff at Daisy Hill. I am very aware that we are not comparing like with like, and I am sure that the staff in Daisy Hill will have every sympathy for their colleagues working under intense pressure in Antrim.

Whilst Daisy Hill may not face the same pressures as some other hospitals, by no means can it afford to rest on its laurels. In fact, I am aware that there has been significant change in health service provision in the wider south Down area. The downscaling of services in the Downe Hospital will have a knock-on effect and impact on those offered by Daisy Hill. Whilst I appreciate that the

minor injuries unit in the Downe will mitigate the worst of the reductions, it is only open part time. After 8.00 pm during the week and after 5.00 pm at the weekends, there is no emergency or minor service in that hospital, so Daisy Hill plays the only important role.

The future of Daisy Hill is now under some threat. Whether the previous Minister would like to admit it or not, the Donaldson report, as well as TYC, quite clearly shone the spotlight on our smaller hospitals. Whilst my party is not stubbornly opposed to any change, we would be opposed to change just for the sake of it. Every decision needs to be taken for sound medical reasons, and, right now, Daisy Hill appears to be offering and efficiently delivering safe and effective care. We see no reason to change that. What the patients and staff of the hospital need is some certainty about their future. If a cloud begins to hang over the hospital, very quickly it will find it difficult to recruit staff in the numbers that it needs, and, ultimately, more money will have to be spent on locums, and that will become unsustainable.

Unfortunately, however, the Minister's absence today is a great disservice to the good people of Newry and Armagh, and the sideshow that we are witnessing and the in-out effect of having no Minister at times or having a Minister for only a few hours will do nothing to protect the hospital or offer it the support that it needs.

Mr Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. You caught me on the hop there.

Before I start, I apologise. I missed being present at a question to the Agriculture Minister last week. I was in Stormont House at the talks, trying, obviously, to secure the future of this institution, but nonetheless I neglected my duties in the Assembly Chamber, and I apologise for that.

I thank the Member for bringing forward the debate. As he and others have said, it is an extremely important debate for our constituency and probably for a large part of the South Down constituency as well. This is probably the primary public-service discussion, debate or concern that applies right across the region. Daisy Hill Hospital is such a vital part of our public-sector infrastructure. It provides a vital service to a largely rural, dispersed community that is not well served by either public transport or roads. I say that as a former Regional Development Minister. The history of the area has been one of poor infrastructure that it will take some time to improve.

As Mr Bradley said, the Southern Trust area is served by two hospitals. This issue is not about trying to play one hospital off against the other, although, as you meet the people who work in Daisy Hill and those who use the service, you find that they quite often feel the poor relation to the needs of the Craigavon Area Hospital. One of the telling features in recent times is that the Southern Trust management produced a 50-page document outlining its plans for the next three years and in it they stated that they would build a new hospital at the Craigavon site, but there was no mention of the impact that such a development would have on the existing hospital and services provided at Daisy Hill. Others have outlined the most recent service to migrate from Daisy Hill to Craigavon: an essential part of the stroke service — not the entirety of it, but a key part of it. So there is a justifiable concern among the staff, patients and families and people who use Daisy Hill. Like Mr Bradley and others, we have all had very direct

experience of availing ourselves of the services of Daisy Hill Hospital, and very much appreciate both the quality of the service and the proximity to our community of where that service is provided.

I acknowledge the efforts of the trust. We have met its representatives, as others have done. Megan Fearon repeated that we met the trust to discuss the problems that it faces in the retention and recruitment of staff in the emergency department. I acknowledge the efforts that the trust has made to try to meet those problems. The trust sent us a very belated briefing note this afternoon to tell us that it is still struggling with recruitment and retention of suitably qualified doctors and will continue to exhaust every recruitment option in relation to it. It has now implemented a management plan to allow the emergency department to remain open overnight.

The trust goes on to say, worryingly, that it is still extremely vulnerable to further loss of any medical staff. In sustaining the service in the medium to long term, that remains a significant challenge for it. Ironically, it goes on in its briefing document to encourage us to avoid media speculation over the future of the emergency department, which could hinder its ability to attract medical staff to help the situation. I have to say that, whether intentional or not, the approach of the trust over a long number of years — I do not apply this to its current leadership — has been to reduce confidence in the longevity of the services at Daisy Hill Hospital. That, in some way, contributes to its ability to attract and retain significant senior staff there. The trust has said — others have mentioned this — that it has struggled to attract suitably qualified staff to cover the night-time service at Daisy Hill Hospital. However, I have been told that four staff posts have been advertised and, although suitably qualified doctors have applied for them, there have not been any interviews as yet. That is something that the trust needs to apply itself to very quickly.

Another suggestion that was put to me is that other medical staff in the employment of the trust are employed on a trust basis, not on a hospital-site-specific basis. The trust is able thereby to rotate their services between the hospitals and provide cover in both, yet it seems that, for cover in the emergency department, staff are being sought on the basis of a specific hospital site. I think that the trust should look at the idea of having consultants who can rotate between both hospital sites to ensure an appropriate level of cover. The case for that level of cover to service our community has been very well made by other Members who have spoken. I endorse what they have said and encourage the trust to continue to do its utmost to provide that service and to create some level of certainty in relation to the services at Daisy Hill and, in doing so, provide a level of certainty for Daisy Hill Hospital as a whole. Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

3.45 pm

Mr Rogers: At the outset, I would like to thank all Members and staff who supported today's Macmillan coffee morning in honour of our good friend Stephen McKiernan.

I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion and want to start by paying tribute to the front-line healthcare professionals who do a fantastic job working under extreme pressure. It is a common occurrence for a nurse who finishes a shift at 8.00 pm still to be caring for his or her patients an hour later. Like the Member who spoke

previously, I acknowledge the efforts of the trust to maintain the A&E at Daisy Hill as a 24-hour service.

The most worrying aspect today is that we do not have a Health Minister in charge. Who is running the health service? We hear grand references to equality in access to services in rural areas, but all we see is centralisation. I will talk more from a South Down perspective. Mourne has lost its hospital and its minor injuries unit, the out-of-hours service operates occasionally and attempts are being made to close the Slieve Roe residential home. We in Mourne depend more than ever on Daisy Hill. The reduction in many critical services, such as A&E at the Downe Hospital and the planned removal of stroke services from Daisy Hill, serve as indicators of the direction of travel that the health service is taking.

Patients who are unable to secure appointments via GP surgeries are presenting at already overstretched accident and emergency departments. Cost savings in one department are leading to chaos in others. Patients who rely on services at Daisy Hill and Downe are being denied access to vital care. South Down constituents are now possibly the most disadvantaged citizens in the North.

What is the clinical basis for the removal of the stroke unit from Daisy Hill? We all know the reasons why it needs to be retained — to provide quicker access for people living in the hospital catchment area to life-saving treatment. Yes, it is life-saving because, if you have a stroke and live in Mourne, in places such as Attical or Ballyvea, you will do very well to get an ambulance and get to Daisy Hill in 90 minutes, never mind the golden hour. I do not want to detract in any way from the level of service at Craigavon, but, without an air ambulance, the journey there from the Mournes is too long. Frequently in the winter, we have only a coastal road to get to hospital.

The towns and rural communities of South Down are being marginalised and let down by the gradual erosion of services, first at the Downe and now at Daisy Hill. I have yet to hear a valid reason why stroke services in the form of a specialised stroke unit at Daisy Hill cannot be maintained. I understand that ongoing consultation with the Dublin Government could result in patients from Louth and Monaghan accessing services at Daisy Hill. Daisy Hill has a fine reputation as a stroke centre. Let us build on it to serve all the people.

During the summer, speculation was rife that accident and emergency provision at Daisy Hill was facing a reduction in services due to staff shortages. At a recent meeting, the acting chief executive of the trust outlined the difficulties in attracting middle-grade doctors and consultants to accident and emergency. As the trusts have reduced services at the Downe and Armagh minor injuries, that has put even more pressure on Daisy Hill, which, in turn, puts more pressure on Craigavon and, in turn, the Belfast hospitals.

In a recent consultation, Improving through Care, the SDLP voiced its concern. We recognised that it is critical for local people to have confidence in the health service and that healthcare is best delivered at a local level, where the facilities exist. I will give one example of a constituent, an elderly lady who is in a nursing home in Newcastle. If she takes ill during the night, she is moved to Daisy Hill. That has happened on a number of occasions, and she has received first-class care. However, if she takes ill

during the day, she is taken to Downpatrick. Recently, her family were contacted and told that she had been taken to Downpatrick, only to discover that she was lying on a trolley there for three or four hours, waiting for a bed to be made available in Downe. That woman will be 84 in a few months' time. How would you like your mother or grandmother to be treated like that? Where is the patient care? Where is Transforming Your Care? Such inhuman treatment is happening in our health service, and it is disgraceful.

The SDLP recognises that, while financial responsibility is a major constraint in determining future strategy, it cannot be the sole focus. If services at Daisy Hill were made more readily available, North and South, it would contribute to making the hospital even more sustainable in the long term. The trust must realise that a health service must operate on the basis of a community's best interest, not strictly on the basis of the financial bottom line.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Member for bringing this very important topic to the Chamber today. Like everyone else who has spoken, I want to put on record that it is regrettable that the Health Minister and, indeed, the former Health Minister, the Member for South Down Jim Wells, are not here. This is a very important issue for our constituents.

I also wish to pay tribute to the staff at the Daisy Hill and Downe hospitals. They do a great service for our community and have done for a long time. Often, when public reps become frustrated at the situation, we are often portrayed as attacking the entire institution of a hospital, including the staff and front-line staff. That is of course a long way from the truth. We would be lost without them.

Mr Rogers touched on the fact that we cannot separate the future of the Downe and Daisy Hill hospitals; they are two very proud hospitals that have served the people of south Down well for many years. Their futures are very much intertwined. The Ulster Hospital is sucking so much out of the Downe Hospital, and I think that there is a similar situation with Craigavon. If we see the loss of the coronary care and emergency department from the Downe — read strokes unit — and the fear of the emergency department moving from Daisy Hill to Craigavon. There is a 'Big Brother' effect that is sucking the life and hope out of so many people who rely upon these services.

Other Members have alluded to the rural aspect of a constituency such as South Down. Ms Fearon mentioned the failings in ambulance cover in what is a very rural area, and Mr Rogers talked about an elderly constituent who was affected. We see that time and time again. In recent months, we have seen tens of thousands of people on the streets of Downpatrick and Newry. I do not think that any of these people are immune to change.

We know that our health system is changing and we know that there is a need for change. How we deliver services in a first-class manner needs to change, but what we are seeing all too often is a complete lack of engagement from the higher echelons of the Department of Health. We need to see a Minister take control of the situation. We need to see the Department of Health carefully lay out a plan and engage with people. There was a totally regrettable situation with the Downe Hospital where news of its closure was leaked the night before Christmas Eve.

Understandably, panic set in. That should not be how things are done.

Where do we go from here? I have spoken to recruitment agencies that deal with medical practitioners who say that it is very possible to follow what they have done in the South and bring in medical doctors from eastern Europe who are more than capable. They have come into the Midland Hospital in Roscommon and are doing a great job. This is where perhaps it would have been good to have Jim Wells in the Chamber, who showed some reluctance to look at this the last time, because I think that this is an avenue that we need to look at. If there are people in the EU or further afield who can come and do a good job, we need to search them out.

How we approach this matter is a big test for the Minister, and, so far, he is failing. If we had to close schools because there were no teachers to teach our kids, there would be pandemonium and we would not tolerate it. We should not tolerate instances in which we have had to close medical departments because we cannot get the doctors. This is a big test for the Minister, and, so far, we have not seen enough.

Finally, we have seen the success that Altnagelvin has had through its cross-border solution for cancer care. There are no good reasons why the likes of Daisy Hill cannot become a champion hospital for those in the border areas. We looked at working alongside Drogheda with the Downe, but it is clear that the people of South Down, and Newry and Armagh, will not be best served by concentrating all our services in Craigavon or the Ulster Hospital in Belfast. It does not serve our people well. We need to see a focus now from the Minister and the Department to reinstate a bit of confidence in these services.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Members. That was an important topic.

Adjourned at 3.54 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 28 September 2015

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Speaker: Before we proceed to today's business, I have some announcements to make.

Resignation: Mr Jimmy Spratt

Mr Speaker: I advise the House that I have received a letter from Mr Jimmy Spratt giving me notice of his intention to resign as a Member for the South Belfast constituency with effect from 10.00 am today. I have notified the Chief Electoral Officer, in accordance with section 35 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

New Assembly Member: Emma Pengelly

Mr Speaker: I advise the House that I have been informed by the Chief Electoral Officer that Mrs Emma Pengelly has been returned as a Member of the Assembly for the South Belfast constituency to fill the vacancy resulting from Mr Spratt's resignation. Mrs Pengelly signed the Roll of Membership and entered her designation in my presence and that of the Clerk/Chief Executive on 28 September 2015. The Member has now taken her seat, and I very much welcome her to the House and wish her every success.

Ministerial Appointments: Mr Bell, Mr Hamilton, Miss M McIlveen, Mr Storey

Mr Speaker: I advise the House that the Rt Hon Peter Robinson, as nominating officer for the DUP, nominated Mr Jonathan Bell MLA as Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment; Mr Simon Hamilton MLA as Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety; Miss Michelle McIlveen MLA as Minister for Regional Development; and Mr Mervyn Storey MLA as Minister for Social Development. Mr Bell, Mr Hamilton, Miss McIlveen and Mr Storey each accepted the nomination and affirmed the Pledge of Office in the presence of the Principal Deputy Speaker and the Director of Clerking and Reporting on Wednesday 23 September 2015.

Ministerial Resignations: Mr Bell, Mr Hamilton, Miss M McIlveen, Mr Storey

Mr Speaker: I advise the House that those four Ministers subsequently resigned their offices on Thursday 24 September 2015. Standing Order 44(3) provides for a seven-day period during which the party that held these offices can nominate Members of its party to replace them and take up office. That period expires at the end of Wednesday 30 September 2015.

Ministerial Appointment: Mr Bell

Mr Speaker: I further advise the House that the Rt Hon Peter Robinson, as nominating officer for the DUP, nominated Mr Jonathan Bell MLA as Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

Mr Bell accepted the nomination and affirmed the Pledge of Office in the presence of the Principal Deputy Speaker and the Clerk/Chief Executive on Monday 28 September 2015. I am satisfied that the requirements of Standing Orders have been met.

Public Petition: Withdrawal of Day Release for Individuals Convicted of Terrorism-related Offences Before 1998

Mr Speaker: Mrs Sandra Overend has sought to present a public petition in accordance with Standing Order 22. The Member will have up to three minutes in which to speak.

Mrs Overend: It gives me no pleasure that circumstances necessitate my presenting to you, this afternoon, a public petition on behalf of Mrs June McMullin and over 3,500 signatories. However, I am honoured that June and members of the mid-Ulster victim empowerment group who are supporting her through these difficult times asked me to do so. They are here this afternoon in the Public Gallery.

On 14 September 1981, June gave birth to her second son in the Mid Ulster Hospital in Magherafelt. It was following a visit to see June and their newborn baby that her husband, RUC Reserve Constable John Proctor, was brutally murdered in the car park of the hospital. Tensions had been high at that time due to the hunger strikes and the IRA having carried out a number of murders in the south Londonderry and east Tyrone areas over the recent days. In fact, earlier that day, John had attended the funeral of a UDR colleague.

The murder took the hearts of John's family. Not only was a life lost, a husband, brother, son and great friend was taken much too soon. It took 32 years, but, indeed, 32 years later, there was a conviction for the murder, and Seamus Kearney was sentenced to at least 20 years in prison, but, under the terms of the Belfast Agreement, was to spend two years in prison. The Belfast Agreement was by no means perfect, but neither was it an amnesty. When Seamus Kearney was sentenced to two years, there was a legitimate expectation that he would serve the full two years.

Day release schemes are designed to help long-term prisoners reintegrate into society towards the end of a long sentence, such as 20 years. For a man serving only a two-year sentence, such frequent day releases certainly seem unnecessary and inappropriate. Day releases are primarily given to enable long-term prisoners to reintegrate into society. There seems to be some confusion in policy that provides day release for those who should have served a long-term sentence to have similar day release conditions in their short-term sentence. Surely, the same reintegration day releases are unnecessary and unjustified.

Being subjected to media reports that Mr Kearney had applied for a series of day releases, including one for a St Patrick's Day GAA match, has been particularly painful for the family. It certainly seems that a convicted murderer was being awarded days off his sentence as and when he chose for social events and such like. When Seamus Kearney was convicted, surely he lost the right to choose freely any day off a prison sentence. Rather, the Prison Service should work in tandem with the prisoner to assess his personal circumstances, his remorse, the risk and whether there is any need for reintegration days.

Today, my thoughts are with June and the wider family who have had to put themselves in the public eye, once again, due to the selfish actions of a cowardly murderer. I call on the Justice Minister to support innocent victims and end the hurtful practice of those who are convicted of terrorist-related offences committed before 1998 being granted day release.

Mr Speaker: I call Ms Bronwyn McGahan.

Mrs Overend moved forward and laid the petition on the Table.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. I will forward the petition to the Minister of Justice and send a copy to the Committee.

Apologies for the confusion, Bronwyn. You are down to speak on the next item of business, so you have plenty of notice.

Assembly Business

Committee Membership

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

Resolved:

That Mr Andrew Allen be appointed as a member of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. — [Mr Swann.]

Ministerial Statement

Supporting Change — A Strategic Approach to Desistance

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement on the launch of Supporting Change, a strategic approach to desistance. This strategy will support my Department's objective to build safer communities and reduce reoffending, and emphasises the need for a flexible, person-centred approach, which supports individuals to live their lives free from further offending.

Desistance theory is an area of criminological research that is primarily interested in the reasons why a person decides to stop offending. Work on desistance recognises the capacity of individuals to change their behaviour. It also provides insight into some of the factors that can support that change.

My Department's work on desistance links directly to a recommendation from the prison reform team and a commitment in the Programme for Government, building on the foundation laid by the strategic framework for reducing offending. The strategic framework sets out how the Executive can build a safer Northern Ireland through a long-term reduction in offending behaviour by preventing people from becoming involved in offending behaviour and reducing reoffending among those who do.

Today's launch of Supporting Change continues that work, setting out an agreed understanding of desistance across statutory and non-statutory organisations and restating my Department's commitment to provide a flexible, person-centred approach, which reduces reoffending and improves outcomes for those who are in contact with the criminal justice system.

The development of the desistance strategy benefited from engagement across the justice system and with our partners in the voluntary and community sector. Our work on desistance has also been informed by a resettlement study conducted on our behalf by Professor Shadd Maruna at Queen's University and by an examination of some of the factors that influence the decision to recall a person to custody.

My Department also hosted an engagement event with stakeholders that demonstrated support for desistance principles and a strong commitment to work in partnership. During the consultation on the strategic framework for reducing offending, which was published in May 2013, stakeholders rightly asked what the Department meant by desistance and what factors could contribute to the process. As research shows, factors that are associated with desistance include things like getting older and maturing, having families and forming relationships, maintaining sobriety and obtaining employment. Desistance theory also recognises the vital role that hope and motivation can play in encouraging a person to move away from offending behaviour. Having something to give others, having a place in a social group, not being viewed as a criminal and being believed in are also important factors in a person's desistance journey.

Each of us can relate to the importance of these factors in our own daily lives: having a feeling of self-worth, a purpose or a loving relationship. Perhaps our lives have

been fortunate in that many of these factors have come naturally to us or with little effort. For many of those who have been in contact with the criminal justice system, their life paths have meant that their experiences are very different and they need help and support if they are to make a lasting change in their lives. That is the purpose of Supporting Change.

Having understood the factors that influence those who have previously offended to become productive members of society, it is incumbent on us to ensure that our system plays an active part in helping individuals to change.

The first step is to turn the theory of Supporting Change into concrete actions, so an action plan is being published along with the strategy. The initial action plan seeks to use to deliver a desistance-based approach that puts the individual at the heart of the rehabilitative process and promotes a coherent, joined-up approach across our justice system. The action plan seeks to address four key areas. First, improving our evidence base and response to offending behaviour. Secondly, developing the capacity of our staff and organisations to support desistance. Thirdly, delivering targeted, joined-up support and interventions, and, finally, engaging and communicating with our stakeholders.

Taking a desistance-based approach is very much about working with the individual to reduce their likelihood of reoffending and to prevent any future risk to the public. The desistance action plan is a solid base from which we can work to address the root causes of offending behaviour, challenge individuals to change that behaviour and support them to live their lives free from further offending.

12.15 pm

While we must all accept that the current fiscal environment is challenging, it must not be allowed to restrict our thinking in improving how we work with people who have offended and support their rehabilitative journey.

The current environment provides us with the incentive to think more creatively, to enhance partnership working and to reduce any potential duplication at the various stages of a person's journey through our justice system. Any action that we can take to support someone to desist from offending reduces the future cost to society and, significantly, prevents the creation of future victims. To that end, there is a strong commitment from the Prison Service, the Probation Board, the Police Service, the Youth Justice Agency and partners in the voluntary and community sector to enhance how we protect the public and reintegrate people who have offended into our society.

The desistance action plan provides a sound platform for greater partnership working, not just in the justice system but across many other Departments. We all have key roles to play in addressing barriers to desistance. For example, homelessness, mental ill health and difficulties in obtaining employment are areas on which we must work together to help to reintegrate people into our society and to build safer communities. Those areas do not fall within the responsibilities of my Department, and it is imperative that Government recognise that we are working to provide services and support for the same people at different, often pivotal, stages of their lives.

The strategy that I am publishing today reinforces my Department's commitment to working with those who

have offended in a flexible, person-centred manner, which, research shows, has the best chance of supporting individuals to live their lives free from further offending. Each individual who is successfully supported in desisting from offending contributes towards reducing the overall level of reoffending in Northern Ireland, which ultimately builds a safer community for us all. Thank you.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. With apologies for the false start, I call Ms Bronwyn McGahan.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. I welcome the statement, in particular the emphasis on the need for change in the culture of how we address crime prevention and the need to move to a multi-agency approach that requires a collaborative, strategic response.

Minister, you quite rightly identified that housing and employment factors do not fall within your remit. Therefore, as Minister, have you given any consideration to, for example, the crime and disorder reduction partnerships in England and Wales, which have been established on a statutory footing and involve joint-working arrangements through collaborative partnerships between public-sector partners and other bodies?

Mr Ford: We have not specifically looked at the recreation of those partnerships, as I believe, to a considerable extent, that our existing policing and community safety partnerships have the capacity to do that. The important issue is that we see joined-up working around the Executive. Whatever difficulties there may be around the Executive working as a whole, I believe that my Department has done some very good partnership working with one or two individual Departments. Perhaps it is easier to get on with one or two other Ministers at a time than the entire tableful. On that basis, I think that we have seen progress being made, but it is certainly an issue that we need to look at to see how we can maximise the response and get all the Departments working together in the way that we need to see.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Mo bhuíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas. I thank the Minister for his statement. In principle, this seems like a good idea, and the practice seems to show that it is beneficial. I note that you have a variety of consultees, Minister. What about victims and victim support groups in the voluntary and community sector? For confirmation, have they, too, bought into this concept?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr McGlone for that point. Clearly, there is a variety of views amongst victims' groups on some of these issues. Victim Support has worked very closely with the Department on a range of initiatives. For example, some Members may have heard the references in the media to the introduction this week of the enhanced combination order. Victim Support has been very much involved in looking at that aspect of work in the Probation Board's more intensive management of offenders in the community. So whilst it is probably the case that not all victims' groups accept the premise of the way in which we are working, we certainly have had good relationships with a number of them in establishing this policy.

I think that there is a general recognition, when one looks at the academic study, that the best way of supporting victims and not creating future victims is ensuring that we work better and more intensively with offenders so that we can see that change happen. I am sure that the work

that my Department will do as we work through the action plan for Supporting Change will ensure that we see a deepening of contact with a range of victims' groups.

Mr Somerville: I thank the Minister for his statement. I support the general principle to reduce future crime and reoffending. How will the strategy involve families in this process?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr Somerville for his welcome. The answer to that is, to some extent, the same as the one I have just given to Mr McGlone about the issue of victims' groups in general. There is joined-up working to be done between a range of Departments and agencies, and there is work to be done involving some of our voluntary sector partners, many of which will be in contact with the families of victims or even the families of offenders.

The important thing is that we see that the work is done in the most effective way. Often, families can be the people who particularly aid the rehabilitation work if they are providing a stable background for somebody who has offended — if they have been in custody — to return to. There is also the issue of the families of victims who may well wish to have a say as we look at some of the other aspects of restorative practice. These are methods that bring home to offenders the effect that what they have done may have had on people, and the work that needs to be done to assist the offenders is sometimes easier if they have been fully aware of what they have done. The families of victims and perpetrators may well have a very significant role.

Mr Dickson: I thank the Minister for his statement. It is sometimes said that you are soft on crime, but today's announcement is surely an indication that you are smart on crime, offering a different pathway to people when it comes to how they are dealt with in the justice system. In your statement, Minister, you have made it very clear that it is not just about your Department but about other Departments, particularly the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, which has to deal with many people with mental health and other issues. Do you agree that it is disgraceful that there is no Minister in place to deal with this important matter in conjunction with your Department?

Mr Ford: I congratulate my colleague on his alliteration. I would dispute that the DOJ is soft on offending but I certainly hope that some of the work that we have been doing, in the very significant reforms carried through in the five and half years since devolution, shows that the justice system as a whole is being smart. Whether that applies to the Minister personally, it can be said to be the case for the system.

Mr Dickson rightly highlights the issue of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, but, when we also look at issues such as housing and related matters, there is a very significant role for the Department for Social Development. If I may digress slightly, Mr Speaker, it is extremely regrettable that some issues of joint working, which I would have hoped to be doing, for example on the joint strategy on domestic and sexual violence, cannot currently be carried through because of the absence of a Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. I am committed to ensuring that the justice elements of that strategy are carried through as best we can, but it would be far better if we could see a joint strategy being carried through by two Departments with Ministers working in them.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement, which very clearly sets out appropriately what the Department is trying to achieve, particularly the action plan with its four key areas. That is very important and is to be welcomed, particularly if we are going to have an effect on tackling the root causes and then on how we take people away from that in future. Does he envisage that, in future, there will be an implementation plan that will allow the effect of the strategy to be measured in an appropriate way?

Mr Ford: I thank the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Justice for his support and, through him, I thank the Committee for the work it has done with my officials on this area. He rightly highlights the importance of the action plan rather than just the strategy. I am not quite sure how many different shades of plan we need to work through as we look at an implementation plan. One of the key things that we have is the research that was done specifically for this work by Professor Maruna and other academic research.

The test will be to ensure that we get appropriate validation of the work being done. I am not in a position to say exactly how that will be done at this stage but I have no doubt that my officials will present me with advice as to how we should ensure that we not only do best practice but are seen to be doing best practice. I am delighted when, at times, Ministers have been known to come from Whitehall to see good work being done in Northern Ireland, particularly in areas such as youth justice, which shows that we can teach others a lesson even if we are a small jurisdiction.

I will do my best to ensure that that continues to be the case in this area.

Mr Allister: Is it not enlightening that, on a day when a petition is presented opposing the constant pandering to convicted criminals, which the Minister upholds and which tramples on the rights of innocent victims, the Minister chooses to come to the House to make a statement that has no mention of victims but is prisoner-centred? Is it not time the Minister realised that he is the Minister of Justice, not a social worker?

Mr Ford: Thankfully, I was never a barrister anyway. I am quite happy to say that my professional background is as a social worker, and I am not the only one in the Chamber who can say that. I notice another Minister nodding sagely from the Front Bench.

If Mr Allister thinks that this statement does not mention victims, I suggest he looks at an electronic version and runs a word search on it, because it talks about reducing —

Mr Allister: Future victims.

Mr Ford: It talks about reducing future victims —

Mr Allister: Future —

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Ford: — and the way we reduce future victims is by stopping people from committing crime. The most effective way of stopping people from committing crime is by dealing with the issues that lead them into criminal activity, like poor relationships, substance misuse, alcoholism, poor housing, lack of work — a whole range of factors that have been shown by those who, rather than making pontificating statements on it, have studied the issue and found those to be the real issues by which we address it.

Of course, there are concerns about the specific matter that Mrs Overend presented a few minutes ago, and there are real issues of concern about what happened in this society in the past. As Minister of Justice, I cannot cure the past, but I can do my best to stop victims in the future.

Mr B McCrea: As the previous question illustrates, there is still work to be done in convincing people that desistance is the right way forward. In fact, I think that it is a shame that we have not had a bigger debate on it.

The Minister mentioned, in response to the previous question and in his statement, that a number of factors help with desistance, such as getting older, maturing, having families and suchlike. However, one issue is becoming involved with the criminal justice system at a very early age. What steps would he consider taking to make sure that, once you get involved in the criminal justice system, you are not ultimately on a treadmill that will take you to incarceration?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr McCrea for returning the questions to a slightly more balanced approach. I have no doubt that, if he speaks to others and wishes to promote an Assembly debate, we might have an interesting discussion if it went to slightly more than a ministerial statement.

When he talks about the dangers of those involved with the criminal justice system at an early age, let me say that we have a good record, as I said a few minutes ago, in the work done by the Youth Justice Agency in preventing reoffending. That is largely built around restorative practice and the work that is done in youth conferencing. That is a key example of how we have been able to change factors to make Northern Ireland an exemplar of good practice in these islands.

We know that, sadly, the children of those in custody are more likely to end up in custody themselves. That is why there is good work being done in Maghaberry prison on the families matter landing to encourage those in custody to have a relationship with their children, to bring children in for an extended visit and to have the opportunity to act like fathers even though they are in jail. I think that is the kind of good example that we can show and that is entirely in line with the development of a wider desistance strategy. However, it does, of course, mean intensive work and resources, and we all know the circumstances we are in regarding finances.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Minister. That concludes questions on the statement.

Executive Committee Business

Pension Schemes Bill: Further Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: This item may not proceed as Consideration Stage of the Bill has not been completed.

Renewables Obligation Closure Order (Northern Ireland) 2015

Mr Bell (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): I beg to move

That the draft Renewables Obligation Closure Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 be approved.

This statutory rule is being made under powers in the Energy (Northern Ireland) Order 2003, which prescribes that the order must be laid in draft form for approval by affirmative resolution of the Assembly.

Renewable electricity generation in Northern Ireland is incentivised through the Northern Ireland renewables obligation, or NIRO, as it has come to be known. Since its introduction in 2005, the NIRO has been instrumental in increasing renewable deployment in Northern Ireland from 3% renewable electricity consumption in 2005 to just over 20% now. That achieves the Executive's ambitious Programme for Government target of having a fifth of our electricity generated from renewables by 2015. I commend the efforts of the renewables industry and infrastructure providers in helping to achieve that target.

12.30 pm

As part of UK-wide electricity market reform, the NIRO, along with the other two renewables obligations in Great Britain, is scheduled to close to new generation in March 2017. A consultation on NIRO closure in 2017 was undertaken in 2012. The majority of respondents at that time agreed that it would not be viable to keep the NIRO open after 2017 if the other two renewables obligations in Great Britain were to close. In March 2015, DETI issued a consultation on NIRO transition and closure grace periods. However, prior to the publication of a DETI response in June 2015, the new Secretary of State for Energy, Amber Rudd MP, announced the closure of the renewables obligations in Great Britain to onshore wind from 1 April 2016. Since that time, discussions have been ongoing with the Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC) regarding Northern Ireland's policy position on onshore wind. Due to those protracted negotiations with the Department of Energy and Climate Change and in the interests of providing legislative clarity to all non-wind technologies, I took the decision to take forward the legislation in two stages: first, non-wind, to be followed by onshore wind as soon as possible. A Government response specifically on non-wind closure grace periods was issued in August 2015.

Having covered what is not in the order, I will now turn to what it does cover. The proposed Renewables Obligation Closure Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 will close the NIRO to all non-wind technologies on 31 March 2017. The order will also introduce 12-month closure grace periods for non-wind projects that meet specified criteria. Those criteria will be that a project that was scheduled to connect by 31 March 2017 will have an extra year to connect if it suffered grid or radar delays through no fault of its own. There are particular arrangements for advanced conversion technology projects, which are, I understand, basically a form of energy from waste, to reflect their lengthy development timescales in Great Britain. Those arrangements reflect the position in the rest of the United Kingdom, and the costs will be socialised across all United Kingdom consumers. Policy on that issue has not changed

since our consultation proposals of March 2015. Some developers sought longer grace periods, but, as set out in my Department's response, which was published in August 2015, that was not feasible in the context of overall United Kingdom policy.

In conclusion, the proposed rule will close the Northern Ireland renewables obligation to new non-wind generation on 31 March 2017 and will also introduce defined closure grace periods.

Mr McGlone (The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Mo bhúiochas leis an Aire as an ráiteas. I thank the Minister for introducing the legislation.

The Renewables Obligation Closure Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 being debated today is a markedly different piece of legislation to that initially proposed and first considered by the Committee back in June. The original closure order covered both wind and non-wind renewable energy. The order being debated today makes provision for the closure of the NIRO to non-wind sources only, as the Minister outlined.

Back in June, the Department informed the Committee that a change in policy at the Westminster Department of Energy and Climate Change has meant that the Northern Ireland renewables obligation will close in 2016, one year earlier than originally planned. This was considered by many to be a very unreasonable change in policy, as wind energy developers have already invested considerable amounts of money in ongoing projects, which the change in DECC policy could put in jeopardy. The Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change has stated that, should DETI decide to extend the grace period and provide support to wind developers for an additional year, she would expect any additional costs to be funded exclusively by Northern Ireland consumers. That, in turn, presented the Department here with a difficult dilemma: to support wind generation with an extended grace period at a cost to consumers or to follow the DECC policy and create difficulties for wind developers.

In the original proposal brought to the Committee on 30 June, the Department planned to support onshore wind generation for an additional year over and above that proposed in the DECC policy so as to allow developers to complete projects that had already been planned. This could add up to £16 a year to an average domestic consumer electricity bill, with the top electricity-consuming companies in the North paying around an additional £30,000 per annum for their electricity. The Committee considered this policy proposal and concluded that, considering the additional costs that consumers would be expected to pay, there was not sufficient or detailed enough information on which to base a decision. No information was provided to the Committee on any long-term benefits to consumers of adopting the proposals for onshore wind. It was unclear if the Committee was being asked to support a policy that would result in consumers being asked to pay more for their electricity with no net long-term benefits merely to subsidise wind developers who might otherwise find themselves in difficulties.

The Department placed considerable emphasis on the urgency with which the Committee's agreement to the legislation was required because one particular project being brought by Full Circle Power/Bombardier required

certainly on the closure order to secure the required funding in time to commence its £100 million non-wind project to ensure the project's completion by the closure date.

No substantive concerns were raised by the Committee regarding the non-wind aspect of the closure order. However, the Committee was not content to agree to legislation that added considerably to costs for consumers in the absence of any consideration by the Department of the potential benefits that the legislation would bring, especially when the sole reason for urgency was to provide certainty to a project that was entirely unrelated to the issues with which the Committee had major concerns. The Committee did everything in its power to assist the Department in providing the certainty that Full Circle/Bombardier needed but could not proceed with the legislation in the proposed format when there was so much uncertainty and so little clarity about other aspects of the order.

Whilst the Committee has every sympathy with wind developers, many of whom have invested considerable sums of money into ongoing projects, the Committee believes that the needs of developers must be appropriately balanced with the cost to consumers of adopting the proposed policy. A Committee decision must be based on full and accurate information.

For this reason, the Committee explored with the Department the option of decoupling the wind and non-wind aspects of the legislation. This would have provided the certainty that Full Circle/Bombardier required and would have given the Committee sufficient time to adequately scrutinise the more contentious aspects of the legislation. Members asked officials whether it would help solve the immediate problem if the legislation was decoupled to allow the non-wind aspects of the legislation to pass and thus enable those projects that were time-critical to move on.

During a meeting with the Minister on the matter on 2 July, I repeated the Committee's suggestion that decoupling the two aspects of the legislation should enable the non-wind aspects of the closure order to pass through the Committee without undue delay. However, the Department seemed determined, for whatever reason, to retain the legislation as it was. During the meeting with the Minister, I was informed that a number of onshore wind projects were in the pipeline that required similar assurances and that solving one problem could result in the creation of another.

The Minister also informed me that the timelines for the Full Circle/Bombardier project were very strict for triggering funding. He stated that the cut-off date for a decision by funders to prevent the project falling was Thursday 9 July and that the Committee's agreement of the SL1 would provide the necessary assurances that investors needed for the project to proceed. It was on this basis and with assurances from the Minister that full clarity would be provided on costs and benefits that I decided to seek the Committee's agreement to convene an additional meeting on 9 July.

At the meeting on 9 July, the Department reiterated its assertion that the two aspects of the legislation could not be decoupled. Officials informed the Committee that the Department had given very extensive consideration to the issue since the previous Committee meeting and had taken legal advice on the matter. The Department put forward three reasons as to why the legislation could not be decoupled. First, the Department said

that decoupling would give rise to uncertainty for other projects and that the time required would be well beyond the critical period for the Full Circle/Bombardier project. Secondly, decoupling would give rise to uncertainty for other projects, causing some to fall with a loss of future investment, a loss of future generating capacity and a loss of substantial economic benefit. Thirdly, according to the Department, differentiating between different types of projects, as proposed by decoupling, may be challenged on the grounds that it could constitute unlawful state aid.

Officials went on to update the Committee confidently on a developing situation that they believed rendered the whole issue of decoupling academic, as there had been a fundamental change in DECC's position, which had been confirmed in writing only that morning. Although the renewables obligation would still close to onshore wind in 2016, projects that were already in the system would be allowed to connect until March 2018, effectively providing a two-year grace period for projects already in the system, which the majority of onshore wind projects in the pipeline would be able to meet.

Officials told the Committee "with confidence and with certainty" that the cost to consumers would be significantly reduced from the figures provided the previous week. The Committee was told that the average increase in domestic bills could be as little as £3 a year and that the increase for high energy users could be almost 70% less than originally estimated. The Committee was put under considerable pressure to accept the SL1 and approve it without having been given access to the correspondence concerned, which, according to the Department, represented a fundamental change in DECC policy and provided a high level of clarity and certainty.

Given this seemingly exceptionally positive development, the Committee asked to see the correspondence concerned so that members could assure themselves that this high level of clarity and certainty had indeed been provided. After some time, the correspondence was brought to the Committee meeting for consideration. There was nothing in that correspondence from DECC to DETI that could in any conceivable way add even a crumb of clarity or certainty, or provide any assurances to the Committee that electricity consumers would not be charged for the additional onshore wind put onto the system as a result of an extended grace period. There was nothing in the papers or in the briefing from officials that could in any way provide a sensible, sound basis for the Committee to make a decision on such an important matter. I emphasise: nothing.

When questioned further, officials went on to state that those assurances had been received from DECC informally during conversations and may not be as clear to anyone who had not been party to them. However, bearing in mind the importance of the matter at hand, the Committee could not make a decision affecting the pockets of so many over such a long period merely on the basis of hearsay. That is not a way to bring forward legislation.

There was nothing in writing that provided the clarity and certainty that the Committee required.

12.45 pm

At that stage, officials agreed that the Minister would write to the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change

to outline his understanding of what had been agreed and to seek the appropriate assurances from the Secretary of State that his understanding of DECC's position was accurate. The Committee agreed to convene a meeting as a matter of urgency as soon as the Department was in a position to provide full clarity on the specific issues of concern. I held the Committee in a position that we would convene with the urgency required as and when we got that clarity from the Department. That was on 9 July this year, just for clarity.

Given the urgency with which we were told that this had to progress, the Committee agreed to meet again as soon as the Department got back to it. Yet, here we are, almost 12 weeks later, considering the statutory rule (SR) for the closure of the renewables obligation to non-wind technologies only. The two aspects of the legislation have been decoupled, as the Committee suggested to the Department on 30 June. As for the clarity and certainty promised on the aspects of the closure order relating to wind projects, the Committee is still waiting.

The Department brought the current proposals to the Committee on 8 September. The SR is for closure of the NI renewables obligation to all non-wind technologies, including anaerobic digestion, hydro, solar PV, biomass and advanced conversion technologies, otherwise known as ACT. ACT includes the proposed project at Full Circle/ Bombardier.

The Committee, having given the proposed policy due consideration, had no concerns about the proposals, but major concerns remain about the Department's handling of the matter and the manner in which it engaged with the Committee. When officials briefed the Committee on 8 September, for example, they were questioned on the reasons why they were able to change position in spite of the prior legal advice received. Officials responded that the original legal advice was based on taking forward legislation for ACT only, whereas the current proposal is to deal with a class of projects, namely, non-wind. At no time did the Committee suggest or even consider the possibility of taking forward legislation for ACT only — at no time. It was always the Committee's view that wind and non-wind could and should be decoupled, given the circumstances that we were in. Where the Department got the idea that it should take legal advice on taking forward legislation for ACT only remains a mystery.

At our Committee meeting on 22 September, we asked the Department for clarification on the nature of the legal advice sought, and we received that confirmation. It turns out that what the Department had emphasised to the Committee was legal advice sought previously in June, and the stuff that we were supposed to make a decision on the SL1 about was, in fact, in its words, "based on an informal request for quick advice" — I could interpret that to be a one-minute or two-minute phone call, but that is my interpretation, by the way — rather than official, formal legal advice to the Department. We were expected to make decisions at a Committee on a poorly prepared SL1 on the basis of an "informal request for quick advice".

The way in which this matter has been handled by the Department leaves much to be desired and many unanswered questions, such as: why was the Department so adamant that the wind and non-wind aspects could not be decoupled when, clearly, as we see today, they could and why did the Department not try harder

and earlier to negotiate with DECC? It was only when departmental officials were questioned at the Committee about renewables and the contribution by DECC that the Department was positioned to reopen negotiations with DECC, which, I hope, will be beneficial and productive, but that question remains: why did the Department not try harder and earlier to negotiate with DECC? Why did it rely on the intervention of the Committee before taking action to protect consumer interests? Why did the Department try so hard to push the original legislation through the Committee for the benefit of developers without having given any consideration to the relative costs and benefits to consumers? If the 9 July deadline was so critical, why did the Department wait until 8 September before coming back to the Committee? Why did the Department try to convince the Committee in July that a solution had been agreed with DECC when, clearly, no such solution, with even the craziest of imaginations, could have been interpreted as having been negotiated? The matter still has not been resolved. What was actually said in those conversations between DECC and DETI officials that resulted in DETI being able to brief the Committee with confidence that the issue had been resolved, when it clearly had not and still apparently is not? Why did the Department robustly defend its original proposal by telling the Committee that it was based on legal advice when, in reality, it was based on nothing more than an informal request for advice?

The Committee will want to get answers to all those questions. If need be, officials and the Minister will be called to the Committee to provide answers and clarity on this matter. We are there for one interest, which is to defend the public interest and the interests of consumers. That is our job. If necessary, the Committee will seek the attendance of appropriate representatives from DECC to ensure that members are provided with satisfactory and clear explanations.

Having given the policy proposals full consideration, the Committee was content and acted efficiently when it got the Department's decision to adopt our suggestion and decouple two aspects of the legislation. The Committee considered the statutory rule in respect of non-wind projects at our meeting on 22 September 2015. The Committee is content that the legislation is appropriate and recommends that SR2015/325, the Renewables Obligation Closure Order (NI) 2015, be affirmed by the Assembly.

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tá áthas orm an tAire a fheiceail ar ais anseo inniu agus ba mhaith liom tréaslú agus aontú le cuid mhaith dá ndúirt an Cathaoirleach ar an Choiste. I welcome the newly appointed economy Minister back to the Chamber. I also want to echo many of the sentiments expressed by the Chair of our Committee. Minister, we have missed you; I know that you have missed us as well. When I was at primary school, we had an attendance inspector who was very efficient. She used to go to your home and speak to your parents. I am not citing any particular experience of that, but she would say, "It's not good enough just to go back for one day." I want to repeat that advice today. I really do hope that you will be around for longer than a few hours because this, as you know and understand, Minister, is crucial to the economy, the public interest and consumers. We must try to stick at this and stay focused on this issue of renewables until we sort it out.

I thank the Minister for introducing the order. The Chair of the Committee has explained the yellow brick road that we have been down over the summer. It is a matter of some regret that, even today, we do not have certainty on whether, during a grace period, costs will be carried only by the consumers here or will be socialised across Britain and here, which, of course, would not really place any burden on consumers; it would only be a matter of pennies. As we push forward, the Chair of the Committee issued a number of what I think were invites. They were in very firm language, but we hope to see the permanent secretary and the Minister as well so that we can continue this discussion.

As we wade through these difficult questions about renewables, I think that there is one crucial issue. It is a question for the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change, Amber Rudd, as well as for us. Where do we go, post-2017, after the grace periods? What will our strategy be for renewable energy? How do we continue to maintain the momentum we have, in particular on wind energy onshore, which we know brings great benefits in green energy and consumer costs? That is a question that I hope that we can tackle even in this mandate to decide where our policy will bring us. Although Mr Cameron and Amber Rudd have turned their face against renewables, that is not what we want to do. We want to continue to build our green energy commitment. I hope that is a discussion that we will have with the Minister and the Department when he returns full time.

Mr Dickson: First, like others, I welcome the Minister to the House. It is just a shame that it is effectively a piece of legislation that this House needs to deal with that has brought him to the House. I would like to ask him about something when he goes back to his ministerial colleagues. This is a serious point.

I appreciate the importance of the legislation, but, Minister, there is a great deal of other important legislation that needs to be dealt with in the House. There are also very important matters that need to be dealt with in the House. I am strongly in support of good-quality environment measures and of the renewables and alternatives to carbon energy in Northern Ireland, but I am equally passionate about those patients who are caught in long queues for cancer treatment; I am equally passionate about street lighting and roads; and I am equally passionate about a whole range of issues that I, as an elected representative sent to the House by the people of East Antrim, cannot do because of your party and its silly stunt antics. That is what you are doing; you are making a farce of this place. You are here today because you know that the legislation has to pass.

Mr Speaker: You should stick to the motion, if you do not mind.

Mr Dickson: Yes; thank you, Mr Speaker, for directing us back to the motion. You are absolutely right. This is an important piece of legislation that needs to be dealt with. On the one hand, we have heard the serious concerns raised by the Committee in respect of the path and the roadway to where you are in respect of this very important debate. Listening to the Chair of the Committee, it clearly seems that you and your Department, Minister, have failed to take on board much of the debate and conversation because you spent the summer doing other things rather than the job that you were elected to do in the House.

I share the concerns that the Chair of the Committee highlighted about the legislation, but, equally, I respect his comment that, at the end of the day, it is essential that the order be passed in order to ensure that Northern Ireland is kept in the appropriate place in the processes that we need to go through.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dickson: I will.

Mr B McCrea: The Member supported the Chair of the Committee talking about the increased burden on the consumer. Would he care to comment on the fact that Northern Ireland has the most expensive electricity in the United Kingdom and that 42% of our consumers are living in fuel poverty?

Mr Dickson: I thank the Member for his intervention and wholeheartedly agree with him. On a daily basis, I see the effect that two power stations in my constituency have in contributing to those costs, at Ballylumford and at Kilroot, the history of which comes back to former direct rule Ministers and where we were in respect of the cost of energy, but the Assembly, the Minister and his predecessors have had ample opportunity to resolve many of the mistakes that were made in the past. I sincerely hope that we are not heading down a route where we see those direct rule Ministers in place again, making the same stupid, irrelevant and costly decisions for the people of Northern Ireland.

Fuel poverty is real; it is in your face. It is where people have to scrape together — I have been there and have seen it — the change out of their purse or their pocket to buy a power card to top up. That is the real face of fuel poverty. That is why it is important that we get our whole energy pricing and production in the right place in Northern Ireland.

We are ideally suited in this part of the world to benefit from wind power, but we have to have a strategic approach to that. There are those who say, "Not in my back yard". That is a matter for the Environment Minister and for quality planning decisions. That is for strategic decisions, but those decisions need to be made in conjunction with the Minister who is here today to ensure that we get best value for money in the delivery of all of that.

The current UK Government seem to have gone off the rails when it comes to renewable energies. They are cosy up to their Russian friends to buy gas rather than ensure that we have a renewable energy source that is fit for purpose and which will deliver for people. Driving through my constituency, when I see windmills and speak to people about them, some people like them and some people consider them an eyesore, but everybody says, "Am I getting value for money when I see that on the landscape?". The reality is that, unless this Minister digs in and does the job he was elected to do, nobody will get value for money when it comes to paying for their electricity or the other energy sources available to them.

1.00 pm

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dickson: Yes.

Mr Allister: Does the Member have any concerns about reports about the activity of lobbyists in respect of some

major renewable energy companies that are active in Northern Ireland and about whether such lobbyists are having undue influence on departmental policy?

Mr Dickson: I think it would be abhorrent to hear that lobbyists have undue influence. I have no problem with those who wish to set out their stall in respect of whatever arguments they are making to Departments, but it is quite clear that the buck stops with the Minister. It is his role to ensure that those who lobby do so fairly and in a straight manner and ensure that he is free and unshackled when it comes to making appropriate decisions.

At the end of the day —

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dickson: Yes.

Mr B McCrea: I want to pick up on the point made by Mr Allister. I was struck by the contributions from Members who spoke earlier in that an awful lot of them seemed to be about the needs of individual projects and companies. Does the Member agree that what is required is a long-term strategic approach and not one that is rushed into on the fly? We have some concerns about this. Perhaps the Member would dwell on how best to make sure that we are not in the pockets of lobbyists and that we make a proper decision.

Mr Dickson: I wholeheartedly agree. Every day, we hear people saying that we need joined-up government. When it comes to renewable energy, it is vitally important that we see a clear road map set in front of us. It is vitally important that we see that it is not about lobbying for individual projects; instead, that it is about a comprehensive strategy. It is the Minister's responsibility, along with others in the Executive, to deliver that comprehensive strategy. Too often, we see the not-in-my-back-yard mindset. One windmill will pop up here and one project will pop up there, but if people were able to see that that constituted part of an overall plan for the delivery of renewable energy in Northern Ireland, it would get a great deal more buy-in from the general public.

As I said, I am passionate about the delivery of renewable energy in Northern Ireland. It is the way forward and it is vitally important. However, I stand here today in frustration at a Minister who is in and out of office, along with his colleagues. That Minister is not delivering for people; he is failing the people of Northern Ireland today, and he is pushing through a piece of legislation because he knows that he has to, otherwise we will be even further out of step.

Equally, I share the concerns of the Chair of the Committee. He said that we do not have that strategy and that we need it. He told us that the Committee has sought information again and again, and that that information has either had to be dragged out of departmental officials or that they or the Minister failed to turn up to explain. That Committee is made up of members who are willing to share their expertise and knowledge and want to gain expertise and knowledge from people who come to the Committee; but when it cannot operate due to the shenanigans that are going on in this establishment, it makes a mockery of what the Minister is trying to do here today.

I support what the Minister is doing. I support this tiny piece of legislation that he is attempting to put through the House today, but, in all honesty, I think that this Minister and his colleagues are making a total and utter mockery of

this devolved Assembly. The sooner they stop it, the better. I encourage them to come back and do the jobs that they have been given.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dickson: I will.

Mr B McCrea: I am interested in the line of argument that Mr Dickson is developing. Can he examine why there is such urgency for the Department to push this through? Why was it necessary for a Minister who, up to now, had been taking post and resigning to stay on? What is so important about this particular bit of legislation that it has required a change of policy? There must be some reason for this.

Mr Dickson: I am pleased at the question, but I think it needs to be directed to the Minister. I will speculate and suggest that would clearly be to the detriment of Northern Ireland if this legislation is not passed. Clearly, some funding has to come along with it, and there is a danger that we will be out of step with the rest of the United Kingdom if we do not pass this today. It seems to be rather selfish that the Minister and his Executive colleagues, rather than the total Executive, have debated the matter and decided that this is important to them, but what is not important to them is the queue of people waiting for cancer treatment and the people waiting for other decisions that various other Departments should and could be making on a day and daily basis. Those are the concerns that I have in all this.

I am tempted to suggest that, if other Members could make speeches, we could effectively filibuster and keep the Minister here for hours on end, but that would be us acting in a silly way. It is worthwhile stressing the importance of the legislation in front of us. It is important because it forms part of a wider strategy on renewable energy, it highlights and points out the failures of this Minister, the Department and the Executive to deliver a road map for renewables in Northern Ireland and, finally, it highlights the ridiculous situation — the very serious ridiculous situation — of revolving-door Ministers coming in and out of the Executive and their failure to do the job they are paid to do by the citizens who elected them here.

Mr B McCrea: This is an interesting debate, if a little surprising. It is very nice to have a Minister here, particularly a renewable Minister, because we seem to renew him every single week. Maybe there will be some merit in that in the future. I hate to take credit for other people's work— Mr Allister can own up to that particular little joke.

There is something strange going on here. I am interested in energy. I have been to Ballylumford and various other power stations to see what is going on, and I am happy to engage with the industry. But this comes against a background. When you look at this originally, you see that we have to do something, because the Westminster Government have changed their position on renewables. I think that there has been a knee-jerk reaction to renewables and their cost, and that has precipitated a crisis of investment not just in this part of the world but throughout the United Kingdom. As someone who firmly believes in climate change, I will say that it is happening —

Mr Flanagan: I thank the Member for giving way. The Member has rightly pointed out that the whole rationale

for the debate is that the policy decisions in Westminster have changed. Given that electricity here trades on an all-island basis, does the Member agree that we should be incentivising renewable electricity generators in the future through an all-island system, where those costs could be socialised across electricity customers in all of Ireland, instead of piggybacking on to a system that can be changed at the whim of a British Minister who has absolutely no control, influence or understanding of our unique set of circumstances here?

Mr Speaker: Just before you resume, let me say that the speaker is well aware of the dress code and of how rigorous I am in ensuring that it applies to all Members. You are well aware that it applies to you. I regard your intervention and your speaking as contravening a ruling on this that I gave previously, and I will return to the matter.

Mr McCrea, please continue.

Mr B McCrea: To deal with the substance of the point that was raised about whether we should be looking at an all-Ireland energy policy or how that would affect the legislation in front of us, I will say that, from what I know of energy policy, it takes place in a European framework. There is an issue about how we manage to deal with what, I think, are the worst excesses of a Northern Ireland energy policy that puts 42% of our people in fuel poverty. That is an intolerable burden, to which we now are apparently going to add.

The Chair of the Committee, in his submission, ran up to the brink three or four times; in fact, maybe even a dozen times. He said, "This is not acceptable; this is not right. We were not informed; we do not know." At the end of it, perhaps for pragmatic, legislative reasons, he said, "But in the end, we are going to support this." I am not sure that that is the right approach. I have not had the opportunity to understand what is motivating this legislation.

It is strange, Mr Speaker, that, in comparison with all other bits of legislation, when you have read out repeatedly over the last number of weeks, "The Minister is not available, so the motion cannot be moved" — really significant bits of legislation that I wanted to make a contribution on — the only bit of legislation that has thus far provoked a change in policy is this one: the seemingly obscure Renewables Obligation Closure Order. It does not exactly roll off the tongue; nor is it immediately apparent what exactly it is about. As someone whose job it is, along with my colleagues in this Chamber, to scrutinise orders, particularly those passed by affirmative resolution, I need to know more and to have a better, convincing story about why this legislation must go through. What is so important about it that it ranks above all other issues, including the health service, the economy in general and the Department of Social Development?

When I heard about the individual, specific projects, which the Chair of the Committee very clearly set out, it started to ring alarm bells with me. It appears to be that we have to pass this legislation or a specific project or a specific company will not invest. Do not get me wrong: I am not saying that we should not get investment. Investment is good; renewable energy is good; all these things are good. But when you start to bring in legislation specifically for the benefit of a particular project, it raises the spectre of undue influence from lobbyists and lobbying. That is a question that we need to address. Energy policy is one of

those things that is so big and so expensive that it is hard to describe and to talk about it sensibly.

It is relevant to this debate that, as we have established, our legislation — this order — takes place against a UK legislative background. I am aware that Drax, the big power station that was talking about investing in CO₂ capture, has pulled out of that investment, citing the fact that they have no confidence in the Government's long-term renewable energy policy. Now, if that is happening in that project, it will happen in all projects.

We talk about the exemption of onshore wind power in this order. I have sat in this Chamber and listened to Members saying time and time again that we have too many wind turbines. A Member of this Assembly, who is now in another place, talked about triffids marching over our landscape and argued that we do not need them anymore. I have heard MLAs bemoan the fact that we do not have the infrastructure to bring back the wind power from our most profitable areas in the west of the Province; I have heard MLAs talk about the dangers of wind turbines collapsing. Against that background, I am slightly curious about why we should exempt onshore wind specifically.

I would have thought, if we were going to take a strategic position, that we would be looking at things in the round. My understanding — I think the Minister said this at the start — is that we have met our targets, so why are we not talking about our future targets? I want to know whether we are going to put public investment into the infrastructure that brings energy back from the wind turbines and who will pay for that.

1.15 pm

It was asked whether we should be in an all-Ireland energy market. The question is, why are we stopping the interconnector? Why are people here saying that they do not want an interconnector because of environmental issues or whatever? We have to make sure that we get an all-Ireland energy market, because that will be good for the people of Northern Ireland. All of that should be dealt with in this debate.

Mr Dickson suggested that, because this is the only bit of legislation that we have to debate, we could talk for some time on this, if we were so minded. We should talk for some time on this; we should be asking the questions; and we should be able to address the specific issues. I have never heard in the Chamber — I have been here for almost eight years — such a list of concerns from the Chair of a Statutory Committee left unanswered by a Department. There is a particular issue around why you would change your mind so quickly. How, from one week to the next, could you suddenly change and say, "Do you know what? We've solved it"? This is energy policy on the fly. This is a knee-jerk reaction, and it does not seem to be the right way to go about things.

Even though I am totally committed to the notion that climate change is a reality, we have to do something about it and we must invest in renewables, the renewables industry has lost the battle with the consumer. The consumer does not understand why prices are going to go up. Hard-pressed consumers are trying to find ways to put food on the table, keep their home heated and look after their family, and, if they hear that they will suddenly have to pay more — it is 42% of the population I am talking about

— they will say, “Are you really sure that we have to make that investment? Are you really sure that it is the consumer who has to pick up the bill?”. Those are legitimate questions, particularly for people in the west of the Province, where fuel poverty is concentrated, for citizens of Northern Ireland who are not on the gas main and for citizens of Northern Ireland who must take oil or other fossil fuels. They have a serious living standards crisis, and that is something that the Assembly ought to deal with.

I will conclude by saying that there needs to be a clear analysis of why specific projects are included in the discussion. I am not heartened by the fact that that is what this debate is all about. There should be some consideration of individual issues, but if we are going to let lobbyists manage this country, we might as well do away with the democratic institutions. All you will hear is, “You need to talk to the right people to see if you can get the right decision made. And, do you know what? Even if you are taking a huge political stance, we can turn it over just to make sure that we get an order through”. That is not right; that is not democracy; and people ought to take a stand on it.

Mr Bell: This is a difficult subject. Energy faces something of a trilemma. My only interest and the only interest I will ever have is in trying to resolve in the best interests of everyone in Northern Ireland the trilemma that energy faces: how to deal with cost for domestic and commercial customers — we know how hard pressed many of our households are; I certainly do in Strangford; how we deal with sustainability; and how we deal with security of supply. Those are three of the most difficult and challenging issues that we have to face and try to get a resolution on that fits now and in the future.

It has been a lengthy process to get to this point. Throughout, it has been my aim to bring the NIRO to an orderly conclusion in a way that maximises renewable deployment in Northern Ireland at least cost to the consumer. The order achieves that balance for non-wind technologies. Today, I have signed off on proposals that will do the same for onshore wind. Those will be with the Committee today.

I want to respond to some of the issues that were raised. Mr McGlone raised issues of confusion, disorientation and a lack of leadership: I have no intention of getting into the SDLP’s leadership debate. On this serious issue, the position on the non-wind closure has remained consistent throughout: closure in 2017, with a grace period to 2018 and the costs being socialised. Because of the cost implications, we have had to take account of the UK Government’s changing policy regarding onshore wind. I wanted to give certainty to all developers, and I recognise — I had to recognise — that that would take longer for onshore wind. There is always more risk in taking different approaches, but you must make a judgement that is based on the balance of risks. If the decisions were entirely black and white and I could see the future, it would be simple, but that is not the reality. It was and has been raised —

Mr Allister: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Bell: No, I think that I have heard enough from you, Mr Allister. Your contribution was spectacularly poor, and it failed to detail any of the real issues that affect jobs and investment in Northern Ireland. It was my intention to —

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it in order for the Minister to mislead the House by suggesting that I have spoken in the debate and made an inadequate contribution when I have not spoken in the debate at all? He is the one running away from a simple intervention.

Mr Speaker: I am more inclined to interpret that as a mistake than as a deliberate intention to mislead the House.

Mr Bell: For the purposes of clarity, Mr Allister’s contribution was inadequate to the matter here today. I have spoken to people who run businesses and to domestic consumers. We have spent hours looking at the trilemma that we face in energy policy, and anybody who looks at the serious issues, as opposed to the immature grandstanding of Mr Allister, will realise how inadequate his intervention was. Let me return to the serious issues. I want to provide —

Mr B McCrea: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Bell: I will come to you in a second, Mr McCrea.

I want to provide all developers with the certainty that they need. Unfortunately, as I said, the changes in the UK Government’s policy position on the early closure of the renewables obligation in Great Britain to onshore wind created unavoidable delays due to the lengthy discussions that were held regarding the socialisation of costs. I want the least costs across the United Kingdom, both for —

Mr Dickson: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Bell: I will deal with a range of things. Bear with me: I want to make some progress.

I want to deal with costs to householders who are struggling, but I want to do that in a balanced way that leads not to jobs leaving Northern Ireland but to sustaining the jobs that are already here and puts us in a position to take new jobs in the future.

In the Member’s contribution, he said that I was not working over the summer, but, to the best of my knowledge, I announced 700-plus new jobs. The Member should consult his ministerial colleague Mr Farry about some of the work that we did on the financial services industry and listen to the speech that he gave that day. That seems to be at variance with what the Member has attempted to suggest to the House.

In August, in the absence of having that final policy position on onshore wind, I took the decision to close the NIRO in two stages. The rationale for that was to give clarity to non-wind developers, as we could not, then, set out a final policy on onshore wind. The proposed Renewables Obligation Closure Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 gives non-wind developers the legislative certainty that they require. A further NIRO closure, as I said, will be introduced to address onshore wind, and that will come to the Committee.

I will turn to the Member who spoke next, Máirtín Ó Muilleoir. Let me say clearly, which I did at the start, that the costs of non-wind will be fully socialised right across the United Kingdom. For me, that is a win for the domestic consumer and for business. It is me acting in the best interests of everyone in Northern Ireland.

In relation to Mr Ó Muilleoir’s comments about posts, most reasonable people will understand that the murder of Kevin

McGuigan was not something that we could just ignore and continue to do business as usual. We said at the time that it was not the case that we would not do business at all but that we could not do business as usual, given the seriousness, which has not been mentioned yet by those who would like to make their points, of the murder of Kevin McGuigan on our streets and the PSNI response to that. Everyone in the House should have taken that seriously and should have mentioned it, had they wanted to open that debate.

In further response to Mr Ó Muilleoir —

Mr B McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Although I sympathise with the statements being made, you have been, correctly, trying to keep our attention on the legislation in front of us. I wonder whether that applies to the Minister as well.

Mr Speaker: I am sure that you are not challenging the authority of the Chair. I consciously paid very close attention to the Minister's response to a number of contributions from Members. I felt that at least there was balance in the discussion. I would have brought the Minister back to the focus of the debate had he continued in that vein. He put on record his position in response to comments made by Members earlier, and I think that that was satisfactory enough.

Mr Bell: Thank you, Mr Speaker. My response to a point raised by Mr Ó Muilleoir is that the existing support for renewable generation will continue post-2017 until 2037. It is anticipated that that will increase renewable electricity deployment in Northern Ireland to somewhere in the region of 30%. I think that that is a considerable achievement for a region of this size.

A decision on whether Northern Ireland should become part of the UK-wide contract for difference is a matter for the Executive. My predecessor consulted on this in March 2015, highlighting the key balance to be struck between further support for new development and the cost to consumers. Given the Conservative manifesto commitment to stop any future subsidies for onshore wind, it is sensible to take account of the UK Government's expected announcements in the autumn. That is because it could be disproportionately expensive to try to run a Northern Ireland-only scheme.

The issue of electricity prices was raised in the debate, and I am acutely conscious of it. The regulator and my Department have a responsibility to protect the interests of all consumers. We have tried to do so by promoting competition, supporting innovation and contributing to investment. I know that the cost of electricity, particularly to business, is as close to many Members' hearts and those of businesses in their constituencies as it is to mine and to those who raise such issues with me in Strangford.

Mr Dickson: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Bell: I wish to make progress.

We have to be careful when talking about cost. My information is that the vast majority of Northern Ireland consumers have electricity bills that are around the European Union average, following falls in tariffs that were announced in April. Recent industry reports show that energy prices are at their lowest level for six years and that Northern Ireland gas bills are below the European Union average. I accept that a small number of very large

consumers have electricity bills that are above that average but I also understand that, currently, they are lower than those in the rest of the United Kingdom as a whole.

1.30 pm

Again, in terms of adding costs to people in fuel poverty, I put on record that the order for non-wind technologies results in costs being socialised. The renewable obligation levels —

Mr B McCrea: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Bell: Yes, go ahead.

Mr B McCrea: Minister, I am wondering about your assertion on the progress on energy in Northern Ireland. Figures just released from the Department of Energy and Climate Change say that, last year, Northern Ireland bills rose by an average of £49, making them more expensive than anywhere in Great Britain. New figures from the Department show that, in 2014, average bills in Northern Ireland were £661, compared with a UK average of £592. That is for consumers. I think that there is a strange chasm between the figures that the Minister is relying upon and the figures produced by the Department of Energy and Climate Change.

Mr Bell: That is why I think, Mr McCrea, we have to deal with what we are dealing with today. It is why I say to you that the order for non-wind technologies results in costs being socialised across the United Kingdom, which, therefore, means that there is no additional burden to Northern Ireland. That is why I have spent hours trying to ensure that we have got a way forward for Northern Ireland that does not lead to additional costs.

The renewable obligation level is a good deal for Northern Ireland. It is estimated to be in the region of 50% of the GB level. Let me repeat this again: it will not mean additional costs to Northern Ireland. That is why I have worked through, intensely, line by line, the sometimes changing position that has come from DECC. I can understand that Members have struggled as positions have changed and we have had to adapt to those positions. The urgency of today will, I think, be well understood out there in the business community, certainly the people I am speaking to, some of the major employers in Northern Ireland.

To conclude, this proposed rule will close the NIRO to new non-wind generation on 31 March 2017 and introduce closure grace periods. A further closure order will be brought forward to address the closure of the NIRO to onshore wind. That will also be subject to debate in the Assembly. I thank everyone who has contributed to today's debate. I commend the motion to the House.

Mr Allister: Resign.

Some Members: He did.

Mr B McCrea: Resign again. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the draft Renewables Obligation Closure Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 be approved.

Committee Business

Environmental Better Regulation Bill: Extension of Committee Stage

Ms Lo (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment): I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 27 November 2015, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Environmental Better Regulation Bill [NIA 55/11-16].

On Tuesday 1 July 2015, the Assembly referred the Environmental Better Regulation Bill to the Committee for the Environment for scrutiny.

The Bill is essentially an enabling Bill and will provide for a more streamlined environmental permitting system; rationalise and simplify the powers of entry for environmental inspection and investigation; and amend existing environmental legislation regarding fuels and fireplaces, air quality assessment and drinking water regulation.

The Committee has already concluded its call for evidence and has received 14 written submissions from interested organisations. These were either in response to the signposting notices in the local press or a result of direct contact by the Committee. The Committee firmly believes that it is essential that all stakeholders be given the opportunity to comment on the Bill. To that end, it has already held three evidence sessions, and a stakeholder event has been arranged for 1 October to allow other organisations that submitted a response an opportunity to voice their views on the Bill.

The Bill is a key element of the Department's regulatory transformation programme. There has been much criticism that environmental regulation is too complex, inflexible, incoherent and time-consuming. Indeed, small and medium-sized businesses cited that the lack of integration between environmental permits and the resource-intensive nature of complying with multiple uncoordinated inspections have hindered them in doing business.

The Committee recognises that this is important and significant legislation, and it is therefore essential that it be afforded the time to fully exercise its scrutiny powers. It seeks to ensure that the Assembly is provided with the right controls and safeguards for any future regulations that will be made under the Bill. It is already aware of some concerns about the Bill and wishes to be afforded adequate time to address those with the Department.

In conclusion, Mr Speaker, I ask that the House support the motion to extend the Committee Stage of the Environmental Better Regulation Bill to 27 November 2015.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 27 November 2015, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Environmental Better Regulation Bill [NIA 55/11-16].

Inquiry into Building a United Community: Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister Report

Mr Speaker: The next item of business is a motion from the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister on the report on its inquiry into building a united community. 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 the motion and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members will have five minutes.

Mr Nesbitt (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the report of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister [NIA 257/11-16] on its inquiry into building a united community; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister, along with their Executive colleagues, to implement the recommendations contained in the report.

As Chair of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, I find it a pleasure to open the debate on the Committee's report on its inquiry into Together: Building a United Community (T:BUC). May I begin by commending my colleagues on the Committee for their work in recent months in bringing this important report to the Floor of the House?

During its inquiry, the Committee received representations from 70 individuals, academics and community, voluntary and statutory organisations. We held two stakeholder events and invited a range of stakeholders to give formal evidence. Some of those who spoke to the Committee told us that it was the first time that they had been heard from in a forum of that kind. In bringing forward this debate and presenting the Committee's report formally to the Assembly, we have an opportunity to give a voice to those who engaged with us. I want to place on record the Committee's thanks to all those who contributed to the inquiry in writing, through formal oral evidence and by participating in the stakeholder events.

The Committee's inquiry has resulted in over 30 key conclusions and recommendations for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, as well as their Executive colleagues, covering a range of issues from consultation and engagement with stakeholders to the financial resources required to adequately resource T:BUC, from involving communities in decision-making to acknowledging the complex issues that need to be addressed before interface barriers can be removed and from considering the challenges of contested space faced by rural communities to issues relating to mental health and intergenerational trauma. I do not wish, nor do I have time, to go through each of those recommendations individually. Members, of course, have an opportunity to read through the report themselves, and I commend that course of action to them. However, I wish to provide some background to the Committee's approach to the inquiry and to highlight some of the themes that emerged.

Many of you will recall that Together: Building a United Community was launched by the First Minister and deputy

First Minister in May 2013 as the Executive's strategy to achieve:

“a united community, based on equality of opportunity, the desirability of good relations and reconciliation — one which is strengthened by its diversity, where cultural expression is celebrated and embraced and where everyone can live, learn, work and socialise together, freed from prejudice, hate and intolerance.”

What began as a strategic priority for the Committee in terms of scrutiny of the T:BUC strategy developed into an inquiry. The Committee agreed its terms of reference for an inquiry into T:BUC in July 2014 and, in doing so, committed to two measures: first, to explore perspectives on sectarianism, division and good relations, looking at theory and practice; and, secondly, to seek views on what “good relations” means and how sectarianism and division can be addressed. That included looking at the role of communities in decision-making; rural and urban interfaces and the issues that need to be addressed for barriers to be removed; and the effectiveness of the good relations indicators in monitoring and measuring government interventions. The inquiry was intended not as a review of the T:BUC strategy but as an opportunity for Members to hear from government, statutory agencies, the community and voluntary sector and interested individuals and to make recommendations to support and enhance policy in uniting communities.

Led by the themes emerging through written and oral evidence, the Committee has considered a wide variety of issues and challenges. While tensions between communities, particularly at urban interfaces, often attract negative press, there are many positive stories of efforts to build a united and shared community. There are good news stories like the plan to transform a waste area of ground at an interface into cross-community garden plots — a plan supported by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and the Big Lottery — or the shared community space developed in a County Antrim village that now incorporates a community pharmacy, a Sure Start programme and mother-and-toddler groups. Members may already be familiar with the Game of 3 Halves initiative promoted by the GAA, the Irish Football Association and the Ulster branch of the Irish Rugby Football Union. Those are not the only examples, but I mention them to remind Members that, while the task of building a united community may, at times, seem like a jigsaw that will never be completed, small pieces of the puzzle are quietly being put in place in communities across this land already.

Over the course of its inquiry, the Committee heard from many committed individuals who have invested much of their time, energy and, sometimes, even their own resources in building a united community. We heard, for example, from three representatives working with groups in Derry/Londonderry who told us that, between them, they had 100 years' experience in the field. The importance of developing good working relationships and building trust also cannot be overstated. I quote one witness:

“You do not build relationships with organisations; you build relationships with people and individuals within organisations.”

1.45 pm

In its report, the Committee expressed its concern regarding the high level of burnout affecting those working in the sector, including a heavy reliance on specific individuals, albeit individuals with enthusiasm and passion for the task in hand. It is for that reason that the Committee recommended that Departments, arm's-length bodies and statutory agencies have in place an appropriate support mechanism for the organisations in receipt of their funding and that they strongly encourage their funded organisations to consider suitable succession planning.

What also became evident through members' engagement with practitioners was the burden placed on organisations and individuals by short-term funding cycles. The Committee acknowledges the financial pressures, due to the uncertain economic climate, faced by all those reliant on public funds, but it also recognises the importance of placing funding mechanisms targeted at building a united community on a more stable footing to achieve the objectives outlined by Together: Building a United Community.

The Committee also noted renewed energy in the involvement of local communities in decision-making and policy development, particularly in relation to the introduction of community planning as a key power of the new councils. Members welcomed the inclusion of the district council good relations programme within the broader T:BUC framework. While there are areas that require attention, such as the timing of letters of offer, we noted the positive working relationship between good relations officers and departmental officials.

The Committee recognises the importance of respecting the pace at which people are willing to travel in building a united community and that that will differ depending on local circumstances. In light of this, the Committee recommended that single identity groups are provided with the tools to build confidence and capacity but, at the same time, are helped to understand the value of moving beyond a single identity approach and are provided with opportunities for that to happen.

A theme that emerged consistently throughout the Committee's evidence gathering but that was not part of the terms of reference was mental health and intergenerational trauma. Whilst acknowledging those very real concerns, members felt that it would be impossible to deal with this subject fairly in the context of what was already a very wide-ranging inquiry. Efforts to build a united and shared community require a holistic approach, and the Committee has therefore recommended that the Executive undertake closer cross-departmental consideration of issues relating to mental health and intergenerational trauma.

This is just a small reflection of the breadth of the issues considered by the Committee during this inquiry. The report represents the first time that a Committee of the Assembly has undertaken extensive scrutiny of these matters. In so doing, the Committee notes the words of the First Minister of the time who, in launching Together: Building a United Community, said:

“It would be idealistic to think that any initiative, no matter how significant, can heal all of society's

divisions and problems". — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 85, p55, col 2].

Similarly, this report and our debate today is not the end of the conversation, but having considered the evidence presented, the Committee proposed a number of recommendations that it hopes will contribute to the ongoing discussions and development of policy aimed at building a truly united community for all our people. On that basis, I look forward to the contributions of other Members today.

Ms Fearon: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak on an important issue, particularly in the week that is in it, which is Community Relations Week. What better time to discuss ways to unite our community? I have to say at the outset that it is a shame that there is no Minister here to respond to the debate. It is important, and we are not going to solve these issues if we do not have political leadership. There seems to be a vacuum in certain parts of the Chamber.

I will start by thanking the Committee staff. I know that a serious amount of work has been involved in the inquiry and the report. I also thank the stakeholders. We heard from a wide-ranging group of stakeholders, as the Chair said. The inquiry and its recommendations are intended to support and enhance the development of T:BUC. It was not necessarily a critique, but it is an important strategy for our community, so the Committee wanted to play a role in that. There are quite a lot of areas to cover throughout the report, so hopefully I will cover a few of them.

One of the strengths of T:BUC is its cross-cutting nature, much like Delivering Social Change, which has proven to be a successful model for joint working and cooperation. T:BUC has the potential to deliver and make a real difference to people on the ground. It is essential that it is given priority by Departments and also by the relevant scrutiny Committees. It cannot just be left to the OFMDFM Committee to cover, because it cuts across all those Departments. We all want to see the best outcomes for each designated project but also for it to have the maximum impact on the ground.

We recommended that it be reported on annually and discussed in the Assembly as a way of measuring progress and of making contributions to that progress. It is important that the sector and stakeholders are included and consulted regularly as people who are often but not always at the coalface of good relations work.

There is a consensus that there is a lack of focus on rural communities at times when it comes to tackling sectarianism and good relations. It is not that problems do not exist. It is just that in rural communities often those issues and problems will manifest themselves in a different way. It is important that the good work being done in rural communities is given the recognition it deserves and that rural models are shared for good practice. It is important that the seven headline actions are rural-proofed. Rural proofing is something that Michelle O'Neill is working on.

Councils will be playing a major role with their community planning powers. I am glad to see that the district council good relations programme has been included in the T:BUC strategy. It is often the small-scale projects with the smallest budgets that will make the most significant impact in communities. That is something that we heard in our evidence.

We have a narrative that there are two communities in the North of Ireland. While that is largely the case, our community has become more diverse than ever and our society has changed and been enhanced. That is sometimes forgotten in this Chamber. That diversity is something we should be proud of and is one of our greatest strengths. This strategy should recognise the valuable contributions that the LGBT community, as well as ethnic minority and disability groups, make to our society. They should be included in a meaningful way. While sectarianism is a major problem, so, too, is racism, homophobia, transphobia and discrimination in general. Those issues must be tackled equally if we are to build a truly shared and united community, as the strategy states.

It would be remiss of me not to mention the failure of strategies to address women. The Good Friday Agreement commitment to advance women in public life is unfulfilled. Agreements and strategies produced to tackle the so-called big issues of our society have been gender-blind and have essentially failed women. How do we expect to build a shared community when we are practically ignoring 50% of it? T:BUC has to address the lack of women in politics and peace-building.

I commend the recent work on the gender principles for dealing with the past. I hope that they will be taken seriously, because the different post-conflict needs that women have compared with men have not been given significant thought.

We talk about developing shared and safe spaces. The reality is that there is no such thing as a safe space for women; there is just no such thing. All we have to do is look at the statistics for crimes against women. That has to be taken into context.

We all want to achieve what T:BUC set out to do and build a society that we can all be proud of, but that has always required political leadership. It is important that whatever we do, it is done in a progressive and inclusive manner. Unfortunately, I do not think that everyone in the Chamber has bought into that yet.

Assembly Business

Standing Order 20(1): Suspension

Mr Speaker: As I announced earlier, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety resigned his position on Thursday 24 September. As the position remains vacant, in accordance with Assembly convention, questions listed for oral answer will fall. I also advise Members that until another Minister is appointed, questions for written answer will not be accepted. Unanswered questions submitted before the Minister's resignation will be answered when the vacancy has been filled.

Questions to Justice will commence at 2.45 pm. To allow us to continue this debate in the meantime requires the suspension of Standing Orders.

Mr Swann: I beg to move

That Standing Order 20(1) be suspended for 28 September 2015.

Mr Speaker: Before I put the Question, I remind Members that this motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Order 20(1) be suspended for 28 September 2015.

Mr Speaker: As the motion has been agreed, we will now return to the debate.

Committee Business

Inquiry into Building a United Community: Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister Report

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly notes the report of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister [NIA 257/11-16] on its inquiry into building a united community; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister, along with their Executive colleagues, to implement the recommendations contained in the report. — [Mr Nesbitt.]

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate. It is an important piece of work that the Committee has undertaken, and I speak on behalf of my party colleague Alex Attwood, who is a member of the Committee. As you know, Mr Speaker, it is called the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. Some listeners might have been a bit confused about whose responsibility the implementation of the strategy is. It is not just the First Minister's; it falls to the First Minister and the deputy First Minister.

It is clear that we have a number of problems in trying to resolve the many issues that continue to divide the community in the North of Ireland. There is still a very long way to travel, and the evidence that the Committee heard about urban interfaces and the malevolent forces that operate in some of them here is a testament to that. I would go further and say that it is not just the physical barriers. There are a number of invisible barriers right across our community that hold back the community. We all look to political leadership and leadership at community level to try to help move society forward.

Mr B McCrea: I thank the Member for giving way. I was going to bring this point up in my contribution. She is the first Member, to my knowledge, to mention paragraph 24, which states:

"recognises that malevolent forces continue to have influence in some communities".

Do you not think that it is strange that such a perverse finding was not mentioned earlier in the debate?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mrs D Kelly: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I think that the unusual circumstances in which we find the Assembly and Executive not working is testament to the prevalence and influence of malevolent forces in many of our communities. That is an important point for Mr McCrea to have made.

(Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Newton] in the Chair)

I will return to my script. Our party fully agrees with the Committee's call for an interim evaluation of the strategy on how to heal society's divisions and problems. It is a worry that, on page 9 of the report, the Committee identified that it was not possible to obtain a budget breakdown for the lifetime of T:BUC. It could not get even a budget outline; that is how bad it is. I recall the former junior Minister Mr Bell in the Chamber, promising over 100 places to our young people. Those have not yet materialised, to the best of my knowledge. In fact, I believe

that pressure was put on the Minister for Employment and Learning to commit to and deliver on that promise under T:BUC without any additional funding. That, in itself, is a major concern. Our young people in particular have lost out on employment and training opportunities because of the failure of politics over the last number of years, and they are being switched off from politics because of the failure to deal with the sectarianism and division that still prevails in our community. The priorities of T:BUC remain crucially important, and the Committee should continue to pursue a budget breakdown for the strategy as evidence that it is being measured and carefully considered.

It is also a worry that money is allocated to specific non-related projects, and the subsequent “ad hoc-ery” does little to advance reconciliation or help to improve the lives of those living in turbulent communities in Northern Ireland. Some of those communities are some of the most deprived communities, where people are living in absolute poverty. It is startling that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister was found guilty in a court over its failure to deliver an anti-poverty strategy. It seems as if some parties are quite happy that some communities are kept down and kept divided. Maybe that is what helps to ensure that their vote continues to rise, but, as the old saying goes, “You can fool some of the people some of the time but not all of the people all of the time”.

2.00 pm

I will go back to the strategy and the uncertainty created about funding. In particular, short-term funding cycles can cause significant delay in the advancement of important projects, and OFMDFM needs to take stock of the difficulty that is caused to groups that are bidding for funding and attempting to keep projects afloat when they are dependent on short-term, indefinite amounts of funding from the Department. We will not be able to make sure that T:BUC continues to progress reconciliation and shared activity in Northern Ireland if we cannot maintain a consistent, fervent approach on project outcomes and finance.

Another interesting aspect of the report is the level and quality of academic work that has been produced on issues such as sectarianism, the effect of the past and coexistent and shared communities. Whilst all this valuable information and research is available to us, there is no point in having a wide array of information and academic analysis if nobody is looking at it. As the Committee has noted, T:BUC needs to be aware constantly of the significant differences between each individual community in Northern Ireland.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring her remarks to a close?

Mrs D Kelly: One method or approach in a particular area may not work at all in another area. I would like to think that we have moved on from single-identity work and are engaging in real cross-community work.

Mr Lyttle: I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion. The ambition to contribute towards tackling division and building a united community is one of the main reasons why I stepped forward to get involved in politics in Northern Ireland. The Alliance Party firmly believes that building a shared society in Northern Ireland is the single biggest challenge facing us. Indeed, it should be the central overarching priority for the Executive. I

echo Megan Fearon's comments, therefore, that it is disappointing that we do not have a ministerial response to this crucial issue. Indeed, I think that it is a disgrace and is a real missed opportunity for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to tell us what positive contribution and development it thinks has been achieved by the strategy to date.

The Alliance Party strongly supported the shared future strategy in 2005 and the triennial action plans that went with the strategy. We worked tirelessly to ensure that the parties in the Executive brought forward a devolved good relations strategy for Northern Ireland and supported the cohesion, sharing and integration (CSI) strategy consultation in 2010. That initial draft strategy was robustly criticised — rightly — by the community in Northern Ireland and led to the CSI working group, to which I contributed for many months before withdrawing on behalf of the Alliance Party, having identified a wholly inadequate lack of ambition in the draft strategy, not least with a lack of targets for integrated education and shared neighbourhoods and a wholly inadequate response to dealing with flags, parades and the past and, indeed, the lack of an action plan on budgets.

Dealing with this issue will not be achieved by tinkering around the edges. We need the Together: Building a United Community strategy to tackle underlying patterns of segregation, exclusion, discrimination and threat if we are to see a truly shared society in Northern Ireland. I welcome the work that is being done by ‘The Detail’ and the Community Relations Council with their poster project, which is being rolled out as part of Community Relations Week. It shows in stark detail how Northern Ireland is now a community of minorities and that, to chart a way forward, we need compromise and a recognition of our inter-reliance and interdependence.

On that note, I welcome a number of the recommendations in the Committee inquiry's report into Together: Building a United Community, not least the recognition that is given to the passion, energy and enthusiasm that many individuals in our community and voluntary sector bring to developing a united community in Northern Ireland. I thank those contributors to the inquiry for their work on the ground. I also welcome the recognition of the burden that is placed on the efforts of those people in our community through the short-term funding cycles that are provided to them and the often late funding offer that they receive.

I proposed that the report on this inquiry recommend the creation of a Together: Building a United Community forum. That was on the basis of my understanding of the positive contribution of the NEETs forum created by the Department for Employment and Learning. It has been a useful model in which to include the community and voluntary sector and other bodies in the design and delivery of this important strategy. I welcome that the recommendation has been made, and I look forward to hearing the ministerial response to it.

I also welcome the reference in the report to the level of academic expertise here in Northern Ireland with regard to the work of Together: Building a United Community. However, I express on record my disappointment that some members of the Committee voted to exclude some of our noteworthy academic experts from giving evidence to this important inquiry.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lyttle: Yes, I will give way.

Mr B McCrea: I think that there was a vote on whether Duncan Morrow would be allowed to make a contribution. Will the Member tell me and the Assembly a little more about that?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Member for his intervention. As he has raised the issue, I will confirm that his understanding is accurate. It is extremely disappointing, not least given that the person whom he mentions was deemed worthy enough by the Scottish Government to appoint as chair of a working group into tackling sectarianism in Scotland. Thankfully, there were many positive contributions made to the inquiry. We have a robust report to work from, and I am sure that Duncan and many of the other academic experts in Northern Ireland will add their support and ongoing efforts.

The Committee report also recognises the merit of bringing groups together on common issues. Groups such as Community Relations in Schools are to be commended and recognised for the work that they have done on a nursery buddy scheme, but we need —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring his remarks to a conclusion?

Mr Lyttle: — much more action from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to support this important work on the ground, if we are to build a truly shared society in Northern Ireland.

Mr Maskey: I would like to say just a few words this afternoon on the inquiry report. I join colleagues in thanking all staff members who worked tirelessly to facilitate this. I also thank all those who participated in the inquiry, including all the Committee members, and particularly the stakeholder organisations and representatives who came and gave of their valuable time and even more valuable experience to allow the Committee to consider T:BUC in the context of work already under way in quite a number of communities.

We often talk about the two communities, and, yes, we do have two core aspects of our community, which is divided along key national identity and constitutional lines. However, thankfully, in another way, we are becoming an increasingly multicultural society, which will be to the benefit of all of us. That does not mean for one second that we seek to diminish or downplay our national identity; it simply gives us a greater opportunity to learn from others. We have to share whatever our identity is with others and learn from them.

Having been an elected representative for quite a number of years, I, for one, have had many, many opportunities to work with people from different community and ethnic minority backgrounds, people of different nationalities and people who have come here more recently. Tremendous opportunities have been afforded to people like me and many other local elected representatives to work with others, learn directly from their experiences and share the best aspects of their cultures. Yes, we have to stand by and protect all our rights and identities, but we have to do so in the context that there are many other worthy and

worthwhile communities and identities here, all of which need to be respected on the same equal basis.

Mr Lyttle: Will the Member give way?

Mr Maskey: I will.

Mr Lyttle: I wholeheartedly support the Member's comments. Does he share my disappointment and concern that a key aspect of the Together: Building a United Community strategy was the delivery of the racial equality strategy by the end of 2013?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I thank the Member for that. Our party is in total agreement that we need to make sure that we protect all our communities. If that means we have to develop different and additional strategies, that has to be the case. I support the concept that we make sure that we develop all these strategies in the interests of all people who now live in this society and many whom we around this Chamber represent.

In conducting the inquiry, there were no surprises because we spoke to a lot of people who have been working at these issues for some time. As the Chair said, some organisations have had a collective 100-year span of experience. I know people around the community who have been working at what we often call the coalface. I would like to pay tribute to many of those people because they have been working very often quietly and in the background to try to sustain their own communities as they see them and are part of, but also work with others.

I want to put on record that, going back to the early 1990s when we had European Peace money coming here, we devised strategies that were very important and there were great lessons around that because there were partnership arrangements in play, and it was probably the first time that we had actual organic partnerships organised and working. That gave a lot of people an opportunity. There was significant funding made available from 1994 for at least another couple of years. A lot of people were doing single-identity work. I listened to the argument around single-identity work, and I think that it is an important part of it, but, in a way, some communities and organisations have chosen to stay within a single-identity framework. I do not think that is at all healthy. It is important that we give each community and all sectors in our community, be it young people, women or whoever, the tools. That is what the inquiry report recommends.

We need to give people the tools to build their capacity to work from within, if that is what makes them comfortable and if they want to learn about and share their own identity and where they see challenges to that. But it is essential that we signpost those people into making sure that they work with the rest of the communities that are around them because none of us live in an island. Too many people live in homogeneous communities, but that is the nature of our society. There are a number of what might be described as shared neighbourhoods, but despite the great work that has been going on for years, an awful lot more work needs to be done.

When we have disputes around flags, parades and so on, very often communities that have been working at the coalface to build good relations tend to take a step back

when they see big controversial issues coming. In other words, when they see the parties taking a lead on those matters, I have found that, over the years, many of the people who have been working at the coalface tend to take a step back. I think that is unfortunate and regrettable. I urge all those out there who have great experience working at cross-community activity, building good relations —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

Mr Maskey: — and doing single-identity work to make sure that they work with the politicians, not against the politicians because neither can the politicians do all the work themselves. These matters are societal, and people across society have to work together. I commend the report on that basis.

Mr Allen: As the new boy in the OFMDFM Committee, it is my privilege to speak in this debate regarding the details of the Committee's inquiry into the T:BUC project. Let me say at the outset that I fully support efforts to move Northern Ireland away from the decades of conflict and division and build a genuinely united community and a shared future. I commend all groups, organisations and individuals working towards that goal. We owe it to our children and to future generations to play our part in ensuring that our future is played out in a country where there is genuine tolerance of people from different community backgrounds and where diversity is not just accepted but embraced.

The Committee report contains a number of points, and I will focus on a few of them here. First, with regard to financial and budgetary matters, it is noted that it has not been possible to obtain a budget profile for the lifetime of Together: Building a United Community or against each of the seven headline actions.

There is also a feeling that T:BUC may be too narrowly focused on the division between the two main communities in Northern Ireland and that that approach risks sending a message that the only cultures and diversity to be protected are those of the two majority communities in Northern Ireland. There were also concerns that, despite the good work that already exists, there was a lack of consultation in preparation for the publication of the Together: Building a United Community project and a lack of recognition of the current work undertaken across the voluntary, community and statutory sectors in this area.

2.15 pm

We also need to consider definitions and terminology. In addition to the need to define "sectarianism" and "good relations", terms such as "shared housing", "shared neighbourhoods" and "shared space" require more clarity. As is all too common, concerns were expressed with regard to the resourcing of the Together: Building a United Community project, the funding available for local community and voluntary sector organisations and the impact of uncertainty around funding on the sustainability of provision. There was a feeling that existing best practice was being challenged because of uncertainty regarding funding, including delays in hearing the outcome of funding applications and very short funding cycles. I fully agree with the suggestion that communities must be considered as key players rather than as supporting actors and that, when it comes to addressing sectarianism and division,

there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Factors relating to location, demography, capacity and confidence must all be taken into account.

There is no question that relationship-building and trust are key to improving relations between communities. Building such relationships takes time, and that process is not helped when organisations go through a high turnover of staff and have to face a constant chase for financial resources. With regard to interfaces, so-called peace walls can and should come down only after full consultation and with the agreement of those living on either side of them.

I would like to make a final point with regard to mixed communities. It was stated that there was much attention paid to establishing new shared neighbourhoods and urban villages but none to learning from existing practice and the networks that have been built over time. From my experience of dealing with the Felden housing development in north Belfast, many people are clearly a long way from being prepared to consider being part of a united community. A shared housing scheme was proposed right between two strongly republican districts. Unionist representatives had fears, right from the start, that this was the right development but in the wrong place and that anyone from a Protestant or unionist background would not be welcomed in a mixed development at the Felden site. I regret to say that their fears have been confirmed even before homes have been allocated.

If we are really serious about building a united community and a truly shared future for our children, we have to remove the poison of sectarianism from this society. As I said, we owe it to our children and to future generations to play our part in ensuring that their future is played out in a country where there is genuine tolerance of people from different community backgrounds —

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

Mr Allen: — where diversity is not just accepted but embraced. That is the vision of a truly united community —

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

Mr Allen: — to which we must all aspire.

Mr B McCrea: This is an important subject but a disappointing debate. I listened, as usual, with interest to Dolores Kelly who, I think, had the bravery to say some things that had to be said, in particular about "ad hoc-ery", the funding of these issues and the talk of "single identity". "Single identity" means that you give money to paramilitaries. The thing that is not being confronted in the Chamber, even though we are talking about it down the hill, is that paramilitaries are the bane of our existence. The crisis that has been brought on is allegedly about the IRA and Sinn Féin, but let me tell you that they are not unique: there are too many political parties that people presume are too close to the UDA, the UVF and all the others.

What is disappointing about this approach is that people talk about a shared space, but there is not a word about flags or intimidation. There is nothing, referring to T:BUC, which states:

"Work to build a culture where people feel comfortable to report when they have been the victim of intimidation or harassment".

The biggest issue I see here is that MLAs are the victims of intimidation and harassment. They will not stand up to the paramilitaries. They are afraid of what will happen to them. When you see communities that are trying to build cross-community projects, when they come along and find out that their bonfires have been burnt early by people who say, "Those are our bonfires. That's our money. You do not have the right to have a cross-community association", then that is the challenge to this society.

You get the issue about people who are burnt out. People are burnt out because political parties pay lip service to community relations and trying to tackle that issue. They come out with dulcet tones. They try to sound senatorial, but they will not deal with the elephant in the room. Paramilitaries are bad for our society and bad for our people, and they scare the hell out of everybody.

Mr Maskey: I thank the Member for giving way. While I do not necessarily disagree with some of his remarks, I ask him this: given his obvious — or apparent — passion on the issue, did he not consider at any point when the inquiry was held by the Committee, when a lot of stakeholders made suggestions and recommendations and tried to be constructive, that he could also have made some positive, constructive suggestions, rather than just getting up in the Assembly and slabbering, which he is doing this afternoon?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr B McCrea: I would just like a point of order before you start, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. Is the word "slabber" parliamentary language?

Mr Maskey: I withdraw that remark.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I note Mr Maskey's apology.

Mr B McCrea: I am glad Mr Maskey has apologised, but he should not have said it in the first place. That is the sort of language that gets this place into the turmoil it is in. He and his party have their part to play, and that sort of language is not useful. I will speak with passion.

Mr Maskey: *[Interruption.]*

Mr B McCrea: You have had your chance. If you want to speak, you ask —

Mr Maskey: Have you any part to play?

Mr B McCrea: Mr Speaker, I am trying to hold the Floor here. If Mr Maskey wishes to intervene he should ask. I want to make a point in the time that is remaining to me.

When we talked about rural communities, referred to in this great report, the Committee went in quiet before you could even get to hear what they had to say. That is how much you care about rural communities and their issues. Did we talk about integrated education or shared education? No, we could not talk about that. That had to go to the Department of Education. There are so many issues that are not tackled in this place.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Member for giving way. Would he be in any way surprised to learn that many of the young people who gave evidence to the Committee inquiry showed strong support for integrated education and children being educated together?

Mr B McCrea: I certainly think that there is an issue that has to be addressed. Many people have moved on; our political classes have not. People want to make Northern Ireland work. Whether you call it Northern Ireland, the North of Ireland or anything else, the people of our community have had enough. They are bored, frustrated and fed up with the lack of political leadership.

When you come back to the key issues about how we deal with our young people outside education — the ones who are in our community groups; the ones who are worried about the walls and those issues — what they really want is to be able to express themselves as young people without fear of intimidation.

Here is the key issue about flags. This is taken from T:BUC, which we are supposed to be looking at. When you look at flags, you can see that it says that 81% of people do not support the flying of flags in their neighbourhood. Why was that not tackled? In addition, 21% of respondents report being annoyed by republican emblems and 25% are annoyed by loyalist emblems, but the key bit is that 13% were intimidated by republican emblems and 14% were intimidated by loyalist emblems. You will also get the issue that people will not go shopping where flags are put up as some sort of testimony of strength — "This is our patch" or "This is our area". Talk about trying to build a shared, united community: all you have to do is walk down the street and see flags everywhere that say, "This is our patch. We are in charge. We don't care who you are, you have to listen to us".

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member conclude his remarks?

Mr B McCrea: That is not the right way forward, and we should tackle it as one.

Mr Nesbitt: Let me begin by sharing the disappointment at the lack of a ministerial response, as mentioned by Megan Fearon, Chris Lyttle and others. I listened carefully and with interest to Members' contributions today, but, before I turn to those, I will mention a particular group of people the Committee met during the inquiry. I accept that it is sometimes dangerous to single out a particular individual or group, but this organisation came to me informally in conjunction with the Bytes Project. It gave members the opportunity to hear at first hand the views of so-called at risk young people on good relations and building a united and shared community. A summary of the event is available in the appendices of the Committee report, and I recommend that everyone in the Chamber, even if they read nothing else of the report, reads what those young people had to say.

On engagement, they suggested better use of social media and online platforms, as well as better engagement with groups and organisations that are working with young people. They commented on the perceived lack of shared space in the city of Belfast and the consequent lack of opportunities to meet people from other communities. The young people also had some innovative ideas on how to approach the process of removing physical interface barriers on an incremental basis. One suggestion was for a clear wall, with those living on either side having the opportunity to see people going about their daily lives through the wall and to recognise that many of the social and economic challenges faced are the same on both sides. Another proposal was to open a gate in a physical

interface barrier for a couple of days, with an event organised to encourage people to come and walk through the wall. The young people recognised the risks involved in those approaches and that some people may feel insecure once the walls are gone, but they felt that maybe now was the time to take the chance.

Turning to some of the remarks from today's contributors, I join Megan Fearon in thanking the Committee staff for the very hard work that they put in to make this report possible at a time when the Committee has a lot on its plate, not least bringing forward its own legislation — the first single Committee to bring legislation to the House. Ms Fearon highlighted a lack of focus on rural areas, where the absence of peace walls should not be confused with the absence of issues and challenges on building a united community. She pointed out that we are no longer simply a binary society but a diverse one and said that we need to take on board our minority communities. She also highlighted the failure to address the under-representation of women in public life — an issue that we need to address on a serious basis. Finally, she mentioned the need for an annual review of the implementation of T:BUC.

Mrs Kelly for the SDLP, again, talked about invisible barriers and the need for political leadership. She highlighted and lamented the lack of solid budgets, a point that my colleague Andy Allen also brought up. She may recall that, in a television programme shown at the beginning of T:BUC, the then junior Minister talked about reviewing budgets on the scale of half a billion pounds. However, as far as we were able to establish during the inquiry, the actual spend to date on T:BUC is under £10 million. Indeed, the majority of that money would have been spent on individual programmes anyway. Dolores Kelly also highlighted the quantity and, indeed, the quality of academic research, which chimes with stakeholders who warned us that T:BUC should not try to reinvent the wheel and that there is plenty of hard evidence out there to pick up.

The Deputy Chair, Chris Lyttle, detailed how a shared future for Northern Ireland is his political passion, and he gave us his interpretation of how we came through various iterations to T:BUC. He reminded us that we are now a society of minorities and that compromise will be required. He also highlighted how late funding awards impact so negatively on the ability of community and voluntary groups to deliver for their people.

Alex Maskey talked about the importance of sharing identities and the challenge we all face in explaining the importance of our own identity and our culture to others. He also highlighted some of the very good work previously undertaken in the community, not least work funded by the European Union. He spoke of the importance of empowering communities and giving them the tools to move forward and to share, particularly single-identity groups, and the requirement for them to move on and embrace the other.

2.30 pm

Andy Allen reassured the House that, as a new boy to the Committee, he fully supports efforts to build a shared future and the need not just to tolerate each other but to embrace our differences. He highlighted the report's finding about the lack of consultation. Having chaired some of the sessions in the stakeholder events, I was

struck very hard and it was very surprising to hear that some people with very solid experience and connections in the community and voluntary sector, which were totally applicable to T:BUC, felt that they had not been contacted or consulted by the Department. There was also the pitfall of the high rate of self-turnover, which is often a product of the failure to deliver timely financial support. Finally, he talked about the Felden housing scheme in north Belfast as an example of areas where there are those who do not support shared housing or a shared future.

Mr Basil McCrea, our final Member to speak, told us that it was a disappointing debate and that paramilitaries are bad.

As I indicated earlier, today's debate has provided us with an opportunity to provide a voice for those who engaged with the Committee during its inquiry. It has been evident throughout that building a united community is not the preserve of one Department, one Committee or one small group of committed individuals; it is a task for which each of us has a responsibility and a part to play. I draw my fellow Committee Chairpersons' attention to one of the recommendations in the report, which is:

“that all NI Assembly statutory committees make it core business to include good relations as part of their regular scrutiny of departmental activity, including the monitoring of T:BUC headline actions where Departments have responsibility for delivery.”

I recognise that we are coming towards the end of a mandate and that Committee work programmes may already be full. However, looking to the future, we anticipate that Departments will be configured slightly differently as will, of course, Committees. I encourage those putting together work programmes for Committees in the next mandate to put the scrutiny of good relations firmly on their agenda. In the meantime, the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister will continue to monitor the implementation of its recommendations throughout its regular scrutiny of the work of the Department.

In closing, I thank all the Members who participated in the debate. In commending the motion and the report to the House, I finish with a personal plea that some Members have already recognised in the debate, which is that we can sit up here on the hill and define a vision and turn it into a policy like T:BUC, but how it is delivered on the ground will differ depending on the environment on the ground — urban, rural and subdivided beyond that. It would be mature politics of us to recognise that delivery on the ground by the people on the ground is the way to go.

I commend the motion and the report to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the report of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister [NIA 257/11-16] on its inquiry into building a united community; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister, along with their Executive colleagues, to implement the recommendations contained in the report.

Commonwealth Youth Games 2021: Bid

Mr Principal Deputy 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 the motion and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members called to speak will have five minutes.

Mr B McCrea: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the motion, unanimously endorsed in November 2014, supporting a bid for Northern Ireland to host the 2021 Commonwealth Youth Games; further notes that the deadline to bid for these games is the end of September 2015; recognises that Northern Ireland is well placed to bid successfully for the games; further recognises the benefits that hosting the games will bring, such as increased tourism, building on the successes of the World Police and Fire Games and Giro d'Italia, the opportunity for our best young athletes to experience world-class competition and to excel, and putting Northern Ireland at the forefront of international sport; and calls on all Members to exert their influence to ensure that a bid is made.

I welcome the opportunity to speak on behalf of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure. The Committee believes that it is vital that the House sends out a clear endorsement of the Northern Ireland Commonwealth Games Council's bid for the 2021 Commonwealth Youth Games.

The Committee discussed the need to encourage more young people to engage in sport a number of times. It is very supportive of DCAL policies that encourage this. Members realise, however, that it often takes more than a strategy to achieve this kind of outcome. Nothing is more inspiring than seeing top-class athletes on your doorstep and it gives you the impetus to get out and try new sports. Equally, the sight of young local people winning medals in a range of sports is extremely powerful.

The reason for this debate is to show the unanimous support of this House for the bid for the games. Another potential bidder, Jersey, has already withdrawn because it could not compete with our facilities, and it looks as if the only other bidder will be Botswana. This means that there has never been a better opportunity for us to bring these prestigious games to Northern Ireland. Not only would the games be a huge boost for our tourism industry, but, as I have already highlighted, they would provide a brilliant platform on which our young athletes could compete and excel on home ground. The games would also act as a catalyst to inspire other young people to become involved in sport, something that is vital if we are to improve our people's fitness and general well-being. I know that is something that we all aspire to do in our communities.

The age range for youth games competitors is 14 to 18. This is a key period in young people's lives for instilling an interest in, and love for, sport. If they can be inspired to participate in sport at this age, it is more likely that they will retain the interest into adulthood.

The youth games have been shown to be a key springboard for future sporting success, and having the games in Northern Ireland would allow us to enter more competitors, so enhancing our chances of fostering a wider range of exceptional sporting talent.

Success breeds success. We have already shown our commitment to the Commonwealth Youth Games through our performance in this year's games in Samoa. Northern Ireland won 12 medals: four gold, four silver and four bronze. This put us ahead of Scotland's two golds and Wales's single gold.

Of course, hosting the 2021 Commonwealth Youth Games would provide a golden opportunity to showcase Northern Ireland as a venue for international sporting events. We already have a successful record in hosting high-level sporting events following the World Police and Fire Games, the Giro d'Italia last year and the Irish Open. No one could deny the positive impact on London of hosting the Olympic Games or the benefits that accrued to Glasgow from hosting the Commonwealth Games in 2014.

The Committee is also concerned about low levels of female participation in sport. Having the Commonwealth Youth Games here in 2021 would provide a range of positive female sporting role models for young women and an opportunity to present sport as exciting and fun.

The reality of the bid is that a modest investment on the part of the Executive of only £3 million to £4 million would produce all the benefits that I have highlighted. Surely this is too good an opportunity to miss. The Committee's motion provides an opportunity for this House to unite in support of something that will not only be positive for Northern Ireland plc but will inspire our young people to become involved in, and be inspired by, sport and encourage those young people already involved in sport to strive for success in a home games.

On behalf of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, I commend this motion to the House.

I will now make a few modest comments in a personal capacity, if you can allow me the time, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. Mr McMullan, as he was walking past, told me not to take too long, and I will take his advice.

This is genuinely meant to be a cross-community opportunity. I pay tribute to the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure. When I raised the matter with her, she was very generous in her response. I am very supportive of her taking the initiative and saying, "It doesn't matter what you call it or where you're from, if you're from this part of the world, we support you". That was a really good thing to say.

Arlene Foster made a point of speaking to me and said that, in a period when she was able to do so, she had sent off a letter to the council to say that the Executive would fund the games.

The purpose of the motion is to remove the absence of doubt and make sure that we do not lose the opportunity to bring these wonderful games to Northern Ireland in 2021. This is a chance for parties and Members to put their support on the record, which will hopefully secure the games for Northern Ireland. It is meant in a very genuine way, and it is a good thing.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: As Question Time to the Minister of Justice begins at 2.45 pm, I suggest that the House takes its ease until then. This debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be Karen McKeivitt.

The debate stood suspended.

2.45 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Justice

Coroners Service: Resources

1. **Mr McCartney** asked the Minister of Justice to outline the steps his Department has taken to ensure that the Coroners Service has the resources necessary to efficiently and effectively fulfil its statutory obligations. (AQO 8728/11-16)

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): Northern Ireland has three full-time coroners, one of whom, John Leckey, is due to retire on 31 October. A competition to appoint a successor to Mr Leckey was launched on 10 September.

The Lord Chief Justice has assigned a County Court judge to the Coroners Service to provide additional capacity, and a High Court judge has been assigned to deal with the new inquest that is to be held into the death of Pearse Jordan. I have also asked the Lord Chief Justice to exercise his statutory powers under section 6(2) of the Coroners Act (Northern Ireland) 1959 to appoint temporary additional coroners to cover vacancies caused by the absence of a coroner due to illness. In addition, the Courts and Tribunals Service has appointed a senior business manager to support the coroners.

Arrangements are also being progressed to recruit two investigating officers for the Coroners Service and to strengthen the panel of counsel available to support coroners in the discharge of their functions. However, as I have said before, progress in dealing with the past, including the legacy inquest process, can be made only in the context of the full implementation of the Stormont House Agreement and the associated funding for which it provides.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his answer. He outlined that a number of recruitment processes are in place. I seek this reassurance: is he satisfied that there will be no gaps in the system, as we go forward, as a result of those recruiting processes?

Mr Ford: I am not sure that I can give an assurance of there being no gaps. The process under section 6(2) to appoint temporary coroners, in particular, is relatively straightforward. It is under way, and my understanding is that there is the potential for people to be in post within a very short time. The job of the Judicial Appointments Commission in making the permanent appointment will take slightly longer. The fact that a County Court judge and a High Court judge have been assigned strengthens the Coroners Service considerably.

Mr Allister: Since the retirement of the chief coroner was well known in advance and flagged for some time, why did it take until September for the recruitment process to begin? Why were several months lost in that process?

Mr Ford: I am afraid that I have no answer to give to Mr Allister. I am not responsible for the appointment of

coroners, and I am therefore not sure why that particular timescale is happening. What I know is that the process is under way, and I trust that the post will be filled permanently as soon as possible.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I inform the House that question 2 has been withdrawn.

Compensation: Unspent Convictions

3. **Mr Eastwood** asked the Minister of Justice to outline the plans he has to address the current process in the criminal injuries compensation scheme whereby victims of crime can be denied compensation if they have unspent convictions that are unrelated to the claim. (AQO 8730/11-16)

Mr Ford: The extent to which unspent criminal convictions should be taken into account when considering a claim for criminal injuries compensation is being addressed as part of the overall review of the compensation scheme. A public consultation exercise was undertaken earlier this year, and responses are being considered with the intention of bringing forward a post-consultation report and proposals for a new scheme by the end of the year.

Mr Eastwood: I thank the Minister for his answer. What specific criteria will he use to withhold or reduce a compensation reward on the basis of an applicant's character?

Mr Ford: I am afraid that it is a bit difficult to say what I will do when the consultation responses are being analysed and proposals developed. However, it is clear that even some of the proposals for reducing the effective unspent convictions did not attract universal support in that consultation process, and it will be necessary to look in detail at how that will be handled.

I expect that, when we produce firm proposals for the new scheme, there is likely to be a lot of interest in the Chamber. Some Members may consider tabling a debate at that point, if they believe that issues need to be teased out. There is a difficult balance to be struck, in particular on historical convictions. That is not easily resolved in the current political difficulties.

Rural Crime Unit: Role and Composition

4. **Ms McGahan** asked the Minister of Justice, given that recent figures in South Tyrone show that over £140,000 of livestock and farm machinery were stolen in the first three months of 2015, to outline the role and composition of the rural crime unit. (AQO 8731/11-16)

Mr Ford: The PSNI's rural crime unit was a central resource for identifying trends and patterns in rural crime. Information from the unit was used by police commanders to enhance the effectiveness of their operational tactics in preventing and detecting rural and agricultural crime. The work of the unit was supported by a dedicated data analyst, who was part-funded by my Department. Information provided by the analyst informed the work of the Rural Crime Partnership, a collaborative arrangement between my Department, the PSNI, NFU Mutual and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. I understand that, as part of the PSNI's termination of contracts for associate workers, the contract for this post was not renewed beyond 31 December 2014. While there is no longer a dedicated rural crime data analyst,

I understand that the PSNI's statistics branch continues to produce detailed quarterly updates on agricultural and rural crime in Northern Ireland. This allows key stakeholders to continue to monitor trends in crime committed in rural settlements and agricultural crime and to allocate resources accordingly.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his response. Given the prevalence of rural crime and just after a week that saw another 13 cattle stolen in an area between Aughnacloy and Caledon, which, yet again, had a devastating impact on a farming family, and given that it appears that the contract for the data analyst post in the rural crime unit has not been renewed, will the Minister give serious consideration to renewing that important role?

Mr Ford: I accept that the data analyst performed an important role. The reality is that that work has been embedded within the PSNI statistics unit in a way that was not previously the case. When I became Minister a mere five and a half years ago, the definitions of "urban" and "rural" in PSNI terms appeared to depend whether one was in the Belfast subregion or beyond it. As a result, large rural areas in places like Antrim, Lisburn and Ards were classified as urban, and major urban settlements in the rest of it — all but the city of Derry — were classified as rural. We have a much better analysis now. That is being embedded through the individual districts.

Given the budget cuts that were being made and, frankly, the political will of some people to see the ending of those contracts, the reality is that it was not possible to retain that post. I do not see, in the financial difficulties, how it would be possible to reinstate it. The important issue is to see that the work is being done otherwise.

Mr Somerville: I thank the Minister for his answers. Newry, Armagh and Dungannon DARD veterinary offices all consistently report the highest number of stolen or missing cattle. The proximity of the border to each area is not a coincidence. Will the Minister support a National Crime Agency (NCA) investigation of these organised crime gangs?

Mr Ford: The Minister always supports the operational decisions of the NCA that best address its responsibilities, because he does not direct the NCA any more than he directs the PSNI what to do. However, a perfectly valid point has just been made: there is no doubt that the prevalence of cattle thefts is greatest in border areas of Northern Ireland and in border areas of the Republic. There is clearly an issue to be addressed there.

I certainly believe that, as part of the ongoing work to address crime on a cross-border basis, good work is being done in a number of areas. I will happily draw the issue of cattle rustling to the attention of the police and the Garda Síochána when I next speak to them and, indeed, when I speak this week to the Irish Justice Minister at the organised crime cross-border seminar. But there are real issues, given the resources that are available, and other initiatives, including some run by PCSPs and so on to assist people with things like Farmwatch. It is not simply a matter of waiting for the formal agencies; there is also the issue of what can be done in partnership to fight those who engage in this crime.

Mr Byrne: Does the Minister recognise that this is a serious issue for the farming community? Many farmers who have suffered the rustling of cattle cannot get

compensation, and there is no such thing as an adequate insurance policy for them. In his discussions with the Minister for Justice in the Republic, can he accentuate a sense of urgency? There is a fear that this is being allowed to slip.

Mr Ford: I certainly agree with Mr Byrne that this is an issue of significant concern to the families who suffer. Thefts of machinery and plant, particularly tractors, can also cause difficulties.

A year or so ago, there was a slight upswing in my constituency in that kind of theft. I have been assured that the treatment of rural crime such as that is a priority in the border areas of Armagh and Tyrone that were highlighted earlier. However, there is also an issue of individual citizens doing what they can to protect their stock and of people being the eyes and ears of the community, contacting police if they have concerns and joining the likes of Farmwatch to help to keep tabs on what is happening. It is not an area in which we can simply depend on the two police services; it requires a joined-up community effort.

Criminal Justice System: Female Representation

5. **Ms Fearon** asked the Minister of Justice to outline the measures his Department is taking to address female representation in leading roles in the criminal justice system. (AQO 8732/11-16)

Mr Ford: The appointment of most of the key personnel in the justice system is outwith my Department. However, many leading roles in the criminal justice system are held by women. On 31 March, female representation on public bodies in the criminal justice system was sitting at 39%. The chair and the director of the Probation Board are women, and the chair of the Policing Board is held by a woman, one of the six whom I appointed to the board earlier this year alongside only three men. In my top team, two of the five roles, including the director general of the Prison Service, are held by women.

Ms Fearon: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer so far. Perhaps many of the roles are held by women, but maybe not enough. Is the Minister aware of research carried out by the Judicial Appointments Commission that found that a culture exists in the criminal, legal and justice system that discriminates against women and which may act as a barrier to women achieving senior appointments?

Mr Ford: Yes, I can certainly assure Ms Fearon that I am aware of that research, which was carried out with specific reference to the judiciary. However, as far as appointments are concerned, I need to leave those with the Judicial Appointments Commission, under the chairmanship of the Lord Chief Justice — one person on whose turf I do not like to tread.

Mrs McKevitt: What more can be done to assist females in achieving higher levels in the judiciary?

Mr Ford: If Mrs McKevitt is talking about the judiciary specifically, I need to be very careful in saying what can be done, because that is a responsibility that sits firmly with the Judicial Appointments Commission. If she were to discuss the wider issues of encouraging females to take up appointments across the higher reaches of the justice

system, I could only say what I quoted. I believe that those areas where I have a degree of responsibility have shown some positive movements, particularly this year, but it is a matter of encouraging women to play their full part in public life across a range of areas. Frankly, the justice system is not much different from others. I have no doubt that some Members will look across the border at a female Justice Minister, a female Attorney General, a female Lord Chief Justice and a female Garda Commissioner, but I am not responsible for the appointment of any of them or of their equivalents in Northern Ireland.

HMP Magilligan: Capital Funding

6. Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the availability of capital funding for the redevelopment of HMP Magilligan. (AQO 8733/11-16)

Mr Ford: An outline business case for the redevelopment of Magilligan prison was approved by DFP on 9 January 2015. I met the then Minister of Finance and Personnel on 28 April to discuss capital funding for the delivery of the Prison Service estate strategy. It is difficult to make commitments to deliver an eight-year construction programme without the assurance of funding across a number of spending review periods. Securing the necessary capital will determine the timeline for the development of the new prison at Magilligan.

My officials will complete the necessary bid to secure capital funding for the project when it is launched by DFP.

Ms Sugden: At what point does the Department need to re-evaluate the outline business case, which is nearly a year into approval by DFP?

Mr Ford: I am happy to say that the outline business case is a sound case that was done a year ago, and there is no likelihood of it needing to be renewed in the near future. The question is much more this: at what point will the Executive agree the finances for Northern Ireland for the future so that we know what the opportunities are for capital spending on not just Magilligan prison but on the much needed women's facility and the upgrading of accommodation at Maghaberry?

Mr Dallat: I thank the Minister for his response. I am doing my best to interpret it as positive. Given that the Minister gave the Assembly an assurance that he was committed to Magilligan prison staying on its present site, will he tell the House what preparatory work has been done to give confidence to the 300 people who work there and the families of people who prefer their family members to be there rather than in that other place called Maghaberry?

3.00 pm

Mr Ford: We should not suggest that preparing the outline business case was not a great deal of preparatory work. That business case has involved all aspects of the running of the prison, including looking at future arrangements for training, job skills, healthcare and staffing. It is not simply a matter of looking at buildings as being major in the business case but at what the needs will be into the future. I believe that that is a firm statement of commitment, which follows through on the commitment I gave the Assembly when I reported back on that particular aspect of the prison reform programme. The fundamental issue is not whether the DOJ is committed to the developments

needed at Magilligan and the other prisons, but whether the capital is available. That requires a joined-up Executive decision. It is not even just a matter for the Justice and Finance Departments, but will require the Executive, as a whole, to prepare a capital programme.

Mrs Overend: Is the Minister aware that, following the delays and prevarications over the community safety college in Desertcreat, there is a great deal of suspicion that Magilligan's location west of the Bann is not helping it when it comes to seeking finance and urgency from his Department and the Executive?

Mr Ford: I cannot accept the thesis that there is prevarication around Desertcreat, which is the responsibility of the DOJ, and which is, apart from anything else, an Executive project that is led jointly by the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, when we have one, and me. I also think that it is fairly clear that the commitment I made to Magilligan, in defiance of a recommendation from the prison reform team that all adult male prisoners should be housed at Maghaberry, is an indication that there is genuine commitment. I do remember, around that time, meeting a group of councillors from some of the councils in the north-west, one of whom somewhat grumpily told me that he thought that some people believed that the world ended at Sandyknowes. I told him that I agreed with that, but pointed out that, as a MLA for South Antrim, I believe that it starts halfway across the Toome bridge. It is certainly not a case of matters being centralised in Belfast: it is a matter of using the opportunities with business and local councils for the constructive activity that was promised. Those promises are still there. That is part of the plan for the redevelopment of Magilligan.

Courthouse Closures

7. Ms Boyle asked the Minister of Justice for an update on his proposals to close local courthouses. (AQO 8734/11-16)

Mr Ford: As I stated at the last questions for oral answer, the consultation on the rationalisation of the court estate closed on 18 May 2015. The responses to the consultation have been analysed and advice will be submitted to me next month.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his response. Can he give an undertaking that his officials will come to the Committee before any final decision is taken on court closures?

Mr Ford: I am happy to give Ms Boyle, as I give many Members of the House on a variety of occasions, a firm promise that the Department does not do anything without consulting the Committee, because, given our structures and the fact that, on a good day, I have the support of 10 or 11 people in the House, I know that we would not get very far if we did not have the support of the Committee. The Committee will be taken into account fully as we look at the options. That does not mean that the Committee will be able, any more than the Department is, to ignore the blunt financial realities of the world we live in; the decreasing amount of business going through our courts and the decreasing amount of money that is available to run our courts.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Mo bhuíochas leis an Aire. With regard to the implication of access to justice and for justice, especially for people who may have disabilities and those who are on lower incomes, for whom additional travel costs may mean exactly that — if you have little, limited or no income, having to attend a court case or hearing may, in actual fact, cause you additional burden — can the Minister give us some sort of idea as to how or what evaluation was made of that particular issue for people on lower incomes?

Mr Ford: As part of the examination and the report that was put out for consultation, there was examination of issues like travel time and arrangements between, potentially, closing courts and, potentially, remaining open courts.

I am not sure that the Department has the capacity to do a full analysis of the economic impact on individuals, but I repeat the point I made that, whilst accepting that Mr McGlone has a point about those who have difficulty in funding travel, there is the significant issue that access to justice does not simply mean having a courtroom close at hand if that courtroom is not fit for purpose and does not operate in an efficient way that meets people's needs. There are many advantages for vulnerable victims and witnesses if they are attending some of our more modern courthouses with facilities for segregation, better arrangements for video links and whatever. Access to justice is, therefore, a matter not simply of physical proximity but of how the justice system treats those who need to use the courts when they are in them. That has had to be taken into account as well.

Prison Service Review: Recommendations

8. **Mrs Cochrane** asked the Minister of Justice how many of the recommendations arising from the review of the Northern Ireland Prison Service have been implemented. (AQO 8735/11-16)

Mr Ford: Of the 40 recommendations made by the prison review team, only two remain outstanding, with 33 having been signed off and three remaining under assessment by the oversight group. An additional two recommendations have been referred by the oversight group to the Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (CJINI) for independent assessment.

The oversight group accepts that delivery of recommendation 3, on effective community sentences, and recommendation 13, on the joint health and justice strategy, will fall outside the lifespan of the reform programme. However, it is important to say that good progress continues to be made on those two complex recommendations. Regarding recommendation 3, work is ongoing with the Lord Chief Justice to consider alternatives to custody without the need for legislative change. On recommendation 13, significant progress has been made on developing the strategy, and my Department will continue to work with DHSSPS colleagues on that.

Four key strategic themes have emerged on which the prison system will continue to focus to ensure that it plays its part in building a safer Northern Ireland. The four themes are leadership; purposeful activity; partnership with healthcare; and a fit-for-purpose prison estate. While the official structures around the reform programme will come to a close in the coming months, that will not

mean the end of change. The Northern Ireland Prison Service will continue to embed the reforms implemented throughout the programme.

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Minister for his answer and for the leadership that he has shown in delivering such an enormous programme of reform. Is it his assessment that the reforms are being seen to take effect across all prison establishments, or are there areas where more intensive efforts are still required to deliver change?

Mr Ford: I thank my colleague for the supplementary question.

She is absolutely right when she makes it clear that there is a need to embed those reforms right across the prison system, which means all three institutions and the way the system as a whole functions, along with issues like, for example, the prisoner escort and custody services (PECS). There is no doubt that the reforms have perhaps made greater progress in some places than others.

We just highlighted the capital build at Magilligan. Although some extremely good work is being done in Magilligan, there is no doubt that the inadequate accommodation in which much of the training and employment opportunities are provided does not help.

We have seen some extremely good work being done amongst young offenders and women in Hydebank. We will shortly see the opening of a step-down facility for women on the Hydebank site but outside the wall, which is a major step forward in promoting rehabilitation. We, of course, now have Hydebank Wood operating as a college with the full partnership of the Department for Employment and Learning alongside the Belfast Metropolitan College.

All those are very positive signs, but there is no doubt that the reform programme has been more difficult at Maghaberry, which is probably the most complex prison in the United Kingdom and where there have been a number of significant problems in the recent past. However, I am glad to say that the new director of operations, working in his capacity as governor of Maghaberry at this stage, is starting to make major changes there for the good.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Can the Minister give an update on the oversight group's engagement with stakeholders, particularly those in healthcare?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr Lynch for that question. There is no doubt that there have been some difficulties in healthcare across all the prisons. There is no doubt that the transfer of healthcare responsibilities to the South Eastern Trust a few years ago was done to ensure that a body that has experience of healthcare was responsible for it, but there is also no doubt that the Prison Service knows more about running prisons than the South Eastern Trust does.

What we have seen, albeit on a slightly slower timeline than some other aspects of the prison reform programme, is good work now being done. When the oversight group meets, it is attended by the permanent secretary or another senior DHSSPS representative and representatives from the trust. There is no doubt that we have seen good responses from the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) in the assessments that it is doing on the work being carried out on the healthcare side, just as we have seen some positive responses from CJINI on the Prison Service side. It is fair

to say that whilst it has not always been easy to manage the healthcare aspects, a lot of good work has been done in recent time, which, I hope, will see significant progress across all three prisons in the near future.

Mr Beggs: Any drugs addiction that was either developed or fed whilst a prisoner was in jail increases the likelihood of them committing a criminal act on their release and their return to prison. What progress has been made with regard to those recommendations relating to reducing the misuse of drugs in the prison population?

Mr Ford: Mr Beggs certainly puts his finger on an issue where there is a very significant problem in terms of running prisons. Given that drugs are a problem in society generally, it is perhaps no surprise that they are also a problem in prisons. Last year, I had the opportunity to visit one particular landing in Maghaberry, where a group of predominantly young male prisoners were seeking to overcome addiction problems and were engaging in a very intensive programme run partly by the Prison Service and partly by one of our NGO partners. The programme showed very good results in terms of the positive options that people were taking.

It is an ongoing issue to ensure that, as far as possible, the security of prisons is managed by stopping drugs coming in. That is not always easy, given that, at times, we seek to allow prisoners home leave, and people come and go to courts and hospital appointments or whatever. We also want to ensure that those who want to get away from a drug problem are assisted in doing it. There is no doubt that a very large number of those who are admitted to custody have a pre-existing drug addiction problem and there is significant work to be done to assist them to get away from it.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for his answers. As a strong supporter of his prisons reform programme, I congratulate him on the progress that has been made. However, what impact have cuts to the Budget had on the implementation of the reform programme?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr Maginness not only for his question but for his ongoing support for the reform programme, which is not always common amongst barristers in the Chamber. He refers to cuts having an effect on the programme, and there is no doubt that, overall, the reform programme has succeeded extremely well despite the problems, but the day-to-day running of prisons has been affected by significant reductions in budgets, unfortunately, particularly at times when there are problems with excessive numbers of prison staff being sick. There has been a recent increase in the number of early lockdowns, and there is no doubt that that does not benefit rehabilitation. We need to continue to address those bits of work, at the same time as we set the wider, overarching proposals.

By and large, I think, when one compares the work of the prison reform programme with that which happened with the formation of the PSNI and looks at the amount of resources that were given to prisons compared with that which was given to the Police Service, one sees that there has been very considerable success, although undoubtedly, particularly on the point of capital, which I mentioned earlier, progress has not been quite as rapid as we would have hoped.

Parole Hearings: Barristers

9. **Mr McMullan** asked the Minister of Justice why his Department is no longer instructing barristers for parole hearings. (AQO 8736/11-16)

Mr Ford: Parole commissioner hearings are intended to be inquisitorial and the nature of these hearings as informal as possible. The Department of Justice submits a dossier to the panel, covering all aspects of the prisoner's time in custody, including reports on the index offence, details of programmes undertaken while in prison, psychological reports and an assessment of the risk of reoffending following release. Parole commissioners are responsible for coming to a view on the potential for release once they have taken account of all the information presented. The prisoner may apply for legal aid so that he or she can appoint legal representation for support at the hearing.

The Department had previously sought to mirror this representation, and a custom and practice emerged that saw a solicitor and, perhaps, counsel supporting the Department.

However, following consultation with the Parole Commissioners, the Department came to the view that that practice was unnecessary in the majority of cases and risked changing the tenor of hearings to one that was adversarial in nature. This over-reliance on legal support was simply not financially sustainable.

3.15 pm

In the majority of cases, the Department now relies on the written evidence that it makes available to the commissioners in a dossier. However, in circumstances where the panel or departmental officials feel the need to have additional support, legal representation will still be employed.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That ends the period for listed questions. We will now move on to topical questions.

Burglaries: North Down and East Belfast

T1. **Mr Cree** asked the Minister of Justice to advise what, if any, extra measures are being taken to combat the existing and increasing number of burglaries in north Down and east Belfast. (AQT 2891/11-16)

Mr Ford: I am sorry, but that is an operational issue for the PSNI, and I cannot, as Minister, give account for operational responses by the Chief Constable.

Mr Cree: It is a pity that that is the case. I thought that, even out of general interest, the Minister would be talking to his colleagues. Reading the 'Belfast Telegraph' today will give an example. I will ask the Minister — although I probably know what the answer is going to be — is he satisfied that enough has been done to apply sentences that deter offenders engaged in those crimes, which have such a traumatic effect on the victims?

Mr Ford: I am sorry, but having said that I cannot answer for the Chief Constable, I must say that I cannot answer for members of the judiciary on individual sentencing policy. The House will know that I may have a role in general guidelines. We have examples where that matter is being looked at in work being done by the Lord Chief Justice.

I keep potential penalties under review across a range of offences, including those that are the responsibility of

other Ministers, where my Department has responsibility for seeing that offences and penalties are consistent, but I cannot possibly comment on individual cases.

Desertcreat Project: Update

T2. **Ms Fearon** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the Desertcreat policing and justice project in Cookstown. (AQT 2892/11-16)

Mr Ford: The answer to the current issue is that the matter remains under consideration. There has been a preliminary report to the two Ministers looking at the revision of the business case, which is due to be made available from the programme board by the end of November. At that point, the two Ministers will have to consider the options with the three services and report to the Executive on the way forward, since the community safety college is an Executive commitment. The timetable for the next significant progress is towards the end of November.

Ms Fearon: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his answer. Is it the Minister's preferred option that the project stays in Cookstown, as that is consistent with the Programme for Government commitment?

Mr Ford: The Programme for Government commitment is to integrated training, and that is my commitment. It is also the case that since the original proposals for an integrated community safety college were made, the training requirements of all three services have been reduced significantly — in fact, by 48%. That calls into question some of the original proposals.

There are also issues in particular for policing. The modern trend, in not just the UK but wider afield, is that people may enter the Police Service having a number of basic qualifications, so there is significantly less training to be done. The issue is to see the best way to provide appropriate training for the three services, acknowledging that the needs of each have changed. I also need to be careful that I do not suggest that, until after next May, the Minister of Justice can speak specifically for the Fire and Rescue Service.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Question 3 has been withdrawn.

Maghaberry: CJI Report

T4. **Ms Maeve McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Justice whether he has been briefed on the pending Criminal Justice Inspection report on Maghaberry. (AQT 2894/11-16)

Mr Ford: No, I have not been briefed on that, although I have been given a general indication of the indication that was given to officers of the Prison Service.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for that answer. Does he now share the increasing concerns that Maghaberry is not fit for purpose?

Mr Ford: No, I do not accept that Maghaberry is not fit for purpose. I accept that it appears likely that the Criminal Justice Inspection report, which is a snapshot report from an unannounced inspection some time ago, will show that there were significant concerns at the time.

Many Members will be aware of very significant work that has been done, even since that inspection, to enhance

the service that is provided at Maghaberry. In particular, the new director of operations is acting as governor of Maghaberry, and most of the senior team has been refreshed in order to strengthen that team and to deal with the difficult issues that surround Maghaberry, which is the most complex prison anywhere in the United Kingdom. Phil Wragg, who is currently acting as governor, has previously governed Belmarsh, which is one of the other most complex prisons in the UK though not as complex as Maghaberry, and that is an indication of his understanding of dealing with those issues. Good work is already being done, including, for example, on addressing sickness rates amongst prison officers, as I mentioned earlier.

Rural Crime

T5. **Mrs Dobson** asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of the impact that measures to combat rural crime are having across Northern Ireland. (AQT 2895/11-16)

Mr Ford: I think that Mrs Dobson missed the comments that I made earlier about rural crime, but there is no doubt that there have been significant hotspots for rural crime in some areas, particularly border areas of Armagh and Tyrone. Although the most recent statistics that I saw pointed to a reduction in rural crime in most of Northern Ireland, there are clearly operational issues for the police at one level, but also issues that require joined-up work in partnership to fight those who engage in that kind of crime rather than merely to deal with crime when it happens. In many cases, that good work is being done by PCSPs and others as they look to different ways of addressing rural crime.

Mrs Dobson: No, I did not hear your comments earlier, and, as an MLA from a rural constituency, I am interested to hear your opinion. It is widely known that local intelligence can lead to criminals being caught. What is the Minister's message to farm families, who often feel let down by the follow-up service after a theft on their farm? What more does he feel needs to be done to improve outcomes for the victims of rural crime?

Mr Ford: The justice system has ways of supporting those who have been victims of crime, whether it is urban or rural and whether it is specifically agricultural or not. Clearly, issues of particular concern tend to bubble up in one area or another at different times, but the key issue for me is not simply saying what is being done for the victims after the crime but saying what is being done to fight the crime. We have seen activities such as a number of rural PCSPs promoting the agenda on matters like Farmwatch, running trailer-marking schemes and the subsidy that we are able to give to people who put tracker machines on heavy machinery such as tractors. Those are all ways in which the fight against rural crime has been supported. It will continue to be supported, but a lot of it depends on local initiative and local partnership working, which the Department can support but cannot initiate.

Maghaberry: Staff Sickness

T6. **Mr Dickson** asked the Minister of Justice whether he is satisfied that the new governor and management team at Maghaberry, whom he had the privilege to meet last week with other members of the Justice Committee and whose work he supports, are working to deal with the high level of sickness amongst prison staff. (AQT 2896/11-16)

Mr Ford: I thank Mr Dickson for that question. I am glad that a number of members of the Justice Committee — though perhaps fewer than there might have been — were able to do that visit last week. It was important that they had the opportunity to see Maghaberry and to speak directly to staff there, whether at management or operational level.

Mr Dickson highlights specifically the issue of sickness, and there is no doubt that there was an issue. In the context of sickness rates across the Civil Service, the Department of Justice scores badly, largely because of high sickness rates in the Prison Service. Those rates are understandable to a certain level in that a prison officer who works on a landing may well not be fit to go to work when somebody with basically a desk job might be, but there were issues that needed to be addressed and that I believe are being addressed.

My information is that, in the couple of months since the beginning of August, there has been a 35% reduction in sickness absence levels at Maghaberry, which is, I think, a good indication of the work that is being done by Phil Wragg as governor and by his senior team.

Mr Dickson: Indeed, Minister, Mr Wragg indicated that to us. I commend him and the new senior management team on that reduction.

Will the Minister acknowledge that being a prison officer, or working in the Prison Service, is a difficult and demanding job, and one to which the community should give a great deal of consideration, even though the issue of sickness does need to be tackled?

Mr Ford: Yes, that point is well made. I have had the opportunity on two or three occasions recently to meet staff working in some of the more difficult areas — with some of the category A and separated prisoners — in Maghaberry, and I have done my best as Minister to convey my support for the work that they do in protecting the community in quite difficult circumstances inside the prison. Frankly, it is one of the more difficult areas in which people have to work anywhere in the public service in Northern Ireland. I certainly join Mr Dickson in making positive comments about that work, and I trust that other Members, while they may have concerns about the way in which prisons operate, will recognise the extremely good work that is being done by many of our officers under quite difficult conditions.

Refugees: Support

T7. **Mr Sheehan** asked the Minister of Justice whether he supports his counterpart in the South, Frances Fitzgerald, who said that Ireland would welcome 4,000 refugees, would put all necessary support in place to help those refugees integrate and would provide them with help to overcome the trauma that they have experienced in fleeing their homeland. (AQT 2897/11-16)

Mr Ford: I am honestly not sure what the Minister of Justice can say in response to that question, which did not quite touch on any justice responsibilities. If Mr Sheehan wants me to apologise for the fact that I was not here last week because I was in Stormont House when the debate on welcoming refugees was put forward by my party colleagues, I am happy to say that I am fully in line with what my party colleagues said that day.

Mr Sheehan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. He has lost me with that response.

Does the Minister agree that we could take in an equivalent number of refugees here as are being taken in in the South; that we could put in place the necessary support to help those refugees integrate; and that we could provide support to help them overcome any trauma that they experienced in fleeing their homeland?

Mr Ford: I am sure that Mr Sheehan will want the Minister of Justice to refer to good activity that the Minister sees being done on integrating members of a diverse community in different ways into the way in which our system of government operates. Whether I as Minister of Justice have the power to set officially a number for those whom we should be admitting from Syria, Eritrea or wherever, I am not sure, but I think that he makes a very valid point that people from this island have left and gone to many other parts of the world when we had difficulties here. It is only but reasonable that we should recognise that we now have the ability to help people going through utterly traumatic circumstances in the Middle East and elsewhere.

CBI Comments

T8. **Mrs Cochrane** asked the Minister of Justice, as one of the Ministers who continues to do his duties as opposed to playing games, whether he agrees with the comments made by the chairperson of the CBI in Northern Ireland, who said that its members want a "restructured, properly functioning executive, with new mechanisms and procedures that deliver results and bring an end to the recent never ending series of standoffs, logjams and showdowns". (AQT 2898/11-16)

Mr Ford: I am certainly happy to agree with my colleague on that one. I was not aware that the current chair of the CBI was a spokesperson for the Alliance Party, but it did seem that what he said was entirely sound, in that there is an impetus on all of us to see that the Stormont House Agreement delivers.

Standing here as the only Minister who is here because he had the confidence of the Assembly to be elected Justice Minister, I do think that there are significant positives in looking at slightly different ways of doing things that promote a more joined-up way of providing government for the people of Northern Ireland. We all would do well to listen to not just the voice of the chair of the CBI but the voices of the Church leaders last week and those of a number of community and voluntary sector groups, reflected through the chair of the Community Relations Council on radio this morning.

3.30 pm

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Mrs Cochrane for a supplementary.

Mrs Cochrane: I do not really have much more to say at this point.

Heroin Problem: South Belfast

T9. **Mr McGimpsey** asked the Minister of Justice where he sees his role in the increasing heroin drug trade that, from the increasing number of needle finds in public and open spaces, is evident in south Belfast. (AQT 2899/11-16)

Mr Ford: Mr McGimpsey highlights a serious problem. The role of the Minister of Justice is to do the best that he can to supply the resources to the justice agencies that are concerned with fighting that criminal activity. At the same time, other Ministers — most notably, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, a post in which Mr McGimpsey has considerable experience — are doing their best to educate people and assist those who wish to move away from heroin addiction.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes Question Time. I invite the House to take its ease while we change at the top Table.

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

Committee Business

Commonwealth Youth Games 2021: Bid

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly notes the motion, unanimously endorsed in November 2014, supporting a bid for Northern Ireland to host the 2021 Commonwealth Youth Games; further notes that the deadline to bid for these games is the end of September 2015; recognises that Northern Ireland is well placed to bid successfully for the games; further recognises the benefits that hosting the games will bring, such as increased tourism, building on the successes of the World Police and Fire Games and Giro d'Italia, the opportunity for our best young athletes to experience world-class competition and to excel, and putting Northern Ireland at the forefront of international sport; and calls on all Members to exert their influence to ensure that a bid is made. — [Mr B McCrea.]

Mrs McKeivitt: I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate. I am sure that we will see overwhelming support for the motion in the Chamber. I am positive that the motion, if acted on, will have a positive impact on the North of Ireland's sporting tradition, its economy and the lives of our young people.

Over the past week, we have had an opportunity to see our sporting abilities on an international stage. I make particular reference to the Ireland rugby team. People right across the world witnessed how we behave in a sporting ground. I take this opportunity to wish that team all the best in the games ahead. The crowds of supporters standing shoulder to shoulder with the team set a fine example to all. Without diluting anything, I also want to make reference to our boxers' success on an international stage. Mr Deputy Speaker, I am sure that you agree that boxing continues to be one of our greatest sporting traditions. Successes such as these will ensure that the tradition continues for some time to come.

Last year, I stood in the Chamber to extend my warm and sincere congratulations to the Northern Ireland Commonwealth team on its successes in Glasgow and called for the Assembly to support fully the efforts to replicate that success in the future. The estimated £3.75 million cost to host the games may be daunting, but I believe that, with proper planning and a positive joint approach to development, it represents an investment worth making. It is essential that the North has in place the facilities and infrastructure not only to host the Commonwealth Youth Games but to ensure that we can avail ourselves of other sporting events in the future and that our natural talent is nurtured in a suitable environment. If we are to see any success in the future, all our sports need to be funded adequately and enjoy full support from the Department and the whole Assembly.

I support Northern Ireland's excellent young athletes. Regardless of the politics of the Commonwealth, the Commonwealth Youth Games is a prestigious and international event that allows Northern Ireland's athletes to shine. Our athletes and competitors should be given every opportunity to compete in international sporting events. They should also be given the opportunity to participate in these world-recognised games at home. The unifying power of sport will allow all traditions and

communities to come together to cheer and celebrate our athletes, as we have done in the past.

It is difficult to overstate the sheer success that this region has had in hosting events in the past couple of years. In the face of continued political instability and strife, Northern Ireland's ability to present its world-class hospitality has persevered. Events such as the World Police and Fire Games, the Giro d'Italia and the recent Irish Open at Royal County Down prove that Northern Ireland has the will and the want to host international sporting events.

As I have often said to colleagues and constituents, the economic benefits of sports tourism do not end with each event. Tourists return to visit, and the reputation of the North is enhanced by each event. Sports tourism remains a booming industry, and the region will continue to benefit greatly from the economic and social benefits that events such as the Commonwealth Youth Games bring.

In the spirit of the unifying power that I spoke of, I ask that the Assembly come together once again to voice its support for Northern Ireland's bid for the Commonwealth Youth Games in 2021. I believe that, regardless of our current dire political circumstances, sport remains a positive force for Northern Ireland and reflects it at its best. I hope that, in 2021, in the Chamber, we will welcome even greater successes for our young athletes.

Mr Cree: I am pleased to stand before the House as a Committee member and spokesman for the Ulster Unionist Party to discuss this important issue today. It is with great annoyance that we have to bring the debate to the Assembly under such negative circumstances, considering that, in November 2014 — only nine months ago — Northern Ireland's potential involvement in hosting the 2021 Commonwealth Youth Games was being hailed as one of the good news stories for sport.

My, my, what a difference several months can make, and guess what the problem is yet again? The dysfunctional Stormont Executive and the trailing indecision of the DUP and Sinn Féin to agree a Budget mean that the in principle Stormont backing indicated to the Northern Ireland Commonwealth Games Council last year is becoming less certain.

Hosting the games would, as other Members said, cost around £3.75 million. I notice that it is £3.861 million in the Minister's letter of last week. As recently as August this year, the Executive had not met to discuss the event, even though the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment had met Northern Ireland Commonwealth Games Council officials. The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure stated last year that her Department:

“through Sport NI, will continue to develop facilities subject to the availability of budgets.”

I hope that that remains the case and that the Minister will find funding for it. To date, the Executive have not called a meeting to discuss the issue, which is required to free up funding to enable the planning of the event to move forward.

Last year, at the Commonwealth Youth Games in Glasgow, Northern Ireland athletes proved their competitiveness and succeeded in bringing home some 12 medals, which was

mentioned by others, ranking Northern Ireland fifteenth of 71 on the medals table.

In light of Northern Ireland's recent successes in attracting major sporting events, such as the World Police and Fire Games, the Giro d'Italia and the Carl Frampton boxing tournament, it would be a great shame if the Executive could not muster £3.861 million to fund the Commonwealth Youth Games in 2021, given the potential return in investment that it would produce for the Northern Ireland economy and right across the financial spectrum.

Locally, the youth games attract around 1,000 young athletes, whose ages range between 14 and 18, and they compete against 70 other nations. In the bigger scheme of things, the potential footfall means that £3.8 million seems a very small price to pay over a five-year spending plan.

I urge all Members to think outside the box in this case. Sport is a global language that embraces all socio-economic backgrounds, ages, genders, colours and creeds. Hosting the event in 2021 would certainly put Northern Ireland on the world map. In this time of unease and uncertainty, it would bring back some faith in this place if the youth games organisers were given positive funding news from Stormont to proceed with their plans. With only one of the bidders — Botswana — remaining, the Executive need urgently to prioritise their decision to enable Northern Ireland to be in with a fair chance of winning the bid to host the games in 2021.

Finally, I refer to the Culture Minister's letter to the Acting First Minister/Minister of Finance and Personnel, dated 25 September, just last week. It states:

“The Commonwealth Games Federation have agreed to extend the closing date for bid submissions until the 30 September 2015”.

So, there are only two days, which is not a lot of time. We need something to happen with the Executive to get this matter moving. I support the motion.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Éirím le tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún seo inniu. I support the motion. Several weeks ago, young athletes from the North of Ireland gave an outstanding account of themselves when they went to Samoa to take part in the Commonwealth Youth Games. Agus faoi dheireadh na gcluichí bhí stór maith bonn curtha le chéile acu ina spóirt. By the end of the games, they had notched up an exemplary array of medals in their sports.

Agus mar aitheantas air seo thug an tAire spóirt Carál Ní Chuilín teachtaireacht dheas dóibh mar chomhgairdeas dóibh. In recognition of this, the sports Minister, Carál Ní Chuilín, sent them a very warm message of congratulations. Sixteen local athletes from the North competed in the games and events, including boxing, swimming, athletics, squash and lawn bowls. An amazing total of 12 medals have been brought home for various sports.

Once again, Irish boxers showed that they can punch above their weight, with James McGivern, Stephen McKenna and Aidan Walsh all winning gold in their events. Tiernan Bradley and Brett McGinty took silver medals. In the swimming events, Conor Ferguson achieved a massive feat when he won four medals in the 200 metres, 100 metres and 50 metres backstroke, as well as the relay.

James Brown, Danielle Hill and Emma Reid were the other winners in the relay team. Competing in track events, Ben Fisher took bronze in the 110 metres hurdles and the long jump. Completing the medals, Stephen Kirkwood won bronze in lawn bowls. So, with four gold, four silver and four bronze medals, the team from the North finished in eighth place overall, a huge achievement and one that we are all incredibly proud of.

Rud iontach a bhaint amach, agus tá muid an-bhródúil as. The sports Minister went on to pay tribute to the support team, including coaching and medical staff, who accompanied the competitors. It is very important also that we applaud everyone who took part in the games and not just the medal winners. For those who missed out this time, we wish you better luck next time.

It is next time that is the subject of the motion. In November 2014, the Assembly unanimously endorsed supporting a bid to host the 2021 Commonwealth Youth Games. The deadline to bid for those games is the day after tomorrow. We know that responsibility for events lies with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. The previous Minister, along with the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, met the Commonwealth Games Council last June on this issue. It was agreed at that meeting that Sport NI would continue to support the Commonwealth Games Council on the preparation of the business case. Prior to Minister Bell's resignation, he issued a letter saying that he and the Finance Minister were formally advising the games council of their support for the bid to host the youth games and that officials would work with them on the development and submission of the bid.

It is disappointing to see that the Chair of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure is not even here to listen, never mind take part in, this important debate, which will bring this great event to the North of Ireland and will create a huge opportunity for our young local athletes to take part on their home turf. It is a matter of real disappointment that only one DUP Committee member thinks that that is a good reason to be here today. However, it is good news to learn that steps have been taken by the Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Finance Ministers to ensure that the bid will proceed. It is good that some common sense has prevailed at the last minute. I welcome that move. In conclusion, is maith an scéal sin — that is good news. Tacaím leis an rún. I support the motion.

Ms Lo: In November 2014, I spoke on behalf of the Alliance Party in support of a bid for Northern Ireland to host the 2021 Commonwealth Youth Games. Our position remains unchanged. However, during the previous debate, it was mentioned that conversations had already started and that discussions were under way between the Northern Ireland Commonwealth Games Council, Sport NI and officials in DCAL.

3.45 pm

We called on the Executive to develop a bid, the deadline for which is the end of September 2015. Today is 28 September. Given the Assembly's unanimous support last year, I am hugely disappointed that no bid has been made so far. I am not on the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee, so I am unaware of how much work has actually been put into the bid, but surely it is far too late now to attempt to submit one. It is perhaps another

indication of the lack of joined-up working of Departments and the lack of delivery in the Assembly.

We celebrated the success of our athletes who competed in the Commonwealth Games in Glasgow last summer, we were proud of how well we handled the first stage of the Giro d'Italia, and we saw how positive the World Police and Fire Games were. After each of those events we stood here and said how important it is for us to build on those successes. I agree that hosting the Commonwealth Youth Games would be an appropriate step to encourage more international events to be held in Northern Ireland, but action speaks louder than words. What action has been taken in the last year to facilitate that? Hearing from other Members who spoke, it seems that there are a lot of issues with the Executive, with budget and with DETI. We just do not seem to be able to agree on anything.

With the huge successes of the Giro d'Italia, the World Police and Fire Games, the MTV music awards and the Irish Open, we know that we are more than capable of hosting world-class international events. We have so much to offer, and it is important to take every opportunity to show the world the positive Northern Ireland that all too often gets overshadowed by our negative politics. This is clearly another missed opportunity.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Beidh mé breá sásta labhairt ar an ábhar seo inniu. Níl mé cinnte go mbeidh mórán le rá agam, ach ar aghaidh linn. I am very pleased to wind up on the motion as a member of the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee and as our party's culture, arts and leisure spokesperson.

When I first saw the motion I was a bit perplexed about it, because we had discussed a very similar motion in November last year, and there was a degree of unanimity on that subject. I was not convinced that it was not perhaps Mr McCrea's attempt to get a 10-minute slot on 'Stormont Today', but I am very happy to discuss it today. It is timely that it has come forward. The developments that we have heard of in the last 24 hours have to be welcomed in that at least a letter of comfort is in place in regard to the bid. Given the fact that the only other serious bid is from Botswana, I am hopeful that the North can possibly secure that.

I thank all those who contributed to the debate. It is an issue on which the Committee has been united. My colleague Rosie McCorley touched on the disappointment that the Chair and other members have not turned up, but there has been a far degree of unanimity. The games, like all sports, of course, have a lot of positives, not least the participation of women and the inspiration that the games give to many young athletes, as well as raising the profile of sport and encouraging general participation in it, and subsequently, of course, health and well-being. It also shows that there is a capacity here to hold major sporting events. There are those of us who are looking forward to some of those events coming up, like the Open in 2019, or, indeed, the Rugby World Cup in 2023.

Mr McCrea highlighted the cross-community aspect. He had to commend the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure's positive response to a question on the Commonwealth Youth Games. He also mentioned Minister Arlene Foster's support for that, and this debate gives us the opportunity to put Members' support for the bid on record.

Karen McKeivitt welcomed the debate and outlined the positive benefits of it. She said that this would provide an

international stage for this part of Ireland. She also wished the Ireland rugby team well. I think that we all celebrated yesterday: I came back from the Ulster hurling final to sit down and watch the rugby and it was absolutely brilliant. It was a great performance against Romania, as it was against Canada previously. I hope that they go very far this time around.

These games would seek to replicate the success of the Glasgow games, which were a great success in terms of medals. I think that the cost of the bid is relatively modest, although it is a significant amount — £3.8 million. Last week, we were forensically going through the legacy moneys for the City of Culture. That cost only slightly more than this sum and I was very much in support of it. I hope that people will also support this bid. Its success would allow us to bid for further support for other events in the future. This is irrespective of the politics of the Commonwealth in itself. Of particular note is boxing: many of our great boxers who went on to box for Ireland cut their teeth on the Commonwealth Games. That has to be welcomed, regardless of the politics.

We had great success in the World Police and Fire Games. I outlined that the last time, when we looked at a rather modest fishing competition in my constituency, which has now brought forward huge proposals for the development of the entire Foyle basin for tourism and other sporting events. We have had, of course, the Giro d'Italia and the Irish Open, which show that we have the ability to host those types of events here. They showed the benefit of sports tourism. It is a unifying power: I have seen that myself at places like the Kingspan Stadium and elsewhere where we see people who go to games and events that, perhaps a few short years ago, they might not have considered. All of that is to be welcomed.

Leslie Cree outlined the cost of £3.75 million. He was disappointed that the Executive had not signed off on it and he commended the performance of the North's athletes at Glasgow. The Youth Games attract about 1,000 athletes and, as he pointed out, the cost of the games is relatively small over a five-year CSR period. There is positive diversity in race, religion and nationality and all the rest of it in the games, and he asked the Executive to respond positively.

I am pleased that we are joined in the Public Gallery today by Conal Heatley, the NI Commonwealth Games Council's executive officer: he has just come in.

Rosie McCorley reflected on the success of the North's athletes in the Youth Games in Samoa and on the Minister's support. Of the four gold medals, four silver medals and four bronze medals, one gold went to James McGivern, the cousin of Rosie's partner. I offer my congratulations particularly to him and to Rosie and her family. She also highlighted the closeness of the deadline of the bid and referenced the Finance and Personnel and Enterprise, Trade and Investment Ministers' letter of support, which is positive. She also referenced the Chair's absence, which I touched on earlier.

Anna Lo reflected on last year's debate on the bid and said that everything seemed to be on track, but she also expressed her disappointment that we are so close to the deadline for the bid. She also highlighted our sporting successes in the World Police and Fire Games and the Giro d'Italia.

All in all, I think that the motion and cause has united Members. I hope that it is successful and that we see a very successful Commonwealth Youth Games coming here to the North in 2021. It would benefit the whole island, because I think that there is a wider sporting interest there. I commend the motion and hope that everyone votes in favour.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the motion, unanimously endorsed in November 2014, supporting a bid for Northern Ireland to host the 2021 Commonwealth Youth Games; further notes that the deadline to bid for these games is the end of September 2015; recognises that Northern Ireland is well placed to bid successfully for the games; further recognises the benefits that hosting the games will bring, such as increased tourism, building on the successes of the World Police and Fire Games and Giro d'Italia, the opportunity for our best young athletes to experience world-class competition and to excel, and putting Northern Ireland at the forefront of international sport; and calls on all Members to exert their influence to ensure that a bid is made.

Adjourned at 3.54 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 29 September 2015

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Speaker: Before we proceed to today's business, I have a couple of announcements to make.

Ministerial Resignation: Mr Bell

Mr Speaker: I wish to advise the House that the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Mr Jonathan Bell, resigned his office on 29 September 2015. Standing Order 44(3) provides for a seven-day period during which the party that held the office may nominate a Member from that party to replace him and take up office. That period expires at the end of Monday 5 October 2015.

Committee Chairperson Appointment

Mr Speaker: I also wish to advise the House that the nominating officer of the DUP has informed me that Mr Paul Givan has been appointed as Chairperson of the Committee on Standards and Privileges with effect from 28 September 2015, and I am satisfied that the requirements of Standing Orders have been met.

Ministerial Statement

Disability Employment Strategy: Consultation Launch

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning):

I wish to inform the Assembly that I am, today, launching the public consultation on the employment strategy for people with disabilities. For a truly successful world-class economy, it is critical that we draw upon all the talents in society, and it is vital that we give every person the opportunity to develop to their full potential.

At a time of unprecedented pressure on departmental budgets, and in a climate of economic change as we attempt to create a more balanced employment base, it is essential that those who may be more distant from the labour market solely because of a lifelong or acquired disability are neither forgotten nor left behind.

The employment strategy for people with disabilities contains proposals that will help the Department, working in partnership with others, to address the difficulties and inequalities that people with significant disabilities are attempting to overcome. The strategy is focused on supporting people with the most significant disability-related barriers to work and is about helping that group to achieve real paid employment outcomes. The strategy is making a clear statement to society that people with disabilities share the same ambitions and aspirations as everyone else and, provided they are given the right support, advice and assistance, are capable of realising their full career potential and making a significant contribution to our economy.

The Department already provides dedicated and enhanced support to enable people with disabilities to access educational and skills programmes and services. It aims to build on those existing disability services and, more specifically, the employment support that is delivered through mainstream as well as community and voluntary sector programmes. The strategy contains a number of proposals that will improve partnership working at all levels and will create a more cohesive pathway to employment for individuals.

In terms of existing provision, the Department has a dedicated Disability Employment Service, which provides and manages a range of pre-employment and in-work support measures, including Access to Work, Workable and Work Connect. The Department also has a dedicated occupational psychology service, and supports residential training for disabled trainees at Parkanaur College.

Across the network of 35 jobs and benefits and jobcentre offices, employment service advisers also work with people with health problems and disabilities to assist them to find and retain employment. With financial support provided through the Department's European social fund, local disability organisations throughout Northern Ireland are delivering quality training, employment and employability services to hundreds of disabled people each year.

The need for a dedicated strategy, however, is based on the fact that there is a need for additional specialist support for people with disabilities to help them prepare for and move into paid employment, specifically at the key transition point between education or skills training and the critical stage of active job search. The strategy aims to address that issue and will build upon and improve what the Department and others currently deliver for people with disabilities who want to work and are capable of doing so.

The Department and the local disability sector have a long-standing positive working relationship. A strategic working group, including key representatives from the sector, was established in 2013 and has played a central role in helping the Department to develop the employment strategy for people with disabilities. The strategy has also been informed by a number of positive engagement events, targeted primarily at people with disabilities but also including support workers, community and voluntary sector organisations and employers. More than 300 people, most of whom had a disability, attended those events. In addition, a separate event, targeted at employers, was organised to help gain an understanding of the issues faced or perceived by employers when recruiting and supporting people with a disability.

As stated, the strategy will target and support people who have significant disability-related barriers to employment. The target group comprises people with learning disabilities and difficulties, long-term mental ill health, autism, neurological conditions and more severe sensory and physical disability. People with significant disabilities feel excluded from many employment opportunities that others take for granted. The aim of the strategy is, therefore, to provide comprehensive and tailored disability employment services, which will lead to an increase in the number of disabled people who will secure successful job and career outcomes.

While the strategy and subsequent implementation plan will support people of all age groups, there will be a particular focus on young people. The intention is to prevent people with significant disabilities from becoming economically inactive and dependent upon welfare benefits as well as health and social care for a large part of their adult life. The strategy will therefore complement some of the other interventions that the Department and Executive are undertaking to support young people with disabilities and will ensure that these service options are fully inclusive. Specifically, it will assist and complement the implementation of the new apprenticeship and youth training strategies, as well as additional support proposed for students within further and higher education.

The Department has been working with others on a cross-departmental group, looking at transitions for young people with severe learning disability. The strategy is directly referenced in the action plan, as it is anticipated that many young people with a learning disability leaving

full-time education or discrete learning units within the local college network will avail themselves of the specialist pre-employment support that the strategy will offer.

One of the key proposals within the strategy is the implementation of the supported employment model throughout Northern Ireland. The model has been used successfully locally, through the European social fund projects and programmes such as Workable, as well as in a number of other countries. It will provide high-quality, personalised and often long-term support to people with significant disabilities to secure, maintain and progress in paid employment.

The key difference between what is offered through the supported employment model and what is offered through mainstream employment programmes or services is the more intense, person-centred and disability-specific support.

A lot of time is spent with the individual at the early stage to engage with them, their family and other key stakeholders. There is an emphasis on vocational profiling to ensure that there is a clear idea of the correct job or career match before the crucial element of employer engagement and job preparation begins. Finally, if the person successfully secures the job, support will remain in place for the individual and the employer for as long as is deemed necessary, although the objective is always to withdraw support at the earliest opportunity.

In order to deliver the supported employment service to more disabled people, the strategy, and those charged with responsibility for its success, has recruited a number of supported employment officers in advance of the strategy's launch. The additional staff are employees of Disability Action, but their remit has been agreed through the strategic working group, and they have been funded through the Department's European social fund. The new staff will work very closely and in collaboration with staff from the Department's Disability Employment Service and Careers Service, as well as front-line staff from the employment service. The new staff will also complement the service being delivered through local disability organisations throughout Northern Ireland.

In summary, the purpose of the employment strategy for people with disabilities will be to improve the job prospects and working careers of people with disabilities. The key objective is to directly assist disabled people to find, sustain and progress in paid employment or to start up a business.

The strategic working group identified five key themes for the strategy, with a number of supporting proposals within each theme. Theme 1 is about supporting people to secure paid employment. The success of the entire strategy will be judged on that. Through the proposals, theme 1 will seek to develop and implement a disability service that maximises the number of people with a disability who make a successful transition into paid employment, including self-employment. Proposals include the recruitment of the new team of supported employment officers and the formal adoption of the model of supported employment. There are also proposals regarding a new pathway to employment, including a clear signposting and referral service for all people with significant disability related barriers and the establishment of annual targets for the number of disabled people who move into paid employment.

Theme 2 is on job retention and career development. Under theme 2, the Department will seek to work with employers and disabled employees to support job retention and promote opportunities for progression, personal development, promotion and career enhancement. The Disability Employment Service is supporting approximately 1,600 disabled people who are in work, so the proposals are aimed at building upon and improving current practice. That will include a targeted campaign to promote existing disability retention services and programmes, considering flexibilities that would support more disabled people in part-time employment and promoting examples of good practice in employing and developing disabled people across all employment sectors. There is a specific proposal to work with the disability organisations to target growth sectors of employment and ensure that disabled employees have an equal opportunity to develop a successful career path in areas such as hospitality, retail, information technology and the creative arts industry.

Theme 3, entitled 'Working with Employers', is critical for obvious reasons. The Department and its partners can have all the best pre-employment services and programmes available. However, unless there are real jobs and employment opportunities for people with disabilities to move into, there will be little benefit or few outcomes to be gained. The strategy, therefore, will seek to encourage and influence employers to take positive action and promote equality for disabled people, particularly when they are creating job opportunities or recruiting and selecting new staff. Proposals that will build upon and improve current practice include working with the Equality Commission to develop a clear understanding in relation to positive action and developing stronger links between the disability sector and the employer, which is work that the Department and Invest Northern Ireland lead on. They will also aim to maximise the benefits to people with disabilities through the appropriate use of social clauses. Proposals that will introduce something new include the developing of a best-practice recruitment-support model with the disability sector, which will be available to employers. There will also be an annual employers' event to promote and facilitate the employment of people with disabilities.

Theme 4 is on research and development and seeks to ensure that Northern Ireland is leading the way in terms of research, development and innovation on disability skills and employment issues at local, national and international levels. There is an intention to commission quality research projects that will provide additional and relevant information on those issues over the lifetime of the strategy.

Theme 5 is on strategic partnership and engagement and seeks to develop a framework that will ensure continuous and meaningful engagement between all of the key stakeholders, including people with disabilities. Proposals that will build on and improve current practice include committing to ongoing communication and engagement with those in the community who are disabled but who want to work or supporting those with a significant disability towards and into employment. Proposals that will introduce something new include establishing a new disability employment stakeholder forum, the membership of which needs to be fully inclusive of those who have a direct impact and influence on the employment prospects of people with disabilities.

10.45 am

The public consultation will run until 27 November this year. During that period, my Department, in cooperation with a number of stakeholders, will undertake further engagement with people about those challenges to encourage a wider discussion about potential solutions. After the public consultation process is completed, I will take stock of the responses and finalise and launch the new strategy by March 2016.

Mr Swann (The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning): I thank the Minister sincerely for his statement this morning, because I think it is a very good and worthwhile initiative and is something that I think acknowledges and recognises the work that the Committee has been doing in its inquiry into the provision of post-19 SEN.

One of the concerns that we have is the lack of available real job opportunities, and I notice that the measures that the Minister intends to take seem to be mostly legal and in enforcement. Is there something he is going to do to break down the perceptions of employers about the benefits of employing somebody with a disability?

I do not want to turn negative about this, but I am afraid I have concerns. My first is the date of the strategy launch in March 2016, which will lead us moving into probably the Department for the Economy. Access to Work is one of the measures you mentioned. According to my figures, it is oversubscribed, and there are £600,000 worth of inescapable pressures on its provision. If it is moved from DEL into the new Department for the Economy, will the Minister reassure us that the programme and strategy will be funded?

Dr Farry: I thank the Chair for his comments and questions. I also acknowledge the good work that the Committee is doing on learning disability transitions. That is a distinct issue in its own right, but it can be regarded as a feeder for people progressing into employment, as well as into different educational opportunities. Those two should knit very closely together, and I look forward to receiving the conclusions of the Committee's inquiry in due course. We have made some progress on an action plan that has been developed by the Bamford implementation Executive subcommittee, although we would, of course, be very happy to revise that in light of any emerging recommendations from the Committee.

The Chair is also right to highlight the importance of employers in creating opportunities. While we made reference to some of the issues on clarifying the legal framework through which things can be done by employers, as the Chair identified, a lot of promotional work and engagement with employers has to be done to ensure that they fully understand the opportunities that are out there.

I think that, first of all, it is important that we get the message out that employing people with disabilities is not something that they should be doing out of some sense of corporate social responsibility or that will be a burden to the organisation. It is important that we fully understand that people with disabilities can play a full and active role in any company or organisation. They are just like any other member of staff, are extremely productive and add immense weight and value to any company or organisation. We are considering how we can identify a business champion in particular who can engage with

companies to try to ensure that they fully understand that. Also, part of the support employment model is about the support employment officers being proactive in talking to companies and trying to source opportunities for people with disabilities, rather than simply using the more proactive model that we have.

The Chair is also right to say that there is a funding pressure on Access to Work, which is obviously a demand-led programme. We in the Department will try to absorb that in-year as we go forward. At this stage, however, the employment service aspect of my Department is scheduled to be transferred to the new Department for Communities, rather than the Department for the Economy. It is the one aspect of the Department that will go off in a different direction.

I am open to the Assembly taking a view on that in due course.

It can be argued both ways. It can be argued that it would sit better in a Department for the Economy or, because of its interactions with social security, that it would sit better in a Department for Communities. My view is that it should be part of a Department of the Economy.

The Chair is right. It is important that we lock it in to ensure that the financial pressures will be absorbed and that we have a long-standing commitment. I appreciate what he said. I am sure that other Members will be equally supportive of the strategy; that there will be cross-party consensus on the importance of this work to our constituents and the Northern Ireland economy; and that we will endeavour to ensure that it is given priority, no matter what structures emerge for the next Assembly mandate.

Ms McGahan: I welcome the Minister's statement and commend his efforts in this important area of work. It has been mentioned that one of the biggest issues that we hear about, particularly from the post-19 special educational needs sector, is that there is simply nowhere to go. Will the Minister elaborate on how proposals in the strategy will improve partnership working and achieve paid employment outcomes? Will targets be specific and measurable?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for her comments and questions. It is important to bear in mind that transitions for young people leaving education is a critical issue in all of this. Young people will have a range of conditions, and we need a cross-Executive response. Hopefully, the action plan that we have put in place gives us a good foundation for that. We are particularly keen to hear the Committee's recommendations, which will touch on my Department and maybe others, on how we can best coordinate and ensure that there is proper provision. Obviously, Members will be aware that, alongside the education and skills opportunities that are there, there is an issue around ensuring that there is proper day provision through social services.

The strategy is to focus on the employment aspect of such opportunities. If we again look to the supported employment model, which is intrinsic to the new strategy, it is important that we identify young people coming through the system at an early stage and get an awareness of where people's aptitudes and aspirations lie. We then must decide which of them should be referred to the supported employment staff in Disability Action. Some of the other disability programmes funded through the European social fund will also have their own supported employment staff doing similar exercises

and having intensive engagement with young people to try to encourage them to move forward.

All of that will be governed by partnership. The strategy has been developed in partnership with the sector, and we are making a clear commitment to having a stakeholder forum to take the strategy forward and to ensure that that engagement continues. However, we are very much in the hands of the sector, which has the experts. We take great counsel from its views.

Mr Rogers: I, too, thank the Minister for his statement. I am taken by its sixth paragraph. Disabled young people start with the same hopes and desires as everyone else, but, by the age of 26, they are four times more likely than their non-disabled peers to be in unemployment.

If young people stay in the education system and get the level of support that is associated with their statement, how will you ensure that those young people in training and employment get a similar level of support? Who will provide it? Who will make the decision, as the statement indicates:

"for as long as it is deemed necessary"?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his comments and questions. To add to the stark statistic that he mentioned about the employment rates for people with disabilities, it is important to bear in mind that it is something like 34% of people with a disability have no qualifications, compared with only 12% of the population as a whole. Therefore, the education that the Member referred to is critical.

Outside the strict boundaries of the strategy, we have a number of existing interventions, including the additional support fund for further education. The House will know that we have increased the budget for that by 50% during this mandate. We also have disabled students' allowances (DSAs) to give young people assistance to obtain a higher-level qualification at university. There is also focus on the outgoing programme, Training for Success, which, as the House will know, is to be replaced shortly by a new youth training system that is to be mirrored in apprenticeships. So, in the existing educational and training opportunities we have consideration for those with disabilities, and we are seeking to ensure that that is improved. In the new strategies on apprenticeships and youth training, in particular, there has to be a clear read-across with this emerging employment strategy to ensure that we give young people the fullest support that we can to enable them to develop to their full potential. As I said to the Chair, everyone in society has the ability to make that contribution to the economy and to develop as an individual, and it is important that we give everyone that opportunity.

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for his statement. I welcome the comprehensive strategy being put in place. The Minister said that the strategy has been informed by people with disabilities and the community and voluntary sector. He also talked about working in partnership with the sector in the future. Will the Minister tell us more? What role will the community and voluntary sector have in the delivery of the strategy?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for her question and, in light of her announcement yesterday, I put on record, I think, everyone's thanks and acknowledgement of the contribution that she has made to the Assembly over

the past seven to eight years and her wider contribution to public life in Northern Ireland over many decades. Hopefully, that will continue in a new role in the years to come. The Member has, quite rightly, put a lot of focus on the importance of working with the community and voluntary sector. An ongoing concern has been expressed over the past number of months, particularly in the context of Budget cuts, that the sector has, somehow, been regarded as an easy target for savings. I, along with a number of other Ministers, have been very keen to make the point that the community and voluntary sector plays a central role in the delivery of services for the community. In many respects, it is better placed and has a better knowledge and level of expertise in some areas than could ever be provided by the state, including engagement on how we work with those with disabilities to give them full opportunities. So, in that context, we have been very pleased that the strategy has been developed over the past couple of years in conjunction, and in very close partnership, with the disability sector.

Looking ahead, we will have the disability stakeholder forum to ensure that we have an ongoing, coordinated approach. A lot of the delivery of the strategy will be through the European social fund projects that have been successful in the current programme, and, most clearly, the supported employment officers, who are central to the new focus of the strategy, will be employed through Disability Action, which was successful as part of the European social fund. Hopefully, Members see how that is beginning to knit together by way of a coordinated strategy to make a real difference for our citizens.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a ráitis, agus cuirim fáilte roimh ráiteas tábhachtach an Aire inniu. Given that the geographical spend and the delivery of programmes through ESF are so heavily skewed towards urban and, often, city areas, how can he ensure that the outworkings of the strategy will benefit all citizens with a disability equally, including those in rural areas and those who live in smaller towns and villages, and that the inbuilt inequalities and discrimination facing people with a disability in rural areas will be addressed?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. Those are the types of issues that we need to emphasise as the consultation unfolds over the next eight to nine weeks. The importance of ensuring that we have fair and equal access across Northern Ireland must be stressed. In the first instance, I assure the Member that the new supported employment officers will be available on a regional basis and will not be concentrated in the greater Belfast area. That geographical coverage is central to the success of the new model. We have a network of jobs and benefits offices and job centres in every major settlement across Northern Ireland. They will have their own catchment areas. As we look to the learning disability transitions, we see that transport, obviously, comes into play with regard to some of the programmes. That can be a more acute issue for those in rural areas.

That is why it is important, again, that this is seen not just in isolation but as part of a wider Executive commitment to ensuring that we have that equality of access to people across the board.

11.00 am

Mr Allister: There are many laudable aspirations in this document, but can I suggest a more tangible impact to the Minister? Invest NI issues letters of offer to those that it supports, yet it has resisted the suggestion that I made to it two years ago to insert in those letters of offer an obligation to employ a certain percentage of people from the disabled community within in the workforce of those that Invest NI supports. Why has that idea, which would be tangible and effective, not been pursued?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. He will appreciate that I cannot answer directly for Invest NI, which is the function of the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. I think that the point he makes is well understood and is also reflected in the approaches taken at present through the use of social clauses, which is now mainstream in public procurement right across the public sector. Indeed, as we build upon existing practices in social clauses, there is an immediate opportunity with regard to the type of outcome that the Member is suggesting. I have no doubt that people with responsibility will reflect on what he says about the opportunity through the work that Invest NI does as well.

Mr F McCann: I thank the Minister for his statement to the House this morning. It is always a subject that gets a lot of interest, not only from Members but especially those in the Department for Employment and Learning who are dealing with the post-19 SEN inquiry. Most of the questions on the statement have been asked. Believe it or not, I have been fairly cynical about the whole question of consultation and the effort that is made to try and get the type of response and information that you require. What difference is being made in this consultation to ensure that nobody is left out, that people have that opportunity to have their input and that those suggestions are listened to at the end?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. Again, he makes a valid comment about the importance of ensuring that public consultations are meaningful. I can reassure him that this consultation is not just coming from a top-down basis whereby Department officials have written something, I am announcing it and it goes out cold to public consultation.

What we are launching today has already been subject to work by the disability sector over the past two years. We have had a number of different events where we have engaged with a whole range of stakeholders, from employers through to the community and voluntary sector and those with disabilities themselves. I think that I am right in saying that we have engaged with over 300 individuals already at this stage, which is greater than the number of people who often respond to public consultations.

I have actually seen the odd public consultation where you have had something extremely technical and only one or two people have actually responded. I think that we are starting from a much stronger base in that regard. The consultation itself is the formal process. As your colleague Mr Flanagan has outlined, there will be issues that people may wish to stress, but we are starting from a good, strong platform. Hopefully, the consultation responses will be favourable and we will be able to move very quickly to put the strategy in place. Many of the action points are already being taken forward in isolation, because the time to proceed with them is now.

Private Members' Business

Children's Services Co-operation Bill: Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: The next item of business is the Consideration Stage of the Children's Services Co-operation Bill. I call Mr Steven Agnew to move the Bill.

Mr Agnew: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I rise to oppose clause 1 of the Bill and speak to the other amendments. The original intention of the Bill was to introduce a statutory duty on Government —

Mr Speaker: I just need you to move the Bill at this stage.

Mr Agnew: Apologies, Mr Speaker.

Moved.—[Mr Agnew.]

Mr Speaker: I salute your enthusiasm.

Members will have a copy of the Marshalled List detailing the order for consideration. The amendments have been grouped for debate in the provisional grouping of amendments selected list. There is a single group of amendments. The debate will be on amendments Nos 1 to 10 and Mr Agnew's opposition to clauses 1 to 5 stand part, which deal with a children's strategy, services and cooperation.

Once the debate on the group is completed, any amendments will be moved formally as we go through the Bill, and the Question on each will be put without further debate. The Question on stand part will be taken at the appropriate points in the Bill. If that is clear, we shall proceed.

Clause 1 (General duty)

Mr Speaker: We will now move into the debate. Mr Agnew has signalled his intention to oppose the Question that clause 1 stand part of the Bill. With that Question, it will be convenient to debate amendment Nos 1 to 10 and opposition to clauses 2 to 5 stand part, which relate to a children's strategy, services and cooperation.

Members should note that amendment Nos 1 and 2 are mutually exclusive with clause 1 standing part; amendment No 4 is mutually exclusive with clause 3 standing part; amendment No 5 is mutually exclusive with clause 4 standing part; amendment No 6 is mutually exclusive with clause 2 standing part; and amendment Nos 8 to 10 are consequential to earlier amendments. I will alert Members before putting the relevant Questions.

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

Mr Speaker: I now call Mr Steven Agnew to address his opposition to clause 1 and the other amendments and clauses in this group.

Mr Agnew: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I will try again.

The following amendments stood on the Marshalled List:

No 1: After clause 1 insert

"Well-being of children and young persons

1A.—(1) *The functions conferred by this Act are to be exercised for the purpose of improving the well-being of children and young persons.*

(2) *For this purpose the "well-being" of children and young persons includes—*

- (a) *physical and mental health;*
- (b) *the enjoyment of play and leisure;*
- (c) *learning and achievement;*
- (d) *living in safety and with stability;*
- (e) *economic and environmental well-being;*
- (f) *the making by them of a positive contribution to society;*
- (g) *living in a society which respects their rights.*

(3) *In determining the meaning of well-being for the purposes of this Act, regard is to be had to any relevant provision of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (which is to say, the Convention of that name adopted by General Assembly resolution 44/25 of 20 November 1989).*

(4) *The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister may by regulations make such amendments to subsection (2) as it thinks appropriate.*

(5) *Regulations must not be made under subsection (4) unless a draft of the regulations has been laid before, and approved by a resolution of, the Assembly."*—
[Mr Agnew.]

No 2: After clause 1 insert

"Co-operation to improve well-being

1B.—(1) *Every children's authority must, so far as is consistent with the proper exercise of its children functions, co-operate with other children's authorities and with other children's service providers in the exercise of those functions.*

(2) *The Executive must make arrangements to promote co-operation of the kind mentioned in subsection (1).*

(3) *Every children's authority must co-operate with the Executive in the making of the arrangements mentioned in subsection (2).*

(4) *"Children functions" are any functions which may contribute to the well-being of children and young persons."*— *[Mr Agnew.]*

No 3: After clause 1 insert

"Children and young persons strategy

1C.—(1) *The Executive must adopt a strategy (the "children and young persons strategy") setting out how it proposes to improve the well-being of children and young persons.*

(2) *The strategy must in particular set out—*

- (a) *what outcomes the Executive intends should be achieved for that purpose;*
- (b) *what actions will be taken by Northern Ireland departments (among others) for the purpose of achieving those outcomes;*
- (c) *how it will be determined whether, and to what extent, the outcomes have been achieved.*

(3) *The strategy must state the period within which it is intended that the outcomes should be achieved (the "lifetime" of the strategy).*

- (4) Before adopting the strategy, the Executive must consult—
- (a) children and young persons,
- (b) parents and guardians of children and young persons,
- (c) such persons representing the views and interests of children and young persons as the Executive thinks appropriate, and
- (d) such other persons as the Executive thinks appropriate.
- (5) The Executive may—
- (a) revise or replace the strategy if the Executive is satisfied that changes in circumstances justify doing so;
- (b) amend the strategy by extending its lifetime.
- (6) The Executive must—
- (a) lay the strategy, and any revisions to it, before the Assembly, and
- (b) publish it, and any revisions, in such other manner as the Executive thinks appropriate.
- (7) At the end of the lifetime of the strategy, the Executive must adopt a new one.
- (8) Subsections (2) to (7) apply to any new strategy.”—
[Mr Agnew.]

No 4: After clause 3 insert

“Sharing of resources and pooling of funds

- 3A.—(1) This section applies to a children’s authority for the purposes of exercising any functions in accordance with arrangements under section 1B (co-operation).
- (2) For those purposes, a children’s authority may—
- (a) provide staff, goods, services, accommodation or other resources to another children’s authority;
- (b) make contributions to a fund out of which relevant payments may be made.
- (3) A “relevant payment” is a payment in respect of expenditure incurred, by a children’s authority contributing to the fund, in the exercise of its functions.”— [Mr Agnew.]

No 5: After clause 4 insert

“Children and young persons plan

- 4A.—(1) The Executive must adopt a plan (a “children and young persons plan”) setting out how it is proposed that children’s services will be provided.
- (2) The plan must in particular set out—
- (a) how children’s services will be planned and commissioned;
- (b) what actions will be taken by children’s authorities and other children’s service providers for the purpose of achieving the outcomes set out in the children and young persons strategy;
- (c) how children’s authorities and other children’s service providers will co-operate with each other in the provision of children’s services and in the taking of the actions mentioned in paragraph (b).
- (3) Every children’s authority must—

- (a) co-operate with the Executive in the preparation of the plan, and
- (b) so far as is consistent with the proper exercise of its functions—
- (i) exercise those functions in accordance with the plan, and
- (ii) co-operate with each other in doing so.
- (4) Before adopting the plan, the Executive must consult—
- (a) children and young persons,
- (b) parents and guardians of children and young persons,
- (c) such persons representing the views and interests of children and young persons as the Executive thinks appropriate, and
- (d) such other persons as the Executive thinks appropriate.
- (5) The Executive must review the plan—
- (a) not later than the first anniversary of the date on which it was adopted, and
- (b) not later than the first anniversary of that review; and the Executive may revise the plan as it thinks appropriate in consequence of a review under this subsection.
- (6) The Executive must—
- (a) lay the plan, and any revisions to it, before the Assembly, and
- (b) publish it, and any revisions, in such other manner as the Executive thinks appropriate.
- (7) Not more than 3 years after the date on which the Executive adopted the plan, the Executive must adopt a new plan.
- (8) Subsections (2) to (7) apply to any new plan.
- (9) The following provisions (which are superseded by this section) cease to have effect—
- (a) paragraph 2A of Schedule 2 to the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 (children’s services plans);
- (b) the Children (1995 Order) (Amendment) (Children’s Services Planning) Order (Northern Ireland) 1998 (S.R. 1998/261);
- (c) in section 7(2) of the Children (Leaving Care) Act (Northern Ireland) 2002, the words “and in paragraph 2A(1)(a)”;
- (d) paragraph 14(28) of Schedule 3 to the Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2014.”— [Mr Agnew.]

(6) The Executive must—

- (a) lay the plan, and any revisions to it, before the Assembly, and
- (b) publish it, and any revisions, in such other manner as the Executive thinks appropriate.
- (7) Not more than 3 years after the date on which the Executive adopted the plan, the Executive must adopt a new plan.
- (8) Subsections (2) to (7) apply to any new plan.
- (9) The following provisions (which are superseded by this section) cease to have effect—
- (a) paragraph 2A of Schedule 2 to the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 (children’s services plans);
- (b) the Children (1995 Order) (Amendment) (Children’s Services Planning) Order (Northern Ireland) 1998 (S.R. 1998/261);
- (c) in section 7(2) of the Children (Leaving Care) Act (Northern Ireland) 2002, the words “and in paragraph 2A(1)(a)”;
- (d) paragraph 14(28) of Schedule 3 to the Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2014.”— [Mr Agnew.]

No 6: After clause 4 insert

“Report on the operation of this Act

- 4B.—(1) For each reporting period, the Executive must prepare a report on the operation of this Act.
- (2) The reporting period is—
- (a) for the first report prepared after the adoption of a strategy, the period since its adoption;
- (b) in any other case, the period since the preparation of the preceding report under this section.

(3) The report must include statements on the following matters, so far as relating to the reporting period—

(a) what actions have been taken by the Executive, and Northern Ireland departments, for the purpose of achieving the outcomes set out in the children and young persons strategy;

(b) what progress has been made towards achieving those outcomes, or the extent to which they have been achieved;

(c) how children's authorities and other children's service providers have co-operated with each other in the provision of children's services;

(d) how children's authorities have exercised the powers conferred by section 3A;

(e) how the well-being of children and young persons has improved.

(4) The report must also identify—

(a) any further opportunities for co-operation between children's authorities and other children's service providers that could help to achieve the outcomes set out in the strategy,

(b) any other ways in which the well-being of children and young persons could be improved, and

(c) any ways in which the children and young persons strategy might be revised in order to contribute to those improvements.

(5) The Executive must prepare a report under this section—

(a) not more than 3 years after the date on which it adopted a children and young person's strategy,

(b) thereafter, during the lifetime of that strategy, at intervals of not more than 3 years, and

(c) at the end of the lifetime of a strategy.

(6) But subsection (5)(c) does not apply if a report was prepared under this section less than 6 months before the end of the lifetime of the strategy.

(7) Children's authorities must co-operate with the Executive in the preparation of a report under this section.

(8) The Executive must—

(a) lay the report before the Assembly, and

(b) publish it in such other manner as the Executive thinks appropriate."— [Mr Agnew.]

No 7: After clause 4 insert

"Guidance

4C.—(1) The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister may issue guidance to children's authorities, or to any particular children's authority, on the exercise of functions conferred by this Act.

(2) A children's authority must have regard to guidance issued to it under this section."— [Mr Agnew.]

No 8: After clause 5 insert

"Interpretation

5A.—(1) In this Act—

"children and young persons" means persons who are—

(i) under the age of 18, or

(ii) aged 18 or over and fall within subsection (2) or (3);

"children's authority" means any of the following—

(i) a Northern Ireland department,

(ii) a district council,

(iii) a Health and Social Care trust,

(iv) the Regional Health and Social Care Board,

(v) the Regional Agency for Public Health and Social Well-being,

(vi) the Education Authority,

(vii) the Northern Ireland Housing Executive,

(viii) the Police Service of Northern Ireland, or

(ix) the Probation Board for Northern Ireland;

"children's service" means any service which is provided (whether by a children's authority or by any other person or body) wholly or mainly to or for the benefit of—

(i) children and young persons generally, or

(ii) children and young persons of a particular description or with particular needs;

"the Executive" means the Executive Committee of the Assembly, established under section 20 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998;

"other children's service provider" means any person or body, of whatever nature, who provides a children's service or is engaged in activities which contribute to the well-being of children or young persons (but does not include a children's authority);

"well-being" has the meaning given by section 1A.

(2) A person falls within this subsection if services are provided to or in respect of the person by, or on behalf of, or under arrangements made with, the Regional Health and Social Care Board or a Health and Social Care trust by virtue of—

(a) Article 34D, 35, 35A or 35B of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 (which provide for the continuing duties of those bodies towards young persons), or

(b) regulations made under Article 34E of that Order (which may provide for the appointment of personal advisers for certain young persons).

(3) A person falls within this subsection if the person—

(a) is under the age of 21 years, and

(b) is a disabled person within the meaning of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

(4) The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister may by regulations make such amendments to the definition of "children's authority" as it thinks appropriate.

(5) Regulations under subsection (4) are subject to negative resolution."— [Mr Agnew.]

No 9: After clause 5 insert

"Commencement

5B.—(1) This Act comes into operation on the day after the day on which it receives Royal Assent.

(2) The first strategy under section 1C must be laid before the Assembly before the end of the period of 12 months beginning with the day on which this Act receives Royal Assent.”.— [Mr Agnew.]

No 10: Leave out from first “Northern” to end and insert

“co-operation among certain public authorities and other persons in order to contribute to the well-being of children and young persons; to require the adoption of a children and young persons strategy; and for connected purposes”.— [Mr Agnew.]

Mr Agnew: I rise to oppose clause 1 and speak to the amendments. The Bill's intention all along has been to introduce a statutory duty on Departments and other agencies to cooperate in the planning, commissioning and delivery of children's services. The aim is to cut out the waste of resources that results from Departments operating in silos, which ultimately leads to wasted potential in children's lives. Whilst the Bill is very much about processes, its ultimate aim and ambition are to improve opportunities for all children in Northern Ireland.

Since the Second Stage debate in January, a lot of work has been done on the Bill. Indeed, on the face of it, with opposition to various clauses and significant amendments, in one sense, it is a Bill rewritten, but the original intentions that the House debated and supported at Second Stage remain at the core of the Bill. In that sense, the Bill is unchanged: the words are different, but the intentions are largely the same.

I express at the outset my gratitude for the cooperation from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, the Department of Health as well as other Departments, the OFMDFM Committee, which I have engaged with on such a number of occasions that I have lost count, and the children's sector, which has been there all along. This is very much its Bill. The children's NGO sector and, indeed, the Children's Commissioner have been calling for this Bill since 2007. Whilst I stand here today presenting these proposals, they very much came from that sector. I also thank the Bill Office, which has assisted me throughout the process and provided invaluable support to me and my team, whom I also thank at this stage.

The work that has gone on since January has ultimately been about making the Bill more effective. Cooperation has ensured that expertise has been brought to the table and that conversations have happened between stakeholders to ensure that what started as a single private Member's Bill has very much become collaborative work between Departments, officials, the sector, the Committee and me. That process highlights the value of cooperative working and why a Bill such as this is needed.

I admit that, when going into the process of engaging with the Department, my fear was that I would have to protect my Bill from possibly being compromised and watered down.

I can honestly say that that has not been the case. Every step of the way, OFMDFM officials sought to improve and enhance the Bill and, in their engagement with other Departments, make it more effective. In my view, that has been the intention of all who engaged.

It is disappointing today that these amendments were not tabled jointly by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and me. That was due solely to the current

political situation, which meant that Executive sign-off was not possible on amendments that are, in many cases, cross-departmental. Undoubtedly, that made tabling the amendments and moving forward with Consideration Stage more difficult to navigate and negotiate. However, I am grateful that, individually, parties have continued to engage, even though, due to the current political situation, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister could not put its name to the amendments. I wait to hear from the individual parties, but, in the discussions that have taken place to date, that spirit of cooperation and goodwill towards the Bill appears to continue.

I had to make a judgement call on whether I waited until the current political situation settled down, but, at times, these institutions have been hanging by a thread, and the fear that the Bill would fall entirely, given the possible collapse of the Assembly, drove me to press on. At this point, I have worked for four years on the Bill and sought at all times to get it right rather than do it quickly, but it is now time to press on. Further delay could, I felt, only harm the Bill, and we are at the stage where decisions have to be made, amendments have to be made and, ultimately, the Assembly has to make a final decision on whether it becomes law.

The amendments tabled today are largely those that were shared with the OFMDFM Committee in June. I will seek to highlight where additional amendments have been made. Further work was done over the summer and during this month, but the amendments are largely those that were presented to and scrutinised by the Committee. Amendment Nos 1 to 3 would replace the original clause 1, which I intend to oppose today. One of the aspects of the original clause 1 that ran into difficulty was the six high-level outcomes. From the outset, I was keen that the high-level outcomes that were lifted from the 10-year strategy for children and young people be included in the Bill. However, the Department and I received legal advice that whilst the language was suitable for a strategy, it was perhaps too loosely defined for legislation. That is why there is a shift in emphasis from the outcomes to the concept of well-being, which is more clearly recognised in law and is defined, as referenced in the amendment, in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Within that definition, we reference and have regard to the six high-level outcomes.

One change made from the amendments shown to the Committee is that the six high-level outcomes have become seven. This is simply about giving greater definition to the outcomes; their original purpose remains the same. I will give Members some insight into why they are deemed so important: since the writing of the 10-year strategy for children and young people, in which the children's sector has been heavily engaged, the sector as a whole has based its strategy for the delivery of its provision around these outcomes. They remain at the core of the sector's work, and the sector very much believes that they should remain at the core of government's work in Northern Ireland.

11.15 am

For that reason, any changes to those outcomes in the Bill would be subject to draft affirmative resolution, ensuring that consultation would have to take place on any changes. As was done with the children's strategy and the Bill to

date, the sector and government would step forward together.

Amendment No 2 enshrines the duty to cooperate. Where that has changed, the intention of the original Bill has remained. The original Bill separated the duty on Departments from the duty on other authorities and agencies that worked with children. Amendment No 2, with the definition at amendment No 8, allows the term "children's authorities" to capture Departments and agencies collectively. This improves the Bill whilst keeping the original intentions.

The requirement of children's authorities to cooperate with one another and the Executive underpins the Bill and its purpose. There is an additional requirement for the Executive to promote cooperation. There are concerns around the word "promote". The duty on children's authorities is that they must cooperate. The word "promote" is very much about the Executive putting the structures in place to ensure that that cooperation happens.

Amendment No 3 is a new aspect of the Bill. It very much came from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister but is an amendment that I wholeheartedly support. It would enshrine in law the production of the children and young people's strategy. Officials are working on an updated strategy. The last strategy had widespread support in its ambition and scope. It was the implementation rather than the strategy that was criticised. It is the application that this Bill seeks to address.

I welcome in this amendment the outcomes-based approach and enshrining in law that there must be an outcomes-based strategy, and included in the production of any such strategy is consultation with the sector, outside stakeholders and, importantly, children. That underpins article 12 of the UNCRC, which requires that children be included in decisions that affect their lives.

Amendment No 4 would replace the original clause 3. This is around pooling funds and resources to achieve the objectives of the Bill. This is a key element of the Bill. I have done a lot of research into how pool funds work in other jurisdictions. I hope and believe that should this Bill become law, the pooling of funds and resources will become a necessary outworking, because this is where a lot of the inefficiency arises. Take early intervention work. Five Departments are working to achieve the same objectives but with separate pools of resources and administrators. Pooling those resources will increase efficiency, improve delivery for children and underpin the joined-up working that the Bill seeks to achieve.

The changes to the original Bill that applied to only Departments now include all children's authorities.

Again, that brings in more stakeholders and will improve the effectiveness of the Bill compared with the original draft. The new amendment also reflects the new language in these amendments.

I will skip amendment No 5 for now and come back to it because it is perhaps one of the most complex aspects of the Bill and one of the areas where it has been hardest to get the drafting right. Much work has gone into bringing it this far. As I say, I will return to it.

Amendment No 6 is on the reporting clause. It is key that we not only put the legislation in place but that we continually scrutinise its operation and review its

effectiveness. The Executive would be required to report every three years and lay a report to the Assembly. That replaces the original reporting requirement in clause 2.

There is a degree of cynicism about reporting mechanisms at times but, for me, one of the key aspects of the reporting requirement is not just what you have done but what further opportunities you can identify for cooperation. That continual challenge to cooperate more and better is key and will mean that reporting cannot simply be a tick-box exercise but is a continual assessment and critique of the work of Departments and, indeed, children's authorities in terms of how cooperation is taking place and how delivery on the outcomes is being achieved.

Amendment No 7 introduces another new clause, simply to give the Executive the power to issue guidance on the operation of the Bill. I think that it is a sensible amendment.

Amendment No 8 is about interpretation and, as I mentioned previously, defines "children's authorities". This aspect of the Bill was always difficult in its original drafting. Again, I appreciate the Department's input into this. It brings in the Departments, the agencies of the Departments and the membership of the current Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership and includes them all under the catch-all term of "children's authorities". It tidies up the language and means that, at various stages of the Bill, one group can be referred to as "children's authorities". It adds definition and clarity to that aspect of the Bill.

The term "young people" also needed to be defined. The definition of "children" in law is fairly straightforward, but "young people" must go beyond the age of 18. The definition contained in amendment No 8 mirrors that which is used in the legislation that established the Children's Commissioner. That was to ensure consistency and therefore includes vulnerable groups up to the age of 21. I know that, in some aspects of the work of Departments, some of those vulnerable groups will receive support until the age of 25, but this is about a working definition for the Bill and I do not want to produce something that may require significant resource when this is really about changing cooperation. For example, I do not believe for a second that those engaged in working with young people up to 25 will say, "We are not included by the Bill. We are not going to cooperate". The Bill is about enshrining cooperation as good practice and standard practice in Departments. Whilst the current definition is not a catch-all, I think that it is a good, workable definition that mirrors other legislation. Should, through review of the Bill, that definition be required to be extended to other groups, I would be open to that. I think that, at this stage, this is a definition that has received a level of consensus and is workable in the context of the Bill.

Amendment No 9 is on the commencement, which would be immediate on Royal Assent. Amendment No 10 is on the Long Title, which has been revised to adequately reflect the new drafting of the Bill.

I said that I would come back to amendment No 5 because, since I laid the Bill before the Assembly, clause 4 of the original draft was that which caused the most concern. I have worked with officials in OFMDFM with the sector, and I have engaged with the Department of Health, which I know has worked continuously with OFMDFM on getting this amendment right. I mentioned previously the

desire to press on with this Bill, and I had been asked for more time to get this amendment right. As I said, at that time, the Assembly was hanging by a thread, and it is not out of the woods yet with political instability. My fear was that the whole Bill could fall. Amendment No 5 is an improvement on the original clause 4. It is that which was brought forward by officials and presented to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. I think that it takes us in the right direction.

In terms of additional time, I am willing to not move this amendment today in the hope of getting an agreed amendment for Further Consideration Stage, but that timeline is still tight. I am keen to see this Bill reach its Final Stage within the next number of weeks, but, as there is an opportunity to make further amendments to get this aspect of the Bill right, I am certainly willing to work with anyone who seeks to do that and give every opportunity for getting there. I do not think that the Bill can be delayed indefinitely. I certainly do not think that it can wait until such a time when we have Executive meetings again because I have no certainty or clarity as to when that might be. I think that there is a window of weeks to get that amendment right, but there is the danger that we allow the perfect to become the enemy of the good. I think that the amendment is a good one.

I will speak to the amendment's content. It is about updating the plan and bringing within the Bill the requirement that already exists in the Children Order to produce a plan for that commissioning and service delivery for children. It is to ensure that that includes all children, as the Bill does in every other aspect. The current Children Order is about children in need, but I think that the research, the evidence and, indeed, the work of the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership (CYPSP) has moved towards working for all children in order to capture those who are most in need, rather than seeking to identify those in need and often missing children who fall through the gaps. I think the catch-all approach is the right one. I think that it is the direction of travel, and I know that, in my discussions with the Department of Health, there is enthusiasm about enshrining that. I know that there were concerns about the original draft couching this within the Children Order. This current draft moves it out of the Children Order and simply repeals aspects of the order to avoid duplication.

I have listened to the Department's concerns, and those are reflected in the Bill.

11.30 am

From the beginning of this process, the work of the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership has been highlighted as good practice within government. I know that there has been further work to enshrine the good work of the CYPSP. What this amendment seeks to do is to put it on a statutory footing. There have been some areas of concern with that but, as I say, this does appear to be the direction of travel. It is something that the children's sector is calling for. It is something that there has certainly been a willingness in the Department of Health to take forward. We have a number of weeks to get that drafting right and, hopefully, bring forward a very good, if not perfect, amendment. As I say, the Bill must progress. We cannot let the perfect be the enemy of the good.

In conclusion, I would like to thank the various stakeholders: OFMDFM, the OFMDFM Committee, the Bill Office, the children's sector and my own team, particularly Ross Brown, who has worked tirelessly on the Bill. The purpose of the Bill is to make good practice common practice. It is to make cooperation in the planning, commissioning and delivery of children's services the norm. I hope that a change in culture can come out of that. We hear a lot about the failure of parties to work together, but those of us who work in this place know about the difficulties in Departments working together. We have to get this right for children. I hope that, should it receive the favour of the House, this Bill and the proposed amendments, along with Mr McCallister's opposition Bill and the proposed reduction in the number of Departments, can collectively improve governance in Northern Ireland.

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

It has often been said that, if the first phase of the peace process was about getting stability, the second phase has to be about good governance. I believe that this Bill is part of that good governance. I believe that other Bills will come forward and take steps in that direction. What I want to see with this is the ending of the waste that arises from duplication, the ending of silo mentality, and the creation of the structures to work together for the best interests of children in Northern Ireland.

I ask Members to oppose clauses 1 to 5 as originally drafted and support the tabled amendments. I reiterate that I will not move amendment No 5 today in the hope of getting a draft that will receive favour from all sides of the House and from the Departments and the sector alike. As with all the other aspects of the Bill, I hope that we can achieve a consensus on the way forward.

Mr Nesbitt (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister):

I commend Mr Agnew for bringing his Bill before the House today for the first of its amending stages. As you know, the OFMDFM Committee has, for some time, been working on its own legislation to reform the office of the Northern Ireland Ombudsman. We, therefore, have some appreciation of the time and effort required to get a Bill to this stage.

Before commenting on the amendments, I would like to briefly inform Members about the Committee's consideration of the Bill. Having provided earlier briefings to the Committee on the development of the Children's Services Co-operation Bill, Mr Agnew attended the Committee on 14 January following the Bill's introduction to the Assembly. On that date, the Committee also heard from OFMDFM officials, who indicated that, while the Department was in principle supportive of the Bill, it was expected that significant amendments would be required to ensure that it met its own objectives. The Bill was referred to the Committee following the Second Stage debate on 26 January, and the Committee Stage was subsequently extended to 3 July following the approval of the Assembly on 2 March.

The Committee received 27 substantive written submissions from organisations and individuals, a number of whom indicated that they also wished to be considered to give oral evidence. To enable the Committee to hear from as wide a range of stakeholders as possible, themed panels of stakeholders were invited to give oral

evidence. Those panels included representatives from children's groups, the voluntary sector, disability groups, occupational health practitioners and councils. In addition, we heard from the Health and Social Care Board, the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership, the Children's Law Centre and an individual with a background in children's services planning.

Two further evidence sessions were held with the Bill sponsor. That allowed Mr Agnew to respond to a number of technical issues that had been raised on the Bill at an early stage of our scrutiny. At the end of the evidence-gathering phase, it provided him with an opportunity to respond to all the issues that had been raised to us. OFMDFM officials briefed the Committee on the Department's initial views on potential amendments to the Bill on 27 April.

At this stage, I acknowledge the work of departmental officials, who not only cooperated as fully as possible with the Committee but engaged with the Bill sponsor and the sector as they carried out their deliberations on the Bill. Indeed, while officials were not in a position to present the Committee with a draft of final amendments before we undertook our clause-by-clause consideration, they provided us with a revised draft of what the Bill could look like, and they discussed that with the Committee on 17 June.

Although not having the final text of amendments was not ideal, the Committee took account of the Department's revised Bill in its clause-by-clause consideration. Members were also mindful that the Bill sponsor had indicated that he was content with the proposed direction of travel by OFMDFM, subject to sight of the final amendments.

In completing its deliberations, the Committee concluded that it was not content with all but one of the clauses. I stress that that was in no way an outright rejection of the Bill. Indeed, the Committee agreed that it had always been broadly supportive of the principles of the Bill. It is, rather, a reflection of the issues that had been raised and the concerns that the Bill would not, in fact, achieve its own objectives. By opposing the clauses today, it seems apparent that the Bill sponsor is, to some extent, of the same opinion.

All the Committee's deliberations are available to read in its report, which was published in July. The revised Bill is included, and those who have had a chance to look at it will note that there is much similarity between it and the amendments that have been tabled by Mr Agnew and others for our consideration today.

Before turning to the amendments before us, I will highlight one issue that was of concern to some stakeholders but that is not directly a subject of the amendments under consideration today. That issue is sanctions. Several stakeholders noted that there are no provisions regarding penalties or sanctions for non-cooperation or limited compliance. The fear from stakeholders was that the duties placed on statutory authorities would become a simple tick-box exercise. The Committee explored that further during the final evidence session with the Bill sponsor. He advised that, while he had considered the issue of sanctions, he was unable to identify any that were appropriate. He told the Committee:

"the ultimate sanction, a judicial review, is a sufficient method of holding the Government to account."

I will highlight that the Committee has not had the opportunity to collectively consider the amendments before us today. However, as I indicated, they broadly mirror the text of the Bill as seen by the Committee.

I will turn now to amendment No 1. During its evidence-gathering session, the Committee heard representations from stakeholders regarding the high-level specified outcomes, which reflect the outcomes detailed in the Executive's 10-year children and young people's strategy. There was a recognition that the outcomes in the children and young people's strategy were widely accepted by stakeholders, who had been consulted extensively during the development of the strategy.

It was therefore felt by some who responded to the Committee that the high-level outcomes should be replicated exactly as they are in the strategy. Others, however, suggested that, as a new children and young people's strategy is due post-2016, rather than specify high-level outcomes, the legislation should simply link to high-level outcomes in the children's strategy currently operative. It was believed that that approach would not predetermine or fetter the development of the new strategy.

In responding to that issue, the Bill's sponsor advised the Committee that he would be concerned if the Bill were to link solely to the children's strategy, as that would not cover other relevant departmental strategies or initiatives; for example, the early years strategy in the Department of Education.

In presenting their revised draft of the Bill to the Committee, officials advised that they did not believe that it would be appropriate to include high-level outcomes from the children's strategy in legislation, but to include high-level policy outcomes instead. Officials also indicated that including an enabling power for the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to amend the legislation if required would provide the appropriate mechanism for any necessary changes. A provision for OFMDFM to amend subsection (2) by means of affirmative resolution is included in the amendment.

In its deliberations, the Committee agreed that it was broadly content with the Department's proposal. While the Committee did not have an opportunity to reach a position on the amendment before us, I note that it is largely similar, with the addition of:

"the enjoyment of play and leisure"

as one of the specified high-level outcomes — the seventh such outcome, as referred to by the Bill's sponsor.

Amendment No 2 would introduce a new clause, titled "Co-operation to improve well-being". The amendment mirrors that in the revised draft of the Bill presented to the Committee by officials. In their briefing to the Committee, officials explained that not only would that require Departments and other statutory bodies to cooperate but that they would have to pay regard to and work with other bodies delivering children's services, such as non-governmental organisations. In considering the revised draft, Committee members discussed with officials the use of the word "promote" in proposed new clause 1B(2). There was a suggestion that the word "advance" might place a stronger duty on Departments to cooperate. Perhaps

the Member can clarify his views on “promote” versus “advance” during the debate.

The Committee was content with the direction of travel indicated by OFMDFM. It has not had the opportunity to reach its final position on the text of the amendment before us today, although I note that there is no change to what was presented by the Department at Committee Stage.

Amendment No 3 would introduce a new clause that requires the Executive to bring forward a strategy to improve the well-being of children and young people. It sets out what should be included in the strategy and the requirements for consultation, including consultation with children and young people, parents, guardians and representative bodies. Consultation with children is therefore embedded in the Bill, and the text before us replicates that which was included in the Department's proposals.

Amendment No 5 is a new clause that would provide for a children and young persons' plan. The new clause proposes that the Executive would be required to adopt a plan setting out how children's services will be planned, commissioned and delivered to support the achievement of the strategy, and it is the same as what was proposed in the Department's revised draft of the Bill. However, in our discussions with officials, they advised that they did not believe that their proposal was sufficient at that stage to deliver what is required and said that a further clause might be needed. In that regard, discussions are ongoing with CYPSP, the Department of Health and the Department of Education on a statutory partnership comprising members of the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB), the health and social care trusts, the Education Authority and other relevant agencies in the two Departments. That statutory partnership would be enabled to develop and deliver the plan.

During deliberations on the OFMDFM proposals, which relate to amendment Nos 3 and 5, Committee members recognised that further amendments were actively being considered. The Committee was therefore unable to reach a position and, as such, agreed that its support or otherwise would be dependent on sight of the final amendments.

Amendment No 4 would provide an enabling power for Departments to pool budgets and share resources, and it broadly reflects the text of the revised draft provided to us by officials. The original Bill also contained an enabling power to permit Departments to establish pooled budgets and to share resources to achieve the high-level outcomes.

11.45 am

Many stakeholders welcomed the provisions regarding the pooling of budgets and sharing of resources and believed that it would make it easier for Departments to share financial and staff resources to deliver the specified outcomes. Indeed, Delivering Social Change, coordinated by OFMDFM, was cited as an example of good practice in this regard. Stakeholders also stressed the importance of clear governance and accountability arrangements. The Committee agreed that it was broadly content with OFMDFM's direction of travel on this issue, subject, of course, to sight of the final wording of the proposed amendment.

Mr Deputy Speaker, a key provision of the Bill, as introduced by the Member, is a report on cooperation, which was to be published periodically on Departments' progress towards achieving specified outcomes; the extent to which they had cooperated with one another; and any efficiency achieved through cooperation. Amendment No 6 provides for a much more substantive report, again reflecting the draft revised Bill prepared by OFMDFM officials. The report, as provided for in this amendment, will include a range of information, such as actions to be taken to achieve the outcomes in the strategy, progress made in the achievement of the outcomes, whether or not the well-being of children and young people has improved, and the cooperation that has taken place across Departments and how it could be improved. It also provides for reporting to take place on a three-yearly basis. The amendment may address concerns that, while the report provided for in the Bill as introduced would focus on how Departments have cooperated, it would not necessarily show how that cooperation had led to better outcomes for children.

The principle of a cooperation report was welcomed by those who responded to the Committee, although a number of those considered that reporting should be at annual intervals rather than every three years. Against this, concern was expressed about placing an extra administrative burden on Departments through additional reporting requirements. Perhaps the Member could advise as to the rationale for a three-year reporting cycle. The Committee also noted that Mr Agnew had also expressed a preference for the report to be conducted by an independent body. He may also wish to provide some clarification on that issue.

Amendment No 7 is a new clause that grants an enabling power to OFMDFM to issue guidance on the exercise of functions conferred by the legislation. Although guidance for Departments was an area raised by some stakeholders during Committee Stage, the Committee has not had sight of this amendment and so does not have a position on this.

I note that amendment No 8 relating to interpretation reflects the similar provision of the draft revised Bill provided to us by officials. In its consideration, the Committee was aware that further amendments would be required. It was therefore not in a position to endorse the OFMDFM proposals at that time and has not had the opportunity to consider the amendment being discussed today.

Mr Deputy Speaker, amendment No 9 is a new clause dealing with commencement, and amendment No 10 amends the long title to reflect the changing nature of the Bill. I can advise Members that the Committee has not had an opportunity to consider those amendments or to come to a position on them.

Ms Fearon: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak to this important piece of legislation and, indeed, congratulate Mr Agnew on getting it this far. Given that amendment No 5 is not being moved today, I do not foresee any major disagreements on the amendments. So, hopefully after today we will have a good Bill going forward to Further Consideration Stage, where we can work together to improve it.

We are very supportive of the principles behind the Bill and its intentions. We all know that there is a lot of existing

good practice when it comes to cooperation. The Bill and the amendments tabled seek to make that good practice systemic in order to achieve better outcomes for children and young people.

We believe that the amendments tabled by Stephen Agnew, myself and others will ensure better outcomes for children and young people. The statutory duty will bring a welcome focus on children's and young people's needs and service delivery. Cooperation as it stands on children's issues is largely informal and dependent on relationships developed over time between relevant officials and workers. That means that the degree of sharing across a range of children's services is varied. Placing a requirement to cooperate in statute will ensure that the interests of children and young people are put first across all services and responsibilities. Of course, the most important people in all of this are our children and young people.

Amendment No 1 — basically a new clause — specifically outlines the core aims and intent of the Bill, which is essentially to support improvements to the well-being of children and the delivery of children's services, all with the benefit of the recipient of that service in mind. The new clause specifically defines well-being and makes links to the children and young people's strategy by way of the high-level outcomes listed. I have to say that the links to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child are welcome. I think that it is a progressive step and important in recognising children as rights' bearers in their own right, which is too often ignored.

Amendment No 2 is on the duty to cooperate in order to improve well-being. This is possibly the most important new clause if not one of the most important clauses in the Bill. A statutory duty will make it easier for Departments to come together, share resources and work collectively; basically, to solidify what is already happening on an ad hoc basis. Collaborative approaches to children's services will undoubtedly improve outcomes, remove duplication and, ideally, lead to budget savings as we try to make the best use of public funds available.

The amendment clearly states:

"Every children's authority must ... co-operate with other children's authorities and with other children's service providers".

This clause will also allow for the Executive to promote cooperation: I know that Steven referred to this and Mike Nesbitt raised it earlier. I think that concerns around loose language have been assuaged since the title of the Bill now places a requirement and this clause states that cooperation is clearly a must.

Amendment No 3 states:

"The Executive must adopt a strategy ... to improve the well-being of children and young persons."

This amendment does the job of amendment No 5 in some ways, but not all, although it needs to be progressed given that it is so outcomes-focused. For example, the strategy must detail the outcomes that have to be met, what actions will be taken, how to determine the extent of the outcomes that have been achieved and when that should happen. I am particularly happy with the reference in amendment No 3 to the Executive's having to consult with children and young people. I think that that is an important

step in having their voices heard in service delivery that affects their lives. Obviously, that applies to those who represent the views of children and young people as well. Practically speaking, it is important that we ensure that a range of young people's voices from all socio-economic backgrounds are heard in that consultation, particularly those who are in most need and are most vulnerable.

Amendment No 4 is potentially another hugely important element of the Bill, particularly in breaking down the silo mentality of Departments. Sharing resources and funds in this regard is basic common sense and can only really be described as a good thing, if it is done properly. In the last debate, I made reference to Delivering Social Change, which I believe is an excellent model for this. Its budget has come from all relevant Departments for the delivery of signature projects, so this Bill epitomises the spirit behind that practice. I think that this approach is almost a safeguard to ensure that no decisions will be taken to the detriment of cooperation and the core aims of delivery for children. I hope to see that practice spread across other Departments and areas, not necessarily just children's services.

Amendment No 5 is, as Steven said, possibly the most complex and contentious amendment to date. We would not have been able to support clause 4, as was stated at the previous stage. It would have meant, in our opinion, a transfer of control of children's services to a non-departmental public body — and one that is already top-heavy and over-bureaucratic. I believe that that original clause would have seen the usurpation of ministerial autonomy and would have taken away from democratic accountability rather than strengthening it. It is hugely important that Ministers are able to retain the right and the ability to develop their own plans in accordance with their own priorities.

I know that amendment No 5 is not being moved today, and we would not have been able to support it in its original form, but we are happy to look at it in the future and come to an agreement on it because it is an important part of the Bill. One of our main concerns was in relation to subsection 9, which would repeal paragraph 2A of schedule 2 to the Children (NI) Order 1995. This amendment would move duties currently placed on the Health and Social Care Board to the Executive, resulting in the Executive being responsible for the planning for the most vulnerable children and young people in our society. The Health and Social Care Board has statutory responsibilities for vulnerable children under the Children Order, and it is important that that continues and that it continues to plan for their needs. We and others have genuine concerns that very vulnerable children could be placed at risk by removing that responsibility from the Health and Social Care Board. Although I believe that that result would have been unintentional, it would still have been a possibility.

It is appropriate that the Executive take responsibility for the strategy document and set out its key objectives and aims across the board to improve the well-being of children and young people. However, and this is all up for discussion, it may be better that the actual services plan is drawn up and implemented by a single Department or body that is more directly involved with children's services. Again, we can come to that at a later stage.

Another issue that we had with amendment No 5 was that one of the original intentions was to place the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership into statute. The amendment did not achieve that, and, on the face of it, it does not appear to improve the effectiveness of that body. However, we can look at all those things, and there are many ways in which those can be progressed before the next stage of the Bill. We welcome the opportunity to engage further with Mr Agnew and other parties on that issue.

Amendment No 6, which deals with reporting, is the last amendment that I will address, as the rest are pretty self-explanatory. A report must be produced every three years detailing actions taken and progress gained on the agreed outcomes, as well as identifying further opportunities for cooperation and good practice, which Steven mentioned. That is an important part of the Bill. I am aware that some may have wanted annual reports, but I believe that the nature of reporting and the actions behind those reports are much more important than their frequency.

Overall, with the amendments, this is a good Bill that will make a positive contribution to our society and, most importantly, to the lives of children and young people. It is an important first step in changing mindsets and breaking down the silo mentality that I am sure everyone in the Chamber has been frustrated with at one point or another. I would like the roll-out of this collaborative approach to be extended to other areas, such as job creation and tackling poverty, as it ensures that the outcome is kept to the fore of each Department's decision-making process.

Sinn Féin will support the amendments, with the exception of amendment No 5, which will not be moved. I congratulate Steven Agnew on the Bill, and we hope to see the positive impact that it is capable of having in the near future.

Mr Attwood: As is always the case with a private Member's Bill, I acknowledge its primary sponsor, Steven Agnew. If you look at the narrative around private Member's Bills in the Chamber, you will see that it is arguably an area in which the Chamber has shown its greatest authority, or certainly a lot of good authority, when you consider the Bills that have been introduced or passed in this and previous mandates. This legislation is no different. Steven Agnew in particular, and all those who worked with him — I will refer to that in a second — need to be acknowledged and affirmed, not least in this vital policy area with this important part of our community.

In its very nature and character, the Bill makes a statement about our Government, which is that they are too dispersed and siloed in their approach and do not adopt a coherent, cohesive and integrated approach. If you look to the Government of Scotland — I always tend to do that — which is the best Government on these islands, as advertised by their success in the Westminster election and confirmed by their success in the campaign on Scottish independence, you will see that they have a fluid approach to Departments. They do not have a silo approach whereby Ministers work and do not relate as fully and effectively to other Ministers and Departments as they might. That is only one example of what we should learn from the Scottish Government about how they conduct ministerial and departmental work. It is a fluid approach.

There are echoes in the Bill and in Steven Agnew's comments of something that the SDLP argued for and succeeded in securing in an earlier mandate: Executive

programme funds. That model recognises that there are issues that, by their character, are either of such priority or diversity that you need an Executive programme approach as opposed to a single departmental approach. Given the clauses in the Bill, even the clauses about pooling resources, that demonstrates that there are models that can be applied to policy areas beyond the Bill for pooling resources and pooling approaches.

12.00 noon

I agree with the proposer's comments on OFMDFM. It was my concern that, once the Bill had been introduced, it would go into the bureaucratic system and either not emerge or emerge in a much-changed format. Mr Agnew will confirm the conversations that I had with him about my worst fears. Maybe tensions in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister got in the way of the ambition and scale of the Bill, but, as Mr Agnew rightly pointed out, the experience of working with OFMDFM officials has been to work up this legislation and then get it over the line. It is not the failure of the office or its officials that Mr Agnew rightly made the decision to bring the Bill to the Chamber at this time, given the uncertainty around our political institutions. I recognise the good authority shown by people in OFMDFM in their response to Mr Agnew's Bill.

I also acknowledge what Mr Agnew has done for the children's sector. As he said, this is their Bill. Whilst he is the sponsor, mover and architect in legislative terms, the ambition, need and policy intent in the Bill come from the children's sector, and we need to acknowledge that.

Mr Agnew also acknowledged the work of the Bill Office. It is always the case in the last year of a mandate that the Floor of the Assembly, or of any legislative Chamber in these islands, can get very busy and crowded, and that places particular burdens on the Bill Office. In the event that our institutions continue for the residue of the mandate, that burden on the Bill Office will become more intense, given the current work-to-rule that we experience. Again, we see that there is nobody on the Benches opposite from the Democratic Unionist Party — nobody. The one person who was there earlier has now absented themselves, maybe for good reason — I do not know. In the event that we get through the current negotiations and the institutions continue for their full mandate, the burden on the Bill Office will become more intense. We need to acknowledge that as we move forward.

The policy content of the document has been corroborated and advertised over the last couple of weeks. The Churches in Northern Ireland and DSD gave huge evidence on the scale of poverty and relative poverty in Northern Ireland, particularly the poverty of our children. In my view, that is the policy background — in fact, the policy foreground — that should surround the Bill because, if we want to have cooperation in children and young people's services, the first task of that cooperation must be to address the objective circumstances experienced by children and young people — children in particular — not least, the scale of relative poverty. That is what DSD confirmed last week.

I make my next point not just in respect of the content of the Bill but in respect of the content of the talks that continue a few hundred yards from here in Stormont House. These figures have relevance to the Bill and to the negotiations, and they should, for reasons that will

I make clear in a second, inform both. Just last week, DSD confirmed that, in 2013-14, some 376,000 people in Northern Ireland remained on a relatively low income, with the average household income dropping by 1%. Among the households, 213,000 working-age adults and 63,000 pensioners were living on the breadline. When you probe further into the 376,000 people who are on relatively low incomes, the child poverty figure was 23%, or 101,000 people, which was up from 20% the previous year.

So, according to our Government, according to DSD, child poverty is up from 20% to 23% in a year, with over 100,000 children living in poverty. As one of the children's charities said, that number is expected to rise even further. There was an ambition to get the level of child poverty down over the lifetime of this mandate and up to 2020, yet some of the figures from the Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS) suggest that relative and absolute child poverty will be above 30% by 2020. Some people dispute some of the figures, but they are all going in the wrong direction, even if you dispute the conclusions drawn from them.

Here we are in 2015, having gone up from 20% to 23% against one of the indicators in the last year, and the evidence indicates that the figures are going in the wrong direction over the next four or five years. That policy content is one of the features that is in the foreground and background of the Bill. It should be in the foreground of the negotiations that are going on a few hundred yards from here.

Quite a number of us are getting weary of the single transferable speech that is coming from the Secretary of State and the Treasury about there being no more money, when we have much more poverty. Whether it is an issue of money for welfare or more money for work, will the London Government get it into their heads that the ambition of the Bill and tackling the scale of child poverty will be damaged and undermined if they do not fully understand the scale of the issues that we face when it comes to child poverty and the scale of response required to protect those who are in poverty, be they children or families, help the children affected to get work when they grow up and help their parents to get work now?

The London Government need to recognise that we are trying to legislate for our particular circumstances because they are trying to damage our ability to tackle those particular circumstances. The Children's Commissioner, writing in the 'Belfast Telegraph' yesterday said:

"The highest levels of child poverty and mental ill-health are in those areas most impacted upon by the conflict. Our children experience unacceptably high rates of mental ill-health, with more children in Northern Ireland dying through suicide than anywhere else on these islands."

In the talks, it has been the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party who has been making the point about the provision of a mental trauma centre and the needs of our people when it comes to mental trauma, remembering that one in 10 of our people receive incapacity benefits. In Britain, the figure is one in five — no, it is one in 20. I have to correct myself: the scale of people on incapacity benefit here is twice that in Britain, whatever those figures look like. When you interrogate those figures somewhat further, you see that the highest levels of child poverty and mental ill-health are in those areas impacted by the conflict.

Therefore, not only does there have to be a joined-up response from our domestic Government but the London Government need to recognise that, if we are to deal with the trauma of our conflict, including the good proposals that are coming forward in respect of mental trauma, on which I think there is probably unanimity across all the parties in the negotiations, they need to work through that. If they want to help us deal with the legacy of our conflict — they say they do and, today, they have shared with the parties elements of the Bill that is to be tabled in the House of Commons to deal with the past at an institutional level — they also need to recognise that we need to deal with it at a practical level. That includes dealing with the issues of the highest levels of child poverty and mental ill health in areas that have been impacted by the conflict. If we are to deal with our child poverty, we have to deal in the talks with the emotional stress and difficulties that are being experienced by our children.

To conclude that argument, I want to quote from what the Church leaders said last week. They said:

"The unacceptable level of child poverty, affecting over 100,000 children, roughly 6% of Northern Ireland's population, constitutes a real crisis. Supports that have proved to be effective in recent years in addressing inequality and closing the gap in crucial areas such as educational disadvantage are now being withdrawn through lack of funding. The failure to invest adequately in the future leaders of our society is a cause of deep frustration among young people, leaving many feeling disconnected from political processes."

London should hear that, and the Bill is an effective response to that narrative. By having joined-up government across Departments and putting life on the various clauses of the Bill, you will end up addressing what the Church leaders recognised last week, which, to use their words, is "a real crisis".

I want to make some passing comments on the amendments that have been tabled. Amendment No 1 seeks to introduce a new clause. That is where the Bill defines the well-being of children and young persons and, in that regard, refers to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. That is a wise approach: to state in legislation, especially by reference to international codes, what the ambition of that legislation is, in this instance the well-being of children and young persons. That should also be part and parcel of the legislation that was shared with the parties this morning, with respect to international and European standards — the rights under article 2 of the European convention — that are involved in how the legacy mechanism, the HIU, should conduct its affairs. I acknowledge that model of putting the ambition of a Bill into a Bill by reference to international convention, as well as defining the nature of the issue and the challenges as new clause 1 would.

At an earlier stage, the SDLP and I commented on our concern about the words in new clause 1B of:

"so far as is consistent with the proper exercise of its children functions".

I look to the sponsor of the Bill to confirm in his reply that that language does not limit the intended ambition of the Bill. In anticipation of confirmation that that is not the case

and that that is not a word that dilutes or limits the ambition of that particular clause, we will support the clause.

Mr Agnew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: I will.

Mr Agnew: That is a phrase about which the Committee took its own legal advice or additional scrutiny from Daniel Greenberg. I also met him, and I think that he referred to it as — I am trying to remember his term, but I remember that the word “heffalump” was used. He said that it was an “avoidance heffalump”, or something like that. I tried to seek other opinions and got reassurances from other legal opinions that that was normal practice in drafting and not simply a loophole through which a Department could escape. In that regard, I was content. I waited to see whether any other amendments came forward to seek that out. However, I am guessing that, whilst there are concerns about it, people are content that it is normal practice.

12.15 pm

Mr Attwood: Certainly, we are reassured by that. We are also reassured by the fact that people who have been drafting other clauses seem to have been shaping them in an expansive and positive way, which reassures me that other words that might be open to interpretation will not be interpreted in a negative and limited way.

Amendment No 3 inserts a new clause stating:

“The Executive must adopt a strategy”.

That is a critical clause, irrespective of the fact that there was a previous strategy. It is critical not least because of the decision of the High Court in July on the failure of FM and dFM to adopt an anti-poverty strategy. The Committee on the Administration of Justice took a judicial review of the conduct of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister on that. Subject to correction, it is my understanding that the argument of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister was that the Programme for Government was an anti-poverty strategy, and that, rather than adopt a dedicated anti-poverty strategy, the Programme for Government was somehow “the” anti-poverty strategy. If I am correct, that argument was rejected by the High Court when it required OFMDFM to adopt an anti-poverty strategy. Therefore, this new clause, which will shape an anti-poverty strategy and the process around all that, is very important, given that High Court ruling on a related matter.

Amendment No 4 proposes a new clause, and Steven Agnew made the point in his opening contribution that this is the place in the Bill where it moves from process to product. This is a pivotal clause, because whatever legislation says and whatever its ambition might be — there is so much in the Bill that is good — unless there are resources to do the work and there is a pooling of resources, we could end up with limited outcomes or less joined-up outcomes. So, critical to the ambition of the Bill is the implementation of this clause for a pooling of resources. If Departments, especially in times of limited resources, protect and do not pool, the Bill could end up being frustrated.

I also acknowledge amendment No 5, which is on the children and young person's plan, noting that it is not to be moved. This clause on the children and young

person's plan provision is where the processes are given dynamism. That is because you can have the best processes, but at the end of that you need the best plans with the best follow-up of resources, including pooled resources. That makes dynamic the ambition of the Bill.

Amendment No 6, which will insert a new clause reporting the operation of the Act, is also critical. I note that it has been said that a report may come forward more often than every three years. It is my view that, in the early life of this new duty, it will have to come forward more regularly, because my experience in government is that there will be a natural resistance to the ambition of this legislation, be it to having a joined-up approach on policy or the pooling of resources in practice. There will be a resistance. If some who may resist think that they have to account only every three years or a Minister thinks that he has to account only every three years, that could, in my view, especially in the early life of these new legislative responsibilities, frustrate what the Bill, its authors and the sector want.

However, subject to all those comments, in the days that are in it when Ministers are in and out, when Members are in and out of the Chamber — I acknowledge that there could be very good reasons in respect of Mr Moutray, so this is not a personal criticism but more of a party criticism in general — this is actually the Assembly showing its good authority, as well as government and government officials showing good authority.

More than anything else, it is the children's sector, on behalf of whom it advocates for, showing the very best of authority. That is why I hope that, even if the Assembly were to go into adjournment, an election or whatever it might be, the Bill gets through all its stages before that day and hour were to come so that, at this time of turbulence, the Assembly shows good authority. If there is to be more turbulence, and I do not believe that there will be, and I trust there will not be, it will perhaps be a willing conclusion to this mandate that, in its latter days, legislation is passed that responds to the human condition and the needs of those who are most vulnerable in our society — children in poverty.

Mr Lyttle: I welcome the opportunity to speak to this stage of the Children's Services Co-operation Bill. The Alliance Party has had a long-standing manifesto commitment to support a statutory duty for Departments to cooperate as part of our commitment to step forward for better government in Northern Ireland. Therefore, I have been glad to support the principles of the Bill to introduce a statutory duty to cooperate on Departments to achieve better outcomes for the well-being of children and young people in society. Indeed, I was glad to engage proactively with the Committee Stage. During it, we gathered a significant amount of evidence to support and progress the Bill to this stage. We welcomed OFMDFM's contribution. It presented a revised draft of the Bill to the Committee. The Committee was broadly content with it, as was the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. It is regrettable therefore that a full, final draft was not presented by OFMDFM, meaning that the Executive did not have a full opportunity to respond to such a draft. It is also regrettable that we do not have full party and ministerial responses to this stage of the Bill. To be honest, I fail to see how a ministerial resignation or a ministerial boycott is doing what is right for Northern Ireland, given the opportunities that we have in the Assembly and at the Executive table to deal collectively with some of the

difficult challenges facing society in Northern Ireland, not least to endeavour to improve the outcomes for children and young people. It is not ideal that we do not have that final draft, or for us to be at this stage today, but I appreciate the sponsor of the Bill's desire to see progress made with this important legislation. I am glad that we have an opportunity to respond today.

Improved cooperation is needed on many issues in our society, such as early intervention in health and education and the delivery of a shared and prosperous society, but it is absolutely required to improve the well-being of children and young people. Cooperation is vital in any Government but perhaps most particularly in a multiparty Executive. We have some positive examples of cooperation in our Executive. Parties may not be surprised to hear me cite the Alliance Party Ministries of the Department of Justice and the Department for Employment and Learning as examples of where work is being done, such as to improve learning outcomes at the Hydebank Wood young offenders' facility. I also recognise the work of the DRD cycling unit, in cooperation with the Department of Health's Public Health Agency, to pool resources to improve the Active School Travel programme. That has had positive active travel outcomes for children and young people.

I welcome the amendments under consideration.

Amendment No 1 sets out good, high-level outcomes to be monitored and achieved as part of the Bill. Those are physical and mental health; the enjoyment of play and leisure; learning and achievement; living in safety; economic and environmental well-being; enablement to make a positive contribution to society; and living in a society that respects the rights of children and young people. These are all issues that I have worked on as an Assembly Member and indeed on which I have worked with the proposer, Steven Agnew, on the all-party group on children and young people. Indeed, it has been a pleasure to work closely with the children's sector on all those issues.

I welcome the placement of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in the Bill, as other Members have done, and the opportunity that any amendments to those high-level outcomes would require the positive approval of the Assembly and full consultation with it. I welcome therefore amendment No 2, the key amendment to the Bill, on the introduction of the statutory duty to cooperate and the provisions that are being made for all children's authorities to cooperate on the key high-level outcomes.

Amendment No 3 to put the adoption of a children and young persons' strategy in the Bill is also a positive inclusion, as is the provision to ensure that it achieves specific outcomes, has specific actions, and is achieved within specific timescales.

I support amendment No 4 on the sharing of resources and the pooling of funds. Indeed, I have asked a number of questions of OFMDFM to seek updates on work that it has done on children's sector budgeting. That would be a positive provision in the final law that comes forward.

The proposer of the Bill has said that he is willing to reflect on the provision in amendment No 5. I will therefore do the same if and when it returns at Further Consideration Stage.

Amendment No 6 is a very important amendment, as it ensures robust reporting on progress on the work that would be carried out as part of the new law when it comes forward. There can be no more important task for an

Executive than to report to the public on whether they are achieving what they said they would achieve. We could improve drastically the Executive's reporting on the Programme for Government in general. I am glad that such specific reporting mechanisms for children and young people are being included in the Bill.

The other amendments are all positive. With regard to amendment No 8's definition of the age of children and young people, I think that it is important that we appear to have provision for that age to be stretched to up to 21 years under particular categories. One particular piece of evidence that was given at Committee Stage was that the transitional period between the ages of 18 and 21 and 23 and 25 can be extremely important for some of the most vulnerable children and young people in our community. I welcome the provision in the Bill of a duty to cooperate on those key age groups.

In conclusion, it is absolutely essential that the Assembly require the Executive to coordinate services and maximise resources as effectively as possible, particularly on behalf of children and young people in our community. We have heard stark warnings from the Institute for Fiscal Studies, the UN and, today, in statistics that have been presented by DSD on the growing issue of child poverty. The UN has warned that the failure to achieve positive outcomes for children is one of the most costly mistakes that this society can make. I certainly hope that the Bill will go some way to ensure that we do not make that mistake in Northern Ireland and that we can deliver for children and young people.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak on what I believe is a very transformative Bill, like Daithí McKay's private Member's Bill on the plastic bag levy, which had a transformative effect on the environment, society's use of plastic bags, and its approach to recycling.

This Bill will hopefully have a very transformative effect on the delivery of children's services right across Government, so I congratulate Steven Agnew for bringing it forward.

12.30 pm

I think that this is a great win for the children and young person's sector and, indeed, for the working of the OFMDFM Committee. Mike Nesbitt, the Committee Chair, outlined some of the work that it has done to date on reporting and working through a variety of issues. Coming to the Bill recently, I have looked through a lot of the reporting and some of the work done by the OFMDFM Committee. It is quite clear that the stakeholders out there and the sector have big things to say, and they are unanimous in their approach to this.

The Health and Social Care Board has said that more can be done when it comes to cooperation. NSPCC said:

"where a policy issue crosses several government departments and their remits, it becomes increasingly difficult to progress in terms of determining leadership and priority."

NILGA said that much work needs to be done to overcome the silo approach to work towards a single outcome. The Commissioner for Children and Young People talked at great lengths right throughout all the reports about

the extent of the barriers that are there for children and children's services.

At the heart of the issue, it is about putting children and their rights first. For too long, government processes have focused on the interests of institutions at the expense of the rights of the child. I think that the ongoing education reforms such as the upcoming Special Educational Needs and Disability Bill, coupled with this private Member's Bill, are crucial in finally giving children and young people a say in their own personal journey and in that of all children and young people in our society.

For too long, the management and configuration of vital services such as health and education have not taken into account the need to strategically plan, deliver and evaluate to meet the needs of all the children and young people in our society. Like much of what government does, that silo mentality of Departments and their agencies has remained an incorrigible barrier to progress and has, undoubtedly, led to a huge duplication of services in recent decades. With the ever-increasing pressures on the public purse, there is a real and urgent need to explore ways in which we can collaborate between Departments and deliver across agencies, and I think that the Bill does that. It is wrong, of course, to suggest that relationships and sharing have not developed extensively in recent times, but I think that we have reached the point of solidifying those partnerships and putting concrete expectations in place to build upon the good practice that has, indeed, flourished.

I now turn to the amendments. It is fair to say that amendment No 1 captures the spirit and the intent of the Bill. It really focuses upon the centrality of the child. I think that it is hugely welcome to see the link with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. That is a very welcome step. As has been outlined already, far too often, institutions neglect the fact that children are rights-bearers. They are the ones who bear the rights in this regard. Bringing that into the Bill is a very welcome step indeed.

If amendment No 1 captures the spirit of the Bill, it is fair to say that amendment No 2 goes to the very heart of the issue. Moving from this permissive notion of cooperation to requiring collaboration between Departments is, I think, going to be a very transformative step indeed. It is going to be a real game changer, and I think that all the stakeholders will, indeed, welcome it.

Again, having a children and young person's strategy in amendment No 3 is to be welcomed. One of the most important parts — we have seen this again in the Committee for Education's deliberations on special educational needs — is about consulting children. We must start to put the child right at the centre of everything that we do, and this amendment certainly looks at that.

Again, continuing on from the analogy about the spirit and the heart, I think that amendment No 4 will be the engine for real change when it comes to sharing resources and pooling funds. No doubt, yes, it is important that we get a more efficient use of public funds, but I think that what is vital here is a realisation of the hopes of many families when it comes to the services for their children. That will be a catalyst for real and welcome reform in Government and will build upon the good practice. We see it with Delivering Social Change programmes, and this development can undoubtedly make a real difference to children and their families.

I came across an issue in my constituency lately when it came to meeting the special educational needs of a particular child. Along one road in the Mourne area, one education authority said that it would fully cost and meet the needs of a child with autism, and at the other end of that road, a different education authority said that it would not meet the needs and the family would have to pay to meet the needs. That was an absolutely disgraceful situation, but it has now been remedied, of course, with the establishment of the Education Authority. However, it highlights the need for Departments and their agencies to work together. No family should ever have to go through such a circumstance. Again, the outworkings of the Bill will give us a great opportunity to relegate those sorts of stories to the past.

I welcome the fact that amendment No 5 will not be moved. That gives us time to bridge the gaps and work in partnership going forward. Amendment No 6 is the last amendment that I will touch on. When it comes to reporting, quality rather than quantity is important. I would like an innovative and diverse approach as to how we report and come back. From government, we also need a rich diversity in how we use the information that is gathered. This has the scope to do that. I will not touch on amendment Nos 7 and 8.

In conclusion, this is a well-deserved win for all those who work in the children and young persons' sector. As I outlined, not only is it a real game changer for children and young people, but, if done right, it will provide a template across government for how best practice can be rolled out. I have no doubt that the issues that we have dealt with today will inspire those people who work in the sector and result in a great improvement. It is about rolling it out. There is no reason why this model cannot help us to tackle environmental issues, the need to build a more socially just economy and issues to do with education in a more holistic and joined-up way. Overall, I welcome the Bill and call on all parties to support the amendments and continue working in a partnership approach that befits the very nature of what we are discussing today.

Mrs Overend: I commend Mr Agnew for getting the Bill to Consideration Stage. It has noble aims and worthy objectives behind it. Although I am not a member of the OFMDFM Committee, which scrutinised the Bill, as the Ulster Unionist spokesperson for children and young people, I have a keen interest in this legislation.

The Bill, as Mr Agnew pointed out, is for the benefit of all children in Northern Ireland. Its purpose is to increase the efficiency of service through effective cooperation and to ensure better outcomes for children and young people in Northern Ireland. The lack of cooperation and joined-up government has been detrimental to the people of Northern Ireland time and time again, but, with issues relating to children, failings in their early years have the potential to have an effect on the rest of their lives.

My party colleague Mike Nesbitt has spoken before of the silo mentality in government, as have a number of those who gave evidence to the OFMDFM Committee on the Bill. The ability to cut across Departments and work horizontally is essential for effective policy delivery, and, at present, there is a concerning lack of this type of cooperation. When Dr Alison Montgomery of NICCY gave evidence on the Bill to the OFMDFM Committee, she said:

"children cannot divide their needs across Departments as we currently have them."

Indeed, the Commissioner for Children and Young People noted that, not having a duty to cooperate:

"has thwarted the full realisation of children's rights and effective services."

As a constituency MLA, I have been dealing with numerous cases in which children are experiencing difficulties in getting education and health authorities to take action and deliver the care to which they are entitled. I am sure that other MLAs are experiencing that in their own daily work. We have many powerful examples of how Departments, when left to their own devices, can often revert to the instinct of seeking to pass the buck to others, hoping that a problem will go away. Likewise, in my pursuit of the development of a cross-departmental Internet safety strategy, I know only too well, unfortunately, how such an important issue can be dealt with like a hot potato. These attitudes are exactly why I am particularly drawn to the intent of the Bill to ensure:

"Each Northern Ireland department must cooperate with the other Northern Ireland departments so as to further the achievement of specified outcomes"

The consultation on the Bill received overwhelming support, and I understand that the vast majority of the amendments received broad support prior to being moved today. I welcome that and the groundwork done by Mr Agnew. The Bill is aimed at all children, and, in essence, it is hoped that it will be a preventative mechanism. It is about creating a culture of cooperation so that all Departments have a role, and all children benefit from the very beginning of their lives. This is a forward-thinking idea, but the question is whether legislation is needed to create this culture. If so, will this proposed legislation be effective? The problem, which has been noted time and time again, is the silo mentality of our Departments.

Will this legislation, if enacted, provide the basis for a better system of cooperation between Departments? It is difficult to say, especially without clearly set out sanctions outside that of judicial review, although that seems to be the only reasonable and appropriate sanction available.

The original Bill sought to put into legislation the Government's six high-level outcomes from their children's strategy and establish a requirement for Departments to discharge their functions and cooperate to further the achievements of those outcomes. The Bill, as amended, focuses more on a legal definition of the well-being of children and young people. At the very least, the Bill would, in its current state, create a floor of cooperation below which Departments must not fall.

The children and young people strategy, guidance on reports on the operation of the Act and the guidance available to children's authorities from OFMDFM should provide clarity to bodies that are to cooperate and ensure effective work towards positive outcomes. I look forward to further amendments to the plan, as per amendment No 5, which I believe is not being moved. However, I am slightly concerned at the phrase in amendment No 2:

"The Executive must make arrangements to promote co-operation of the kind mentioned in subsection (1)".

That was discussed in Committee, and it was noted that using the word "promote" rather than "advance" or "achieve" was easier to measure. However, as with DETI in recent years, where many jobs have been promoted but fewer realised, that could harm the efficacy of the proposals. The flexibility permitted by the Bill would allow areas of weakness and ineffective plans and strategies to be amended, with proper oversight from the Assembly. That seems to strike the right balance.

Permitting the pooling of funding and sharing of other resources, although not legal requirements in the Bill, would allow a flexible method of cooperation. Mr Agnew spoke of his hope that through the required departmental cooperation, the pooling of resources will happen organically. That is a vital aspect of the Bill, and a lot rests on the successful pooling of resources to ensure not only efficiency savings in the long run but the effective implementation of strategies to improve outcomes for children and young people. That will be the true test of these proposals.

It is important that cross-departmental work is successful, not only across Ministers but across government officials and workers in various Departments. We need this, and the Bill has the right tools to ensure effective delivery. We will support it, and it will be up to all parties in the Executive to use it to the benefit of the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr Beggs: I declare an interest. I am the chair of the Carrickfergus children and young people's locality group, which works with a range of government agencies and the voluntary sector. The group feeds into the Northern Ireland Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership. I am a committee member of Horizon Sure Start, which tries to assist expectant mothers and parents with children of nought-to-four years. I am also a Boys' Brigade officer and a governor of Glynn Primary School. I have a general interest in this area and feel that it is very important.

I am minded of information that I received about Professor James Heckman and the importance of investing in the young. I see that the Bill tries to avoid duplication. The amendments require cooperation and aim to get better value for money. In that, I support the Bill and the amendments to it. We must not only invest more in the young but make better use of the money that we invest.

I thank Steven for his efforts. The Bill is the right direction of travel, and Mr Agnew's detailed engagement with officials and the Committee have helped to refine it.

I can see, in his amendments, that he is still trying to achieve the original objectives but perhaps in a more practical and workable fashion by altering the wording.

12.45 pm

I will turn to amendment No 1. The idea of trying to improve children's well-being is important, and we must look at a wide range of activities. I note that new clause 1A(3) states:

"In determining the meaning of well-being for the purposes of this Act, regard is to be had to any relevant provision of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child".

I think that that is the correct wording. Regard has to be given to them, but we should not necessarily slavishly follow everything that is there. I am content with that

wording. If there is international good practice, we should try to follow it, but we should not follow everything slavishly. We have to satisfy ourselves that it makes sense.

I will turn to amendment No 2, which requires cooperation between different authorities that are working with children and young people. This is essential, and, in my previous experience of working in this area, I have come across some quite surprising things. Originally, I got drawn into educational underachievement not through the Department of Education but, believe it or not, through the Northern Health and Social Services Board's children and young people's planning section, which was concerned with levels of exclusion, suspensions and, indeed, absenteeism in parts of my constituency. It was very surprising that the Department of Health was appreciating the long-term adverse effect that this could have on children and young people and the frequent need for a range of services and support, not just the school, to intervene, and the need for a wide variety of bodies to work in a coordinated fashion.

There are a range of interventions that public bodies can make when families get into crisis. That crisis is sometimes shown by a child's behaviour and perhaps lack of attendance at school, but there can be involvement from social services, the Department of Health, the Education Welfare Service and the Department of Justice.

It is very important that you do not have a wide variety of engagements, because, potentially, you will not have a consistent message or may have several people engaging with an individual. This does not bring about the best results. Generally, in my experience, it is important that there is coordinated working between the range of officials who are trying to assist a family and that someone takes the lead and coordinates all the information required to bring about the best outcomes. I agree that there is a need for close working between all the Departments and that this is an important method of direction.

Some of that engagement can bring about very dramatic improvements in the short term and in the long term. Through the Action for Children Choices programme, engagement with families in which children were seen to be at risk of offending brought about dramatic improvements in the family situation. Additional parenting skills were given, boundaries were given, consistent parenting became much better and children's attendance at school once again improved. It is important that that type of work continues in a coordinated fashion, not through multiple government officials but in an efficient way that brings about the best outcome.

I am generally content with the remainder of the amendments. I, too, welcome the Member's decision not to press amendment No 5 at this stage. If practical discussions are needed to further refine it, to try to bring about improvement and to enable it to cross the line, that is a wise decision. I hope that the time between this stage of the Bill and the next stage will not be too long and that it can be finalised and come into statute.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): I call Mr John McCallister. I inform the Member that, if his contribution extends beyond 1.00 pm, I will have to interrupt him for the Business Committee, which meets at that time.

Mr McCallister: Thank you, Deputy Speaker. Normally, when people assure the House that they are not going to take long, they usually go on and do exactly that. I think

that, on this occasion, I can say with some degree of certainty that I will not take long.

First, I congratulate Mr Agnew on the work that he has put into the Bill and for the engagement generally around getting the Bill to this stage. I welcome, of course, some of the change in direction that the Bill has taken during its Committee Stage that is coming out here at Consideration Stage. I have a few points that may be useful, and I apologise for not being able to stay for the first part of Mr Agnew's winding-up speech. I note the references to "economic and environmental well-being" and:

"the making by them of a positive contribution to society".

I am slightly concerned how government would measure such a thing. I welcome the reference to:

"the enjoyment of play and leisure".

It is no secret that I have long been an advocate of the councils, particularly with their new powers of community planning, all developing a play park strategy. I would like to see much more emphasis on the importance of that and local government trying to deliver. I am a little concerned about how those aims would be measured, and I would like some ideas from Mr Agnew on how he sees that. Are we creating something in legislation that, quite frankly, we may not ever be able to achieve, as laudable as the goal and the anticipation of it might be?

I, like Mr Beggs, welcome the Member's not moving amendment No 5, which is to insert a new clause. It will be interesting to see at Further Consideration Stage what the work that he has done on that has developed into and what it looks like.

I think that the Chair of the Committee made a point about the lack of sanctions, and that is a worry to me, given the nature of our government and how good it is at delivering on things. Do we need to look at and seriously think about whether we build in some form of sanction if government does not measure up to this? Almost the only recourse available is taking Departments to court to try to exercise that. Is there some other sanction or mechanism that we can use?

On the broader policy debate that we have had around the amendments to the Bill in this Consideration Stage, I think that, as Mr Agnew touched on in his opening remarks, there is a huge onus on how this place does its business and the actual ability of an Executive to formulate an agreed policy agenda. There is an onus and an emphasis on political parties to come up with agreed policy agendas and not always be passing the buck. I have heard others, including Mr Attwood, who talked about child poverty figures, always looking to London and blaming what is happening there and what other Governments are doing, sometimes forgetting that he is in a party that is in the Government. It is incumbent on all those who hold office in the Executive arm of the Assembly to formulate agreed Government policy to tackle the very issues that Mr Agnew wants to see tackled and that his Bill is driving to do through having a collective approach to dealing with children and young people's issues and services. It is about how best to get those innovative policy advancements, instead of always cutting those services at the very times we need them the most. Many of us speak

about early interventions, but we do not seem to be able to deliver them.

I wish Mr Agnew well on the passage of the Bill at this stage. I will certainly be voting in support of him and his advice on these amendments.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): The Business Committee has arranged to meet at 1.00 pm. I therefore propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.56 pm.

On resuming (Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Newton] in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Notice taken that 10 Members were not present.

House counted, and, there being fewer than 10 Members present, the Principal Deputy Speaker ordered the Division Bells to be rung.

Upon 10 Members being present —

Oral Answers to Questions

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: As the Speaker announced yesterday, the Minister for Social Development and the Minister for Regional Development resigned their positions on Thursday 24 September. The positions remain vacant, so, in accordance with Assembly convention, questions listed for oral answer will fall. I advise Members that, until Ministers are appointed, questions for written answer will not be accepted. Unanswered questions submitted before the Ministers' resignation will be answered when the vacancies have been filled.

Assembly Business

Suspension of Standing Order 20(1)

Mr Dickson: I beg to move

That Standing Order 20(1) be suspended for 29 September 2015.

It is with protest that I moved the motion. The failure of Ministers to be here for the job that they are paid to do is nothing short of a disgrace.

Mr 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 Order 20(1) be suspended for 29 September 2015.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: We will now return to the debate.

Private Members' Business

Children's Services Co-operation Bill: Consideration Stage

Debate resumed on Question, That clause 1 stand part of the Bill.

The following amendments stood on the Marshalled List: Amendment Nos 1 to 10

Mr Agnew: I thank all the Members who contributed to today's debate. I believe that the spirit of the debate so far has reflected the process involved in getting the Bill to this stage. It has been cooperative and constructive. I will speak to some of the comments made on each of the amendments and conclude by reflecting on some Members' contributions.

On amendment No 1, there was a broad welcome for the inclusion of regard being paid to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in defining "well-being", particularly from Megan Fearon and Alex Attwood. Roy Beggs welcomed the language of "regard is to be had" and made the point that regard should be paid to the UNCRC rather than it be slavishly followed. That having been said, he welcomed the benefit that regard being had to the UNCRC could bring and said that, where we can look internationally for best practice, we should do that.

The only concern raised about amendment No 1 was how we measure the outcomes. That was raised by John McCallister, who made specific reference to measuring the economic and environmental well-being of children and whether they are positively contributing to society.

Throughout my research on the Bill on measuring outcomes, we looked a lot at the UK Children Act 2004, which had similar high-level outcomes enshrined in it. By their very nature, they are difficult outcomes to measure, particularly when you are looking at outcomes for children and generational outcomes and changes. So the measurement, even in the research of a historical piece of legislation such as the 2004 Act is, to some extent inconclusive, although many indicators are used. However, the outcomes are those used in the 10-year strategy for children and young people. They are outcomes that Departments are used to assessing, and, in that regard, they do not deviate from work that is already being done in Departments. So, whilst I do not think that you can definitively answer questions about outcomes, you can measure indicators as to whether travel is in the right direction, and that is how I anticipate the reporting of those outcomes taking place.

I turn to amendment No 2. The Chair of the Committee, Mike Nesbitt, raised the issue as to whether the Executive requirement to "promote co-operation" was sufficient and whether the term "advance" would perhaps be stronger. I said in my opening comments that I was content with the language because it is an absolute requirement on children's authorities to cooperate: the word is "must". The promotion of cooperation by the Executive was additional to wording that was in the original draft of the Bill, so, in that regard, I support it because it went further than the original Bill. That said, however, now that the issue has been raised by stakeholders, I will seek advice on whether the term "advance" would further the aims of the Bill.

One of the things that I have learnt through this process is that, sometimes, words that we use in everyday language that seem strong may not have much legal meaning. That is something that I will investigate, and, if necessary, I will bring an amendment if the advice is that that would indeed make the Bill stronger. That said, I am relaxed about the wording and echo the comments that Alex Attwood made. The constructive nature by which the Office of the First and deputy First Minister engaged with the Bill makes me think that the language that has come from the Department is there to assist rather than somehow to escape responsibility.

Similar to that point — indeed, I think that it was in reference to this point that Alex Attwood talked about the genuine spirit of the work of the Department — the question was asked about the phrase:

“so far as is consistent with the proper exercise of their functions”

in relation to the statutory duty to cooperate. Again, that was a phrase that I interrogated. I think that I made reference in the opening remarks that it was Daniel Greenberg who described that as an “avoidance heffalump”.

What it came down to when I interrogated this was different styles of drafting and different opinions. I sought a number of opinions, and it is not unusual language. I did not find examples where Departments had used this type of language to avoid their responsibilities. In the absence of evidence of harm from this sort of language, I am relaxed about its usage. I am content, in that regard, and I think that Mr Attwood was content when I intervened and explained my position.

Both Megan Fearon and Chris Lyttle highlighted that amendment No 2 is key to the Bill. It absolutely underpins the purpose of the Bill; it is about cooperation, and that was the purpose of the Bill when I set out on this journey.

Amendment No 2 being the latest draft or the latest iteration of that purpose, I absolutely think that it is essential that the Assembly supports that today in the Bill going forward.

On amendment No 3, Megan Fearon highlighted the need, not just to consult with children, but to ensure that different socio-economic backgrounds were captured in any consultation. I think that is right. Whilst this is a Bill about children and, I suppose, about age, I think it is important that we do look at socio-economic background and that we do not just consult those who may seem easiest to reach or most able, but actually seek to engage those who might otherwise be seen as marginalised in society. I think that it was a point well made.

On amendment No 4, Alex Attwood described the pooling of resources as taking the Bill from one of process to one of product, and I liked that phrasing, because to me it is an essential part of the journey. The research that I did around this — and there was a great piece of guidance from the Department of Communities in the UK on the pooling of resources — showed that aligned budgets were what took place before the culture of true cooperation really happened. First, the Departments, agencies or whatever it might be would hold their own budgets but work together, but, in the natural course of trust and cooperation, pooled budgets would be the outcome and, indeed, the most

effective measure. If we look at some of the evidence of the Children Act 2004 in England, which contained the statutory duty that inspired a large part of this Bill, the evidence in England is that, where cooperative working and integrated services take place, they are a more efficient use of resources, meaning more money gets to those who need it, meaning better outcomes in the long term.

On amendment No 5, there was a welcome throughout the House for delay and the desire to get this right. I hope, with the contributions made around amendment No 5, that there is a willingness to continue the work on this clause. As I say, the time frame will be weeks, rather than months, because this Bill does need to progress, but I think that, if there is a will, there is a way. I think that we are close to the end product, and I hope that, by Further Consideration Stage, we can achieve that end product and get an amendment that receives unanimous support.

On amendment No 6, the Chair of the Committee suggested that the report did not include outcomes, just cooperation. I draw the Member's attention — I appreciate that he may be drawn elsewhere in the closing stages of the debate — but, for the record, in amendment No 6, new clause 4B(3)(b) does say that the report must include statements on:

“what progress has been made towards achieving those outcomes, or the extent to which they have been achieved”.

While the Chair was right to draw attention to the importance of measuring outcomes and reporting on outcomes, I do believe that it is sufficiently contained in the Bill, but, if that in any way can be strengthened, I am certainly open to looking at that.

A number of Members throughout the process raised the question of how regularly reporting should take place: whether it should be annual, whether it should be every three years, every two years, or what it might be. I know that, in discussions with some of the stakeholders, there was a contentment that, within the children's plan, there would be an annual review, and that, alongside the three-year reporting on the overall statutory duty to cooperate in the children's strategy, this may be sufficient. I make note, however, of Mr Attwood's point that perhaps if this legislation is passed and there is a feeling that nothing needs to take place — well, no reporting — for three years, there may be less urgency than otherwise might be the case. I think that would be something that I would be willing to look at, even if, perhaps, it is an initial report after one or two years, with maybe reporting every three years. What I do not want to happen — there was a lot of concern about this at Second Stage and Committee Stage — is for the Bill to become overly bureaucratic and for Departments to spend more time reporting on how they are cooperating than actually cooperating. I have sought to find a balance, but perhaps the initial impetus is that there is something that could be looked at to ensure that the urgency of the Bill is not lost in a reporting time frame that may allow too much time to come to terms with it.

2.15 pm

The Chair of the Committee mentioned an issue that was raised by stakeholders: whether there should be an independent report on the Bill's effectiveness. I have looked at the issue, as I told the Committee that I

would. I did not find a great desire for the Bill to include a requirement for an independent report, but it was pointed out that it was well within the powers and remit of the Children's Commissioner to produce such a report. That ability is already there, and, when I spoke to the commissioner, I got the impression that the commission is keen to produce a report on the Bill alongside that of the Department rather than instead of it. The present commissioner and previous commissioner have both been very supportive of the Bill. The commission has produced research that points to the need for a statutory duty to cooperate. There is a feeling that, if the requirement to report is taken away from the Department, it might have the unintended consequence of taking away the desire to put the Bill's requirements in place.

I believe that those were the main comments on specific clauses. However, I will touch briefly on points that were made that I thought added positively to the debate. Alex Attwood highlighted child poverty rates in Northern Ireland. While the Bill is not specifically about child poverty, it has the ambition of helping in strategies to combat child poverty, ensuring that the child poverty strategy is joined up and that Departments work to tackle the issue in a joined-up fashion. It was worth highlighting because while the drafting of the Bill is about process, its ambition is about changing children's lives for the better and reducing the wasted opportunities and potential that might arise from a lack of support for some of the children who are in need in our society. I thought that highlighting the failures of governance on child poverty was beneficial.

Mr Attwood referred to the Scottish model and Scotland's more integrated approach. I took time to meet the Scottish Minister, Aileen Campbell, and to hear about the work of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014. It very much follows the approach of a statutory duty to cooperate. In that regard, Northern Ireland, in introducing this Bill, would be following a similar track to that taken by England in 2004 and Scotland more recently.

Although I think that he was speaking as an Alliance Party member, the Deputy Chair of the Committee, Chris Lyttle, lamented the lack of ministerial response. Although I am saddened by that, I will not get into the wider politics too much because my focus is on getting the Bill passed, but, because there has been so much constructive work by OFMDFM and the other Departments in engaging with the Bill, it would have been good, as a private Member and a Back-Bencher, to have been standing alongside the junior Ministers in bringing forward the Bill and the amendments, because they and their office have worked constructively on it.

As I said, I felt that it was more important to progress the Bill than to worry too much about the choreography. I hope that, in my contributions, I have given credit where it is due — to all stakeholders. Whilst, in title, this is a private Member's Bill from Steven Agnew, it is very much a collaborative Bill with stakeholders, including OFMDFM, the other Departments, the Committee and the children's sector.

Chris Lyttle referred to the work of the all-party group for children and young people, the secretariat of which is provided by Children in Northern Ireland. The genesis of the Bill emerged from that all-party group, and I pay tribute to Chris Lyttle's chairing of it. I pay tribute, too, to another contributor, Roy Beggs, who chaired the group when I was a researcher for Brian Wilson and sat on the group representing him. That is where these ideas were kicked

around. The group, under Mr Beggs's chairmanship, took the issue to the then junior Ministers and has raised it consistently. I am delighted that the Bill has come to the Chamber and is receiving the support that I believe it deserves. I further congratulate Chris Lyttle on his work on children's budgeting. He referred to, I think, a UN comment — the failure to achieve positive outcomes for children is one of our greatest mistakes — and I think that that is right. I have talked about wasted opportunity and wasted potential, and that is the result when government structures fail children. The reverse of that is getting it right and making a real difference to the lives of children to help them to maximise their potential, realise their opportunities and tackle the disadvantage that comes from poverty and other societal issues.

Chris Hazzard referred to the extent of the silo mentality in government and to the report on barriers to effective governance by the Children's Commissioner. One of its conclusions was that we needed a statutory duty to cooperate. In introducing the Bill, I came forward with an idea that had the backing of the sector, that emerged from the sector and on which the sector had produced significant research. Barriers to effective governance was just one piece of research conducted by Queen's and commissioned by the Children's Commissioner that pointed to that.

I welcome Sandra Overend's comments as UUP spokesperson for children, and I welcome her work. There was a reference to the work of the Assembly, not just the Executive, and the work that private Members, including Mrs Overend, do on child protection and Internet safety. When we take the Bill, along with her work and the work on children's budgeting that Chris Lyttle is engaged in, we see an Assembly that is interested in children's issues and seeks to make progress on improving outcomes. That constructive relationship between the Assembly and the Executive can only be a good thing.

Roy Beggs referred to the work of Professor Heckman, and that, too, underpins what the Bill is about. If we get the processes and the vehicles for delivery right, we can intervene earlier and more effectively. We have the research and the evidence: invest early and you get better outcomes. Whether it is health, justice, education or employment, it is for the betterment of society to invest in the early years of a child's development. If we put in the support then, we could avoid many of the problems that dog our society, whether that is poverty, crime or educational underachievement.

Another criticism of the Bill that came from both the Chair of the Committee and Mr McCallister was on the lack of sanctions. That is something that I looked at. I looked across legislation, and, whilst I can understand the compulsion to have some sort of punitive sanction in there, I was at a loss to find any good examples. How do we put a punishment on the Executive or even individual Departments in legislation? Do we fine them? If it is a fine on the Executive, the Executive do not promote cooperation. Who fines the Executive? What are we fining, and how does it help? Why would we fine Departments? Where would the money go? What is the incentive?

Looking through legislation, I think that judicial review is the normal mechanism of sanction. It is legal action. Whilst it might not be ideal, short of any alternative proposals coming forward, I was at a loss as to how I could put

sanctions into the Bill that would be constructive and beneficial in achieving the proposals contained in the Bill. I am sympathetic to those, like me, who want the Bill to be as strong as it can be, but I think the accountability of reporting, the accountability to the Assembly, the accountability to Committees and the accountability to the public — indeed, I referred to the powers of the Children's Commission — are, in the first instance, what the Departments will pay regard to. However, the threat of judicial review is not a minor threat. It is one that Departments are mindful of, and it is, in that regard, a useful tool for holding Departments to account.

To conclude, I thank all Members for their contributions. I specifically thank Children in Northern Ireland and its membership, the Children's Commissioner and her team and, indeed, the Children's Law Centre, all of which have been working for, calling for and driving the calls for this legislation or something similar to it. I know that there will be many watching: I hope they feel that the Assembly has listened, that we have stepped up and that we will take action to end the waste that is created by duplication and end the wasted opportunities and potential that poverty and the other consequences of lack of support for children and families create. I hope that, with the Bill, we can achieve better outcomes for children in Northern Ireland.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before I put the Question, I remind Members that we have debated Mr Agnew's opposition to clause 1, but the Question will be put in the positive as usual. Members will also note that clause 1 is mutually exclusive with amendment No 1.

Question put and negatived.

Clause 1 disagreed to.

New Clause

Amendment No 1 made:

After clause 1 insert

"Well-being of children and young persons

1A.—(1) *The functions conferred by this Act are to be exercised for the purpose of improving the well-being of children and young persons.*

(2) *For this purpose the "well-being" of children and young persons includes—*

- (a) *physical and mental health;*
- (b) *the enjoyment of play and leisure;*
- (c) *learning and achievement;*
- (d) *living in safety and with stability;*
- (e) *economic and environmental well-being;*
- (f) *the making by them of a positive contribution to society;*
- (g) *living in a society which respects their rights.*

(3) *In determining the meaning of well-being for the purposes of this Act, regard is to be had to any relevant provision of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (which is to say, the Convention of that name adopted by General Assembly resolution 44/25 of 20 November 1989).*

(4) *The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister may by regulations make such amendments to subsection (2) as it thinks appropriate.*

(5) *Regulations must not be made under subsection (4) unless a draft of the regulations has been laid before, and approved by a resolution of, the Assembly.*—
[Mr Agnew.]

New clause ordered to stand part of the Bill.

New Clause

Amendment No 2 made:

After clause 1 insert

"Co-operation to improve well-being

1B.—(1) *Every children's authority must, so far as is consistent with the proper exercise of its children functions, co-operate with other children's authorities and with other children's service providers in the exercise of those functions.*

(2) *The Executive must make arrangements to promote co-operation of the kind mentioned in subsection (1).*

(3) *Every children's authority must co-operate with the Executive in the making of the arrangements mentioned in subsection (2).*

(4) *"Children functions" are any functions which may contribute to the well-being of children and young persons.*— [Mr Agnew.]

New clause ordered to stand part of the Bill.

New Clause

Amendment No 3 made:

After clause 1 insert

"Children and young persons strategy

1C.—(1) *The Executive must adopt a strategy (the "children and young persons strategy") setting out how it proposes to improve the well-being of children and young persons.*

(2) *The strategy must in particular set out—*

- (a) *what outcomes the Executive intends should be achieved for that purpose;*
- (b) *what actions will be taken by Northern Ireland departments (among others) for the purpose of achieving those outcomes;*
- (c) *how it will be determined whether, and to what extent, the outcomes have been achieved.*

(3) *The strategy must state the period within which it is intended that the outcomes should be achieved (the "lifetime" of the strategy).*

(4) *Before adopting the strategy, the Executive must consult—*

- (a) *children and young persons,*
- (b) *parents and guardians of children and young persons,*
- (c) *such persons representing the views and interests of children and young persons as the Executive thinks appropriate, and*

- (d) such other persons as the Executive thinks appropriate.
- (5) The Executive may—
- (a) revise or replace the strategy if the Executive is satisfied that changes in circumstances justify doing so;
- (b) amend the strategy by extending its lifetime.
- (6) The Executive must—
- (a) lay the strategy, and any revisions to it, before the Assembly, and
- (b) publish it, and any revisions, in such other manner as the Executive thinks appropriate.
- (7) At the end of the lifetime of the strategy, the Executive must adopt a new one.
- (8) Subsections (2) to (7) apply to any new strategy.”—
[Mr Agnew.]

New clause ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 2 (Co-operation report)

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Clause 2 is mutually exclusive with amendment No 6. I remind Members that we have debated Mr Agnew's opposition to clause 2. The Question will be put in the positive, as usual.

Clause 2 disagreed to.

Clause 3 (Sharing resources and pooling funds)

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Clause 3 is mutually exclusive with amendment No 4.

Clause 3 disagreed to.

New Clause

Amendment No 4 made:

After clause 3 insert

“Sharing of resources and pooling of funds

- 3A.—(1) This section applies to a children's authority for the purposes of exercising any functions in accordance with arrangements under section 1B (co-operation).
- (2) For those purposes, a children's authority may—
- (a) provide staff, goods, services, accommodation or other resources to another children's authority;
- (b) make contributions to a fund out of which relevant payments may be made.
- (3) A “relevant payment” is a payment in respect of expenditure incurred, by a children's authority contributing to the fund, in the exercise of its functions.”— [Mr Agnew.]

New clause ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 4 (Amendment of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995)

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Clause 4 is mutually exclusive with amendment No 5.

Clause 4 disagreed to.

New Clause

Amendment No 5 not moved.

New Clause

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Amendment No 6 is consequential to amendment Nos 3 to 5.

Amendment No 6 made:

After clause 4 insert

“Report on the operation of this Act

- 4B.—(1) For each reporting period, the Executive must prepare a report on the operation of this Act.
- (2) The reporting period is—
- (a) for the first report prepared after the adoption of a strategy, the period since its adoption;
- (b) in any other case, the period since the preparation of the preceding report under this section.
- (3) The report must include statements on the following matters, so far as relating to the reporting period—
- (a) what actions have been taken by the Executive, and Northern Ireland departments, for the purpose of achieving the outcomes set out in the children and young persons strategy;
- (b) what progress has been made towards achieving those outcomes, or the extent to which they have been achieved;
- (c) how children's authorities and other children's service providers have co-operated with each other in the provision of children's services;
- (d) how children's authorities have exercised the powers conferred by section 3A;
- (e) how the well-being of children and young persons has improved.
- (4) The report must also identify—
- (a) any further opportunities for co-operation between children's authorities and other children's service providers that could help to achieve the outcomes set out in the strategy,
- (b) any other ways in which the well-being of children and young persons could be improved, and
- (c) any ways in which the children and young persons strategy might be revised in order to contribute to those improvements.
- (5) The Executive must prepare a report under this section—
- (a) not more than 3 years after the date on which it adopted a children and young person's strategy,
- (b) thereafter, during the lifetime of that strategy, at intervals of not more than 3 years, and
- (c) at the end of the lifetime of a strategy.
- (6) But subsection (5)(c) does not apply if a report was prepared under this section less than 6 months before the end of the lifetime of the strategy.
- (7) Children's authorities must co-operate with the Executive in the preparation of a report under this section.

- (8) *The Executive must—*
 (a) *lay the report before the Assembly, and*
 (b) *publish it in such other manner as the Executive thinks appropriate.*— [Mr Agnew.]

New clause ordered to stand part of the Bill.

New Clause

Amendment No 7 made:

After clause 4 insert

- “Guidance**
 4C.—(1) *The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister may issue guidance to children’s authorities, or to any particular children’s authority, on the exercise of functions conferred by this Act.*
 (2) *A children’s authority must have regard to guidance issued to it under this section.*— [Mr Agnew.]

New clause ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 5 disagreed to.

New Clause

Amendment No 8 made:

After clause 5 insert

- “Interpretation**
 5A.—(1) *In this Act—*
“children and young persons” means persons who are—
 (i) *under the age of 18, or*
 (ii) *aged 18 or over and fall within subsection (2) or (3);*
“children’s authority” means any of the following—
 (i) *a Northern Ireland department,*
 (ii) *a district council,*
 (iii) *a Health and Social Care trust,*
 (iv) *the Regional Health and Social Care Board,*
 (v) *the Regional Agency for Public Health and Social Well-being,*
 (vi) *the Education Authority,*
 (vii) *the Northern Ireland Housing Executive,*
 (viii) *the Police Service of Northern Ireland, or*
 (ix) *the Probation Board for Northern Ireland;*
“children’s service” means any service which is provided (whether by a children’s authority or by any other person or body) wholly or mainly to or for the benefit of—
 (i) *children and young persons generally, or*
 (ii) *children and young persons of a particular description or with particular needs;*
“the Executive” means the Executive Committee of the Assembly, established under section 20 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998;
“other children’s service provider” means any person or body, of whatever nature, who provides a children’s service or is engaged in activities which contribute to

- the well-being of children or young persons (but does not include a children’s authority);*
“well-being” has the meaning given by section 1A.
 (2) *A person falls within this subsection if services are provided to or in respect of the person by, or on behalf of, or under arrangements made with, the Regional Health and Social Care Board or a Health and Social Care trust by virtue of—*
 (a) *Article 34D, 35, 35A or 35B of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 (which provide for the continuing duties of those bodies towards young persons), or*
 (b) *regulations made under Article 34E of that Order (which may provide for the appointment of personal advisers for certain young persons).*
 (3) *A person falls within this subsection if the person—*
 (a) *is under the age of 21 years, and*
 (b) *is a disabled person within the meaning of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.*
 (4) *The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister may by regulations make such amendments to the definition of “children’s authority” as it thinks appropriate.*
 (5) *Regulations under subsection (4) are subject to negative resolution.*— [Mr Agnew.]

New clause ordered to stand part of the Bill.

New Clause

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Amendment No 9 is consequential to amendment No 3.

Amendment No 9 made:

After clause 5 insert

- “Commencement**
 5B.—(1) *This Act comes into operation on the day after the day on which it receives Royal Assent.*
 (2) *The first strategy under section 1C must be laid before the Assembly before the end of the period of 12 months beginning with the day on which this Act receives Royal Assent.*— [Mr Agnew.]

New clause ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 6 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Long Title

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Amendment No 10 is consequential to amendment Nos 1 and 3.

Amendment No 10 made:

Leave out from first “Northern” to end and insert

- “co-operation among certain public authorities and other persons in order to contribute to the well-being of children and young persons; to require the adoption of a children and young persons strategy; and for connected purposes.”— [Mr Agnew.]*

Long title, as amended, agreed to.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes the Consideration Stage of the Children’s Services Co-operation Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

City Deal for the North-west

Mr Principal Deputy 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 the motion and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Eastwood: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes that the One Plan endorsed in the Programme for Government has not enjoyed full delivery traction in a number of key areas but still provides a valid and viable prospectus for driving growth in the north-west; further notes that Derry City and Strabane District Council has resolved to explore the potential of a city deal for the council region and its relevance to the One Plan priorities; recognises that city deal compacts are now developing under devolution in Scotland and Wales, as well as in their varying formats in England; and calls on the Executive and the north-west ministerial subgroup to join in scoping a city deal for the north-west, and encourages their best engagement to this end with the UK Treasury, council, the North/South Ministerial Council and relevant stakeholders, focusing on key commitments of the One Plan and utilising the potential platform of the north-west gateway initiative.

It is not often that I rise to encourage our Executive to adopt a Conservative Party proposal, but the fact that it is a Conservative Party proposal does not mean that it is not a good one. Chancellor George Osborne's proposal and the outworkings of it in England and now in Scotland and Wales have been very positive for the cities involved.

City deals began in smaller cities across England, and we were told at the time that we would not have access to them because of our devolution settlement. Since then, we have seen Glasgow enter into a city deal compact with the Treasury and the Scottish Government that will, in effect, draw down over a billion pounds of investment in Glasgow. Like other cities in England, Scotland and Wales, Glasgow has decided and will decide how best they will spend that money and use that new power to determine and develop their future and their economy.

I think that it is a fantastic idea to allow cities to play a full part in deciding their own priorities and developing their own plans. Of course, in Derry, we have a lot of experience of developing our own plans. Unfortunately, many of those plans are sitting on a shelf somewhere in one or more Departments in and around this Building. We now need to ensure that we have delivery of some of those plans. We were delighted to see the Heenan-Anderson report recognise the ability that city deal has to be transformational for local economies.

We all know the difficulties in Derry. I have had to stand up in this place far too many times and explain that Derry is at the wrong end of many of the economic league tables and that Derry lags behind in investment, infrastructure and skills and in investing in our young people to try to ensure that we can have a stable and sustainable economy, in which our young people do not have to leave to get work.

Very recently, we saw the Department for Social Development's 'Households Below Average Income Northern Ireland 2013/14' report. Derry, which is the

second city in the North and is recognised by the Programme for Government and the Executive's economic strategy as one of the key economic drivers for Northern Ireland, ranked number 21 out of the 26 previous council areas for high earners. Is it really the legacy that we and the Executive want to leave for the next generation that the second city in Northern Ireland, which is recognised as one of two key economic drivers by the Executive, is ranked at number 21 out of 26 areas for having high-value jobs. I do not think that that is good enough. That is why we have come here with the motion and why Mark Durkan and the SDLP have, for a long time, campaigned for a city deal.

We have been told by the Treasury and the Secretary of State that, if the Executive come with an idea, a plan and a proposal for a city deal for Derry, they will look positively at that idea. Why would we look a gift horse in the mouth? We all played varying degrees of a part in developing the One Plan for the city. It recognised all the issues that we have talked about. People in the House who are not from the north-west are probably fed up listening to all of us talking about the problems that we face in Derry. Unfortunately, we are going to have to keep talking about those problems if the Executive do not begin to find ways in which to resolve them.

Our view is that the One Plan and a city deal can operate side by side. In fact, a city deal is the way of delivering the One Plan objectives, one of which was that we would see 9,400 students at Magee university by 2020. Even I now can recognise that we are not going to meet that target. Of course, it has been 50 years since we were told that Magee university would not be able to reach its full potential because of the University of Ulster campus being sited at Coleraine. Fifty years on, and we are still here making this argument. We have been without a motorway from Derry to Belfast for 50 years. It is God knows how many years since we began calling for a motorway from Dublin to Derry. I am glad to hear more soundings and positive words coming from the Irish Government today around the A5.

I think that people have had enough of positive words and of nice reports being written. People want to see delivery. They want to see us taking people off welfare. The best way in which to take people off welfare is to ensure that they have the opportunity of getting a job, and the best way in which to get a job and to create employment in areas of high unemployment is to invest in infrastructure and skills. We have not done that. There is a black spot in Northern Ireland: it is called the north-west. It has not got a motorway going in or out of it, nor has it a university of the right size to attract the investment that is required. That is a stain on the reputation of politics in Northern Ireland. We are offering a very obvious solution, even though it comes from the Tory party in England. We do not look a gift horse in the mouth. If Glasgow can attract £1.3 billion of investment to their area, why can we not do something similar? Why can we not ask the simple and obvious question to which the Treasury has already said it would say yes? Why can the Executive not do that? I do not understand.

2.45 pm

We are not surprised that we have not had movement on this yet. In a question for oral answer, in September 2014,

I asked OFMDFM how it planned to deliver the One Plan commitments. That question has not yet been answered. In June of this year, I asked OFMDFM how it planned to progress the north-west gateway initiative. That still has not been answered. I have asked OFMDFM to detail job promotion targets for 2015-16. They still have not been decided by the Executive. The north-west ministerial subgroup, which we all welcomed, has met once.

We all know the problems; we are coming to this with solutions. I think that everybody recognises that road infrastructure and investment in Magee and higher education in the city are starting points. We have the One Plan, but the solution to delivering those things is for the Executive to ask the Treasury to allow a city deal for the north-west. We recognise that Belfast is also looking for a city deal, and we wish them well in their endeavours, but we will not accept a city deal for Belfast and a road to Derry. I can hear those arguments being made: "Och, wouldn't it be great if Derry and Belfast got together and did one big city deal?". We have had experience of that. The north-west is the area of highest economic need; the north-west needs investment first, as was the case with the enterprise zone idea, which came from the Executive. The question was asked and the proposal was made by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, and it went off to the Treasury. However, the first enterprise zone in Northern Ireland is going to Coleraine — an area that does not need it. It is also an area that got things before Derry in the past, and we are still feeling the effects of that. So, I implore the Executive. We will all play our part, but if we are going to ask for city deals for Northern Ireland, let us ask for one for Derry first, because it is Derry that needs it most.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate. I make no apologies for enjoying the fact that we have an opportunity to debate the needs in Derry and the wider north-west and, indeed, solutions to how we tackle the very apparent regional disparities that exist in my city and the wider north-west. I agree with the proposer of the motion that we need delivery — certainly, people in my city and beyond require that delivery — and that we should not look a gift horse in the mouth. However, we need to ensure that that gift horse has teeth; we need to ensure that that gift horse can deliver. I say that in support of what the motion is calling for in relation to scoping out its proposal for a city deal, but I want to make a number of observations.

City deals are basically contractual agreements between the Westminster Government and local councils. They have, no doubt, provided councils with some devolved powers, although what is devolved in each city has been very much discretionary. The contract means that there are offers and demands on both sides. I do not think that we can lose sight of that as we explore this concept.

The devolved powers have allowed councils to make demands about public spending, growing businesses and growing the economy. Of course, we are prepared to look at any genuine attempt to see investment in Derry and in the wider north-west, but the city deal is the contract, and it is a contract with a Tory-led Government. That will require us as a society to give something in return.

That giving-back element could be anything from directly elected mayors to placing more autonomous powers, functions and decision-making capabilities elsewhere. With

the One Plan process, which the proposer referred to, and now indeed the new community planning process — whilst it is not perfect and is certainly time-consuming — we have a model towards greater participation in decision-making that encourages a balance of elected representatives, members of the public, the community and voluntary sector, the public sector and the private sector. There is a developing remit there for more of a partnership.

Let me make this second point: no new public money is being attributed to city deals. Thirdly, the population in Derry and the north-west is very small in comparison with the other city regions in England. Twenty-seven city deals have already been created; 26 in England and one now in Scotland, which was given to them after the referendum. Some of the larger cities there have populations of upwards of 1 million people, and some city regions have populations of over 2 million. Because of this, their revenue-generating powers are substantially stronger than what we have in the north-west. More money is available for capital and investment projects than we could possibly hope to raise. Our rates levels are low compared with those of other regions. There is obviously pressure on us as a society, and in the north-west individually, to keep them low and to provide rate relief. Again, this situation limits revenue-generating capacity. I want to make this point because where they have succeeded in England, they have succeeded well. It is expected that the first wave of city deals will create 175,000 jobs over the next 20 years.

If the devolved powers that would be required for a city deal include tax takes, it is difficult to see how they can be devolved to a city or region in the North when the North itself does not have devolved fiscal powers. Focusing on business rates, there have been concerns about how this would work for us. I do however say that what we need to do is scope out what city deals mean.

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

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: I support the call in the motion to scope out the benefits and outcomes of a city deal proposal for the north-west.

Mr Hussey: On behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, I wish to state our support for the motion despite the fact that it is so long-winded and convoluted that it could have been dreamt up only by a committee. Insofar as the motion calls on relevant agencies to explore the possibilities of a city deal for the north-west and to build on the One Plan document, we fully support it on these Benches.

Sometimes it could be argued that debates relevant to the north-west can be parochial, but, in this case, the issue of city deals belongs in the wider context of the devolution and decentralisation of powers throughout the United Kingdom. This is a debate that we in Northern Ireland, not just in the north-west of Northern Ireland, need to have. Speaking as a convinced unionist and devolutionist, I welcome its being on the agenda.

It is interesting to see how the concept of city deals has evolved in past years. The White Paper 'Unlocking Growth in Cities', published in December 2011, led to the Westminster coalition Government's rolling out the first wave of eight city deals in July 2012. The second wave followed in 2013-14 for 18 other urban centres. The basic premise of the policy was to shift responsibility for creating local growth to local leaders and businesses, the

buzzword being “localism”. The deals so far have been bespoke to each city and covered a range of policies, such as transport, housing and skills. They are designed for cities to develop their capacity to manage devolved funding and to take increased responsibility for economic growth. They are also designed to empower local leaders and businesses to create local growth and have enabled cities to present their local economic priorities directly to government decision-makers. Departments have committed up to £2.3 billion to the deals, spread over 30 years. So far, as has already been said, city deals have been developed in England and followed by Glasgow, with Cardiff also in the pipeline. It would appear that Northern Ireland needs to play catch-up.

As for a potential city deal for the north-west, it seems to me that the ball is firmly in the court of civic leaders in Londonderry and Strabane. They should come to the UK Government with a business plan and make their case. It is high time that civic leaders in the north-west stepped up to the mark, prioritised elements of the One Plan and kick-started the transformation of the economy in the Maiden City and its hinterlands, including Strabane.

There is, however, a problem that we need to consider. A city deal needs a delivery body. Despite the recent reform of the public administration process, local government in Northern Ireland still has considerably fewer powers than its compatriots in the rest of the United Kingdom and does not have direct responsibility for things like transport, infrastructure and housing. Stormont and Stormont Departments have a key role to play in the delivery, possibly in conjunction with council community planning.

I respectfully point out that the new council in the north-west has, in my opinion, not been covering itself in glory during the relatively short time that it has been in existence. Its record thus far on inclusiveness and partnership has been less than stellar, and I know that my party colleagues in the new Derry and Strabane council have been struggling to get their voices heard.

We also need to be mindful of the continual difficulties with and the recent debate in the media about the management and role of Ilex, the urban regeneration company for Londonderry. Ilex produced the One Plan referred to in the motion. Remember that One City, One Plan, One Voice aimed to be the plan to end all plans. We have had plans, strategies, reports and committees, but, at the end of the day, we need delivery.

The official economic statistics are not good. The figures for August relating to the claimant count, which consists of all people claiming jobseeker's allowance at jobs and benefits offices, show that the new Derry City and Strabane District Council area has the highest rate — 7.1% — in Northern Ireland. In the nearby Mid Ulster District Council area, the claimant count rate is 2.5%, while the Northern Ireland average is 4.7%. Historically, that pattern is deeply ingrained. Over the 30-plus years of the claimant count being the standard measurement of unemployment rates, fluctuations in the north-west have closely mirrored Northern Ireland trends. Strabane and Londonderry have always been above the average. In 1992, average unemployment for Northern Ireland was 10.7%, with 15% in Londonderry and 15.3% in Strabane.

If, in applying for and gaining a city deal for the north-west, we can start to change the record and tackle the

long-term and deep-seated problems of intergenerational unemployment, youth unemployment and economic inactivity in the north-west, we will support it. We need to free up the entrepreneurial instincts of our people and allow the private sector to grow and prosper.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member conclude his remarks?

Mr Hussey: As a unionist, I am delighted to be here today to support the motion. I remind the city of Londonderry not to forget the town of Strabane, which is an integral part of Derry City and Strabane District Council.

Mrs Cochrane: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate today. Just last week in the Chamber, we considered the use of the multiple deprivation indicators in trying to tackle poverty, deprivation and lack of opportunity in rural areas. This motion focuses on how we can tackle the issues in those same areas by creating an environment that champions innovation and prevents its workforce from having to migrate to achieve its ambitions. The Alliance Party certainly supports the general principle of the motion, but we believe that other factors need to be considered.

Before I became an MLA, I served at local council level, and I am fully supportive of our councils playing their part in driving economic growth. I commend Derry City and Strabane District Council for its willingness to explore how it can further support local businesses, improve infrastructure and create jobs, perhaps through a city deal approach.

As others said, city deals are not a completely new idea. They were originally introduced by Westminster in 2011-12 for the eight largest cities outside London. Then, in 2013-14, the Government agreed a second wave of city deals, with 18 more cities included. Further deals with Sheffield, greater Manchester and Leeds followed, providing increased flexibilities, and they have operated with some success.

More recently, the city deal model has been deployed in Scotland, with Glasgow negotiating a £1.13 billion deal with the UK Treasury, which it hopes will lead to the creation of 29,000 jobs by 2020 and unlock a further £3.3 billion of private sector investment across the city region. In addition, a city deal for Cardiff has recently been discussed with the UK Government, with a view to that being announced at the next Budget.

There may indeed be merit in exploring city deals, but the model itself is primarily geared to the English context of not having devolution. If we were to try to implement this model in Northern Ireland, it might not have as much economic potential, given the relative scale of our councils compared with England, even post-RPA.

3.00 pm

Further alterations would also be required, and they would need to be worked out between the Northern Ireland Executive and the Treasury. While some Members might believe that a proposal will be looked at favourably, I am not quite sure whether our latest crisis might not have altered that view. If the city deal model does not prove to be a viable option, what more can we do to tackle the economic issues that face the north-west?

The One Plan has had some successes, most notably 81% of commitments being met during a difficult financial period, but a lot more needs to be done through the completion of the Ebrington site and meeting the continued need for motorway investment. The expansion of Magee was also a key element of the One Plan, but, despite some perceptions to the contrary, there was no specific commitment in the Programme for Government for the expansion of Magee. Despite starting with no specific budget for that expansion, the Minister for Employment and Learning has managed to expand the university sector. This has been the biggest increase in the size of the campus at Magee for many years, but, of course, it could now be under threat again from university cuts.

The Alliance Party supports the expansion of Magee and the higher education sector in general, but there is already a £55 million shortfall in higher education investment, and the recurrent cost of an expanded Magee would be around £30 million. If people want Magee to expand, it will mean a commitment of around £85 million every year. In the current financial climate, the only way for this to become viable is if we truly address the costs of a divided society, including, for instance, teacher training, but, of course, this was blocked by the same parties who say that they want money to be spent in certain areas but are not realistic about where that money will come from.

The skills pressures in the north-west are not just at higher levels; they are primarily at low and intermediate levels. In that regard, the north-west has a worse profile than Northern Ireland as a whole. It also has the highest unemployment and the highest economic inactivity. There is, of course, an Executive-agreed, DEL-led economic inactivity strategy that envisages subregional interventions in which the north-west would be a priority, but, unfortunately, there is no resource to deliver this at present. Perhaps some parties need to ask themselves why that is so. The failure to tackle the welfare reform issue and balance the Budget are compounding the problem, and Budget problems have also led to the suspension of many of DEL's specific additional employment interventions.

In conclusion, the UK Government are empowering cities to unleash their growth potential, and I believe that it is time for our cities to be more ambitious in achieving their aims. However, until we can show that we are financially responsible and can resolve our own budgetary issues, it is debatable whether the Treasury would be willing even to negotiate any further options for us at this time.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, Mr Deputy Speaker. I agree with much of what has been said today. However, like the Member opposite, given the size and rural dimension of the new Derry City and Strabane District Council area, with Strabane making up 37% of the population of that area, what would a City deal for a rural area look like? It should take into account the rural aspect, and any negotiations with government on any new powers to support economic growth and fiscal devolution should bring further opportunities for those living in rural areas, as not everyone lives in the city.

Any prospect of driving growth in the north-west should and would be welcomed. If the north-west were to get control over its finances, the city would thrive, but we do not want certain areas in that city to be left behind, particularly constituents, as the Member opposite said,

who live in Strabane or in smaller towns and rural villages. They would have to be taken account of. How would the finances gained remain in the city, and how would that operate? It would need to be distributed fairly: we would need to ensure fairness of distribution in order for our towns and villages to survive and have power over their own economic growth.

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

A City deal has to have its citizens at the heart of it unless there are life changes and opportunities for the people to be involved in the process. We cannot allow more taxes to be put onto the people who, in return, receive much greater losses. Fiscal devolution will work only if people, communities and business are allowed to have their say on financial matters and, indeed, gain in that. As was said, a city deal does sound good, but there remain many challenges and questions that need to be answered. For example, how do we deal with the process of increased powers and who will preside over those powers?

I represent a border constituency, and any City deal would have to include Donegal as there already exists cooperation between our councils. I understand that, through the north-west gateway initiative, they are keen to achieve objectives with our Donegal colleagues. Many connections and linkages already exist between Derry, Strabane and Donegal, and everyone is interdependent. The radiotherapy unit at Altnagelvin is one great example. Even our previous Health Minister, Mr Poots, recognised its mutual benefits. That is relevant business for both Administrations on this island. Therefore, any benefit to the north-west will need the cooperation of the Irish Government, as that is vital to the success of a city deal for the north-west.

I support the motion. The positive outcomes of a city deal for the north-west within Derry City and Strabane District Council outweigh the negatives but we have to tread carefully. Businesses, elected representatives, citizens young and old having the power to set our own agenda over our own economic growth is an opportunity to be creative and innovative with our future finances. This will allow the north-west to prosper and grow.

The potential of a city deal for future investment in infrastructure, health, housing, education, transport and the wider economy is a good deal. We have social value partnerships already leading the way to putting greater financial powers into the hands of local businesses and bodies. That has to be welcomed. I support the motion.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I also support the motion. Although, when Colum Eastwood was proposing it — I do not see him in his place — I was struck by the number of times he said that this came from a Tory Government. It seemed as if he had his own reservations about it.

All of us from the north-west realise the need for the appropriate framework and delivery mechanisms to ensure that there is a regeneration process to deal with decades of underdevelopment in the region. That is true of other parts of the North as well. In proposing the motion, its supporters accept the central role that the One Plan has played and will continue to play, much in the same way that there is an acknowledgement of the role that the north-west ministerial

subgroup will have in ensuring that there is delivery on these issues, which we all know and have listed.

When people refer to documents proposing the city deal as a way forward, and when you read what it actually entails, you always find it a bit light on detail. At the strategy board meeting in May, there was a presentation on the city deal by Mark Durkan MP. All of us on the strategy board agreed that it would be appropriate for the officials of Derry City and Strabane District Council to ensure that we had a scoping document to look at the pros and cons, and the pitfalls and issues, around city deals. This is relevant because, living in Derry, we have a tendency to see the north-west as being Derry and Derry alone. If we are going to develop any concept to broaden the horizon of the north-west, then we have to be mindful, particularly now with the new council and our neighbours in east Derry, who are very much part of the north-west.

Last week at a conference in the city, I heard the chief executive of Derry City and Strabane District Council talk about the great work that has been done in recent months with Donegal County Council. We all realise that if we are to tackle the deficit in our infrastructure — we all know that investment and increasing education and skills will flow from that, as was teased out at the conference — we have to be in a place where, when we define the north-west, we see Donegal as part of that. Sometimes, when people present aspects of this, I am not saying that it is ignored, but it is certainly not pointed up. We have to ensure that we get the maximum buy-in from the greatest number of people. We have often talked about Magee and about the A5 and A6: it will not just be the people within the city limits of Derry who will benefit from that. We see it in terms of the north-west. Indeed, truth be told, we see it in the context of the island of Ireland as a whole.

Some people have raised points that are worth exploring, and that is why we, as a party, await the scoping document from the council officials. With the size of the city deals at present, as seen particularly in England but even in the Glasgow experience — I want to talk about that briefly as we come to the end — the volume of people is sometimes upwards of half a million. There are issues about council boundaries. In Glasgow, I think, 13 councils have come together. I am wondering whether there is a legislative issue. The Minister is here; I am not sure whether he will speak, but he will certainly know that, quite recently, he has taken a legislative process through the Assembly. I am wondering about the implications for that, particularly if one of the demands is the idea of an elected mayor covering the whole area. How would that affect local government? Would legislation need to be tweaked as a result of it?

You will have read about the Glasgow experience. There are two aspects of it. You do not have to be from this part of the world to know that —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

Mr McCartney: — the British Treasury has control over the rules and regulations, and it is sometimes not easy to change its mind. Glasgow is finding out already that the vast majority of the money in the Glasgow city experience is coming from the Scottish Government and from the local councils —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member's time is up.

Mr McCartney: — with the Treasury falling short.

Mr Dallat: I am glad to take part in the debate today. While I do not represent the Foyle constituency, let me explain to the Members present that I believe that this is about more than Derry city because, when that city prospers, a very wide region will benefit from that on this side of the Foyle and Craigavon bridges but also in the Donegal hinterland, which was mentioned. God knows, east Derry might also benefit from it. In fact, I know that it will.

Let us be positive about this and dismiss the nonsense about having no money. That came from a Belfast MLA. There is a huge deficit here, and it needs to be addressed. A few years ago, a few of us took up the cudgels for the railways. That has been a success, and, with the £45 million invested in it, we will have a railway that is fit for purpose. The gas pipeline was a struggle, too. We were told that there was no money, but the case was made, and of course it happened. Let us apply that principle to all the other things that are not present but are needed in the north-west. The A5 has been mentioned. Do not forget the A6. Anyone who has travelled between Belfast and Derry and has undertaken that arduous journey will know exactly what I am talking about, and I doubt that anyone would make an argument that there is no money. I encourage them to use that.

The city deal, provided it recognises and addresses the regional inequalities and disparities in Derry, will have a ripple effect, which I have talked about, and will benefit us all. The motion did not come here today for us to bemoan an imagined situation and retread a tale of two cities. The reality is that deprivation and economic disparity in Derry continue to this day. That is a situation that, once again, was confirmed by the Heenan-Anderson report of 2015. Not surprisingly, that report recognises that the causes of poverty are structural and are based on the distribution of wealth, power and opportunities. That certainly echoes what has been the SDLP voice for many years.

3.15 pm

I know that there are some in the Chamber — I wish that there were more on the Benches opposite — who envy the successes of Derry, particularly the way that it has embraced the two cultures and shown how it is possible, twice a year and perhaps more often, to invite thousands of Orangemen to the city without a problem. If a city can do that, surely it is deserving of the best will of the British Government to empower Derry City and Strabane District Council to identify all the other things that will allow Derry city to become the city I believe it could. Yes, it endured the worst years of the Troubles. It has emerged out of them a better place, where people are comfortable with each other and have a common purpose of creating prosperity, enlightenment, security and happiness for everyone.

While the Assembly at the moment is perhaps not the best example, let us for goodness' sake in these days answer the call of that wonderful city, which was there long before Belfast was even a village. Let us answer the call. Let us give it the resources and the empowerment it needs. Let us give the local super-council the opportunity to demonstrate to the wider world that the reorganisation of local government was a good thing. Let us accept that, whatever the reasons, there is that huge deficit in the north-west. It should not be competing with projects in the greater Belfast area, because, if that is the case, Derry

will never get the infrastructure it needs. Let us accept that there are historical reasons why the infrastructure is not there, and let us for goodness' sake demonstrate that, as an Assembly, we have the wisdom and the goodwill to support the council and, indeed, all the other wonderful organisations in the north-west and bring about the city deal, which is desperately needed to make Derry city an even better place than it is today.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Is as an Iarthuaisceart mé agus beidh mé breá sásta a bheith ag labhairt ar an rún anseo inniu. Being from the north and west, I am very happy to speak on the issue, and I welcome any new ideas to tackle the inequalities in the north and west. I choose those two words carefully, because it is my contention that, in the past, the words “north-west” have perhaps had a different meaning for many people. For some in Derry — “Derry wans”, as they refer to themselves — it represents an area that is bounded on one side by Altnagelvin Hospital and on the other side by Budgen. For now, we see, particularly in the motion, that the area should cover the old Strabane council and Derry City Council areas. I contend that the north and west should be wider than that and should cover the areas that were covered by the former Limavady Borough Council, Coleraine Borough Council, Donegal, which my colleague referred to, and, perhaps, even as far away as Omagh.

During my time in local government, I was a member — indeed, the chair — of the North West Region Cross Border Group, which looked after the council areas of Donegal, Derry, Strabane, Limavady and, at that time, Magherafelt. The coming together of the northern councils on that was proposal 7 under RPA, and I believe that, at the time, it should have been a more natural model to go with. But we are where we are. Many, indeed, would consider the north and west to be an area north of Sligo and west of the Bann, which might actually be even more accurate. As I said, we are where we are, and we have to work on that.

There are not only economic inequalities in the area, which have been mentioned, but infrastructure inequalities, particularly the shortcomings in the delivery of the A6, the Dungiven bypass and the A5. The railway will be worked on, but that work has not been delivered on as yet. There are also shortcomings with the deep-water port at Lisahally and at Derry City Airport.

Some Members talked about population figures and the economies of scale needed for any city deal. The Derry City and Strabane District Council area has a population of some 147,000. However, if the other former council areas were to be added to that figure, and we were to take the north and west as a singular region, we would be looking at adding the populations of Limavady, which is 33,000; Coleraine, which is 59,000; Omagh, which is 52,000; and Donegal, which is 161,000. That would increase the entire population of the area to almost 450,000 — nearly half a million. Wearing my DRD hat, I think of the population requirements for core nodes for infrastructure, which are around the 300,000 mark. That might open up an opportunity for the delivery of some of the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) funding for the entire north and west region.

One of the big events in the north and west in recent times was, of course, the City of Culture. Its biggest event — the anchor event — was Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann, for which

half a million people travelled to Derry. That was of huge benefit to the local economy: some £43 million from that week alone. On Sunday, we have the county GAA final in Celtic Park. It is being played between two teams that are approximately 35 miles from Derry city, so the wider region would benefit from any development in the area.

We need proper buy-in to the ministerial subgroup. That initiative may be a more plausible way of delivering for the north-west, but I support the scoping document. I appeal for it to be widened out to include the wider north-west, because there is a sense of belonging right across all those former council areas, not just Derry and Strabane. I wish this well.

Mr Durkan: Last week, I participated in an event at the Magee campus of the Ulster University in Derry. It was hosted by the Chamber of Commerce up there and was attended by me, Minister Foster and Mr McCartney. We took part in what I found to be a very constructive discussion. It was more of a discussion or dialogue than a debate around the issues that are inhibiting the economic development of the north-west. Those are issues that everyone sitting around here will be familiar with. Those of us who are from the north-west will be more familiar with them than those who are not.

There is the issue of roads and the lack of good infrastructure in and out of the city. It is ridiculous that the second city in Northern Ireland and the fourth largest on this island does not have a motorway coming in or out of it. Mr Dallat touched on the issue of rail, where we have seen some real improvement. However, the fact is that, for many years, since long before I was here and long before I was even born, people have lobbied for road improvements that we have yet to see. There are connectivity issues that need to be addressed.

There is also the issue of digital connectivity, which is something that prospective investors and employers very much look for. We have seen improvements made in the past few years since the advent of Project Kelvin. I know that the Chamber of Commerce in Derry is working hard to maximise the benefits from those improvements. The issue of the university is a running sore that has never healed in the city. Most of us have been and are fighting for its expansion, but we now find ourselves fighting against its contraction.

However, the motion and debate is not about rehashing those problems but about identifying a solution to them. A lot of people in the north-west thought that there might have been a speck of light at the end of the tunnel with the establishment of the new north-west ministerial subgroup, which was then diluted to the regional opportunities task force. However, given more adverse publicity around the lack of progress that that group has managed to achieve, we have to be careful that it does not become seen as a wasted opportunities task force. I think it is vital that we have all Ministers in all Departments where there are no Ministers with responsibility for addressing these issues around a table with a commitment to doing just that: addressing them.

We need to look at a creative way of finding and securing the funding necessary to overcome the obstacles to Derry and the north-west's economic development. We in the SDLP believe that the city deal is such a vehicle. There has been quite a bit of discussion today, however I think that you would need a full day to discuss city deals and what

they look like; they look different in different places. That is the beauty of them. We can work together with the council, businesses and communities to see what a city deal would look like, how it would work and what it can achieve.

Mr Eastwood, who proposed the motion, said that, in Derry, we are no stranger to plans. We have had lots of them, but the resources have never been allocated to allow those plans to be implemented. Colum gave some statistics around the low number of high-end jobs in the city, and he touched on economic activity and unemployment. Derry City and Strabane District Council area has the bleakest figures out of 650 councils across these islands.

Maeve McLaughlin agreed with Colum that we should not look a gift horse in the mouth, but her concerns about the idea of entering into a contract, as she saw it, with a Conservative Government suggest that she fears it might be more of a Trojan Horse than a gift one. To address one of Ms McLaughlin's points, it is not only big cities that are benefiting from city deals. While our population cannot compare to some of the bigger cities, why can the financial approach that is being taken there not be taken here? Ms McLaughlin referred to tax takes and wondered how that would or would not work in a devolved region, but Scotland and Wales are devolved regions and they will work. We can design our own deal. This is about empowerment — empowerment of Derry.

Ross Hussey said that civic leaders in the city need to step up to the mark. Civic leaders in the north-west have always stepped up to the mark; they just keep getting left there. It is time that we, as political leaders, stepped up to the mark and delivered for them. He touched on the subject of Ilex, the urban regeneration company in the city, which, despite being hampered by excessive red tape, has managed to make some progress but nowhere near as much as we would like to have seen or that the city needs. He spoke of the need to change the record in a remark that sounded scarily like Minister Foster. The Government need to change or improve their record of underinvestment and support for the north-west.

Mr Hussey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Durkan: I do not really have time, but I will chat to you afterwards.

Mr Hussey: Do not forget Strabane.

Mr Durkan: I will not.

Judith Cochrane is supportive of the concept of city deals. She spoke of the successes of the One Plan and said that 81% of it had been implemented. I must check that out, but small matters of it have not been implemented, such as motorways and the university. I recognise and acknowledge her party colleague Minister Farry's support for the physical extension to Magee but have seen little evidence of his commitment to increasing the student numbers there. Mrs Cochrane quite cynically played off the support of other Executive parties for teacher training at St Mary's and Stranmillis against the expansion of Magee. I think that was quite a feeble excuse for her Minister, unless he is proposing or considering that all teacher training be moved to Magee in the future.

3.30 pm

Michaela Boyle raised concerns — as did Mr Hussey and some other Members — that all citizens and constituents of the wider north-west region must benefit from this type of deal, and I have no doubt that they would. I have no doubt that the benefits of this would not be confined even to the north-west. All of Northern Ireland would benefit as a result of lifting the performance and value of the second city, primarily, and its environs, the surrounding towns and villages, of which Strabane is a most important one.

Collaboration with our neighbours in the South is imperative. We have raised this already as a party directly with the Irish Government, and it has been incorporated into the motion. For this to be a success, we have to raise the performance not just in the north-west of the North but in the north-west of the South, which has similarly suffered due to its peripherality.

Raymond McCartney spoke of the work of the strategy board and said that any discussions around city deals had been light on detail. As I said, we, the council and the community have a role to play in fleshing out that detail. Mr McCartney referred to the experience of Glasgow, with most money coming from the Scottish Government and not from the Treasury. The fact is that, for the north-west, not enough money is currently coming from this Government, never mind from the Treasury, so anything additional will be a bonus. Councils here have new powers and functions, but I will have to get back to the Member on the issue of the directly elected mayor.

Mr Dallat spoke of some of the successes of Derry, and there have been many, as there have been for Strabane and other areas of the north-west. Despite that, we have to accept that there has been a historical infrastructural and economic neglect of the north-west. Mr Ó hOisín also touched on some of those successes, namely around the UK City of Culture.

If the Assembly is to truly deliver for people and if the Executive are serious about addressing the economic deficit in the north-west, we need to step up to the mark and lobby Treasury for a city deal for Derry, Strabane and the wider north-west.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes that the One Plan endorsed in the Programme for Government has not enjoyed full delivery traction in a number of key areas but still provides a valid and viable prospectus for driving growth in the north-west; further notes that Derry City and Strabane District Council has resolved to explore the potential of a city deal for the council region and its relevance to the One Plan priorities; recognises that city deal compacts are now developing under devolution in Scotland and Wales, as well as in their varying formats in England; and calls on the Executive and the north-west ministerial subgroup to join in scoping a city deal for the north-west, and encourages their best engagement to this end with the UK Treasury, council, the North/South Ministerial Council and relevant stakeholders, focusing on key commitments of the One Plan and utilising the potential platform of the north-west gateway initiative.

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs).]

Adjournment

PSNI Tactical Support Group in County Fermanagh

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes, and all other Members who are called to speak will have approximately seven minutes.

Mr Somerville: I welcome the opportunity to bring the issue before the Assembly for debate. It is especially appropriate, given that the tactical support group (TSG) officers in Lisnaskea only had it confirmed this time yesterday evening that their unit would be removed. From the outset, I register my disappointment at the absence of the Justice Minister from the debate. Many people, especially the officers affected, will struggle to see the difference between what are clearly overall ministerial responsibilities for law and order and what he claims are operational matters within the PSNI. I know that the Policing Board has its place, but, when it comes to matters like this, the Minister needs to realise that he cannot cast off all accountability. Nevertheless, I hope that the debate will allow the Minister and the top command of the PSNI the opportunity to read Hansard and reflect on some of the many concerns being raised locally.

I have been disappointed in the senior ranks of the PSNI and the way that they have handled the issue. They have not given the TSG officers in Lisnaskea the support that they deserve by landing out of the blue and making the announcement that they hoped to remove the unit. They have not placed enough weight on the impact that this will have on wider policing in the area.

There is no doubt that policing in Fermanagh has changed over the last 15 years. However, it would be foolish to say that everything is a bed of roses. Whilst I am so glad that no police officer has lost their life in recent years, we must not be complacent about the scale of the threat that remains in the area. There are already too many bereaved policing families living in Fermanagh.

Dissident republicans retain significant and deadly capability, and, more importantly, I am aware that the capability even exists on the other side of the border in the Irish Republic. In addition, the almost regular finds of arms, including the recent discovery of Semtex in west Belfast, shows that serious levels of weaponry still exist. The tactical support group based in Fermanagh not only ensures that the PSNI in the county has the ability to respond quickly and forcefully, it ensures that the dissidents are well aware of this. Simply by being there, they act as a major deterrent to anyone or any organisation contemplating a terrorist attack. There are criminals operating along the border, jumping from one side to the other to suit their own convenience, but they are known to the security forces, and I suspect that they know that themselves.

If Fermanagh loses its only TSG unit, what guarantees are there that it will not lose that invaluable information and intelligence? In addition, the removal of the TSG in Lisnaskea now leaves Northern Ireland in a very

vulnerable position, in that there will be no tactical support presence the entire length of the border from Castleberg to Armagh. Given the pressures on policing and the threats that very much exist in the area, its removal is simply unacceptable. Whilst I am glad that Fermanagh does not witness scenes of public disorder like many other areas in Northern Ireland, that does not mean that the skills of the TSG unit based in Lisnaskea are wasted. As and when necessary, the officers can be moved to other areas where needs exist, whether it be Belfast, Lurgan or anywhere else.

Of course, the strength of the TSG was the talent of the officers in it, and I have spoken to quite a number of them over recent weeks and, in fact, days, and I am in no doubt whatsoever of their dedication and skills. The removal of the TSG will have a major impact not only on the overall provision of policing in south-east Fermanagh and beyond but, on a more personal level, on the officers affected. Many have made homes across Fermanagh; they have families, and they have children in local schools. What happens to them now? Those officers face huge uncertainty at present. Many have made major personal sacrifices to be part of the unit. They have carried out the training, and they have spent many evenings — in fact, weekends — away from their families.

Many ordinary residents and businesses in Fermanagh are concerned that this decision is yet another example of the PSNI trying to roll back core service provision in rural areas. In recent years, changes to the neighbourhood policing teams in north and south Fermanagh have left communities often with skeleton services. For example, in Kesh, the neighbourhood policing team numbers were reduced, and now responses to calls are prioritised over traditional neighbourhood work. In the circumstances, I understand why, but in reality it has left crime prevention and deterrence weaker in the area. Towns across Fermanagh and South Tyrone will say that they have no regular police presence at all. The closure of so many stations in recent years has really reduced the level of visible policing, and now the decision to remove such an important group of PSNI officers is yet another blow to our area.

I know the financial pressures that policing in Northern Ireland is under, but that should not be allowed to have an impact on public safety. I do not envy the decision that the Chief Constable and his senior officers have to make. However, I would equally stress to them that changing service provision in Belfast, where support will always be only a matter of minutes away, is unlike removing key units in Fermanagh, where the nearest support could be two or three towns away. I am fearful of what the removal of the group could lead to, and I am annoyed at how the officers in it have been treated. I urge the Minister and the PSNI to reconsider the decision in the interests of public safety and to acknowledge that people living in Fermanagh and along the border deserve the same protections as are available in other parts of Northern Ireland.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. I welcome the opportunity to speak in today's debate on the removal of the TSGs from Fermanagh, and I thank the Member for bringing forward the debate.

A large part of my work as a public representative has been to bring about a new beginning to policing, as envisaged by the Good Friday Agreement. As we know from international studies, policing needs to be about more

than just the police. Delivering accountable policing with the community — I stress the phrase “with the community” — puts focus on many issues, including quality of life, community justice, public safety and freedom from fear and intimidation. Our work in Sinn Féin is about advancing a new beginning to policing, firmly based on the concept of policing with the community. It is about law and policy, and it is about the PSNI networking and engaging with the community to gather intelligence, as the Member said, which is vital. Our role is to support good policing and to hold to account bad policing.

As for the removal of the TSG from Fermanagh, I want to take the opportunity to make the case for its replacement to be met by a policing initiative that firmly takes into account the need to tackle rural crime in a robust manner. Whilst many concerns have been expressed in relation to the functioning of the TSG, we need local police officers to be trained up in practices that effectively tackle crime in our communities in all of its manifestations, in a manner that is compliant with a human rights framework. Good neighbourhood police officers are the first in line in a good policing operation in all districts. Delivering personal, professional and protective policing to the people of the North was a commitment made by former Chief Constable Matt Baggott in his foreword to the Policing with the Community 2020 strategy. That commitment needs to be made a reality for all our citizens

As I have already reported in the Chamber this week, someone in my community recently lost another 13 or 14 cattle, worth £15,000. They were stolen between Aughnacloy and Caledon in south Tyrone. It gave me no satisfaction to learn from our Justice Minister that the rural crime unit has been allowed to dissolve due to budget cuts, which we know emanate from the pro-austerity decisions of Tory Ministers in London. We need to be granted a workable Budget to ensure that our society's needs in all aspects of our economic, social and cultural life can be met. Public safety is a key concern for many vulnerable citizens.

There must be more training on how to tackle rural crime for our neighbourhood police officers. I do not accept the mantra emanating from some quarters that nothing can be done to tackle rural crime. The PSNI has a statutory duty to tackle crime, and is being well paid for it. There is a statutory requirement that the PSNI must do this in an effective manner. Forging good relationships between the police and the community is vital for effective civic policing. I recall being at a meeting of the former district policing partnership in Fivemiletown where the PSNI was complaining that it needed more feedback from the community. A member of the public stood up and said, “Well, there is a poor community response because there is a poor police response.” That relationship must, in the first instance, be based on mutual respect, and that can only happen if police activity is informed by an emphasis on human rights and equality. Furthermore, it must also be based on partnership with the community and community consent.

These are elements of the approach that we call policing with the community. The removal of the TSG from Fermanagh will present challenges, but the most pressing will be to build upon the good work that has been rolled out to date in the context of policing with the community. For Sinn Féin, policing with the community is the overarching principle that we believe should be at the core of civic policing. Tackling rural crime and enhancing public safety

and quality of life in the Fermanagh and South Tyrone constituency is a top priority for me as a local MLA.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh an díospóireacht seo inniu. I thank Mr Somerville for bringing forward the debate. I welcome the opportunity to participate today, although, from my perspective, the focus of the debate is somewhat narrow. It focuses on one small aspect of policing within the county. In my opinion, that aspect is not the priority for the people that I engage with on a daily basis who find themselves the victims of crime in Fermanagh. The TSG does not, in my opinion, make people feel safer or protect them from crime. If that is what it is supposed to do, it certainly does not achieve it.

3.45 pm

As an MLA for Fermanagh and South Tyrone, I regularly have engagements with members of the police to discuss issues that affect the local community, and I engage with police officers at all levels in the county. I have access to the phone numbers of many police officers whom I can contact to discuss issues that are raised with me by the local community. In fact, I will be meeting the chief superintendent for the area on Friday to discuss a range of issues. However, I could not tell you the name of any single member of the tactical support group in Fermanagh. For me, that is why it does not feature heavily in the prevention of crime or the detection of crime in Fermanagh. Local officers should be known to the local community, but, equally importantly, they should be accountable through the local policing structures, particularly the local command structures, so that, if a member of the local community has a problem, a criticism or a suggestion that does not necessarily need to go to the Police Ombudsman, that person should be able to phone somebody locally to give feedback about the police without having to go through the formal mechanism of a Police Ombudsman complaint. Unfortunately, that mechanism does not exist for the tactical support group. It may well have an office of some sort in Lisnaskea. I do not know who is in it or what they do — it seems that the local policing structures have no control over them and that they report to somewhere else. There are not that many people in Fermanagh who are overly exercised about the potential loss of the TSG, because few people know what it does, and it is not the priority for most of the people in the county who are concerned about crime.

The officers in the tactical support group fall outside the structure of local policing accountability. The main focus of that accountability mechanism, as Bronwyn said, from the report that was launched by the previous Chief Constable, is about policing with the community, how you build relationships with people in the community to maximise the outputs of the police, how they prevent crime and how they tackle crime. Community police officers who are in the local community and who are known to people and people can trust are the way to move ahead. I think that that presents a much brighter future than bemoaning the loss of the tactical support group from Lisnaskea.

The work of the tactical support group is not the most important aspect of policing in Fermanagh — far from it. In my opinion, more emphasis needs to be put on preventing crime and tackling and dealing with criminals. The tactical support group is not a strategic approach to dealing with

crime. Local accountability structures are an important mechanism for building trust in the local community and for ensuring that the actions and priorities of the PSNI meet the needs of the local community.

We all agree that resources are scarce. Like everybody else, the PSNI is struggling to get as much money as it wants or as it could spend. Unfortunately, like other agencies, it has to make difficult and unpopular decisions. However, if additional resources were to be made available to the police, or when the police are deciding where to allocate resources, for me, the priority has to be in building up the community policing structures as well as preventing and detecting crime. Personally, I would be more concerned about the threatened removal of the roads policing unit and the public protection unit that deals with domestic violence than I would be about the tactical support group being taken out of Fermanagh. Those people, as well as the community officers, build a rapport with people and with the local community, which is the proper way to improve the performance of the police.

I come from a rural community, and as I look at the implications of crime, it is clear that crime has a major impact on our society. In recent weeks, our local newspapers have been littered with cases of thefts and burglaries from houses, schools, chapels, workplaces and even cars outside places of worship. It has become so bad in recent times that members of different religious congregations are keeping an eye on each other's cars when people are inside celebrating their religious beliefs. That tells you that very many people living across Fermanagh are living in fear of serious and petty crime. A tactical support group will not address that fear, and it will certainly not tackle that crime, which is what most people in Fermanagh are complaining about and trying to deal with.

People want to see and are crying out for more community-based police officers on the ground engaging with the local community to tackle criminals and to prevent crime. The perception that I get is that the PSNI is lazy, disorganised and ineffective.

When victims phone the police to request support in the immediate aftermath of a crime, the police regularly fob them off. They say that they are under-resourced and overstretched — those are the excuses that people are given. However, when money had to be found to police the G8, there was no bother getting that. I think that, over the week of the G8, one person was arrested, yet £92 million was spent, nearly two thirds of it on policing. When it comes to the G8, there is an abundance of money, but when it comes to everyday policing, it seems that the money cannot be found.

In the past, many in my community had a major psychological and political problem with engaging with the police, but, thanks to recent changes, those barriers have, in the main, been dealt with. However, there now exists a different hurdle. There is little faith among many across the community in the ability or willingness of the police to respond effectively to criminal activity or work seriously to prevent crime. When people phone the police, they want help; they do not want to be fobbed off with excuses.

Right along the border, there is a widespread criminal enterprise in stealing livestock and farm machinery and transporting it into nearby counties across the border. The lack of joint working between the PSNI and an Garda

Síochána makes life much easier for criminals. That gap needs to be addressed as a matter of priority. Those crimes might appear low level in nature, but they are not victimless and deserve to be dealt with properly.

Crime costs the local economy millions of pounds every year. Efforts need to be put in to preventing crime, taking criminals off the streets and dismantling their operations, not worrying about where a tactical support group, which has questionable success in Fermanagh, is based. If we are to address criminality in Fermanagh, the words of Matt Baggott that Bronwyn quoted must be acted on and taken forward in all communities. That can be done only in partnership, through building trust and confidence and by working with the community.

Mr Hussey: It is very appropriate that I am taking part in the debate, given that I was away at the weekend attending the National Police Memorial Day service in Edinburgh, which paid tribute to all police officers throughout the United Kingdom who lost their life whilst serving the community. We should always remember that. Whether it is the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the Royal Ulster Constabulary or, indeed, even an Garda Síochána, anyone who serves as a police officer should be respected by the community.

Mr Flanagan referred to his community. I would have thought that, in Northern Ireland, everybody was part of the community. Regardless of whether you are Protestant or Catholic, a believer or non-believer, black, white or whatever colour you want to be, you should be part of the community, and the police are part of that community. Quite a few police officers live in County Fermanagh and have done so over the years. Local policing means local knowledge, and there is no doubt that the police must work with the community.

Community justice was mentioned. Sometimes, community justice has meant people having their kneecaps shot off or being shot in the legs, the knees, through the hands and, later, through the head, so we know what some forms of community justice can entail. We are dealing with a society coming towards peace, but we must bear in mind that, in Fermanagh particularly, there was an attempt at ethnic cleansing. There was an attempt to murder farmers who lived along the border, and that fear still exists. There are farmers in that area of County Fermanagh and County Tyrone who served in the security forces and still believe that there is a threat to their life. Dissident republican activity does not help us to come to a normal society, so there is a need for a TSG, whether it is based in Fermanagh or Tyrone, because we have to have a police service that can react.

Mr Flanagan referred to some police officers whom he described as lazy. That is an intolerable position. If there is a serving police officer who is lazy, he should be removed, and that is what the force can do. There are police officers who are occasionally slovenly and might appear without their tie. They, too, can be disciplined, but that is the way that the service works. We have a police service that is there to defend and protect all.

I agree that rural crime is a major issue. Rural crime in the Clogher valley has had a major knock-on effect in my constituency of West Tyrone. My solution is quite simple: we should improve and we should attract part-time police officers from the area in which they live, because they will

have stronger local knowledge than any police officer who comes in from outside, but that is a debate for another day. Crime is crime is crime, and we want to see police officers doing their job and taking people to court.

I support the call for the retention of the roads protection unit. I believe that it will stay, because I met the assistant chief constables to discuss the issue. We want to see that unit retained in Fermanagh, because it is necessary. We have far too many people taking to the roads who assume that they can do what they like.

Police officers are accountable. They are more accountable now than they have ever been: they can be reported to the ombudsman, or, as the Member has suggested, the local officers can be contacted. He said that certain officers cannot be identified but, within the neighbourhood unit, as he well knows, he can go up to the rank of inspector. The Member mentioned having a meeting with the chief superintendent: that door is open to him, and that is his opportunity to bring forward any complaints.

I thank my colleague for tabling this topic for the debate; I am glad that I stayed behind to participate in it. We want to see the police anywhere and everywhere, and we want to get as much support as possible for the police from the community.

Adjourned at 3.56 pm.

Written Ministerial Statements

The content of these written ministerial statements is as received at the time from the Ministers. It has not been subject to the official reporting (Hansard) process.

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Environment

Strategic Planning Policy Statement for Northern Ireland: 'Planning for Sustainable Development'

Published at 12.00 noon on Monday 28 September 2015

Mr Durkan (Minister of the Environment): I am announcing today the publication of the Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS) for Northern Ireland following Executive Committee agreement by urgent decision on 22 September 2015. The SPPS is a new strategic planning policy framework for the reformed planning system that was introduced on 1 April when the vast majority of planning powers transferred from the Department to the eleven new councils. It sets out the planning matters that should be addressed across the Region and reflects both my Department's and the Executive's expectations for the delivery of important planning functions, such as the preparation of new Local Development Plans, the determination of individual planning applications, and planning enforcement. The provisions of the SPPS apply to the whole of Northern Ireland. They must be taken into account in the preparation of Local Development Plans and are material to all decisions on individual planning applications and appeals. The SPPS is in general conformity with the Regional Development Strategy 2035.

Consultation on the draft SPPS took place over 12 weeks in the early part of last year. There was tremendous interest in this exercise and a lively and constructive debate on the appropriate planning policy context for the reformed two-tier planning system took place. My Department received well over 700 responses.

In finalising the SPPS my Department has taken into account all the responses received. A Synopsis Report on the outcome of the consultation exercise is being published alongside the SPPS.

My Department has also taken into account the iterative Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) process which has been integrated into the preparation of the SPPS. I can advise that the specialist SEA consultants who led the SEA process have concluded that the final SPPS is much better environmentally than its draft and that there are no significant adverse environmental or transboundary impacts.

The SPPS is a shorter, simpler, strategic planning policy framework that provides clarity and certainty for councils, planners, communities, developers, investors and other stakeholders. It consolidates some twenty separate pieces

of planning policy into a single statement. The SPPS is an enabling document that, under the new two-tier planning system, gives councils flexibility to bring forward detailed operational planning policies through their Local Development Plans, tailored to local circumstances.

The SPPS sets out a new purpose of planning and clarifies that furthering sustainable development is at the heart of the planning system – supported by new overarching core planning principles that give expression to it. The SPPS emphasises that the planning system operates in the public interest of local communities and the region as a whole, and encompasses the present as well as long term future needs of society.

Core Planning Principles on Improving Health and Well-being; Creating and Enhancing Shared Space; Supporting Good Design and Positive Place-making, have also been retained and improved in finalising the SPPS.

There are two new Core Planning Principles included in the SPPS. These are 'Supporting Sustainable Economic Growth, and 'Preserving and Improving the Built and Natural Environment'. These additions give emphasis to planning matters set out elsewhere in the SPPS and help to ensure an appropriate balance in relation to social, economic and environmental considerations.

Four core planning principles from the draft SPPS which were more process orientated are now reflected in a new section in the SPPS titled "The Planning Process: Implementation".

In finalising the SPPS my Department has restructured how the Subject Policies are presented. Subject Policies are now set out with reference to Regional Strategic Objectives; Regional Strategic Policy; and Implementation. This is designed to make the Department's strategic policy approach clearer. Further general revisions to subject policies include necessary updates and improvements such as setting out the wider policy context, and where appropriate highlighting the role and contribution of the specific subject policy.

There are a number of subject policies that are likely to be of particular interest to Assembly Members.

The first of these is Renewable Energy. Having taken into account all the comments received on the draft SPPS and following additional engagement with the Committee and others in relation to this particular policy area, the SPPS has been revised and improved.

There is a greater acknowledgement of the contribution the renewable energy industry makes towards achieving sustainable development, as a provider of jobs and

investment across the region, and an acknowledgement of wider government policy support for the use of renewable energy sources. This includes reference to DETI's Strategic Energy Framework.

Furthermore, the SPPS seeks to more closely reflect PPS 18 by making it clearer that development that generates energy from renewable resources will be permitted where the proposal and any associated buildings and infrastructure, will not result in unacceptable adverse impacts on interests of acknowledged importance.

In relation to how the wider environmental, economic and social benefits are to be assessed the SPPS clarifies that planning authorities will give such considerations 'appropriate' weight in determining whether planning permission should be granted.

It is also considered appropriate that a cautious approach in designated landscapes, as per the current best practice guidance, is reflected in strategic policy and therefore this approach has been carried forward in the SPPS.

Where appropriate, the SPPS also takes into account the recommendations of the Report of the Environment Committee's Wind Energy Inquiry.

In relation to Development in the Countryside, the SPPS has been revised and improved to better reflect, in a strategic way, the policy approach contained in PPS21. It provides additional clarity on the range of development types considered, in principle, to be acceptable in the countryside, including infill opportunities, replacement dwellings and farm dwellings.

The SPPS retains the general current policy approach which provides significant opportunities for farming and non-farming rural dwellers wishing to live in the countryside. Furthermore, in the context of the two-tier planning system and the revisions within the finalised SPPS, a considerable degree of flexibility exists for councils to reflect differences within the region. The SPPS enables councils to bring forward bespoke local policies for the development of the rural parts of their own plan areas through their Local Development Plans which will address their specific economic, social and environmental circumstances. Such policies can reflect the provisions of the SPPS and may involve recognising areas that are particularly sensitive to change and areas which have lower sensitivities and thus provide opportunities to accommodate sustainable development.

Subject to some minor revisions the SPPS retains the overall town centres first approach for the location of future retail and other main town centre uses proposed in the draft SPPS which was broadly supported.

In addition, the SPPS also reaffirms my position that there should be a presumption against the exploitation of unconventional hydrocarbon extraction until there is sufficient and robust evidence on all environmental impacts. I believe this is a sensible and reasonable approach.

The primary focus of the SPPS has been a consolidation of the Department's existing planning policy rather than a fundamental review of all planning policy. However, I acknowledge that significant issues have been raised particularly in relation to strategic planning policy for renewable energy and strategic planning policy for development in the countryside. These issues require full and comprehensive policy review, incorporating an

updated evidential context and extensive engagement with key stakeholders.

I therefore now intend to commence these reviews of strategic policy on development in the countryside and strategic policy on renewable energy.

Planning is fundamentally about creating places where communities flourish and enjoy a sense of belonging, both now and into the future. Publishing the SPPS in final form provides clarity and certainty in terms of the policy context for unlocking development potential, supporting job creation, and aiding economic recovery, but not at the expense of compromising on environmental standards. This key document will help ensure that the planning system delivers for all now and for future generations. I am confident that the SPPS and the return of planning functions to councils will help achieve this.

My Executive colleagues have agreed the SPPS. I now commend it to you.

Copies of this written statement have been placed in Assembly Member's pigeon holes. A copy of the SPPS and supporting documents will be available to view or download from the Departmental website www.planningni.gov.uk/SPPS from 1pm on 28 September 2015.

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Northern Ireland Trauma Network and Hems Public Consultation

Published at 2.00 pm on Thursday 3 September 2015

Mr Hamilton (Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Members will be aware of my Department's policy proposal, set out in Transforming Your Care (TYC) to establish a regional network for major trauma in Northern Ireland.

While major trauma cases are relatively small in Northern Ireland, due to our population size, major trauma has, however, historically been the single biggest potential cause of death of people under 35 years of age. I want to provide our citizens who experience a major trauma with the best possible service to improve their chances of survival. To achieve this, I believe that the time is right to transform our major trauma services. The development of the new Critical Care Building at the Royal Victoria Hospital and the supportive public debate on the need for a Helicopter Emergency Medical Service (HEMS) provides the opportunity for this.

I am therefore announcing today my commitment to further strengthen our existing high quality trauma services by enabling clinicians to take this service to the next level. This commitment involves the establishment of the Northern Ireland Trauma Network, with recurrent investment of £211,000 to operate the Network, and plans to move forward with a HEMS as a key component of the network.

The Regional Network will further develop the Royal Victoria Hospital as the centre

of Northern Ireland's major trauma service working within a strong network of acute hospitals across the region. Protocol dictates that patients should be transferred to the Royal Victoria Hospital directly, provided they are able to withstand the journey. If a patient is not able for the journey, they are taken to the nearest major acute hospital within the network with the intention of transferring them to the Royal Victoria Hospital when they are able.

Speed of patient transport to the specialist centre is therefore a key requirement for an effective trauma network and I want to also take this to the next level. I am therefore announcing today my commitment to the establishment of a Northern Ireland HEMS as a key component of the Trauma Network. The exact HEMS model will be determined following the outcome of a public consultation to be undertaken by my Department on key issues related to the development of the HEMS.

The key issues covered by the consultation will include service configuration, target patient groups, home base location and funding models.

I will launch the public consultation document later this month and would ask everyone with an interest in HEMS to respond with their views.

The estimated cost for a HEMS is £2.38m for initial infrastructure and £1.8m annual recurrent operating costs. Given the difficult financial climate for the health service with many competing priorities for funding we will need to

establish if it is possible to secure a robust and recurrent charitable funding contribution for this service. I therefore welcome the recent approaches from potential charitable sources who potentially could raise funds and provide other support.

To conclude, I believe that my announcements today hold the prospect of implementing the vision for major trauma services which the late Dr John Hinds, and his colleagues, have highlighted. I want to pay tribute to all our trauma clinicians, nurses, paramedics and support staff for the exemplary service that they provide in striving to save lives. My mission is to support and enable them to continue their sterling work and I look forward to the delivery of these enhanced services in the months ahead.

Committee Stages

Northern Ireland Assembly

Ad Hoc Committee on the Public Services Ombudsperson Bill

15 September 2015

Public Services Ombudsperson Bill [NIA 47/11-16]

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Lord Morrow (Chairperson)
Mr Pat Sheehan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Leslie Cree
Mr Colum Eastwood
Mr Trevor Lunn
Mr Alban Maginness
Ms Maeve McLaughlin
Mr Gary Middleton
Mr Jim Wells

Witnesses:

Ms Shauna Mageean *Senior Assistant Assembly Clerk*

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): The Committee will carry out its formal clause-by-clause scrutiny of the Bill and reach its final decision on each clause and schedule. I will seek agreement on each clause and schedule in turn and members should indicate agreement or otherwise. We have 57 clauses, 9 schedules and over 330 amendments. The Committee has previously considered all amendments on which we will seek agreement today. Are there any issues that members wish to discuss before we proceed to the formal clause-by-clause scrutiny? Alyn Hicks and Patricia Casey will be with us.

I advise members that on page 12 there is a table summarising each clause and, where applicable, amendments to that clause. Members will recall that we have amendments that the Committee sought to change the word "ombudsperson" to "ombudsman". There are also amendments proposed by the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. For information, seven of the amendments proposed by the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister contain a reference to "ombudsperson". Members will recall that it was agreed, following a briefing last week from the Bill Clerk, that the Committee's amendments to changing the name of the office will be dealt by amending the long and short titles and clause 1 at Consideration Stage, with consequential amendments being dealt with at Further Consideration Stage. I do not propose to read out each amendment; rather, I will indicate where there are amendments and refer members to the table on page 12. Are members content with that approach?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): Hansard will be present. The options available to the Committee on each clause and schedule are these: agree that the Committee is content with the clause as drafted or amended; agree that the Committee is not content with the clause; or agree that the Committee is not content with the clause and will table opposition to the clause standing part prior to Consideration Stage.

I remind members that the Committee's report on the Bill can also include points of concern and/or recommendations on specific issues if members wish that such points are specifically noted in the report of the Committee's scrutiny. Members will also be aware that they have the option of tabling amendments in their own name through the Bill Office.

Clause 1 (The Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsperson)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): There are eight amendments to the clause, five proposed by this Committee to amend the name of the office, and three amendments proposed by the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. I refer members to table at page 12.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Clause 2 (Independence)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): As detailed in the table, there are three amendments to the clause, two proposed by this Committee to amend the name of the office and one proposed by the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister as detailed in the table.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Clause 3 (Appointment)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): There are three amendments to the clause, all proposed by the Committee, to amend the name of the office as detailed in the table on page 13.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Clause 4 (Abolition of existing offices)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): There is one amendment to the clause, proposed by the Committee, to amend the name of the office as detailed in the table.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Clause 5 (Power to investigate complaints made by a person aggrieved)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): There is one amendment to the clause, proposed by this Committee, to amend the name of the office as detailed in the table on page 14.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Clause 6 (Power to investigate complaints referred by a listed authority)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): There is one amendment to the clause, proposed by this Committee, to amend the name of the office as detailed in the table.

Mr A Maginness: I will raise one point, just by way of comment, relating to the term "listed authority". At our meeting yesterday we discussed another issue in relation to the BMA and single or small group practitioners, which I think are shown as a listed authority in a schedule to the Bill. It may well be that, to try to address the issues that were raised yesterday, we revisit this in respect of small practitioners. I am just raising that as an issue that we might want to explore.

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): Yes, there was some discussion around that yesterday.

Mr A Maginness: I know that Mr Eastwood raised a point on that yesterday.

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): What is your definition of a small practice; is it one person or up to three?

Mr A Maginness: In schedule 3, under "Health and Social Care", the last item is:

"An independent provider of health and social care"

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): Are you sure that is it? Is it not the penultimate item? It is listed as:

"A general health care provider"

Mr A Maginness: Yes. It is the second last item. It may be an issue that we wish to address.

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): As I said earlier, there is nothing to prohibit anyone from having views on this at another stage. If you feel strongly enough about it, that can be done.

Mr A Maginness: Yes. I am just making a point.

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): Having listened to what Mr Maginness has said, are members content?

Mr Lunn: Chair, sorry to prolong this, but if you want to do something about this, it would not be under clause 6.

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): Clause 5, maybe.

Mr A Maginness: Yes.

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): OK, but can we agree clause 6?

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Clause 7 (Acting on behalf of person aggrieved)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): There are four amendments to the clause, all proposed by this Committee, to amend the name of the office as detailed.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Clause 8 (Power to investigate on own initiative)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): There are two amendments, again to amend the name of the office.

Mr Wells: Chairman, many of the amendments will be the same, and we are obviously going to agree them all. We have agreed, in principle, the name change based on the Scandinavian evidence. To save time, could we just accept them all? Is that in order?

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): Procedurally, I think we have to put the Question on each clause.

Mr Wells: Good try. [Laughter.]

Mr Eastwood: It is not the amendments that might cause problems; it is the clauses.

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): We will not drag it out if you do not. [Laughter.]

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Clause 9 (Criteria for own initiative investigations)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): There are three amendments to the clause: two proposed by this Committee to amend the name of the office and one amendment proposed by the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, as detailed in the table on page 15.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Clause 10 (Alternative resolution of complaints)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): There are three amendments to the clause, all proposed by this Committee, to amend the name of the office, as detailed in the table.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Clause 11 (Purposes of investigation)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): There is one amendment to the clause, proposed by this Committee, to amend the name of the office, as detailed in the table.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Clause 12 (Listed authorities)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): There are five amendments to the clause: one proposed by this Committee to amend the name of the office and four

amendments proposed by the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, as detailed in the table.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 13, put and agreed to.

Clause 14 (Matters which may be investigated: general)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): There are two amendments to the clause: one proposed by this Committee to amend the name of the office and one amendment proposed by the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, as detailed in the table on page 16.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Clause 15 (Matters which may be investigated: health and social care bodies)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): There are four amendments to the clause: one proposed by this Committee to amend the name of the office and three amendments proposed by the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, as detailed in the table on page 17.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Clause 16 (Matters which may be investigated: general health care providers)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): There are four amendments to the clause: one proposed by this Committee to amend the name of the office and three amendments proposed by the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, as detailed in the table.

Mr Eastwood: Chair, just to reiterate, we are at that point —

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): This is about the issue that Alban and others —

Mr A Maginness: Yes.

Mr Eastwood: We will return to it, Chair.

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): Yes, OK. You have the right to do that.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Clause 17 (Matters which may be investigated: independent providers of health and social care)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): There are four amendments to the clause: one proposed by this Committee to amend the name of the office and three amendments proposed by the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, as detailed in the table.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Clause 18 (Matters which may be investigated: universities)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): There are four amendments to the clause: three proposed by this Committee to amend the name of the office and one amendment proposed by the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, as detailed in the table on page 18.

Mr A Maginness: I am not persuaded, as yet, to include the universities as public bodies that can be investigated by the ombudsman. My view is that there already is a mechanism for dealing with complaints. I am not saying that that is the definitive view of my party; we need to have further discussions. I am just signalling our preliminary view.

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): Yes, I hear what you say, but could the BMA not have said that it too has plenty of control and investigative mechanisms?

Mr A Maginness: Yes, I suppose it could.

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): So you are putting a similar case in relation to the universities?

Mr A Maginness: Yes, although I think it is at a higher level because it is an independent body appointed by the Privy Council and is chaired by a high court judge for both universities. It is a much higher level of investigation and determination.

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): OK, we have heard what you said.

Mr Lunn: Chair, sorry to take an opposite view, but we are of the opinion that it is high time this change was made, so we will return to it.

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): Are members content with clause 18 as amended? Members are allowed to vote and/or declare their position on a particular clause.

Mr A Maginness: As I said, Chair, it is only a preliminary view, not necessarily a definitive view.

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): So you may not want to divide now, but come back to it at a later stage?

Mr A Maginness: Yes. I am neutral on it at this point in time.

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): It will be reflected that some members had contrary views.

Mr Lunn: One of the amendments is just a change in name; the other is just to include constituent colleges and is a technical amendment. They do not really address the basic issue of whether we want the ombudsman to do what the board of governors did. We will have to come back to that.

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): Some reference was made to this before, but the Committee's previous view was that it was content with the clause and amendments. That does not prohibit anybody from coming back at a later stage and saying, "Hold on a moment, I have thought longer about this and I want to say something".

Bearing in mind what has been said, are members content with the clause?

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Clause 19 (Administrative functions of staff of tribunals)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): There is one amendment to the clause, proposed by the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, as detailed in the table.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Clause 20 (Exclusion: public sector employment)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): There is one amendment to the clause, proposed by this Committee, to amend the name of the office, as detailed in the table on page 19.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Clause 21 (Exclusion: other remedies available)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): There are four amendments to the clause, all proposed by this Committee, to amend the name of the office, as detailed in the table.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Clause 22 (Other excluded matters)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): There are two amendments to the clause, one proposed by this Committee to amend the name of the office, and one amendment proposed by the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, as detailed in the table.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Clause 23 (Decisions taken without maladministration)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): There is one amendment to the clause, proposed by this Committee, to amend the name of the office, as detailed in the table.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Clause 24 (Complaint procedure to be invoked and exhausted)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): There are three amendments to the clause, two proposed by this Committee to amend the name of the office, and one amendment proposed by the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, as detailed in the table.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Clause 25 (Duty to inform person aggrieved about the Ombudsperson)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): There are three amendments to the clause, all proposed by this Committee to amend the name of the office, as detailed in the table on page 20.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Clause 26 (Form and time limit for making complaint)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): There are four amendments to the clause, all proposed by this Committee to amend the name of the office, as detailed in the table.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 27, put and agreed to.

Clause 28 (Procedure for complaint referred to the Ombudsperson)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): There are four amendments to the clause: three proposed by this Committee to amend the name of the office and one amendment proposed by the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, as detailed in the table on page 21.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Clause 29 (Procedure for own initiative investigations)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): There is one amendment to this clause, proposed by this Committee, to amend the name of the office, as detailed in the table.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Clause 30 (Investigation procedure)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): There are 14 amendments to the clause: 12 proposed by this Committee to amend the name of the office and two amendments proposed by the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, as detailed in the table.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Clause 31 (Information, documents, evidence and facilities)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): There are eight amendments to the clause: five proposed by this Committee to amend the name of the office and three amendments proposed by the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, as detailed in the table.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Clause 32 (Privileged and confidential information)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): There is one amendment to the clause, proposed by the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, as detailed in the table on page 22.

Mr A Maginness: Chair, that relates to issues that we discussed yesterday about legal privilege. Speaking on behalf of the SDLP, we do not have a definitive view on it. There are questions that we need to examine further.

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): Yes, that is fair enough, and it does not prohibit you from coming back at a later stage.

Mr A Maginness: Yes, I understand and accept that.

Mr Lunn: There is something in the wording “content with clause and amendment”. Some of us are clearly not content with clauses; we may be content with the amendments agreed so far, but we are not necessarily content with clauses; we may have to come back to them. This is giving the impression that the Committee is content with all these clauses.

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): Trevor, actually we are agreeing that we are content — or not content, as the case may be — with the clauses.

Mr Lunn: I am not content with clause 32.

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): Are you content with the amendment, which is to leave out the word “supply” and insert the word “provide”?

Mr Lunn: That is the point I am making. The amendment is changing one word, which does not have a dramatic effect on the clause, but, just as Alban does, I have reservations about the effect of the clause in the overall context.

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): You are allowed to say that.

Mr Lunn: I could say the same thing about other clauses, but you said we could come back to them.

Mr Cree: You can table amendments in due course.

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): Yes. We are here to ascertain the views of the Committee. Is the Committee content with clause 32 as amended? Trevor, I know that you are going to come back at a later date, and you are entitled to do that. Do the members who have some reservations on this clause want to divide?

Mr A Maginness: I think that, just to mark it out, we will divide.

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): OK.

Question put, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendment.

The Committee divided: Ayes 4; Noes 3; Abstentions 1.

AYES

Mr Cree, Mr Middleton, Lord Morrow, Mr Wells.

NOES

Mr Eastwood, Mr Lunn, Mr A Maginness.

ABSTENTIONS

Mr Sheehan.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Clause 33 (Obstruction and contempt)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): There are four amendments to the clause: three proposed by this Committee to amend the name of the office and one amendment proposed by the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, as detailed in the table.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Clause 34 (Reports on investigations)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): There are five amendments to the clause, all proposed by this Committee, to amend the name of the office, as detailed in the table on page 23.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Clause 35 (Publication of reports on investigations in the public interest)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): There are seven amendments to the clause: six proposed by this Committee to amend the name of the office and one amendment proposed by the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, as detailed in the table.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Clause 36 (Publication of reports on own initiative investigations)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): There are two amendments to the clause, both proposed by this Committee to amend the name of the office, as detailed in the table.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Clause 37 (Reports to the Assembly)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): There are 10 amendments to the clause: nine proposed by this Committee to amend the name of the office, and one amendment proposed by the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, as detailed in the table.

Mr A Maginness: Yesterday we talked about issues in relation to special reports to the Assembly, and again I would like to reserve our position on this clause.

Mr Eastwood: Chair, I think that this can be dealt with. I do not think that we have a problem; in fact I think we are in favour of reports and special reports. We may be able to deal with the list of authorities and solve problems at a later date.

Mr A Maginness: It is really about the disproportionate impact on a small practitioner. If there were a special report to the Health Committee stating, “Dr Maginness was guilty of whatever”, a health board could do x, y or z, but the reputational impact and damage on a small practitioner could be disproportionate.

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): That could come in a later debate. I have heard what you said, Alban.

Mr A Maginness: Thank you, Chair.

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): Is the Committee content with clause 37 as amended? All these issues can be dealt with, Alban, at a later stage, but I am dealing with the Committee today.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Clause 38 (Reports and privileged information)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): There are three amendments to the clause: two proposed by this Committee to amend the name of the office and one amendment proposed by the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, as detailed in the table.

Mr Eastwood: Chair, just to say that this sits alongside clause 32.

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): So you would have the same reservations.

Mr Eastwood: Yes. At this stage.

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): OK.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Clause 39 (Privilege for certain publications)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): There are five amendments to the clause, all proposed by this Committee, to amend the name of the office, as detailed in the table on page 24.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Clause 40 (Disclosure of information)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): There are four amendments to the clause, all proposed by this Committee, to amend the name of the office, as detailed in the table.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Clause 41 (Disclosure contrary to public interest)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): There are five amendments to the clause: four proposed by this Committee to amend the name of the office and one amendment proposed by the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, as detailed in the table.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Clause 42 (Consultation and co-operation with other ombudspersons)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): There are four amendments to the clause: three proposed by this Committee to amend the name of the office and one amendment proposed by the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, as detailed in the table.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Clause 43 (Application to county court by person aggrieved)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): There is one amendment to the clause, proposed by this Committee, to

amend the name of the office, as detailed in the table on page 25.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 44, put and agreed to.

Clause 45 (Application to High Court by Attorney General)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): There are three amendments to the clause, all proposed by this Committee, to amend the name of the office, as detailed in the table.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Clause 46 (Relief granted by High Court)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): There is one amendment to the clause, proposed by this Committee, to amend the name of the office, as detailed in the table.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Clause 47 (Court proceedings and privileged information)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): There are two amendments to the clause: one proposed by this Committee to amend the name of the office and one amendment proposed by the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, as detailed in the table.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Clause 48 (Supplementary provision in relation to court proceedings)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): There are four amendments to the clause: three proposed by this Committee to amend the name of the office and one amendment proposed by the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, as detailed in the table.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Clause 49 (Ombudsperson to be Judicial Appointments Ombudsman)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): There are three amendments to the clause: two proposed by this Committee to amend the name of the office and one amendment proposed by the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, as detailed in the table on page 26.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Clause 50 (Interpretation)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): There are five amendments to the clause: two proposed by this Committee to amend the name of the office and three amendment proposed by the Committee for the Office of

the First Minister and deputy First Minister, as detailed in the table.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 51, put and agreed to.

New Clause

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): The Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister proposes to insert a new clause on “Orders” after clause 51, as detailed in the table on page 27.

Question, That the Committee is content with the new clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 52 (Orders)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): Given the insertion of the new clause, the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has given notice of its intention to oppose the Question that clause 52 stand part of the Bill. The Question for the Committee is whether we agree that we are not content to agree clause 52.

Mr A Maginness: Is this clause 52?

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): Clause 52.

Mr A Maginness: New Clause 52?

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): Yes.

Ms Shauna Mageean (Senior Assistant Assembly Clerk): The existing one will be removed.

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): It goes out and this comes in. Is that it?

Ms Mageean: The Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister proposed the amendment on the back of comments made by the Examiner of Statutory Rules about how orders should come before the Assembly.

Mr A Maginness: This is not a Henry VIII amendment. [Laughter.]

Mr Wells: I have divorced my fifth wife. [Laughter.]

Ms Mageean: When members have agreed the insertion of the new clause, this one will then come out if members are content.

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): We were content in the past.

Mr A Maginness: Yes, and we are content now.

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): And we are more content now. [Laughter.]

Mr A Maginness: We are content.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and negated.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 53, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 54, put and agreed to.

Clause 55 (Commencement)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): There are three amendments to the clause, all proposed by the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, as detailed in the table.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Clause 56 (Short title)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): There is one amendment to the clause, proposed by this Committee, to amend the name of the office, as detailed in the table.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 57, put and agreed to.

Schedule 1 (The Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsperson)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): There are 70 amendments to the schedule: 68 proposed by this Committee to amend the name of the office and two amendments proposed by the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, as detailed in the table. To go back to your point, Jim, we are not going to go through them one by one; we are taking them all together. [Laughter.]

Question, That the Committee is content with the schedule, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Schedule 2 (Transfer of assets, liabilities, staff, and other transitional arrangements)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): There are 39 amendments to the schedule: 17 proposed by this Committee to amend the name of the office and 22 amendments proposed by the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, as detailed in the table.

Question, That the Committee is content with the schedule, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Schedule 3 (Listed authorities)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): There are five amendments to the schedule, all proposed by the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, as detailed in the table on page 30. Is the Committee content with schedule 3?

Mr A Maginness: Yes, subject to — go ahead.

Mr Eastwood: Just to note that we may want to come back to it at some point.

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): You may want to come back to it. OK.

Question, That the Committee is content with the schedule, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Schedule 4 (Tribunals referred to in section 19)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): There is one amendment to the schedule, proposed by the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, as detailed in the table.

Question, That the Committee is content with the schedule, subject to the proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Schedule 5 (Other excluded matters)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): There are four amendments to the schedule: two proposed by this Committee to amend the name of the office and two amendments proposed by the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, as detailed in the table.

Question, That the Committee is content with the schedule, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Schedule 6 (Amendments consequent upon Ombudsperson being Northern Ireland Judicial Appointments Ombudsman)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): There are six amendments to the schedule: three proposed by this Committee to amend the name of the office and three amendments proposed by the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, as detailed in the table on page 31.

Question, That the Committee is content with the schedule, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Schedule 7 (Amendments to Part 9 of the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 2014)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): There are 19 amendments to the schedule: 15 proposed by this Committee to amend the name of the office and four amendments proposed by the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, as detailed in the table.

Question, That the Committee is content with the schedule, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Schedule 8 (Other minor and consequential amendments)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): There are 13 amendments to the schedule, all proposed by this Committee, to amend the name of the office, as detailed in the table.

Question, That the Committee is content with the schedule, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Schedule 9 (Repeals)

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): There is one amendment to the schedule proposed by the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister as detailed in the table.

Question, That the Committee is content with the schedule, subject to the proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Long Title

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): There are two amendments to the long title, both proposed by this Committee to amend the name of the office, as detailed in the table.

Question, That the Committee is content with the long title, put and agreed to.

The Chairperson (Lord Morrow): The good news is that that concludes the clause-by-clause scrutiny of the Bill. I know that some members may want to return to it at another time and in another place; that is their privilege, and they can do that. Thank you for your cooperation.

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 4 September 2015

Written Answers to Questions

Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what consideration has been given to the establishment of an approved list of dog breeders. (AQW 48310/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): The Welfare of Animals (Dog Breeding Establishments and Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (NI) 2013 make provision for the licensing of dog breeding establishments here by District Councils.

Section 5(7) of the Regulations requires District Councils to maintain a register of all persons licensed under the Regulations.

As part of the ongoing Review of the Implementation of the Welfare of Animals Act 2011, consideration is being given to how information on registered dog breeders could be made more widely available while maintaining compliance with data protection requirements.

Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether any of her departmental responsibilities have been affected by the actions of any proscribed organisations since 2011. (AQW 48299/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): No.

Department of Finance and Personnel

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, following her comments that the Executive is facing funding pressures of £600 million, to provide a breakdown of each of these pressures. (AQW 46663/11-15)

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): The £600 million was comprised of the Resource DEL pressures that would arise should the Stormont House Agreement not proceed and an additional amount to allow the Executive to take decisions on the possible reallocation of resources to address the significant inescapable pressures emerging in some departments.

The latter was based on an assessment by my officials of the likely quantum of these pressures. Departments have subsequently submitted June Monitoring bids in excess of £230 million Resource DEL and £300 million Capital DEL. These bids will now be subject to scrutiny and the Executive will take decisions on the June Monitoring allocations and any necessary reductions in due course.

The position is further compounded by the Chancellor's recent announcement of in-year budgetary cuts.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 18 September 2015

Written Answers to Questions

Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQW 47950/11-15, whether she can make it compulsory for herd keepers to share their Animal and Public Health Information System herd information with Animal Health and Welfare NI for the purposes of that programme.

(AQW 48268/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): The proposed Bovine Viral Diarrhoea Eradication (BVD) Scheme Order will place a mandatory requirement on herd keepers regarding the testing of new born calves for BVD. The current Data Sharing Agreement between the Department and Animal Health and Welfare NI (AHWNI) will be amended as necessary to allow AHWNI to carry out the functions associated with implementing the legislation for animal health control reasons.

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what legislation her Department plans to bring forward by the end of the current Assembly mandate.

(AQW 48292/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: I plan to bring forward two Bills in the remainder of the current mandate, a Fisheries Bill (in conjunction with my colleague the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure), and a Rural Proofing Bill.

The Fisheries Bill will amend legislation to modernise fisheries enforcement powers, enable more efficient implementation of European legislation, create a national system for administrative penalties and update aquaculture licensing in line with elsewhere in Ireland.

The Rural Proofing Bill will make statutory provision to enhance the existing rural proofing process. It will introduce a statutory duty on all Departments and local councils to consider the needs of rural dwellers when developing and implementing government policies and strategies and delivering public services.

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the (i) destination; (ii) duration; (iii) total cost; and (iv) purpose of each trip outside the United Kingdom and Ireland taken by (a) the Minister; (b) her Special Adviser; (c) her departmental officials; and (d) personnel in each of the departmental arm's-length bodies, in each of the last four years.

(AQW 48295/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: The information for DARD and its arm's-length-bodies is not held on accounting systems at the level of detail requested and could only be provided by collating this from other sources which would be at a disproportionate cost. It is important to note that there are robust controls and mechanisms within the Department for all travel requests, including those for overseas travel. Since April 2015 all overseas travel requests are authorised by senior officials at Grade 5 and above. This requires that there must be legitimate business reasons to support all overseas travel undertaken by all representatives and officials of the Department. These arrangements are also subject to regular review by the Internal Audit.

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many farms have been subject to remote sensing in each of the last three years.

(AQW 48323/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: The number of farms subject to an inspection by Remote Sensing (RS) in each of the last three years is listed in the table below.

Year	Number of farms inspected by Remote Sensing
2012	250
2013	1139
2014	1335

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the financial assistance her Department has provided to Rural Support in each of the last four years.

(AQW 48325/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: Rural Support has received the following financial assistance from my Department's Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation Programme in the last four years:-

Financial Year	Amount
2011/12	£96,000
2012/13	£84,775
2013/14	£85,000
2014/15	£91,000

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of the impact of the Maximising Access in Rural Areas to Grants, Services and Benefits project on people living in rural areas that are at risk of poverty and social isolation.

(AQW 48367/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: I am very pleased with how the MARA Project has been delivered and the impact it has made in all rural areas across the north of Ireland in the past 4 years. To date 15,274 households and over 17,250 individuals have had a holistic assessment in respect of entitlements and availability of various grants, benefits and services undertaken generating 40,000 referrals.

Initial findings from the draft independent evaluation report indicate that: all MARA targets and objectives as set out in the Project Business Case were achieved; nine out of 10 clients had at least one referral (with many clients having multiple referrals); more than half of the clients attained a successful outcome from a referral (55.4%); and, overall client ratings of general health and social connectedness significantly increased as a result of the MARA intervention. These are very significant, positive and hopefully sustainable impacts for those involved in the Project.

I expect to be in a position to share the final evaluation report when available later this Autumn.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of referrals made to Government Agencies and Departments as a result of assessments through the Maximising Access in Rural Areas to Grants, Services and Benefits project, broken down by (i) type of referral; and (ii) constituency.

(AQW 48368/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: The information requested is contained in the attached table.

Referrals by Constituency

Constituency	Benefit Entitlement Check	Boiler Replacement Scheme	Energy Saving Homes Scheme	Flexicare	Home Safety Check	Local Services	NI Sustainable Energy Programme (Levy Scheme)	Occupational Therapy Assessment	Rural Community Transport Partnerships	Smartpass	Social Services	Total
Belfast North	1				1	1						3
East Antrim	472	108	174		332	297	82	181	113	35	33	1827
East Derry	700	202	241	101	488	353	138	168	228	51	43	2713
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	950	301	515	104	1094	829	183	345	383	47	204	4955
Foyle	44	32	25	19	50	43	20	18	16	2	10	279
Lagan Valley	348	226	230		702	115	143	257	272	48	18	2359
Mid Ulster	887	351	543		942	439	114	317	199	93	76	3961
Newry and Armagh	756	329	391		722	221	154	196	178	41	42	3030

Constituency	Benefit Entitlement Check	Boiler Replacement Scheme	Energy Saving Homes Scheme	Flexicare	Home Safety Check	Local Services	NI Sustainable Energy Programme (Levy Scheme)	Occupational Therapy Assessment	Rural Community Transport Partnerships	Smartpass	Social Services	Total
North Antrim	1045	211	344		660	463	225	265	258	93	69	3633
North Down	44	7	19		37	15	1	13	14	4	4	158
South Antrim	503	237	157		502	264	107	200	106	41	37	2154
South Down	1184	602	778		1155	700	260	365	495	102	49	5690
Strangford	917	390	452		690	414	159	276	366	48	41	3753
Upper Bann	375	146	188		326	192	66	104	120	17	9	1543
West Tyrone	763	335	370	225	884	304	105	263	303	82	82	3716
Total	8989	3477	4427	449	8585	4650	1757	2968	3051	704	717	39774

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what form the Maximising Access in Rural Areas to Grants, Services and Benefits project will take after 2016; and whether there are plans to continue this service.
(AQW 48369/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: Deloitte and the Public Health Agency, Health Intelligence Team have recently forwarded a comprehensive draft evaluation report on the MARA Project to officials for consideration.

I understand the report contains a very positive overview of the Project and a number of conclusions and issues for consideration. The draft report is currently being reviewed and will be shared with the Project's Interdepartmental Regional Project Management Forum later this month.

This Forum has representation from a range of partner Government Departments and provides strategic direction, oversees monitoring and evaluation and advocates for the Project. Therefore their views on the continued need for the MARA Project bearing in mind other similar projects, budgetary issues, the positive nature of the evaluation will be key in informing the future need for MARA and any DARD involvement.

I hope to be able to take a decision on this by the beginning of October.

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the costs to her Department of processing Single Farm Payment claims in each of the last three years.
(AQW 48401/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: The salary costs for Single Farm Payment processing staff for each of the last three years is detailed below:-

Year	Total salary costs (£)
2012	2,207,618
2013	2,243,866
2014	2,176,487

These costs do not include staff who conduct inspections and related mapping work, the development and testing of IT systems or staff engaged in review of decisions work.

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the (i) role; (ii) terms of reference; and (iii) membership of the Agri-Food Strategy Board's genomics sub-group.
(AQW 48427/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: The Agri-Food Strategy Board established an industry-led livestock genetics sub-group in February 2015, consisting of representatives of the relevant stakeholder organisations.

- (i) Its role is to provide strategic direction for the agri-food sector in addressing issues which have hindered the impact of genetic improvement programmes in the north of Ireland dairy, beef and sheep sectors.
- (ii) The sub-group's Terms of Reference are attached at Annex A.

(iii) Members of the sub-group represent the following stakeholder organisations:

- Agri-Food Strategy Board
- Ulster Farmers Union
- Dairy Council (NI)
- Livestock and Meat Commission (NI)
- AgriSearch
- UK Dairy Genetics Forum
- AFBI
- DARD

Annex A

Terms of Reference for Proposed Agri-Food Strategy Sub-Group on Livestock Genetics

Background

Livestock genetic improvement is permanent, cumulative and is a proven method of improving the competitiveness and environmental impact of livestock production. Increasingly, genetic programmes are now also focussed on improving the health and welfare of livestock. The need for increased rates of genetic progress in each of the livestock sectors is highlighted in the *Going for Growth* report produced by the Agri-Food Strategy Board.

Genetic improvement programmes in the NI dairy, beef and sheep sectors are hindered by the small size of livestock businesses, diverse methods of production, low level of ancestry and performance recording and fragmented breeding structures. To provide strategic direction for the agri-food sector to address these issues, Agri-Food Strategy Board has established an industry-led livestock genetics sub-group, consisting of representatives of relevant stakeholder organisations.

The overall objectives of this sub-group are to develop a strategy for the NI dairy, beef and sheep sectors to accelerate economic genetic gain, thus putting the industry at a competitive advantage through establishing NI at the pinnacle of international genetics.

Draft Terms of reference

The terms of reference are detailed below.

- 1 To produce a scoping report considering how animal events data (e.g. BovIS, APHIS, livestock mart, milk recording, veterinary etc.) is currently captured within NI for the dairy, beef and sheep sectors. Its potential use for genetic evaluations and data ownership issues will be considered. Report to be submitted to the AFSB by end of March 2015.
- 2 To explore ways in which industry data can be gathered and integrated more effectively, and how this might enable its use for genetic evaluations and the development of farm management and benchmarking reports. A series of recommendations will be made in a report to the AFSB by end of May 2015.
- 3 To review options for the provision of genetic evaluations and develop recommendations for the dairy, beef and sheep sectors. This will include consultation with selected current providers of genetic evaluation. A report with recommendations will be produced for the AFSB by the end of June 2015.
- 4 To develop funding options for genetic improvement programmes. This work will be based on the development of the appropriate business cases for consideration by AFSB and potential funders. The required business cases will be produced by the end of Aug 2015.
- 5 To provide continuing strategic direction on livestock genetics to the NI dairy, beef and sheep sectors to implement the recommendations from the AFSB.

Method of working

To provide the reports, reviews and business cases outlined above, a substantial amount of work will be required from group members, with outside expertise required in some areas. As a first action, the sub-group will develop work programmes in each of the required areas. A specification for the work requiring external support/consultancy will be developed by the steering group by end February with the work itself to be undertaken in the period from March to May 2015.

The Group will be facilitated by the AFSB secretariat. Work streams will be supported from AFSB resource, wider DARD resource (where available) and industry (where appropriate). Given the tight timeframes it will not be possible to procure external resource through Government central procurement processes. It is therefore likely that financial resource will be required from industry to facilitate the exercise. Such support has not yet been formally sought but it is hoped such requests would be considered positively in view of the enormous potential benefits arising.

Membership of the sub-group

The following membership is proposed. A Chairman will be appointed at the first meeting.

- | | |
|---|---|
| ■ Trevor Lockhart (AFSB red meat sub-group) | ■ Ian Stevenson (LMC) |
| ■ Mike Johnston (AFSB dairy sub-group) | ■ Sinclair Mayne (AFBI) |
| ■ Ian Marshall (AFSB & UFU) | ■ Gary Watson (UK Dairy Genetics Forum) |

- Alistair Carson (DARD)
- James Campbell (Agrisearch)
- Martin McKendry (AFSB & DARD)

Mrs Overend asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, in relation to the rights and responsibilities of farmers when submitting evidence of the status of their herds, either associated or separate herds, in relation to Single Farm Payment applications, to outline the extent to which her Department has the power to request to examine applicants' personal data which has not already been supplied as evidence of associated or separate herd.

(AQW 48523/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: The Basic Payment Scheme is a voluntary scheme to which farmers can choose to apply, with the onus on applicants to demonstrate that they meet the scheme conditions.

The EU Regulations require my Department to ensure that only businesses that remain operationally separate in practice should be able to receive payment. Herds and flocks need to be managed separately for as long as the businesses concerned wish to maintain separate business IDs.

Cross checks have identified some businesses as being linked through associated animal herds which may be an indication that they no longer meet this eligibility requirement. These businesses have been asked either to provide evidence that they are separate or to merge.

The Department will use the evidence provided by the business(es) together with information held on its own systems in order to make a determination on the application. For assessment purposes, the Department has no power to request to examine applicants' personal data not already provided by them as evidence.

The Department has a responsibility to ensure that any information supplied to it is dealt with in a way which complies with Data Protection legislation as outlined in the DARD Privacy Notice on the 2015 Single Application Form.

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how her Department monitors the loss of trees and woods; and to detail the amount of woodland lost in each year since 2011.

(AQW 48574/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: The Forestry Act (2010) requires my Department to provide and maintain a Woodland Register and to publish the Register at intervals not exceeding 10 years. A draft Register was published by Forest Service in March 2013 and contained 111 thousand hectares of woodland. This is available on the Department's website broken down by local government district and as a map. Review of the Register will be the principal means by which Forest Service will monitor changes of woodland cover including loss of woodland.

In addition to the Register, those seeking to remove woodland, other than woodland removal associated with development, come within the scope of the Environmental Impact Assessment (Forestry) Regulations 2006 which is administered by Forest Service. This regulates deforestation for the purpose of converting woodland to another type of land use and contains thresholds above which a formal opinion must be sought from Forest Service to see if consent is required before work can begin. Since 2011, Forest Service has provided a formal opinion that no consents were required for deforestation of the following woodland areas: 10 hectares in 2011/12, 40 hectares in 2012/13 (which included 28 hectares of Short Rotation Coppice willow), 3 hectares in 2013/14 and 16 hectares in 2014/15. A list of the Department's opinions on these projects since 2012 is on a public register located on the Department's website.

Mrs Hale asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail what assessments are made by local councils before issuing dog breeding licences.

(AQW 48578/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: Dog breeding here is regulated by the Welfare of Animals (Dog Breeding Establishments and Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2013 (the 2013 Regulations). These Regulations, which are enforced by District Councils, define a breeding establishment as one or more premises, within the same District Council area, operated by the same person from which that person keeps 3 or more breeding bitches; and

- (a) breeds 3 or more litters of puppies in any 12 month period;
- (b) advertises 3 or more litters of puppies for sale in any 12 month period;
- (c) supplies 3 or more litters of puppies in any 12 month period; or
- (d) advertises a business of breeding or selling of puppies.

Subject to certain qualifying criteria and some exceptions, any person wishing to breed dogs must obtain a licence from the District Council in which the establishment is located.

The 2013 Regulations set out clear welfare standards with which commercial dog breeders must comply. Council inspectors visit each premises to assess whether or not it meets the 12 licensing conditions specified in the Regulations which include:

- the requirement to provide suitable accommodation, whelping facilities and diet;
- the requirement to microchip all dogs and pups in the establishment;

- a control on the age a bitch can be bred at and the number of litters she that can be produced in her lifetime;
- a minimum age a pup can leave the breeder; and
- the need for breeding establishments to maintain records and introduce written socialisation enhancement and enrichment programmes for approval by the Council.

A dog breeding establishment licence is valid for a period of 12 months from the date of issue.

The 2013 Regulations also provide Council inspectors with strong enforcement powers to take action and to prosecute as necessary any commercial breeder who is operating in sub-standard conditions.

Mr Murphy asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the measures available through the Farm Business Improvement Scheme.

(AQO 8607/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 5 and 7 together.

The Farm Business Improvement Scheme is designed to help drive competitiveness in our agri-food sector and will be an important part of the north's new Rural Development Programme 2014-2020.

The FBIS will be a package of measures aimed at knowledge transfer, innovation, cooperation and capital investment which will help support sustainable growth in the sector. The FBIS will have a budget of up to £250m and will include Business Development Groups, Farm Family Key Skills, European Innovation Partnership Groups, Innovation and Technology Demonstration Scheme, Farm Exchange Visits, an Agri Food Producer Cooperation Scheme and a Business Investment Scheme.

We are planning to roll out the Farm Business Improvement Scheme package in a phased way. With the approval of the Rural Development Programme by the European Commission last month, my officials are continuing to work hard in order to open the first phase of the Farm Business Improvement Scheme measures later this year. This first phase will include the establishment of the Business Development Groups for farmers. This scheme will encourage farmers to learn about and enhance their knowledge of business management, new technologies and innovative ways of working, which will assist them to think clearly about their farm, their income and their future. We are also planning Farm Family Key Skills training schemes, including farm safety and business planning, in this initial phase.

These knowledge transfer measures will help farmers to think carefully about their business plans and will help prepare the way for the proposed Business Investment Scheme capital programme that is planned for next year.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the Crossnacreevy facility and site.

(AQO 8611/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: You are aware that public sector finances are under significant pressure as a result of reductions to the Executive's block grant.

My officials have been in discussions with AFBI on how the Institute can reposition itself to meet the priority needs of government and industry while responding to the budget reductions that will be affecting all parts of the public sector for the remainder of the decade.

Difficult choices have been necessary as we have sought to focus available funding on the most strategically important areas of the DARD work programme delivered by AFBI.

I have considered very carefully AFBI's 2020 Strategy and the range of cost savings proposals within it. As part of these proposals, I have agreed that DARD funding will be withdrawn from the arable research programme and the production of recommended lists for grass, clover and cereals. These work programmes are currently delivered from AFBI's site at Crossnacreevy.

I also agreed AFBI's proposal to close its Crossnacreevy site.

However, closure of AFBI's Crossnacreevy site does not mean that all of the functions currently undertaken there will stop. Given DARD's legislative obligations, funding for work on the production of National Lists will continue on another AFBI site. DARD also has a range of legal obligations in relation to seed certification. Therefore the Official Plant Testing Station will also be relocated from Crossnacreevy to another AFBI site, as will Distinctiveness, Uniformity and Stability testing.

The relocation of these functions is consistent with our plans for the AFBI estate which would see AFBI consolidating onto a smaller number of sites with modern, efficient, leading edge facilities. AFBI has indicated that, because of the nature of the work and given various contractual commitments, closure of the Crossnacreevy facility will take four years to complete.

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the Supply Chain Forum.

(AQO 8612/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: I believe that there are significant challenges presently facing the primary production sector which could impact on the long term sustainability of the sector. These challenges must be met at an industry level, with the entire supply chain working together to seek solutions to those issues that it can.

That is why I have called upon Tony O'Neill, Chair of the Agri-Food Strategy Board, to convene a Supply Chain Forum to explore how best to meet the current and future challenges affecting the industry. I believe that such a Forum will open up clear communication channels so that all parts of the industry can position themselves to meet the needs of the marketplace, thereby securing the long term sustainability of the agri-food sector.

I have met with the AFSB Chair to discuss his proposals to deliver the Supply Chain Forum and I am impressed with his current plans. The Forum is scheduled to hold its first meeting on 14 October at Loughry Campus's new Food Innovation Centre and I understand that invitations will be issued in the near future.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the action she has taken to resolve the dairy crisis.

(AQO 8613/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: The dairy sector makes an important contribution to the local agri-food industry. I am extremely concerned by the fall in dairy prices, the impact on farmers, their families and the wider industry. The crisis cannot be solved at a local level alone.

Over the past year, I have been engaging regularly with the Defra Secretary of State, Liz Truss to emphasise our unique circumstances in the north of Ireland and press her to support our case for effective and timely EU action. In particular, I have been pushing for a review of intervention threshold rates and immediate help for the dairy sector.

I have also been liaising with our MEPs, my opposite numbers in Scotland and Wales and with Minister Coveney in the south.

I have taken our case directly to Brussels. I was pleased to lead a strong delegation of political and industry representatives, including our local MEPs and Chair of the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee, to meet Agriculture Commissioner, Phil Hogan on 1 September.

On 7 September I attended the extraordinary EU Agriculture Council meeting in Brussels. While there was welcome recognition of the particular difficulties facing our local farmers, I am disappointed at the lack of detail on the package of proposals brought forward by the Commission. The Commission's response falls short of the immediate meaningful action I have been pushing for. Instead we have a commitment to funding of 500m euro across all 28 Member States. My concern is how it will be apportioned within our Member State to help those farmers in greatest need. My job is to make sure that our share is based on need and reflects our vulnerability given the amount of product we export.

I will continue to work closely with our industry on the implications of the Commission's package.

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development when applications for the new Rural Development Programme will be accepted.

(AQO 8614/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: As you will know, the European Commission approved the new Rural Development Programme on 25 August. I now look forward to a broad range of measures over the next few years which will improve the competitiveness of our farm and agri-food businesses, protect and enhance our environment and improve the quality of life in rural communities across the north.

As regards when applications will be accepted, I expect the first phase of the Farm Business Improvement Scheme will get under way later this year with the establishment of Business Development Groups for farmers. This measure will help farmers learn about and enhance their knowledge of business management, new technologies and innovative ways of working. This will assist them to think more clearly about their farm, their income and their future ahead of any capital investment. This is a particularly important measure to kick start the Farm Business Improvement Scheme as farmers are facing difficult and challenging times. I want farmers to think very carefully and acquire the tools that will help them make the right decisions about their businesses before taking on additional financial commitments.

It is also my intention that the new Farm Family Skills Measure will get underway quickly in this initial phase, to include training on farm safety and business planning.

On the wider rural front the new Local Action Groups will be working with Local Councils over the next number of weeks to draw up and submit interim rural development strategies which will formalise the LAG structure and allow allocation of budgets. Once strategies are agreed, LAG's can open calls for applications depending on which measure they consider to be most relevant for their areas.

Mr Ramsey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what discussions she has had with local banks in relation to supporting the agriculture industry.

(AQO 8616/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: I have had three constructive meetings with and written to representatives of the local banks in the past year to impress on them, the important role they have in supporting the local agricultural industry at this difficult time.

At these meetings I have raised farmers concerns and encouraged banks to be pro-active, flexible and understanding in their approach, and to support farmers in a practical way with their cash flow and funding requirements at this time.

I intend to meet again with local banking representatives in the near future to monitor the situation, and ensure that they fulfil their responsibilities and commitments to the industry, and work with others in a collaborative way.

Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure why the capital funding award to Cairn Boxing Club has been withheld.

(AQW 48121/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): Sport NI, an arms length body of my Department, is unaware of Cairn Boxing Club. This answer is provided in respect of Cairn Lodge Amateur Boxing Club.

I can advise that Cairn Lodge Amateur Boxing Club received an indicative offer of £39,627 from Sport NI's Boxing Investment Programme towards capital works and professional design fees.

Sport NI has advised that this award is not being withheld from Cairn Lodge Amateur Boxing Club and that the club is currently at the design stage of the funding process. Sport NI together with an architect, funded via the Boxing Investment Programme, met with the club as recently as 2 July 2015 to discuss moving to the next stage of the capital works process.

Sport NI has been working with Cairn Lodge Amateur Boxing Club, the Department of Social Development and Ulster Garden Villages in order to fully utilise the funding available to the club.

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what progress has been made in meeting the Programme for Government 11-15 commitment to support 200 projects through the Creative Industries Innovation Fund.

(AQW 48361/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Programme for Government commitment to support 200 projects through the Creative Industries Innovation Fund has been exceeded. As of 31st March 2015, 203 projects had been supported by the fund.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether any declarations of interest were made by staff within Sport NI in connection with the granting of funding to upgrade premises situated within St Paul's GAC for St Paul's Amateur Boxing Club, on the basis of those staff's membership of St Paul's GAC, the landlord of the boxing club; and whether such interests should have been declared.

(AQW 48422/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department and Sport NI operate robust conflict of interest policies to ensure that any actual, or perceived conflict of interest matters are managed effectively.

I can advise that it is the policy of Sport NI that staff and members declare any interest(s) that may give rise to any impairment in their judgement or bias when acting under the authority of Sport NI.

I can confirm that a number of Sport NI employees are affiliated with St Paul's Gaelic Athletic Club and that they have declared their association with the Club formally in line with the declaration of interest policy.

The offer of funding to St Paul's Amateur Boxing Club under the Boxing Investment Programme, including the potential for conflicts of interest, was independently assessed by Deloitte, Sport NI's Internal Auditor, in March 2014. Deloitte found that the Sport NI employees complied fully with the organisation's policy regarding declaration of interest.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what procedures are in place to ensure that exhibits seized by water bailiffs are properly recorded and stored in a manner consistent with evidentiary standards; and whether such procedures were followed in the prosecution under fishery legislation of Person A.

(AQW 48545/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Where fishing engines or any other equipment are seized by DCAL Fisheries Protection Officers, my Department has robust procedures in place for recording and storage of items in a manner consistent with evidentiary standards.

When equipment is seized by Private Water Bailiffs the responsibility for the safe custody and storage of such equipment rests with them. At court the magistrate can request to see evidence of any such equipment and as normal practice, all aspects of the case are subject to the full scrutiny of the defence team.

In the prosecution of Person A, the seized equipment remained in the custody of the Private Water Bailiff until after the case was heard.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure where the fishing rod seized from Person A was stored from the date of seizure until the date of prosecution; and where the rod is now.

(AQW 48546/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The fishing rod was seized from Person A by a Private Water Bailiff on 3 September 2013 and remained in his custody until after the case was heard at court.

The fishing rod is now stored at the DCAL Inland Fisheries Group premises at Portadown.

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what support her Department offers to amateur sporting organisations to help them attract corporate sponsorship.

(AQW 48572/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I can advise that Sport NI, an arms length body of my Department, has initiated plans to provide support to amateur sporting organisations to help them attract corporate sponsorship as part of a wider sustainability package of work.

This includes seeking to develop working partnerships with organisations such as Business in the Community and the School of Sport at Ulster University. This work will be disseminated through the Governance Network and also made available online.

In addition, I understand that Sport NI plans to hold a seminar before the end of March 2016 to bring together corporate business and sports bodies to discuss good practice in terms of sponsorship.

Mr Somerville asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what discussions she has had to establish a Centre of Sporting Excellence in Fermanagh.

(AQO 8628/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Responsibility for the provision of local sporting facilities, including Centres of Sporting Excellence, is a matter in the first instance for District Councils.

While there have been no discussions to establish a Centre of Excellence in Fermanagh, Sport NI, an arm's length body of my Department, is currently developing a Sports Facilities Strategy in partnership with all the District Councils. As part of this, it has been discussing with Fermanagh and Omagh District Council the sports facilities needs of the area. I understand that local consultation has recently concluded and this information will be used to draft a Report detailing sports facility provision throughout the Council Area. I would expect to see this work completed by the end of this year.

More widely, the Regional Facilities Strategy together with the eleven District Council Area Reports and information provided by sports governing bodies, will help inform how the needs of sport at both a community and high performance level can be best met in the future.

In addition to the Facilities Strategy, Sport NI has identified seventeen point five million pounds of Lottery Funding for capital investment in sports facilities. This investment, under the Sports Facilities Fund, will aim to provide integrated sport facilities that meet the needs of the community and high performance athletes within the same multi sport environment.

While this Lottery funding is welcome, it is clearly not going to meet the significant demand that exists for investment in sporting and leisure facilities. It is critical that we continue to improve collaboration between Government Departments, District Councils, sports governing bodies and private providers. Together, we must ensure that the limited funding that is available is targeted to meet the needs of those who want to be active, participate and excel in sport and leisure activities.

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the support her Department provides for the development of Uilleann piping.

(AQO 8625/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department, through the Arts Council, supports the development of all aspects of music in a wide variety of settings including voluntary, amateur, community, bands and festivals.

Specifically in relation to Uilleann pipes, the Arts Council provides or has provided a range of assistance including the following;

In this financial year the Arts Council has, through its Lottery funding stream, provided a total of £140,075 in support of uilleann piping related activity. The previous year a total of £19,862 was provided

In addition, the Arts Council has made a series of funding awards over the last number of years to award winning and internationally renowned uilleann pipe-maker master craftsman and player Martin Preshaw, to support his career development and the purchase of equipment for his workshop.

Individual musicians, if they wish to apply, may qualify for an interest free loan through the Arts Council's 'Take it away' scheme to purchase their musical instrument.

Ms McCorley asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how she plans to implement the recommendations from the Project Assessment Review of Casement Park.

(AQO 8626/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: In June 2015, I announced an independent Project Assessment Review of the Regional Stadia Programme by the Cabinet Office's Major Projects Authority and made a commitment to 'implement any learning points and recommendations which may be made and to publish the Report'.

The independent PAR Report was published on 7 August 2015.

The report made 20 recommendations, which I will ensure are implemented in full.

Immediately following receipt of the report, I set about implementing those recommendations that were deemed 'critical'.

Ian Maye has now been appointed as the new full-time dedicated SRO for the Stadia Programme and he took up post on 1 September 2015.

Good progress has also been made in implementing the second 'critical' recommendation, a new independent Chair for the Programme's Safety Technical Group, and the third critical recommendation that the Casement Park project team should develop and test with stakeholders a realistic and comprehensive plan that sets clear expectations for when a new planning application for Casement Park can be submitted.

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline how her Department and Sport NI plan to improve Gaelic games facilities in County Fermanagh.
(AQO 8629/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Under the Recreation and Youth Services (NI) Order 1986, responsibility for the provision of sports and leisure facilities, including for Gaelic Games, rests in the first instance with District Councils. In addition, responsibility for improving existing sports facilities rests with the owners and operators.

Any future plans to improve sports facilities will be considered through the work Sport NI is currently progressing with the District Councils, including Fermanagh and Omagh District Council. This work involves the development of a Regional Sports Facilities Strategy and eleven District Council Area Reports which will define existing sports facilities, and identify future needs, at both a regional and local level, and will take account of Gaelic Games facilities within County Fermanagh.

My Department, through its arms-length body, Sport NI, has provided both financial and practical assistance to sport governing bodies, including the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), District Councils and sports facility owners/operators to improve sports facilities in County Fermanagh.

Recent Sport NI facility investment in the area includes Exchequer capital funding of two hundred and forty five thousand pounds which was provided in 2013/14 to St Joseph's Gaelic Athletic Club in Ederney.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the reasons for the delay in releasing information from the Public Records Office of Northern Ireland to families and representatives.
(AQO 8630/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Public Record Office is currently responding to 169 requests from families and representatives seeking access to information.

My Officials are working through requests in chronological order by date of receipt.

More than 50 requests have been completed to date.

PRONI consults with the Department of Justice and NIO about the information which may be released to families and representatives. The Department of Justice and NIO may also consult with other relevant 3rd parties such as the PSNI.

This consultation is a painstaking and time consuming process as it is crucial that the right decisions are made about the release of information.

As the Minister responsible for the Public Record Office I will continue to make the final decision on the release of information.

I remain committed to the disclosure of conflict-related information to families and their representatives.

Department of Education

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Education when the pay raise for lower paid education workers, agreed in January 2015, will be paid; and the date to which it will be backdated.
(AQW 48263/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): In accordance with the Executive's Public Sector Pay Policy, following the Finance Minister's approval on 10 August 2015, the Education Authority (EA) is now processing the payment of revised rates of pay in line with a 2.2 per cent pay rise applicable from 1 January 2015 to 31 March 2016 for eligible staff.

The EA has advised that it could take up to 4 months to complete this process; payments, where applicable, will be backdated to January 2015.

Mrs Overend asked the Minister of Education whether any of his departmental responsibilities have been affected by the actions of any proscribed organisations since 2011.
(AQW 48300/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: None.

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Education to detail how much (i) has been spent on staff training in each of the last 3 years; (ii) is budgeted for the current financial year; and (iii) the rationale for any financial reduction.

(AQW 48316/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: The Department of Finance and Personnel's Centre for Applied Learning (CAL) provides training for staff in all NICS Departments. The Department of Education (DE) has spent £79,714 on staff training provided by CAL in each of the last 3 financial years:

- (i) 2012/13, 2013/14 and 2014/15.
- (ii) The budget for DE staff training provided by CAL in the current financial year, 2015/16, is £67,757.
- (iii) The financial reduction is due to overall budgetary constraints.

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Education for an update on the development of a pilot proposal on the future of St Mary's High School, Brollagh, by CCMS and the Education Authority working with education providers in Co Donegal.

(AQW 48351/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: When I turned down a development proposal recommending the closure of St Mary's in June 2014 I asked CCMS and the then Western Education and Library Board to bring forward a pilot scheme which would allow the school to work with schools on the other side of the border.

CCMS presented an outline proposal to my Department in April 2015 and following a preliminary assessment my officials, at my request, have asked both the Education Authority and CCMS to develop the proposal further and to engage with the local community to ascertain likely levels of support. I expect this work now should be well in hand and will be seeking an update from the EA and CCMS later in the autumn.

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Education how many applications were made to the Exceptional Circumstances Body in each of the last 3 years, including 2015 to date.

(AQW 48363/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: The following table sets out the number of applications made to the Exceptional Circumstances Body in each of the last three reporting years, including the year to date, and the number of these applications which were upheld by the Body.

Reporting Period*	Applications received	Applications upheld
25/05/13 to 31/05/14	114	29
01/06/14 to 31/03/15	104	28
01/04/15 to 03/09/15	103	29
Total	321	86

* Please note that, until 1 April 2015, the Body's reporting year did not align with the financial year as a result of the Body beginning to operate on 1 June 2010.

Information on applications to the Exceptional Circumstances Body is published in the Body's Annual Reports which are available online at <http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/schools-and-infrastructure-2/admission-and-transport/6-transfer-procedure.htm>

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Education how many applications to the Exceptional Circumstances Body were approved in each of the last three years, including 2015 to date.

(AQW 48364/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: The following table sets out the number of applications made to the Exceptional Circumstances Body in each of the last three reporting years, including the year to date, and the number of these applications which were upheld by the Body.

Reporting Period*	Applications received	Applications upheld
25/05/13 to 31/05/14	114	29
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01/04/15 to 03/09/15	103	29
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Mr McKinney asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of children waiting on special educational needs (SEN) statutory statements, broken down by Education Authority region, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 48379/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: The Education Authority (EA) has advised that the number of children waiting on a statutory statement of special educational needs (SEN), as at 1 September 2015, broken down by Education Authority region, is as follows:

EA region	Number *
Belfast	80
North-east	87
South-east	134
Southern	160
Western	49

* The number of children who have received a proposed statement of SEN but who, as at 1 September 2015, had not yet received their final statement of SEN.

The EA has advised that it is not possible to provide this information for previous years.

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Education whether he is aware of any plans the Education Authority has in relation to the Causeway School.

(AQW 48405/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: The Education Authority has advised that it is its intention to return the Causeway School to the Trustees, the Macnaghten estate, by way of an early surrender of the lease of the premises.

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Education, following the BBC publication of statistics on the number of sexual assaults in school premises, to detail the number of (i) sex offences reported to have been committed on school premises; (ii) alleged cases of rape; and (iii) physical sexual assaults, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 48474/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: The statistics published by the BBC were provided by the Police Service (PSNI). The Department of Education does not hold this information.

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the impact the removal of modern languages at degree level will have on subject choices by pupils selecting GCSE subjects.

(AQW 48504/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: My department closely monitors the uptake of modern languages at GCSE and A level. Whilst there have been some decline over recent years in French and German, there have been notable increases in numbers taking Spanish.

Students and their parents take into account a wide variety of factors when considering subject choices at GCSE level, including their enjoyment and aptitude for particular subjects as well as future careers or education prospects. I believe students who enjoy learning languages will continue to study languages at GCSE level, despite Ulster University's announcement. When these pupils come to consider third level education, they will be able to choose from a range of universities here or further afield depending upon their subject specialism.

Whilst I have had no discussion with the Minister for Employment and Learning on Ulster University's announcement, I believe acquiring a second language has significant benefits for both the local and global economies and it is up to all of us to continue to promote the advantages which studying a modern foreign language can bring in terms of access to vibrant and exciting careers.

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Education what discussions he had with the Minister for Employment and Learning prior to Ulster University removing modern languages as a degree subject.

(AQW 48505/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: My department closely monitors the uptake of modern languages at GCSE and A level. Whilst there have been some decline over recent years in French and German, there have been notable increases in numbers taking Spanish.

Students and their parents take into account a wide variety of factors when considering subject choices at GCSE level, including their enjoyment and aptitude for particular subjects as well as future careers or education prospects. I believe students who enjoy learning languages will continue to study languages at GCSE level, despite Ulster University's announcement. When these pupils come to consider third level education, they will be able to choose from a range of universities here or further afield depending upon their subject specialism.

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to continue to promote the advantages which studying a modern foreign language can bring in terms of access to vibrant and exciting careers.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education to detail the reasoning behind some schools operating a system of taking pupils finger prints when obtaining school lunches.

(AQW 48508/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: Some larger schools have introduced cashless catering systems to modernise and streamline cash collection in school dining rooms. Cashless systems can be operated using cards and 4 digit pin numbers or biometric systems. As cards and pin numbers are easily lost, stolen or forgotten, the use of biometric systems, including those which use a finger image, have become more common in recent years.

The rationale behind the use of a biometric system which uses a finger image includes:

- It helps remove the stigma attached to free meal entitlement by providing anonymity ie the pupil's account is credited directly.
- Speed of service is increased at the point of sale thus reducing queuing times.
- Parents can receive a report on their child's eating habits. These can show how much money was paid in and when; how much was spent on food and when; and can detail each individual item purchased.
- Specific food allergy ingredients can be barred automatically.

All data held electronically is handled in accordance with the guidelines of the Data Protection Act 1998. The data is only utilised for the purposes of the cashless catering system and is destroyed when the data is no longer required or relevant ie when the pupil leaves the school. The child's finger print is not stored on the system.

As a matter of good practice schools write to parents to advise them of the systems in use, giving them an opportunity to opt out. There is a facility to provide a child with a card or PIN number in this scenario.

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Education to detail the scale of each of the 2015/16 inescapable budgetary pressures faced by his Department.

(AQW 48514/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: The table below which was included in my Department's Draft Budget 2015-16 document, published on 26 November 2014, details the inescapable pressures faced by my Department in 2015-16.

	£m
Annual increase in staff pay costs	28.0
EA Block Grant: Special Education Needs pressures	10.0
Aggregated Schools Budget: Targeting Social Needs funding	10.0
Non pay inflationary pressures	7.2
Furniture & equipment: New Major works	4.0
CCEA: Revision of GCSE specifications	3.2
Free School Meal Entitlement: post primary	2.0
Special Education Needs: Roll out of Early Years	1.4
Other	2.3
Total	68.1

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education what additional steps his Department is taking following the report detailing 237 reported sex attacks in local schools in the last three years.

(AQW 48524/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: The safety of children while at school is of paramount importance to me. Schools do great work to ensure that is the case and Boards of Governors will be clear on the need for reporting concerns about criminal activity to the PSNI and I know take those responsibilities seriously.

We need however to ensure that we understand the picture behind the figures being released by the police. I have asked my officials to seek a meeting with the PSNI to discuss in more detail the figures that were released by the PSNI in the past few weeks. That meeting is now scheduled and will provide an opportunity to review the figures and explore the nature of the reports that have been reported by schools to the police.

Mr Weir asked Minister of Education to detail the number of schools that have been granted Integrated status and subsequently had that status withdrawn as a result of failing to achieve an appropriate mixture of community backgrounds in the pupil intake.

(AQW 48525/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: A significant change to the character of a school, such as a change in management type, requires the publication of a statutory Development Proposal.

There have been no Development Proposals to alter the management type of an existing grant-aided integrated school.

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education what guidance or requirements his Department gives to schools with Integrated status on the mix of community background in relation to pupil intake.

(AQW 48526/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: Schools transforming to integrated status are expected to demonstrate the ability to achieve a minimum of ten per cent of their intake from the minority tradition within the school's enrolment, working towards achieving a minimum of thirty per cent in the longer term.

A new grant-aided integrated school should aim to attract thirty per cent of its pupils from the minority community in the area where the school is situated.

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education to detail the schools with Integrated status that have (a) less than ten per cent; (b) between ten and thirty per cent; and (c) above thirty per cent of pupils from the minority community at the school.

(AQW 48527/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: The information requested is detailed in the tables below.

Religious balance of integrated schools, 2014/15

(a) Less than ten per cent of pupils from the minority community at the school

Primary

	% Protestant	% Catholic	% Other
Ballymoney Controlled Integrated Primary School	68.9	7.0	24.1
Groarty Primary School	*	76.5	#

Post-primary

	% Protestant	% Catholic	% Other
Parkhall Integrated College	74.4	5.8	19.8

(b) Between ten and thirty per cent of pupils from the minority community at the school

Primary

	% Protestant	% Catholic	% Other
All Childrens Integrated Primary School	21.1	53.7	25.1
Annsborough Primary School	22.2	68.5	9.3
Bangor Central Integrated Primary School	56.6	16.6	26.7
Carhill Integrated Primary School	66.7	13.6	19.7
Cedar Integrated Primary School	26.2	47.5	26.2
Cliftonville Integrated Primary School	18.3	41.2	40.5
Crumlin Controlled Intergrated Primary School	41.9	18.2	39.9
Forge Integrated Primary School	24.3	35.2	40.5
Fort Hill Integrated Primary School	65.4	13.3	21.3
GlenCraig Integrated Primary School	48.8	29.9	21.3
Glengormley Integrated Primary School	23.8	38.9	37.3
Hazelwood Primary School	26.8	46.6	26.6

	% Protestant	% Catholic	% Other
Kilbroney Integrated Primary School	20.0	56.8	23.2
Kircubbin Integrated Primary School	48.2	22.1	29.6
Oakgrove Integrated Primary School	26.2	46.1	27.7
Oakwood Integrated Primary School	27.7	43.6	28.7
Omagh Integrated Primary School	21.8	53.1	25.1
Phoenix Integrated Primary School	23.4	58.3	18.3
Portadown Integrated Primary School	20.8	34.9	44.3
Roe Valley Integrated Primary School	21.0	66.7	12.3
Rowandale Integrated Primary School	26.9	45.2	27.9
Saints & Scholars Int Primary School	24.0	39.6	36.4
Windmill Integrated Primary School	25.8	44.4	29.8

Post-primary

	% Protestant	% Catholic	% Other
Blackwater Integrated College	58.7	25.4	16.0
Brownlow Int College	27.6	54.5	17.9
Drumragh Integrated College	27.3	57.8	14.9
Fort Hill College	70.2	10.1	19.6
Hazelwood College	50.8	28.1	21.2
Integrated College Dungannon	24.5	60.0	15.5
North Coast Integrated College	61.6	19.6	18.8
Oakgrove Integrated College	27.5	65.8	6.7
Priory College	73.8	12.0	14.2
Strangford Integrated College	58.7	17.1	24.2

- (c) Above thirty per cent of pupils from the minority community at the school

Primary

	% Protestant	% Catholic	% Other
Acorn Integrated Primary School	54.6	31.4	14.0
Ballycastle Integrated Primary School	43.6	39.9	16.5
Braidside Integrated Primary School	34.7	37.2	28.1
Bridge Integrated Primary School	42.4	44.4	13.2
Carnlough Controlled Integrated Primary School	39.3	35.7	25.0
Corran Integrated Primary School	39.2	35.6	25.3
Cranmore Integrated Primary School	38.0	32.2	29.8
Drumlins Integrated Primary School	35.7	36.3	28.1
Enniskillen Integrated Primary School	34.4	45.5	20.1
Loughview Integrated Primary School	36.8	35.7	27.5
Maine Integrated Primary School	33.1	46.3	20.7
Millennium Integrated Primary School	35.8	37.8	26.4
Millstrand Integrated Primary School	32.9	38.6	28.6

	% Protestant	% Catholic	% Other
Portaferry Integrated Primary School	31.7	42.9	25.4
Rathenraw Integrated Primary School	35.2	40.9	23.9
Round Tower Integrated Primary School	32.0	30.6	37.4
Spires Integrated Primary School	38.1	36.5	25.4

Post-primary

	% Protestant	% Catholic	% Other
Crumlin Integrated College	35.5	36.4	28.0
Erne Integrated College	41.8	43.1	15.1
Lagan College	42.6	36.3	21.1
Malone Integrated College	50.4	31.3	18.3
New-Bridge Integrated College	41.8	48.1	10.1
Shimna Integrated College	34.8	51.1	14.0
Slemish College	41.3	35.8	22.9
Sperrin Integrated College	39.9	42.1	18.0
Ulidia Integrated College	52.5	36.4	11.1

Source: NI school census

Notes:

- 1 Figures for primary includes nursery, reception and year 1 - 7 classes.
- 2 The 'other' category includes pupils that are classified as other Christian, non-Christian, no religion or where religion is unknown or not provided.
- 3 Integrated schools include 'Grant Maintained Integrated' and 'Controlled integrated'.
- * denotes fewer than 5 pupils
- # denotes figure >=5 suppressed due to potential identification of individual pupils

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education (i) what progress has been made by Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG) in meeting the governance proposals of the Deloitte report: and (ii) the input his Department has made in meeting these proposals.

(AQW 48528/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta has developed and is implementing an action plan in response to the Deloitte Review of Organisational and Governance Structures.

My officials are monitoring progress regularly and a formal review will be carried out in November 2015.

Mrs Overend asked the Minister of Education, given the publication of statistics revealing that 259 sexual assaults occurred in schools over the last three years, what plans his Department has to provide better help and guidance to teachers.

(AQW 48530/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: The safety of children while at school is of paramount importance to me. Schools do great work to ensure that is the case and Boards of Governors will be clear on the need for reporting concerns about criminal activity to the PSNI and I know take those responsibilities seriously.

We need however to ensure that we understand the picture behind the figures being released by the police. I have asked my officials to seek a meeting with the PSNI to discuss in more detail the figures that were released by the PSNI in the past few weeks. That meeting is now scheduled and will provide an opportunity to review the figures and explore the nature of the reports that have been reported by schools to the police.

Child protection in schools is an important issue which my Department takes extremely seriously. In dealing with child protection concerns, the Department's document, 'Pastoral Care in Schools – Child Protection' provides clear advice to schools and others on their responsibilities in relation to child protection.

Additionally, our revised curriculum includes, as an integral element, the Personal Development and Mutual Understanding and Learning for Life and Work statutory areas of learning. Relationships and Sexuality Education is a core element of this part of the curriculum and the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) has worked with teachers to

update guidance on Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) for schools, with new guidance published just at the end of August 2015. This guidance is designed to help schools to reflect on their existing RSE provision to take steps to ensure that it is relevant to pupils' lives and addresses the dangers to which young people may be exposed, in particular technology.

As well as the curriculum, the i-Matter Programme promotes pupils' emotional health and wellbeing and on helping to build resilience among our young people. It also provides support services for vulnerable pupils and support to schools in the event of a crisis. A further development is the piloting of a new 'Preventative Education' programme in partnership with the NSPCC which is working to build the capacity of teachers to deliver an effective preventative curriculum in primary schools.

I would also add that my Department also works closely with other Departments and agencies including the Safeguarding Board (SBN) to share information and advice on any emerging issues of a child protection nature with schools and others in the education sector.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education for an update on the future plans for the old Redburn Primary School site, Holywood.

(AQW 48548/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: The Education Authority has responsibility for the former Redburn Primary School site in Holywood and has confirmed, subject to available funding, its intention to rebuild Priory College and Holywood Nursery School on the site.

Mr Middleton asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of secondary school children (i) entitled to; and (ii) claiming free school meals, broken down by constituency.

(AQW 48555/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: The following table details the number of post-primary pupils (i) entitled to free school meals; and (ii) uptaking of free school meals broken down by constituency.

Table 1. Entitlement and uptake of free school meals by constituency, 2014/15.

Constituency	Entitled to Free School Meals	Uptake of Free School Meals
Belfast East	870	662
Belfast North	3,702	2,682
Belfast South	1,671	1,282
Belfast West	3,993	2,996
East Antrim	1,217	898
East Derry	1,958	1,558
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	2,363	1,972
Foyle	3,651	2,945
Lagan Valley	975	611
Mid Ulster	2,044	1,704
Newry and Armagh	2,984	2,379
North Antrim	1,890	1,505
North Down	950	686
South Antrim	654	459
South Down	2,136	1,693
Strangford	1,404	1,021
Upper Bann	2,121	1,749
West Tyrone	2,653	2,168
Total	37,236	28,970

Entitlement source: School census, 2014/15.

Uptake source: School meals census, 2014/15.

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education what (i) discussions have taken place between the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) and his Department regarding NICIEs £10m historical debt; and (ii) actions have been taken following these discussions.

(AQW 48564/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: This historical debt was an operational matter for NICIE as a company limited by guarantee.

My Department was kept informed of progress in reaching a settlement and has been advised that the matter has now been resolved.

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education what progress the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education has made to meet the requirements, in the findings in the review by Deloitte.

(AQW 48565/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: NICIE has developed and is implementing an action plan in response to the Deloitte Review of Organisational and Governance Structures. My officials are monitoring progress regularly and working with NICIE to ensure full implementation of the Deloitte recommendations.

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education how much funding has been received by Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 48566/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: The table below shows funding allocated by my Department to Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta in each of the last five financial years.

Financial Year	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2014/15
Funding (000's)	£637	£691	£679	£615	£685

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of schools (i) currently involved in a formal intervention process; and (ii) his Department estimates will become involved, following the changes that are being made to the formal intervention process in September 2015.

(AQW 48567/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: There are currently nine schools in formal intervention.

Any decision to place a school in formal intervention as a result of the changes to the process will be dependent on the outcome of a future follow-up inspection. For this reason it is not possible to estimate the number of schools that may require support through the process.

The change that may result in an increase in the number of schools receiving support through the process relates to those occasions when a school is evaluated as needing to address (an) important area(s) for improvement (formerly a 'satisfactory' evaluation) at its initial inspection and remains at this level at both its first and second follow-up inspections.

Based on historic data, however, the number is likely to be relatively small. If this change to the process had been introduced from 2009, when Every School a Good School – a Policy for School Improvement was launched, then only an additional five schools, which were evaluated as 'satisfactory' on three consecutive occasions, would have entered the process during the six school years to June 2015.

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education to detail the rationale behind the change to school inspection descriptors.

(AQW 48568/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: The rationale for the changes to the Education and Training Inspectorate's use of performance levels and descriptors came about as a result of engagement with the education and training sectors and Teaching Unions and their negative feedback over a prolonged period of time about the use of the overall effectiveness conclusions 'satisfactory', 'inadequate' and 'unsatisfactory'. The Committee's Inquiry into the ETI and School Improvement also recommended that "in line with the practice in other jurisdictions, less pejorative descriptors be adopted for public domain summative inspection reports and accompanied by plain English statements of a school's strengths and weaknesses".

Therefore the ETI is changing the terms used for the performance levels for the key questions in the inspection report - the terms 'satisfactory', 'inadequate' and 'unsatisfactory' used in the body of the inspection report have been replaced by 'important area(s) for improvement', 'requires significant improvement' and 'requires urgent improvement'.

Changes have also been made to the overall effectiveness paragraphs at the end of inspection reports. These have been reduced from six to four paragraphs which highlight the capacity of the school to improve and identifies the next step in the monitoring process.

Both of the above changes were undertaken after extensive consultation with stakeholders, including the Northern Ireland Teachers' Council (NITC).

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Education, following recent GCSE results, for his assessment of what impact the Literacy and Numeracy Signature Project has had on improved achievements.

(AQW 48595/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: In line with the Every School a Good School Policy and the Count, Read: Succeed Strategy; schools have been focussed on school improvement and in raising standards in literacy and numeracy. Improvement in attainment is often a result of effective leadership along with the provision of high quality teaching and learning.

In support of this, DE working in partnership with the Education Authority (EA), other managing authorities and the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) have implemented a range of programmes and interventions to improve literacy and numeracy achievement including the significant investment from the DSC Literacy and Numeracy Signature Programme.

This year, following the second year of the DSC programme, GCSE results show that in English over three-quarters of entries (75.8%) achieved A*-C grades, 2.8 percentage points higher than last year and in maths, one-third (66.6%) achieved A*-C grades, up from 66.2% last year.

The analysis of the Year 12 School Annual Examination Results (SAER) for 2013/14 indicated that around 69% of the DSC supported schools showed an improvement in the proportion of pupils achieving 5+ GCSEs A*-C (or equivalent) including English and maths from the previous year. Analysis of this year's SAER, published in December, may provide further evidence of the effect of the second year of the DSC programme on improved GCSE results.

We do not have the means to disaggregate the effect of quality teaching or the impact of individual elements of interventions on overall attainment, to state categorically that one intervention or another was largely responsible for the improvement in performance..

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education what are the plans for the future of the old Conlig school site.

(AQW 48614/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: The Education Authority (EA) has responsibility for the old Conlig school site. In line with its statutory responsibility to undertake area planning, the EA is currently considering whether to retain the site for future educational use.

Mr McKinney asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the process whereby children are referred from the Education Authority to Health and Social Care Trusts as part of the Special Educational Needs assessment.

(AQW 48627/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: I am content with the process whereby children are referred by the Education Authority (EA) to the appropriate Health and Social Care Trust (HSCT), as part of the statutory assessment process.

When issuing a Notice of Proposal to make a statutory assessment to parents, the EA must copy any such proposal to a designated officer of the appropriate HSCT. This enables the Trust to seek the parents' consent to their child being medically examined as part of any proposed statutory assessment.

If the assessment proceeds the EA is required to seek advice from the HSCT as part of the process and all such requests specify a date by which it must be submitted.

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Education (i) how many shared educational campuses have now been formally approved by his Department; and (ii) for his assessment of how this compares with the commitments referenced in Together: Building a United Community.

(AQW 48686/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: To date, I have announced 3 projects to proceed in planning under the Shared Education Campuses Programme. Feasibility Studies and Economic Appraisals are currently being progressed.

The Together: Building a United Community strategy includes a headline action to commence 10 new shared education campuses by 2018.

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Education what steps his Department has taken to support organisations that no longer receive funding via the Youth Council.

(AQW 48687/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: I can confirm that in the current financial year no organisations have lost the entirety of their funding from the Youth Council.

The Youth Council's resource budget for 2015-16 was £4.1m, which was £1m lower than the 2014-15 opening baseline. The Youth Council has used circa £3.3m of this to maintain support for Regional Voluntary Youth Organisations albeit at a reduced level of financial support compared to that provided in previous years.

Decisions on individual funding allocations are an operational matter for the Youth Council.

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Education for an update on (i) Mill Strand Integrated Primary School; and (ii) Glengormley Integrated Primary School, in relation to the Schools Enhancement Programme.

(AQW 48712/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: I established the School Enhancement Programme in January 2013. This programme made available funding of up to £4 million for refurbishing or extending existing schools deemed sustainable under area planning.

The deadline for the submission of applications was 10 May 2013. Seventy applications were received. No applications were made by either Mill Strand Integrated Primary School or Glengormley Integrated Primary School.

The Department has undertaken capital Minor Works at both schools and will continue to prioritise future needs within available budget.

At this time I am unable to say when another call under the School Enhancement Programme will be issued.

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Education whether his Department has a definition it uses to describe a Christian ethos in schools.

(AQW 48713/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: My Department does not have a definition it uses to describe a Christian ethos in schools.

Mr McKinney asked the Minister of Education whether his Department has considered reforming the Special Educational Needs assessment procedure.

(AQW 48736/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: A Review of Special Educational Needs and Inclusion resulted in the introduction to the Assembly of a Special Educational Needs (SEN) and Disability Bill on 2 March 2015. The Bill is currently in Committee Stage. One of the proposals from the Review is to reduce the time taken for statutory assessment of a child's SEN from the current 26 weeks to 20 weeks. The SEND Bill and supporting statutory regulations, when drafted, will together support this reform to the statutory assessment procedure.

The SEND Bill also introduces provision to enable the child, who is over compulsory school age and still at school, to exercise rights within the SEN framework, which are currently exercisable by the child's parent. In relation to statutory assessment of SEN for a child of this age, this would mean that the child will be able to request a statutory assessment and have the right to engage directly with the Education Authority in relation to all matters relating to that assessment.

These are important proposals that aim to ensure an up-to-date approach is taken forwards in respect of statutory assessment.

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Education whether a (i) Grant Maintained Integrated School; and (ii) a Transformed School can be funded through the Shared Education Project.

(AQW 48748/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd:

- (i) A grant maintained integrated school can be funded through the Shared Education Project as part of a partnership with another school provided the partnership meets the criteria as specified in the call for application;
- (ii) A school which has transformed to an integrated management type, can be funded through the Shared Education Project as part of a partnership with another school provided the partnership meets the criteria as specified in the call for application.

See www.sepni.gov.uk for details, which was provided in the response to your previous question (AQW 42863/11-15).

Mr McKinney asked the Minister of Education whether his Department has considered establishing a dedicated special needs secondary school.

(AQW 48749/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: The Education Authority is responsible for ensuring there is sufficient provision for children and young people with special educational needs. I commissioned a review of special schools provision, the terms of reference of which included an assessment of the existing provision and a recommended regional plan for the future structure and provision of Special Schools. I am currently considering the review findings and recommendations before deciding on the way forward.

Mr Murphy asked the Minister of Education when he plans to introduce anti-bullying legislation.

(AQO 8640/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: On 23 June 2014, I announced my intention to introduce new Anti-Bullying Legislation in the current Assembly mandate. I did so in response to a review of anti-bullying policies and practices undertaken by the NI Anti Bullying Forum.

The proposed legislation will:

- Provide a common definition of bullying;
- Require all schools to centrally record incidents of bullying, their motivation and their outcome; and
- Require Boards of Governors to play an active role in the preparation and implementation of anti-bullying policies and measures within the school.

Executive consent to legislate on this matter was received on 28 May and my officials have been working closely with the Office of Legislative Counsel over summer recess to prepare a draft Bill. This is now very close to completion.

Once I have considered the Bill, I will be writing to the Departmental Solicitors Office and the Office of the Attorney General to confirm legislative competence and, at the earliest opportunity, will be seeking Executive consent for its introduction to the Assembly.

To have sufficient time for the Bill to complete all of its legislative stages will require the positive support of Executive colleagues, the Education Committee and members of this House.

I am confident all would wish to see this Bill, which will enhance schools abilities to tackle this complex problem, pass into law.

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of Education for an update on the hydrotherapy pool project at Roddensvale Special School, Larne.

(AQO 8641/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: The economic appraisal for the hydrotherapy pool at Roddensvale special school was approved in April 2014 and a scheme, valued at approximately £900,000.00, was designed and put out to tender. The Education Authority, which has responsibility for the school, has advised that due to budget constraints the scheme was not able to progress to completion at that time. However I previously gave a commitment that this scheme would be delivered and I am currently seeking additional capital funding for minor works. If it is not possible to complete the scheme before the end of this financial year I would envisage that it will be delivered during FY 2016/17.

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education for an update of any proposed changes in how split-site schools are funded.

(AQO 8642/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: Schools operating on split-sites, who meet the criteria outlined at paragraph 6.22 of the Common Funding Scheme, can receive centre funding support from their relevant Funding Authority. I have no plans to change this arrangement.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Education for an update on the implementation of the Careers Continuing Professional Development programme.

(AQO 8644/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: My Department commissioned the development of a bespoke Continuing Professional Development (CPD) programme for careers teachers to provide both a support and an information function. The learning activities have been derived from models of best practice and include practical examples which can be built upon and implemented within teachers' own school contexts. The programme is made up of four modules and is currently being rolled out to schools.

The four modules are:

- Leading & Managing Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance (CEIAG);
- Developing CEIAG across the Curriculum;
- Personal Career Planning; and
- Monitoring & Evaluation.

The first two modules were delivered by the Education Authority in 2014/15 and the remaining two modules will be delivered in the current academic year. Year two of the programme will again be developed and delivered by the Education Authority across a number of regional centres. Initial evaluation of the delivery of the first two modules shows that participants found the programme to be valuable, relevant, and informative.

Department for Employment and Learning

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his assessment of the relationship between his Department and Steps 2 Success providers, in particular with regards to young people who do not complete the programme.

(AQW 48283/11-16)

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): The Department has developed a good working relationship with the three Lead Contractors that are contracted to deliver the Steps 2 Success programme on its behalf. The three Lead Contractors: Ingeus, EOS NI and Reed in Partnership have each invested time, effort and resources into putting in place a delivery infrastructure to meet the Department's contractual requirements. The Department worked closely with the Lead

Contractors during the implementation phase and this laid the groundwork for a positive relationship that has continued now that the programme is being delivered.

The Department has developed a model of joint working between the Department and the Lead Contractors ensuring regular meetings, with policy, contract management, regional operations and quality improvement staff. This has proved to be a worthwhile process and has helped develop an open and constructive way of working.

There are no issues in regards to young people not completing the Steps 2 Success programme. People aged 18 – 24 who are in receipt of Jobseekers Allowance for nine months are mandated to participate on Steps 2 Success for a one year period. To date, no participants aged 18 to 24 have completed the full duration of their period on the programme.

A mandatory JSA participant must attend and participate on Steps 2 Success as a requirement of their continuing entitlement to benefit. Sanctions may apply to mandated JSA participants who fail to attend or participate, without good cause, as determined by the Social Security Agency.

Steps 2 Success participants continue to receive assistance from their Contractor for up to one year after starting work.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Employment and Learning (i) how many young people have left the Steps 2 Success programme before completion, broken down by constituency area; and (ii) for his assessment of how this affects his Department's European Social Fund targets.

(AQW 48284/11-16)

Dr Farry:

- (i) Delivery of Steps 2 Success commenced on 20 October 2014 and to date no participants aged 18 to 24 have completed the full duration of their attachment period on the programme. People aged 18 – 24 who are in receipt of Jobseekers Allowance for nine months are mandated to participate on Steps 2 Success for a one year period. Steps 2 Success participants who find work continue to receive assistance from their Steps 2 Success contractor for a period of up to one year. A mandatory JSA participant must attend and participate on Steps 2 Success as a requirement of their continuing entitlement to benefit. Sanctions may apply to mandated JSA participants who fail to attend or participate, without good cause, as determined by the Social Security Agency.
- (ii) The Steps 2 Success programme does not receive funding from the European Social Fund (ESF) and participants leaving the programme before completion will not impact on any ESF targets.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of providers who have withdrawn from the Steps 2 Success programme, including their reasons for withdrawal.

(AQW 48285/11-16)

Dr Farry: One supply chain partner withdrew from the Steps 2 Success programme. I have attached a table at Annex A that contains information on the Steps 2 Success Lead Contractors and their supply chain partners at the time of award of contract and details of any changes that have occurred since then, including the reason for any such changes.

Annex A

Lot 1

Type of Delivery Organisation	Delivery Organisations Listed in S2S Tender	Current Delivery Organisations	Details of any Changes
Lead Contractor	Ingeus UK Ltd	Ingeus UK Ltd	N/A
End to End Supply Chain Partner	DFPF Ltd (trading as People 1st)	DFPF Ltd (trading as People 1st)	N/A
	Armstrong Learning NI Ltd (trading as Armstrong NI)	Armstrong Learning NI Ltd (trading as Armstrong NI)	N/A
	Springvale Training Ltd (trading as Springvale Employment and Learning Solutions)	Springvale Training Ltd (trading as Springvale Employment and Learning Solutions)	N/A

Lot 2

Type of Delivery Organisation	Delivery Organisations Listed in S2S Tender	Current Delivery Organisations	Details of any Changes
Lead Contractor	EOS	EOS NI	Change in company name listed in tender from "EOS" to "EOS NI". No other material change.

Type of Delivery Organisation	Delivery Organisations Listed in S2S Tender	Current Delivery Organisations	Details of any Changes
End to End Supply Chain Partner	Elle Enterprises	Elle Enterprises	N/A
	Network Personnel (Workspace Group)	Network Personnel (Workspace Group)	N/A
	Roe Valley Community Education Forum	Roe Valley Community Education Forum	N/A
	Customized Training Services	Customized Training Services	N/A
	Ulster Supported Employment Ltd (USEL)	Ulster Supported Employment Ltd (USEL)	N/A
	North City Business	North City Business	N/A
	Roe Valley Enterprise Ltd	Roe Valley Enterprise Ltd	N/A

Lot 3

Type of Delivery Organisation	Delivery Organisations Listed in S2S Tender	Current Delivery Organisations	Details of any Changes
Lead Contractor	Reed in Partnership	Reed in Partnership	N/A
End to End Supply Chain Partner	Global Education (NI) Limited (GEL)	Global Education (NI) Limited (GEL)	N/A
	Network Personnel (trading as Network Recruitment)	Network Personnel (trading as Network Recruitment)	N/A
	Omagh District Training Consortium (ODTC)	Network Personnel (trading as Network Recruitment)	Reed in Partnership tender listed Omagh District Training Consortium as the Supply Chain Partner for the Omagh Area. During implementation stage, a Variation to Contract was agreed to replace ODTC with Network Personnel. The reason listed on the Variation was that ODTC had decided to withdraw.
	Rutledge Training & Recruitment	Rutledge Training & Recruitment	N/A
	SERC	SERC	N/A

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on ongoing work between his Department, Tourism NI and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to review the skills needs of the tourism sector. (AQW 48375/11-16)

Dr Farry: Following on from the response to AQW 46558/11-15, RSM McClure Watters have now been appointed to undertake the research into the skills needs of the tourism industry.

Initial work to initiate the project is underway and the final report is expected to be completed by the end of February 2016.

Mr Swann asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many Letters of Offer have been issued under the new European Social Fund. (AQW 48394/11-16)

Dr Farry: A total of 66 Letters of Offer were issued under the new European Social Fund, covering 67 individual projects.

Mr Swann asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many Letters of Offer issued under the latest European Social Fund round have not been taken up by the relevant organisation. (AQW 48395/11-16)

Dr Farry: Under the latest European Social Fund round, 66 Letters of Offer were issued covering 67 projects, all of which were taken up by the applicant organisations.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister for Employment and Learning why his Department has not hosted any job fairs in Tyrone or Fermanagh.

(AQO 8650/11-16)

Dr Farry: My officials work closely with employers locally and actively pursue opportunities to facilitate Job Fair and recruitment events for jobseekers across Northern Ireland.

Bringing Job Fair events into local communities has proven to be a very successful means of assisting people back into work.

When planning to host a Job Fair my Department carefully considers the number of job opportunities, employers available in the location, whether there is sufficient demand from local companies to participate and events being organised by partner organisations.

Two events are planned for Tyrone and Fermanagh in September, in the South West College, Omagh on 17 September 2015 and Reed in Partnership is scheduled to run an event in Enniskillen on 18 September.

My Department has recently facilitated two recruitment events in Tyrone. Both events took place in Omagh in June 2015. The first event was recruitment for 120 new jobs created by the opening of the Primark Store in Omagh town centre and the second event was a social clause Recruitment and Skills event for Phase 1 of the Arvalee Schools Project. The local Jobs and Benefits Offices in both Omagh and Strabane promoted these events widely to local clients and the Primark event, in particular, was extremely well attended.

Should a further opportunity arise during 2015, and there is sufficient demand from employers in Tyrone or Fermanagh Districts, my officials would be happy to scope out any of these locations to consider facilitation of a Job Fair event.

Mr McMullan asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how his Department is engaging with students as part of the consultation on the frequency of student support payments.

(AQO 8651/11-16)

Dr Farry: Maintenance support payments for students are currently paid three times per year at the beginning of each term of the academic year. These payments are large but infrequent, and students must therefore budget the finance over quite long periods.

For some time now student unions here, and in other parts of the UK, have advocated a monthly payment system. It is contended that more frequent payments could mitigate the risk of financial mismanagement and, by extension, financial hardship amongst students. On the other hand, more frequent payments could leave some students struggling with certain bulk costs, particularly those associated with accommodation.

The consultation outlines options for various payment models, and clearly outlines the pros and cons of each, including the financial implications of implementing any new system. These options were developed through engagement with students unions, and they include several versions of a monthly payment system.

Students will be affected most by the policies considered within the consultation, and students can also provide the most helpful insight into the strengths and weaknesses of the existing system. For this consultation to hold value, it is crucial for students to continue to be thoroughly engaged in the process.

Since the launch of the consultation on the 3rd of August, my officials and I have continued this engagement process through formal meetings with students unions, and I know they have in turn been engaging thoroughly with their membership.

My Department has advertised the consultation more broadly through press and social media channels, and most responses so far have come from students. I would like to take this opportunity again today to encourage as many people as possible to respond before the closing date on the 27th of September.

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what consideration was given to extending flexibility on the level of qualifications to be supported under the European Social Fund programme for participants with caring responsibilities.

(AQO 8652/11-16)

Dr Farry: The needs of participants with caring responsibilities are addressed through the unemployed and economically inactive strand of the new European Social Fund Programme.

Decisions regarding the level of qualifications to be supported were informed by a range of connected Departmental policy reviews, including the review of youth training.

Account was also taken of the need to minimise duplication between programmes funded by the Department. This was particularly important within the context of the current budget constraints being faced by my Department.

Progression is a key component of the new ESF Programme, with the underlying aim of encouraging and enabling progression to other DEL programmes such as Further Education; Apprenticeships NI; or Steps to Success.

Mr G Kelly asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what discussions he has had with employers, trade unions and the British government on the introduction of a statutory living wage and the resulting implications for workers' rights.

(AQO 8653/11-16)

Dr Farry: My Department does not have policy responsibility for matters relating to the statutory living wage, and has not held any discussions with employers, trade unions or the UK government on the introduction of a statutory living wage.

In July 2015 the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced that the UK Government will introduce a compulsory minimum wage premium for all workers over 25 years of age, and referred to it as the national living wage.

The government rate will be introduced in April 2016 and the government has instructed the Low Pay Commission that the minimum wage premium for over 25s, should reach 60% of median earnings by 2020.

The government rate is separate to the Living Wage rate calculated by the Living Wage Foundation. The government rate is based on median earnings while the Living Wage Foundation rate is calculated according to the cost of living.

These changes will have UK wide effect as the current national minimum wage and the anticipated statutory living wage are reserved matters.

Mr McNarry asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many higher education institutions and regional colleges had budgetary overspends in the last five years.

(AQO 8654/11-16)

Dr Farry: None.

Mr Nesbitt asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his assessment of labour relations legislation in Northern Ireland.

(AQO 8655/11-16)

Dr Farry: I am committed to ensuring that we have in Northern Ireland an employment rights and relations framework that responds to the needs of our local economy and society.

My approach is to keep our employment rights and relations landscape under review, and respond in the best interests of Northern Ireland with measures that support effective employment rights whilst recognising the need for employers not to be subject to excessive red tape.

Where it has been evident that Great Britain proposals are likely to be to our benefit, I will seek to take them forward, as with the successful passage earlier this year of the Work and Families Act which extended important employment rights to working parents.

I recently indicated that I would not be seeking to replicate measures concerning trade unions that are being taken forward in Great Britain. The way forward lies in building stronger and more constructive relationships between government, business and trade unions. There may be some reforms to trade union law and practice that could be considered and delivered if sufficient consensus could emerge, and as such I will take some initial soundings on the issue.

However, I am not complacent. As my Department's employment law review has made clear, there is always scope for improvement. The constructive proposals which have emerged from the review form part of a proposed Employment Bill which, I intend to introduce into the Assembly, subject to Executive colleagues agreement.

My Department will continue to engage with stakeholders to establish where there are issues that need to be addressed, and I will seek to address them.

Mr Attwood asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his assessment of the impact that the recent cutbacks made by universities will have on the Widening Participation Strategy.

(AQO 8656/11-16)

Dr Farry: In 2012, I launched Access to Success, my Department's widening participation strategy for higher education. The underlying ideal within that strategy is that everyone with the potential to benefit from higher education should have equal opportunity to do so, irrespective of their social or personal background.

Widening participation in higher education by students from disadvantaged backgrounds remains a key priority for my Department.

In February 2015, I recognised the competing pressures within the widening participation agenda and reduced the minimum level of reinvestment in widening participation programmes from 20% to 10% of additional student fee income. This will provide institutions with a greater degree of flexibility in their approach and seeks to protect overall recruitment numbers at a time of reduced resources. There is a need to ensure that the burden of any reductions in student places is not felt disproportionately by those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

However, there are some important caveats attached to my decision. Any reductions in spend made by institutions must come from efficiency savings. There should be no reduction in either widening participation performance or targeted outcomes. Institutions are expected to invest at higher levels higher than the minimum of 10%, if that is required to protect widening participation outcomes.

Access to Success requires all higher education institutions to have an approved Widening Access and Participation Plan. These plans outline the expenditure, programmes and anticipated outcomes for widening participation. I am pleased to advise that the Widening Access and Participation Plans received to date for academic year 2016-17, do not indicate any reductions in outreach activities or anticipated outcomes for widening participation.

Ms Boyle asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how he will involve young people in the higher education big conversation.

(AQO 8658/11-16)

Dr Farry: The Higher Education Big Conversation will run for a six week period up to the 23rd of October and comprise of two stages.

The first stage will focus on promoting the value of higher education to individuals, the economy and wider society. It will outline how the existing higher education system works and the challenges it faces. It will also draw on the ways in which higher education is delivered and funded across the globe.

The second stage, informed by stage one, will be similar to a public consultation exercise where opinions and solutions will be sought from key stakeholders, and the wider public, as to how Northern Ireland can secure a sustainable higher education system in the future.

During both stages, I wish to ensure that as many as people as possible have the opportunity to actively engage in this process, especially the young people of Northern Ireland. That is why, as well as promoting the Big Conversation through traditional media, it will also have a strong social media presence utilising Twitter and Facebook. People can get involved by testing their knowledge through online surveys and each week my Department will be disseminating fact sheets on a number of key themes. Events are also being organised by numerous stakeholders to enable people to discuss and debate the future of higher education in Northern Ireland.

The Big Conversation will be supported by the National Union of Students - Union of Students in Ireland, which represents the interests of over 200,000 students here, careers advisers, post-primary school teachers, and parents, in a bid to ensure that the young people of Northern Ireland can be actively involved in finding out why higher education is important to them and provide their opinions as to how higher education might look in the future.

Department of the Environment

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister of the Environment, following the change in the law regarding child car seats, whether there is a communication strategy in place to ensure parents are aware of the changes and how it will affect them.

(AQW 48279/11-16)

Mr Durkan (The Minister of the Environment): On 20 April 2015, Northern Ireland domestic legislation was changed to recognise a new 'i-Size' safety standard for child restraints. A key feature of the new standard is that seats are secured into anchorage points that have been fitted by the manufacturer into the structure of the vehicle.

In order to raise awareness of the new 'i-Size' standard, my Department issued a press release which announced the new legislation and alerted parents to related question and answer material published on the NI Direct website. The Department also highlighted the new standard on its road safety social media page, Share the Road to Zero.

It is important to state that not all cars are fitted with i-Size anchorage points – although it is now mandatory for new cars. For this reason other car seats, which are secured using the adult seat belt, remain perfectly legal. Retailers will continue to stock a range of car seats and will be able to advise parents as to which seats are suitable – taking account of both their vehicle and the height and weight of their child.

Current road safety social media focuses on 'Back to School' and highlights child safety. An important part of these communications will be ensuring that children are properly protected as they travel in cars. The Department's road safety officers remain available to answer queries from parents should the need arise.

Officials will continue to monitor social media regarding this issue. Where appropriate, social media users will be directed to the relevant page on NI Direct. Through NI Direct, parents can access a number of websites which provide a range of very useful information on the purchase and use of child seats.

Finally, it is important to remember that every car seat must be properly fitted and used if it is to be effective. Our overall priority is to improve not only the use of child restraint systems but also the quality of that use. My Department will continue to make the necessary information available to parents and other users of child restraint systems.

Mrs Overend asked the Minister of the Environment whether there have been any linkages between cases of environmental crime and the Provisional IRA since 2011.

(AQW 48303/11-16)

Mr Durkan: The Northern Ireland Environment Agency's Environmental Crime Unit conducts investigations into reported environmental offending purely on the grounds of the evidence available. Questions on linkages with any groupings are a matter for the Department of Justice and the PSNI.

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister of the Environment, given the rise in the number of tourists visiting natural locations, such as the Dark Hedges, that have appeared in television shows, what consideration has been given to maintaining the environmental integrity of this and other similar locations.

(AQW 48321/11-16)

Mr Durkan: Numerous locations in Northern Ireland have been used in recent years as locations for filming a range of television series and films. This activity is important economically and makes use of a wide variety of location types – including the countryside, coast and built heritage where there could be a risk of damage to the environment and/or heritage associated with the activity of filming itself or by increased visitor numbers following a popular series or film.

The example of the Dark Hedges refers to an avenue of beech trees that were planted by the Stuart family in the eighteenth century at Bregah Road, Stranocum, Ballymoney.

The Dark Hedges were planted in order to be a striking landscape feature to the Georgian mansion, Gracehill House. The trees remain and are one of the most photographed natural phenomena in Northern Ireland and have been used in filming of Game of Thrones representing the 'King's Road'.

The trees are subject to a Tree Preservation Order (TPO), and thus are afforded statutory protection. On 1 April 2015 the majority of planning functions transferred to the new 11 Councils for Northern Ireland. These functions included tree protection and the necessary powers to make and enforce TPOs, therefore councils, (in the case of the Dark Hedges – Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council) now have responsibility for the protection of trees considered to be of special value in terms of amenity, history or rarity.

Part 2 of the Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 provides for the preparation of Local Development Plans (LDP) by a council for its area, which will (when adopted) replace current development plans produced by the Department of the Environment. The LDP will include a Local Policies Plan (LPP). LPPs will contain the local planning policies, including site specific proposals, designations and land usage zonings required to cover the Council vision, objectives and strategic policies. This will afford Councils the opportunity to develop a range of policies to balance the needs of the tourism industry with the protection of environmental assets such as popular tourist locations such as the Dark Hedges. DOE is a statutory consultee in the planning process and advice is given by DOE to ensure that countryside, urban and village environments are able to grow in a manner that creates and promotes quality places to live and visit.

A further initiative is the soon to be published Northern Ireland Regional Landscape Character Assessment which has been commissioned by NIEA Landscape Architects. This will set the context to enable Councils to carry out more local level Landscape Character Assessments as part of the Development Plan Process.

DOE owns a range of properties that have been used for filming in recent years for well known series such as Game of Thrones and films such as Dracula Untold. Sites include Dunluce and Carrickfergus Castles, Inch Abbey, Ness Country Park, and areas of Roe Valley and Scrabo Country Parks. Requests for filming on our properties are an increasingly regular occurrence.

For DOE owned properties a filming application process is in place to consider requests to film which considers environmental and heritage issues and ensure sites are protected. Through legally binding filming agreements measures are put in place to ensure that if any damage occurs as a result the filming company are required to undertake reinstatement of any damage that may have occurred. In cases where filming is requested to take place at specially protected sites such as Roe Valley Country Park, NIEA staff would undertake a Habitats Risk Assessment to ensure that the proposals would not have an adverse impact on the features for which the site is protected. On average one request a week is received to film at state care monument sites.

The Department seeks to encourage visitors to experience the natural and historic environments through the management of Country Parks and State Care Monuments. Increased visiting of film locations by the public through film tourism is welcome and to date has not raised any issues capable of causing environmental harm to sites.

In broad terms the use of environmentally sensitive locations for filming can be seen as contributing to the sites being viewed as increasingly important culturally and economically and is likely to assist with interest in their preservation rather than presenting a threat.

Mr Swann asked the Minister of the Environment when he plans to bring forward planning policy on large scale solar farms.
(AQW 48362/11-16)

Mr Durkan: A robust planning policy framework for the consideration of a diverse range of renewable energy development proposals, including large scale solar farms is already in place. Relevant planning policies are set out within Planning Policy Statement 18 'Renewable Energy'. As such, proposals for large scale solar farms are considered on a case by case basis against the policy contained within PPS18, as well as its supplementary Best Practice Guidance, the local development plan and all other material considerations.

In addition, my Department is bringing forward a shorter, simpler and more strategic planning policy framework for the reformed two-tier planning system which has been operational since the 1 April 2015. The new Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS) consolidates and updates in a strategic way the existing suite of planning policy statements, including PPS 18. In finalising the SPPS I have taken account of the comments received through the public consultation exercise, including those relating to solar energy development. I am satisfied that the SPPS provides an appropriate level of strategic policy direction for such development proposals.

The final draft of the SPPS was completed in March this year and subsequently circulated to Executive colleagues. I intend to publish the SPPS once it has been fully considered by the Executive.

Although the SPPS is largely a consolidation of existing planning policy rather than a wholesale policy review, I acknowledge the significant issues raised during its formulation, particularly in relation to renewable energy development. I have therefore, on a priority basis, committed to subjecting the strategic 'Renewable Energy' policy to a fundamental review, following publication of the SPPS. It is my intention that this review will be concluded as quickly as possible.

Furthermore, I recently issued new guidance notes for the processing of renewable energy applications which will provide useful advice and guidance to planning officers dealing with large scale solar farm proposals. This focuses on the process that should be followed rather than adding to the existing policy and guidance documents.

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of (i) fish kills investigated by the NIEA in each of the last three years; and (ii) fish killed in each incident.

(AQW 48373/11-16)

Mr Durkan: Table A provides the number of fish kills investigated by NIEA in the last three years and Table B the fish killed in each incident.

Table A

Sector	2012	2013	2014
Farming	0	8	9
Industry	1	3	0
NIWL	1	0	1
Other	4	2	1
Transport	0	0	0
Domestic	0	0	0
Total	6	13	11

Table B

NIEA Incident Number	Date	Kill Count
WR 8/12/0002	09-Jan-12	20
WR 4/12/0094	02-Mar-12	50
WR 4/12/0778	19-May-12	5
WR 6/12/0780	24-May-12	55
WR 3/12/0143	07-Aug-12	20
WR 6/12/0182	17-Aug-12	100
WR 7/13/0044	25-Feb-13	137
WR 6/13/0068	28-Feb-13	6500
WR 4/13/0040	04-Mar-13	1000
WR 6/13/0157	04-Jun-13	60
WR 8/13/0074	10-Jul-13	1000
WR 8/13/0854	25-Jul-13	1540
WR 5/13/0120	31-Jul-13	9
WR 8/13/0855	09-Aug-13	60
WR 5/13/0134	21-Aug-13	4939

NIEA Incident Number	Date	Kill Count
WR 2/13/0856	03-Sep-13	6
WR 1/13/0135	24-Sep-13	120
WR 6/13/0260	04-Oct-13	90
WR 1/13/0139	08-Oct-13	100
WR 2/14/0046	26-Feb-14	76
WR 2/14/0056	07-Mar-14	300
WR 7/14/0777	20-Apr-14	1918
WR 8/14/0854	02-Jun-14	201
WR 4/14/0860	10-Jun-14	45
WR 8/14/0856	15-Jun-14	235
WR 4/14/0123	27-Jun-14	398
WR 7/14/0781	08-Jul-14	400
WR 6/14/0207	23-Jul-14	582
WR 5/14/0712	27-Jul-14	48
WR 3/14/0227	29-Oct-14	964

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of the Environment whether any land ownership or access issues are inhibiting the NIEA from making repairs to the Waterfall Walk at Crawfordsburn Country Park.

(AQW 48384/11-16)

Mr Durkan: Pursuant to my response to AQW 46729/11-15 there are no ownership or access issues preventing access to make repairs.

In my response to AQW 46729/11-15 I advised that the outcome of a current bid for funding will determine whether works to create an alternative pathway can progress this financial year. My Department are still awaiting the outcome of their June monitoring round bid which will ultimately determine whether funding is available to allow the works to commence this financial year.

Meanwhile visitors to Crawfordsburn Country Park wishing to see the waterfall can still access the waterfall view point from the path on the right side of the Crawford's Burn.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of the Environment, given Rathlin Island's Special Area of Conservation Status, to outline any protective conditions and criteria set by the NIEA in respect of its land leasing contracts in 2015.

(AQW 48430/11-16)

Mr Durkan: The NIEA has this year licensed grazing on over 20 NIEA managed sites across Northern Ireland. Each licence was secured through a fair and open tendering competition. The NIEA, in licensing grazing as with any other procurement process, must comply with Central Government's audit procedures to ensure probity and equity.

As part of the Rathlin Island licences NIEA has determined specific prescriptions which are necessary to maintain the sward in favourable condition. It is a condition of the agreement that the grazier complies with all conditions of the licence including stocking rates and environmental and agricultural conditions. For the Rathlin Island lands the licence included the following specific prescriptions:

- To stock the lands with cattle and sheep or a combination thereof (details of the livestock requirements for each field area are set out in a schedule).
- To stock the lands in accordance with the maximum and minimum numbers of livestock outlined in the agreement.
- To increase the number of livestock on the lands within the maximum livestock units specified at the direction of the Licensor.
- To decrease the number of livestock on the lands within the minimum livestock units specified at the direction of the Licensor.
- Not to apply artificial or organic fertiliser or slurry to the lands.
- Not to apply lime, pesticides, sheep dip, basic slag, sewage sludge, poultry litter or any other foreign material to the lands.

- Not to bring any feeding stuffs on to the Lands including hay, haylage or silage forage or any concentrated cereal mixture feeds without prior permission of the Licensor and, if permitted, to place such feedstuffs only at locations indicated by the Licensor.
- Not to treat livestock grazing the Lands with any medication that contains Ivermectin.
- Not to graze livestock that might present a danger to NIEA staff, authorised agents and the general public; and not to graze a bull on the Lands without written permission from the Licensor.
- To cut and remove all noxious weeds growing on said Lands so as to comply with the requirements of the Noxious Weeds (NI) Order 1977 or any statutory modification or re-enactment thereof.
- Subject to arrangement with the Site Manager or person appointed by the site manager, to flail or mow accessible portions of The Land which have dominant swards of rush, mowing up to 20% of the rush area per year between 15 March and 15 July, ensuring that at least 10% cover of rush remains.

Whilst organic farming may be beneficial for the environment in general, organic status is not essential for the features of NIEA sites and so could not be included as an essential criteria.

Please also be assured that all farm businesses have to comply with environmental and agricultural statutory management regulations as part of their eligibility for DARD agricultural payments including husbandry and environmental considerations. As part of the eligibility for award of a licence to graze NIEA lands, farm businesses are checked for a history of compliance with these environmental and agricultural conditions.

I can assure you that it is NIEA's objective in employing this procedure to be fair and equitable whilst ensuring environmental outcomes are achieved. NIEA will continue to monitor all grazing licences to ensure that conditions of the agreement are adhered to and that the NIEA managed sites are maintained in a favourable condition.

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of the Environment to detail any evidence that the introduction of compulsive basic training for motorcycle learners in 2011 has reduced the number of road accidents.
(AQW 48442/11-16)

Mr Durkan: Compulsory Basic Training (CBT) was introduced on 21 February 2011, and is applicable to all those wishing to ride a motorcycle as a learner rider.

In addition to CBT, the Third European Driving Licence Directive, which was implemented in January 2013, changed the licensing rules for moped, motorcycle and tricycle riders, making access to more powerful bikes staged, subject to competence, age and previous experience.

In the five years prior to the introduction of CBT, the highest number of motorcyclist deaths was noted in 2007 with 25 fatalities. During the first year of implementation (2011), fatalities fell to 6 but by 2014, this figure had risen to 13 motorcyclist deaths. There have been 3 motorcyclist deaths so far this year compared to 11 deaths at the same point last year. If you consider all motorcycle casualties: killed, seriously or slightly injured; there has been a decline from 346 casualties in the year of implementation to 289 casualties in 2014.

My Department continues to take a range of actions to continue to push down deaths and serious injuries on our roads; this includes the development of the advertising campaign launched on 10 March 2015 to address the rise in motorcyclist casualties. In addition to this, the development of a motorcycle safety action plan for Northern Ireland, in partnership with key stakeholders including statutory bodies and groups representing the motorcycle community, will look at how we can help make our roads safer for motorcyclists.

Given the range of measures which my Department has been taking forward and the lack of a clear overall pattern to motorcyclist casualties, it is impossible to isolate or attribute the overall reduction in motorcyclist casualties to just one measure, such as Compulsory Basic Training.

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of the Environment, given the environmental damage caused by the by-product of removing dye from agricultural diesel, whether he has considered engaging with HMRC or the Office of the Revenue Commissioners in order to request (i) a change in the policy of marked diesel; and (ii) the introduction of a rebate scheme for registered agricultural or construction vehicle operators.
(AQW 48447/11-16)

Mr Durkan: My officials have been working closely with HMRC for some time now in an effort to mitigate the impact of illegally deposited fuel laundering waste. A change in the approach to marked diesel came into effect in April 2015, when a new marker was added to diesel by HMRC. The intention behind this new marker is to make the diesel more difficult, and too expensive, to launder. I am hopeful that this action will make a positive impact on the levels of fuel laundering taking place, and the associated dumping of its waste.

Whilst I have not made any such approaches, discussions on a possible rebate scheme for registered agricultural or construction vehicle operators would perhaps be better suited to colleagues in the Departments for Regional Development and Agriculture and Rural Development.

Department of Finance and Personnel

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether she has considered the option of requesting monies from Libor fines to fund an air ambulance, as per current practice in other parts of the United Kingdom.

(AQW 48287/11-16)

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I have been in discussion with the Health Minister on the issue of Air Ambulances and am considering the options for funding such a scheme, including utilising funding from UK banking fines. Access to the banking fines would require any local Air Ambulance charity to be affiliated to the UK Air Ambulance Association. My officials have raised this with the Northern Ireland Air Ambulance Campaign.

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether any of her departmental responsibilities have been affected by the actions of any proscribed organisations since 2011.

(AQW 48304/11-16)

Mrs Foster: No, DFP responsibilities have not been affected by the actions of any proscribed organisations during this time.

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, pursuant to AQO 8353/11-15, for an update on the projected sale of assets from the Government estate in 2015-16.

(AQW 48309/11-16)

Mrs Foster: Officials from my Department have been working closely with the Asset Management Unit (AMU) within the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) to identify assets that could be disposed of during 2015/16. This forms part of the wider proposals being developed for the delivery of the capital receipts target of £50m for the current financial year. These proposals will be considered first by the Asset Management Programme Board (FM and dFM) prior to being included in Monitoring Round papers.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, pursuant to AQW 35938/11-15, why the response omitted the ministerial meeting in March 2014 with Cerberus.

(AQW 48343/11-16)

Mrs Foster: To reiterate, my Department had no role in the sale of NAMA's Northern Ireland loan portfolio.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what was the cost of surrendering leases to enable Land and Property Services headquarters to be located in Lanyon Plaza.

(AQW 48346/11-16)

Mrs Foster: No leases were surrendered or exited early to enable LPS headquarters to be located in Lanyon Plaza. One lease ran its term and was not renewed resulting in a cost of £1.3m for agreed dilapidations which would have been incurred regardless of where the LPS staff moved to at lease end.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the countries to which local business export, broken down by percentage.

(AQW 48347/11-16)

Mrs Foster: Table 1 below details the key countries to which local businesses export, with the value and percentage of goods sold in 2014. The information is taken from HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC) Regional Trade Statistics, which refer solely to the export of goods.

Table 1: Value and proportion of Northern Ireland goods¹ exports² to key export destinations 2014

	£m	% total exports
Irish Republic	2,296	38.4%
United States	646	10.8%
Canada	332	5.6%
Germany	319	5.3%
France	301	5.0%
Netherlands	135	2.3%
Spain	104	1.7%
Belgium	95	1.6%
China	94	1.6%

	£m	% total exports
Thailand	92	1.5%
Australia	82	1.4%
Saudi Arabia	78	1.3%
Italy	63	1.1%
Other	1,340	22.4%
Total	5,978	100.0%

Note: Figures may not add due to rounding. Source: HMRC Regional Trade Statistics

- 1 Exports include all sales outside the United Kingdom
- 2 Including live animals

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, given that she has co-signed a letter with the Scottish and Welsh Finance Ministers to the British Treasury indicating that the British government's 'ongoing austerity plans' reduce public spending 'too fast and too far, and present unnecessary risks to our public services', whether she intends to work collectively with the other Executive parties to send a similar united message from Stormont to London.

(AQW 48349/11-16)

Mrs Foster: My recent joint correspondence with the Scottish and Welsh Finance Ministers set out the position of the Northern Ireland Executive to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury. In that respect the UK Government are fully aware of the united message of not only Stormont, but also the Welsh and Scottish Governments.

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the progress made in meeting the Programme for Government 11-15 commitment to improve online access to government services.

(AQW 48356/11-16)

Mrs Foster: My Department is leading the Digital Transformation Programme which seeks to complete the delivery of 16 digital services by 2016 and to achieve 3.5 million transactions through these online services by March 2016.

The Programme is on target to meet these Milestones with nine digital services having gone live to date. Around 2.8 million transactions have now been carried out online using the new digital services delivered through the Transformation Programme. Examples of the services available online now include Family History Search through Genealogy NI, Buy a Birth Death or Marriage Certificate, Access NI, Online Ordnance Survey Map Sales, Landlord Registration and Rates Payments.

Mr McKinney asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of suicides in South Belfast, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 48388/11-16)

Mrs Foster: The table below details the number of deaths registered due to suicide¹ in Belfast South Assembly Area between 2010 and 2014, the latest year for which figures are available.

Number of Deaths from Suicide Registered¹ in Belfast South Assembly Area, 2010-2014

Assembly Area	Registration Year				
	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Belfast South	19	20	17	13	19

- 1 In considering suicide events it is conventional to include cases where the cause of death is classified as either 'Suicide and self-inflicted injury' or 'Undetermined intent'. Since 2001, the ICD10 codes used for 'Suicide and self-inflicted injury' are X60-X84 and Y87.0 and the ICD10 codes used for 'Undetermined intent' are Y10-Y34 and Y87.2

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the countries that local business import from, broken down by percentage.

(AQW 48397/11-16)

Mrs Foster: Table 1 below details the key countries from which Northern Ireland businesses import, with the value and percentage of goods bought in 2014. The information is taken from HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) Regional Trade Statistics, which refer solely to the import of goods.

Table 1: Value and proportion of Northern Ireland goods¹ imports² from key destinations, 2014

	£m	% total imports
Irish Republic	1,664	27.7%
China	992	16.5%
United States	438	7.3%
Germany	366	6.1%
Netherlands	341	5.7%
Italy	241	4.0%
France	197	3.3%
India	195	3.2%
Turkey	167	2.8%
Belgium	156	2.6%
Spain	103	1.7%
Sweden	97	1.6%
Argentina	77	1.3%
Poland	60	1.0%
Other	917	15.3%
Total	6,012	100.0%

Note: Figures may not add due to rounding. Source: HMRC Regional Trade Statistics

- 1 Imports include all purchases outside the United Kingdom.
- 2 Including live animals.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the communication she has had with the Financial Secretary to the Treasury regarding a reduced rate of VAT for the local hospitality industry.
(AQW 48404/11-16)

Mrs Foster: I wrote to David Gauke MP, Financial Secretary to the Treasury, on 15 June 2015 calling on the Government to reconsider how a reduced rate of VAT could be used and targeted to improve the competitiveness of the UK tourism industry. In his response dated 27 July 2015, Mr Gauke stated that the government currently has no plans to introduce a reduced rate of VAT for tourism.

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel when her Department will next publish a Net Fiscal Balance report.
(AQW 48417/11-16)

Mrs Foster: My Department intends to publish the next Northern Ireland Net Fiscal Balance Report this autumn. This Report will include estimates for both 2012-13 and 2013-14 for the first time.

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel (i) what capital investments are currently being undertaken in East Belfast; and (ii) what capital investments will be undertaken in East Belfast in the next 12 months.
(AQW 48419/11-16)

Mrs Foster: The following capital investments are currently being undertaken in East Belfast by my Department:

- Ladas Drive partial refurbishment
- Stormont Estate boundary fence replacement
- Stormont Estate replacement of obsolete high voltage equipment

At present my Department has no new schemes due to commence in the next 12 months in East Belfast.

This response is provided for the Department of Finance and Personnel only as the information for all departments is not held centrally. The Member should contact individual departments for their information.

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, out of those set to conclude their service with the NICS as part of the Voluntary Exit Scheme, whether any personnel approved for the current scheme have previously benefited from earlier

NICS exit schemes, before returning to employment in the NICS with the opportunity to benefit from further redundancy compensation.

(AQW 48446/11-16)

Mrs Foster: No NICS employee will benefit from redundancy compensation. This is a voluntary exit scheme, which will compensate staff who choose to apply to leave the NICS early and who are selected to leave.

The information you seek is not readily available and was not part of the Scheme's eligibility criteria. In the event that a person is re-employed having previously left the NICS on an exit scheme then, at the point of re-employment the rules of the Civil Service Compensation Scheme (Northern Ireland) in operation at that time are applied. Under the current Scheme rules, introduced from 1 April 2014, part or all of the compensation paid is repaid depending on the terms under which the person has been re-employed and the length of the break in service. Similar arrangements were in place under previous versions of the compensation Scheme rules.

The current Scheme rules are available at: http://www.dfpni.gov.uk/civilservicepensions-ni/new_civil_service_compensation_scheme__northern_ireland__rules_-_april_2014-2.pdf

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether she plans to implement a further in-year cut across a range of departmental budgets in advance of the October Monitoring Round.

(AQW 48459/11-16)

Mrs Foster: There are a number of Resource DEL pressures facing the Executive's budget in the 2015-16 year, and it will be for the Executive to agree how to address those pressures. There is currently no Executive agreement for an in-year reduction to departmental budgets.

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail any discussions she has held with the HM Government since May 2015 in regards to public finances in Northern Ireland, including (i) the date and location of the discussions (ii) a full list of all those in attendance (iii) the specific issues discussed and (iv) the outcomes.

(AQW 48460/11-16)

Mrs Foster: I met with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, Greg Hands, on 17th June 2015 in London. The following were in attendance:

- | | |
|---------------------------|---|
| ■ Greg Hands MP | ■ DFP Private Secretary |
| ■ Arlene Foster MLA | ■ Jon Donaghy, HM Treasury |
| ■ DFP Permanent Secretary | ■ Anna Rudge, HM Treasury Private Secretary |
| ■ DFP Budget Director | ■ Lyndsay Fussell, HM Treasury |
| ■ DFP Special Advisor | |

The issues discussed and the outcomes were presented in my press release of 17th June which can be accessed at the following link:

<http://www.northernireland.gov.uk/index/media-centre/news-departments/news-dfp/news-dfp-june-2015/news-dfp-170615-foster-sets-out.htm>

In addition I wrote to Greg Hands following the meeting, summarising the discussion and offering to host a meeting of Devolved Finance Ministers with the Chief Secretary in the future.

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, pursuant to AQW 46663/11-15, to detail (i) the scale of each of these Resource DEL pressures, and; (ii) the scale of each of these inescapable pressures.

(AQW 48461/11-16)

Mrs Foster: The Resource DEL pressures facing the Executive in 2014-15 should the Stormont House Agreement not be implemented are significant and include, loss of flexibility to repay both the £100 million reserve claim in 2014-15 and the £114 million reduction for non-implementation of Welfare Reform from capital budgets. The Secretary of State has only recently agreed access to £200 million of RRI borrowing for the Voluntary Exit Scheme.

The £600 million pressure also included my officials' assessment of inescapable departmental pressures. Subsequent to this departments have submitted bids as part of the June Monitoring Round in excess of £230 million Resource DEL and £300 million Capital DEL. The Executive has yet to agree the June Monitoring Round, however once agreed the outcome, including detail of departmental bids will be reported to the Assembly.

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the number of civil servants, broken down by Department, that have been advised that they have underpaid their pension contributions due to a failure by payroll to update their pay to reflect 3.5 per cent Classic Plus deductions.

(AQW 48492/11-16)

Mrs Foster: My Department does not hold records of such cases.

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel (i) when the Voluntary Exit Scheme will commence; and (ii) based on that commencement date, how much the Voluntary Exit Scheme is projected to save the Executive by 5 May 2016.
(AQW 48498/11-16)

Mrs Foster: Exits under the NICS Voluntary Exit Scheme will commence on 30th September. It is planned that staff will be released in tranches up to the end of March 2016.

Departments have indicated a requirement to reduce the NICS workforce by around 2,700 Full Time Equivalent posts, saving an estimated £26 million this financial year and approximately £100 million annually thereafter. These projections assume the required level of exits is achieved. However as this is a voluntary scheme, this cannot be pre-determined with absolute accuracy until all selections and acceptances for later tranches are complete.

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the current minimum thermal insulation requirements for newly built private properties.
(AQW 48519/11-16)

Mrs Foster: The Building Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 (as amended), Part F - Conservation of fuel and power, applies to almost all new buildings and requires that 'reasonable provision shall be made to conserve fuel and power'. The Department's supporting guidance documents, Technical Booklets F1 and F2, set out minimum acceptable standards of thermal insulation for building fabric elements for the more common situations. These documents are available in the Assembly Library.

It should be noted that Part F also requires carbon emissions modelling for new buildings. This assumes thermal insulation standards well in excess of these minima, unless equivalent carbon saving measures from efficient or low-carbon building services can be demonstrated.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in light of finances being released for a voluntary exit scheme for Civil Servants by the Secretary of State, when will those who have been accepted be allowed to leave.
(AQW 48522/11-16)

Mrs Foster: The first exit tranche of those who have accepted their conditional offer to leave the NICS is due to occur on 30th September and those who accepted their conditional offer to leave in the second tranche will exit at the end of November.

Executive colleagues were advised of the position on 7 September and an update to all NICS staff was issued by the Head of the Civil Service also on 7 September.

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for details of any efforts she has made to secure additional resources from the British Treasury as a result of Barnett consequentials arising from additional spending in England.
(AQW 48674/11-16)

Mrs Foster: Any Barnett consequentials that arise as a result of additional spending on comparable services in England are applied automatically to the Executive's Budget.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the Northern Ireland Investment Fund.
(AQW 48695/11-16)

Mrs Foster: A feasibility study carried out by consultants Deloitte into the proposed Northern Ireland Investment Fund has now concluded.

My officials are currently considering the way forward in liaison with European Investment Bank officials. The work to develop specific Fund proposals is technically complex and until this work concludes, I cannot provide any further detail.

Mr McKinney asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether there are any plans to consult on the utilisation of dormant bank account funds.
(AQW 48702/11-16)

Mrs Foster: Some £6.4m is available for Northern Ireland expenditure under the "Dormant Accounts and Building Society Accounts Act 2008". As part of Budget 2015-16, the Executive agreed that these monies should be made available in Northern Ireland under the heading of the Social Innovation Fund.

A consultation will issue shortly inviting views on, amongst other issues, the spending priority and the distribution mechanism for the Social Innovation Fund.

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an assessment of what the impact of not proceeding with aspects of the Stormont House Agreement will be on the funding available for the Voluntary Exit Scheme.
(AQW 48711/11-16)

Mrs Foster: Following the Secretary of State's announcement on 5 September, the Voluntary Exit Scheme will now be funded independently of the remaining elements of the Stormont House Agreement.

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, pursuant to AQW 46663/11-15, to detail her officials' estimation of each individual inescapable departmental pressure.

(AQW 48717/11-16)

Mrs Foster: As you will be aware departmental pressures change throughout the course of the year.

In the early stages of this year, my officials assessed departmental Resource DEL pressures at a high level as totalling almost £247 million. This compares to Resource DEL pressures registered by departments in the June Monitoring Round of £234.6 million. This represents a variance between my officials' assessment of pressures and departmental bids of less than 5 per cent.

My officials' assessment of pressures was undertaken at a high level and as such provides limited transparency in respect of individual pressures facing departments. Departmental bids submitted in the June Monitoring Round provide this transparency and are detailed in the attached Annex.

Department	Description	Non Ring Fenced Resource
AOCC	Judicial Review	0.3
	Northern Ireland Public Service Ombudsperson	0.1
Total AOCC		0.3
DARD	CAP Reform IT and Online Services	
	Tuberculosis Compensation	4.5
Total DARD		4.5
DCAL	Arts Cultural Programmes and Festivals	1.3
	Contractual Commitments, Statutory Obligations and Health and Safety	1.1
Total DCAL		2.4
DE	Drawdown of School Surpluses	5.0
	Early Years Fund	2.0
	Education and Schools' Estate Maintenance	18.4
	School Furniture/Equipment	3.6
Total DE		29.0
DEL	Drawdown of FE Colleges Surpluses	6.0
	EU Match Funding - Young People and Disability Projects	4.6
	Economic Inactivity Strategy	1.0
	New Youth Employment Scheme	1.5
	Youth Employment Scheme	4.0
Total DEL		17.1
DETI	Invest NI - Bombardier Nacelles Project	4.0
	Tourism NI - Feasibility Studies	1.0
Total DETI		5.0

Annex A

June Monitoring – Non Ring-fenced Resource DEL Bids Submitted (£ million)

Department	Description	Non Ring Fenced Resource
DFP	Rate Rebate Replacement Programme	1.0
	Reform of Property Management Programme	1.5
	Stormont House Agreement	2.5
Total DFP		5.0

Department	Description	Non Ring Fenced Resource
DHSSPS	Elective Care and Diagnostics	45.0
	Existing Service Pressures	17.0
	Service Developments	16.0
	Supported Living Schemes	6.0
	Transforming Your Care	5.0
Total DHSSPS		89.0
DOE	Consultancy and Judicial Review	0.3
	De-Rating Grant	1.3
	Dereliction/Emergency Planning	1.7
	Listed Buildings Grants	1.4
	Natural Environment Programmes	2.0
	Office of Legislative Council	0.1
	Rates Support Grant	2.8
	Regional Operations	0.8
	Roads Safety Communications	1.0
Total DOE		11.3
DOJ	Cyber Crime	1.4
	Legal Aid	23.9
	PSNI	
Total DOJ		25.3

Department	Description	Non Ring Fenced Resource
DRD	Concessionary Fares	3.8
	NI Water PC15 Final Determination	3.8
	Road Maintenance Essential Safety	14.8
	Road Maintenance Limited Service	6.6
	Rural Transport Fund/Accessible Transport	1.5
	Street Lighting Maintenance	2.0
	Translink - Bus and Rail Service Efficiency Measure	2.4
	Translink Public Service Obligation Subsidy	4.9
Total DRD		39.8
DSD	Social Enterprise Hubs	1.0
Total DSD		1.0
NIA	Terminal Payments to Retiring Members	0.1
NIAO	Staff Costs	0.1
OFMDFM	China Bureau and International Relations Team	0.6
	Delivering Social Change	1.6
Total OFMDFM		2.2
PPS	Funding Shortfall	2.5
Total Bids Submitted		234.6

Totals may not add due to roundings

Department of Justice

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Justice what steps are being taken to review sentences in animal cruelty cases, with a view to compel magistrates and Judges to use the maximum tariff of sentences available.

(AQW 48264/11-16)

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): The Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 (the 2011 Act), which is the main piece of animal welfare legislation in Northern Ireland, sets out the sentences available for animal welfare offences. The implementation of the 2011 Act, for which the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has policy responsibility, is currently under review and I, as Justice Minister, have responsibility for ensuring that the courts have adequate sentencing powers to deal with those convicted of offences under the Act. However, sentencing in individual cases is entirely a matter for the independent judiciary.

Officials from my Department are working closely with colleagues in DARD on the review. Among the matters considered by the review was the introduction of minimum sentences and increases to the maximum penalties available in respect of animal welfare offences.

However, in its interim report which was published earlier this year, the review team recommended that minimum sentences should not be introduced, as to do so would fetter judicial discretion and make no allowance for exceptional cases. The review found the existing approach, which allows judges the latitude to consider all aggravating and mitigating factors and the particular circumstances of a case, to be the most appropriate method for sentencing.

The interim report also recommends that the maximum penalties for animal cruelty offences should be increased.

It is expected that the Review will publish its final recommendations towards the end of 2015, at which point I will consider any recommendations that fall to my Department.

As part of a separate exercise, my Department is also examining the existing law around the unduly lenient sentencing scheme. One element being considered is whether animal cruelty offences should be amongst the offences that can be referred to the Court of Appeal where it is

considered that the sentence handed down has been unduly lenient.

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Justice whether he will establish a register of people found guilty of abusing animals so that a proper track may be kept on these individuals, given the evidence that there is a link between animal cruelty and violence towards humans.

(AQW 48266/11-16)

Mr Ford: A review of the implementation of the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 was established by the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development in 2014 with the assistance of my Department. The review examined a range of proposals aimed at strengthening our approach to animal welfare, one of which was the introduction of a central register of those convicted of animal welfare offences.

The review recognises the legislative constraints around the sharing of personal data and the particular difficulties this presents to some enforcement bodies in obtaining conviction data. Whilst the review team is yet to publish its final report, which is expected later this year, my Department is working closely with DARD to consider how accessibility to relevant data could be enhanced to assist all enforcement bodies and non-statutory bodies such as animal re-homing charities. I will of course consider any recommendations that fall to my Department.

Mr Somerville asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of the current status of the Provisional IRA.

(AQW 48305/11-16)

Mr Ford: My assessment as Justice Minister is, naturally, based on the views of the Chief Constable. He is on record as saying that the police "...do not see the Provisional IRA as being involved in terrorism. They are not involved in paramilitary activity in the sense that they were during the period of the conflict".

He has also indicated that he does not have information at the moment to suggest that at a senior level in the Provisional IRA or within the wider republican movement, the murder of Kevin McGuigan was sanctioned or directed.

I believe we need to be guided by the Chief Constable's view and to see where the evidence and intelligence takes his assessment in due course.

Mr Somerville asked the Minister of Justice whether any of his departmental responsibilities have been affected by the actions of any proscribed organisations since 2011.

(AQW 48306/11-16)

Mr Ford: All parts of the criminal justice system have been involved in responding to criminal activities carried out by members of proscribed organisations during this period.

Mr Somerville asked the Minister of Justice what progress has been made to meet the Programme for Government 11-15 commitment to improve access to justice.

(AQW 48326/11-16)

Mr Ford: Significant progress has been made across a range of areas through the Access to Justice Reform Programme. Responsibility for the administration of legal aid has transferred to the Legal Services Agency, and a new Appeals Panel has been created. Revised arrangements are in place for criminal legal aid, and the development of new remuneration arrangements for family cases is at an advanced stage. Work is also ongoing on addressing the scope of civil legal aid, where other support arrangements are in place. A project manager has now been appointed to the pilot project to speed up the family court system. I have also commissioned the Access to Justice Review Part II, which will inform further reform in this area.

Mr Somerville asked the Minister of Justice what progress has been made to meet the Programme for Government 11-15 commitment to reduce the level of serious crime.

(AQW 48328/11-16)

Mr Ford: The Strategic Framework for Reducing Offending was published in May 2013, setting out the Executive's long term approach to reducing offending in Northern Ireland.

The Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse strategy, which is now finalised, sets out what my Department, the DHSSPS and our partners aim to do to tackle domestic and sexual violence in the future. Significant consideration continues to be given to how we can maximise and prioritise the limited resources we have to deliver against the strategy.

The target for implementing agreed recommendations within the Youth Justice Review has been met, and work continues across those areas which require longer-term legislative or significant structural changes. The focus is now on ensuring that the positive outcomes and benefits for children envisaged in the Youth Justice Review are achieved, through the work of the Scoping Study on Children in the Justice System.

To date my Department has provided two written briefings to the Justice Committee on the joined up oversight and evaluation of Reducing Offending interventions. The report reflects the work taken forward since the publication of the Strategic Framework for Reducing Offending in May 2013. The latest report was considered by the Justice Committee on 23 April 2015.

Separately, my Department has been developing the use of a Northern Ireland Data Lab Facility to assist in the evaluation of reducing offending interventions. New statistical measures for first time offenders entering the justice system and one year proven reoffending rates have also been established and published in June 2014, December 2014 and August 2015.

My Department has produced a Desistance Strategy and Action Plan entitled Supporting Change. It was informed by research and consultation with key stakeholders, and its scope involves the wider Criminal Justice system. The strategy was considered by the Justice Committee on 16 April 2015; the Committee also received an oral briefing from officials on 4 June 2015. The Strategy will be published in October 2015.

Mr Somerville asked the Minister of Justice what progress has been made to meet the Programme for Government 11-15 commitment to tackle crime against older and vulnerable people by more effective and appropriate sentences and other measures.

(AQW 48329/11-16)

Mr Ford: An update on the progress made by my Department in relation to Programme for Government commitment 55 (tackle crime against older and vulnerable people by more effective and appropriate sentences and other measures) is available by following:

<http://www.northernireland.gov.uk>

Click on Work Of The Executive, and then click on Programme for Government, Budget and Economic Strategy. Click on Programme for Government, then under the heading Programme for Government 2011 – 2015 click on the Programme for Government 2011-15 – Strategic Online Report. Finally, click on Priority 3: Protecting Our People, the Environment and Creating Safer Communities.

This Programme for Government commitment is being delivered through the Community Safety Strategy. Annual progress reports on the delivery of the Strategy are made available to the Justice Committee and a copy of the relevant progress report is available on the Department of Justice website at the following address:

<http://www.dojni.gov.uk>

On the right hand side click on Publications. Under Categories click on Policing & Community Safety, then click on Community Safety. Click on Reviews, Strategies, Action Plans. Click on Community Safety Strategy Progress Report February 2015. Click on the Fear of Crime – report for Justice Committee – February 2015 PDF.

Mr Somerville asked the Minister of Justice what progress has been made to meet the Programme for Government 11-15 commitment to improve community safety by tackling anti-social behaviour.

(AQW 48330/11-16)

Mr Ford: An update on the progress made by my Department in relation to Programme for Government commitment 56 (to improve community safety by tackling anti-social behaviour) is available online:

<http://www.northernireland.gov.uk>

Click on Work Of The Executive, and then click on Programme for Government, Budget and Economic Strategy. Click on Programme for Government, then under the heading Programme for Government 2011 – 2015 click on the Programme for Government 2011-15 – Strategic Online Report. Finally, click on Priority 3: Protecting Our People, the Environment and Creating Safer Communities.

This Programme for Government commitment is being delivered through the Community Safety Strategy. Annual progress reports on the delivery of the Strategy are made available to the Justice Committee and a copy of the relevant progress report is available on the Department of Justice website at the following address:

<http://www.dojni.gov.uk>

On the right hand side click on Publications. Under Categories click on Policing & Community Safety, then click on Community Safety. Click on Reviews, Strategies, Action Plans. Click on Community Safety Strategy Progress Report February 2015. Click on the Anti-Social Behaviour – Report for Justice Committee – February 2015 PDF.

Mr Somerville asked the Minister of Justice what progress has been made to meet the Programme for Government 11-15 commitment to reform and modernise the Prison Service.

(AQW 48331/11-16)

Mr Ford: Good progress continues to be made against the extensive programme of end to end transformational reform, guided by the 40 recommendations made by the Prison Review Team.

Of the 40 recommendations, only two remain outstanding, with 33 having been signed off and three remaining under assessment by the Oversight Group, which I chair. An additional two recommendations have been referred by the Oversight Group to Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland for independent assessment.

While I am pleased that progress continues, fulfilling the Programme for Government commitment will not be the end of the process of change. The Northern Ireland Prison Service must now continue to embed change and continuous improvement, focusing on the four key areas of leadership, purposeful activity, healthcare and the prison estate.

Mr McKinney asked the Minister of Justice how his Department is supporting victims of hate crime in South Belfast.

(AQW 48389/11-16)

Mr Ford: My Department has brought forward Building Safer, Shared and Confident Communities: A Community Safety Strategy for Northern Ireland 2012-2017. The Strategy contains a commitment to tackle all forms of hate crime and reduce the harm it causes through prevention, awareness and education. It also has a set of associated action plans, including a dedicated hate crime action plan detailing the measures which a multi-agency Hate Crime Delivery Group is taking forward under a safety remit to address hate crime.

Examples of measures supported by my Department include: dedicated emotional and practical support for victims of hate crime through the regional Hate Crime Advocates (PSNI and DOJ); and the Hate Incident Practical Action (HIPA) Scheme which provides personal and home protection measures for victims of hate incidents where the incident has occurred at or in the vicinity of their home (PSNI, DOJ and Northern Ireland Housing Executive).

At a local level, my Department funds Policing and Community Safety Partnerships, which deliver a range of initiatives designed to meet the needs of local communities. I have been advised that the South Belfast District Policing and Community Safety Partnership has supported a number of schemes which aim to tackle hate crime and support victims, including: the development by Migrant Centre NI of a hate crime response and resource pack for community groups in South Belfast; the launch of a 'Living in Northern Ireland' DVD in partnership with Romanian/Roma Community Association of Northern Ireland and other agencies; and the provision of small grants to the African and Caribbean Society of Northern Ireland to help promote safety amongst their members.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice what is the average waiting time for enhanced clearance through Access NI; and what steps are being taken to address any delays.

(AQW 48402/11-16)

Mr Ford: In July 2015, the average time taken to issue certificates for enhanced checks was six days.

At present, where an application for an enhanced check is received on-line and the individual has no criminal record, or police have no information about that individual, these certificates are being issued on the day after receipt of the application. However, approximately 28% of enhanced applications must, under the legislation, be forwarded to PSNI (or other police services as appropriate) for consideration. These cases take longer to process. Even with this added process, over 96% of the enhanced applications received by AccessNI in July were returned within 28 calendar days. This exceeded the published target of returning 90% of cases within 28 days.

There is, however, a backlog of applications under consideration by the PSNI. At present, 590 cases have been with the PSNI for a period of 60 days or more, a reduction from 798 two months earlier, as a result of measures put in place to reduce this backlog. My officials continue to work with PSNI at senior levels to ensure this improvement is sustained.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Justice how his Department, alongside the Prison Service, is addressing concerns of Prison Service staff who are under stress.

(AQW 48479/11-16)

Mr Ford: The Northern Ireland Prison Service takes seriously all issues concerning staff with stress related problems. In conjunction with the core Department NIPS will be working with the Health and Safety Executive NI on the development of Mental Wellbeing at Work Risk Assessments, in early 2016. NIPS is also currently exploring measures specifically designed to address stress related issues through the development of resilience training and an Individual Professional Development (IPD) programme.

IPD is a support and resilience tool designed to promote and build staff resilience by providing staff with an opportunity to discuss issues that can potentially cause stress and anxiety through a safe and confidential peer support process. This has been used successfully in the special closed supervision units of the National Offender Management Service (England & Wales) and has been introduced to the staff working on the separated landings in Roe House, Maghaberry Prison and may be offered to staff working in other high stress environments.

These measures are in addition to the existing Employee Assistance services available to staff such as Welfare Support and Carecall.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Justice what measures the Prison Service has taken to provide the minimum staffing levels in prisons.

(AQW 48481/11-16)

Mr Ford: There are ongoing staffing pressures brought about by departures from the organisation and high sickness levels. NIPS is working to maximise the use of existing staff resources through re-profiling, the use of detached duty and continued robust management of, and support for, absentees to ensure that impact is reduced.

Agreed procedures and processes, including Work Area Risk Assessments, are in place to inform decisions on staffing levels and deployment needs.

Regime Delivery Quotas specify the operational activities and Standard Operating Procedures to meet health and safety requirements in the event of staff shortages.

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of drugs and alcohol addiction support provision in cases dealt with by Probation Service, including the process involved; and how this operates in conjunction with the Public Health Agency and their contacted service providers.

(AQW 48483/11-16)

Mr Ford: Substance misuse in its various forms is a known significant contributor to offending behaviour. Probation Board for Northern Ireland assessment processes indicate that approximately 70% of those under Probation statutory supervision have a significant lifestyle issue with substance misuse.

To address the issue of drugs and alcohol addiction, arrangements have been negotiated between PBNI and the Public Health Agency. Under the PHA-led Commissioning Framework, commencing 1 July 2015, the PHA would provide screening and brief interventions training for all frontline PBNI staff. This training will enable staff to assess the needs of those under supervision within a continuum of addiction-related services.

The roll out of this training to approximately 160 Probation staff is nearing completion. PBNI will undertake screening with all those on its caseload and follow-up brief interventions work where substance misuse is assessed as hazardous. Onward referral to the PHA's recently commissioned Step 2 and Step 3 services will be made for those whose misuse is assessed as harmful or dependent.

PBNI and PHA have agreed to review these working arrangements in January 2016.

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice what is the average turnaround time, in the last six months, from the issuing of a committal warrant for an unpaid fine during fine default magistrates court listings brought by the Courts and Tribunal Service in the Fermanagh and Tyrone court division; and what is the average time taken to execute a warrant on the defaulter, broken down court house within the division.

(AQW 48486/11-16)

Mr Ford: In the six month period ending 31 August 2015 there have been 389 committal warrants issued in respect of unpaid fines as the result of Fine Default Review Hearings in the Magistrates' Court in the Division of Fermanagh and Tyrone. Our records indicate that PSNI have recorded the execution of 159 committal warrants in this period in this division within an average of 26 days.

The table below sets out the information by court office with the Division of Fermanagh and Tyrone.

Division	Office	Number Executed	Average Days to Execute
Fermanagh And Tyrone	Dungannon Court Office	93	16
	Enniskillen Court Office	19	57
	Omagh Court Office	11	25
	Strabane Court Office	36	37
Total		159	261

The overall average number of days is a calculation of the total number of days required to execute committal warrants i.e. 4178 divided by the number of warrants executed i.e. 159 making an average of 26.2.

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, in relation to the assault on a prison officer in Braid House HMP Maghaberry on 19 August 2015, (i) how many staff were on duty (a) in Braid House; and (b) on the landing in question at the time of the incident; and (ii) whether the level of staff was compliant with (a) health and safety legislation; and (b) stipulated prison service safety protocols and procedures.

(AQW 48488/11-16)

Mr Ford: An incident which occurred at Maghaberry Prison on 19 August is the subject of a criminal investigation by PSNI. It would not be appropriate for NIPS to comment until the outcome of the investigation is known.

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant AQW 46145/11-15, and in light of allegations by the Public Prosecution Service on the role of the Courts and Tribunal Service in the compassionate bail hearing for J Turley on 9 May 2015, whether he will launch an investigation to establish responsibility and the facts as to the input of the various agencies involved.

(AQW 48491/11-16)

Mr Ford: Senior staff from the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service, the PSNI and the Public Prosecution Service have held discussions on the events that preceded Mr Turley's release on compassionate bail.

On Friday 8 May 2015 the PPS and the PSNI were informed that Mr Turley intended to make an application for compassionate bail.

The application for compassionate bail was made on the morning of Saturday 9 May 2015. The PPS Prosecutor who was in court that morning was informed and raised an objection to the bail. While the PSNI were not in attendance the District Judge was informed that they too objected to bail being granted.

The agencies involved have agreed that the court staff fulfilled their responsibilities and informed the PPS at the earliest opportunity.

The granting of bail is a matter for the District Judge. It is an accepted principle that the courts are completely independent and therefore I cannot become involved in, or comment on, the judicial decisions in this case.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of Justice for an update on his discussions with the Home Office in relation to the intention to prohibit the sale and distribution of legal highs.

(AQO 8581/11-16)

Mr Ford: Over the last year I have written to the Home Secretary and the Minister for Crime Prevention indicating that further legislation was required to tackle new psychoactive substances and, given the positive impact of the legislation introduced in the Republic of Ireland, I had suggested that they consider adopting a similar approach.

In May the UK Government introduced a Psychoactive Substances Bill which aims to tackle the production, supply, import and export of New Psychoactive Substances and includes provision for a range of offences that could carry a maximum sentence of 7 years in prison. I warmly welcome the introduction of this Bill.

Following the Bill's introduction, my officials have continued to engage with the Home Office Bill Team. This ongoing process has been informed by a range of sources including Legal opinion and the views of professionals and specialists in other Executive Departments and Agencies. Work will continue during the Bill's passage.

In addition the PSNI, together with Belfast City Council have utilised the General Product Safety Regulations 2005 to secure the first UK wide successful prosecutions in Northern Ireland courts.

Also, in their Drug Strategy 2015 – 18 the PSNI have stated that there is "no overt sale of new psychoactive substances from any retailer in Belfast". This demonstrates the success of these efforts and is to be welcomed.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice to outline the criteria to qualify for legal aid.

(AQW 48510/11-16)

Mr Ford: There are a range of eligibility criteria for civil legal services depending on the scheme to which the application applies. However, in general terms there are two distinct tests; the legal merits test and the financial eligibility test. An applicant must satisfy both tests before civil legal services can be granted. There are some specific types of cases which are exempt from one or both of these tests.

The legal merits test for advice and assistance is whether it is reasonable for the advice and assistance to be given. The legal merits test for Representation (Lower Courts) and (Higher Courts) is whether the applicant has reasonable grounds for taking, defending or being a party to the proceedings. The merits test for Exceptional funding is whether failure to fund a case would be a breach of the individual's Convention rights or any rights of the individual to the provision of legal services that are enforceable EU rights or it is appropriate to make services available in the particular circumstances of the case, having regard to any risk that failure to do so would be such a breach.

The financial eligibility test applies to an applicant's income and capital. The income test includes a number of allowances and disregards which can vary depending on an applicant's personal circumstances. Applicants for civil legal services under any of the schemes who are in receipt of Income Support, Income Based Job Seeker's Allowance, Income-related Employment and Support Allowance or the guarantee credit element of State Pension Credit are automatically passported through the financial eligibility test with no contribution being payable. Applicants who are not passported through the financial eligibility test, if eligible, may be required to pay a contribution towards the cost of the case which reflects their disposable income.

The Regulations provide upper limits on the amount of disposable income and disposable capital which an applicant can have and still be eligible for civil legal services. The current limits are:

Scheme	Disposable Income	Disposable Capital
Advice and Assistance	£234 per week	£1,000
Representation (Lower)	£234 per week	£3,000
Representation (Higher) /	£10,995 (personal injury)	£8,560 (personal injury)
Exceptional Funding	£9,937 (other cases)	£6,750 (other cases)

The judiciary is responsible for granting individuals criminal legal aid. The relevant tests for criminal legal aid are whether the means of the individual are insufficient to enable the application to obtain legal aid and that it is in the interests of justice that criminal legal aid should be granted.

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Justice (i) how members of the Sentencing Council are appointed; (ii) by whom they are appointed; and (iii) to who they are accountable.

(AQW 48512/11-16)

Mr Ford: There is no Sentencing Council in Northern Ireland. However, as part of his Programme of Action on Sentencing, the Lord Chief Justice, in 2010, established a Sentencing Group to enhance the guidance available to the judiciary, through oversight of the development and publication of sentencing guidelines. Details of appointments to the Group can be found in the second biennial Report of the Sentencing Group, December 2014. The Report is available at:

<http://www.courtsni.gov.uk>

Under the Judicial Decisions section, click on LCJ's Sentencing Group. Then click on the Report by the Lord Chief Justice's Sentencing Group – December 2014 PDF to view the document.

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice for a breakdown of the legal aid costs to date of the matters relating to Barry McCahey, including his appeal.

(AQW 48550/11-16)

Mr Ford: The total fees paid before the appeal as reported in AQW/29629/11-15 were:

Solicitor	£167,029.92
Junior Counsel	£29,748.12
Senior Counsel	£121,085.51
Total	£317,863.55

In addition the costs determined for Junior and Senior Counsel in the Criminal Court of Appeal are:

Junior Counsel	£60,000.00
Senior Counsel	£90,000.00

The costs for the Solicitor in the Criminal Court of Appeal have yet to be notified to the Legal Services Agency.

At this time the total costs notified to the Legal Services Agency are:

Solicitor	£167,029.92
Junior Counsel	£89,748.12
Senior Counsel	£211,085.51
Total	£467,863.55

Ms Fearon asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the Hidden Crime, Secret Pain strategy on tackling sexual violence and abuse.

(AQO 8576/11-16)

Mr Ford: There have been significant achievements since the publication of the 'Tackling Sexual Violence and Abuse' strategy in 2008.

A key success has been the establishment of 'The Rowan' Sexual Assault Referral Centre in May 2013. The centre offers a range of services and support to victims of sexual violence. I have no doubt the excellent work of the centre has contributed to an increase in reported sexual crimes.

Since the publication of the strategy, there has been a public campaign to generate awareness, and an anti-rape campaign in universities and colleges. A handbook of information, help and support has also been published for adult victims of rape and sexual assault. These campaigns are widely recognised to increase the reporting of these crimes.

In September 2013 the domestic violence helpline was expanded to respond to the needs of victims of sexual violence and abuse.

Public Protection Arrangements have also been introduced in Northern Ireland, to enhance the management of risk posed by certain sexual and violent offenders. This will be strengthened further by added protections emerging from the Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2015, such as, the arrangements for Child Protection Disclosure and Violent Offences Prevention Orders.

A new victim of crime information leaflet and a Victim Charter have been published. The Charter will be put on a statutory footing in November.

In addition, the Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse strategy, which is now finalised, sets out what the two departments and our partners aim to do to tackle domestic and sexual violence in the future. As the Member will appreciate, significant consideration continues to be given to how we can maximise and prioritise the limited resources we have to deliver against the strategy.

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, given that a fine issued by a judge is a court order, why defaulters are not being charged with contempt of court and dealt with accordingly.

(AQW 48552/11-16)

Mr Ford: Decisions in individual cases are a matter for the judiciary. Where an offender fails to pay a fine, there are already specific statutory provisions to deal with default. Article 92 of the Magistrates' Courts (NI) Order 1981 and section 35 of the Criminal Justice Act (NI) 1945 set out the procedures to be followed by Magistrates' Courts and the Crown Court respectively. Where specific provisions exist those are what will be applied by courts.

Mr Ó hOisín asked the Minister of Justice whether any damage occurred to the area surrounding the Magilligan prison complex, prior to the opening of the new waster-water treatment plant at Point Road, and during the forty year period when the prison managed its own waste.

(AQW 48570/11-16)

Mr Ford: Northern Ireland Prison Service files indicate that a routine inspection by the Environment Agency, prior to the opening of the new waste-water treatment works, occurred in November 2010. The Environment Agency tests indicated that the effluent quality at the time was operating in accordance with the required standards.

The Environment Agency sampled and monitored the effluent discharges at Magilligan and would be best placed to comment on historical data. They can be contacted at:

NIEA
Water Management Unit
17 Antrim Road
Lisburn BT28 3AL

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 48029/11-15, given that the numbers of prisoners in Magilligan Prison between 2009 and 2015 rose from 401 to 544, what has been the change in the total cost of running the prison in this time.
(AQW 48571/11-16)

Mr Ford: The financial information requested is provided in the table below.

Financial Year	Running Cost (£m)
2009/10	30.04
2010/11	28.05
2011/12	28.60
2012/13	26.35
2013/14	23.49
2014/15	22.12

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the proposed sale of the Lisnevin site in Millisle.
(AQW 48613/11-16)

Mr Ford: The disposal of the site is now being handled by SIB Asset Management Unit.

The timing of the disposal is dependent on the conclusion and agreement to the business case currently exploring the relocation of NIPS training from Millisle.

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice (i) how Terry McConnell was transferred from HMP Maghaberry to the Royal Victoria Hospital for a surgical procedure; (ii) whether he was escorted by prison staff and whether he remained so for the duration of the hospital stay; (iii) on what date did he leave hospital; (iv) whether he signed himself out of hospital; and (v) whether hospital staff alerted HMP Maghaberry.
(AQW 48617/11-16)

Mr Ford: The requested information cannot be provided as disclosure would be contrary to the Data Protection Act 1998.

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice whether he will conduct an investigation into the circumstances of the assault on a prison officer in Braid House HMP Maghaberry on 19 August 2015, to include risk assessments carried out the staffing requirement and procedures on the day; and to publish the terms of reference of such an investigation.
(AQW 48619/11-16)

Mr Ford: An incident which occurred in Braid House at Maghaberry Prison on 19 August is the subject of a criminal investigation by PSNI. It would not be appropriate to comment until the outcome of the investigation is known.

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice (i) how many committal warrants have been issued for unpaid fines at Dungannon Magistrates Court since the commencement of fine default procedures were undertaken by NI Courts and Tribunal Service; (ii) how many resulted in custody; and (iii) how many fines were settled in full when the committal warrant was presented to the defaulter.
(AQW 48620/11-16)

Mr Ford:

- (i) From June 2014 to 31 July 2015 there have been 155 committal warrants issued in respect of unpaid fines as the result of Fine Default Review Hearings at Dungannon Magistrates' Court.
- (ii) and (iii) Our records indicate that PSNI have recorded 28 warrants were executed by committal and 34 were executed by payment in full within this division. One warrant was executed by part payment and committal.

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice to outline the benefits to North Down of the National Crime Agency operating locally.
(AQW 48645/11-16)

Mr Ford: The fact that the National Crime Agency is now fully operational will bring advantages across Northern Ireland. This comes from its ability to tackle serious and organised crime threats across boundaries including, for instance, in relation to child sexual exploitation and drugs, meaning the most serious criminals can be pursued wherever they are. It can also bring civil recovery proceedings. An important element is that its engagement either supports the PSNI or releases the PSNI to conduct other investigations.

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice whether Victim Impact Statements are routinely sought exclusively in crown court cases in which a death has occurred; and why this is not extended mandatorily to similar matters dealt with at magistrates' courts.
(AQW 48672/11-16)

Mr Ford: Victim Personal Statements were introduced in December 2013 to replace the previously used Victim Impact Statements. The Victim Personal Statement allows a victim to say, in their own words, how a crime has affected or continues to affect them.

The Public Prosecution Service will advise the victim that a person is to be prosecuted for the crime. It is entirely the choice of the victim if they wish to make a statement.

A Victim Personal Statement can be used in any court and for any offence where there has been a conviction.

The use of Victim Personal Statements was placed on a statutory footing in the Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2015.

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice for a breakdown of the legal aid costs to date of all matters relating to Karen Walsh, including the appeal.

(AQW 48678/11-16)

Mr Ford: The total fees paid (including VAT) in relation to Magistrates' Court and Crown Court proceedings are

Solicitor	£158,037.47
Junior Counsel	£38,238.92
Leading Junior Counsel	£18,159.00
Senior Counsel	£60,111.90
Total	£274,547.29

No claims have been received in respect of the Court of Appeal proceedings.

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice whether he will conduct a review into the process that follows the issuing of a committal warrant after a fine default, including the roles of various agencies; and whether a policy or protocol has been developed for such circumstances.

(AQW 48680/11-16)

Mr Ford: A fine default committal warrant is a court order and the instructions for its execution are contained within it. In addition, the roles and responsibilities of the PSNI and the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service in the timely execution of fine default warrants are now defined under the terms of a Service Level Agreement.

In light of this I am not currently considering a review of this process.

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Justice, given the recent decision by the Pension Ombudsman on the payment of commutation figure to police officers between 2001 and 2006, when outstanding figures to former police officers will be paid through Police Pensions Branch.

(AQW 48701/11-16)

Mr Ford: I understand that the PSNI received a bulk calculation facility from the Government Actuary Department at the end of August. With almost 3,000 former police officers potentially affected, the PSNI envisage that it may take six to eight months to pay all those affected. I am advised that payment will be made based on the date of retirement from 1 December 2001 forward.

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Justice what discussions his officials have had with Home Office officials on the recent Pension Ombudsman's ruling on the payment of commutation figures, which were underpaid to police officers between 2001 and 2006.

(AQW 48727/11-16)

Mr Ford: My officials have had no discussions with Home Office Officials on the recent Pension Ombudsman's ruling on the payment of commutation figures, which were underpaid to police officers between 2001 and 2006.

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Justice, in relation to the Pension Ombudsman's ruling on the payment of commutation figures underpaid to police officers between 2001 and 2006, what information his officials have obtained on the direction given by the Home Office to other police forces in the UK.

(AQW 48763/11-16)

Mr Ford: My officials have been advised that the Home Office has written to Chief Constables in England and Wales. This is in relation to the Pension Ombudsman's ruling on the payment of commutation figures underpaid to police officers between 2001 and 2006. The devolved institutions have not been copied into this correspondence.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice what meetings he has had with the Chief Constable to discuss recent Provisional IRA activity.

(AQW 48767/11-16)

Mr Ford: I have regular discussions with the Chief Constable on security related matters. That does not extend, of course, into areas which fall within his operational independence.

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice whether Patrick John Fitzpatrick is a separated prisoner in Roe House, HMP Maghaberry; and if so, whether he has signed the required compact.

(AQW 48775/11-16)

Mr Ford: It would not be appropriate to discuss the circumstances of an individual prisoner.

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice what is the preferred timescale for the carrying out of a Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference following a domestic violence report.

(AQW 48838/11-16)

Mr Ford: The dates of MARAC meetings are agreed annually with the MARAC partner agencies and are generally scheduled on a monthly basis.

Department for Social Development

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister for Social Development when changes to housing benefit award notifications will be implemented to improve and simplify letters received by recipients, especially elderly residents; and whether these amendments will require legislative change.

(AQW 48259/11-16)

Mr Storey (The Minister for Social Development): The Housing Executive has advised that they consulted with tenant groups in both the social and private rented sectors and with voluntary agencies on the format for new simplified notifications. They are now in the final stages of production testing the new letters and plan to have them in operation later this month.

The Housing Executive further advised that there is no need for legislative change in relation to the new Housing Benefit notification letters.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the development of transition plans for the transfer of regeneration powers to local government in April 2016.

(AQO 8599/11-16)

Mr Storey: From 1 April 2016 Council will take on responsibility for Urban Regeneration and Community Development. In order to help ensure a smooth transition of responsibilities and functions from the Department to Council my officials have provided each Council with a transition plan setting out DSD's role and responsibilities between now and 1 April 2016 and the proposed actions that Council should consider.

This Transition Plan has been prepared by the Department to assist the Council in its budget planning and decision making process for the delivery of urban regeneration and community development activities. It aims to:-

- Ensure those projects currently supported by DSD, with funding ending on 31st March 2016, are given clear indications as early as possible whether they will receive further funding;
- Provide a pipeline of projects (were requested by the Council) for the new councils to consider to deliver after the RLG transfer date; and
- Ensure the new councils meet their statutory duty to have regard for the Urban Regeneration and Community Development Policy Framework.

The plan sets out the various activities and projects that it currently administers under a range of programmes. It also lists the potential projects which Council may consider funding during 2016-2019. These plans are a work in progress and will evolve as we move closer to April 2016 and decisions are made on the programme and projects that Council agree to progress post Reform of Local Government.

Ms McCorley asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the benefits of the Tenancy Deposit Scheme.

(AQO 8600/11-16)

Mr Storey: The Tenancy Deposit Scheme, which came into operation on 1 April 2013, provides benefits for both private landlords and tenants by encouraging a more professional approach to tenancy deposits practice, minimises disputes and also improves the private rented sector's reputation as a desirable housing option.

The Scheme was introduced to safeguard deposits on the basis that:

- When tenants are entitled to it, they will get all or part of their deposit back;

- Any disputes between tenants and landlords/agents including unpaid rent will be easier to resolve; and
- Tenants are encouraged to look after the property they are renting.

From 1 April 2013 to 31 July 2015 over 47, 800 deposits have been protected amounting to over £27.1m.

Mr Attwood asked the Minister for Social Development for his assessment of the impact locally of the working tax credit changes announced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer on 8 July 2015.

(AQO 8601/11-16)

Mr Storey: In the Summer Budget 2015 the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced that he intended to achieve annual savings of £12 billion on welfare expenditure by 2019/2020. This included savings from changes to working tax credits.

Tax credits are a reserved matter and therefore changes to payment rates or eligibility criteria do not require Executive agreement. These measures will therefore be introduced by HM Revenue and Customs following the legislative passage of the Welfare Reform and Work Bill 2015 in Great Britain. The savings will be achieved at a UK level regardless of the positions adopted by any devolved administration.

Since the budget statement DSD officials have been working to better understand both the detail and financial implications of the welfare measures in the budget and the impact on Northern Ireland.

An assessment of the impacts of the Summer Budget to include the changes to working tax credits will be available at the end of September.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Social Development, as holder of the head lease of 148/158 Springfield Road, Belfast, which prohibited sub-letting for any purpose other than that which is compatible with the Articles and Memorandum of Association of a Local Residents Association, for his assessment of the part occupation of these premises by Research Ireland Limited.

(AQO 8602/11-16)

Mr Storey: The Department's lease of 148-158 Springfield Road, Belfast permits the use of the premises as an office including for: the provision of financial services and/or professional services; provision of medical or health services; as a crèche, day nursery or day centre; the provision of education; the display of works of art or other exhibits, a museum, library, social recreation or any other purpose that would usually be compatible with the Articles and Memorandum of Association of a Local Residents Association and as specifically agreed with the Lessors.

As I advised in my Answer of the 10th of July to the Member's previous Written Question on this matter, I have no details under which Research Services Ireland Limited has taken offices at 148-158 Springfield Road, Belfast.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 25 September 2015

Written Answers to Questions

Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to list the grades used in the (i) beef; (ii) lamb; and (iii) pork sectors of the agri-food industry.

(AQW 48475/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): All cattle, sheep and pigs presented for slaughter in the north of Ireland are graded according to the European Community scale for the classification of carcasses. The relevant classification requirements are set out in European Commission Regulation (EC) 1249/2008 and, Annex IV to European Parliament and Council Regulation (EU) 1308/2013.

Beef

Each carcass is identified as falling into one of the classes in the table below.

Conformation class	Carcass quality	Subdivision (where applicable)
E	excellent	upper (+) or lower (-)
U	very good	upper (+) or lower (-)
R	good	upper (+) or lower (-)
O	fair	upper (+) or lower (-)
P	poor	upper (+) or lower (-)

The scale has five classes for fat cover.

Fat class	Fat cover	Subdivision (where applicable)
1	low	upper (+) or lower (-)
2	slight	upper (+) or lower (-)
3	average	upper (+) or lower (-)
4	high	leaner (L) or fatter (H) upper (+) or lower (-)
5	very high	upper (+) or lower (-)

Pigs

Each pig carcass is assessed and identified as falling into one of the following classes in the table below.

Conformation class	Carcass quality
S	superior
E	excellent
U	very good
R	good
O	fair
P	poor

Sheep

Each sheep carcase is identified as falling into one of the classes in the table below.

Conformation Class	Carcase quality
E	Excellent
U	Very Good
R	Good
O	Fair
P	Poor

The scale has five classes for fat cover.

Fat class	Fat cover	Subdivision
1	low	
2	slight	
3	average	
4	high	leaner (L) or fatter (H)
5	very high	

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to list the (i) local companies licensed to import meat; (ii) weight of meat each of these companies imported in each of the last five years; and (iii) type of meat imported by each company.

(AQW 48476/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: Individuals or companies do not need a license to import meat. Rather consignments of meat imported into the EU must meet specific import conditions laid down in the Community legislation.

Release of the information requested at points (ii) and (iii) would be likely to prejudice the commercial interests of the companies concerned. However the total quantity and type of meat that has been imported through the two Border Inspection Posts in the north of Ireland over the last 5 years amounts to 98 tonnes of beef, 674 tonnes of venison, 4,647 tonnes of chicken and 7,465 tonnes of lamb.

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how much of the recently agreed funding to be allocated under the Rural Development Programme will be dedicated to woodland creation; and how close this will take her Department towards achieving its aim of doubling woodland cover within fifty years.

(AQW 48575/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: I have allocated £17.4 million to support woodland expansion and the management of existing woodland under the Rural Development Programme 2014-20, which is sufficient to create 1,800 hectares of new woodland and sustain approximately 4,000 hectares created under previous programmes.

This will make a small but positive contribution towards our aim of 12% woodland area by the middle of this century. I will review progress during the mid-term review when the availability of farmland for planting will be clearer.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans her Department has to replace trees that have been cut down in the last year.

(AQW 48615/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: In line with sustainable forest management standards, all Departmental owned forests have forest management plans which provide an appropriate balance between economic, environmental and social objectives. These management plans include information on how trees should be replaced according to the identified objectives listed above. Most areas will be replanted after harvesting while others will be replaced using natural regeneration of either conifers or broadleaves depending on the objective for the area. In some instances we do not replace cleared trees in order to create open habitats, water or wind buffer zones as identified within the forest plan for the area. Those trees cut down in the last year will be replaced according to the forest management plan for the area.

With certain exemptions specified in the Forestry Act (2010), private woodland owners who intend to fell woodlands must apply for a felling licence from the Department. Felling is only permitted subject to agreement of a felling management plan, which includes information on how the felled area will be re-established with tree species in accordance with the principles of sustainable forest management.

Mr Milne asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (i) how many applications for the Single Farm Payment in the last two years have been declined as a result of incomplete forms; (ii) how many applicants have appealed this decision; (iii) how many took no further action; and (iv) how many appeals were upheld.

(AQW 48622/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: No applications for Single Farm Payment (SFP) were declined as a result of incomplete forms in the last two years.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what measures are being used to combat poor animal welfare in puppy farms.

(AQW 48637/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: Dog breeding here is regulated by the Welfare of Animals (Dog Breeding Establishments and Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2013 (the 2013 Regulations). These regulations are enforced by District Councils and define a breeding establishment as one or more premises, within the same District Council area, operated by the same person from which that person keeps 3 or more breeding bitches; and

- (a) breeds 3 or more litters of puppies in any 12 month period;
- (b) advertises 3 or more litters of puppies for sale in any 12 month period;
- (c) supplies 3 or more litters of puppies in any 12 month period; or
- (d) advertises a business of breeding or selling of puppies.

Subject to certain qualifying criteria and some exceptions, any person wishing to breed dogs must obtain a licence from the District Council in which the establishment is located.

The 2013 Regulations set out clear welfare standards with which commercial dog breeders must comply. Council inspectors visit each premises to assess whether or not it meets the 12 licensing conditions specified in the Regulations which include:

- the requirement to provide suitable accommodation, whelping facilities and diet;
- the requirement to microchip all dogs and pups in the establishment;
- a control on the age a bitch can be breed at and the number of litters that she can produce in her lifetime;
- a minimum age a pup can leave the breeder; and
- the need for breeding establishments to maintain records and introduce written socialisation, enhancement and enrichment programmes for approval by the Council.

A dog breeding establishment licence is valid for a period of 12 months from the date of issue.

The 2013 Regulations also provide Council inspectors with strong enforcement powers. Powers include amendment, suspension and revocation of a licence. A person breeding dogs without a licence or in breach of their licence conditions can be fined up to £5,000 and imprisoned for up to 6 months.

Those responsible for animals, including dog breeders, must also comply with the Welfare of Animals Act 2011. Anyone found guilty of causing unnecessary suffering to any animal face the tough penalties set out in the Act, which currently are up to 2 years imprisonment and/or an unlimited fine.

Legislation alone will not stop illegal "puppy farming". This will take a concerted effort by the public, dog buyers, welfare charities and enforcement agencies working together to identify breeders, licensed or unlicensed, who put financial gain before the welfare of their dogs and pups. All evidence about illegal dog breeding here should be reported to District Councils for investigation.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what her Department is doing to combat the existence of puppy farms.

(AQW 48638/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: Dog breeding here is regulated by the Welfare of Animals (Dog Breeding Establishments and Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2013 (the 2013 Regulations). These regulations are enforced by District Councils and define a breeding establishment as one or more premises, within the same District Council area, operated by the same person from which that person keeps 3 or more breeding bitches; and

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- a minimum age a pup can leave the breeder; and
- the need for breeding establishments to maintain records and introduce written socialisation, enhancement and enrichment programmes for approval by the Council.

A dog breeding establishment licence is valid for a period of 12 months from the date of issue.

The 2013 Regulations also provide Council inspectors with strong enforcement powers to take action and to prosecute as necessary any commercial breeder who is operating in sub-standard conditions.

You will be aware that my Department is currently carrying out a review into the implementation of the Welfare of Act 2011. The 2013 Regulations are made under this Act and their implementation is also under review. Following the public consultation exercise on the Interim Report of the Review of the implementation of the Welfare of Animals Act 2011, the Review Team is taking stakeholder ideas and suggestions into consideration in further developing the Review's findings and recommendations. The Review Team is currently preparing a Final Report which I anticipate will be published later this year.

Legislation alone will not stop illegal "puppy farming". This will take a concerted effort by the public, dog buyers, welfare charities and enforcement agencies working together to identify breeders, licensed or unlicensed, who put financial gain before the welfare of their dogs and pups. All evidence about illegal dog breeding here should be reported to District Councils for investigation.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the criteria for obtaining a dog breeding licence. (AQW 48639/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: Dog breeding here is regulated by the Welfare of Animals (Dog Breeding Establishments and Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2013 (the 2013 Regulations). These regulations are enforced by District Councils and define a breeding establishment as one or more premises, within the same District Council area, operated by the same person from which that person keeps 3 or more breeding bitches; and

- (a) breeds 3 or more litters of puppies in any 12 month period;
- (b) advertises 3 or more litters of puppies for sale in any 12 month period;
- (c) supplies 3 or more litters of puppies in any 12 month period; or
- (d) advertises a business of breeding or selling of puppies.

Subject to certain qualifying criteria and some exceptions, any person wishing to breed dogs must obtain a licence from the District Council in which the establishment is located.

The legislation introduced licence fees on a sliding scale, depending on the number of breeding bitches. These range from £150 for establishments with 10 bitches or less to £350 for those with over 200 bitches. The fee is increased by £50 for every 100 bitches thereafter.

The 2013 Regulations, at Schedule 4, set out clear welfare standards with which commercial dog breeders must comply. Council inspectors visit each premises to assess whether or not it meets the 12 licensing conditions specified in the Regulations which include:

- the requirement to provide suitable accommodation, whelping facilities and diet;
- the requirement to microchip all dogs and pups in the establishment;
- a control on the age a bitch can be breed at and the number of litters that she can produce in her lifetime;
- a minimum age a pup can leave the breeder; and
- the need for breeding establishments to maintain records and introduce written socialisation, enhancement and enrichment programmes for approval by the Council.

A full list of licensing conditions are set out at Schedule 4 of the 2013 Regulations which can be accessed at the following link: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nidsr/2013/9780337989957/contents>

A dog breeding establishment licence is valid for a period of 12 months from the date of issue.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the measures in place to ensure registered dog breeders provide adequate welfare for their animals. (AQW 48640/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: Dog breeding here is regulated by the Welfare of Animals (Dog Breeding Establishments and Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2013 (the 2013 Regulations).

The 2013 Regulations set out clear welfare standards with which commercial dog breeders must comply. Council inspectors visit each premises to assess whether or not it meets the 12 licensing conditions specified in the Regulations which include:

- the requirement to provide suitable accommodation, whelping facilities and diet;
- the requirement to microchip all dogs and pups in the establishment;
- a control on the age a bitch can be breed at and the number of litters that she can produce in her lifetime;
- a minimum age a pup can leave the breeder; and
- the need for breeding establishments to maintain records and introduce written socialisation, enhancement and enrichment programmes for approval by the Council.

A dog breeding establishment licence is valid for a period of 12 months from the date of issue.

The 2013 Regulations also provide Council inspectors with strong enforcement powers. Powers include amendment, suspension and revocation of a licence. A person breeding dogs without a licence or in breach of their licence conditions can be fined up to £5,000 and imprisoned for up to 6 months.

Those responsible for animals, including dog breeders, must also comply with the Welfare of Animals Act 2011. That legislation provides for a "duty of care" in respect of all protected animals and allows action to be taken to prevent suffering. Anyone found guilty of causing unnecessary suffering to any animal face the tough penalties set out in the Welfare of Animals Act 2011, which currently are up to 2 years imprisonment and/or an unlimited fine.

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many of her departmental staff have a registered disability, broken down (i) by full time equivalent; and (ii) as a percentage of the workforce.

(AQW 48641/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: There are 235 staff with a registered disability in the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. This equates to 213 full time equivalent staff and represents 7.3% of the Department's workforce.

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether any of her departmental responsibilities have been affected by the actions of any proscribed organisations since 2011.

(AQW 48659/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: No.

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline her Department's guidance issued on farm machinery safety, particularly in relation to having more than one person travel in the cabin of single seat vehicles.

(AQW 48670/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department does not issue guidance on farm machinery safety. Health and Safety is a matter for the north's Health and Safety Executive. However in relation to farm machinery I would strongly urge users to follow the manufacturer's instructions.

The Health and Safety Executive provide guidance on these matters and I understand they do not advocate more than one person travelling in the cabin of a single seat vehicle unless for the purposes of instruction.

The law in the north, from the 27th February 2007, states that drivers and passengers must wear a seat-belt in cars and goods vehicles where one is fitted. This includes agricultural vehicles. This message and instruction on the proper use of machinery is conveyed to all students and farmers attending courses or undertaking training at CAFRE.

I am also aware that the Ulster Farmers Union have a booklet "Agriculture and the Public Roads" (2014 edition). Guidance states "If your vehicle is designed to carry only one person you must NOT carry a passenger."

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what practical help or support her Department can provide to rural communities interested in pursuing the micro-generation of electricity from renewable sources.

(AQW 48681/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: Thank you for the enquiry into the help or support my department can provide. As you will know the Rural Development Plan 2014-2020 (RDP) has been recently approved by the European Commission. Under the proposed Business Investment Scheme of the RDP, feasibility studies into renewable energy projects are eligible for support as it is vital that rural communities take decisions on an informed basis. Purchase and installation of renewable energy technologies are not eligible for support due to the generation incentives (Renewables Obligation) already in place.

Small scale Feed-In Tariff (FIT) mechanisms are also being considered following the scheduled closure of the Renewables Obligation in 2017.

In March 2014 I met with the members of Down District Farmers for Renewable Energy (DDFFRE) to discuss a potential renewable energy project in the Lecale area led by local farmers. This microgrid system intends to utilise local renewable generation provided by a structured mix of renewable technologies; small scale wind, solar PV, on-farm AD and the Sea-gen tidal test site at Portaferry.

As the current electricity grid system is under increasing pressure, innovative energy storage systems such as this example could be a key component in allowing farmers and or rural communities to continue to further develop renewable energy technologies.

My Department also delivered two tranches under the Biomass Processing Challenge Fund (BPCF), a capital grant scheme for renewable energy installations on farms under The European Sustainable Competitiveness Programme 2007-2013. While this scheme is now closed and will not be re-opened due to changes in the generation incentives and network capacity issues, its successful projects may provide a demonstration facility for a range of technologies that may be suitable for those interested in micro-generation.

The Greenhouse Gas Implementation Partnerships' (GHGIP); a DARD-chaired representative body consisting of agri-food industry and environmental stakeholders, and established with the aim of ensuring that local food production is undertaken in the most carbon efficient manner possible; produced the "Efficient Farming Cuts Greenhouse Gases" action plan. The plan includes action such as the Practical On-Farm Renewable Energy event (POFRE). This event along with training and guidance offered by the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) courses, highlight all potential advantages and disadvantages associated with on-farm renewable energy projects and allow farmers to make informed decision based on what is best for their particular business.

I hope this information and available support can help rural communities develop their plans on micro generation.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the delivery of Rural Development money, following the European Commission's approval of the Rural Development Programme 2014 – 2020.

(AQW 48691/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: European Commission approval of our Rural Development Programme paves the way for up to £623m in funding to become available for improving farming and agri-food businesses, protecting our environment and supporting rural development projects across the north of Ireland.

I have allocated £261million to support the competitiveness of our agri-food industry in the north, £245.2 million to support schemes that protect our rural environment and £80 million to develop our rural economies to enable them to thrive and prosper. Up to £37.2 million has been allocated to Technical Assistance to support the implementation and delivery of the Programme.

The Programme will be funded with a European contribution of approximately £186.5 million and match funding from DARD's own budget to maximise the drawdown of EU funds available. Despite the significant financial pressures facing my Department, this will be a high priority for me.

The agreement secured with the Executive will provide additional funding of up to £250m to fund the proposed 'Farm Business Improvement Scheme' requested by the Agri-Food Strategy Board to deliver on the aims and objectives in the Board's Going for Growth.

All proposed budgets will be subject to the necessary business case approvals, industry uptake, delivery considerations and approval of bids made to DFP for the necessary additional funds.

My officials are finalising work for the various schemes within the Programme in order to start to open the new schemes when the necessary approvals are in place.

The first phase of the Farm Business Improvement Scheme is expected to open later this year. This will include the establishment of Business Development Groups and training for farmers including farm safety and business planning, with the other schemes to follow in a co-ordinated manner.

Local action Groups and Councils are working to submit interim rural development strategies and community plans.

Forestry schemes are also expected to open this autumn in readiness for the 2015/16 tree planting season.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the selection criteria or scoring mechanisms which have been established for projects making applications to the Rural Development Fund 2014-2020, following its approval by the European Commission.

(AQW 48693/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: Officials in my Department are currently developing application procedures and relevant selection criteria for each scheme and measure recently approved by the EU Commission. They have been and will continue to engage with the Monitoring Committee and Stakeholders on the application procedures and selection criteria. When the appropriate approvals are in place my Department will make clear the application procedure and selection criteria for each scheme and measure being funded through the Rural Development Programme 2014-2020.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what are the financial consequences of the EU Commission announcement of 7 September 2015 relating to the farming crisis.

(AQW 48697/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: At the Special Agriculture Council on 7 September the European Commission announced an aid package worth €500m, which it said was focused on addressing: the cash flow difficulties facing farmers; the functioning of the supply chain; and stabilising markets.

While this package is welcome, it is clear that the Commission's response falls short of the immediate meaningful action I have strenuously been pushing for regarding raising the intervention price.

Commissioner Hogan has since announced that €420m of the Commission's package relates to targeted aid. He has also announced the national envelopes of targeted aid for each of the 28 Member States. The allocation for Britain and the north of Ireland is €36.07m.

The exact financial consequences of this package for the north of Ireland remain to be decided. Discussions are ongoing with Defra, Scotland and Wales on the detail of EU aid proposals, including distribution of the allocation of targeted aid.

I have written to Commissioner Hogan seeking further clarification on support measures outlined in the package and expressing my concern about how our Member State envelope will support our farmers in the north of Ireland. I am continuing to urge the Commission to use the full range of tools at its disposal to help our farming industry, including raising the dairy intervention price.

I have also written again to the Defra Secretary of State Liz Truss, expressing my disappointment at her position and the Commission's on intervention prices. In addition, I have and will continue to press hard the strong case for differentiated aid for the north of Ireland.

I have and will continue to fully support the farming sector and work wholeheartedly to get the best possible deal for the industry in the north. I remain optimistic for the future. Whilst dairy farmers are facing a very difficult time at present I believe that the longer term outlook for the industry is good.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how much funding has been provided to local farmers by her Department under the EU de minimis rules, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 48698/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: The support provided to local farmers under EU de minimis rules in each of the last three years is as follows:

- 2013 £3.963 million
- 2014 £0.017 million
- 2015 (to date) £1.662 million

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what funding her Department has provided to tackle the current farming crisis.

(AQW 48703/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: The crisis facing all sectors of agriculture is largely a global crisis. It has been caused by a range of factors outside our control and it cannot be solved at a local level alone. I have therefore consistently stated my view that it is incumbent upon the European Commission to provide timely and effective support. Given this, my focus has been on lobbying the European Commission to provide immediate aid for our farmers and asking my counterparts in the south and in Britain to support me in this.

I have pressed the Agriculture Commissioner, Phil Hogan, on a number of occasions to ensure the market support measures available within the Common Market Organisation Regulation (EU No 1308/2013) are fit for purpose and deployed swiftly and effectively. In particular, I have called for an increase in the intervention price for which I have received cross party support in these efforts.

At the 7 September extraordinary EU Agriculture Council meeting in Brussels, the Commission announced a €500m package of proposals to support farmers. Following confirmation of Member State allocations of targeted direct aid last week, my immediate priority is to ensure that our farmers get a fair share of Britain's and the north's €36.1m allocation, and that this reaches farmers without delay.

In addition, I am aware how vital CAP Pillar 1 payments are to the livelihoods of many farmers and I have already given my commitment to making full Direct Payments to as many farmers as possible in December 2015.

Finally, I am delighted that the European Commission has now approved our Rural Development Programme 2014-2020. Approval paves the way for up to £623m in funding to become available over the Programme period for supporting the competitiveness of farming and agri-food businesses, protecting our environment and supporting rural development projects. It will introduce schemes to help farmers improve productivity, contain costs and review their business models.

The new Rural Development Programme will be funded with a European contribution of approximately £186.5 million and match funding from DARD's own budget to maximise the drawdown of EU funds available. Despite the significant financial pressures facing my Department, this will be a high priority for me.

The agreement secured with the Executive will provide additional funding of up to £250m to fund the proposed Farm Business Improvement Scheme, recommended as part of the industry's 'Going for Growth' report. This is a portfolio of training,

knowledge transfer and targeted capital investment schemes which will assist the sustainable growth of farm and commercial horticulture businesses.

The first phase of the Farm Business Improvement Scheme is expected to open later this year, with the establishment of Business Development Groups for farmers. The scheme will help farmers to learn about and enhance their knowledge of business management, new technologies and innovative ways of working, which will assist them to think more clearly about their farm, their income and their future.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many dairy farms are in North Down.

(AQW 48726/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: Analysis of the June Agricultural and Horticultural Survey indicates that there were 27 Dairy type farms in the North Down constituency in 2014.

The table below provides the number of Dairy type farms from 2010 to 2014.

Number of Dairy Type Farms in North Down (2010-2014)

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Dairy Type Farms	31	29	25	27	27

Source: DARD, June Agricultural and Horticultural Survey (various years)

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the payments to North/South bodies that she has approved this year.

(AQW 48742/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: I have responsibility for one North/South Body – the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission (FCILC), also known as the Loughs Agency.

The Loughs Agency aims to provide sustainable social, economic and environmental benefits through the effective conservation, management, promotion and development of the fisheries and marine resources of the Foyle and Carlingford Areas. Marketing and promoting the resources of these Areas is one of the Agency's key priorities. An annual programme of marketing local and international events, developed with a range of partners, ensures that the Foyle and Carlingford Areas continue to be a major tourist attraction. Earlier this year, the Agency completed a suite of INTERREG IVa funded marine tourism and angling development projects, aimed at providing accessible infrastructure for visitors and local people alike. Enhancement of the Foyle Marina and cruise ship quay is just one of a number of successful projects. This has been the centre point for several maritime festivals and preparations are well underway for the return of the Round the World Clipper race here once again in 2016. The Agency's education and outreach activities continue to grow, with new education programmes developed upon the 'Foyle Ambassadors' theme. These programmes, which are aimed at engaging young people in the significance and use of the river, also result in qualifications in angling, canoeing and power boating. Another prime example of the Agency's work is through its investment strategy for local and community initiatives. The Agency's 'Sustainable Development Fund', which offers 75% funding up to a maximum of £7,500, enables local community and private organisations to design and deliver marine tourism and angling development projects which compliment the Agency's aims. The Loughs Agency, where possible, manages and assists programme developments with EU INTERREG and other sources of funding.

To date this year, my Department has made two grant-in-aid payments to the Loughs Agency, equating to £1,677,204. The first payment of £1,316,704 was made on 26 January 2015 and the second payment of £360,500 made on 26 August 2015.

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the funding provided in 2015-16 to the Open Farm Weekend initiative; and to list the farms that received funding.

(AQW 48770/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: Financial support for initiatives such as The Bank of Ireland Open Farm Weekend (BOIOFW) has been made available through the NI Regional Food Programme, which is administered by my Department. The Ulster Farmer's Union, who deliver the BOIOFW, did not seek funding from the 2015-16 programme.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many claimants under the Basic Payment Scheme were asked for written evidence to confirm that they meet the active farmer requirements.

(AQW 48806/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: The Department sought written evidence from 2,941 farm businesses that they meet the active farmer requirements.

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what contact she has had with the Ministry of Defence to ensure there is no repetition of the incident in which a Royal Navy submarine caught the net of a fishing trawler, off the County Down coast in April 2015.

(AQW 48828/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: At the time of the incident I visited the owner and skipper of the trawler Karen to see for myself the damage to their vessel and the effect it had on those involved. I wrote to the British Secretary of State on 17 April asking the matter to be fully investigated and requested a full report. On 13 May I followed up with a letter to the British Minister for Transport asking that his Department's Marine Accident Investigation Branch determine who was responsible and ensure the incident could not occur again. The British Minister of the Armed Forces twice stated in the House of Commons during the summer that a Royal Navy submarine was not involved. However on 7th September I received a letter from that Minister stating that new information confirmed that a Royal Navy submarine was in fact involved and we had a Written Ministerial Statement to that effect on the same day. I issued a statement on that date outlining how appalled I was about this revelation, asking why it had taken five months for the British Ministry of Defence to admit responsibility and on 14th September I wrote to the British Minister of the Armed Forces stating that there appeared to be conflicting evidence of this incident and asked that I was fully briefed on the matter and given a full report. I also stated that to ensure there could be no repetition of the accident, the Fishing Industry Safety Group be approached with all the information and bring forward recommendations with fishing industry endorsement. I will continue to prioritise the safety of our fishing fleet in the time ahead to ensure there is no repetition of this incident.

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQW 48401/11-16, to detail the costs of staff who conduct inspections and are involved in mapping work and the staff who are engaged in reviewing these decisions.

(AQW 48835/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: The cost of staff who conduct inspections and are involved in mapping work and review of decisions was £4,681,874 in 2014/15. This includes staff working in Land and Property Services.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, of those claimants under the Basic Payment Scheme who were asked for written evidence to confirm they meet the active farmer requirements, how many have been rejected.

(AQW 48866/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: The assessment of evidence provided by farm businesses has recently commenced and no decisions have yet been issued.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what is the appeal process for Basic Payment Scheme claimants who are refused payment after failing to meet the active farmer requirements.

(AQW 48867/11-16)

Mrs O'Neill: The Department continues to operate a two-stage Review of Decisions Procedure for area-based schemes. Claimants who are found not to meet the active farmer requirements will be advised of their right to seek a review of decision. Full details of the procedure are published on the Department's website.

Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, in light of the decision by Foras na Gaeilge to cut the scholarship scheme to Gael Linn by 50 per cent, for her assessment of the impact of a reduction in the number of students attending Coláiste Mhachaire Rabhartaigh college this summer; and whether this scheme will be reinstated in the future.

(AQW 48345/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): The scholarship grant provided by Foras na Gaeilge to Gael Linn and other organisations in 2015 was based on the 2014 attendance figures on a per capita basis as follows:-

Organisation	Amount awarded in 2014	No. of students in 2014	Average funding per student 2014	Average funding per student 2015
Conradh na Gaeilge (Comhaltas Uladh)	€28,488	1,646	€17.3	€27.2
Gael Linn	€60,055	852	€70.5	€27.2
Coláiste na bhFiann	-	75	-	€27.2
All Organisations	€88,343	2,573	€34.3	€70,010

This adjustment in funding was made in an effort to match funding with demand and allow students to choose their own college.

Although the numbers attending Gael Linn courses have fallen overall, I am advised that the numbers of students attending other colleges in the Donegal area have risen. I have asked Foras na Gaeilge to provide me with an assessment of the impact of their decision to reallocate the funding.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for a breakdown of the Sports Matters Monitoring Group by (i) age; and (ii) gender.

(AQW 48403/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Membership of the Sport Matters Monitoring Group is set out in the Terms of Reference for the Group. The Terms of Reference states that the Group will be chaired by the Minister and members will include: -

- Senior officials from Government Departments - DCAL, DHSSPS, DE, DSD, DEL and DARD;
- Senior representatives from Sport NI, the NI Sports Forum and the NI Environment Agency; and
- a representative of the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives.

The Terms of Reference outlines the role of the Sport Matters Monitoring Group and does not impose age or gender criteria on the membership of that Group. In addition, organisations can choose, with agreement of the Chair, to send a different representative to meetings if required.

As DCAL does not ask members to declare their age, this information is not held by the Department. As such, I am unable to provide you with the information you seek in this regard.

In addition, while the gender make up of the Group does vary between meetings there is no requirement to formally record this. You may wish to refer to the Terms of Reference for, and minutes of meetings held by, the Sport Matters Monitoring Group which are publically available on the DCAL website and can be accessed via the following link:

http://www.dcalni.gov.uk/index/sport/sport_matters/sport_matters_monitoring_group.htm

Mr McKinney asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on the future of the departmental facilities in South Belfast which are used by the public.

(AQW 48433/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Department is responsible for the Lagan Towpath parts of which run through the South Belfast constituency. DCAL co-funds Lagan Canal Trust along with Belfast; Lisburn & Castlereagh; and Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Councils.

The Trust's primary objective is to reopen the Lagan Navigation from Belfast Harbour to Lough Neagh and it has submitted a Strategic Outline Business Case to the Department of Finance and Personnel for approval for the first phase only from Belfast Harbour to Union Locks, Lisburn.

National Museums' intends to retain the current opening hours and free admission to the public to the Ulster Museum.

National Museums' development aspirations for the Ulster Museum is to increase gallery space for art and contemporary history as well as developing the Troubles Gallery and to continue to focus its activity on promoting equality, tackling poverty and social exclusion.

In May 2015 Libraries NI completed a review of current library opening hours to enable the organisation to live within budget in 2015/16 and ensure that all libraries remain sustainable. The reduced hours come into effect in November 2015.

Impact of Opening Hours review on Libraries in South Belfast:

Library	Opening Hours November 2014	Proposed Opening Hours November 2015	Change (Hours)
Carryduff	18	18	0
Finaghy	42	50	+8
Lisburn Road	40	40	0
Newtownbreda	40	40	0
Ormeau Road	46	45	-1

As part of Libraries NI Invest Strategy it has recently submitted (September 2015) a Business Case to the Department for a £1.65 million redevelopment of Lisburn Road library.

SportNI are developing a Sports Facility Strategy for the North and have engaged with key stakeholders including sport governing bodies, sports clubs, community groups and the 11 District Councils. I would point out that the sport governing bodies and clubs are responsible for running the facilities.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether St. Paul's Amateur Boxing Club was granted funding under the Boxing Investment Programme to refurbish premises within St. Paul's GAC complex and then permitted to transfer the spend to new premises; and by what process was this possible.

(AQW 48462/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: In June 2014, Sport NI issued an indicative letter of offer to St Paul's Amateur Boxing Club (ABC) outlining financial assistance of £56,077 available to it under the Boxing Investment Programme. This indicative award was based on the capital works needed to the premises occupied by the boxing club within the St Paul's GAC complex at that time. No building work has been undertaken under the award and no payment has been made to St Paul's ABC.

A Design Team, appointed by the Irish Amateur Boxing Association, and approved by Sport NI, has prepared plans for the Boxing Club for their current facilities at Riverdale Park East, Andersonstown Road, Belfast.

However, I understand that they are currently considering an opportunity to relocate to new premises at Finaghy Road, Belfast. Sport NI has asked the Boxing Club to confirm by 30th September 2015, whether it intends to proceed with the development of the Riverdale premises or relocate to the Finaghy Road premises.

It was recognised from the outset that many boxing clubs lacked the capacity to avail of public funding and that a degree of flexibility would be required within the administration processes for the Boxing Investment Programme. As part of this, it was recognised that some boxing clubs may need to relocate to more suitable premises and Sport NI has been working with the Design Teams and District Councils in this regard for a number of clubs.

I can assure you that any funding provided under the Boxing Investment Programme goes through an audited process, is based on plans prepared by Design Teams and is independently scrutinised by a Technical Survey Team.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to AQW 46116/11-15, whether bailiffs and adjudicating officers within her Department have been trained in how to deal with people on the autistic spectrum who have been referred for fisheries prosecutions.

(AQW 48463/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: No specific training has been provided, however officials are currently engaging with Autism NI to deliver an awareness programme for DCAL Inland Fisheries staff.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what procedures her Department has in place to ensure that the warrants of private water bailiffs are up to date.

(AQW 48464/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Private Water Bailiffs are authorised officers under the Fisheries Act (NI) 1966 and are warranted by the courts to carry out enforcement duties on private fisheries. They are nominated by angling clubs to operate only on those waters either owned or leased by the angling club to which they belong.

Individuals are required to renew their warrant every 5 years and it is an angling club's responsibility to ensure that all Private Water Bailiffs operating on waters under its jurisdiction have valid warrants.

Where my Department progresses a fisheries prosecution case detected by a Private Water Bailiff, a check will be made to ensure the Private Water Bailiff's warrant card is valid for the date of detection and for the water where the illegal fishing activity was detected.

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how many of her departmental staff have a registered disability, broken down (i) by full time equivalent; and (ii) as a percentage of the workforce.

(AQW 48643/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The number of departmental staff who have registered a disability by full time equivalent is 2.97. This equates to 1% of the Department's workforce.

It should be noted however, that this figure only reflects those staff who have identified themselves as having a disability and who have recorded this information on the HR Connect system.

Mrs Hale asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure when the Lagan Navigation Canal Locks were last maintained.

(AQW 48646/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: As the Lagan Navigation is currently abandoned, DCAL does not routinely maintain any of the 27 Canal locks. However, under a Service Level Agreement with DARD Rivers Agency, the locks are included in monthly maintenance inspections to identify any potential Health and Safety issues, such as repairs required to fencing or clearance of vegetation.

Mrs Hale asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what financial support her Department has offered the Lagan Canal Trust, given that their budget has been cut by 11 per cent.

(AQW 48647/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: In line with budget cuts to my Department for the 2015-16 financial year, funding to Lagan Canal Trust has been reduced by 11.2% to £17,405k.

Financial support 'in-kind' is also provided to the Trust through access to the Department's officials, including Economists, who have provided assistance to the Trust in the preparation of a Strategic Outline Business Case for the re-opening of the Lagan Navigation.

DCAL has also entered into a Licence Agreement with Lagan Canal Trust and Springvale Employment and Learning to allow participants of The Waterways College to use the DCAL owned Lagan Towpath free of charge, for their learning opportunities.

DCAL Inland Waterways funding for Lagan Canal Trust can be found on the Government Funding Database at the link below <https://govfundingpublic.nics.gov.uk>

Mr Ó hOisín asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail any discussions her Department has had with the Roe Angling Association regarding the transfer of fishing rights on a stretch of the River Roe at Roepark, currently managed by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency.

(AQW 48667/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My officials have not had any discussions with the Roe Angling Association Ltd regarding the transfer of fishing rights on a stretch of the River Roe near Limavady.

I am also advised that DOE Officials have not had any discussions with the Roe Angling Association regarding the transfer of fishing rights on a stretch of the River Roe at Roepark.

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether she will seek discussions with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport to establish the potential support there would be for a bid by Londonderry as a UK nomination for EU City of Culture status.

(AQW 48684/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The next opportunity for a North of Ireland city to hold the designation of European Capital of Culture is in 2023, in association with a winning city in Hungary. Cities will declare to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport their intention to bid in December 2016.

I understand that Derry City and Strabane District Council are still considering whether they wish to apply for the title. My Department will continue to work with and support stakeholders in Derry and across the North West to ensure that the City is in a strong position should they proceed with a bid next year.

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether any public money is being sought for the reconstruction of the collapsed stand at the new National Stadium at Windsor Park.

(AQW 48685/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: It is anticipated that the costs associated with rectifying the issues with the West Stand will be a matter for the insurers and no additional funds will be required by DCAL.

The Windsor Park project is currently under construction and the project is progressing well, with construction of the East and South Stand well advanced and refurbishment of the North Stand having commenced.

In March 2015, the Department was notified by the IFA that there was a structural problem with the existing West Stand.

After receiving approval from the IFA's insurers, the old West Stand has now been demolished and the details of the next steps are being developed between the IFA, their insurers and the project team.

Excluding the West Stand the remainder of the project is scheduled to be completed in November 2015; it is unknown at this stage how much the redevelopment of the entire West Stand will impact on the project timeline, although it is envisaged that from the point of approval, construction of the new West Stand could be completed within 12 months.

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what discussions she has had on the provision of funding for arts organisations who have lost funding from the Arts Council.

(AQW 48728/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: This has been a difficult budget with pressures resulting directly from cuts imposed by the British Government and I have had to apply cuts across a number of business areas and other Arms Length Bodies, not just Arts.

It is for the Arts Council and its Board to consider how to accommodate reductions in its budget and decide on the organisations to lose funding. I appreciate this will be extremely difficult and that at this stage in the year, adverse consequences are unavoidable but I am confident that the Arts Council is working through the details in order to minimise the effects.

I will, however, continue to promote the benefits of the arts and I am bringing forward an Arts and Culture Strategy which will emphasise the importance of arts and culture in creating a cohesive society, in contributing to positive health and well

being, in promoting tourism, in helping the economy and acting as an inspirational driver for the creative industries and artistic excellence.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on the ongoing work between Sport NI and local government to develop Sports Facilities Strategies for each council area; and when area reports will be published.

(AQW 48754/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I can advise that Sport NI continues to progress the development of a Sports Facilities Strategy for the north of Ireland. In October 2014 Strategic Leisure Limited was appointed to lead a consortium of consultants to take forward the Regional Sport Facilities Strategy with work focusing on research and consultation with key stakeholders from District Councils, Governing Bodies and other Government Departments. The Strategy is complemented by 11 associated Council Area Reports which are currently being prepared by District Councils.

I understand that Sport NI has now received a first draft of the Sports Facilities Strategy for consideration and comment. This will be finalised in partnership with District Councils during the period September – December 2015.

District Councils are also currently finalising the Council Area Reports on the provision of sports and leisure facilities in each of their areas. Sport NI expects the first drafts of the Council Area Reports to be completed in October/November 2015. These will ensure that the facility needs of local clubs, community organisations and schools will be included.

When complete, the Strategy and Reports will provide a framework for the strategic development of sports facilities throughout the north of Ireland.

Mr Hazzard asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what programmes or initiatives her Department has established to increase the use of libraries among local communities.

(AQW 48764/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Libraries NI runs a number of programmes and initiatives aimed at increasing the use of libraries among local communities.

Programmes such as 'Rhythm and Rhyme', 'Quality Assured Class Visits', the 'Summer Reading Challenge' and 'Family Fun days' are designed to attract families and young children into libraries.

The 'One to One Assistance' and other IT programmes, such as 'Got IT?' and 'Go ON!', are designed to help people in local communities to improve their IT skills and to use library IT services.

Libraries also run a number of activities to encourage people in local communities to come to libraries in order to learn more about how they can improve their health and well-being and tackle issues such as stress, mindfulness and nutrition.

Libraries also host Heritage and Culture related events aimed at those interested in local and family history and to promote the unique heritage resources available in libraries and elsewhere. As part of this, Libraries NI has recently agreed a new partnership with National Museums. The aim of the partnership is to improve community access to museums stored collections by bringing them into local libraries. To this end a number of museums based workshops and other events will be taking place in local libraries over the next 6 months on topics such as archaeology, emigration, farming, transport and space. The new programme will be launched during Communities Relations and Cultural Awareness Week 2015.

Mr Hazzard asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how libraries can play a role in the educational development of pre-school children; and what support libraries can give to parents with young children.

(AQW 48765/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Libraries are at the heart of local communities. They actively promote the value of educational development at every stage of life, beginning with pre-school children. To this end, all libraries provide free books for babies and toddlers as well as information leaflets and other materials containing reading tips for parents of young children.

Libraries also offer a wide range of learning support services and programmes for pre-school children, parents and families. Some of these, such as Rhythm and Rhyme sessions and Storytime, are designed to give young children, their parents and/or carers time to have fun and learn together. Libraries also run free courses for parents and carers to assist them, where necessary, in developing the skills they require to support their young children's educational development.

Mr McKinney asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what action her Department is taking to promote arts therapy for people suffering from mental ill-health.

(AQW 48783/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department's funding for the Arts is mainly disbursed through the Arts Council.

The Arts Council's communications strategy for Promoting Positive Mental Health and Wellbeing through the Arts aims to raise awareness of the following:

- (i) Participation in the arts promotes positive mental health
- (ii) The Public Health Agency's relevant information

- (iii) The Lifeline organisation
- (iv) The Lifeline telephone number
- (v) Suicide prevention messages

The Arts Council has profiled two case studies;

- Partisan Productions and Colin Neighbourhood Partnership joined forces to present 'I Never See The Prettiest Thing', a new play exploring the causes and consequences of suicide in a community with one of the highest rates in Belfast. The play ran from Tuesday 25 - Saturday 29 March in the Brook Activity Centre, Twinbrook – in the very heart of the community that its narrative deals with. 'I Never see the Prettiest Thing' was funded by my Department, the Arts Council and the Community Relations Council
- Local charity Action Mental Health recently launched their "Basket case" exhibition at Fermanagh County Museum. Funded by the Arts Council Small Grants Programme, the inspirational and thought provoking exhibition aims to challenge the stigma associated with mental illness while highlighting how the arts can promote better mental health.

The Arts Council's Communications Department continues to profile programmes of arts activities which promote health and wellbeing.

In addition, the Arts Council continues to support mental wellbeing through its Arts & Older People Programme, Small Grants Programme and Lottery Funded Programme. Recent awards include Brain Injury Matters (Lottery), Mindwise (Art & Older People Programme) and NIAMH (Arts & Older People Programme).

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for her assessment of the 3G pitch provision in the Banbridge area; and what steps are being take to address increase provision.

(AQW 48796/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I can advise that Sport NI's Active Places facilities database shows the following 3G pitch provision in the Banbridge Area:

- Cheney Park – 105 x 65m
- Havlock Park – 80 x 40m
- Rathfriland High School – 95 x 54m
- Moneyslane Football Club – 45 x 25m

In addition, Sport NI's Active Places Research Report, Bridging the Gap (2014 update), shows a significant shortfall in playing pitches throughout the north of Ireland, including the provision of 3G pitches in the Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Council area. This research does not take account of the quality or condition of existing pitch provision and is not based on 'actual need' but rather a standard suggesting three acres of pitch space per 1,000 people.

As a first step, I can advise that Sport NI is progressing with the development of a Sports Facilities Strategy for the north of Ireland. In October 2014 Strategic Leisure Limited was appointed to lead a consortium of consultants to take forward the Regional Sport Facilities Strategy with work focusing on research and consultation with key stakeholders from District Councils, Governing Bodies and other Government Departments. The Strategy is complemented by 11 associated Council Area Reports which are currently being prepared by District Councils, including Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon District Council. When complete, the Strategy and Reports will provide a framework for the strategic development of sports facilities, including pitch provision throughout the north of Ireland.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether funding has been made available for 2015/2016, to support the continuation of successful projects and outcomes of the North West Social and Economic Development Programme.

(AQW 48832/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: A bid was submitted in the 2015/16 June Monitoring Round to support continuation of successful projects and outcomes from the 2014/15 North West Social and Economic Development Programme.

As you are aware, the Executive has not yet agreed in-year Monitoring Round bids in the 2015-16 financial year.

My officials continue to work closely with stakeholders in the North West to support partnerships and opportunities to maximise the long term impact of City of Culture 2013. A significant investment of £6m from 1st January 2014 to date has significantly increased capacity and sustainability of successful projects established in 2013.

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the usage of (i) Holywood; (ii) Bangor; and (iii) Donaghadee libraries, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 48848/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Library usage is defined by a combination of:

- the loans made by the library;
- the use of Public Access Terminals (PATs);

- the use of the free public WiFi;
- the level of participation in core programmes run by the libraries e.g. Rythm & Rhyme sessions, reading groups; and
- the level of participants in regular activities e.g. IT training sessions, Job Clubs.

Libraries NI has supplied, for the libraries at Holywood, Bangor and Donaghadee, a breakdown of usage, based on this definition, for the last three years, this is set out in the tables below:

Holywood Library

	Loans	PAT Use Number of sessions	WiFi Number of sessions	Core Programmes Number of participants	Regular activities Number of participants
2012/13	64,449	11,309	N/A	1,529	N/A
2013/14	62,213	10,804	N/A	1,517	330
2014/15	60,438	10,040	2,383	2,399	367

Bangor Library

	Loans	PAT Use Number of sessions	WiFi Number of sessions	Core Programmes Number of participants	Regular activities Number of participants
2012/13	214,751	36,860	N/A	3,703	N/A
2013/14	192,944	32,585	N/A	5,344	304
2014/15	187,291	31,286	5,648	4,654	418

Donaghadee Library

	Loans	PAT Use Number of sessions	WiFi Number of sessions	Core Programmes Number of participants	Regular activities Number of participants
2012/13	48,973	5,871	N/A	1,695	N/A
2013/14	48,343	5,296	N/A	2,255	33
2014/15	45,871	4,222	549	2,369	801

The information provided for 2014/15 is provisional and subject to Libraries NI's statistical validation process.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to AQW 48422/11-16, to list the dates when each of the referred to declarations were made.

(AQW 48865/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Relevant declarations of interest in relation to St Paul's Gaelic Athletic Club were made by Sport NI employees as part of the organisation's annual returns for declarations of interests by staff members as follows:

- One employee declared an interest as part of the 2003/04 return and has declared an interest in every subsequent year.
- One employee declared an interest as part of the 2009/10 return and has declared an interest in every subsequent year.
- One employee declared an interest as part of the 2010/11 return and has declared an interest in every subsequent year.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (i) when she was provided with a draft answer to AQW 48121/11-15; and (ii) to provide an answer to this question.

(AQW 48868/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I can advise that I was provided with a draft answer to AQW 48121/11-15 on 8 July 2015.

I provided the Member with a response to this question on 3 August 2015.

Department of Education

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Education to detail the (i) destination; (ii) duration; (iii) total cost; and (iv) purpose of each trip outside the United Kingdom and Ireland taken by (a) the Minister; (b) his Special Adviser; (c) his departmental officials; and (d) personnel in each of the departmental arm's-length bodies, in each of the last four years.

(AQW 48298/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): The information requested is detailed in the tables below;

Minister

	Destination	Duration	Reason	Total Cost
2011/12	N/A			
2012/13	N/A			
2013/14	Toronto/New York	5 Days	Ministerial Visit	£3078.92
2014/15	N/A			

Special Adviser

	Destination	Duration	Reason	Total Cost
2011/12	N/A			
2012/13	N/A			
2013/14	Toronto/New York	5 DAYS	Ministerial Visit	£4,535.85
2014/15	N/A			

Departmental Officials

	Destination	Duration	Reason	Total Cost
2011/12	Tallinn, Estonia	5 Days	SICI Conference	£431.71
	Arnhem, Netherlands	3 Days	EU Thematic Working Group On Assessment	£714.82
	Brussels, Belgium	3 Days	TWG Assessment Meeting	£867.24
	Brussels, Belgium	2 Days	EU Working Group On ICT	£403.39
	Brussels, Belgium	2 Days	EU Working Group	£295.09 Cost oo Department – Some Costs Met By EU
	Amsterdam, Netherlands	3 Days	SICI Conference	£122.72
	Bordeaux, France	3 Days	EU Agency For Special Needs Meeting	£192.66 Cost to Department - Some Costs Met By EU
2012/13	Nicosia, Cyprus	4 Days	Special Education Needs Conference	£878.47
	Ljbljiana, Slovenia	3 Days	Special Education Needs Conference	£585.82
	Odense, Denmark	2 Days	European Agency For Special Needs Meeting	£18.29 Cost To Department - Most Costs Met By European Agency
	Beijing, China	6 Days	British Council International Conference	£31.25 Cost Tto Department –Most Costs Met By British Council
	Washington, Usa	5 Days	Leadership Programme	£1,296.92
	Brussels	3 Days	Special Education Needs	Cost Met By European Agency

	Destination	Duration	Reason	Total Cost
2013/14	Toronto/New York	5 Days	Ministerial Visit	£1,982.92
	Toronto/New York	5 Days	Ministerial Visit	£4,086.90
	Nice, France	3 Days	European Policy Network On School Leadership	£328.95
	Oslo, Norway	2 Days	International Conference Evaluation & Assessment	£1,044.89
	Bratislava, Slovakia	3 Days	SICI Conference	£442.42
	Brussels, Belgium	3 Days	International Conference	£331.36
	Lisbon, Portugal	4 Days	Transatlantic Forum Early Years	£170.43
	Paris, France	6 Days	Early Years Study Visit	£548.96
	Washington, Usa	7 Days	British Council	£1,145.70
	Amsterdam, Netherlands	3 Days	Transatlantic Forum On Early Years	£270.15
2014/15	Amsterdam, Netherlands	3 Days	SICI International Conference	£373.96
	Dresden, Germany	4 Days	Impact On The Inspection Conference	£489.30
	Bilbao, Spain	5 Days	Exchange Visit With The Basque Government	Cost Met By European Agency
	Bilbao, Spain	5 Days	Exchange Visit With The Basque Government	Cost Met By European Agency
	Brussels, Belgium	1 Day	Quality Assurance Workshop	£120.69
	Seoul, Korea	8 Days	Study Visit To South Korea	Cost Met By British Council
	Seoul, Korea	8 Days	Study Visit To South Korea	Cost Met By British Council
	Vienna, Austria	6 Days	Study Visit Organised By British Council	Cost Met By British Council
	Budapest, Hungary	3 Days	Special Education Needs	Cost Met By European Agency
	Lithuania	10 Days	Oecd Review Of Aspects Of The Lithuanian Education System	Costs Met By Oecd
	Washington, Usa	3 Days	Fulbright Alumni Advisory Council. Attendance At Fulbright Association Conference.	Paid By The British Fulbright Scholars Association Fund

Southern Education & Library Board (SELB)

	Destination	Duration	Reason	Total Cost
2011/12	Austria	4 Days	FLIP Concluding Conference	£6343.70
	Bucharest	4 Days	AEDE Conference	£768.36 – COSTS REFUNDED BY EAT
	Bordeaux	3 Days	AEDE Committee Meeting	£252.79 – COSTS REFUNDED BY AEDE
	Italy	5 Days	ICT IN EDU + Training	£220.00
	Bologna	4 Days	Aqueduct Project Meeting	£533.89 – COSTS REFUNDED BY AQUEDUCT

	Destination	Duration	Reason	Total Cost
	Lithuania	6 Days	ELOS Partners Meeting	£213.05 – Costs Refunded By ELOS
	Strasbourg	3 Days	EUROSCALA	£18558.10 – Costs Refunded By European Parliament
2012/13	Brussels	3 Days	PEACE 3 Conference	£291.50
	Vienna	1 Day	ED and European Conference	£206.22
	Strasbourg	3 Days	EUROSCALA 2013	£19,679.53 - All Costs Refunded By European Parliament
	France	5 Days	SOMENIUS Training	£1,008.11
	Strasbourg	4 Days	Council of Europe Training	£616.35
	Brussels	3 Days	AEDE MEETING	£432.38 - Costs Refunded By AEDE
	Latvia	5 Days	Transversal Study Visit	£939.23 - Costs Refunded By Transversal
	Athens	4 Days	ELOS Partners	£451.39 – Refunded By ELOS
2013/14	Strasbourg	3 Days	EUROSCOLA 2014	£ 23,296.78 - All Costs Met By European Parliament
	Copenhagen	3 Days	School Conference and Visit	£ 418.55
	Netherlands	3 Days	AEDE Conference	£265.20
	Belgium	2 Days	Annual Planning Conference	£329.76
	Berlin	3 Days	English Language And Culture	£625.95
	Belgium	4 Days	Annual Planning Conference	£14,688.40
2014/15	Berlin	6 Days	Berlin Teacher Conference	£ 770.55 All Costs Refunded By Foreign Office Of Germany
	Strasbourg	3 Days	EUROSCOLA 2015	£ 23,601.72 - All Costs Refunded By European Parliament
	California	7 Days	ADE Global Institute	£ 1,223.00 - Costs Covered By Dcal
	Cologne	4 Days	ELOS Partner Meeting	£278.06 Total Costs £235.00 Refunded By ELOS £43.06 Costs To SELB,
	Belgium	4 Days	Annual Planning Conference	£40,984.89

	Destination	Duration	Reason	Total Cost
	Washington Dc	8 Days	UK Education Department Visit	£1,196.70 - Refunded by British Council
	Berlin	1 Day	Berlin International Teacher Conference	£285.55
	Belgium	4 Days	Annual Planning Conference	£1,718.93
	Turkey	5 Days	Pestalozzi Network Of Trainers	£795.94 - Refunded By Council of Europe
	Portugal	4 Days	ELOS Partner Meeting	£715.68 – Refunded by ELOS
	Prague	7 Days	E-Learning in Classroom	£1,346.70

Western Education & Library Board (WELB)

	Destination	Duration	Reason	Total Cost
2011/12	N/A			
2012/13	N/A			
2013/14	Rome, Italy	5 Days	Lifelong Learning Course	£343.90
2014/15	Spain	3 Days	E-Learning International Conference	£350.30

Belfast Education & Library Board (BELB)

	Destination	Duration	Reason	Total Cost
2011/12	Italy	4 Days	Multilateral Eu Funded Training Course	£654.70
2012/13	Austria	4 Days	TQM Project	£689.98
2013/14	Italy	3 Days	EU Funded TQM Project	£530.98
2014/15	N/A			

North Eastern Education & Library Board (NEELB)

	Destination	Duration	Reason	Total Cost
2011/12	Poland	3 Days	PEACE Building	£7,104.00
	Germany	3 Days	Comenius Regio-Ideals	£8,768.00
2012/13	Oslo	4 Days	REGIO Comenius Project	£12,574.00
2013/14	Ethiopia	9 Days	Connecting Classrooms	£5,806.00
2014/15	N/A			

South Eastern Education & Library Board (SEELB)

	Destination	Duration	Reason	Total Cost
2011/12	Berlin	2 Days	Youth Travel	£4208.00
2012/13	Madrid	6 Days	Primary Languages – CASS	£1568.00 Refunded by British Council
	Krakow	2 Days	Youth Travel	£3195.00
	New York	5 Days	Youth Travel	£7264.00
	New York	8 Days	Youth Travel	£454.00
	Alicante	5 Days	Youth Travel	£3930.00
	Castilla-La-Mancha	7 Days	Regional PLMP Study Visit	£387.00 Refunded by The British Council
2013/14	Boston	4 Days	Youth Travel	£690.00

	Destination	Duration	Reason	Total Cost
	Boston	4 Days	Youth Travel	£5595.00
	Pittsburg	1 Day	Youth Travel	£466.00
	Boston	4 Days	Youth Travel	£1574.00
	Newark	1 Day Coach Hire	Youth Travel	£1100.00
	Abu Dhabi	10 Days	St Ita's PS Travel	£998.00
	Krakov	3 Days	Youth Travel	£2176.00
	Washington	8 Days	Youth Travel	£14562.00
	New York	7 Days	Youth Travel	£9342.00
	Philadelphia	8 Days	Youth Travel	£8433.00
	Krakov	3 Days	Youth Travel	£5336.00
	New York	7 Days	Youth Travel	£519.00
	Krakov	3 Days	Youth Travel	£103.00
	Paris	6 Days	Early Years Study Visit	£349.00 Paid For by British Council
	Faro	5 Days	School Improvement	£1345.00 – Paid by British Council
2014/15	Krakov	4 Days	Youth Travel	£4884.00
	Krakov	4 Days	Youth Travel	£84.00
	Dubrovnik	7 Days	TOR Bank School Travel	£408.00
	Philadelphia	7 Days	Youth Travel	£8433.00
	Krakov	3 Days	Youth Travel	£2180.00
	Washington	8 Days	Youth Travel	£9594.00

General Teaching Council (GTCNI)

	Destination	Duration	Reason	Total Cost
2011/12	N/A			
2012/13	N/A			
2013/14	N/A			
2014/15	Toronto, Canada	4 Days	INTERNATIONAL FORUM OF TEACHING REGULATORY AUTHORITIES CONFERENCE	£898.61

Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA)

	Destination	Duration	Reason	Total Cost
2011/12	Vienna	3 Nights	European Credit System For Vocational Education Seminar	£810.09
	Brussels	1 Night	ECVET User Group Meeting	£440.57
	Budapest	6 Nights	European Qualifications Framework Conference	£531.85 Flight & Minor Expenses
	Vienna	2 Nights	UK Expert To Help Austrian Ministry During EQF Process	£374.52
	Madrid	2 Nights	Annual ECVET Forum	£604.03

	Destination	Duration	Reason	Total Cost
	Brussels	2 Nights	European Qualifications Framework Advisory Group Meeting	£1259.66
	Berlin	2 Nights	European Qualifications Framework Bilateral Meeting	£243.94
	Brussels	1 Nights	European Skills/Competences, Qualifications and Occupations Meeting	£457.26
	Helsinki	5 Nights	Peer Learning Activity	£1078.22
	Rome	5 Nights	European Education Conference	£126.61 Flight Only
	Brussels	2 Nights	European Commissions Maths, Science And Technology Working Group	£545.29
	Brussels	2 Nights	European Centre For The Development Of Vocational Training Conference	£492.19
	Dusseldorf	2 Nights	Seminar Quality Of Vocational Education And Training Qualifications	£625.21
	Dusseldorf	2 Nights	European Quality Assurance In Vocational Education Training Sectoral Seminar	£592.49
	Geneva	3 Nights	Visit To Cern Switzerland	£342.20
	Brussels	1 Night	European Skills/Competences, Qualifications And Occupations Maintenance Committee	£273.63
	Brussels	2 Nights	UK European Co-Ordination Group	£790.42
	Paris	2 Nights	Neteuropean Credit System For Vocational Education And Training Workshop	£597.02
2012/13	Brussels	1 Night	European Skill/ Competences, Qualifications And Occupations Maintenance Committee	£676.37
	Brussels	2 Nights	European Qualifications Framework Peer Learning Activity	£666.33
	Brussels	1 Night	European Credit Systm, For Vocational Education And Training User Group Meeting	£326.27
	Berlin	2 Nights	Referencing German National Qualifications Framework To European Qualifications Framework	£119.39 Flight Only
	Brussels	1 Night	European Skills/Competences, Qualifications And Occupations , Maintenance Committee	£437.25
	Brussels	2 Nights	European Qualifications Framework Ag Meeting	£607.50
	Brussels	2 Nights	European Skills/Competences, Qualifications And Occupations Maintenance Committee	£286.30
	Brussels	1 Night	European Skills/Competences, Qualifications and Occupations Maintenance Committee	£362.56
	Brussels	2 Nights	European Qualifications Framework National Co-Ordination Point Meeting	£529.77
	Brussels	1 Night	European Credit System For Vocational Education And Training User Group	£306.21

	Destination	Duration	Reason	Total Cost
	Brussels	1 Night	European Skills/ Qualifications And Occupations Maintenance Committee	£330.20
	Paris	2 Nights	ECVET Designers Seminar	£649.60
	Brussels	1 Night	European Skills/Competences, Qualifications And Occupations Maintenance Committee	£628.14
	Brussels	2 Nights	European Qualifications Framework National Coordination Meeting	£575.94
	Brussels	1 Night	European Commission Meeting of Thematic Working Group On Maths, Science And Technology Education	£469.00
2013/14	Brussels	2 Nights	Representing Uk European Qualifications Framework National Coordination Points At The European Qualifications Framework Ag Meeting	£815.25
	Prague	2 Nights	European Credit System For Vocational Education And Training Annual Forum	£671.06
	Brussels	1 Night	European Skills/Competences, Qualifications Maintenance Committee	£557.37
	Brussels	1 Night	European Skills/Competences, Qualifications Maintenance Committee	£464.41
	Berlin	2 Nights	German Workshop	£472.92
	Brussels	1 Night	European Skills/Competences, Qualifications Maintenance Committee	£527.98
	Brussels	2 Nights	European Qualifications Framework National Coordination Meeting	£670.88
	Brussels	2 Nights	Eu European Credit System For Vocational Education And Training User Group	£795.81
	Brussels	1 Night	European Skills/Competences, Qualifications Maintenance Committee	£575.47
	Brussels	1 Night	European Skills/Competences, Qualifications Maintenance Committee	£622.85
2014/15	Brussels	1 Night	European Skills/Competences, Qualifications Maintenance Committee	£529.79
	Brussels	3 Nights	European Qualifications Framework Meeting	£891.57
	Brussels	1 Night	European Skills/Competences, Qualifications Maintenance Committee	£483.82
	Brussels	1 Night	European Qualifications Framework National Coordination Point Meeting	£467.00
	Brussels	2 Nights	European Skills/Competences, Qualifications Maintenance Committee	£581.83
	Brussels	2 Nights	European Qualifications Framework Ag Meeting	£740.03
	Vienna	5 Nights	Attendance At The European Credit System For Vocational Education And Training Annual Forum	£729.77
	Brussels	2 Nights	ECVET User Group Meeting	£635.32
	Brussels	1 Night	European Skills/Competences, Qualifications Maintenance Committee	£588.07

	Destination	Duration	Reason	Total Cost
	Brussels	2 Nights	European Qualifications Framework Meeting	£708.37
	Brussels	1 Night	European Skills/Competences, Qualifications Maintenance Committee	£411.26
	Brussels	2 Nights	European Skills/Competences, Qualifications Maintenance Committee	£567.04

Note; CCEA recovered £18,223.57 of the £30,690.90 spent during the four financial years, from various organisations.

Youth Council (YCNI)

	Destination	Duration	Reason	Total Cost
2011/12	Antwerp, Belgium	4 Days	International Training Event	£495.00
2012/13	N/A			
2013/14	N/A			
2014/15	Bilbao, Spain	5 Days	Exchange Programme, Learning From Peace	Paid In Full By Seupb

Council for Integrated Education (NICIE)

	Destination	Duration	Reason	Total Cost
2011/12	N/A			
2012/13	Macedonia	2 Days	Developing Partnership With Nansen Centre For Integrated Education	All Costs Met By Third Party
2013/14	Macedonia	2 Days	Developing Partnership With Nansen Centre For Integrated Education	All Costs Met By Third Party
	Dubai	3 Days	Centre For Countering Extreme Violence, Presentation To Conference	All Costs Met By Third Party
2014/15	Macedonia	3 Days	Principals Visit To Integrated Schools, Meetings With Local Municipalities.	All Costs Met By Third Party

The following Arm's Length Bodies had no travel outside the United Kingdom & Ireland during the last four years;

- Staff Commission of the Education & Library Boards (SCELB)
- Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS)
- Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG)

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education what are the future plans for the old Bangor Grammar school rugby and hockey pitches at Ballymacormick, Bangor.

(AQW 48675/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: Bangor Grammar School rugby and hockey pitches at Ballymacormick, Bangor are the responsibility of the school's Trustees. I understand that the Trustees have sold the pitches.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education what are the future plans for the unused pitched and land at the new Bangor Grammar site, formally the old Gransha Boys High School.

(AQW 48677/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: The unused pitches and land at the old Gransha Boys High School are the responsibility of the Education Authority (EA).

The EA has advised that it is currently assessing its need for the land.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of parents taken to court due to children being absent from school, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 48730/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: The Education Authority has provided the information as follows:

Number of parents taken to court due to children being absent from school	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15
Belfast Region	10	6	9	5	*
North Eastern Region	6	10	68	49	41
South Eastern Region	10	3	15	16	12
Southern Region	37	37	67	59	32 ¹
Western Region	45	26	33	31	54
Total	108	82	192	160	139

* As this number is fewer than 5 the exact figure cannot be given in line with Data Protection

1 Current figure for 2014/15 year

Mr McKinney asked the Minister of Education to detail how his Department will alleviate increasing demand for pre-school places in South Belfast.

(AQW 48734/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: The Pre-School Education Advisory Groups (PEAG) within the Education Authority (EA) are responsible for ensuring that there is adequate pre-school provision in local areas. For 2015/16 admissions two new non-statutory providers were brought into the Pre-School Education Programme and an additional 28 places were approved under temporary flexibility arrangements for six statutory nursery settings. I understand that pre-school places remain available in parts of South Belfast for this year's admissions.

The Executive's Programme for Government includes a commitment to provide a year's funded pre-school education to every family that wants it and for September 2015 admissions, 99.8% of parents who stayed with the admissions process to the end received the offer of a funded place.

In planning for next year's admissions the EA has advised that it anticipates demand for places in South Belfast to decrease but this will be subject to review.

I will continue to support the EA to ensure sufficient pre-school places are available across all areas for September 2016 admissions.

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Education, given the level of public funding investment in the site, whether the governance and ownership arrangements for Lisanelly will be put out to public consultation.

(AQW 48745/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: Following a period of extensive public consultation, I launched "Sharing Works: A Policy for Shared Education," on 16 September 2015. This provides the Department's overarching policy framework for shared education. The Lisanelly Shared Education Campus (LSEC) Programme, as an infrastructure project within the Executive's Programme for Government (PfG) 2011-15, has also been subject to public consultation in the development of the PfG.

Future arrangements for the governance and ownership of the LSEC are being developed as a distinct project within the wider LSEC programme.

Reflecting the particular needs of the project my Department is consulting with the relevant school managing authorities affected by the arrangements – that is, the Education Authority, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools and the voluntary Trustee groupings of the schools which will move to the LSEC.

Work is well underway with the educational stakeholders to agree future governance and ownership arrangements and I look forward to the outcome of this engagement in due course.

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Education when the Special Educational Needs model will be amended in order to measure future needs and demand,

(AQW 48746/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: Supporting children and young people with special educational needs (SEN) is framed by legislation, which places responsibilities on Boards of Governors of grant-aided schools and on the Education Authority (EA) to have policies and arrangements in place for securing that SEN provision is made for pupils for whom they are responsible.

It is the responsibility of the EA, at an operational level, to deliver SEN supports to schools and children in a consistent manner. In relation to making provision for children with statements, the SEN Code of Practice requires the EA to inform schools of the services and expertise they can arrange or make available in order to meet the needs of children, with or without statements, and to obtain information from schools about children at Stage 3 of the current framework, so that they can identify those children who may require statutory assessment. There are no current plans to change this model.

The EA has been working to bring consistency to current practices across the regions since its creation on 1 April 2015.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education to detail any future plans his Department has for the old Cotton Primary School site.

(AQW 48759/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: The Education Authority (EA) has responsibility for the old Cotton Primary School site. Following the relocation of the Cotton Reading Unit to Castle Gardens Primary School in September 2013, EA officers have been exploring whether there is any alternative educational use for the former building and site.

Should the property be declared surplus to requirements EA officers will commence the disposal process, in line with guidance from Land and Property Services.

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Education how many staff in the Education Authority that are over 65 (i) have been offered; and (ii) will be offered the Voluntary Exit or Redundancy Scheme.

(AQW 48760/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: The number of staff in the Education Authority over 65 who have been offered the Voluntary Exit or Redundancy Scheme is 7.

The number who will be offered the Voluntary Exit or Redundancy Scheme is unknown at this stage.

Mr Hazzard asked the Minister of Education for an update on Area Planning proposals for post-primary provision in Downpatrick.

(AQW 48761/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: The Education Authority is in ongoing discussions with the Board of Governors of Blackwater Integrated College to establish whether any mutually beneficial collaboration can be put in place with other local schools.

Trustees in the Catholic Maintained schools sector have set up a working group involving the three schools in Downpatrick, St Mary's High School, De La Salle Secondary School and St Patrick's Grammar School to progress a Case for Change document for consultation on proposed changes to post primary provision in Downpatrick.

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 48474/11-16, to detail any meetings that have taken place between departmental officials and the PSNI following the release of figures by the BBC relating to reports of (i) sex offences; (ii) alleged cases of rape; and (iii) physical sexual assaults, committed on school premises.

(AQW 48787/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: My officials are due to meet the PSNI later this week to discuss the statistics in detail.

Mr McKinney asked the Minister of Education for an update on the amalgamation of Fane Street, Blythefield and Donegal Road Primary schools.

(AQW 48793/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: The responsibility for planning the controlled schools' estate in Belfast lies, in the first instance, with the Education Authority (EA). It is a matter for the EA to publish a statutory development proposal (DP) in order to effect any significant change to controlled schools, including an amalgamation.

The EA has confirmed to my Department that initial pre-consultation on the proposed amalgamation of Fane Street, Blythefield and Donegal Road Primary Schools has been completed with the Governors, staff and parents of these schools and also local political and community representatives.

However, as the outcome of that consultation highlighted very little support for the amalgamation of the three schools, the EA began to engage with local parents' groups in late June 2015 regarding the way forward.

I understand from the EA that it has, at present, no plans to publish a DP in relation to these schools.

Mr McKinney asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the support given to parents waiting for a Special Educational Needs Assessment for their child.

(AQW 48794/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: I am content with the support given to parents waiting for a statutory assessment of their child's special educational needs (SEN).

When a request for a statutory assessment is received by the Education Authority (EA), a notice of consideration of statutory assessment is issued to parents, providing full detail regarding the assessment, how it may proceed and of the parents' right to submit written evidence to the EA within 29 days. A form is enclosed to enable parents to do this.

Parents are advised regarding their right to choose someone, independent of the EA, to guide and support them through the statutory assessment process and that the EA will consider all reports and evidence and write again advising if a statutory

assessment will take place. At this stage of the process, information is attached which provides parents with details regarding statutory assessments and statements of SEN.

In addition parents are given details of the EA website which provides further information and are provided with a telephone number should they wish to seek advice from the EA's Advice and Information Service. They are also advised of the Dispute Avoidance and Resolution Service (DARS) and of the name and contact details of the officer in the EA who will be responsible for answering any queries they may have in regard to their child's assessment.

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of school based teachers in the (i) Maintained; (ii) Controlled; (iii) Integrated; and (iv) Irish Medium sectors in 2014.

(AQW 48798/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: The below table details the headcount of teaching staff in schools in 2014/15, broken down by management type.

Table 1. Teacher headcount by school management type, 2014/15.

Management Type	Teacher Headcount
Controlled	8,193
Voluntary	3,173
Catholic Maintained	6,793
Other Maintained	258
Controlled Integrated	393
Grant Maintained Integrated	993
Total	19,803
Irish Medium*	234

*Teachers in Irish Medium schools are counted both under their respective management type total and under the Irish Medium total.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education, in relation to redundancy payments under the voluntary exit schemes operated in the school sector, whether (i) they are subject to taxation at source; and (ii) there is any difference in how taxation is handled between the Controlled sector and the Maintained sector.

(AQW 48810/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: In relation to both teaching and non-teaching staff in the school sector:

- (i) Redundancy payments are subject to taxation at source. The first £30,000 is not subject to tax; and
- (ii) There is no difference in how taxation is handled between the Controlled sector and the Maintained sector.

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of pupils that (i) enrolled for the school term commencing September 2015 in the post-primary Irish language school in Dungiven; and (ii) live (a) within; and (b) outside a three mile radius of the school.

(AQW 48818/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: The Education Authority has advised that there are currently 14 pupils enrolled in Gaelcholáiste Dhoire and that three of the pupils live within three miles of the school and eleven live over three miles from it.

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister of Education for an update on his Department's Deferring Compulsory School Starting Age in Exceptional Circumstances consultation.

(AQW 48821/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: The consultation on deferral of school starting age in exceptional circumstances concluded on 6 March 2015. A summary of the consultation was published on the Department's website. Following the consultation I decided not to proceed with legislation in this Assembly mandate.

As a result of calls from parents for clarity on this issue, I have asked the Education Authority to produce guidance for parents. The guidance will issue shortly.

I recognise that some parents may have concerns about the age at which their children will start school. I recommend that parents talk to the principal of the school their child is to attend, in the first instance.

I am aware of the position on this issue in other jurisdictions and it is interesting to note the position in England in particular. However, we have our own separate education policy here and I am content with the policy direction I have set in this area.

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister of Education, given developments in Great Britain to ensure children born in the summer have the option to enter primary education at the age of five, to detail (i) what steps his Department is taking to address this issue locally; and (ii) a timescale for when he plans to enact similar measures to ensure local children are not disadvantaged when compared to their counterparts in other regions.

(AQW 48822/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: The consultation on deferral of school starting age in exceptional circumstances concluded on 6 March 2015. A summary of the consultation was published on the Department's website. Following the consultation I decided not to proceed with legislation in this Assembly mandate.

As a result of calls from parents for clarity on this issue, I have asked the Education Authority to produce guidance for parents. The guidance will issue shortly.

I recognise that some parents may have concerns about the age at which their children will start school. I recommend that parents talk to the principal of the school their child is to attend, in the first instance.

I am aware of the position on this issue in other jurisdictions and it is interesting to note the position in England in particular. However, we have our own separate education policy here and I am content with the policy direction I have set in this area.

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Education to detail how much would be saved if the small school's support funding ceased, broken down by (i) Maintained; (ii) Controlled; (iii) Integrated; and (iv) Irish Medium sectors.

(AQW 48847/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: Small School Support funding for primary and post-primary schools is (along with Primary Principals' Release Time funding in primary schools) a funding element within the relevant formula streams for schools, funded under the Common Funding Scheme.

Funding under these factors reflects the fact that smaller schools do not generate sufficient core funding based on pupil numbers alone, to provide sufficient delegated budget to enable them to effectively deliver the curriculum.

In the current (2015-16) financial year, a total of £27 million was distributed within the funding formula streams to primary and post-primary schools under the Small Schools' Support Factor, with a further £8.1 million to primary schools under the Primary Principals' Release Time factor. In total this accounted for just over 3% of the overall delegated budget distributed to schools in the current year. The split across the sectors is detailed in the table below -

2015/16 CFS	PRIMARY + POST-PRIMARY schools		
	No. schools receiving support	Sector	Support Funding ^(a)
(i) ^(b)	317	Controlled	£14,756,960
(ii) ^(c)	341	Maintained	£17,294,095
(iii)	40	Integrated	£1,616,896
(iv)	27	Irish Medium	£1,431,476
	725	Totals for requested sectors^(d)	£35,099,427

Notes:

- (a) Small School Support funding (and Primary Principal Release funding where applicable at primary)
- (b) Includes Controlled Grammar schools
- (c) Includes Other Maintained primary - excludes Irish Medium schools
- (d) Excludes Voluntary Grammar schools

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 46459/11-15, to detail when the interim report will be published.
(AQW 48850/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: The report on the review of integrated provision in the Lurgan, Portadown and Craigavon will form part of the information and advice to me in my consideration of the Development Proposal for Portadown Integrated Primary School. My decision on the DP, and all supporting information including the report, will be published on my Department's website.

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education for an update on any plans to increase flexibility regarding school starting age.
(AQW 48852/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: Following a consultation on deferral of school starting age in exceptional circumstances earlier this year, I decided not to proceed with legislation in this Assembly mandate.

As a result of calls from parents for clarity on this issue, I have asked the Education Authority to produce guidance for parents. That guidance will issue shortly.

I recognise that some parents may have concerns about the age at which their children will start school. I recommend that parents talk to the principal of the school their child is to attend, in the first instance.

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Education to detail what standing does music have on the curriculum for secondary and grammar schools.

(AQW 48858/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: Music is a statutory part of the curriculum at Key Stage 3 and pupils may also choose to study it as an exam choice at Key Stage 4.

The Department also provides funding for the Music Service which allows schools to have access to additional music provision for pupils wishing to learn a particular instrument.

This non-statutory provision is part of the curriculum advisory and support services (CASS) delivered by the Education Authority on a regional basis. This facility provides pupils the opportunity to develop their musical creativity which they may wish to pursue into adult/work life.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Education what steps his Department is taking to increase the percentage of five or more GCSEs at grades A-C, or equivalent achieved, among pupils who receive free school meals.

(AQW 48860/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: Young people who see their time in education as relevant to their aspirations and interests are more likely to remain engaged with their education and achieve their full potential. The full implementation of the Entitlement Framework is about broadening access to economically relevant and individually engaging courses with clear progression pathways for all pupils in Key Stage 4 and post-16. This can make an important contribution to increasing the proportion of pupils who achieve at least five GCSEs at A*-C grades (or equivalent).

In 2014 the proportion of Year 12 pupils entitled to free school meals achieving five or more GCSEs (or equivalent) at grades A*-C increased by 2.0 percentage points (from 62.6% in 2012/13 to 64.6% in 2013/14). Improvements in attainment at age sixteen are enabling our most deprived children to remain in education. In the last year a greater proportion of free school meal entitled pupils stayed on into year 13 in school to continue their education and undertake level 3 studies; an increase from 43.2% in 2013/14 to 44.8% in 2014/15.

Evidence shows that pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, with greater obstacles to overcome, make up a significant proportion of those who do not achieve at this level. Therefore, I have redistributed school funding to target those schools with high numbers of pupils from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. I have also funded and implemented interventions to improve outcomes in literacy and numeracy.

A legacy project for the Delivering Social Change Literacy and Numeracy Programme will be developed to ensure that the best practice and learning developed through the Programme can be disseminated across all schools.

I have also provided funding to support programmes aimed at improving school-parent and school-community links. In addition, the focus of the Education Works advertising campaign in 2014/15 was on parents of post primary school age pupils and sought to encourage parents to take steps to support their child in making subject choices and planning for their future education, training and career. The second phase of this year's campaign, to be launched in January 2016, will also focus on parents of post-primary school age pupils.

However, to raise standards across our education system we need to remove the inequalities within the system, and that means removing academic selection. Admissions decisions based on the outcome of unregulated academic testing are not consistent with the objective of treating children fairly and giving each child the opportunity to reach his/her full potential. This is consistent with views expressed by the Human Rights Commission, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the NI Children's Commissioner and international experts from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

The results of the 2013 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) – an international comparison of school systems for 15 year olds – highlighted the remarkably wide gap between high achievers and low achievers in our education system. The use of academic selection contributes to the maintenance of that gap, resulting in our system being at best average in the PISA rankings.

The continued use of academic selection is a barrier to addressing underachievement in disadvantaged communities. It damages children's confidence, their motivation to learn, and lowers their expectations of themselves, all of which contributes to the high levels of underachievement we are seeking to tackle.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Education how he is working with schools to encourage families of children who are eligible to avail of free school meals.

(AQW 48861/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: I am keen to ensure that the parents/guardians of every child who is eligible to a free school meal (FSM) establishes that entitlement and avails of a nutritionally balanced meal during the school day.

My Department works in partnership with the Education Authority (EA) and individual schools to take various steps to promote both applications for and uptake of FSM. To encourage parents to check they are eligible to a FSM the EA issues press releases, sends out renewal applications and letters to parents, and distributes display posters to schools, the Social Security Agency, the Citizens Advice Bureau and libraries to increase awareness of entitlement criteria and the application process. Within schools there are a range of activities undertaken to encourage uptake including the installation of cashless payment systems in a number of postprimary schools to reduce any perceived stigma associated with FSM, menus are sent home with pupils and promoted through school websites, theme days and taster sessions are arranged for parents and pupils and the uptake of FSM meals against entitlement is monitored to identify particular issues. Consideration is also given to ways of improving the school meals experience of pupils by reducing queuing time, improving the variety and quality of food and improving the dining environment and experience, as these factors can impact on a decision to avail of a FSM.

My Department also issues a press release before the start of the school year to encourage parents who think they might be eligible to a FSM to apply and officials are working with colleagues in the Department for Social Development to explore further ways to encourage parents receiving a qualifying benefit to apply for FSM.

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Education for an update on the Home to School Transport report.
(AQW 48874/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: I intend to launch a public consultation in the coming weeks on a number of the recommendations made within the Independent Review of Home to School Transport. A number of consultative public meetings will take place in order to help gauge the views of the public on these recommendations. The views expressed during this consultation period will be analysed and help inform the development of future policy proposals.

Mr Hazzard asked the Minister of Education to detail his Department's position in relation to the provision of traffic attendants at post-primary schools.
(AQW 48876/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: The Department of Education does not have a policy on the provision of school crossing patrols as this is a discretionary function determined by the Education Authority (EA). Patrols are provided in support of the parental duty to ensure the safety of their child(ren) when walking to school. Patrols are provided where a location has been assessed as exceeding the threshold(s) set out in assessment guidelines. The guidelines are based on those of Road Safety GB, previously Local Authority Road Safety Officers Association (LARSOA).

Mr McKinney asked the Minister of Education whether his Department has drafted legislation relating to departmental waiting times for Special Educational Needs assessments.
(AQW 48877/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: A review of Special Educational Needs and Inclusion resulted in the introduction to the Assembly of a Special Educational Needs (SEN) and Disability Bill on 2nd March 2015. The Bill is currently in Committee stage.

The associated policy proposals of July 2012, which resulted from the SEN Review, aim to reduce the time taken for a statutory assessment of a child's SEN from the current 26 weeks to 20 weeks. This reduction will be achieved through revised SEN regulations, which are currently being considered by the Department.

While the SEND Bill itself does not contain any proposals to reduce the timeframe for statutory assessments to be undertaken by the Education Authority (EA), it makes an amendment to Articles 15 and 20A of the Education (NI) Order 1996 by shortening the period of time, to not less than 22 days, in which the EA can receive written evidence from parents of children of compulsory school age or, from children over compulsory school age, when it is considering whether to undertake a statutory assessment. The existing legislation allows for the EA to accept written evidence outside of this period.

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of the families that (i) are eligible for free school meals; and (ii) avail of free school meals, broken down by constituency.
(AQW 48902/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: The Department does not hold free school meal entitlement or uptake at a family level. The data is held at a pupil level, and was supplied in the answer to AQW 48555/11-16.

Department for Employment and Learning

Mr Ó Muilleoir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if local businesses were consulted over the decision to relinquish the licence to offer local Investors in People accreditation.

(AQW 48335/11-16)

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): From 1997 until March 2015, my Department held the licence for the delivery of Investors in People (IiP) in Northern Ireland. From April 2015, IiP has been delivered in Northern Ireland by the United Kingdom Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES), who own the IiP standard. The decision not to renew the licence was made in the context of the need to deliver the functions of my Department as efficiently and effectively as possible in the light of budget reductions faced. The net cost of the existing delivery model was approximately £685,000 per year, and the decision to relinquish the licence therefore freed up a considerable resource to meet other pressures.

Direct services continue to be delivered through a team of highly trained expert business specialists. Local businesses were not consulted over the decision to relinquish the licence as the opportunity to benefit from the standard remained intact.

Mr Ó Muilleoir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his assessment of whether the increase in the cost of Investors in People assessment from £350 per day to around £600 per day for small businesses will lead to fewer businesses deciding to acquire the standard.

(AQW 48336/11-16)

Dr Farry: The existing delivery model, supported by a generous subsidy from public funds, allowed costs to be artificially capped at £350 per day. In the current financial climate this was no longer practical. In addition, this arrangement meant that Northern Ireland was out of step with the rest of the United Kingdom where fees are assessed on a full commercial basis of £750 per day.

Based on figures from the rest of the United Kingdom, there is no indication that increasing the cost of accreditation to £750 per day will, in the longer term, lead to a reduction in the number of businesses putting themselves forward for IiP assessment and recognition. This reflects the fact that IiP continues to represent excellent value for money in terms of assisting small businesses to improve the productivity of their workforce. This is particularly the case with the advent of the new standards for assessment, which provide even greater focus on positive outcomes for each small business.

Mr Ó Muilleoir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if any payment was made to UK Commission for Skills in relation to their taking over the role of delivering the Investors in People standard locally.

(AQW 48337/11-16)

Dr Farry: Any move away from the existing funding model required an element of resource transfer, for the 2015/16 year, in order to meet contractual arrangements for IiP assessments and services that had been initiated in the 2014/15 year but which would not be carried out until Quarter 1 and Quarter 2 of the 2015/16 year.

In addition, a transition funding package of £175,000 to support a subsidy through to 2016/17 was agreed with, and paid to, UKCES. This will help to reduce the impact of the revised delivery arrangements on small companies (private organisations with less than 50 employees) in the move to a fully costed commercial model.

As a result of these arrangements, small companies continue to pay less for IiP accreditation than their equivalents in the rest of the United Kingdom.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on a timeline for a decision on the Magee Business Case.

(AQW 48342/11-16)

Dr Farry: A draft of the business case was resubmitted in late June. However, some issues require further clarification as is the norm in any complex business case. Officials are awaiting a revised business case in the coming weeks.

Mr Douglas asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the NEETs programmes funded to work with young people in East Belfast.

(AQW 48496/11-16)

Dr Farry: My Department's current support specifically for young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) is mainly through the NI European Social Fund (ESF) Programme 2014-2020.

Two of the five distinct funding streams under the Programme have a specific focus on NEET young people:

- Priority 1.2 – Young people not in education, employment or training and
- Priority 2.2 – Community-based support for families, aimed at preventing young people becoming NEET.

Under priority 1.2, the following organisations are being funded through ESF in East Belfast:

- Bryson Charitable Group;
- Extern Group;

- GEMS NI Ltd;
- Include Youth;
- Springboard Opportunities Ltd;
- The Prince's Trust; and
- Youth Action NI Ltd.

The following is a short synopsis of each of these projects:

Bryson Charitable Group

Bryson Charitable Group's Young Person's Employment Initiative will provide sustainable and quality employment opportunities for young people who are long-term unemployed, economically inactive and furthest removed from the workforce. The project will combat inactivity, improve employability and reduce personal barriers to work. The project will engage 240 unemployed young people aged 16-24 years over a three year period, and provide opportunities for sustainable employment, qualifications, progression routes to further training/education and provided enhanced employability skills.

Extern Group

Extern Group's Moving Forward – Moving On project will work with an annual total of 130 young people aged 16-24 who are not in employment, education or training and who come from an alternative education background (education other than at school), and/or have a history of offending behaviour. The project will provide mentoring support to help each individual address barriers to progression through an individual action plan based on assessed need. The action plan will move each individual closer to the labour market, by focussing on social and emotional capabilities, building resilience, developing employability skills and matching skills and interests to appropriate training and employment pathways.

GEMS NI Ltd

GEMS NI's CO-MENT project will deliver a package of active measures designed to identify, access, engage and support young people in the 16-24 year old age range who are among the hardest to reach and hardest to help groups of young people who are currently NEET. The project will provide each young person with a mentor who will support them throughout their participation in the programme, help them to develop an action plan that meets their changing needs, assist them to identify the vocationally-orientated development opportunities they can access, and support them to self-advocate.

Include Youth

Include Youth's Give & Take Scheme aims to improve the employability skills and self-esteem of young people aged 16-24 who are NEET, face complex barriers to engagement and come from communities of greatest disadvantage. The programme will assist them in progressing into education, employment and/or training. The project will include: supported work experience; personal development; training and qualifications; one-to-one mentoring; transitional support and employability programmes.

Springboard Opportunities Ltd.

Springboard Opportunities' JobWorks programme will target 18-24 year olds, including those who are affected by multiple disadvantages such educational, social, emotional, economic and community relations issues which act as a direct barrier to fulfilling potential and participation in the workplace. The project will engage young people to develop a personalised development pathway that reflects their individual occupational preference and career aspirations, and will increase employability through development of work readiness skills, accredited qualifications and experience of the world of work.

The Prince's Trust

The Prince's Trust's Explorer Enterprise Programme will support unemployed and economically inactive young people who are far removed from the labour market, to move towards self-employment/employment or further education/training. The project will include a needs assessment and action plan tailored to their individual needs, along with a flexible menu of provision that includes practical advice on how to run your own business, one-to-one mentoring, qualifications up to Level 1, and support for job search and personal development.

Youth Action NI Ltd.

Youth Action NI's GET SET project will target and train young people who have complex needs and multiple barriers which prevent them from progressing into employment or training. The project will empower young people and build their skills for living/learning/work by: increasing their economic activity; increasing their employability skills; promoting their inclusion; improving social connections between young people, employers and communities; and valuing young people as assets for investment.

Under Priority 2.2 of the ESF Programme, Upper Springfield Trust is the lead provider for delivery of the Community Family Support Programme in East Belfast. The programme aims to prevent young people falling into the NEET category by addressing the barriers of the young person in this category and help other young people in the family to re-engage. Professional support workers engaged and consulted with parents to promote early intervention and high quality parenting and to identify solutions to address their specific needs.

Additionally, my Department is funding a number of pilot projects for the Executive's United Youth Programme. The following pilots intend to work with young people from East Belfast:

- Fusion – Springboard Opportunities

- Gener8 – Springboard Opportunities
- STRIVE – Include Youth
- Be the Change – Public Achievement
- Venture – Youth Initiatives
- Leading Your Own Learning – Achieve Enterprises
- Peace Players – Peace Players International NI

These pilots are currently recruiting and will operate until the end of March 2016. They are being funded by DEL via the Change Fund.

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the scale of each of the 2015/16 inescapable budgetary pressures faced by his Department.

(AQW 48516/11-16)

Dr Farry: The inescapable budgetary pressures currently facing my Department for 2015-16 are as detailed below.

Further Education Colleges' End Year Flexibility (EYF) - £6.0 million

There is an EYF scheme in place for the Further Education Colleges given that the colleges have a different financial year end to the Department. A bid was made in June Monitoring to draw down £6.0 million from the current EYF stock. The colleges require this funding in 2015-16.

Youth Employment Scheme (YES) residual costs - £5.1 million

The YES was an Executive funded programme and the funding ended in March 2015. The YES programme was paused in December 2014 and an upsurge in programme starts before closure has caused this residual pressure in 2015-16.

Return to Work Credit residual costs - £2.2 million

A policy decision to close this programme was taken in November 2014 and the programme was closed in March 2015. The residual pressure relates to those already on the programme prior to closure.

European Social Fund - £2.5 million

This pressure relates to additional match funding requirements of the European Social Fund and an exchange rate loss.

Access to Work increased participation - £0.6 million

This is a demand-led specialist disability programme. There has been increased participation and an increasing number of clients requiring higher level support.

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether his Department takes any role in a strategic oversight with regards to the number of people qualifying in different subjects.

(AQW 48521/11-16)

Dr Farry: My Department allocates teaching funds to each university to support teaching and related activities through the annual block grant. As legally autonomous bodies, the universities are free to distribute all funding from my Department, which is not earmarked or provided for a specific purpose, at their own discretion.

'Graduating to Success', the Higher Education Strategy provides the overarching context for the development of the sector in Northern Ireland. A key commitment within the Strategy is for the sector to rebalance its profile of courses so that subject areas offered more closely reflect the needs of the economy.

Since 2012, my Department has supported this commitment by funding an additional 1,419 undergraduate places in science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) subject areas. Budget cuts to the higher education sector, which are the inevitable outworking of the Executive's budget cuts to my Department, have impacted on student places at the universities; however, both universities have committed to protect overall STEM subjects.

Latest figures for 2012/13 show there were 43,380 Northern Ireland domiciled students enrolled on STEM courses at our higher education institutions, whilst the proportion of qualifiers from Northern Ireland higher education institutions with 'narrow' STEM (Biological Sciences, Physical Sciences, Mathematical Sciences, Computer Science and Engineering & Technology) qualifications for 2013/14 now stands at 20.7%, a significant uplift from the 2012/13 rate of 18%.

Furthermore, funding has been provided to grow the number of Postgraduate Awards my Department funds in areas of economic relevance to the current level of 729 Awards.

Mr Swann asked the Minister for Employment and Learning why is it mandatory for all European Social Fund participants to have presented themselves at a Jobs and Benefits Office to validate their eligibility for the programme.

(AQW 48534/11-16)

Dr Farry: The reason it is mandatory for the individual to present at their local Office is to ensure that they are made aware of how participation on a European Social Fund (ESF) Project may affect their entitlement to benefits.

In addition, it is important to put in place a process that will be followed uniformly by all Project Providers operating the new ESF Programme. This new process will contribute to providing the clear documentary evidence that is now required as part of the revised audit processes which will feature prominently in the new Programme, and ensure that all participants secure the relevant approvals before engaging on a Project.

Whilst I am aware that some concerns have already been raised by individual Providers on the specific issue you have identified, these have been addressed and explained in detail during a recent series of information awareness sessions held by my Department, aimed at both former and new ESF Project Providers - the vast majority of whom recognise and accept the need for a uniform process to be put in place.

Mr Swann asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, given that European Social Fund Tutors must have completed an accredited course with Ulster University, to detail how many places are currently available on the relevant courses.
(AQW 48535/11-16)

Dr Farry: The number of places currently available on the Certificate in Teaching (CIT) course delivered by the University of Ulster for the 2015-16 academic year is 150.

Mr Swann asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline what opportunities exist for primary school students currently studying Chinese through the Confucius Institute to extend that language to degree level at a local university.
(AQW 48561/11-16)

Dr Farry: My officials have been informed by the Department of Education that 60 schools are currently involved in the work of the Confucius Institute. A number of factors will impact on the shape of our higher education sector in the years before the young people, currently involved with the Confucius Institute, are of an age to apply for third level education.

It is, therefore, difficult to predict what course provision will be available in future years.

Mr Ó hOisín asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the implications of the recently announced closure of the School of Modern Languages at the Ulster University Coleraine campus.
(AQW 48562/11-16)

Dr Farry: Ulster University has announced that it is making a number of changes to course provision from 2016/17, in order to manage the budget cuts imposed as a result of the decisions taken by the Northern Ireland Executive. This includes the closure of some courses and the consolidation of others. The University has confirmed that current students will be able to complete their courses.

The University has advised that although the School of Modern Languages is closing at Coleraine, the BSc Hons Psychology and all combinations with Psychology will be moving from the Magee campus and the teaching of these courses will be consolidated at Coleraine. The University has also confirmed that it will no longer be offering modern languages as a component of joint degrees. It is too early to comment on how this will affect overall student and staff numbers on the Coleraine campus.

The University has stated that in making these decisions, a number of factors have been taken into consideration, including student demand, attrition rates, student satisfaction, employment statistics and research performance. Ulster University has also stated that consolidation of teaching provision across all faculties will facilitate the necessary reduction of staff numbers without impacting on the quality of teaching, which remains paramount.

These decisions are the inevitable outworking of the budget cuts passed on to my Department and the higher education sector by the Northern Ireland Executive. The funding status quo that has been maintained over the last Programme for Government is no longer tenable and Northern Ireland will be unable to meet the skills demands of local employers in the future. That is why I have launched the Big Conversation on the future financial sustainability of higher education in Northern Ireland. I will be presenting the findings to my Executive colleagues, outlining the ways in which higher education could be sustained in the future.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether his Department has received a HR1 form from Ulster University in respect of the recent announcement of cuts to courses, and the subsequent job losses.
(AQW 48581/11-16)

Dr Farry: I would refer the member to the answer which I provided to this question during Oral Questions on Tuesday September 15th. My department has not received an HR1 Form in respect of Ulster University's recent announcement of cuts to courses.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his assessment of the impact of closing the Modern Languages School at Ulster University Coleraine on (i) the local student economy, (ii) drawing and retaining students to study in Northern Ireland, and (iii) the future of subjects studied with a modern language as a joint degree.
(AQW 48582/11-16)

Dr Farry:

- (i) Ulster University has announced that it is making a number of changes to course provision in order to manage the budget cuts imposed as a result of the decisions taken by the Northern Ireland Executive. This includes the closure of some courses and the consolidation of others. The University has advised that although the School of Modern Languages is closing at Coleraine, the BSc Hons Psychology and all combinations with Psychology will be moving from the Magee campus and the teaching of these courses will be consolidated at Coleraine. It is too early to comment on how this will affect overall student numbers on the Coleraine campus and, therefore, too early to tell what the impact the changes will have on the local student economy.
- (ii) At this stage I have no reason to expect there to be a negative impact on the number of students coming to Northern Ireland to study. The University has an internationalisation strategy and actively recruits students from international markets as well as Europe and Great Britain. I expect the number of students from outside Northern Ireland enrolling at our institutions to continue to increase.
- (iii) Ulster University has confirmed that it will no longer be offering modern languages as a component of joint degrees.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the total number of (i) student places, and (ii) jobs, that have been lost from Ulster University at (i) Coleraine, and (ii) Magee, since May 2011.

(AQW 48585/11-16)

Dr Farry: My Department does not hold this information on a campus basis. My officials, therefore, obtained the figures directly from Ulster University. The following is the most up to date information available and compares the position in 2010/11 with 2014/15.

At Coleraine campus the total number of student places has reduced from 5,420 in 2010/11 to 5,344 in 2014/15. However it is important to note this is a reduction of 76 student places, mainly due to a reduction in part-time numbers, where demand can fluctuate from year to year. Overall, the number of full-time student places at Coleraine has increased by 80 since 2010/11.

Eighty-one jobs have been lost at Coleraine campus since May 2011.

At Magee campus the total number of student places has increased from 4,148 in 2010/11 to 5,096 in 2014/15. This is a total increase in student places of 948 since May 2011 544 of which are full-time.

Thirty-two jobs have been lost at Magee campus since May 2011.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail what correspondence he has had with Ulster University in respect of support staff who are (i) directly, and (ii) indirectly connected with courses affected by the recent announcement of University cuts.

(AQW 48586/11-16)

Dr Farry: While the University's decision to reduce course, staff and student provision is the inevitable outworking of the Executive's budget cuts to my Department and the higher education sector, universities are autonomous and responsible for their own course provision and staffing levels.

I did meet with Trade Union representatives earlier this year to discuss the potential job losses and reduced student places across all the higher education institutions.

I have no remit to intervene in these decisions and, therefore, I have not had any specific correspondence with Ulster University in relation to support staff.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether any investigation has been conducted into allegations of nepotism in regard to appointments at the Southern Regional College.

(AQW 48658/11-16)

Dr Farry: My Department received anonymous correspondence on two separate occasions during 2015, containing allegations of mismanagement at Southern Region College, including accusations of nepotism.

In line with established whistleblowing procedures, my Department referred each letter to the Chair of the Governing Body to initiate investigations. On both occasions, the College advised that there was no evidence to substantiate the claims made.

Mr Swann asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail how many of his departmental staff have a registered disability, broken down (i) by full time equivalent; and (ii) as a percentage of the workforce.

(AQW 48682/11-16)

Dr Farry: At 1 April 2015, there were 164 members of staff who had self-declared that they had a disability in the Department for Employment and Learning. This represented 7.4% of the Departmental workforce. In terms of full-time equivalent staff, this equates to 144.4 staff or 7.2% of DEL staff.

There is no requirement for an individual to declare that they have a disability. In addition, the disability declared does not have to be a registered disability.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail when the Outline Business Case, as submitted by the Northern Regional College in respect of its accommodation needs, will be approved; and to give a timescale for the announcement of a preferred option for a new build.

(AQW 48696/11-16)

Dr Farry: The Northern Regional College is close to finalising the business case for proposals to address deficiencies at its Coleraine, Ballymoney and Ballymena campuses. I had hoped the business case would have been officially presented to my Department before now. However, while the delay is regrettable, I accept that given the significant investment potential, it is appropriate to take the necessary time to ensure a robust case is made in support of the preferred option.

The current timescale should see the final business case being presented to my Department by the end of this month and subject to my approval and the approval of the Department of Finance and Personnel, a final decision on the preferred option is expected in October 2015.

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail how much is yet to be paid by his Department to organisations through payments of the European Social Fund.

(AQW 48704/11-16)

Dr Farry: Given the overlap in these three questions, I have combined the responses into a single, composite response.

Under the 2007-2013 European Social Fund (ESF) Programme, there are 169 outstanding claims for 60 organisations which remain to be processed. The potential payment value of these claims is £7.58m.

The 60 organisations are broken down as follows: 53 voluntary & community organisations; three District Councils; and four further education colleges

Of the 169 claims which are outstanding, my Department has received, and is currently processing, 163 claims. The breakdown of when these 163 claims were received is as follows:

Claims received 1 July to 11 September 2015:	65
Claims received 1 April to 30 June 2015:	38
Claims received before 31 March 2015:	60

The potential payment value of the 60 claims received before 31 March 2015 is £1.54m.

There are six outstanding claims which have yet to be submitted from organisations. My officials wrote to these organisations on 12 August 2015, encouraging them to submit their outstanding claims. Submission of the outstanding claims will enable my Department to process and pay these claims as soon as possible.

Since July 2015, my Department has released £5.53m in payments to organisations, including advance partial payments to help ease the financial pressures being incurred by organisations.

My Department is in the closure phase of the programme, which ended in March 2015, and is therefore committed to having these claims processed and paid as quickly as possible.

There are no other European projects funded by my Department.

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how much money in total is owed by his Department to organisations through the European Social Fund and how much of this is more than six months in arrears.

(AQW 48705/11-16)

Dr Farry: Given the overlap in these three questions, I have combined the responses into a single, composite response.

Under the 2007-2013 European Social Fund (ESF) Programme, there are 169 outstanding claims for 60 organisations which remain to be processed. The potential payment value of these claims is £7.58m.

The 60 organisations are broken down as follows: 53 voluntary & community organisations; three District Councils; and four further education colleges

Of the 169 claims which are outstanding, my Department has received, and is currently processing, 163 claims. The breakdown of when these 163 claims were received is as follows:

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Since July 2015, my Department has released £5.53m in payments to organisations, including advance partial payments to help ease the financial pressures being incurred by organisations.

My Department is in the closure phase of the programme, which ended in March 2015, and is therefore committed to having these claims processed and paid as quickly as possible.

There are no other European projects funded by my Department.

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the organisations who are owed arrears by his Department on (i) European Social Fund and (ii) any other European projects.

(AQW 48706/11-16)

Dr Farry: Given the overlap in these three questions, I have combined the responses into a single, composite response.

Under the 2007-2013 European Social Fund (ESF) Programme, there are 169 outstanding claims for 60 organisations which remain to be processed. The potential payment value of these claims is £7.58m.

The 60 organisations are broken down as follows: 53 voluntary & community organisations; three District Councils; and four further education colleges

Of the 169 claims which are outstanding, my Department has received, and is currently processing, 163 claims. The breakdown of when these 163 claims were received is as follows:

Claims received 1 July to 11 September 2015:	65
Claims received 1 April to 30 June 2015:	38
Claims received before 31 March 2015:	60

The potential payment value of the 60 claims received before 31 March 2015 is £1.54m.

There are six outstanding claims which have yet to be submitted from organisations. My officials wrote to these organisations on 12 August 2015, encouraging them to submit their outstanding claims. Submission of the outstanding claims will enable my Department to process and pay these claims as soon as possible.

Since July 2015, my Department has released £5.53m in payments to organisations, including advance partial payments to help ease the financial pressures being incurred by organisations.

My Department is in the closure phase of the programme, which ended in March 2015, and is therefore committed to having these claims processed and paid as quickly as possible.

There are no other European projects funded by my Department.

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail how funding has been given to an outside body to carry out Article 13 checks on behalf of his Department, and why could this have not been carried out by his Department.

(AQW 48708/11-16)

Dr Farry: Given the overlap in these two questions, I have combined the responses into a single, composite response.

The vouching of Further Education Colleges' claims in relation to the 2007-2013 European Social Fund (ESF) has been carried out by staff in my Department's ESF Managing Authority and by PROTEUS NI Ltd.

PROTEUS NI Ltd carry out Article 13 checks as part of the service they provide to the ESF Managing Authority, dictated by the business needs of the ESF Managing Authority according to times of higher demand for vouching activity.

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many claims are currently outstanding in relation to the outgoing programme of European Social Fund funding; and when he expects the claims to be finalised.

(AQW 48714/11-16)

Dr Farry: Under the 2007-2013 European Social Fund (ESF) Programme, there are 169 claims for 60 organisations remaining to be processed. The potential payment value of these claims is £7.58m.

Of these 169 outstanding claims, my Department has received, and is currently processing, 163 claims.

There are also six outstanding claims which have yet to be submitted to the Department from ESF organisations. My officials wrote to these organisations on 12 August 2015, encouraging them to submit their outstanding claims. Submission of the outstanding claims will enable my Department to process and pay these claims as soon as possible to the ESF organisations.

Since July 2015, my Department has released £5.53m in payments to ESF organisations, including advance partial payments to help ease the financial pressures being incurred by organisations.

My Department is in the closure phase of the programme, which ended in March 2015, and is therefore committed to having these claims processed as soon as possible. The Department is forecasting that all claims will be paid by mid-December 2015.

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Employment and Learning (i) to provide an update on the interruption process from the European Commission in relation to European Social Fund funding; (ii) whether this interruption has been lifted; (iii) when does he envisage this being lifted; and (iv) to outline whether the Department has sufficient funds to meet the outgoing funding claims related to European Social Fund as well as the first quarter of funding claims for the new European Social Fund programme.

(AQW 48716/11-16)

Dr Farry: The Interruption has already been lifted for Priorities 2 and 3 of the European Social Fund (ESF) 2007-2013 Programme, and work has continued with EU Commission officials to address the remaining barriers to re-instating Priority 1.

Commission officials have recently confirmed that the Directorate General Policy and Audit Teams have recommended lifting the partial Suspension of the Programme, and the Department understands that the EU Commission has accepted this recommendation, and has written to the UK Permanent Representation to confirm this. The Monitoring Committee will be informed of this decision at its meeting on 25 September which is scheduled for 25 September 2015.

I would point out that the remaining outstanding claims for the 2007 – 13 ESF Programme Voluntary and Community projects are now being funded from DEL's own resources, not ESF funding, so they are not affected by the Interruption.

In respect of the 2014 – 2020 ESF programme, I can confirm that sufficient funds are available to meet any claims submitted during the first quarter of the programme. However, claims will only be paid by the Department if they are submitted with all relevant documentation and in full compliance with the terms and conditions of the ESF Letter of Offer.

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether the amount of technical assistance awarded under the European Social Fund 2007-2013 programme to his Department was in Sterling.

(AQW 48731/11-16)

Dr Farry: The Technical Assistance awarded under the European Social Fund 2007-2013 programme to my Department was in Euros.

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, pursuant to AQW 48213/11-15, to detail the breakdown of the expenditure totalling £561,975 on other costs.

(AQW 48732/11-16)

Dr Farry: The breakdown of the 'other costs' of £561,975 is as follows:

Activity	Amount
Funding of methodology for measuring/monitoring of Soft Outcomes and Distance Travelled	£65,633.40
Payments to the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) for Technical Assistance costs incurred by the member state	£280,014.63
Database Maintenance	£11,812.50
Audit - Funding of staff to undertake verification of programme claims	£188,894.17
New Programme Expenses and Costs associated with Consultation for the Draft Operational Programme	£1,783.72
Other Costs (inc Stationery, Room Hire, Project Seminars, Postage etc)	£13,837.04
Total	£561,975.46

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the breakdown of those that carried out the verification and vouching of college spend on the 2007-2013 European Social Fund programme.

(AQW 48735/11-16)

Dr Farry: Given the overlap in these two questions, I have combined the responses into a single, composite response.

The vouching of Further Education Colleges' claims in relation to the 2007-2013 European Social Fund (ESF) has been carried out by staff in my Department's ESF Managing Authority and by PROTEUS NI Ltd.

PROTEUS NI Ltd carry out Article 13 checks as part of the service they provide to the ESF Managing Authority, dictated by the business needs of the ESF Managing Authority according to times of higher demand for vouching activity.

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning why his Department extended priority 2 of the European Social Fund 2007-2013 programme but not priority 1.

(AQW 48737/11-16)

Dr Farry: The European Social Fund Programme 2007-2013 Priority 2 has not been extended.

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, with regard to the European Social Fund 2007-2013 programme, whether a European Regulation determines that redundancies are not an eligible cost of the programme.

(AQW 48738/11-16)

Dr Farry: The European Social Fund 2007-2013 Regulation does not make reference to the eligibility or otherwise of redundancy costs within a programme. However, redundancy costs fall under National rules, specifically the Employment Relations Order (NI) 1996.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how he is engaging with local businesses outside of Belfast and Londonderry to discuss their skills needs.

(AQW 48751/11-16)

Dr Farry: Meeting the skills needs of employers remains crucial to ensuring a strong and vibrant economy in Northern Ireland. I have therefore developed a number of channels to ensure that there is effective two-way communication on skills issues. These are designed to reflect the needs of employers across the region.

I personally chair three working groups representing key priority sectors. These are the Food and Drink Industry Working Group, the Information and Communications Technology Working Group and the Advanced Manufacturing and Engineering Services Working Group. The membership of these groups includes employers, further and higher education representatives, officials and others with relevant interests. These provide a valuable forum through which employers can articulate their skills needs and interact directly with service and programme providers.

In addition, I meet regularly with individual employers and representatives of particular sectors. I also meet with organisations such as Chambers of Commerce, the Institute of Directors and the Local Confederation of British Industry which provide the opportunity for me to get a clear perspective on skills needs across Northern Ireland.

At a local level, Further Education Colleges have employer engagement teams in place to meet with employers and respond to their skills needs. Meeting the skills needs of local business is central to the strategic purpose of the Further Education Colleges and they are well placed to respond in a positive way through their general provision and also the Employer Support Programme which helps small and medium sized enterprises to identify and meet skills needs through a collaborative approach.

My Department's Assured Skills programme works in collaboration with indigenous and foreign direct investment companies throughout Northern Ireland to deliver the skills they need. Training is delivered through the Academy model by the Further Education sector, including recruitment and pre-employment training.

Using funding secured from the Executive's Change Fund, Academies have been delivered for employers across Northern Ireland, for example on welding for SDC Trailers in Toombridge and MDF Engineering in Antrim; export sales and marketing for Mallaghan Engineering, EMS and Linden foods in Dungannon, Cubis from Craigavon and Whale Pumps from Bangor.

In addition, the Employment Service supports all businesses across Northern Ireland by providing a comprehensive range of products and services designed to assist employers to fill vacancies with appropriately skilled staff. This includes engaging proactively with urban and rural employers and the local community sector to promote a better understanding of the skills development and employment opportunities available.

The Employer Engagement Team supports local employers by ensuring that people of all skill levels and geographic location are given individually tailored advice and guidance to help address skill deficits in local areas. Plans are also well advanced for the introduction of Employment Liaison Officers whose role will be to establish positive and constructive relationships with local employers and to assist them to recruit suitable skilled staff.

My Department is also committed to working with employers across Northern Ireland to meet their skills needs through the provision of apprenticeships. I have established an interim Strategic Advisory Forum to provide oversight of the new model for apprenticeships. The Forum is already advising on issues concerning the implementation of this new model. It will also address the issue of how employers, particularly small and micro businesses can be encouraged to engage with the new system.

I have also established sector partnerships in support of apprenticeships covering the ICT, manufacturing and engineering and agri-food sectors. These partnerships will ensure employer needs are at the centre of the new system for apprenticeships through developing and agreeing the curriculum and content for relevant occupational areas at each skills level.

Further partnerships are being established over the coming months to cover construction, financial services, utilities and life sciences.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail what action his Department has taken to make payment of £75,000 to the Kilcooley Women's Education Centre.

(AQW 48756/11-16)

Dr Farry: For purposes of clarity, the Department does not have any direct funding relationship with the Kilcooley Women's Education Centre, which is one of 13 partner organisations led by their lead partner, the Training for Women Network (TWN). The Department has a direct funding relationship only with TWN.

The Department has met on several occasions with TWN to help them find a way forward to complete and submit their outstanding ESF claims. However, it is the responsibility of TWN to submit financial claims to the Department within the terms and conditions of their European Social Fund Letter of Offer.

The Department received, on 9 September 2015, a financial claim from TWN covering the period July - December 2014. This was initially processed under the accelerated payments process I initiated in July 2015, and a payment for 50% of their claim was issued on 15 September 2015. The balance of the claim will be processed and paid in the normal way as quickly as possible. Any remaining eligible funds payable to TWN will be paid by the Department on receipt of the remaining outstanding financial claim for the period January – March 2015.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on what action his Department is taking to resolve the problems regarding the European Social Fund.

(AQW 48757/11-16)

Dr Farry: To relieve financial pressures on organisations and to speed up the payment process, it was agreed that, from 1 July 2015, the following would apply:

- i) for unpaid claims submitted with claim periods up to the end of March 2014, 80% of the ESF/DEL contribution (65%) would be paid with completion of the verification process carried out at a later date. The remaining 20% would be paid when claims are fully vouched; and
- ii) for unpaid claims submitted with claim periods from April to December 2014, 50% of the ESF/DEL contribution (65%) would be paid, with completion of the verification process carried out at a later date. The remaining 50% would be paid when the claims are fully vouched.

These payments commenced to all eligible organisations on 6 July 2015 and have all now been paid.

In addition, a new claim inspection test grid and staff guidance to vouch claims was introduced on the 17 June 2015, and a new ESF claims tracking spreadsheet was also introduced in June 2015 to monitor the progress of claims being processed.

For the 2014-2020 ESF Programme, the Department has also made available a 5% advance payment to ensure that any initial cash-flow or financial issues are avoided for project promoters. To date, 36 advance payments have been made to organisations.

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, pursuant to AQW 48213/11-15, for a further breakdown of the staff travel costs of £9415.

(AQW 48762/11-16)

Dr Farry: The table below provides a further breakdown of staff travel costs:

Event/Destination/Date	Number of Attendees	Total Cost
Meeting of UK ESF Evaluation Group. London, June 2012	2	£462.47
EU Co-ordination Meeting. Brussels, August 2012	1	£122.50
Training Seminar for Successful Application of Article 13 verifications. Berlin, April 2013	7	£5, 484.10
Meeting with UK Colleagues to finalise Operational Programme. London, March 2013	2	£812.21
ESF Committee Meeting Dublin, August 2013	1	£81.38
ESF Meetings. Brussels and Dublin, September 2013	1	£637.58
Meeting with ROI Colleagues. Dublin, January 2014	1	£65.00
2 day Meeting with EU Commission. Brussels, October 2013	2	£1,749.72
Total		£9,414.96

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on the replacement of the Steps to Work programme, including any associated timescales.

(AQW 48811/11-16)

Dr Farry: The Department's main employment programme, Steps 2 Success, commenced on 20 October 2014. Steps 2 Success replaced the Steps to Work programme which stopped taking referrals on 30 May 2014.

Steps 2 Success is delivered throughout Northern Ireland by three Lead Contractors in three contract areas. The three Lead Contractors are Ingeus UK Ltd, in the Belfast Contract area, EOS NI, in the Northern area and Reed in Partnership, in the Southern area. Each Lead Contractor is supported in delivery by a supply chain of local organisations in each contract area.

From the start of the programme on 20 October 2014 to 30 June 2015, 25,333 individuals have been referred from the Department's front line offices to Steps 2 Success. Of the number referred, 21,289 individuals started the programme, giving an attachment rate of 84% which is very encouraging.

It is worth noting that the majority (71%) of clients starting Steps 2 Success were from the JSA 25+ category, 21% were from the JSA 18-24 category and the remaining 8% were from the JSA Early Entry, ESA and Voluntary categories.

Implementing Steps 2 Success was a major challenge for both the Department and the three Lead Contractors. The referral and attachment of more than 21,000 clients, in what was a relatively short period of time, is a positive start to the programme.

Official statistics relating to employment outcomes from the Steps 2 Success programme are currently under development and it is anticipated that the first release of these statistics will be during spring 2016.

Mr McKinney asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the voluntary and community organisations in South Belfast that receive funding from his Department.

(AQW 48812/11-16)

Dr Farry:

European Social Fund 2014-2020

Under the European Social Fund 2014-2020 programme, the Department funds the following organisations in South Belfast:

- | | |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| ■ Action Deaf Youth | ■ Include Youth |
| ■ Action Mental Health | ■ Mencap |
| ■ Action on Hearing Loss | ■ NOW Group |
| ■ Association for Real Change NI | ■ RNIB |
| ■ Ashton Community Trust | ■ Springboard Opportunities |
| ■ Barnardo's NI | ■ The Cedar Foundation |
| ■ Bryson Charitable Group | ■ The Orchardville Society |
| ■ Conservation Volunteers | ■ The Prince's Trust |
| ■ Enterprise NI | ■ Women in Business NI |
| ■ Extern NI | ■ Women's Tec |
| ■ GEMS NI | ■ YouthAction NI |

Disability Employment Service

The Department's Disability Employment Service provides public match funding, through the European Social Fund, to the following disability organisations: Cedar Foundation and Mencap.

United Youth

Two voluntary and community organisations based in South Belfast have received funding from the Department to deliver United Youth pilots in 2015/16: Peace Players International NI and Clubs for Young People.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the departmental funding streams available to community groups.

(AQW 48824/11-16)

Dr Farry: NI European Social Fund Programme

My Department administers the NI European Social Fund (ESF) Programme 2014-2020, which has five distinct funding streams focusing on support for specific groups of beneficiaries:

- Priority 1.1 – Individuals facing barriers to employment and economic activity;
- Priority 1.2 – Young people not in education, employment or training (NEET);
- Priority 2.1 – People with a disability;
- Priority 2.2 – Community-based support for families, aimed at preventing young people becoming NEET; and
- Priority 3 – Apprenticeships and Youth Training

The first call for funding applications under these streams has already taken place, and 67 projects, including some being taken forward by community groups, have accepted their Letter of Offer.

United Youth

In addition, my Department is currently funding 12 community and voluntary organisations to deliver 13 United Youth pilots from August 2015 until the end of March 2016. The purpose of the pilot phase is to test a range of delivery approaches with a view to developing a service design framework for the United Youth Programme post 2015/16.

Steps2Success

My Department's Employment Service procures services to assist unemployed and economically inactive customers to return to work.

Steps2Success (S2S), my Department's main adult return-to-work programme, was contracted for a 4-year period commencing on 20 October 2014. Some community-based groups are part of the supply chain arrangements for S2S and receive Departmental funding through their Lead Contractor. My Department does not, however, hold details on payments made between Lead Contractors and individual sub-contractors.

Leadership and Management

My Department offers a number of initiatives to help improve leadership and management competence in Northern Ireland-based Micro-Businesses, Small to Medium-sized Enterprises, and Social Economy Enterprises. My Department's leadership and management suite currently comprises the Management and Leadership Development Programme (MLDP) and The INTRO Graduate Programme.

Funding is available from my Department in respect of the MLDP programme at a rate of 50% of approved training costs. The INTRO programme is funded at a rate of £2,250 per participant, with employers making an £800 contribution as well as paying a salary to the graduate for the duration of the 24 week programme.

Training Programmes

With the support of Central Procurement Directorate, the appointment of contracted training suppliers to deliver my Department's training programmes (such as Training for Success) is subject to the outcome of separate procurement exercises. A guide to public sector procurement for small to medium sized enterprises (including community groups) is available for download from the Central Procurement Directorate website <http://www.dfpni.gov.uk/pgn-02-12>

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail what university courses are available at Queen's University Belfast.

(AQW 48883/11-16)

Dr Farry: My department does not hold this information. You may wish to refer to each institution's online prospectus for details of course provision.

- Queen's University: www.qub.ac.uk
- Ulster University: www.ulster.ac.uk

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail what university courses are available at Ulster University.

(AQW 48884/11-16)

Dr Farry: My department does not hold this information. You may wish to refer to each institution's online prospectus for details of course provision.

- Queen's University: www.qub.ac.uk
- Ulster University: www.ulster.ac.uk

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail how many students currently attend Queen's University Belfast.

(AQW 48885/11-16)

Dr Farry: Queen's University Belfast has advised that 23,319 students attended the University in the 2013/14 academic year. Figures for the 2014/15 academic year are still being compiled.

Ulster University has advised that 26,969 students attended the University in the 2014/15 academic year.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail how many students currently attend Ulster University.

(AQW 48886/11-16)

Dr Farry: Queen's University Belfast has advised that 23,319 students attended the University in the 2013/14 academic year. Figures for the 2014/15 academic year are still being compiled.

Ulster University has advised that 26,969 students attended the University in the 2014/15 academic year.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail how staff at Ulster University, Coleraine, have been informed about changes to their employment, following the closure of the Modern Languages School.

(AQW 48908/11-16)

Dr Farry: While my Department provides funding and sets the strategic direction for the higher education sector, universities are autonomous and responsible for their own personnel policies and procedures.

Department of the Environment

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of the Environment to review the £825 permit costs to individuals in the farming industry which allows the use of used tyres for agricultural purposes.

(AQW 48432/11-16)

Mr Durkan (The Minister of the Environment): Under the Waste Management Licensing Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2003, it is the responsibility of anyone who produces, collects, stores, treats, reuses or deposits waste or used tyres to minimise the risk to the environment, human health and animal welfare, this Regulation is enforced by NIEA.

There are however criteria and thresholds in the legislation which permits certain small scale, low risk waste activities to be exempt from the waste licensing regime. In this instance a farmer may apply to NIEA to register a Paragraph 16 waste exemption for the beneficial use of tyres. This exemption permits a person to use the tyres provided:

- (a) they are put to that use without further treatment; and
- (b) that use of the tyres does not involve their disposal.

The fee to register a Paragraph 16 exemption is currently £854 for 3 years. The Paragraph 16 exemption has been a legal requirement since The Waste Management Licensing Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2003 came into operation on 19 December 2003, nearly 12 years ago. To date, no farmers have applied for a Paragraph 16 exemption.

Farmers may keep waste tyres, already in place on the farm, to re-use in agricultural activity. An example of this would be for use in a silage clamp. However, it is important that the quantity of tyres should not exceed the number required for the silage clamp(s). If a farmer wishes to bring additional waste tyres onto the farm, the farmer must hold an appropriate waste authorisation, the transportation of which must be undertaken by a registered waste carrier, waste transfer notes must be completed and retained by the farmer for two years.

Guidance on the use of tyres on farms has been produced in conjunction with DARD and NIEA are more than happy to assist farmers on this issue.

It should be noted that the Fees and Charges Scheme for Waste Management Licensing are set in accordance with statutory requirements and DFP (Department of Finance and Personnel) and Treasury guidance and the NIEA 3 year Charging Policy. A review of this policy is due later this year, however I can give no guarantees in respect of the cost for an exemption.

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of the Environment whether he will inform the European Commission by the 3rd October 2015 deadline, that he plans to ban the growth of all GM crops and opt out of EU approvals.

(AQW 48441/11-16)

Mr Durkan: The deadline relates to crops that have been approved or which are already within the EU approvals process. Although none of these are considered suitable for growing here, the Commission will be notified that I wish to prohibit their cultivation in any case.

In the longer term, I remain unconvinced of the benefits of GM crops. I therefore plan to exercise the territorial opt out which the latest EU Directive allows. This is a different process to that which is to be concluded by the October deadline. However, in short, no GM crops will be permitted here until further notice.

Mrs Hale asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the total tonnage of Greywacke reserves currently approved for extraction from local quarries.

(AQW 48489/11-16)

Mr Durkan: From the 1 April 2015, the operational responsibility for local planning transferred from my Department to the eleven newly established councils as part of the new two tier planning system. Typically planning application files for extraction will include tonnage information in the form of estimated annual extraction and the proposed life expectancy of the extraction sites. Following any planning approval, these figures will be influenced by market forces in the construction industry in terms of supply and demand for the material.

Figures for approved Greywacke reserves are not held by my Department. However, I understand that DETINI receive annual quarry returns data from minerals operators and may hold data on the tonnages of Greywacke reserves approved.

Mrs Hale asked the Minister of the Environment what tonnage of Greywacke is yet to be extracted from the approved reserves.

(AQW 48490/11-16)

Mr Durkan: From the 1 April 2015, the operational responsibility for local planning transferred from my Department to the eleven newly established councils as part of the new two tier planning system. Typically planning application files for extraction will include tonnage information in the form of estimated annual extraction and the proposed life expectancy of the extraction sites.

Following any planning approval, these figures will be influenced by market forces in the construction industry in terms of supply and demand for the material. Figures for ongoing 'banked' reserves of material are not held by my Department. However, I understand that DETINI receive annual quarry returns data from minerals operators and may hold this information.

Mrs Hale asked the Minister of the Environment how much Greywacke currently extracted from local quarries is exported.

(AQW 48495/11-16)

Mr Durkan: My Department does not hold data on how much Greywacke is exported from Northern Ireland quarries. I understand that DETINI receive annual quarry returns data from minerals operators and these returns may detail the tonnages of Greywacke currently exported from local quarries.

Mrs Hale asked the Minister of the Environment whether any assessments have been made examining the potential to expand existing or dormant quarries to increase the supply of Greywacke.

(AQW 48557/11-16)

Mr Durkan: Any assessment of, or decision to expand existing or dormant quarries is a matter for the relevant operator(s). Any such proposed developments would be subject to planning approval.

Mrs Hale asked the Minister of the Environment whether permission has been approved or sought to (i) extend existing quarries; and (ii) reopen dormant quarries to extract Greywacke, in last five years.

(AQW 48558/11-16)

Mr Durkan: Following the transfer of powers to local government on the 1 April 2015, the majority of planning applications for quarries, are now dealt with by local councils as they are not regionally significant applications.

The Department no longer holds this information. DETINI receive annual quarry returns data from minerals operators and these returns may include the location of quarries where Greywacke is currently extracted.

Department of Finance and Personnel

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the shortfall in pension contributions per Department due to a failure by payroll to apply the Classic Plus 3.5 per cent deduction from pensionable earnings.

(AQW 48494/11-16)

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): There is no known shortfall in pension contributions in any department as any shortfalls which are identified are recovered.

Mr Ramsey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether his Department will publish an update following the consultation exercise on parental responsibility for unmarried fathers and their contact with children post-separation.

(AQW 48533/11-16)

Mrs Foster: There was a low response rate to the consultation exercise and it was agreed that further research should be undertaken to help inform policy proposals. It will take some time to complete that research and it is, therefore, unlikely that policy proposals will issue during the current mandate. Moreover, the Lord Chief Justice has just announced a Review of Civil and Family Justice, which will also touch on issues raised during the consultation, and we will wish to see how that review progresses.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail how many conditional offers under the Voluntary Exit Scheme were made to civil servants on career breaks; and how does admitting such candidates to the Voluntary Exit Scheme represent a cost saving, as calculated on the basis of the formula deployed.

(AQW 48559/11-16)

Mrs Foster: 168 staff on career break received conditional offers for early exit under the Scheme and 55 of those have accepted and will leave either at the end of September or November. Further offers may be made to career break staff if selected in later tranches of the Scheme.

While staff on career break do not represent an immediate pay bill saving, and are not therefore included in the current estimates of savings to be achieved through the Scheme, they do (whilst on career break) have the right to return to a post in the NICS at some point in the future and in doing so would add to the pay bill at that point.

In terms of the application of the value for money criteria used in selection, using the last salary paid to someone prior to their career break

to calculate the compensation costs and the, albeit notional, pay bill saving, provides that applicants are treated consistently for selection purposes. This approach aligns with the principle adopted throughout the development and implementation of the Voluntary Exit Scheme, which has been to ensure that all staff, including those on career break, are treated fairly and lawfully.

In addition, where a member of staff on career break is selected, an additional applicant is selected to ensure the level of pay bill savings required are met.

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel when she will answer AQO 8535/11-15.
(AQW 48580/11-16)

Mrs Foster: The Member was not in his place to ask AQO 8535/11-15.

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel on what date the last meeting of the Ministerial Advisory Council on Public Sector Reform took place; and on what date the next meeting will take place.
(AQW 48694/11-16)

Mrs Foster: The last meeting of the Ministerial Advisory Council for Public Sector Reform took place on 25th March 2015. The next meeting is scheduled for 3rd December 2015.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of vacant domestic properties, based on rating records, in North Antrim.
(AQW 48709/11-16)

Mrs Foster: A total of 1,056 domestic properties in the North Antrim Parliamentary Constituency were recorded as vacant as at 31st August 2015.

Since the introduction of the Rating of Empty Homes legislation on 1st October 2011, the rate liability for vacant domestic properties has been assessed at 100%. There is currently no requirement for ratepayers to inform Land & Property Services that their property is vacant, nor is there any financial advantage to doing so. As such, current information on the number of empty domestic properties may not be complete.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (i) how many business premises are currently vacant in (a) Ballymena; (b) Ballymoney; and (c) Ballycastle; and (ii) how many premises in each of these towns are occupied by charities with rates exemption.
(AQW 48710/11-16)

Mrs Foster: Information is not collated at town level as requested. Information is available for the North Antrim Parliamentary Constituency.

- (i) The number of vacant non-domestic properties in the North Antrim Parliamentary Constituency at 31st August 2015 was 683.
- (ii) Information is not available in the form requested. The number of non-domestic properties granted charitable exemption in the North Antrim Parliamentary Constituency at 31st August 2015 was 663. These include churches, halls, charity shops, educational establishments and some local authority properties which are for public use.

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how much was raised across the Executive through the sale of capital assets, in each of the last five years, including up to September 2015.
(AQW 48720/11-16)

Mrs Foster: The amount raised through the sale of capital assets in the years specified is as follows:

£million				
2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15
31.9	17.9	31.1	23.1	35.3

For 2015-16 the most recent information from departments indicates that currently the planned level of capital asset disposals is around £18.7 million.

These figures only include asset sales and do not reflect the total level of capital receipts.

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel (i) to list the public appointments processes initiated by her Department for its arm's-length bodies and Non Departmental Public Bodies since May 2011; and for each appointment (ii) whether she chose to be presented with the list of those judged suitable for appointment in a ranked or an unranked order, based on the candidates' scores at interview against an agreed pass mark.

(AQW 48878/11-16)

Mrs Foster: The Public Appointment competitions that have been initiated by my Department since May 2011 are listed in the table below.

DFP Public Appointment competitions initiated since May 2011

Date	Public Appointment Competition
August 2011*	Competition to appoint a Chair of the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation (NIAUR)*
February 2012	Competition to appoint a Chair of the NIAUR
October 2012	Competition to appoint Board Members to the NIAUR
January 2013	Competition to appoint Board Members to the Northern Ireland Statistics Advisory Committee (SAC)
June 2014*	Competition to appoint Board Members to the NIAUR*
March 2015	Competition to appoint Board Members to the NIAUR

* No candidates were found suitable for appointment during these competitions. They were therefore re-run at a later date.

In each of these competitions it was decided that those candidates that the interview panel judged as suitable for appointment would be presented to the Minister in an unranked order. The candidate(s) that had the skills and experience that most closely matched those required and who best met the needs of the Board could then be selected.

These procedures are fully compliant with the Code of Practice for Ministerial Appointments.

Mr McKinney asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, pursuant to AQW 48702/11-16, to detail how the £6.4m was calculated.

(AQW 48887/11-16)

Mrs Foster: Financial institutions participating in the dormant accounts scheme surrender funds held in dormant accounts to the Reclaim Fund. The Reclaim Fund estimates the prudent level of funds required to meet future claims and determines how much funding to release.

The funds released by the Reclaim Fund are apportioned according to the Barnett Formula, as set out in "The Distribution of Dormant Account Money (Apportionment) Order". To date £6.4m is available to meet expenditure in Northern Ireland, with £1.3m being received in 2011-12, £1.4m in 2012-13, £2.3m in 2013-14 and £1.4m in 2014-15.

Mr McKinney asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the Northern Ireland Investment Fund.

(AQW 48888/11-16)

Mrs Foster: A feasibility study carried out by consultants Deloitte into the proposed Northern Ireland Investment Fund has now concluded.

My officials are currently considering the way forward in liaison with European Investment Bank officials. The work to develop specific Fund proposals is technically complex and until this work concludes, I cannot provide any further detail.

Mr McKinney asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the June Monitoring Round.

(AQW 48890/11-16)

Mrs Foster: The Executive agreed a June Monitoring technical exercise on 7 July which allowed departments some internal flexibility in management of their budgets. It also addressed the carry forward of funding from 2014-15 and agreed allocations in relation to Delivering Social Change, Childcare Strategy, the Social Investment Fund and Financial Transactions Capital. Full details were provided in my written statement to the Assembly.

The Executive has not yet agreed the remaining elements of the June monitoring round.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the review of the current business rates system.

(AQW 48907/11-16)

Mrs Foster: I have been considering the findings from the innovation lab and hope shortly to finalise and publish terms of reference for the review. I have already received the views of the Finance Committee on the direction of the review and am in the process of advising other Ministers. Initial research and preparatory drafting of the consultation document commenced over the summer. I plan to publish the paper late autumn, which will initiate a 12 week open consultation process.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (i) how many notifications of appointees as Special Advisers has Corporate HR received, in this calendar year; and (ii) when was each notification given and from which Departments.
(AQW 48923/11-16)

Mrs Foster:

- (i) Corporate HR has been notified of 6 prospective appointees as Special Advisers in this calendar year i.e. from January 2015 to date.
- (ii) The table below shows the date that notification was given to Corporate HR and from which department.

Date	Department
30/03/2015	Department of Environment
14/05/2015	Department of Finance and Personnel
20/05/2015	Department for Social Development
21/05/2015	Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment
04/06/2015	Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety
28/08/2015	Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel given the reduction in the support grant to some councils, particularly Derry City and Strabane District Council, whether financial support will be given to councils as a result of the non domestic revaluation process.

(AQO 8700/11-16)

Mrs Foster: Policy on Rates Support Grant lies with DOE and therefore this is a question that would be better directed at the DOE Minister. DOE reduced the grant this financial year and its distribution was also affected by the reorganisation of local government and the non domestic revaluation.

The formula for calculating each council's share of the grant is based on an assessment of the relative wealth and needs of each council and this remains DOE's policy and budget responsibility.

Mrs McKeivitt asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether she plans to include provision for rate relief for amateur sports clubs in the planned Rates (Amendment) Bill.

(AQO 8701/11-16)

Mrs Foster: I do intend to include provision of enhanced rate relief for HMRC registered amateur sports clubs in the planned Rates (Amendment) Bill.

However, it is effectively blocked because Mr McKay has gone ahead and introduced a private members' bill on the same subject. A bill which is flawed in many respects, not least by its failure to take into account the views of the business community when developing the policy. This is despite me advising him not to proceed and the risks in taking it forward.

Department of Justice

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of the restructured domestic violence protocol; and whether the protocol is victim-centred and in line with the Victim's Charter.

(AQW 48551/11-16)

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): My officials have been working closely with the Department of Health Social Services and Public Safety, to bring forward a new joint strategy dealing with domestic and sexual violence and abuse. In line with previous strategies, the draft strategy, which I will be sharing with the Justice Committee shortly, will be victim focused. It will aim to ensure that victims are provided with appropriate support and protection, and that perpetrators of these crimes are called to account.

In taking forward the priorities within the Strategy, the aim will be to adhere to the Victim Charter, ensuring victims are recognised and treated in a respectful, sensitive and professional manner, without discrimination, in their contact with criminal justice organisations, victim support and restorative justice services. This includes victims being proactively provided with information about how a case is progressing and getting help and support as they move through the criminal justice system.

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice what is the target timescale in the Fermanagh-Tyrone Court Division for carrying out a Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference following a domestic violence report; and whether this timescale will remain in place prior to the centralisation of services to align with the Health and Social Care Trusts.

(AQW 48621/11-16)

Mr Ford: On 1 April 2015 Public Protection Branch within PSNI was formed. This comprises five public Protection Units that are coterminous with the five Health and Social Care Trusts in order to provide better collaborative working and provide a better service to the public.

In the Fermanagh-Tyrone Court Division the Enniskillen and Omagh MARAC continues to meet monthly within the Western Health and Social Care Trust and the Dungannon MARAC meets monthly within the Southern Health and Social Care Trust. There have been no changes to MARAC timescales since implementation in 2010.

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, in each of the last three years, (i) how many times prisoners have been permitted to travel from prison facilities unescorted; (ii) how many prisoners have been granted special permission to recover from surgery or treatment away from their respective prison facility; and (iii) how many of these occasions have resulted in an attempted or successful escape.

(AQW 48676/11-16)

Mr Ford:

- (i) The number of prisoners who were permitted to travel unescorted from Prison facilities were:

Year	Total Prisoners
2012	53
2013	99
2014	250

- (ii) NIPS does not collate figures in respect of prisoners who are granted special permission to recover from surgery or treatment away from their Establishment.

- (iii) The number of prisoners who failed to return from unescorted compassionate temporary release is shown in the table below:

Year	Number of prisoners	Total Days Unlawfully at Large
2012	1	5
2013	1	2
2014	3	8

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice whether Public Protection Arrangements in Northern Ireland is mandated to launch a prosecution on a non-cooperating offender registered with one or more of the partner agencies.

(AQW 48721/11-16)

Mr Ford: Public Protection Arrangements for Northern Ireland (PPANI) are a set of arrangements requiring agencies to cooperate in the interests of public protection, not an organisation. Responsibility for initiating prosecution of non-cooperating offenders rests with the agency which has responsibility for management of the offender where statutory powers exist.

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice whether every person entering Dungannon Court House is required to be security scanned or checked by G4S staff; and whether this is applied across all court houses.

(AQW 48722/11-16)

Mr Ford: It is not my Department's policy to comment on security matters. I can confirm that search arrangements at Dungannon Courthouse are consistent with those for the rest of the court estate.

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice (i) on which date was the agreement made to hold benefits appeal tribunals at Dungannon Court House; (ii) how many have been heard to date; and (iii) for his assessment of the success of this arrangement to date.

(AQW 48724/11-16)

Mr Ford: Agreement on the use of the court estate to hold benefits appeals tribunals has been in place since 2013. There have been twelve such sessions arranged at Dungannon Courthouse to date, commencing from June 2013.

The venue provides an informal courtroom suitable for benefit appeal hearings. To date there have been no formal complaints received in relation to the facilities provided in Dungannon.

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice how many fine defaults are being (i) pursued by (a) postal; or (b) personal summons service, by the Courts and Tribunals Service in the Fermanagh and Tyrone Division, broken down by court; and how many defaulters have entered into re-payment schedules.

(AQW 48725/11-16)

Mr Ford: The table below sets out the number of Fine Default Notices which are currently being pursued by postal or personal service by summons server by court office in the Division of Fermanagh and Tyrone.

Court Office	Personal Service	Postal Service	Total
Dungannon Court Office	223	96	319
Enniskillen Court Office	47	39	86
Omagh Court Office	-	40	40
Strabane Court Office	2	52	54
	272	227	499¹

1 This statistic relates to Fine Default Notices that have been listed for hearing on or after the 1 September 2015.

The table below sets out the number of fines imposed and the number of individuals who as a result of Fine Default Review proceedings currently have fine payment terms by instalment as of 1 September 2015.

Court Office	Number of Fines	Number of Defaulters
Dungannon Court Office	102	55
Enniskillen Court Office	176	108
Omagh Court Office	9	5
Strabane Court Office	78	51
	365	219²

2 An individual who is in default may be counted in more than one court office.

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, given that a fine issued by a judge is a court order, why defaulters are not re-sentenced for their original convictions, as is the case with breaches of probation orders, community service orders or similar. **(AQW 48771/11-16)**

Mr Ford: Probation and community service orders are imposed for more serious offences than those which typically attract fines. To re-sentence every defaulter in the same form as community order enforcement would not only be inappropriate but would also be impractical.

Legislation already provides a number of powers for courts when dealing with fine default. The original fine can be partially or fully remitted; further time for payment may be allowed; a distress warrant can be issued; or the person can be imprisoned. A Supervised Activity Order requiring service in the community will also be available along with a range of additional options being created by way of the Justice (No. 2) Bill.

Subject to the Assembly's consideration, the Bill will provide courts with new and additional powers to deduct payments from income, to freeze and obtain access to money held in bank accounts, or - in certain circumstances - to seize vehicles to secure payment.

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, given that the PSNI bring persons arrested by warrant to courts, which agency has responsibility for transporting said persons back to their home or agreed residence if bail is granted, particularly if they have been brought to a divisional court outside their own area or some distance from the specific court which issued the warrant. **(AQW 48772/11-16)**

Mr Ford: There is no legal requirement to provide transport for persons released on bail. However, it is custom and practice for the police to undertake this task where resources permit.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Justice for a religious breakdown of the Prisoner Ombudsman's office staff. **(AQW 48776/11-16)**

Mr Ford: The Prisoner Ombudsman's Office has 12 staff, all of whom are seconded from other organisations: 11 are Northern Ireland Civil Servants, while one is a public servant. The Office does not carry out equality monitoring: the staff are included in the monitoring arrangements of their parent employer. In the case of the civil servants, this is done by the Department of Finance and Personnel. The Fair Employment and Treatment (NI) Order 1998 specifies DFP as a public authority and provides that all civil servants are treated as employees of DFP.

Information on the religion of staff is not held. As required by the Fair Employment and Treatment (NI) Order 1998, information is collected on their perceived community background. It is an offence under the Fair Employment (Monitoring) Regulations (NI) 1999 for an employer to disclose the community background of any individual.

In order to protect the confidentiality of community background information and in accordance with guidance from the Equality Commission, DFP will not provide the community background profile of any group of staff where the number of Protestant or Roman Catholic employees is less than 10. In the circumstances therefore, it is not possible to provide the information requested.

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Justice how many contractors working on the Maghaberry Prison site have reported threats against their person for working on the site.
(AQW 48795/11-16)

Mr Ford: I do not comment on security matters.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of the Belfast Age Friendly Strategy; and whether his Department plans to support the development of Age Friendly Strategies in other areas.
(AQW 48829/11-16)

Mr Ford: Belfast Policing and Community Safety Partnership (PCSP) and District Policing and Community Safety Partnerships have been involved in the implementation of the Belfast Age Friendly Strategy, developed by Belfast Strategic Partnership. I understand that intergenerational work in particular is a priority for the PCSP.

The multi-agency Older Persons Delivery Group, chaired by my Department, has developed an action plan which contains a range of measures being taken forward by the relevant organisations to tackle fear of crime among older people. Last year, the Group invited representatives from the Belfast Strategic Partnership to deliver a presentation on the Age Friendly Strategy, to discuss how it would be implemented and to offer support where it was deemed necessary.

My Department would welcome development of Age Friendly Strategies in other areas, and would particularly welcome the involvement of PCSPs to support the implementation of such strategies at a local level to address fear of crime issues amongst older people.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Justice how his Department assesses (i) levels of crime against older people; and (ii) fear of crime amongst older people; and how he is working with statutory agencies, arm's-length bodies and groups within the community, voluntary and charity sectors to address this issue.
(AQW 48830/11-16)

Mr Ford: My Department developed and leads on the implementation of Building Safer, Shared and Confident Communities: A Community Safety Strategy for Northern Ireland 2012-2017.

The Strategy has a set of associated action plans, including a dedicated fear of crime action plan detailing the measures which a multi-agency Older Persons Delivery Group is taking forward to reduce the fear of crime amongst older and vulnerable people.

Membership of the Group comprises representatives from various statutory bodies across the justice family including PSNI, Policing and Community Safety Partnerships, and the Northern Ireland Policing Board. Other statutory bodies represented include Health and Social Care Board, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, and the Department of the Environment.

The Police Service of Northern Ireland recorded crime figures, where a victim is aged 60+, are monitored by the Group. The Group also considers the Northern Ireland Crime Survey findings for respondents over 60 in relation to their feelings about crime and their fear of crime.

In addition to the representatives detailed above, Age Sector Platform, a voluntary sector organisation which lobbies for the rights of older people, also holds membership of the Group. My Department had previously funded this organisation to carry out research into why older people are so fearful of becoming a victim of crime, even though the statistics show that this is unlikely. My Department is currently funding Age Sector Platform to build on this research, taking forward engagement with older people regionally to address the concerns that they have around crime.

At a local level, PCSPs are taking forward a range of initiatives that aim to tackle fear of crime amongst older people. For example, Derry City and Strabane PCSP and partners have developed a film resource pack to help raise awareness of scams and financial abuse among older people. Community Safety Wardens and other community leaders are using this resource to engage with older persons groups, providing practical advice on improving their safety.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Justice on how many occasions since 2012 his Department has met the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Older People to discuss crimes against older people, their fear of crime, and actions to address these issues.
(AQW 48831/11-16)

Mr Ford: I refer to AQW/40167/11-15 in which I provided details of the two occasions when I personally met with the Commissioner in March 2013 and June 2015, and a meeting my officials had with representatives from the Office of the Commissioner in July 2012. No other meetings with the Commissioner or her representatives to discuss these issues specifically have taken place since that time.

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice to outline the membership of the newly established Sex Worker Liaison Group on Human Trafficking.

(AQW 48836/11-16)

Mr Ford: A Sex Worker Liaison Group on Human Trafficking is in the process of being established by my Department. Membership is likely to include the Department of Justice, law enforcement bodies, sex worker representatives and health professionals.

The purpose of the group is to assist in the work of tackling trafficking for sexual exploitation. Those working with, or representing, sex workers can play an important role in that. I am keen to explore how we can work together to identify, protect and assist those being exploited.

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice on how many occasions in each of the last twelve months Probation Service staff have carried out an unannounced visit to the hostel at Edward Street, Portadown in respect of (i) persons on bail; (ii) persons released from custody; and (iii) persons subject to monitoring and Sexual Offences Prevention Orders.

(AQW 48837/11-16)

Mr Ford: Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI) staff undertake visits to all offenders subject to their supervision, including offenders residing in hostel accommodation. The frequency and nature of these visits will be determined on an individual basis, subject to the individual offender's assessed risk, the associated risk management plan and nature of their offending.

Unannounced visits are undertaken to particular categories of offenders who live in the community in order to assist PBNI staff to effectively supervise and monitor offender compliance.

There is not the same need for visits to be undertaken on an announced basis to offenders who reside in a supervised hostel such as Edward Street, as they are subject to a significantly higher level of supervision and monitoring. PBNI staff do not, therefore, make unannounced visits to hostels.

Mr Hazzard asked the Minister of Justice how his Department's proposed changes to legal aid will alter existing provision for parents and pupils in an educational setting.

(AQW 48873/11-16)

Mr Ford: Legal Aid is currently available for certain matters relating to Special Educational Needs. I have no plans to change the current arrangements.

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice whether the agenda and minutes of meetings of the Sex Worker Liaison Group on Human Trafficking will be published.

(AQW 48898/11-16)

Mr Ford: In my response to AQW/48836/11-16, I highlighted that my Department is in the process of establishing a Sex Worker Liaison Group on Human Trafficking. In line with current practice in respect of the Human Trafficking Engagement Group, minutes of meetings of the Sex Worker Liaison Group will be published on the Organised Crime Task Force website: www.octf.gov.uk.

Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

Mr Allister asked the Assembly Commission whether the Lydia de Burgh portrait of HM The Queen is on loan to Hillsborough Castle or has it been gifted.

(AQW 48875/11-16)

Mr Ramsey (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): Further to AQW 7197/11-15, I can confirm that the Lydia de Burgh portrait of Her Majesty the Queen has been on loan to Hillsborough Castle since 2006 and this remains unchanged.

I hope that the above information provides the detail that you sought, however if you require anything further I would be very happy to assist.

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

Revised Written Answers

Department of Education

In Bound Volume 91, page WA 148 please replace AQW 30039/11-15 with:

Middletown Centre for Autism

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Education how many children are treated in outreach by the Middletown Centre for Autism. (AQW 30039/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): The Chief Executive of the Middletown Centre for Autism has advised that 20 children were provided with outreach support from 1 April 2013 to 30 November 2013.

A further 123 children also benefitted from support offered to the referred children within the same school.

Journal of Proceedings

Minutes of Proceedings

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 7 September 2015

The Assembly met at noon, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Personal Prayer or Meditation

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Speaker's Business

2.1 Royal Assent – Ombudsman and Commissioner for Complaints (Amendment) Act 2015

The Speaker informed Members that Royal Assent had been signified, on 20 July 2015, to the Ombudsman and Commissioner for Complaints (Amendment) Act 2015.

2.2 Royal Assent – Budget (No.2) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015

The Speaker informed Members that Royal Assent had been signified, on 24 July 2015, to the Budget (No.2) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015.

2.3 Royal Assent – Reservoirs Act (Northern Ireland) 2015

The Speaker informed Members that Royal Assent had been signified, on 24 July 2015, to the Reservoirs Act (Northern Ireland) 2015.

2.4 Royal Assent – Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2015

The Speaker informed Members that Royal Assent had been signified, on 24 July 2015, to the Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2015.

2.5 Ministerial Resignation

The Speaker informed Members that, on Wednesday 02 September 2015, Mr Danny Kennedy resigned as Minister for Regional Development.

2.6 Member Resignations

The Speaker informed Members that Mr Michael Copeland resigned as a Member of the Assembly with effect from Sunday 31 August 2015 and that Mr Sammy Wilson resigned as a Member of the Assembly with effect from Wednesday 29 July 2015. The Speaker advised that the Speaker's Office had notified the Chief Electoral Officer, in accordance with section 35 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

2.7 New Members

The Speaker informed Members that he had been notified by the Chief Electoral Officer that Mr Gordon Lyons had been returned as a Member of the Assembly for the East Antrim constituency to fill the vacancy that resulted from the resignation of Mr Sammy Wilson.

Mr Lyons signed the Roll of Membership on 19 August 2015 in the presence of the Principal Deputy Speaker, Mr Newton, and the Clerk to the Assembly. The Speaker confirmed that Mr Lyons had signed the Roll and had entered his designation of identity.

2.8 Committee Chairperson Nomination

The Speaker informed Members that, with effect from 01 September 2015, Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson replaced Mr Roy Beggs as Chairperson of the Audit Committee, and confirmed the appointment.

3. Matter of the Day

3.1 Queen Becoming Longest Serving British Monarch

Mr Jim Allister, made a statement, under Standing Order 24, in relation to the Queen becoming the longest serving British monarch. Other Members were also called to speak on the matter.

3.2 Syrian Refugee Crisis

Ms Caitriona Ruane, made a statement, under Standing Order 24, in relation to the Syrian Refugee Crisis. Other Members were also called to speak on the matter.

The Principal Deputy Speaker (Mr Newton) took the Chair.

4. Assembly Business

4.1 Motion – Committee Membership

Proposed:

That Mr Gordon Lyons be appointed as a member of the Committee for Social Development.

Mr P Weir

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

4.2 Motion – Committee Membership

Proposed:

That Ms Claire Hanna replace Mr Seán Rogers as a member of the Public Accounts Committee; and that Ms Claire Hanna replace Mr Joe Byrne as a member of the Committee for Regional Development.

*Mr P Ramsey
Mrs K McKeivitt*

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

5. Executive Committee Business

5.1 First Stage – Houses in Multiple Occupation Bill (NIA Bill 60/11-16)

The Minister of Enterprise Trade and Investment, Mr Jonathan Bell, on behalf of the Minister for Social Development, introduced a Bill to make provision for and in connection with the licensing of houses in multiple occupation.

The Houses in Multiple Occupation Bill (NIA Bill 60/11-16) passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

6. Committee Business

6.1 Motion – Extension of Committee Stage – Water and Sewerage Services Bill (NIA Bill 51/11-16)

Proposed:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33 (4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33 (2) be extended until 25 November 2015, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Water and Sewerage Services Bill (NIA Bill 51/11-16).

Chairperson, Committee for Regional Development

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

6.2 Motion – Extension of Committee Stage – Legal Complaints and Regulation Bill (NIA Bill 50/11-16)**Proposed:**

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33 (4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33 (2) be extended to 18 December 2015, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Legal Complaints and Regulation Bill (NIA Bill 50/11-16).

Chairperson, Committee for Finance and Personnel

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

6.3 Motion – Report on Growing the Economy and Creating Jobs with Lower Corporation Tax (NIA 259/11-16)**Proposed:**

That this Assembly approves the Opportunities for Excellence Report of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment on its Inquiry into Growing the Economy and Creating Jobs with Lower Corporation Tax; and calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, in conjunction with his Executive colleagues, to implement the recommendations contained in the report.

Chairperson, Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Debate ensued.

The Speaker took the Chair.

The debate was suspended for Question Time.

7. Question Time

7.1 Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Questions were put to, and answered by, the deputy First Minister, Mr Martin McGuinness. The junior Minister, Ms Jennifer McCann, also answered a number of questions.

7.2 Justice

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Justice, Mr David Ford.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat) took the Chair.

8. Committee Business (Cont'd)

8.1 Motion – Report on Growing the Economy and Creating Jobs with Lower Corporation Tax (NIA 259/11-16) (Cont'd)

Debate resumed on the motion.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

The Speaker took the Chair.

9. Private Members' Business

9.1 Motion – Murders of Gerard Davison and Kevin McGuigan

Proposed:

That this Assembly condemns the murders of Gerard Davison and Kevin McGuigan; extends its condolences to their families; and calls on anyone with information to bring it forward to assist the ongoing PSNI investigation so those responsible can face due process.

Mr G Kelly
Mr R McCartney
Ms C Ní Chuilín

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

10. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 5:47pm

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin
The Speaker

7 September 2015

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 1 July – 7 September 2015

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly

Ombudsman and Commissioner for Complaints (Amendment) Act 2015

Budget (No.2) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015

Reservoirs Act (Northern Ireland) 2015

Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2015

2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly

Houses in Multiple Occupation Bill (NIA Bill 60/11-16)

3. Orders in Council

4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly

Annual Report about Special Advisers Employed for the Financial Year 1 April 2014 to 31 March 2015 (DFP).

Youth Justice Agency Annual Report and Accounts 2014-2015 (DOJ).

PSNI Annual Report and Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2015 (DOJ).

PSNI Police Pension Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2015 (DOJ).

Northern Ireland Policing Board Annual Report and Accounts for the Period 1 April 2014 - 31 March 2015 (NI Policing Board).

Health and Social Care Board Annual Report and Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2015 (DHSSPS).

Public Health Agency Annual Report and Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2015 (DHSSPS).

The Arts Council of Northern Ireland Annual Report and Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2015 (DCAL).

Registrar General Northern Ireland Annual Report 2014 (DFP).

Forest Service Annual Report and Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2015 (DARD).

Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service Annual Report and Accounts 2014-15 (DOJ).

Northern Health and Social Care Trust Charitable Accounts Annual Report and Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2015 (DHSSPS).

Northern Health and Social Care Trust Annual Report and Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2015 (DHSSPS).

Social Security Agency Annual Report and Accounts 2014 – 2015 (DSD).

Committee on Climate Change Annual Report and Accounts 2014/15 (DOE).

Committee on Climate Change, Meeting Carbon Budgets, 2015 Progress Report to Parliament (DOE).

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister Annual Report and Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2015 (DFP).

Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) Report to the Northern Ireland Assembly 1 April 2012 - 31 December 2014 (Ofqual).

Northern Ireland Prison Service Annual Report and Accounts 2014-15 (DOJ).

Driver and Vehicle Agency Annual Report and Statement of Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2015 (DOE).

Northern Ireland Environment Agency Annual Report and Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2015 (DOE).

Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland Annual Report and Resource Accounts 2014-15 (AGNI).

Translink Annual Report and Accounts 2014/15 (DRD).

Forensic Science Northern Ireland Annual Report and Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2015 (DOJ).

Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland Annual Report and Accounts 2014/15 (CJINI).

Youth Council for Northern Ireland Annual Report and Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2015 (DE).

Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment Annual Report and Accounts 2014/15 (DE).

Staff Commission for Education and Library Boards Annual Report and Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2015 (DE).

Middletown Centre for Autism Annual Report and Financial Statements for the Year Ended 31 March 2015 (DE).

Council for the Catholic Maintained Schools Annual Report and Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2015 (DE).

Livestock and Meat Commission for Northern Ireland Annual Report and Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2015 (DARD).

Invest Northern Ireland Annual Report and Accounts 2014-15 (DETI).

Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland Annual Report and Statement of Accounts 1 April 2014 to 31 March 2015 (DETI).

NISRA Annual Report and Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2015 (DFP).

Department of Agriculture and Rural Development Resource Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2015 (DFP).

Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure Resource Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2015 (DFP).

Department of Education Annual Report and Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2015 (DFP).

Department of Education – Teachers' Superannuation Annual Scheme Statements for the Year Ended 31 March 2015 (DFP).

Department for Employment and Learning Resource Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2015 (DFP).

Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment Resource Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2015 (DFP).

Department of the Environment Annual Report and Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2015 (DFP).

Department of Finance and Personnel Superannuation and Other Allowances Resource Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2015 (DFP).

HSC Pension Scheme Resource Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2015 (DFP).

Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety Resource Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2015 (DFP).

Department for Regional Development Resource Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2015 (DFP).

Northern Ireland Assembly Resource Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2015 (DFP).

Department of Justice Annual Report and Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2015 (DFP).

Department for Social Development Resource Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2015 (DFP).

Northern Ireland Housing Executive Annual Report and Accounts For the Year Ended 31 March 2015 (DSD).

The Annual Report and Accounts of the Charitable Trust Funds held by the South Eastern HSC Trust for the year ended 31 March 2015 (DHSSPS).

The Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education Directors' Report and Financial Statements for the year ended 31 March 2015 (DFP).

National Crime Agency Annual Report and Accounts 2014-15 (DOJ).

Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service Investment Account (DOJ).

British Library Annual Report and Accounts 2014/15 (British Library).

Financial Reporting Advisory Board – Annual Report 2014/15 (DFP).

National Heritage Memorial Fund Lottery Distribution Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2015 (HLF).

National Heritage Memorial Fund Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2015 (HLF).

Gambling Commission Annual Report and Accounts 2014/15 (GC).

Tourism Ireland Limited Annual Report 2014 (DETI).

Northern Ireland Water Annual Report and Accounts 2014/15 (DRD).

Education and Training Inspectorate Retention and Disposal Schedule (DCAL).

General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland Retention and Disposal Schedule (DCAL).

Labour Relations Agency Annual Report and Accounts 2014-2015 (DEL).

Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation Resource Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2015 (DFP).

The Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority Annual Report and Accounts for the year 1 April 2012 to 31 March 2013 (DHSSPS).

Annual Report of the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland for the Year Ended 31 March 2015 (OFMDFM).

Belfast Health and Social Care Trust Charitable Trust Funds Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2015 (DHSSPS).

Northern Ireland Medical and Dental Training Agency Annual Report and Accounts for the year ending 31 March 2015 (DHSSPS).

The Patient and Client Council Annual Report and Accounts for the Year Ending 31 March 2015 (DHSSPS).

Northern Ireland Guardian ad Litem Agency Annual Report and Accounts for the year ending 31 March 2015 (DHSSPS).

Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service Annual Report and Accounts for year ended 31 March 2015 (DHSSPS).

Northern Ireland Blood Transfusion Service Annual Report and Accounts for the Year Ending 31 March 2015 (DHSSPS).

The Northern Ireland Practice and Education Council for Nursing and Midwifery Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2015 (NIAO).

The Northern Ireland Social Care Council Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2015 (NIAO).

Gangmasters Licensing Authority (GLA) Annual Report and Accounts: 1 April 2014 to 31 March 2015 (DARD).

Public Health Agency Annual Report and Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2015 (DHSSPS).

Health and Social Care Board Annual Report and Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2015 (DHSSPS).

DFP Minute on the Direction of Accruing Resources (DFP).

Probation Board for Northern Ireland Annual Report and Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2015 (PBNI).

DRD Resource Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2015 (DRD).

DOE Annual Report and Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2015 (DOE).

DETI Resource Accounts - Annual Report and Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2015 (DETI).

InterTradeIreland Annual Review of Activities and Annual Accounts 2014 (DETI).

The Northern Ireland Environment Agency Annual Report and Accounts 2014/2015 (DOE).

Northern Health and Social Care Trust - Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2014 (DHSSPS).

Northern Health and Social Care Trust - Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2015 (DHSSPS).

2013-14 Land and Property Services Trust Statement (DFP).

Invest Northern Ireland: Annual Report and Accounts 2014-15 (DETI).

Report for the 2014-2015 of the Appointed Person for NI Under Section 291 of the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 (DOJ).

Northern Ireland Local Government Officers Superannuation Committee (NILGOSC) Annual Report and Accounts 2014/2015.

Regulatory Impact Assessment: Amendment of the Tuberculosis (Examination and Testing) Scheme Order (NI) 2015.

5. Assembly Reports

Report on the Inquiry into Shared and Integrated Education (NIA 194/11-16) (Committee for Education).

Report on the Children's Services Co-Operation Bill (NIA Bill 44/11-16) (NIA 258/11-16) (Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister).

Inquiry into Building a United Community (NIA 257/11-16) (Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister).

6. Statutory Rules

S.R. 2015/197 The Civil Legal Services (Appeal) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DOJ).

S.R. 2015/199 The Civil Legal Services (Cost Protection) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DOJ).

S.R. 2015/202 The Civil Legal Services (Disclosure of Information) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DOJ).

S.R. 2015/203 The Criminal Legal Aid (Disclosure of Information) Rules (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DOJ).

S.R. 2015/282 The Non-Commercial Movement of Pet Animals (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DARD).

S.R. 2015/286 The Common Agricultural Policy Direct Payments and Support Schemes (Cross Compliance) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DARD).

S.R. 2015/288 The Hazardous Waste (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DOE).

S.R. 2015/294 The Teachers' Superannuation (Additional Voluntary Contributions) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DE)

S.R. 2015/301 The Waste Management Licensing (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DOE).

S.R. 2015/302 The Lands Tribunal (Amendment) Rules (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DOJ).

S.R. 2015/306 The A29 Moy Road and U7004 Drumcain Road, Armagh (Abandonment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DRD).

S.R. 2015/308 The Pensions (2015 Act) (Consequential Amendments) (Units of Additional Pension) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DSD).

S.R. 2015/309 The Occupational Pension Schemes (Charges and Governance) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DSD).

S.R. 2015/310 The Occupational and Personal Pension Schemes (Automatic Enrolment) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DSD).

S.R. 2015/311 The Social Security (Units of Additional Pension) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DSD).

S.R. 2015/315 The State Pensions Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DSD).

S.R. 2015/318 Common Agricultural Policy (Review of Decisions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DARD).

S.R. 2015/321 The Country of Origin of Certain Meats Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DHSSPS).

S.R. 2015/322 The Tuberculosis (Examination and Testing) Scheme (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DARD).

S.R. 2015/325 Control of Major Accident Hazard Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DETI).

For Information Only

S.R. 2015/157 (C.9) The Criminal Evidence (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 (Commencement No. 10) Order 2015 (DOJ).

S.R. 2015/158 (C.10) The Justice (2011 Act) (Commencement No. 8) (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DOJ).

- S.R. 2015/193 (C.12) The Legal Aid and Coroners' Courts (2014 Act) (Commencement No. 1) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DOJ).
- S.R. 2015/194 (C.13) The Access to Justice (2003 Order) (Commencement No. 7, Transitional Provisions and Savings) Order (Northern Ireland) (DOJ).
- S.R. 2015/237 (C.17) The Access to Justice (2003 Order) (Commencement No. 8) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DOJ).
- S.R. 2015/291 The Road Races (POC NI Oils Stages Rally) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DRD).
- S.R. 2015/292 The Road Races (Ulster Grand Prix Bike Week) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DRD).
- S.R. 2015/293 The Roads (Speed Limit) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DRD).
- S.R. 2015/295 The Roads (Speed Limit) (No. 2) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DRD).
- S.R. 2015/296 (C.24) The Criminal Justice (2013 Act) (Commencement No. 5) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DOJ).
- S.R. 2015/297 The Bus Lanes (Upper Newtownards Road, Belfast - between Sandown Road and Knock Road) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DRD).
- S.R. 2015/298 The Prohibition of U-Turn (A2 Belfast Road, Carrickfergus) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DRD).
- S.R. 2015/299 The Parking Places on Roads (Medical Practitioners) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DRD).
- S.R. 2015/300 The Parking and Waiting Restrictions (Belfast) (Amendment No. 3) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DRD).
- S.R. 2015/303 The One-Way Traffic (Ballymena) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DRD).
- S.R. 2015/304 The Waiting Restrictions (Cookstown) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DRD).
- S.R. 2015/305 The Control of Traffic (Lisburn) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DRD).
- S.R. 2015/307 (C. 25) The Pensions (2015 Act) (Commencement No. 1) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DSD).
- S.R. 2015/312 The Road Races (Ulster Rally) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DRD).
- S.R. 2015/313 The Road Races (Garron Point Hill Climb) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DSD).
- S.R. 2015/314 The Parking Places on Roads (Disabled Persons' Vehicles) (Amendment No. 2) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DRD).
- S.R. 2015/316 The Parking Places and Waiting Restrictions (Ballymoney) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DRD).
- S.R. 2015/317 The Parking Places on Roads (Lisburn City Centre) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DRD).
- S.R. 2015/319 The Pensions (2005 Order) (Code of Practice) (Funding Defined Benefits) (Appointed Day) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DSD).
- S.R. 2015/320 (C.26) The Justice (2015 Act) (Commencement No. 1) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DOJ).
- S.R. 2015/323 The Road Races (Bushwhacker Rally) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DRD).
- S.R. 2015/324 (C. 27) The Justice (2015 Act) (Commencement No 2) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DOJ).
- SR 2015/327 The Local Government (Performance Indicators and Standards) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DOE).

7. Written Ministerial Statements

- Launch of Consultation on New Further Education Strategy for Northern Ireland (DEL).
- Public Expenditure 2014-15 Provisional Outturn/2015-16 June Monitoring Technical Issues (DFP).
- Launch of Consultation on Draft Childcare Strategy (OFMDFM).
- Northern Ireland Trauma Network and HEMS Public Consultation (DHSSPS).
- Launch of consultation on proposals to extend age discrimination legislation (age goods, facilities and services) (OFMDFM).

8. Consultation Documents

Horse Racing (Charges on Bookmakers) Order (NI) 2016 (DARD).

Proposal to rename the DVTA Trading Fund Order and to extend its scope (DOE).

Proposals to Extend Age Discrimination Legislation (Age Goods, Facilities and Services) (OFMDFM).

Developing Modern, Efficient and Effective Employment Tribunals – Public Consultation (DEL).

Regulations under the Tobacco Retailers Act (Northern Ireland) 2014 (DHSSPS).

The draft Fluorinated Greenhouse Gases Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 - A Consultation Paper (DOE).

Amending the Fit and Proper Person Requirements of the Waste Management Licensing Regime (DOE).

Proposed changes to the unladen weight for powered mobility scooters and powered wheelchairs (DOE).

Executive's Draft Childcare Strategy, Delivering Social Change Through Childcare; A Ten Year Strategy for Affordable and Integrated Childcare 2015-2025 (OFMDFM).

Proposed Changes to the Policy on Compensation for Compulsory Land Acquisition (DRD).

Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation Closure Grace Periods – DETI Response in relation to non-onshore wind technologies (DETI).

Proposed Changes to the Policy on Compensation for Compulsory Land Acquisition (DRD).

Department for Business Innovation and Skills: Implementing the Posted Workers Enforcement Directive (DEL).

Codes of Practice issued under the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 (DOJ).

9. Departmental Publications

Police Rehabilitation and Retraining Trust Annual Report and Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2015 (DOJ).

Northern Ireland Screen Commission Strategic Report, Directors' Report and Financial Statements for the Year Ended 31 March 2015 (DCAL).

Department of Finance and Personnel Memorandum on the Twenty Eighth Report from the Public Accounts Committee Mandate 2011-2016 - Managing and Protecting Funds Held in Court (DFP).

Adult Safeguarding: Prevention and Protection in Partnership (DHSSPS).

Management Statement and Financial Memorandum between the Department for Employment and Learning and the Further Education Colleges (Executive NDPBs) (DEL).

Department for Social Development Business Plan 2015-2016 (DSD).

Criminal Cases Review Commission Annual Report and Accounts 2014/2015 (DOJ).

Northern Ireland Changing Gear, A Bicycle Strategy for Northern Ireland (DRD).

10. Agency Publications

11. Westminster Publications

12. Miscellaneous Publications

The United Kingdom Sports Council Grant-in-Aid and Lottery Distribution Fund Report and Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2015 (UK Sport).

Comhairle Na Gaelscolaíochta Annual Report and Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2015 (Comhairle Na Gaelscolaíochta).

Ulster Supported Employment Limited Annual Report for the Year Ended 31 March 2015 (USEL).

Annual Report of the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints (Northern Ireland Ombudsman).

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 8 September 2015

The Assembly met at 10.30am, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Personal Prayer or Meditation

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Public Petition

2.1 Public Petition – Helicopter Emergency Medical Service in Northern Ireland

Mr Jim Allister was granted leave, in accordance with Standing Order 22, to present a Public Petition regarding a helicopter emergency medical service in Northern Ireland.

3. Executive Committee Business

3.1 Second Stage – Justice (No.2) Bill (NIA Bill 57/11-16)

The Minister of Justice, Mr David Ford, moved the Second Stage of the Justice (No.2) Bill (NIA Bill 57/11-16).

Debate ensued.

The Justice (No.2) Bill (NIA Bill 57/11-16) passed Second Stage without division.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs) took the Chair.

4. Committee Business

4.1 Motion – Report on Shared and Integrated Education (NIA 194/11-16)

Proposed:

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee for Education on its Inquiry into Shared and Integrated Education (NIA 194/11-16); and calls on the Minister of Education to implement the recommendations contained in the report.

Chairperson, Committee for Education

Debate ensued.

The sitting was suspended at 1.03pm.

The sitting resumed at 2.00pm, with the Speaker in the Chair.

5. Assembly Business

5.1 Motion – Suspension of Standing Order 20(1)

Proposed:

That Standing Order 20(1) be suspended for the 8th September 2015.

*Mr P Weir
Ms C Ruane
Mrs K McKeivitt
Mr R Swann
Mr S Dickson*

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** with cross-community support *nemine contradicente*.

6. Committee Business (cont'd)

6.1 Motion – Report on Shared and Integrated Education (NIA 194/11-16) (cont'd)

Debate resumed on the motion.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

7. Private Members' Business

7.1 Motion – Housing Executive Structures

Proposed:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Social Development to instruct the Chairperson of the Housing Executive to cease immediately the dismantling of Housing Executive structures until full political debate has been held on the future of housing.

Mr A Maskey

Mr F McCann

Debate ensued.

The debate was suspended for Question Time.

The Principal Deputy Speaker (Mr Newton) took the Chair.

8. Question Time

8.1 Social Development

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Mr Simon Hamilton, on behalf of the Minister for Social Development.

9. Private Members' Business (cont'd)

9.1 Motion – Housing Executive Structures (cont'd)

Debate resumed on the motion.

The Question being put, the Motion was **negatived** (Division).

10. Adjournment

Mr Daithí McKay spoke to his topic regarding the future of Dalriada Hospital.

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 4.58pm.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin

The Speaker

8 September 2015

Northern Ireland Assembly

8 September 2015
Division

Motion - Housing Executive Structures

Proposed:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Social Development to instruct the Chairperson of the Housing Executive to cease immediately the dismantling of Housing Executive structures until full political debate has been held on the future of housing.

Mr A Maskey

Mr F McCann

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 31

Noes: 51

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Attwood, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Byrne, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Ms Hanna, Mr G Kelly, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKeivitt, Mr McKinney, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr Ó Muilleoir, Mr O'Dowd, Mr Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Maskey, Mr F McCann.

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Beggs, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mrs Cameron, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mr Cree, Mr Dickson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyons, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCallister, Mr McCarthy, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr McGimpsey, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Somerville, Mr Spratt, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Noes: Ms P Bradley, Mr Douglas.

The Motion was negatived.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 8 September 2015

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
Draft – The Renewables Obligation Closure Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DETI).
7. Written Ministerial Statements
8. Consultation Documents
Department for Regional Development Accessible Transport Strategy 2025 (DRD).
9. Departmental Publications
10. Agency Publications
Criminal Justice Inspection (NI) - Adult Safeguarding: The Approach of the Criminal Justice System to Investigating and Prosecuting Crimes Against Vulnerable Adults (DOJ).
11. Westminster Publications
12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly Legislation:

Stages in Consideration of Public Bills

First Stage: Introduction of Bill.

Second Stage: General debate of the Bill with an opportunity for Members to vote on its general principles.

Committee Stage (Comm. Stage): Detailed investigation by a Committee which concludes with the publication of a report for consideration by the Assembly.

Consideration Stage (CS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, the details of the Bill including amendments proposed to the Bill.

Further Consideration Stage (FCS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, further amendments to the Bill.

Final Stage: Passing or rejecting of Bill by the Assembly, without further amendment.

Royal Assent.

Stages in Consideration of Public Bills 09 September 2015

2011-2016 Mandate

Executive Bills

Title & NIA Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Marine Bill 5/11-15	21.02.12	05.03.12	06.07.12	05.07.12	30.04.13	13.05.13	21.05.13	17.09.13
Welfare Reform Bill 13/11-15	01.10.12	09.10.12	19.02.13	14.02.13	10.02.15 & 11.02.15	24.02.15		
Education Bill 14/11-15	02.10.12	15.10.12	08.04.13	08.04.13				
Planning Bill 17/11-15	14.01.13	22.01.13	07.06.13	06.06.13	24.06.13 & 25.06.13			
Tobacco Retailers Bill 19/11-15	15.04.13	23.04.13	18.10.13	09.10.13	3.12.13	10.02.14	18.02.14	25.03.14
Carrier Bags Bill 20/11-15	03.06.13	11.06.13	30.11.13	26.11.13	28.01.14	25.02.14	10.03.14	28.04.14
Financial Provisions Bill 22/11-15	17.06.13	01.07.13	13.12.13	11.12.13	11.02.14	24.02.14	04.03.14	28.04.14
Public Service Pensions Bill 23/11-15	17.06.13	25.06.13	29.11.13	27.11.13	14.01.14	27.01.14	04.02.14	11.03.14
Licensing of Pavement Cafés Bill 24/11-15	17.06.13	25.06.13	13.12.13	05.12.13	04.03.14	25.03.14	07.04.14	12.05.14

Title & NIA Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Health and Social Care (Amendment) Bill 27/11-15	16.09.13	24.09.13	11.12.13	04.12.13	20.01.14	28.01.14	11.02.14	11.04.14
Local Government Bill 28/11-15	23.09.13	01.10.13	20.02.14	20.02.14	18.03.14 & 19.03.14	01.04.14	08.04.14	12.05.14
Road Races (Amendment) Bill 29/11-15	18.11.13	26.11.13	/	/	2.12.13	9.12.13	10.12.13	17.01.14
Reservoirs Bill 31/11-15	20.01.14	04.02.14	04.07.14	24.06.14	28.04.15	09.06.15	24.06.15	24.07.15
Budget Bill 32/11-15	10.02.14	11.02.14	/	/	17.02.14	18.02.14	24.02.14	19.03.14
Legal Aid and Coroners' Courts Bill 33/11-15	31.03.14	08.04.14	20.06.14	18.06.14	16.09.14	30.09.14	13.10.14	17.11.14
Work and Families Bill 34/11-15	28.04.14	12.05.14	30.11.14	08.10.14	11.11.14	24.11.14	02.12.14	08.01.15
Road Traffic (Amendment) Bill 35/11-15	12.05.14	27.05.14	27.03.15	19.03.15	29.06.15			
Budget (No.2) Bill 36/11-15	09.06.14	10.06.14	/	/	16.06.14	17.06.14	30.06.14	16.07.14
Justice Bill 37/11-15	16.06.14	24.06.14	27.03.15	25.03.15	02.06.15	16.06.15 & 22.06.15	30.06.15	24.07.15
Education Bill 38/11-16	06.10.14	14.10.14	/	/	21.10.14	11.11.14	17.11.14	11.12.14
Insolvency (Amendment) Bill 39/11-16	07.10.14	10.11.14	13.03.15	03.03.15	23.06.15			
Off Street Parking Bill 40/11-16	13.10.14	21.10.14	09.12.14	08.12.14	13.01.15	26.01.15	03.02.15	12.03.15
Food Hygiene (Ratings) Bill 41/11-16	03.11.14	11.11.14	08.05.15	29.04.15	29.06.15			
Pensions Bill 42/11-16	10.11.14	18.11.14	26.03.15	19.02.15	24.03.15	21.04.15	11.05.15	23.06.15
Regeneration Bill 43/11-16	08.12.14	20.01.15	28.05.15	28.05.15				

Title & NIA Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Budget Bill 45/11-16	09.02.15	16.02/15	/	/	17.02.15	23.02.15	24.02.15	12.03.15
Special Educational Needs and Disability Bill 46/11-16	02.03.15	10.03.15	13.11.15					
Mental Capacity Bill 49/11-16	08.06.15	16.06.15	28.01.16					
Legal Complaints and Regulation Bill 50/11-16	08.06.15	16.06.15	18.12.15					
Water and Sewerage Services Bill 51/11-16	16.06.15	29.06.15	25.11.15					
Health and Social Care (Control of Data Processing) Bill 52/11-16	16.06.15	29.06.15	26.11.15					
Budget (No. 2) Bill 53/11-16	16.06.15	24.06.15	/	/	24.06.15	29.06.15	30.06.15	24.07.15
Pensions Schemes Bill 54/11-16	22.06.15	30.06.15	/	/				
Environmental Better Regulation Bill 55/11-16	22.06.15	30.06.15	07.10.15					
Credit Unions and Co-operative and Community Benefit Societies Bill 56/11-16	23.06.15							
Justice (No. 2) Bill 57/11-16	30.06.15	08.09.15	20.10.15					
Housing (Amendment) Bill 58/11-16	30.06.15							
Houses in Multiple Occupation Bill 60/11-16	07.09.15							

**2011-2016 Mandate
Non-Executive Bills**

Title & Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Road Traffic (Speed Limits) Bill 25/11-15	17.06.13 Bill fell. Re-introduced as Bill 30/11-15 (see below)							
Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Further Provisions and Support for Victims) Bill 26/11-15	24.06.13	23.09.13 & 24.09.13	11.04.14	11.04.14	20.10.14	01.12.14	09.12.14	13.01.15
Road Traffic (Speed Limits) Bill 30/11-15	09.12.13	17.02.15	16.10.15					
Children's Services Co-operation Bill 44/11-16	08.12.14	26.01.15	03.07.15	02.07.15				
Public Services Ombudsperson Bill 47/11-16	20.04.15	11.05.15	30.09.15					
Ombudsman and Commissioner for Complaints (Amendment) Bill 48/11-16	27.04.15	11.05.15	/	/	01.06.15	08.06.15	09.06.15	20.07.15
Rates (Relief for Amateur Sports Clubs) Bill 59/11-16	30.06.15							

/ Bill progressing by accelerated passage

** Please note that any bills that received Royal Assent in the previous session have been removed from the table.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 14 September 2015

The Assembly met at noon, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Personal Prayer or Meditation

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Speaker's Business

2.1 Ministerial Resignations

The Speaker informed Members that, on Thursday 10 September 2015, Mr Jonathan Bell resigned as Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Mr Simon Hamilton resigned as Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Miss Michelle McIlveen resigned as junior Minister, and Mr Mervyn Storey resigned as Minister for Social Development.

2.2 Committee Chairperson Nomination

The Speaker informed Members that, with effect from 08 September 2015, Mr Fra McCann had been appointed as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development and that, with effect from 10 September 2015, Mr Conor Murphy replaced Mr Phil Flanagan as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and confirmed the appointments.

3. Matter of the Day

3.1 Future of the Northern Ireland Political Institutions

Ms Claire Sugden, made a statement, under Standing Order 24, in relation to the future of the Northern Ireland political institutions. Other Members were also called to speak on the matter.

The Principal Deputy Speaker, (Mr Newton) took the Chair.

4. Assembly Business

4.1 Motion – Committee Membership

Proposed:

That Mr Danny Kennedy replace Mr Ross Hussey as a member of the Committee for Education; and that Mr Danny Kennedy replace Mr Robin Swann as a member of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee.

Mr R Swann

Mrs S Overend

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

4.2 Motion – Committee Membership

Proposed:

That Mr Phil Flanagan be appointed a member of the Committee for Social Development; that Mr Conor Murphy replace Mr Daithí McKay as a member of the Public Accounts Committee; that Mr Daithí McKay be appointed a member of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety; that Ms Bronwyn McGahan replace Mr Chris Hazzard as a member of the Committee for Justice; and that Mr Chris Hazzard replace Ms Bronwyn McGahan as a member of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

Ms C Ruane

Mr R McCartney

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

5. Executive Committee Business

5.1 Statement – Action to Address the Current Crisis in the Dairy Sector

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, Mrs Michelle O'Neill, made a statement regarding action to address the current crisis in the dairy sector, following which she replied to questions.

6. Private Members' Business

6.1 First Stage – Civil Service (Special Advisers) (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 61/11-16)

Mr Jim Allister introduced a Bill to amend sections 7 and 8 of the Civil Service (Special Advisers) Act (Northern Ireland) 2013 and Article 3 of the Civil Service Commissioners (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 in relation to special advisers in the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

The Civil Service (Special Advisers) (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 61/11-16) passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

6.2 Motion – Multiple Deprivation Indicators

Proposed:

That this Assembly recognises that the current multiple deprivation indicators do not accurately identify the extent of poverty and deprivation in rural areas; and calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to review this urgently.

Mr D McAleer

Mr O McMullan

Mr I Milne

Debate ensued.

The debate was suspended for Question Time.

The Speaker took the Chair.

7. Question Time

7.1 Agriculture and Rural Development

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, Mrs Michelle O'Neil.

7.2 Culture, Arts and Lesiure

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, Ms Carál Ní Chuilín.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat) took the Chair.

8. Private Members' Business (cont'd)

8.1 Motion – Multiple Deprivation Indicators (cont'd)

Debate resumed.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** (Division).

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs) took the Chair.

8.2 Motion – Increasing Free Childcare

Proposed:

That this Assembly notes the 2014 Employers for Childcare survey which indicated that 46 per cent of parents in Northern Ireland reduced their working hours or left work due to a lack of affordable childcare; recognises that greater childcare provision would be a key catalyst in bolstering the economy, retaining a skilled workforce and improving the lives of working families; further notes that the Childcare Bill announced in the Chancellor of the Exchequer's July Budget will increase free preschool childcare entitlement for three and four-year-olds to 30 hours a week in England; and calls for the establishment of an equal 30 hours of free childcare locally as part of a move towards the establishment of an universal childcare model.

Mr P McGlone

Mr S Rogers

Ms C Hanna

Debate ensued.

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 4:50pm.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin

The Speaker

14 September 2015

Northern Ireland Assembly

14 September 2015

Division

Motion – Multiple Deprivation Indicators

Proposed:

That this Assembly recognises that the current multiple deprivation indicators do not accurately identify the extent of poverty and deprivation in rural areas; and calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to review this urgently.

Mr D McAleer

Mr O McMullan

Mr I Milne

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 50

Noes: 36

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Attwood, Mr Beggs, Mr D Bradley, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Cree, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Gardiner, Ms Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Mr B McCrea, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKeivitt, Mr McKinney, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr Milne, Mr Murphy, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr Ó Muilleoir, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mrs Overend, Mr Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan, Mr Swann.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr McAleer, Mr McMullan.

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mrs Cameron, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Mr McCallister, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr McQuillan, Mr G Robinson.

The Motion was **carried**.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 9 September – 14 September 2015

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly
2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly
Civil Service (Special Advisers) (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 61/11-16)
3. Orders in Council
4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly
Social Security Agency: Annual Report and Accounts 2014-2015 (DSD).
Victim Charter - A Charter for victims of crime (DOJ).
Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister Resource Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2015 (OFMDFM).
Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure Resource Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2015 (DCAL).
Department of Justice Annual Report and Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2015 (DOJ).
Department of Finance and Personnel Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2015 (DFP).
Department of Finance and Personnel Superannuation and Other Allowances Resource Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2015 (DFP).
5. Assembly Reports
6. Statutory Rules
S.R. 2015/326 The Rural Development Programme Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DARD).
S.R. 2015/328 The Unfunded Public Service Defined Benefits Schemes (Transfers) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DFP).
Draft S.R. 2015/XXX The Victim Charter (Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2015) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DOJ).
7. Written Ministerial Statements
8. Consultation Documents
Leaving Prostitution: a Strategy for Help and Support (DHSSPS).
Draft Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) (Independent Guardian) Regulations (Northern Ireland) (DHSSPS).
9. Departmental Publications
NI Statistics and Research Agency – Sickness Absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service 2014/2015 (DFP).

10. Agency Publications
11. Westminster Publications
12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 15 September 2015

The Assembly met at 10.30am, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Personal Prayer or Meditation

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Speaker's Business

2.1 Functions of the First Minister

The Speaker informed Members that, pursuant to section 16A(11) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, Mrs Arlene Foster, Minister of Finance and Personnel, had been designated to exercise the functions of the First Minister, effective from 10 September 2015.

3. Executive Committee Business

3.1 Statement – Launch of the Higher Education Big Conversation

The Minister for Employment and Learning, Dr Stephen Farry, made a statement regarding the launch of the Higher Education Big Conversation, following which he replied to questions.

3.2 Second Stage – Credit Unions and Co-operative and Community Benefit Societies Bill (NIA Bill 56/11-16)

The Speaker informed Members that, as the Second Stage of the Credit Unions and Co-operative and Community Benefit Societies Bill (NIA Bill 56/11-16) was listed in the name of the Minister of Enterprise Trade and Investment and as the ministerial office was vacant, the item of business could not be moved.

3.3 Further Consideration Stage – Insolvency (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 39/11-16)

The Speaker informed Members that, as the Further Consideration Stage of the Insolvency (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 39/11-16) was listed in the name of the Minister of Enterprise Trade and Investment and as the ministerial office was vacant, the item of business could not be moved.

4. Private Members' Business

4.1 Motion – Crisis in Waiting Times

Proposed:

That this Assembly notes that in June 2015 there were 373,000 people waiting for a first outpatient appointment, a diagnostic test or inpatient treatment at hospitals in Northern Ireland and that this is equivalent to over 20% of the entire population; expresses concern that waiting times are now worse than at any time in recent history and that far too many people are having to wait in pain and under emotional distress for far too long; 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 calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to work with each of the Health and Social Care Trusts to identify and resolve the causes of the delays.

Mrs J Dobson

Mr M McGimpsey

4.2 Amendment

Proposed:

Insert at end:

‘;and further calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to take immediate action to alleviate current pressures and to fully implement and fund the Transforming Your Care plan to ameliorate future pressures.’

Mr F McKinney

Mrs K McKeivitt

Debate ensued.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat) took the Chair

The Question being put, the Amendment was **made** without division.

The Question being put, the Motion, as amended, was **carried** without division.

The sitting was suspended at 12.36pm.

The sitting resumed at 2.00pm, with the Principal Deputy Speaker (Mr Newton) in the Chair.

5. Question Time

5.1 Education

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Education, Mr John O’Dowd.

5.2 Employment and Learning

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister for Employment and Learning, Dr Stephen Farry.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs) took the Chair.

6. Adjournment

Ms Bronwyn McGahan spoke to her topic regarding the future of rural childcare in Fermanagh/South Tyrone.

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 4.02pm.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin

The Speaker

15 September 2015

Northern Ireland Assembly

**Papers Presented to the Assembly on
15 September 2015**

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
Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Resource Accounts For the year ended 31 March 2015 (DHSSPS).
HSC Pension Scheme Resource Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2015 (DHSSPS).
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 Legislation:

Stages in Consideration of Public Bills

First Stage: Introduction of Bill.

Second Stage: General debate of the Bill with an opportunity for Members to vote on its general principles.

Committee Stage (Comm. Stage): Detailed investigation by a Committee which concludes with the publication of a report for consideration by the Assembly.

Consideration Stage (CS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, the details of the Bill including amendments proposed to the Bill.

Further Consideration Stage (FCS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, further amendments to the Bill.

Final Stage: Passing or rejecting of Bill by the Assembly, without further amendment.

Royal Assent.

Stages in Consideration of Public Bills 16 September 2015

2011-2016 Mandate

Executive Bills

Title & NIA Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Marine Bill 5/11-15	21.02.12	05.03.12	06.07.12	05.07.12	30.04.13	13.05.13	21.05.13	17.09.13
Welfare Reform Bill 13/11-15	01.10.12	09.10.12	19.02.13	14.02.13	10.02.15 & 11.02.15	24.02.15		
Education Bill 14/11-15	02.10.12	15.10.12	08.04.13	08.04.13				
Planning Bill 17/11-15	14.01.13	22.01.13	07.06.13	06.06.13	24.06.13 & 25.06.13			
Tobacco Retailers Bill 19/11-15	15.04.13	23.04.13	18.10.13	09.10.13	3.12.13	10.02.14	18.02.14	25.03.14
Carrier Bags Bill 20/11-15	03.06.13	11.06.13	30.11.13	26.11.13	28.01.14	25.02.14	10.03.14	28.04.14
Financial Provisions Bill 22/11-15	17.06.13	01.07.13	13.12.13	11.12.13	11.02.14	24.02.14	04.03.14	28.04.14
Public Service Pensions Bill 23/11-15	17.06.13	25.06.13	29.11.13	27.11.13	14.01.14	27.01.14	04.02.14	11.03.14
Licensing of Pavement Cafés Bill 24/11-15	17.06.13	25.06.13	13.12.13	05.12.13	04.03.14	25.03.14	07.04.14	12.05.14

Title & NIA Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Health and Social Care (Amendment) Bill 27/11-15	16.09.13	24.09.13	11.12.13	04.12.13	20.01.14	28.01.14	11.02.14	11.04.14
Local Government Bill 28/11-15	23.09.13	01.10.13	20.02.14	20.02.14	18.03.14 & 19.03.14	01.04.14	08.04.14	12.05.14
Road Races (Amendment) Bill 29/11-15	18.11.13	26.11.13	/	/	2.12.13	9.12.13	10.12.13	17.01.14
Reservoirs Bill 31/11-15	20.01.14	04.02.14	04.07.14	24.06.14	28.04.15	09.06.15	24.06.15	24.07.15
Budget Bill 32/11-15	10.02.14	11.02.14	/	/	17.02.14	18.02.14	24.02.14	19.03.14
Legal Aid and Coroners' Courts Bill 33/11-15	31.03.14	08.04.14	20.06.14	18.06.14	16.09.14	30.09.14	13.10.14	17.11.14
Work and Families Bill 34/11-15	28.04.14	12.05.14	30.11.14	08.10.14	11.11.14	24.11.14	02.12.14	08.01.15
Road Traffic (Amendment) Bill 35/11-15	12.05.14	27.05.14	27.03.15	19.03.15	29.06.15			
Budget (No.2) Bill 36/11-15	09.06.14	10.06.14	/	/	16.06.14	17.06.14	30.06.14	16.07.14
Justice Bill 37/11-15	16.06.14	24.06.14	27.03.15	25.03.15	02.06.15	16.06.15 & 22.06.15	30.06.15	24.07.15
Education Bill 38/11-16	06.10.14	14.10.14	/	/	21.10.14	11.11.14	17.11.14	11.12.14
Insolvency (Amendment) Bill 39/11-16	07.10.14	10.11.14	13.03.15	03.03.15	23.06.15			
Off Street Parking Bill 40/11-16	13.10.14	21.10.14	09.12.14	08.12.14	13.01.15	26.01.15	03.02.15	12.03.15
Food Hygiene (Ratings) Bill 41/11-16	03.11.14	11.11.14	08.05.15	29.04.15	29.06.15			
Pensions Bill 42/11-16	10.11.14	18.11.14	26.03.15	19.02.15	24.03.15	21.04.15	11.05.15	23.06.15
Regeneration Bill 43/11-16	08.12.14	20.01.15	28.05.15	28.05.15				
Budget Bill 45/11-16	09.02.15	16.02/15	/	/	17.02.15	23.02.15	24.02.15	12.03.15

Title & NIA Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Special Educational Needs and Disability Bill 46/11-16	02.03.15	10.03.15	13.11.15					
Mental Capacity Bill 49/11-16	08.06.15	16.06.15	28.01.16					
Legal Complaints and Regulation Bill 50/11-16	08.06.15	16.06.15	18.12.15					
Water and Sewerage Services Bill 51/11-16	16.06.15	29.06.15	25.11.15					
Health and Social Care (Control of Data Processing) Bill 52/11-16	16.06.15	29.06.15	06.10.15					
Budget (No. 2) Bill 53/11-16	16.06.15	24.06.15	/	/	24.06.15	29.06.15	30.06.15	24.07.15
Pensions Schemes Bill 54/11-16	22.06.15	30.06.15	/	/				
Environmental Better Regulation Bill 55/11-16	22.06.15	30.06.15	07.10.15					
Credit Unions and Co-operative and Community Benefit Societies Bill 56/11-16	23.06.15							
Justice (No. 2) Bill 57/11-16	30.06.15	08.09.15	20.10.15					
Housing (Amendment) Bill 58/11-16	30.06.15							
Houses in Multiple Occupation Bill 60/11-16	07.09.15							

**2011-2016 Mandate
Non-Executive Bills**

Title & Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Road Traffic (Speed Limits) Bill 25/11-15	17.06.13 Bill fell. Re- introduced as Bill 30/11- 15 (see below)							
Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Further Provisions and Support for Victims) Bill 26/11-15	24.06.13	23.09.13 & 24.09.13	11.04.14	11.04.14	20.10.14	01.12.14	09.12.14	13.01.15
Road Traffic (Speed Limits) Bill 30/11-15	09.12.13	17.02.15	16.10.15					
Children's Services Co- operation Bill 44/11-16	08.12.14	26.01.15	03.07.15	02.07.15				
Public Services Ombudsperson Bill 47/11-16	20.04.15	11.05.15	30.09.15					
Ombudsman and Commissioner for Complaints (Amendment) Bill 48/11-16	27.04.15	11.05.15	/	/	01.06.15	08.06.15	09.06.15	20.07.15
Rates (Relief for Amateur Sports Clubs) Bill 59/11-16	30.06.15							
Civil Service (Special Advisers) (Amendment) Bill 61/11-16	14.09.15							

/ Bill progressing by accelerated passage

** Please note that any bills that received Royal Assent in the previous session have been removed from the table.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 21 September 2015

The Assembly met at noon, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Personal Prayer or Meditation

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Speaker's Business

2.1 New Member

The Speaker informed Members that he had been notified by the Chief Electoral Officer that Mr Andy Allen had been returned as a Member of the Assembly for the East Belfast constituency to fill the vacancy that resulted from the resignation of Mr Michael Copeland.

Mr Allen signed the Roll of Membership on 17 September 2015 in the presence of the Speaker, Mr McLaughlin, and the Director of Clerking and Reporting to the Assembly. The Speaker confirmed that Mr Allen had signed the Roll and had entered his designation of identity.

2.2 Ministerial Appointments

The Speaker informed Members that, on 16 September 2015, Mr Jonathan Bell had taken up the office of Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Mr Simon Hamilton had taken up the office of Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and that Mr Mervyn Storey had taken up the office of Minister for Social Development.

The Speaker confirmed that the Members affirmed the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in Schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and confirmed the appointments.

2.3 Ministerial Resignations

The Speaker informed Members that, on 17 September 2015, Mr Jonathan Bell resigned as Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Mr Simon Hamilton resigned as Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and Mr Mervyn Storey resigned as Minister for Social Development.

2.4 Ministerial Appointment

The Rt Hon Peter Robinson, the nominating officer for the Democratic Unionist Party, nominated Miss Michelle McIlveen to be Minister for Regional Development.

The Speaker confirmed that Miss Michelle McIlveen affirmed the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in Schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and confirmed the appointment of Miss Michelle McIlveen as Minister for Regional Development.

3. Executive Committee Business

3.1 Statement – North South Ministerial Council Meeting in Inland Waterways Sectoral Format

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, Ms Carál Ní Chuilín, made a statement regarding the North South Ministerial Council meeting in Inland Waterways sectoral format, following which she replied to questions.

3.2 Statement – North South Ministerial Council Meeting in Language Body Sectoral Format

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, Ms Carál Ní Chuilín, made a statement regarding the North South Ministerial Council meeting in Language Body sectoral format, following which she replied to questions.

The Principal Deputy Speaker (Mr Newton) took the Chair.

3.3 Second Stage – Housing Amendment Bill (NIA Bill 58/11-16)

The Speaker informed Members that, as the Second Stage of the Housing Amendment Bill (NIA Bill 58/11-16) was listed in the name of the Minister for Social Development and as the ministerial office was vacant, the item of business could not be moved.

3.4 Second Stage – Houses in Multiple Occupation Bill (NIA Bill 60/11-16)

The Speaker informed Members that, as the Second Stage of the Houses in Multiple Occupation Bill (NIA Bill 60/11-16) was listed in the name of the Minister for Social Development and as the ministerial office was vacant, the item of business could not be moved.

4. Committee Business**4.1 Motion – Extension of Committee Stage: Health and Social Care (Control of Data Processing) Bill (NIA Bill 52/11-16)****Proposed:**

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 20 November 2015, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Health and Social Care (Control of Data Processing) Bill (NIA Bill 52/11-16).

Chairperson, Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

5. Private Members' Business**5.1 Motion – Crisis in the Agriculture Industry****Proposed:**

That this Assembly notes with concern the crisis facing all sectors of agriculture across Northern Ireland; recognises the need to deliver significant change in the short term and into the future; and calls on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to do more for the industry by ensuring basic payments are issued to farmers in early December 2015, lobbying the EU Agriculture Commissioner, Phil Hogan, to raise dairy intervention prices as a matter of urgency and bringing forward a wider strategy to deal with the immediate challenges facing the industry.

Mr W Irwin

Mr T Buchanan

Mr E Poots

Mr S Anderson

5.2 Amendment**Proposed:**

Leave out all after the first 'industry' and insert:

'by availing of the important permission from the European Commission to make up to 70 per cent of advance Basic Payments from October 2015, lobbying the EU Agriculture Commissioner to raise dairy intervention prices as a matter of urgency and bringing forward a specific set of action points to deal with the immediate challenges facing the industry.'

Mrs J Dobson

Mr R Swann

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Amendment was **made**.

The Question being put, the Motion, as amended, was **carried**.

The Speaker took the Chair.

6. Question Time

6.1 Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Acting First Minister, Mrs Arlene Foster.

6.2 Enterprise, Trade and Investment

The Speaker informed Members that, as the ministerial office was vacant, Questions to the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment could not proceed.

7. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 2.46pm.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin

The Speaker

21 September 2015

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 16 September – 21 September 2015

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 Law Commission's Annual Report, for the year ended 31 March 2015 (DOJ).
 - Attorney General for Northern Ireland – Guidance for the Police Service of Northern Ireland on Human Rights Standards Relevant to the Protection of the Right to Life, by the Attorney General for Northern Ireland (DOJ).
 - Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland – Annual Report and Accounts Year ending 31 May 2015 (DHSSPS).
5. Assembly Reports
6. Statutory Rules
 - S.R. 2015/331 The State Pension Credit (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DSD).
7. Written Ministerial Statements
8. Consultation Documents
 - Debt Relief Scheme – Proposals to Amend the Limits for Eligibility (DETI).
 - Proposal to raise the threshold level of debt at which a creditor can petition for bankruptcy (DETI).
 - Emissions Performance Standard Monitoring and Enforcement Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DOE).
9. Departmental Publications
10. Agency Publications
11. Westminster Publications
12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 22 September 2015

The Assembly met at 10.30am, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Personal Prayer or Meditation

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Speaker's Business

2.1 Ministerial Resignation

The Speaker informed Members that, on 21 September 2015, Miss Michelle McIlveen resigned as Minister for Regional Development.

3. Executive Committee Business

3.1 Consideration Stage – Pension Schemes Bill (NIA Bill 54/11-16)

The Speaker informed Members that, as the Consideration Stage of the Pension Schemes Bill (NIA Bill 54/11-16) was listed in the name of the Minister for Social Development and as the ministerial office was vacant, the item of business could not be moved.

4. Private Members' Business

4.1 First Stage – Assembly and Executive Reform (Assembly Opposition) Bill (NIA Bill 62/11-16)

Mr John McCallister introduced a Bill to provide for the formation of an Assembly Opposition; to provide for the passing of an Assembly and Executive Reform Motion; to reform the Assembly and the Executive; and to provide that all Northern Ireland Departments are a single legal entity.

The Assembly and Executive Reform (Assembly Opposition) Bill (NIA Bill 62/11-16) passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

4.2 Motion – Humanitarian Crisis

Proposed:

That this Assembly expresses its despair at the ongoing international humanitarian crisis in Syria; notes the tragic deaths of refugees fleeing to Europe seeking sanctuary and the terrible conditions endured by those refugees in transport to Europe and in refugee camps upon arrival; believes that EU nations have a moral obligation to assist people seeking refuge from war and persecution; further notes the Prime Minister's eventual decision to accept 20,000 refugees; further believes that the UK government and some other EU governments have not acted in line with their humanitarian obligations; and calls on the Executive to ensure provisions are in place for Northern Ireland to welcome refugees from Syria.

Mr S Dickson

Ms A Lo

Mr C Lyttle

Debate ensued.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat) took the Chair.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

4.3 Motion – Absence of a Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Proposed:

That this Assembly expresses grave concern that there is no Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in place given the urgent need to implement speedily Transforming Your Care, to address the important issues of waiting times, workforce planning and the health sector pay review and to provide the essential leadership and policy direction which our Health Service requires in the current difficult and challenging environment.

Ms M McLaughlin

Mr C Murphy

Ms R McCorley

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** (Division).

The sitting was suspended at 12.37pm.

The sitting resumed at 2.00pm, with the Principal Deputy Speaker (Mr Newton) in the Chair.

5. Question Time

5.1 Environment

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of the Environment, Mr Mark H. Durkan.

5.2 Finance and Personnel

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mrs Arlene Foster.

6. Adjournment

Mr Dominic Bradley spoke to his topic regarding the development of Daisy Hill Hospital Emergency Department.

The Speaker took the Chair.

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 3.54pm.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin

The Speaker

22 September 2015

Northern Ireland Assembly

22 September 2015

Division

Motion – Absence of a Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Proposed:

That this Assembly expresses grave concern that there is no Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in place given the urgent need to implement speedily Transforming Your Care, to address the important issues of waiting times, workforce planning and the health sector pay review and to provide the essential leadership and policy direction which our Health Service requires in the current difficult and challenging environment.

Ms M McLaughlin

Mr C Murphy

Ms R McCorley

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 48

Noes: 31

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Allen, Mr Attwood, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Byrne, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Cochrane-Watson, Mr Dickson, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Ms Fearon, Mr Gardiner, Ms Hanna, Mr Hazzard, Mr Hussey, Mr G Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr McCallister, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Ms McCorley, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr McKinney, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr Murphy, Mr Nesbitt, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr Ó Muilleoir, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mrs Overend, Mr Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan, Mr Somerville, Mr Swann.

Tellers for the Ayes: Ms McCorley, Ms Maeve McLaughlin.

NOES

Mr Anderson, Ms P Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mrs Cameron, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Mr McCausland, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Mr Middleton, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr G Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr McQuillan, Mr G Robinson.

The following Member voted in both Lobbies and is therefore not counted in the result: Mr Allister.

The Motion was **carried**.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 22 September 2015

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly
2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly
Assembly and Executive Reform (Assembly Opposition) Bill (NIA Bill 62/11-16).
3. Orders in Council
4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly
5. Assembly Reports
6. Statutory Rules
S.R. 2015/330 The Disclosure of Victims and Witnesses' Information (Prescribed Bodies) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DOJ).

For Information Only
S.R. 2015/334 The Roads (Speed Limit) (No. 3) Order (Northern Ireland) (DRD).
S.R. 2015/335 The Parking and Waiting Restrictions (Cathedral Quarter, Belfast) (Amendment) Order Northern Ireland) (DRD).
S.R. 2015/336 The Bus Lanes (Falls Road – Grosvenor to Whiterock Road, Belfast) Order (Northern Ireland) (DRD).
S.R. 2015/337 The Waiting Restrictions (Dungannon) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DRD).
S.R. 2015/338 The Prohibition of Waiting (Amendment No. 2) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DRD).
7. Written Ministerial Statements
8. Consultation Documents
9. Departmental Publications
10. Agency Publications
11. Westminster Publications
12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly Legislation:

Stages in Consideration of Public Bills

First Stage: Introduction of Bill.

Second Stage: General debate of the Bill with an opportunity for Members to vote on its general principles.

Committee Stage (Comm. Stage): Detailed investigation by a Committee which concludes with the publication of a report for consideration by the Assembly.

Consideration Stage (CS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, the details of the Bill including amendments proposed to the Bill.

Further Consideration Stage (FCS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, further amendments to the Bill.

Final Stage: Passing or rejecting of Bill by the Assembly, without further amendment.

Royal Assent.

Stages in Consideration of Public Bills 23 September 2015

2011-2016 Mandate

Executive Bills

Title & NIA Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Marine Bill 5/11-15	21.02.12	05.03.12	06.07.12	05.07.12	30.04.13	13.05.13	21.05.13	17.09.13
Welfare Reform Bill 13/11-15	01.10.12	09.10.12	19.02.13	14.02.13	10.02.15 & 11.02.15	24.02.15		
Education Bill 14/11-15	02.10.12	15.10.12	08.04.13	08.04.13				
Planning Bill 17/11-15	14.01.13	22.01.13	07.06.13	06.06.13	24.06.13 & 25.06.13			
Tobacco Retailers Bill 19/11-15	15.04.13	23.04.13	18.10.13	09.10.13	3.12.13	10.02.14	18.02.14	25.03.14
Carrier Bags Bill 20/11-15	03.06.13	11.06.13	30.11.13	26.11.13	28.01.14	25.02.14	10.03.14	28.04.14
Financial Provisions Bill 22/11-15	17.06.13	01.07.13	13.12.13	11.12.13	11.02.14	24.02.14	04.03.14	28.04.14
Public Service Pensions Bill 23/11-15	17.06.13	25.06.13	29.11.13	27.11.13	14.01.14	27.01.14	04.02.14	11.03.14
Licensing of Pavement Cafés Bill 24/11-15	17.06.13	25.06.13	13.12.13	05.12.13	04.03.14	25.03.14	07.04.14	12.05.14

Title & NIA Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Health and Social Care (Amendment) Bill 27/11-15	16.09.13	24.09.13	11.12.13	04.12.13	20.01.14	28.01.14	11.02.14	11.04.14
Local Government Bill 28/11-15	23.09.13	01.10.13	20.02.14	20.02.14	18.03.14 & 19.03.14	01.04.14	08.04.14	12.05.14
Road Races (Amendment) Bill 29/11-15	18.11.13	26.11.13	/	/	2.12.13	9.12.13	10.12.13	17.01.14
Reservoirs Bill 31/11-15	20.01.14	04.02.14	04.07.14	24.06.14	28.04.15	09.06.15	24.06.15	24.07.15
Budget Bill 32/11-15	10.02.14	11.02.14	/	/	17.02.14	18.02.14	24.02.14	19.03.14
Legal Aid and Coroners' Courts Bill 33/11-15	31.03.14	08.04.14	20.06.14	18.06.14	16.09.14	30.09.14	13.10.14	17.11.14
Work and Families Bill 34/11-15	28.04.14	12.05.14	30.11.14	08.10.14	11.11.14	24.11.14	02.12.14	08.01.15
Road Traffic (Amendment) Bill 35/11-15	12.05.14	27.05.14	27.03.15	19.03.15	29.06.15			
Budget (No.2) Bill 36/11-15	09.06.14	10.06.14	/	/	16.06.14	17.06.14	30.06.14	16.07.14
Justice Bill 37/11-15	16.06.14	24.06.14	27.03.15	25.03.15	02.06.15	16.06.15 & 22.06.15	30.06.15	24.07.15
Education Bill 38/11-16	06.10.14	14.10.14	/	/	21.10.14	11.11.14	17.11.14	11.12.14
Insolvency (Amendment) Bill 39/11-16	07.10.14	10.11.14	13.03.15	03.03.15	23.06.15			
Off Street Parking Bill 40/11-16	13.10.14	21.10.14	09.12.14	08.12.14	13.01.15	26.01.15	03.02.15	12.03.15
Food Hygiene (Ratings) Bill 41/11-16	03.11.14	11.11.14	08.05.15	29.04.15	29.06.15			
Pensions Bill 42/11-16	10.11.14	18.11.14	26.03.15	19.02.15	24.03.15	21.04.15	11.05.15	23.06.15
Regeneration Bill 43/11-16	08.12.14	20.01.15	28.05.15	28.05.15				
Budget Bill 45/11-16	09.02.15	16.02/15	/	/	17.02.15	23.02.15	24.02.15	12.03.15

Title & NIA Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Special Educational Needs and Disability Bill 46/11-16	02.03.15	10.03.15	13.11.15					
Mental Capacity Bill 49/11-16	08.06.15	16.06.15	28.01.16					
Legal Complaints and Regulation Bill 50/11-16	08.06.15	16.06.15	18.12.15					
Water and Sewerage Services Bill 51/11-16	16.06.15	29.06.15	25.11.15					
Health and Social Care (Control of Data Processing) Bill 52/11-16	16.06.15	29.06.15	20.11.15					
Budget (No. 2) Bill 53/11-16	16.06.15	24.06.15	/	/	24.06.15	29.06.15	30.06.15	24.07.15
Pensions Schemes Bill 54/11-16	22.06.15	30.06.15	/	/				
Environmental Better Regulation Bill 55/11-16	22.06.15	30.06.15	07.10.15					
Credit Unions and Co-operative and Community Benefit Societies Bill 56/11-16	23.06.15							
Justice (No. 2) Bill 57/11-16	30.06.15	08.09.15	20.10.15					
Housing (Amendment) Bill 58/11-16	30.06.15							
Houses in Multiple Occupation Bill 60/11-16	07.09.15							

**2011-2016 Mandate
Non-Executive Bills**

Title & Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Road Traffic (Speed Limits) Bill 25/11-15	17.06.13 Bill fell. Re- introduced as Bill 30/11- 15 (see below)							
Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Further Provisions and Support for Victims) Bill 26/11-15	24.06.13	23.09.13 & 24.09.13	11.04.14	11.04.14	20.10.14	01.12.14	09.12.14	13.01.15
Road Traffic (Speed Limits) Bill 30/11-15	09.12.13	17.02.15	16.10.15					
Children's Services Co- operation Bill 44/11-16	08.12.14	26.01.15	03.07.15	02.07.15				
Public Services Ombudsperson Bill 47/11-16	20.04.15	11.05.15	30.09.15					
Ombudsman and Commissioner for Complaints (Amendment) Bill 48/11-16	27.04.15	11.05.15	/	/	01.06.15	08.06.15	09.06.15	20.07.15
Rates (Relief for Amateur Sports Clubs) Bill 59/11-16	30.06.15							
Civil Service (Special Advisers) (Amendment) Bill 61/11-16	14.09.15							
Assembly and Executive Reform (Assembly Opposition) Bill 62/11-16	22.09.15							

/ Bill progressing by accelerated passage

** Please note that any bills that received Royal Assent in the previous session have been removed from the table.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 22 September 2015

The Assembly met at 10.30am, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Personal Prayer or Meditation

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Speaker's Business

2.1 Ministerial Resignation

The Speaker informed Members that, on 21 September 2015, Miss Michelle McIlveen resigned as Minister for Regional Development.

3. Executive Committee Business

3.1 Consideration Stage – Pension Schemes Bill (NIA Bill 54/11-16)

The Speaker informed Members that, as the Consideration Stage of the Pension Schemes Bill (NIA Bill 54/11-16) was listed in the name of the Minister for Social Development and as the ministerial office was vacant, the item of business could not be moved.

4. Private Members' Business

4.1 First Stage – Assembly and Executive Reform (Assembly Opposition) Bill (NIA Bill 62/11-16)

Mr John McCallister introduced a Bill to provide for the formation of an Assembly Opposition; to provide for the passing of an Assembly and Executive Reform Motion; to reform the Assembly and the Executive; and to provide that all Northern Ireland Departments are a single legal entity.

The Assembly and Executive Reform (Assembly Opposition) Bill (NIA Bill 62/11-16) passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

4.2 Motion – Humanitarian Crisis

Proposed:

That this Assembly expresses its despair at the ongoing international humanitarian crisis in Syria; notes the tragic deaths of refugees fleeing to Europe seeking sanctuary and the terrible conditions endured by those refugees in transport to Europe and in refugee camps upon arrival; believes that EU nations have a moral obligation to assist people seeking refuge from war and persecution; further notes the Prime Minister's eventual decision to accept 20,000 refugees; further believes that the UK government and some other EU governments have not acted in line with their humanitarian obligations; and calls on the Executive to ensure provisions are in place for Northern Ireland to welcome refugees from Syria.

Mr S Dickson

Ms A Lo

Mr C Lyttle

Debate ensued.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat) took the Chair.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

4.3 Motion – Absence of a Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Proposed:

That this Assembly expresses grave concern that there is no Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in place given the urgent need to implement speedily Transforming Your Care, to address the important issues of waiting times, workforce planning and the health sector pay review and to provide the essential leadership and policy direction which our Health Service requires in the current difficult and challenging environment.

Ms M McLaughlin

Mr C Murphy

Ms R McCorley

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** (Division).

The sitting was suspended at 12.37pm.

The sitting resumed at 2.00pm, with the Principal Deputy Speaker (Mr Newton) in the Chair.

5. Question Time

5.1 Environment

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of the Environment, Mr Mark H. Durkan.

5.2 Finance and Personnel

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mrs Arlene Foster.

6. Adjournment

Mr Dominic Bradley spoke to his topic regarding the development of Daisy Hill Hospital Emergency Department.

The Speaker took the Chair.

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 3.54pm.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin

The Speaker

22 September 2015

Northern Ireland Assembly

22 September 2015
Division

Motion – Absence of a Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Proposed:

That this Assembly expresses grave concern that there is no Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in place given the urgent need to implement speedily Transforming Your Care, to address the important issues of waiting times, workforce planning and the health sector pay review and to provide the essential leadership and policy direction which our Health Service requires in the current difficult and challenging environment.

Ms M McLaughlin
Mr C Murphy
Ms R McCorley

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 48

Noes: 31

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Allen, Mr Attwood, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Byrne, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Cochrane-Watson, Mr Dickson, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Ms Fearon, Mr Gardiner, Ms Hanna, Mr Hazzard, Mr Hussey, Mr G Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr McCallister, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Ms McCorley, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr McKinney, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr Murphy, Mr Nesbitt, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr Ó Muilleoir, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mrs Overend, Mr Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan, Mr Somerville, Mr Swann.

Tellers for the Ayes: Ms McCorley, Ms Maeve McLaughlin.

NOES

Mr Anderson, Ms P Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mrs Cameron, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Mr McCausland, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Mr Middleton, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr G Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr McQuillan, Mr G Robinson.

The following Member voted in both Lobbies and is therefore not counted in the result: Mr Allister.

The Motion was **carried**.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 22 September 2015

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly
2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly
Assembly and Executive Reform (Assembly Opposition) Bill (NIA Bill 62/11-16).
3. Orders in Council
4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly
5. Assembly Reports
6. Statutory Rules
S.R. 2015/330 The Disclosure of Victims and Witnesses' Information (Prescribed Bodies) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DOJ).

For Information Only
S.R. 2015/334 The Roads (Speed Limit) (No. 3) Order (Northern Ireland) (DRD).
S.R. 2015/335 The Parking and Waiting Restrictions (Cathedral Quarter, Belfast) (Amendment) Order Northern Ireland) (DRD).
S.R. 2015/336 The Bus Lanes (Falls Road – Grosvenor to Whiterock Road, Belfast) Order (Northern Ireland) (DRD).
S.R. 2015/337 The Waiting Restrictions (Dungannon) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DRD).
S.R. 2015/338 The Prohibition of Waiting (Amendment No. 2) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DRD).
7. Written Ministerial Statements
8. Consultation Documents
9. Departmental Publications
10. Agency Publications
11. Westminster Publications
12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly Legislation:

Stages in Consideration of Public Bills

First Stage: Introduction of Bill.

Second Stage: General debate of the Bill with an opportunity for Members to vote on its general principles.

Committee Stage (Comm. Stage): Detailed investigation by a Committee which concludes with the publication of a report for consideration by the Assembly.

Consideration Stage (CS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, the details of the Bill including amendments proposed to the Bill.

Further Consideration Stage (FCS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, further amendments to the Bill.

Final Stage: Passing or rejecting of Bill by the Assembly, without further amendment.

Royal Assent.

Stages in Consideration of Public Bills 23 September 2015

2011-2016 Mandate

Executive Bills

Title & NIA Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Marine Bill 5/11-15	21.02.12	05.03.12	06.07.12	05.07.12	30.04.13	13.05.13	21.05.13	17.09.13
Welfare Reform Bill 13/11-15	01.10.12	09.10.12	19.02.13	14.02.13	10.02.15 & 11.02.15	24.02.15		
Education Bill 14/11-15	02.10.12	15.10.12	08.04.13	08.04.13				
Planning Bill 17/11-15	14.01.13	22.01.13	07.06.13	06.06.13	24.06.13 & 25.06.13			
Tobacco Retailers Bill 19/11-15	15.04.13	23.04.13	18.10.13	09.10.13	3.12.13	10.02.14	18.02.14	25.03.14
Carrier Bags Bill 20/11-15	03.06.13	11.06.13	30.11.13	26.11.13	28.01.14	25.02.14	10.03.14	28.04.14
Financial Provisions Bill 22/11-15	17.06.13	01.07.13	13.12.13	11.12.13	11.02.14	24.02.14	04.03.14	28.04.14
Public Service Pensions Bill 23/11-15	17.06.13	25.06.13	29.11.13	27.11.13	14.01.14	27.01.14	04.02.14	11.03.14
Licensing of Pavement Cafés Bill 24/11-15	17.06.13	25.06.13	13.12.13	05.12.13	04.03.14	25.03.14	07.04.14	12.05.14

Title & NIA Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Health and Social Care (Amendment) Bill 27/11-15	16.09.13	24.09.13	11.12.13	04.12.13	20.01.14	28.01.14	11.02.14	11.04.14
Local Government Bill 28/11-15	23.09.13	01.10.13	20.02.14	20.02.14	18.03.14 & 19.03.14	01.04.14	08.04.14	12.05.14
Road Races (Amendment) Bill 29/11-15	18.11.13	26.11.13	/	/	2.12.13	9.12.13	10.12.13	17.01.14
Reservoirs Bill 31/11-15	20.01.14	04.02.14	04.07.14	24.06.14	28.04.15	09.06.15	24.06.15	24.07.15
Budget Bill 32/11-15	10.02.14	11.02.14	/	/	17.02.14	18.02.14	24.02.14	19.03.14
Legal Aid and Coroners' Courts Bill 33/11-15	31.03.14	08.04.14	20.06.14	18.06.14	16.09.14	30.09.14	13.10.14	17.11.14
Work and Families Bill 34/11-15	28.04.14	12.05.14	30.11.14	08.10.14	11.11.14	24.11.14	02.12.14	08.01.15
Road Traffic (Amendment) Bill 35/11-15	12.05.14	27.05.14	27.03.15	19.03.15	29.06.15			
Budget (No.2) Bill 36/11-15	09.06.14	10.06.14	/	/	16.06.14	17.06.14	30.06.14	16.07.14
Justice Bill 37/11-15	16.06.14	24.06.14	27.03.15	25.03.15	02.06.15	16.06.15 & 22.06.15	30.06.15	24.07.15
Education Bill 38/11-16	06.10.14	14.10.14	/	/	21.10.14	11.11.14	17.11.14	11.12.14
Insolvency (Amendment) Bill 39/11-16	07.10.14	10.11.14	13.03.15	03.03.15	23.06.15			
Off Street Parking Bill 40/11-16	13.10.14	21.10.14	09.12.14	08.12.14	13.01.15	26.01.15	03.02.15	12.03.15
Food Hygiene (Ratings) Bill 41/11-16	03.11.14	11.11.14	08.05.15	29.04.15	29.06.15			
Pensions Bill 42/11-16	10.11.14	18.11.14	26.03.15	19.02.15	24.03.15	21.04.15	11.05.15	23.06.15
Regeneration Bill 43/11-16	08.12.14	20.01.15	28.05.15	28.05.15				
Budget Bill 45/11-16	09.02.15	16.02/15	/	/	17.02.15	23.02.15	24.02.15	12.03.15

Title & NIA Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Special Educational Needs and Disability Bill 46/11-16	02.03.15	10.03.15	13.11.15					
Mental Capacity Bill 49/11-16	08.06.15	16.06.15	28.01.16					
Legal Complaints and Regulation Bill 50/11-16	08.06.15	16.06.15	18.12.15					
Water and Sewerage Services Bill 51/11-16	16.06.15	29.06.15	25.11.15					
Health and Social Care (Control of Data Processing) Bill 52/11-16	16.06.15	29.06.15	20.11.15					
Budget (No. 2) Bill 53/11-16	16.06.15	24.06.15	/	/	24.06.15	29.06.15	30.06.15	24.07.15
Pensions Schemes Bill 54/11-16	22.06.15	30.06.15	/	/				
Environmental Better Regulation Bill 55/11-16	22.06.15	30.06.15	07.10.15					
Credit Unions and Co-operative and Community Benefit Societies Bill 56/11-16	23.06.15							
Justice (No. 2) Bill 57/11-16	30.06.15	08.09.15	20.10.15					
Housing (Amendment) Bill 58/11-16	30.06.15							
Houses in Multiple Occupation Bill 60/11-16	07.09.15							

**2011-2016 Mandate
Non-Executive Bills**

Title & Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Road Traffic (Speed Limits) Bill 25/11-15	17.06.13 Bill fell. Re-introduced as Bill 30/11-15 (see below)							
Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Further Provisions and Support for Victims) Bill 26/11-15	24.06.13	23.09.13 & 24.09.13	11.04.14	11.04.14	20.10.14	01.12.14	09.12.14	13.01.15
Road Traffic (Speed Limits) Bill 30/11-15	09.12.13	17.02.15	16.10.15					
Children's Services Co-operation Bill 44/11-16	08.12.14	26.01.15	03.07.15	02.07.15				
Public Services Ombudsperson Bill 47/11-16	20.04.15	11.05.15	30.09.15					
Ombudsman and Commissioner for Complaints (Amendment) Bill 48/11-16	27.04.15	11.05.15	/	/	01.06.15	08.06.15	09.06.15	20.07.15
Rates (Relief for Amateur Sports Clubs) Bill 59/11-16	30.06.15							
Civil Service (Special Advisers) (Amendment) Bill 61/11-16	14.09.15							
Assembly and Executive Reform (Assembly Opposition) Bill 62/11-16	22.09.15							

/ Bill progressing by accelerated passage

** Please note that any bills that received Royal Assent in the previous session have been removed from the table.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 28 September 2015

The Assembly met at noon, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Personal Prayer or Meditation

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Speaker's Business

2.1 Member Resignation

The Speaker informed Members that Mr Jimmy Spratt resigned as a Member of the Assembly with effect from 28 September 2015. The Speaker advised that the Speaker's Office had notified the Chief Electoral Officer, in accordance with section 35 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

2.2 New Member

The Speaker informed Members that he had been notified by the Chief Electoral Officer that Mrs Emma Pengelly had been returned as a Member of the Assembly for the South Belfast constituency to fill the vacancy that resulted from the resignation of Mr Jimmy Spratt.

Mrs Pengelly signed the Roll of Membership on 28 September 2015 in the presence of the Speaker, and the Clerk to the Assembly. The Speaker confirmed that Mrs Pengelly had signed the Roll and had entered her designation of identity.

2.3 Ministerial Appointments

The Speaker informed Members that, on 23 September 2015, Mr Jonathan Bell had taken up the office of Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Mr Simon Hamilton had taken up the office of Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Miss Michelle McIlveen had taken up the office of Minister for Regional Development and that Mr Mervyn Storey had taken up the office of Minister for Social Development.

The Speaker confirmed that the Members affirmed the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in Schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and confirmed the appointments.

2.4 Ministerial Resignations

The Speaker informed Members that, on 24 September 2015, Mr Jonathan Bell resigned as Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Mr Simon Hamilton resigned as Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Miss Michelle McIlveen resigned as Minister for Regional Development and Mr Mervyn Storey resigned as Minister for Social Development.

2.5 Ministerial Appointment

The Speaker informed Members that, on 28 September 2015, Mr Jonathan Bell had taken up the office of Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

The Speaker confirmed that Mr Bell affirmed the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in Schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and confirmed the appointment.

3. Public Petition

3.1 Public Petition – To stop individuals convicted of terrorist-related offences committed before 1998 from being granted day release any time during their subsequent two year sentence

Mrs Sandra Overend was granted leave, in accordance with Standing Order 22, to present a Public Petition to stop individuals convicted of terrorist-related offences, committed before 1998, from being granted day release any time during their subsequent two year sentence.

4. Assembly Business

4.1 Motion – Committee Membership

Proposed:

That Mr Andrew Allen be appointed as a member of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

Mr R Swann

Mrs S Overend

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

5. Executive Committee Business

5.1 Statement – Supporting Change – A Strategic Approach to Desistance

The Minister of Justice, Mr David Ford, made a statement regarding a strategic approach to desistance, following which he replied to questions.

5.2 Further Consideration Stage – Pension Schemes Bill (NIA Bill 54/11-16)

The Speaker informed Members that, as the Consideration Stage of the Pension Schemes Bill (NIA Bill 54/11-16) had not been completed, the item of business could not be moved.

5.3 Motion – The draft Renewables Obligation Closure Order (Northern Ireland) 2015

Proposed:

That the draft Renewables Obligation Closure Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 be approved.

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

6. Committee Business

6.1 Motion – Extension of Committee Stage: Environmental Better Regulation Bill (NIA Bill 55/11-16)

Proposed:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 27 November 2015, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Environmental Better Regulation Bill (NIA Bill 55/11-16).

Chairperson, Committee for the Environment

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

6.2 Motion – Report on the Inquiry into Building a United Community (NIA 257/11-16)**Proposed:**

That this Assembly notes the Report of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (NIA 257/11-16) on its Inquiry into Building a United Community; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister, along with their Executive colleagues, to implement the recommendations contained in the report.

Chairperson, Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Debate ensued.

The debate was suspended for Question Time.

7. Question Time**7.1 Health, Social Services and Public Safety**

The Speaker informed Members that, as the ministerial office was vacant, Questions to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety could not proceed.

8. Assembly Business (cont'd)**8.1 Motion – Suspension of Standing Order 20(1)****Proposed:**

That Standing Order 20(1) be suspended for the 28th September 2015.

*Mr P Weir
Ms C Ruane
Mr P Ramsey
Mr R Swann
Mr S Dickson*

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** with cross-community support *nemine contradicente*.

9. Committee Business (cont'd)**9.1 Motion – Report on the Inquiry into Building a United Community (NIA 257/11-16) (cont'd)**

Debate resumed.

The Principal Deputy Speaker (Mr Newton) took the Chair.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

9.2 Motion – 2021 Commonwealth Youth Games Bid**Proposed:**

That this Assembly notes the motion, unanimously endorsed in November 2014, supporting a bid for Northern Ireland to host the 2021 Commonwealth Youth Games; further notes that the deadline to bid for these Games is the end of September 2015; recognises that Northern Ireland is well-placed to bid successfully for the Games; further recognises the benefits that hosting the Games will bring, such as increased tourism, building on the successes of the World Police and Fire Games and Giro d'Italia, the opportunity for our best young athletes to experience world-class competition and to excel, and putting Northern Ireland at the forefront of international sport; and calls on all Members to exert their influence to ensure that a bid is made.

Chairperson, Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure

Debate ensued.

The debate was suspended for the continuation of Question Time.

10. Question Time (cont'd)

10.1 Justice

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Justice, Mr David Ford.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs) took the Chair.

11. Committee Business (cont'd)

11.1 Motion – 2021 Commonwealth Youth Games Bid (cont'd)

Debate resumed.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

12. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 3.54pm.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin

The Speaker

28 September 2015

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 23 September – 28 September 2015

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 Local Government Officers' Superannuation Committee Annual Report and Accounts 2014/2015 (DOE).

Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland, Annual Report and Statement of Accounts 1 April 2014 - 31 March 2015 (DETI).

Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2015 (OFMDFM).

5. Assembly Reports

6. Statutory Rules

S.R. 2015/332 The Animal By-Products (Enforcement) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DARD).

S.R. 2015/341 The General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland (Constitution) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DE).

S.R. 2015/344 The Planning (Hazardous Substances) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DOE).

For Information Only

S.R. 2015/329 (C.28) The Pensions (2015 Act) (Commencement No. 2) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DSD).

S.R. 2015/340 The Brucellosis (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DARD).

7. Written Ministerial Statements

Strategic Planning Policy Statement for Northern Ireland: Planning for Sustainable Development. (DOE).

8. Consultation Documents

Draft Guidance on the Identification and Designation of Quiet Areas (DOE).

9. Departmental Publications

10. Agency Publications

11. Westminster Publications

12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Audit Office, The Northern Ireland Events Company (NIAO).

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 29 September 2015

The Assembly met at 10.30am, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Personal Prayer or Meditation

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Speaker's Business

2.1 Ministerial Resignation

The Speaker informed Members that, on 29 September 2015, Mr Jonathan Bell resigned as Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

2.2 Committee Chairperson Nomination

The Speaker informed Members that, with effect from 28 September 2015, Mr Paul Givan was appointed as Chairperson of the Committee on Standards and Privileges, and confirmed the appointment.

3. Executive Committee Business

3.1 Statement – Launch of the Consultation on the Disability Employment Strategy

The Minister for Employment and Learning, Dr Stephen Farry, made a statement regarding the launch of the Consultation on the Disability Employment Strategy, following which he replied to questions.

4. Private Members' Business

4.1 Motion – Consideration Stage: Children's Services Co-operation Bill (NIA Bill 44/11-16)

The sponsor of the Bill, Mr Steven Agnew, moved the Consideration Stage of the Children's Services Co-operation Bill.

Ten amendments were tabled to the Bill.

Debate ensued.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat) took the Chair.

The sitting was suspended at 12.56pm.

The sitting resumed at 2.00pm, with the Principal Deputy Speaker (Mr Newton) in the Chair.

5. Question Time

5.1 Regional Development

The Speaker informed Members that, as the ministerial office was vacant, Questions to the Minister for Regional Development could not proceed.

5.2 Social Development

The Speaker informed Members that, as the ministerial office was vacant, Questions to the Minister for Social Development could not proceed.

6. Assembly Business

6.1 Motion – Suspension of Standing Order 20(1)

Proposed:

That Standing Order 20(1) be suspended for the 29th September 2015.

Mr P Weir
Ms C Ruane
Mr P Ramsey
Mr R Swann
Mr S Dickson

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** with cross-community support *nemine contradicente*.

7. Private Members' Business (cont'd)

7.1 Motion – Consideration Stage: Children's Services Co-operation Bill (NIA Bill 44/11-16) (cont'd)

Debate resumed.

Clauses

After debate, the question being put, it was **negatived** without division that clause 1 stand part of the Bill.

After debate, amendment 1 inserting new clause 1A was **made** without division and it was **agreed** that the new clause stand part of the Bill.

After debate, amendment 2 inserting new clause 1B was **made** without division and it was **agreed** that the new clause stand part of the Bill.

After debate, amendment 3 inserting new clause 1C was **made** without division and it was **agreed** that the new clause stand part of the Bill.

After debate, the question being put, it was **negatived** without division that clause 2 stand part of the Bill.

After debate, the question being put, it was **negatived** without division that clause 3 stand part of the Bill.

After debate, amendment 4 inserting new clause 3A was **made** without division and it was **agreed** that the new clause stand part of the Bill.

After debate, the question being put, it was **negatived** without division that clause 4 stand part of the Bill.

Amendment 5 was not moved.

After debate, amendment 6 inserting new clause 4B was **made** without division and it was **agreed** that the new clause stand part of the Bill.

After debate, amendment 7 inserting new clause 4C was **made** without division and it was **agreed** that the new clause stand part of the Bill.

After debate, the question being put, it was **negatived** without division that clause 5 stand part of the Bill.

After debate, amendment 8 inserting new clause 5A was **made** without division and it was **agreed** that the new clause stand part of the Bill.

After debate, amendment 9 inserting new clause 5B was **made** without division and it was **agreed** that the new clause stand part of the Bill.

The question being put, it was **agreed** without division that clause 6 stand part of the Bill.

Long Title

After debate, amendment 10 to the Long Title was **made** without division.

The question being put, the Long Title, as amended, was **agreed** without division.

The Children's Services Co-operation Bill (NIA Bill 44/11-16) stood referred to the Speaker.

7.2 Motion – City Deal for the North West

Proposed:

That this Assembly notes that the One Plan endorsed in the Programme for Government has not enjoyed full delivery traction in a number of key areas but still provides a valid and viable prospectus for driving growth in the North West; further notes that Derry and Strabane District Council have resolved to explore the potential of a City Deal for the council region and its relevance to the One Plan priorities; recognises that City Deal compacts are now developing under devolution in Scotland and Wales, as well as in their varying formats in England; and calls on the Executive and the North West Ministerial Sub-Group to join in scoping a City Deal for the North West, and encourages their best engagement to this end with the UK Treasury, council, the North South Ministerial Council and relevant stakeholders, focusing on key commitments of the One Plan and utilising the potential platform of the North West Gateway Initiative.

Mr C Eastwood

Mr P Ramsey

Mr J Dallat

Debate ensued.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs) took the Chair.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

8. Adjournment

Mr Neil Somerville spoke to his topic regarding the removal of the PSNI Tactical Support Group in County Fermanagh.

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 3.56pm.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin

The Speaker

29 September 2015

Children's Services Co-operation Bill

Annotated Marshalled List of Amendments

Consideration Stage

Tuesday 29 September 2015

Amendments tabled up to 9.30am Wednesday, 23 September 2015 and selected for debate.
The Bill will be considered in the following order-
Clauses and Long Title

Clause 1 [*Question that clause 1 stand part was negated*]

The Members listed below give notice of their intention to oppose the question that clause 1 stand part of the Bill.

*Mr Steven Agnew
Ms Megan Fearon
Mr Chris Hazzard
Mr Alex Attwood*

Amendment 1 [*Made*]

New Clause

After clause 1 insert -

'Well-being of children and young persons

1A.—(1) The functions conferred by this Act are to be exercised for the purpose of improving the well-being of children and young persons.

(2) For this purpose the “well-being” of children and young persons includes—

- (a) physical and mental health;
- (b) the enjoyment of play and leisure;
- (c) learning and achievement;
- (d) living in safety and with stability;
- (e) economic and environmental well-being;
- (f) the making by them of a positive contribution to society;
- (g) living in a society which respects their rights.

(3) In determining the meaning of well-being for the purposes of this Act, regard is to be had to any relevant provision of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (which is to say, the Convention of that name adopted by General Assembly resolution 44/25 of 20 November 1989).

(4) The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister may by regulations make such amendments to subsection (2) as it thinks appropriate.

(5) Regulations must not be made under subsection (4) unless a draft of the regulations has been laid before, and approved by a resolution of, the Assembly.’

*Mr Steven Agnew
Ms Megan Fearon
Mr Chris Hazzard
Mr Alex Attwood*

Amendment 2 [*Made*]

New Clause

After clause 1 insert -

'Co-operation to improve well-being

1B.—(1) Every children's authority must, so far as is consistent with the proper exercise of its children functions, co-operate with other children's authorities and with other children's service providers in the exercise of those functions.

(2) The Executive must make arrangements to promote co-operation of the kind mentioned in subsection (1).

(3) Every children's authority must co-operate with the Executive in the making of the arrangements mentioned in subsection (2).

(4) “Children functions” are any functions which may contribute to the well-being of children and young persons.’

*Mr Steven Agnew
Ms Megan Fearon
Mr Chris Hazzard
Mr Alex Attwood*

Amendment 3 [Made]

New Clause

After clause 1 insert -

‘Children and young persons strategy

1C.—(1) The Executive must adopt a strategy (the “children and young persons strategy”) setting out how it proposes to improve the well-being of children and young persons.

(2) The strategy must in particular set out—

- (a) what outcomes the Executive intends should be achieved for that purpose;
- (b) what actions will be taken by Northern Ireland departments (among others) for the purpose of achieving those outcomes;
- (c) how it will be determined whether, and to what extent, the outcomes have been achieved.

(3) The strategy must state the period within which it is intended that the outcomes should be achieved (the “lifetime” of the strategy).

(4) Before adopting the strategy, the Executive must consult—

- (a) children and young persons,
- (b) parents and guardians of children and young persons,
- (c) such persons representing the views and interests of children and young persons as the Executive thinks appropriate, and
- (d) such other persons as the Executive thinks appropriate.

(5) The Executive may—

- (a) revise or replace the strategy if the Executive is satisfied that changes in circumstances justify doing so;
- (b) amend the strategy by extending its lifetime.

(6) The Executive must—

- (a) lay the strategy, and any revisions to it, before the Assembly, and
- (b) publish it, and any revisions, in such other manner as the Executive thinks appropriate.

(7) At the end of the lifetime of the strategy, the Executive must adopt a new one.

(8) Subsections (2) to (7) apply to any new strategy.’

*Mr Steven Agnew
Ms Megan Fearon
Mr Chris Hazzard
Mr Alex Attwood*

Clause 2 [Question that clause 2 stand part was negatived]

The Members listed below give notice of their intention to oppose the question that clause 2 stand part of the Bill.

*Mr Steven Agnew
Ms Megan Fearon
Mr Chris Hazzard
Mr Alex Attwood*

Clause 3 [Question that clause 3 stand part was negatived]

The Members listed below give notice of their intention to oppose the question that clause 3 stand part of the Bill.

*Mr Steven Agnew
Ms Megan Fearon
Mr Chris Hazzard
Mr Alex Attwood*

Amendment 4 [Made]

New Clause

After clause 3 insert -

‘Sharing of resources and pooling of funds

3A.—(1) This section applies to a children’s authority for the purposes of exercising any functions in accordance with arrangements under section 1B (co-operation).

(2) For those purposes, a children’s authority may—

- (a) provide staff, goods, services, accommodation or other resources to another children's authority;
 - (b) make contributions to a fund out of which relevant payments may be made.
- (3) A "relevant payment" is a payment in respect of expenditure incurred, by a children's authority contributing to the fund, in the exercise of its functions.'

*Mr Steven Agnew
Ms Megan Fearon
Mr Chris Hazzard
Mr Alex Attwood*

Clause 4 [Question that clause 4 stand part was negatived]

The Members listed below give notice of their intention to oppose the question that clause 4 stand part of the Bill.

*Mr Steven Agnew
Ms Megan Fearon
Mr Chris Hazzard
Mr Alex Attwood*

Amendment 5 [Not moved]

New Clause

After clause 4 insert -

'Children and young persons plan

4A.—(1) The Executive must adopt a plan (a "children and young persons plan") setting out how it is proposed that children's services will be provided.

(2) The plan must in particular set out—

- (a) how children's services will be planned and commissioned;
- (b) what actions will be taken by children's authorities and other children's service providers for the purpose of achieving the outcomes set out in the children and young persons strategy;
- (c) how children's authorities and other children's service providers will co-operate with each other in the provision of children's services and in the taking of the actions mentioned in paragraph (b).

(3) Every children's authority must—

- (a) co-operate with the Executive in the preparation of the plan, and
- (b) so far as is consistent with the proper exercise of its functions—
 - (i) exercise those functions in accordance with the plan, and
 - (ii) co-operate with each other in doing so.

(4) Before adopting the plan, the Executive must consult—

- (a) children and young persons,
- (b) parents and guardians of children and young persons,
- (c) such persons representing the views and interests of children and young persons as the Executive thinks appropriate, and
- (d) such other persons as the Executive thinks appropriate.

(5) The Executive must review the plan—

- (a) not later than the first anniversary of the date on which it was adopted, and
- (b) not later than the first anniversary of that review;

and the Executive may revise the plan as it thinks appropriate in consequence of a review under this subsection.

(6) The Executive must—

- (a) lay the plan, and any revisions to it, before the Assembly, and
- (b) publish it, and any revisions, in such other manner as the Executive thinks appropriate.

(7) Not more than 3 years after the date on which the Executive adopted the plan, the Executive must adopt a new plan.

(8) Subsections (2) to (7) apply to any new plan.

(9) The following provisions (which are superseded by this section) cease to have effect—

- (a) paragraph 2A of Schedule 2 to the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 (children's services plans);
- (b) the Children (1995 Order) (Amendment) (Children's Services Planning) Order (Northern Ireland) 1998 (S.R. 1998/261);
- (c) in section 7(2) of the Children (Leaving Care) Act (Northern Ireland) 2002, the words "and in paragraph 2A(1)(a)";
- (d) paragraph 14(28) of Schedule 3 to the Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2014.'

Mr Steven Agnew

*Mr Alex Attwood***Amendment 6 [Made]****New Clause**

After clause 4 insert -

‘Report on the operation of this Act**4B.**—(1) For each reporting period, the Executive must prepare a report on the operation of this Act.

(2) The reporting period is—

- (a) for the first report prepared after the adoption of a strategy, the period since its adoption;
- (b) in any other case, the period since the preparation of the preceding report under this section.

(3) The report must include statements on the following matters, so far as relating to the reporting period—

- (a) what actions have been taken by the Executive, and Northern Ireland departments, for the purpose of achieving the outcomes set out in the children and young persons strategy;
- (b) what progress has been made towards achieving those outcomes, or the extent to which they have been achieved;
- (c) how children’s authorities and other children’s service providers have co-operated with each other in the provision of children’s services;
- (d) how children’s authorities have exercised the powers conferred by section 3A;
- (e) how the well-being of children and young persons has improved.

(4) The report must also identify—

- (a) any further opportunities for co-operation between children’s authorities and other children’s service providers that could help to achieve the outcomes set out in the strategy,
- (b) any other ways in which the well-being of children and young persons could be improved, and
- (c) any ways in which the children and young persons strategy might be revised in order to contribute to those improvements.

(5) The Executive must prepare a report under this section—

- (a) not more than 3 years after the date on which it adopted a children and young person’s strategy,
- (b) thereafter, during the lifetime of that strategy, at intervals of not more than 3 years, and
- (c) at the end of the lifetime of a strategy.

(6) But subsection (5)(c) does not apply if a report was prepared under this section less than 6 months before the end of the lifetime of the strategy.

(7) Children’s authorities must co-operate with the Executive in the preparation of a report under this section.

(8) The Executive must—

- (a) lay the report before the Assembly, and
- (b) publish it in such other manner as the Executive thinks appropriate.’

Mr Steven Agnew
Ms Megan Fearon
Mr Chris Hazzard
Mr Alex Attwood

Amendment 7 [Made]**New Clause**

After clause 4 insert -

‘Guidance**4C.**—(1) The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister may issue guidance to children’s authorities, or to any particular children’s authority, on the exercise of functions conferred by this Act.

(2) A children’s authority must have regard to guidance issued to it under this section.’

Mr Steven Agnew
Ms Megan Fearon
Mr Chris Hazzard
Mr Alex Attwood

Clause 5 [Question that clause 5 stand part was negated]

The Members listed below give notice of their intention to oppose the question that clause 5 stand part of the Bill.

*Mr Steven Agnew
Ms Megan Fearon
Mr Chris Hazzard
Mr Alex Attwood*

Amendment 8 [Made]**New Clause**

After clause 5 insert -

‘Interpretation

5A.—(1) In this Act—

“children and young persons” means persons who are—

- (i) under the age of 18, or
- (ii) aged 18 or over and fall within subsection (2) or (3);

“children’s authority” means any of the following—

- (i) a Northern Ireland department,
- (ii) a district council,
- (iii) a Health and Social Care trust,
- (iv) the Regional Health and Social Care Board,
- (v) the Regional Agency for Public Health and Social Well-being,
- (vi) the Education Authority,
- (vii) the Northern Ireland Housing Executive,
- (viii) the Police Service of Northern Ireland, or
- (ix) the Probation Board for Northern Ireland;

“children’s service” means any service which is provided (whether by a children’s authority or by any other person or body) wholly or mainly to or for the benefit of—

- (i) children and young persons generally, or
- (ii) children and young persons of a particular description or with particular needs;

“the Executive” means the Executive Committee of the Assembly, established under section 20 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998;

“other children’s service provider” means any person or body, of whatever nature, who provides a children’s service or is engaged in activities which contribute to the well-being of children or young persons (but does not include a children’s authority);

“well-being” has the meaning given by section 1A.

(2) A person falls within this subsection if services are provided to or in respect of the person by, or on behalf of, or under arrangements made with, the Regional Health and Social Care Board or a Health and Social Care trust by virtue of—

- (a) Article 34D, 35, 35A or 35B of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 (which provide for the continuing duties of those bodies towards young persons), or
- (b) regulations made under Article 34E of that Order (which may provide for the appointment of personal advisers for certain young persons).

(3) A person falls within this subsection if the person—

- (a) is under the age of 21 years, and
- (b) is a disabled person within the meaning of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

(4) The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister may by regulations make such amendments to the definition of “children’s authority” as it thinks appropriate.

(5) Regulations under subsection (4) are subject to negative resolution.’

*Mr Steven Agnew
Ms Megan Fearon
Mr Chris Hazzard
Mr Alex Attwood*

Amendment 9 [Made]

New Clause

After clause 5 insert -

‘Commencement

5B.—(1) This Act comes into operation on the day after the day on which it receives Royal Assent.

(2) The first strategy under section 1C must be laid before the Assembly before the end of the period of 12 months beginning with the day on which this Act receives Royal Assent.’

Mr Steven Agnew

Ms Megan Fearon

Mr Chris Hazzard

Mr Alex Attwood

Amendment 10 [Made]

Long Title

Leave out from first ‘Northern’ to end and insert ‘co-operation among certain public authorities and other persons in order to contribute to the well-being of children and young persons; to require the adoption of a children and young persons strategy; and for connected purposes’

Mr Steven Agnew

Ms Megan Fearon

Mr Chris Hazzard

Mr Alex Attwood

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 29 September 2015

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

Department for Social Development: Advanced Land Purchases (PAC).

5. Assembly Reports

6. Statutory Rules

S.R. 2015/146 Correction Slip – The Shared Parental Leave and Statutory Shared Parental Pay (Consequential Amendments to Subordinate Legislation) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DEL).

S.R. 2015/339 The Genetically Modified Organisms (Contained Use) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DETI).

S.R. 2015/342 The Glebe Way, Moira (Abandonment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DRD).

For Information Only

S.R. 2015/343 The Parking and Waiting Restrictions (Banbridge) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 (DRD).

7. Written Ministerial Statements

8. Consultation Documents

2021 Census: Topic Consultation for Northern Ireland (DFP).

9. Departmental Publications

10. Agency Publications

11. Westminster Publications

12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly Legislation:

Stages in Consideration of Public Bills

First Stage: Introduction of Bill.

Second Stage: General debate of the Bill with an opportunity for Members to vote on its general principles.

Committee Stage (Comm. Stage): Detailed investigation by a Committee which concludes with the publication of a report for consideration by the Assembly.

Consideration Stage (CS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, the details of the Bill including amendments proposed to the Bill.

Further Consideration Stage (FCS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, further amendments to the Bill.

Final Stage: Passing or rejecting of Bill by the Assembly, without further amendment.

Royal Assent.

Stages in Consideration of Public Bills 30 September 2015

2011-2016 Mandate

Executive Bills

Title & NIA Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Marine Bill 5/11-15	21.02.12	05.03.12	06.07.12	05.07.12	30.04.13	13.05.13	21.05.13	17.09.13
Welfare Reform Bill 13/11-15	01.10.12	09.10.12	19.02.13	14.02.13	10.02.15 & 11.02.15	24.02.15		
Education Bill 14/11-15	02.10.12	15.10.12	08.04.13	08.04.13				
Planning Bill 17/11-15	14.01.13	22.01.13	07.06.13	06.06.13	24.06.13 & 25.06.13			
Tobacco Retailers Bill 19/11-15	15.04.13	23.04.13	18.10.13	09.10.13	3.12.13	10.02.14	18.02.14	25.03.14
Carrier Bags Bill 20/11-15	03.06.13	11.06.13	30.11.13	26.11.13	28.01.14	25.02.14	10.03.14	28.04.14
Financial Provisions Bill 22/11-15	17.06.13	01.07.13	13.12.13	11.12.13	11.02.14	24.02.14	04.03.14	28.04.14
Public Service Pensions Bill 23/11-15	17.06.13	25.06.13	29.11.13	27.11.13	14.01.14	27.01.14	04.02.14	11.03.14
Licensing of Pavement Cafés Bill 24/11-15	17.06.13	25.06.13	13.12.13	05.12.13	04.03.14	25.03.14	07.04.14	12.05.14

Title & NIA Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Health and Social Care (Amendment) Bill 27/11-15	16.09.13	24.09.13	11.12.13	04.12.13	20.01.14	28.01.14	11.02.14	11.04.14
Local Government Bill 28/11-15	23.09.13	01.10.13	20.02.14	20.02.14	18.03.14 & 19.03.14	01.04.14	08.04.14	12.05.14
Road Races (Amendment) Bill 29/11-15	18.11.13	26.11.13	/	/	2.12.13	9.12.13	10.12.13	17.01.14
Reservoirs Bill 31/11-15	20.01.14	04.02.14	04.07.14	24.06.14	28.04.15	09.06.15	24.06.15	24.07.15
Budget Bill 32/11-15	10.02.14	11.02.14	/	/	17.02.14	18.02.14	24.02.14	19.03.14
Legal Aid and Coroners' Courts Bill 33/11-15	31.03.14	08.04.14	20.06.14	18.06.14	16.09.14	30.09.14	13.10.14	17.11.14
Work and Families Bill 34/11-15	28.04.14	12.05.14	30.11.14	08.10.14	11.11.14	24.11.14	02.12.14	08.01.15
Road Traffic (Amendment) Bill 35/11-15	12.05.14	27.05.14	27.03.15	19.03.15	29.06.15			
Budget (No.2) Bill 36/11-15	09.06.14	10.06.14	/	/	16.06.14	17.06.14	30.06.14	16.07.14
Justice Bill 37/11-15	16.06.14	24.06.14	27.03.15	25.03.15	02.06.15	16.06.15 & 22.06.15	30.06.15	24.07.15
Education Bill 38/11-16	06.10.14	14.10.14	/	/	21.10.14	11.11.14	17.11.14	11.12.14
Insolvency (Amendment) Bill 39/11-16	07.10.14	10.11.14	13.03.15	03.03.15	23.06.15			
Off Street Parking Bill 40/11-16	13.10.14	21.10.14	09.12.14	08.12.14	13.01.15	26.01.15	03.02.15	12.03.15
Food Hygiene (Ratings) Bill 41/11-16	03.11.14	11.11.14	08.05.15	29.04.15	29.06.15			
Pensions Bill 42/11-16	10.11.14	18.11.14	26.03.15	19.02.15	24.03.15	21.04.15	11.05.15	23.06.15
Regeneration Bill 43/11-16	08.12.14	20.01.15	28.05.15	28.05.15				
Budget Bill 45/11-16	09.02.15	16.02/15	/	/	17.02.15	23.02.15	24.02.15	12.03.15

Title & NIA Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Special Educational Needs and Disability Bill 46/11-16	02.03.15	10.03.15	13.11.15					
Mental Capacity Bill 49/11-16	08.06.15	16.06.15	28.01.16					
Legal Complaints and Regulation Bill 50/11-16	08.06.15	16.06.15	18.12.15					
Water and Sewerage Services Bill 51/11-16	16.06.15	29.06.15	25.11.15					
Health and Social Care (Control of Data Processing) Bill 52/11-16	16.06.15	29.06.15	20.11.15					
Budget (No. 2) Bill 53/11-16	16.06.15	24.06.15	/	/	24.06.15	29.06.15	30.06.15	24.07.15
Pensions Schemes Bill 54/11-16	22.06.15	30.06.15	/	/				
Environmental Better Regulation Bill 55/11-16	22.06.15	30.06.15	27.11.15					
Credit Unions and Co-operative and Community Benefit Societies Bill 56/11-16	23.06.15							
Justice (No. 2) Bill 57/11-16	30.06.15	08.09.15	20.10.15					
Housing (Amendment) Bill 58/11-16	30.06.15							
Houses in Multiple Occupation Bill 60/11-16	07.09.15							

**2011-2016 Mandate
Non-Executive Bills**

Title & Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Road Traffic (Speed Limits) Bill 25/11-15	17.06.13 Bill fell. Re-introduced as Bill 30/11-15 (see below)							
Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Further Provisions and Support for Victims) Bill 26/11-15	24.06.13	23.09.13 & 24.09.13	11.04.14	11.04.14	20.10.14	01.12.14	09.12.14	13.01.15
Road Traffic (Speed Limits) Bill 30/11-15	09.12.13	17.02.15	16.10.15					
Children's Services Co-operation Bill 44/11-16	08.12.14	26.01.15	03.07.15	02.07.15	29.09.15			
Public Services Ombudsperson Bill 47/11-16	20.04.15	11.05.15	30.09.15	29.09.15				
Ombudsman and Commissioner for Complaints (Amendment) Bill 48/11-16	27.04.15	11.05.15	/	/	01.06.15	08.06.15	09.06.15	20.07.15
Rates (Relief for Amateur Sports Clubs) Bill 59/11-16	30.06.15							
Civil Service (Special Advisers) (Amendment) Bill 61/11-16	14.09.15							
Assembly and Executive Reform (Assembly Opposition) Bill 62/11-16	22.09.15							

/ Bill progressing by accelerated passage

** Please note that any bills that received Royal Assent in the previous session have been removed from the table.