

# Official Report (Hansard)

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# Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 4 October 2011

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## Ministerial Statement

### **North/South Ministerial Council: Health and Food Safety**

**Mr Speaker:** Order. The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety wishes to make a statement.

**Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety):** I wish to make the following statement on the twelfth North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) meeting in health and food safety sectoral format, which took place in the NSMC joint secretarial offices in Armagh on Wednesday 20 July 2011. The Executive were represented by me as Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and by Martina Anderson MLA, junior Minister for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM). This statement has been endorsed by Minister Anderson. The Irish Government were represented by James Reilly TD, the Minister for Health, who chaired the meeting, and he was accompanied by Frances Fitzgerald TD, the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs.

James Reilly and I used the occasion to launch the 2010 cancer consortium annual report, entitled 'International Cooperation in Cancer Control: Overcoming Challenges Through Leadership and Training'. The publication marks the eleventh anniversary of this highly beneficial collaboration between our two jurisdictions and the National Cancer Institute in Washington DC in the United States of America. We also noted the high-level review of consortium activities that was conducted to inform the drafting of a revised memorandum of understanding to cover 2011-16. It is anticipated that all three participating member countries will sign the revised memorandum in November 2011.

Ministers also welcomed the launch of the All-Ireland Institute of Hospice and Palliative Care, which was established to expand education, research, policy and service development in palliative care.

Ministers noted progress in tackling alcohol abuse, tobacco consumption and obesity and welcomed plans for a North/South conference on alcohol misuse to be held in the autumn. The Council welcomed cross-border co-operation between the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service and firefighters from the six border fire and rescue services on the Driving Change project. Ministers also welcomed co-operation between the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service and the HSE National Ambulance Service through the development of a memorandum of understanding that will provide for cross-border assistance in the event of major incidents.

On the subject of the all-island action plan on suicide prevention, we noted the publication of the all-island evaluation of applied suicide intervention skills training (ASIST) and the fact that, by the end of 2011, over 25,000 people will have completed the ASIST training programme. Ministers noted that consideration is being given to rolling out the register of deliberate self-harm across Northern Ireland and that under the new area of action — suicide and the economic downturn — a range of initiatives has been shared between the National Office for Suicide Prevention and the Public Health Agency.

Ministers looked forward to the commencement of the all-island men's health forum, which seeks to help males in crisis and emotional distress, and there are plans in place for pilot initiatives to be taken forward in the autumn. Ministers were informed of the continuing progress in advancing co-operation on child welfare and protection, including an update on the continued co-operation by the two police services and social services

on sharing information on a cross-border basis on individuals who may pose a risk to children.

In the food safety sector, Ministers received a progress report on the activities of Safefood, including promotional activities already undertaken and those that are planned as well as the review of current and previous research activities. The report also advised of an extension to the term of the obesity action forum, which assists in identifying common areas in obesity reduction policies. We also approved Safefood's 2011-13 corporate plan and 2011 business plan and recommended budget provision for 2011 of €8.5 million or £6.97 million. It was noted that indicative budgets of €8.5 million or £6.97 million for each of the years 2012 and 2013 would be subject to budgetary consideration by the Executive and the Irish Government.

Ministers noted that key objectives for Safefood for 2011-13 include empowering individuals to make healthier and safer choices in relation to food safety and healthy eating and supporting communities, including those at social and economic disadvantage, to achieve better food safety and healthy eating outcomes.

**Ms Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety):** Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement and thank him for it. I am sure that he cannot but be impressed by the amount of collaborative working that there is on health on an all-Ireland basis and by how better services are provided at a lower cost to people across the island.

The Minister referred to the progress that has been made on the all-island action plan on suicide prevention and said that the Public Health Agency and the National Office for Suicide Prevention will undertake initiatives to tackle the impact of the economic downturn on suicide. Will the Minister provide details of those initiatives and what they involve? We welcome all the work that the Minister and other Ministers carry out on this very difficult issue.

**Mr Poots:** There has been a rolling programme of all-island actions on suicide prevention, and it has been developed in conjunction with my officials and their colleagues in the Republic of Ireland. Areas where there is co-operation or where co-operation is being considered include training, media monitoring, self-harm

data collection, public awareness campaigns and the promotion of positive mental health in men. Positive work is being carried out in quite a range of areas.

**Ms P Bradley:** I thank the Minister for his statement. Will the Minister tell us where such co-operation sits with the overall cancer services?

**Mr Poots:** I announced on 23 May this year that we would commission the construction of a radiotherapy unit in Altnagelvin Hospital that would be used by people in the Republic of Ireland. We have been working closely on that. We believe that the satellite unit will have a major benefit for people in Northern Ireland, and it will make a major contribution to the fight against cancer for people in the Irish Republic, particularly people in Donegal. We are happy to work with the Irish Government on that.

We are also engaged with the National Cancer Institute in America, with which we are working on cancer research. It is a tremendous opportunity to work with an organisation of real excellence and help people on both sides of the border to have a better chance of fighting cancer as a result of that.

**Mr Kinahan:** I thank the Minister for his statement. It covers a wide range of matters. I welcome the fact that at the end of this year more than 25,000 people will have gone through the applied suicide intervention skills training. Will the Minister detail whether that training is mandatory for health employees across the trusts and whether it is being targeted specifically towards those who hold positions in the community?

**Mr Poots:** No, the training is not mandatory. We are particularly encouraging key people in trusts and, indeed, in GP services to take up training, as we believe that it would be very beneficial to them in identifying the problems at an early stage and in seeking to address those problems at the earliest possible point, as opposed to letting them develop further, which has devastating consequences.

**Mrs D Kelly:** I thank the Minister for his statement. In relation to the work and co-operation on cancer control, we were informed by your predecessor that cancer on the island of Ireland had substantially increased. Have you given any consideration to an all-island agreement on the purchasing of drugs to treat cancer, given their high cost, so that people can

access the most effective forms of treatment for cancer and, indeed, pain control?

**Mr Poots:** I thank the deputy-in-waiting for her question. She has seen off all other runners.

I will get back to a serious subject. Unfortunately, across the island of Ireland, there are 6% to 7% additional cases each year, so it is a big problem. As people live longer, there is a greater likelihood of getting cancer, so some of it is down to the fact that people are living longer.

We certainly have a problem in Northern Ireland in relation to appropriate and adequate drugs. We take our guidance from the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE), which is UK-based, and we are currently not buying the same drugs as other parts of the United Kingdom. I have made it clear that that is something that I cannot stand over and that I am therefore seeking solutions. I want to ensure that we are in a position to buy drugs that are effective for people who have cancer and help them to overcome that awful illness.

**Mr McCarthy:** I thank the Minister for his statement. He said:

*“Ministers noted progress in tackling alcohol abuse, tobacco consumption and obesity”.*

I do not see any mention of the scourge of drug abuse or substance abuse, which applies right across the board. Will the Minister tell us whether it was mentioned in any other aspect of the meeting? There was a lot of coverage, and we must congratulate the Ministers on their work, but that was not mentioned in the statement. Has it been mentioned elsewhere?

**Mr Poots:** It was not mentioned at this particular meeting. As the Member has rightly indicated, we covered a wide range of subjects. It would be impossible to cover every aspect of health in one meeting, but I have absolutely no doubt that it will be discussed at some length at future meetings.

**Mr Dunne:** I thank the Minister for his statement. Will he tell us whether cancer research remains a priority? Why is it still so important?

#### 10.45 am

**Mr Poots:** I think that cancer research is a very high priority. It is important because the chances of recovering from cancer today are far greater than they were 10, 20, 30 or 40 years

ago, and that is down to good research and the implementation of that research. Without it, people will lose their life, and we therefore want to ensure that people engage in research.

I have already expressed concern that we do not contribute to the research budget that is available in the UK, which means that we cannot bid for research from that fund. That is another issue that I would like to see addressed in future. Nevertheless, we are working with the all-Ireland National Cancer Institute Cancer Consortium, the aim of which is to reduce the incidence and mortality of cancer throughout Ireland, North and South. The consortium's activities are funded by HSC research and development (HSCR&D), which is a division of the Public Health Agency. The annual allocation of funding to HSCR&D comes from my Department, so we are investing in that area. The National Cancer Institute has a board of directors, which is made up of the Chief Medical Officers from Northern Ireland, the Irish Republic and the United States and the institute's director. That organisation has invested €11 million over five years, €7 million of which has been provided by the group of funders, and the institute has undertaken to achieve the final €4 million through fundraising. By tapping into one of the largest cancer research institutions in the world, we are able to benefit from and buy into its particular field of work, so that is a good use of money.

**Ms Boyle:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. It was mentioned earlier, but, because this is breast cancer awareness month, many people will be waiting to hear the news that the planned radiotherapy centre is on track. Will he come back to the House in the near future to assure us that things are on track? Will we get regular updates?

**Mr Poots:** I am glad to say that the radiotherapy centre is still on track. Unfortunately, there is still quite a wait, which means that people will have to travel for a considerable time to come. In the intervening period, we will install new lines in Belfast City Hospital, where new investment will enable it to deal with the rising numbers. That will not deal with the problem indefinitely, but the satellite centre will be created in 2016, and it will be able to do so for the foreseeable future thereafter. That is really good news for cancer sufferers. The feedback that I have received from people across



Northern Ireland is that they greatly appreciate the fact that the centre is proceeding.

**Ms Lewis:** I thank the Minister for his statement. What is the source of funding for Northern Ireland's participation in the cancer consortium?

**Mr Poots:** We fund the consortium through the Public Health Agency, and the money comes from the DHSSPS budget. It is important that the Assembly, as government, encourages and drives the public health agenda and invests in public health. As a group of politicians, we may not see all the benefits because many will be generational. Nonetheless, if we are to leave an indelible mark for good, we can do it in this area. We can make real, life-changing differences for people in Northern Ireland and change attitudes so that their health can be greatly enhanced as a consequence.

**Mr Nesbitt:** I thank the Minister. According to seafood's corporate plan for 2011-13, it has an indicative budget in the region of £21 million or several pounds per citizen on the island. How will citizens know that the money is well spent?

**Mr Poots:** The Member was, possibly, referring to Safefood, as opposed to seafood. If we were to spend £21 million on seafood diets, we would all be obese, so that would not be a good idea. Nonetheless, the Member makes a relevant point.

Safefood has brought forward its proposals for that money. They will be inspected by both Departments. We live in a time in which budgets are constrained, so there is absolutely no guarantee that £21 million will ultimately be spent on that. I have asked that we look at areas in which there is a crossover, particularly with the Food Standards Agency, so that services are not duplicated. I have also asked that we look at areas that should be the responsibility of the Public Health Agency. We want to ensure that all the money for this area is well spent and that services are not duplicated.

**Mr Brady:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. The Minister mentioned an all-island men's health forum and the commencement of pilot initiatives, possibly in the autumn. Will he give us some more detail on a timeline and where the pilot initiatives may be placed?

**Mr Poots:** As I said, we will kick it off in the autumn. It is important that we look after men's

health because that issue is often ignored, and, as a consequence, among men, a higher number of cancer cases are not cured. We have invested in bowel screening, for example, because bowel cancer is more frequently associated with men. So far, the feedback has been very good. Early detection means that people's lives are being saved because cancer is not entering other organs. Great work can be done for men, and driving that agenda means that people on both sides of the border will see real benefits.

**Mr McDevitt:** I join colleagues in thanking the Minister for what is, by all accounts, a pretty comprehensive report. I specifically welcome the continued co-operation on child welfare and protection. Will the Minister inform the House whether he and his Southern counterpart have started a specific conversation about how the inquiries into clerical and diocesan-level abuse that are taking place in the Republic can be co-ordinated across the island of Ireland, as they are, by definition, North/South issues?

**Mr Poots:** I am not sure whether that was a compliment from the Member, and I am not sure how I should take it if it was. Maybe I should take it as an insult. Nonetheless, I thank the Member.

We have certainly failed in the area of child protection in the past, but we are currently doing very good work. The better our results, the more cases will come forward. That is a demonstration of good practice. I welcome the fact that my staff are very busy; we need to get on top of the issue. It does not need to take place underneath the radar, where children are exploited and hurt and we are not able to get to it.

I have a couple of comments about investigating the past. I am opposed to going down the route that was used in the Republic of Ireland. I am opposed to the judiciary and legal people getting heavily involved in a process in Northern Ireland to find the truth. Too many public inquiries have been taken over and dominated by barristers and solicitors who have made excessive sums of money from other people's misery. Therefore, the further we stay away from judicial inquiries and get straight to the truth, the better for victims, the shorter the inquiry, the less pain and trauma victims are put through and the quicker they get results. I welcome the inquiry that has been proposed by the Executive. I truly hope that we do not get drawn into a long



judicial inquiry because we will not see the benefits of that.

We do not need an inquiry that draws my officials and staff away from the important work that they do today. I do not want the Assembly or the Department to pay the price of going after the truth of the past at the expense of looking after the children of today. It is important that we do not end up being dragged into a long judicial inquiry in which DHSSPS staff who are involved in child protection have to spend inordinate amounts of time dealing with such an inquiry, as opposed to protecting children who currently need protection.

**Mr Buchanan:** I thank the Minister for his statement. A lot of questions have been put to him about cancer, and I welcome the fact that he used the occasion to launch the 2010 Cancer Consortium annual report. I also welcome the ongoing collaboration in the fight against cancer. Who actually leads the Cancer Consortium, and why does he feel the need for a revised memorandum of understanding?

**Mr Poots:** The Chief Medical Officers lead it. Dr Michael McBride is our Chief Medical Officer, and, from the US, the consortium is led by the director of the National Cancer Institute. I give great credit to the work of Dr Paddy Johnson, who started all this many years ago. He is a particular expert in the field, and he came back to Northern Ireland to lead the campaign in the fight against cancer. Individuals such as Paddy Johnson could make huge amounts of money elsewhere, but they have chosen to lead the battle against cancer in Northern Ireland, so great credit should be attributed to them.

The memorandum of understanding needs to be updated as we move to the 2011-16 period. We are moving into a new period, so it requires some updating. Hopefully, that will be completed by November and signed in that month so that we can move ahead in this very important area.

**Mr Beggs:** I thank the Minister for his statement. Was the new food hygiene rating scheme discussed at the North/South meeting? I understand that it has been adopted by 17 of the 26 local councils, as it removes a degree of the confusion that existed with the old scheme. Would the potential for confusion as a result of different schemes operating in different jurisdictions be removed if the new scheme, which has been adopted throughout the United Kingdom, were also adopted throughout Ireland?

**Mr Poots:** No, it was not discussed. The Food Standards Agency brought that forward. As I said earlier, I do not want duplication. If the Republic of Ireland wanted to adopt the same or a similar scheme, that would be up to them. It is easily and readily understood that, if there are five stars on a restaurant door, that restaurant is excellent, while one star means that you might be as well going to another to ensure that you do not get food poisoning.

**Mr Givan:** I welcome the statement and the sharing of information between the two jurisdictions. During the meeting, was there any discussion of how the Republic of Ireland has dealt with health workers' union representatives in dealing with the austerity measures that have been introduced in that jurisdiction? Can any lessons be learned in this jurisdiction in dealing with our own trade union partners? What credibility has the strike that has been called by UNISON tomorrow, given the negligible participation in the vote and given that the Executive have protected health workers, particularly the low paid?

**Mr Speaker:** I urge the Member to come to his question.

**Mr Givan:** Is there any sharing of information with the South?

**Mr Poots:** That is an interesting question. *[Laughter.]* On the austerity measures in the Republic of Ireland, I discussed with Minister Reilly how we could do things better. For example, I believe that we could provide a wider range of services at the new hospital in Fermanagh if the Republic of Ireland were to buy into them. If we were to introduce an air ambulance to Northern Ireland, it would probably have greater potential if we were to serve Donegal and, perhaps, some other counties.

I understand that, at this stage, there has not been a strike in the Republic of Ireland in spite of the fact that it has had much deeper and much more severe cuts than Northern Ireland. The fact that, in Northern Ireland, only 13% of UNISON members voted to go on strike is an indication that that is not widely supported. Vulnerable and ill people will be hurt as a consequence.

11.00am

## Executive Committee Business

### London Olympic Games and Paralympic Games (Amendment) Bill: Legislative Consent

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

*That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the provisions in the London Olympic Games and Paralympic Games (Amendment) Bill dealing with ticket touting.*

I seek the Assembly's approval for this legislative consent motion (LCM). The London Olympic Games and Paralympic Games (Amendment) Bill makes a small number of technical amendments to the commercial and traffic-management provisions of the London Olympic Games and Paralympic Games Act 2006. The only provision of the Bill that extends to Northern Ireland and which requires this legislative consent motion is on ticket touting for the Olympic Games. The provision amends the penalty for unauthorised ticket sales for Olympic and Paralympic events and covers matters on which the Assembly normally legislates for Northern Ireland, such as those covering criminal penalties and sport.

Although the LCM concerns a penalty only, it is worth noting at this point that the underpinning offence to which it relates is already UK-wide. The offence of Olympic ticket touting was created in the 2006 Act and, therefore, already applies in Northern Ireland. Under the 2006 Act, it is an offence to sell an Olympic ticket in a public place or for profit without written authorisation from the London Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games. The current maximum penalty for the offence is a level 5 fine, which is £5,000. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), the sponsor of the Bill, wishes to increase the maximum fine to £20,000 across the UK. DCMS is concerned about the low deterrent potential of £5,000, especially given the likely involvement of organised criminal gangs in ticket sales for Olympic events. Its information suggests that the scale and global significance of the games makes the likelihood of touting materially higher than for other events. Touting for the games offers a lucrative source of revenue to organised criminals, and

it is important to frustrate the moneymaking activities of organised criminals and to prevent them from seeking to use Northern Ireland as a back-door opportunity.

As this is a UK-wide offence, I do not wish the penalty available in Northern Ireland to be any lower than that in England, Wales or Scotland; the Scottish Government are also proposing to have the Bill increase the penalty in Scotland. It is not a practical option to increase the penalty by Assembly legislation. Given that the games are less than a year away, it would take too long and would not be a good use of Assembly time. The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, Carál Ní Chuilín, is content with my proposal for an LCM; I have also consulted the Committee for Justice. Some members expressed concerns, which I appreciate, about the enforceability of the offence, particularly regarding internet sales, the arrangements in place for legitimate ticket sales and the use of the LCM mechanism generally. However, the Committee was prepared to go down the route of an LCM, albeit with some reluctance.

In response to some of those concerns, I should emphasise that the police learned much about enforcement from serious ticket scams during previous games. Furthermore, members should note that the public will quite legitimately be able to sell spare tickets at face value to friends or family without committing an offence. Additionally, the London organising committee will operate an exchange system for those who wish to sell on any unwanted tickets legitimately.

Like most Members, I am reluctant in principle to resort to legislative consent motions; that is not why I sought election to a legislature. However, I believe that this one is justified and necessary for an issue with limited impact for a limited time. The Olympic movement is entitled to expect host countries to do their best to enforce its rules and to deter would-be offenders. It is also important that we do not send out a message that Northern Ireland is softer on that type of crime than the rest of the UK. Therefore, I ask Members to support the motion.

**Mr Givan (The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice):** My comments will be brief. The Department advised the Committee for Justice on 9 June that the Minister wished to take the legislative consent motion to the Assembly.

The Scottish Parliament was also asked to agree a similar motion to extend the maximum

penalty in its jurisdiction. The Committee took oral evidence from officials on 16 June, and some issues of concern were raised. The Minister highlighted and addressed some of them. Such issues included whether there was a practical need for the provision; whether the provisions could be enforced, given their inability to address internet sales from non-UK-based websites and ticket sales outside the UK; whether the legislation would achieve the stated aim of deterring organised crime groups by stopping major criminality; and the principle of using a legislative consent motion to deal with the issue.

Having heard the responses from officials, which are set out in the Committee report on the legislative consent motion that was circulated to Members, the Committee for Justice concluded that, on balance, it was prepared to support the Minister's motion.

**Mr McCartney:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Beidh muid ag tabhairt tacaíochta don rún. We also support the legislative consent motion. The Chair outlined the concerns raised at Committee, and I know that the Minister and his officials are aware of them. In principle, we are not opposed to this, but it was highlighted, particularly throughout the passage of the Justice Bill, that, when we legislate for here, we should be conscious of the issues that prevail here, and we are not sure that ticket touting would have been a major concern.

There was also concern about legislation that is passed in Westminster and the use of legislative consent motions to offset our ability and power to legislate. That is our only concern, but we approve of the motion.

**Ms McKevitt:** Ticket touting is a serious issue that needs to be addressed. It is hoped that the legislative consent motion will prevent people from touting London Olympic and Paralympic Games tickets. We support the motion as a welcome addition to provisions made by the House last year to tighten the law on ticket touting in football, GAA and soccer.

**Mr Ford:** I thank the Members who contributed to the debate. Although the issue raises the concerns of the sort highlighted in particular by Mr McCartney, the Committee Chair explained the way in which the Committee addressed the issue. It recognised that there were problems, in principle, with legislative consent motions, but acknowledged that this is a particular issue to deal with a specific, short-term problem.

I assure the House that the Department of Justice will not readily seek to use legislative consent motions where they can be avoided. I thank Mr Givan and the Committee for the consideration that they gave to the motion, and welcome their support.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the provisions in the London Olympic Games and Paralympic Games (Amendment) Bill dealing with ticket touting.*

## Private Members' Business

### Student Places at the University of Ulster's Magee Campus

**Mr Speaker:** The Business Committee agreed to allow an hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose the motion and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes to do so.

**Mr Eastwood:** I beg to move

*That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning to ensure the creation of 1,000 extra student places at the University of Ulster's Magee campus during the current comprehensive spending review period in order to provide the key economic driver that is envisaged by the Ilex regeneration plan.*

Derry's politicians, business people, union representatives and community activists spent two years pulling together a regeneration plan: our 'One Plan'. The First and deputy First Ministers were in Derry to launch that plan. Unfortunately, the 'One Plan' is not even mentioned in the first draft of the Programme for Government (PFG), and, every week, we have a new announcement from the Executive that further dilutes the proposals in the plan. One such proposal is for Magee to have a targeted maximum student number (MaSN) increase by 2015, with the hope that it will have 6,000 full-time students by 2020. That could add £1 billion to the regional economy by 2040. The plan — our plan — refers to Magee as the catalyst for city-wide economic renewal, with the potential to create up to 2,800 new direct and indirect jobs by 2020.

This year, Magee received 5,786 applications via the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), of which 4,072 were from Northern Ireland. A mere handful of those — 1,111 — were accepted, and just 727 were from the North. Magee had to reject 4,675 applications this year alone, and 3,345 of those applications were from local students. One thousand extra students would only begin to plug that gap.

On 12 September, the Minister said that:

*"the Executive felt that it was financially prudent to assess the actual distortions in student flows, and to consider additional resources in due course."*

Perhaps the Minister will outline to the House what additional resources there may be and whether "due course" means within this comprehensive spending review (CSR) period.

I remind the Minister, the Executive and the House that we have been waiting since 1965 for a meaningful commitment from Stormont to Magee and to Derry. In 1965, when John Hume led 25,000 Derry people from every political persuasion to the steps of this Building, they were ignored. We will not be ignored again. If the Executive are serious about making the economy their top priority, they need to urgently tackle Magee university. We have a broad coalition of support in and outside Derry, and, no doubt, we will have support from different parties in the House. However, the time for lip service is over. The people demand action from the Executive. It is not six months since posters went up all over Derry telling us that the expansion of Magee was guaranteed. The people of Derry are now calling that guarantee.

**Mr Speaker:** Before I call the next Member, who will be Alastair Ross, I remind the House that the motion relates to student places at the University of Ulster's Magee campus. I will allow Members to widen their contribution slightly. The motion relates to student places at a particular university, but I can understand that Members may want to go outside the motion slightly. I do not see anything wrong with that, but let us not stray too far from the motion.

**Mr Ross:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. I welcome your guidance. Given that this is not an Adjournment debate, perhaps it is necessary to broaden it out a little bit. We will aim to do that.

The motion calls on the Minister to ensure an additional 1,000 places at the University of Ulster's Magee college. We have three main concerns about the motion, which is why we sought to table an amendment to address those concerns. I will try to outline those concerns during my short contribution.

First, we had an issue about looking at Magee in isolation. As I said, this is not an Adjournment debate, and, therefore, we have to take into consideration the fact that other



universities, campuses and FE colleges are looking for additional places. Those who support the motion will say that Magee has asked for them, while others have not. That may be the case, but it is important for us to look at other institutions when we are debating the issue. The issue is important to the Members who tabled it as there is a particular geographical interest. However, it is important not to focus narrowly on one geographical area. We must look at our HE and FE sectors right across the board. Had our amendment been accepted, it would have widened that out a little.

The second issue relates to the 1,000 extra student places. Again, our amendment sought to get more focus on those 1,000 places. It is a little bit woolly in the sense that we wanted to focus those 1,000 places on —

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I am trying to be careful not to stifle the debate. However, the amendment that the Member is talking about was not selected. I am happy to give him a number of reasons why it was not selected if he wants to talk to me afterwards. We should not stray into an amendment that was not selected. I am not stopping or stifling the debate at all. Nevertheless, the Assembly has procedures and conventions.

**Mr Ross:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. I appreciate your comments. I am trying to address the motion as tabled and the reasons why we cannot ultimately support it. We can vote only on what is on the Order Paper, and the fact that we are not focusing on science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects specifically is of concern to us.

We know that, given our economy, we need to get more people to university. The Minister's decision on freezing fees will help us to do that. I also know that those who support the additional places at Magee college also want to see more young people going to university and being able to compete for the graduate jobs that we hope to create here.

### 11.15 am

**Mrs D Kelly:** I thank the Member for giving way. I note that he is trying to explain that the reason why the DUP is not supporting the motion relates to the 1,000 places and the STEM subjects. Given that the Minister said that there will be an extra 1,000 places potentially spread across the universities, does the logic apply that those

1,000 places should be for STEM subjects only across all universities, or just Magee?

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

**Mr Ross:** As an Assembly, I think that we want to be focusing additional places on those STEM subjects; those are the subjects that are going to be relevant in a global economy.

**Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning):** I am grateful to the Member for giving way. I was not planning on speaking so soon, but I want to put something on record, before people get too carried away. I have never said on the record that there are 1,000 places based upon the resources that have been allocated as part of the Executive's agreement, nor have I said that there are going to be 600. We are talking about several hundreds. I want to put that in context for Members, before they work ahead on the assumption that there are 1,000 places to talk about; there are not.

**Mr Ross:** I think that the Minister's contribution is helpful. The issue about the STEM subjects is one that we, perhaps, would not be so prescriptive on. However, it is important that we focus on the knowledge-based economy that we want to create in Northern Ireland. Those are the subjects that we need to focus on. The growth in the science and technology sector is going to continue over the next number of decades. It is, therefore, important that we focus on those subjects, particularly given the Assembly and the Executive's continued efforts at devolving corporation tax and the reliance on the graduate-type jobs that will flow from that and from the foreign direct investment.

The third issue that we have with the motion is around cost. At the moment, costs are an issue in every Department. We have to be cognisant of that, particularly following the Executive decision of 8 September to freeze student fees. That was supported by parties across the House, the universities, students and families across Northern Ireland. However, in supporting the decision to freeze student fees, we were aware that there would be a financial implication and a knock-on cost. The decision came at a cost. We know that there will be constraints across the Executive Budget and, particularly, in the Department for Employment and Learning budget. The motion is lacking due to the fact that it does not refer to the cost or to the tightening of the budget.

I believe that the decision on student fees will help to increase participation and to make sure that there is not a barrier to more young people going to university. However, I think that it will have a potential impact on whether any additional places can be created at Magee college or anywhere else. That is a financial reality that we must live in.

There are, therefore, three reasons why we cannot support the motion. First, it focuses on one geographical area rather than across Northern Ireland. Secondly, it does not focus on the subjects that we desperately need to get young people into for the good of the economy in Northern Ireland. Thirdly, there is the issue of costs and the cost of doing this in tighter financial budgets, particularly given the decision that was taken on student fees.

**Mr McCartney:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Beidh Sinn Féin ag tabhairt tacaíochta don rún. Sinn Féin will support the motion. Sinn Féin has long advocated the need for the expansion of the Magee campus in particular, and my party colleague Martina Anderson was one of the people in Derry who led on that very vocally in the past number of years. We have been advocates for expansion for a variety of reasons. The neglect of third level education in Derry has been well presented over a long number of years, and I think the case has been made. The strength of the university and the reputation of the campus have grown, but that has not been reflected in the lifting of the MaSN cap or the realisation of extra spaces.

The Ilex regeneration plan for Derry is known as 'One City, One Plan, One Voice'. It is, perhaps, one of the most comprehensive pieces of work to be carried out in Derry or, indeed, the north-west over a long number of years. At its core are attempts to tackle years and years of economic, social and political discrimination and underdevelopment. There is absolutely no doubt that, as Colum Eastwood has said, at the core of that regeneration initiative and concept is the absolute need for more university places to become the economic driver, along with many other aspects of it, in the delivery of the plan.

If we do not realize the extra places, and if the MaSN cap and the ambitions of U4D and the university are not realized in the next number of years, it will deal a blow to attempts to address years and years of economic underinvestment and regional disparity.

The case for expansion has been made. The Minister visited Derry recently and received a presentation from the university and Ilex. I listened to what he said then, and I think that he is on record as saying that he accepts the need for expansion and that he wants to work with the university to deliver that expansion. I think that he has also accepted that Magee is the only university that currently has a proposal on the table for the number of places. The Minister smiled when I said that, so it will be interesting to hear his take on that.

**Dr Farry:** Two out of three.

**Mr McCartney:** As the song goes: "Two out of three ain't bad".

Support for the expansion is important. The university has stated that publicly and forcefully on a number of occasions, and I have not heard any counterstatement from the Minister or his Department. I will listen in particular to what he has to say about the matter, and I want him to reaffirm that today. He has to say that he agrees with the expansion of Magee. It is not just about the expansion of a university campus, and the Minister must see it in the context of the regeneration of Derry and tackling regional disparity. From the point of view of his party, if it is going to make any sort of contribution to a shared future, the expansion of the Magee campus is a way of showing the people of the north-west that there is a shared future for them after years of underdevelopment.

The Minister said that there are a limited number of spaces, and that is where the debate lies and why we must focus on that particular aspect. He knows that the demand is there for STEM subjects. He must pay particular attention to that and ensure that STEM subjects feature high on his list of priorities for the extra places.

There has been speculation about the total number of places. Some reports have put it at 600, and we have heard this morning that it may be 1,000. We hope that it is 1,000, although the Minister is saying that it will not be 1,000. Whatever the number, the Minister must make a decision, in the current context, on what will have the maximum impact on the economy of the North and on the economy of the north-west in particular. If the Minister can make a decision that will get the maximum delivery and the maximum outcomes in tackling regional disparity and economic underdevelopment and that will kick-start a regeneration plan in the

north-west that is focused on Derry and the Magee campus, there is no doubt that that is what he should do. The case is overwhelming. Whatever extra places the Minister can deliver should be delivered to the Magee campus.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member should bring his remarks to a close.

**Mr McCartney:** That will be seen as a statement of his intent to make the regeneration plan work. It will also show that he wants proper third-level education in the city of Derry.

**Mr B McCrea:** I was surprised by the last speech. Maybe it is because I am the Chair of the Committee, but the statements that I have heard from the Minister put the number of places at nowhere near 600 or 1,000 — a few hundred is what I have heard. It is as well to get the facts right, and I am sure that the Minister will clarify that.

One of the first Acts of Parliament in this place was the Basil McCrea Endowments Act (Northern Ireland) 1923, which passed considerable sums of money to Magee College. I want people to understand that I am supportive of Magee. My colleague Mrs Overend is a graduate of Magee, so we are supportive of Magee. However, Mr McCartney's statement that there is an overwhelming business case is simply not true; the case has not been made. You can say that there has been an increase in applications and that those are up 30% in the past —

**Mr McCartney:** It was not me who said that the business case has been made; it was the university. As far as I am aware, that has not been publicly challenged by you or the Minister.

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

**Mr B McCrea:** Thank you for that.

I recall that there was some discussion in Londonderry, and I challenged it. The business case has not been made and accepted. These figures are not trivial; you are asking for an extra 1,000 places. I refer to the University of Ulster, not just Magee campus. There were 8,487 places last year. You are looking for a significant uplift, and you have to realise that this is not just about Londonderry, it is about the whole of Northern Ireland.

I return to the issue of informed debate. A publication was released in March 2011 entitled 'Identification of Priority Skill Areas For

Northern Ireland — March 2011'. The report says that there is evidence of graduates moving out of Northern Ireland for better pay or jobs. We do not have jobs for the graduates we are producing. The report goes on to say that increasing our skills makes sense only if we have jobs to give the graduates. My problem is that we are doing this in a somewhat cavalier fashion: we feel that we must tick the boxes and get 1,000 more graduates, but we do not know what skills people require.

It is not that I am unsympathetic to what people are trying to do, but it is not for the Minister to dictate to any university where it will put its places or what its subjects will be. A negotiation, a discussion, is to be had but, ultimately, universities are independent institutions.

When we look at how best to address the skills gap in Northern Ireland, there are other institutions such as further education that deal with the issue in a different way. According to the report, this is what is required:

*"As there is a significant increase in the number of people required with professional and technical skills, to at least level 3, it is recommended that particular emphasis is placed on the attainment of level 3 qualifications."*

That is to say, apprenticeships. If money is found, that is where I want to see it spent; that is where we need it. It is not right that the 50% of people who go to university, to higher and further education, are subsidised by the 50% of the people who do not have those skills.

**Mrs D Kelly:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr B McCrea:** I have already given way, so I will not do that.

An awful lot of people are out of work now because they used to go into jobs such as plumbing, maintenance and electricity working. Those people need our help and support as well. Those are the skills to which the Minister should rightly direct resources. I feel that they have been missed out. I give way to the Member now.

**Mrs D Kelly:** I thank the Member for giving way. I understand his frustration about the lack of money. One in four of the young people who left school this year has found nowhere to go. Given that the Executive have, allegedly, put the economy at the centre of this mystical Programme for Government, does the Member not consider that all of those challenges should be met?



**Mr B McCrea:** I agree with the Member in that respect, and that is why I have some difficulty with the motion. I agree that all areas should be tackled and that we should look at skills. The direct consequence of freezing student tuition fees at the level at which that has been done is that there are knock-on effects on other sectors.

The Minister will argue that there will be no diminution in what will be offered, because he will find it from elsewhere, but the opportunity to increase student numbers is not there, because the Executive took that decision. It is an absolute knock-on effect. No increase in fees, no more student numbers — unless the Minister goes back to the Executive and asks them for more money, which will be taken from other hard-pressed sectors. If I am not right on that, the Minister may contradict me.

*(Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Molloy]  
in the Chair)*

When it comes to making the proper decision, it is not an absolute declaration that we keep pushing more and more people into university when we cannot get them jobs. We should be looking at the real skills and needs of our people, and supporting them.

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

**Mr B McCrea:** My party therefore will not support the motion.

**Mr Lyttle:** I welcome the opportunity to discuss the issue, and I recognise that further and higher education has a vital role to play in the regeneration of the north-west. I met many people involved in the sector in Derry, at meetings of the Committee for Employment and Learning and the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. The Magee campus strategic development plan and the Ilex regeneration plan are robust, innovative and inclusive frameworks for renewal and regeneration of the city.

I also recognise the centrality of skills provision to developing and driving our economy at regional and local level, to increasing employability, reducing social inequality and improving the quality of life of our citizens. Of course, higher education has a vital role to play in delivering those aims, but, as the previous Member mentioned, we must also invest in other key skills areas, which the Ilex plan recognises.

Therefore, although I agree with the supporters of the motion that it is vital that the Assembly does all that it can to support regeneration for Derry/Londonderry, I put it to them that, as a result of the Executive's agreed higher education funding package, which their parties signed up to, which included the delivery of no increase in student tuition fees — issues on which they vociferously campaigned — we have to be realistic about what else can be achieved at this stage.

### 11.30 am

The Alliance Party supports the aim of increasing student numbers at the University of Ulster's Magee campus, not least given its importance to the Derry/Londonderry regeneration plan. However, I also understand that the Executive have jointly recognised the vital role that higher education has to play across the region and have agreed a good deal that will secure what were key aims for many political parties of no increase to student tuition fees, significant ongoing public investment in our universities, and a commitment from the Minister to work with the sector to expand student places. As the Minister said, it will perhaps not be in the region of 1,000 places, which was mentioned today.

Where additional student places are possible, I ask the Minister to ensure that allocation is based on evidence of demand. The House must be realistic about what can now be achieved and where we need to target the scarce resources that we have. Therefore, I oppose the motion.

**Mr D McIlveen:** I, too, thank the Members who brought the motion to the House, but, like my party colleagues, I am unable to support the motion in its current form. I appreciate that the issue is very important to the city of Londonderry, especially in the context of the Ilex regeneration plan. Before I address the Magee issue specifically, I think that it is very important to put on record the efforts made by our party and the then Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, Nelson McCausland, and also Arlene Foster, in campaigning for the city of culture bid in 2013.

We support Londonderry, and we have endeavoured to make sure as best we can that it gets the recognition that it deserves. I hope that the aim to deliver the best regeneration of any city that these islands have ever seen is fully realised. I make that point because if the motion divides the House, and, ultimately, is not carried, I think that it is very important that it

does not send out an erroneous message that the Assembly is against any sort of regeneration in Londonderry. We are supportive of the city and all that it aims to achieve, but we have difficulty with the wording of the motion.

I find that I just cannot support the motion with regard to the specific creation of 1,000 extra places at the University of Ulster's Magee campus. I understand that the plan is very closely linked with increasing the number of full-time student places. However, that is only one part of an overall strategy. I favour more places.

**Mr McCartney:** Although you are opposing the motion, I want to put on record my appreciation that you welcome the fact that the regeneration plan is about economic regeneration and that the expansion of Magee is at the heart of it.

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

**Mr D McIlveen:** I thank the Member for his intervention and for his kind words. I am open to hearing what Magee campus would have to say on this issue, but, though I favour more places, I cannot favour this motion with regard to just one institution. I support more places at Queen's University, at the other University of Ulster institutions and at the Open University. However, as we have already discussed this morning, all that is subject to funding. Everything, unfortunately, has a price. I am sure that the Minister will outline just exactly where the budget sits in relation to that

We are squeezed for funds across the higher education budget; that is no secret. Increasing places at Magee cannot be at the cost of other universities. Why should Magee be a special case? That is the question that Members who represent constituencies other than those affected have to ask. As I said, I am open to hearing what staff at Magee have to say on the issue, as the Committee for Employment and Learning has not heard enough from those staff during this Assembly term to make a full assessment about whether there is even a demand for additional places. I cannot, therefore, support the motion. Even if the budget were in place, we still lack a lot of the information that is required to make a decision.

In addition, there is a frank admission in the Ilex plan that the plan for expansion at Magee includes:

*"encouraging the uptake of economically relevant study including but not restricted to STEM."*

That has already been mentioned, and we will not deviate from the topic. However, that point has not been reflected in the motion.

Any extra student places granted should focus on science, technology, engineering, and maths subjects in order to best support our economy. However, as was stated earlier, those places should not be restricted just to Magee; higher education uptake does not have to be supported only in Londonderry. In fact, the proportion of people enrolled in higher education in my constituency of North Antrim is lower than in East Londonderry and Foyle put together. If the debate is to be parochial, I would say, in support of my constituency, that we need more places in the Northern Regional College, especially when we consider Northern Ireland's poor record on essential skills provision. I cannot support the motion. I do, however, urge the House to consider increases in student places across the Province, where possible, with a particular focus on STEM subjects.

**Mr McElduff:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom tacaíocht a chur in iúl don rún. I support the motion tabled by, among others, Colum Eastwood, who is not in his place at this time, and which was supported by Raymond McCartney during the debate.

Mr Ross said that the motion was too narrowly focused on one geographic area. However, it has relevance for a wider geographic area than the city of Derry alone. We are talking about the entire region, but in particular west of the Bann, where a strong case needs to be made for regeneration and a degree of economic rebalancing. The Minister and the Department for Employment and Learning, one of the economic Ministries, have a key role to play in addressing the dual challenge of tackling disadvantage and helping to grow and, indeed, rebalance the economy. I ask the Minister to think strategically about what measures he and his Department can take in that regard.

The statement that accompanied the announcement about the review and freezing of tuition fees included additional notes to editors and was circulated to various newspapers. I was drawn to a particular phrase in paragraph 8, which stated that:

*“any new student places will only be in areas of economic relevance”.*

As Raymond McCartney said, where the difference can be made is in areas of economic relevance, and where the Department can make a difference is, essentially, at Magee. That is where additional places would have the maximum impact.

There is no contest in the University of Ulster about where additional places should be allocated. It is my understanding that the University of Ulster has said that, whichever number of additional places may be allocated — we are arguing for the greater number — those places should be allocated to Magee and that the expansion of Magee is the linchpin not only of the north-west regeneration plan but of the University of Ulster's strategic plan.

In his response to the debate, I would like the Minister's clarification on the level of demand for places at the Magee campus. I understand that as many as five students compete for every place that becomes available at Magee. Chris Lyttle said that he wants to see evidence of demand; so do I. I would like the Minister to address the issue of demand.

In conclusion, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle, I ask that the Minister also clarifies his own party's position in respect of its election manifesto. I understand that, on page 57, specific commitments to expansion of the Magee campus are made. Go raibh maith agat.

**Mr Douglas:** As an Assembly Member, I recognise the importance of improving the lives of people throughout Northern Ireland and of not looking at issues purely on a personal level with regard to my constituency of East Belfast.

I recognise the serious social and economic problems that face people in the north-west. Recent depressing unemployment figures show a 13-year high; a statistic that masks its adverse effects on families and the daily grind of poverty that many people face in that area. Therefore, from the outset, I want to state clearly that expansion of the Magee campus is an important pillar of the north-west's social and economic regeneration hopes as outlined in the llex regeneration plan.

Last night, I read that, in 2010, some 6,000 students applied for places at Magee, yet there were only 700 places available. Evidence of

demand should, therefore, be forthcoming. Certainly, the Committee for Employment and Learning would like to see that evidence at a future meeting.

If one looks at the number of university places in Northern Ireland per head of the population, it is clear that it has the smallest higher education sector of all regions of the United Kingdom. Coupled with that, the size of Northern Ireland's higher education sector per head of the population puts it joint bottom of the league with the east of England. It is clear for all to see that Northern Ireland needs a bigger higher education sector and more student places if it is to keep pace with the rest of the United Kingdom. Even more importantly, there needs to be growth in that sector if Northern Ireland is to compete seriously in an increasingly competitive and shrinking economy. I would like to see proposals come forward at a future Committee meeting.

This morning, the Minister stated that there could, potentially, be 300 extra places. We have heard that there might be 600 or 1,000 extra places. My problem is that, at present, Magee, notwithstanding all its needs, will be the only institution to benefit. My fear is that that could prove extremely detrimental to other universities and colleges throughout the Province. I believe that it was Mr McCrea who mentioned the importance of apprenticeships. Certainly, I get weekly demands for training and apprenticeships from people in Ballymacarrett, whether from the lower Newtownards Road or Short Strand. I suppose that, within tight budgetary constraints, we are all trying to develop and encourage initiatives in our own areas.

Other universities and regional colleges should be considered for the provision of potential extra student places throughout Northern Ireland. The Magee campus should be included in that consideration. Provision of STEM subjects should also be considered in order to provide a key driver for the economy. In 2010, a Confederation of British Industry (CBI) survey entitled 'Ready to Grow' identified a shortage of STEM skills at all levels. It identified an under-supply of those skills and reckoned that the problem is likely to get worse. The CBI policy adviser Leo Ringer stated:

*“Over the next three years, more than half of all employers predict difficulty finding the STEM talent they need, which could act as a barrier to business growth in key areas such as low-carbon manufacturing and the creative industries”.*

As the Member said, it is important that we focus on STEM if there are going to be additional places.

#### 11.45 am

I am not saying that higher education is only about STEM. We need to recognise that it is not an academic route for everyone. Indeed, 10% of all STEM students drop out in the first year. Just last Friday, Google announced over 200 jobs at a new £65 million data centre in Dublin. That is very much about the creative industries —

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Bring your remarks to a close.

**Mr Douglas:** — and encouraging training and education in that sector.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Before I call the next Member, I remind Members to stick to the motion.

**Mrs Overend:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion, and I thank the Members who tabled it. As a past student of the University of Ulster at Magee College, I look back on my time there with great fondness. Despite all the strife that Londonderry suffered over the years, when I studied in the city, there was a great student community, and we always felt that the residents welcomed us very much. I have some great memories of my time there, and it is my hope and desire that it goes from strength to strength as an educational establishment.

I am not against the motion in principle. However, in practice, the outworkings of the decision to cap student fees, as well as the Department's sustained contribution to the two HE establishments, will be phenomenal for the higher education sector and, specifically, its ability to increase student places.

**Mrs D Kelly:** I am very concerned at increased funding for tuition fees being the sole argument as to why places at Magee should be capped, given that, only last week, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) announced an £80 million social investment fund, otherwise known as its slush fund, without even telling the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. Does the Member agree that the money that went to other budgetary headlines could provide the places, if education and the economy are the main drivers in the mystical Programme for Government?

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

**Mrs Overend:** I thank the Member for her intervention. It is another example of the need for improved, joined-up government, and I will go into the detail.

When the Minister met the Committee for Employment and Learning, he said that there are consequences that flow from the decision. I wonder how many people are going into this with their eyes closed to what those consequences might be. We have to be careful that, in seeking to increase the number of places at Magee, we do not disproportionately affect the resources for areas such as apprenticeships and further education colleges.

Not only are students discouraged from travelling to other parts of the UK to study at university, but we are now actively discouraging students to come to Northern Ireland from Scotland, England and Wales to study. The result will be that demand for student places in Northern Ireland will rise. If demand rises without sufficient supply, the result will be an increase in the universities' grade requirements. How else will they determine who will be awarded the university places?

It is unfortunate that this will erode the strides that the previous — might I say, Ulster Unionist — Ministers for Employment and Learning took towards making university places accessible to a huge range of people in Northern Ireland from various socio-economic backgrounds and making university attendance not just for the elite.

We can wish for the sun, moon and stars, but the current state of the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) budget sets the future agenda for university places. The Minister has set his target for increasing student places by a few hundred but, because of financial constraints, I guess, is unable to define any specific time frame for that. Moreover, I understand that it is not in his power to decide where those student places will be offered, whether in Belfast, Jordanstown, Coleraine or Magee. He can encourage better targeting, but, at the end of the day, the universities have control of that.

With all that in mind, I ask the Minister to look at other areas where he could help the key economic driver that is envisaged by the Ilex regeneration plan. An increase in apprenticeships is one suggestion, especially given the need to



increase our students' capacity in the STEM subject areas, as has been a recommended specialism for the suggested extra student places at Magee. Our FE colleges are ideally suited to help deliver on this issue. Furthermore, while the MaSN cap is not set to increase by any more than a few hundred, I wonder whether the Minister will encourage universities to increase the number of part-time courses available in these key subjects.

In conclusion, is the Minister prepared to think strategically about the economic regeneration of all arts and parts of Northern Ireland? It is time for some joined-up thinking on the delivery of the higher and further education sectors.

**Mr McDevitt:** Nearly 45 years ago, the men and women who went on to found the SDLP led a march to the front door of this very Building. They united the city of Derry behind a single call for a university that would service all the people of the north-west of this island. That spirit seems to have been lost along the way, and we sit here today debating the need to put some energy back into what the Executive allegedly support.

OFMDFM is the sponsoring Department of Ilex. The growth of the Magee campus and the arrival of extra students are key elements in the regeneration of the city of Derry. Yet, for some reason, that does not appear to be a priority for the Executive. I am also aware that the regional development strategy clearly identifies the city of Derry as the north-west's regional hub. Again, I am not aware of any party in the Executive that dissents from the principles of the regional development strategy, except when it comes to actually doing something about them.

This is the basic issue: are we all talk, or is there any substance behind what we put on paper and behind the commitments that we make to people? The people of Derry are beginning to wonder what the Executive will ever do for them.

The Magee campus is not the only example: Mr Eastwood covered an entire programme-for-government's worth of examples where the city of Derry can look to the Chamber with disappointment.

In the House yesterday, I asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether he agreed that it was time to make supporting third-level education a financial priority. He said:

*"The answer to that is a very simple no." —  
[Official Report, Vol 67, No 1, p37, col 2].*

What sort of region refuses to make funding third-level education a financial priority? What sort of region reduces a debate about the regeneration of our second city — the most important city to everyone in the north-west of this island — to that sort of argument? That is what has been peddled in the House today. I do not want to see the people of Derry having to unite for the second time in two generations and marching to the steps of this Building to demand what is rightly theirs: equality, fairness and the same opportunity that anyone else is entitled to. I fear, however, that that may well come to pass again. John Hume had to march the city to the Building in the late 1960s; Mark Durkan, Colum Eastwood, Pat Ramsey and Mark H Durkan, with others, may have to do the same in the future. It is simply not right or fair to ignore all the commitments that we make to the city of Derry because it does not suit us financially.

Some people wondered whether the elephant in the room was the fact that, for ill or for good, the composition of the Magee campus reflects the general population of the north-west of Northern Ireland and the north-west of the island of Ireland.

**Mrs D Kelly:** Is it not a fact that, each year, over 2,000 young Catholics get university places in Derry as opposed to under 500 from the Protestant community? Is that the elephant in the room to which you refer?

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** The Member has an extra minute in which to speak.

**Mr McDevitt:** I hope that the elephant in the room is not that. If it is, the people of Derry will have a further question to ask about this place. Is it failing on not only what it puts on paper but by actually perpetuating an old prejudice that has dogged the city for generations, a prejudice that prevented its development, that held it back, and that everyone in this region, I think, would have the right to expect no longer exists?

I understand that the city of Derry does not provide the Minister's party with a great amount of political support. I accept that. However, it is an absolute fact that the city of Derry is a fundamental and central part of the regional development strategy, that it has the alleged commitment of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the entire

Executive to its regeneration, and that it is entitled to expect, in the same way as every other town and city in this region expects, that it would understand the value of education —

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Bring your remarks to a close.

**Mr McDevitt:** — and would understand that if you fail to invest in it, you fail to invest in society.

**Mr Buchanan:** I will, first, apologise to the Member who moved the motion for missing his contribution. I want to express my disappointment that the Democratic Unionist Party amendment was not selected. Therefore, as my colleagues highlighted, the narrow focus of the motion means that we are unable to support it, and I thank my colleague Alastair Ross for clearly highlighting the reasons why. Although I understand the proposer's sentiments and his desire to see the expansion of Magee, which is in his constituency, by another 1,000 student places in this CSR period, he is failing to face up to the fact that we are working within a limited budget. I think that that is lacking from today's motion.

**Mr Ross:** I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that the previous speaker, Mr McDevitt, took a rather worrying turn when he almost tried to sectarianise this debate? The reasons that this party outlined for not supporting the motion have nothing to do with that. In fact, they were genuine reasons, which Mr McDevitt did not allude to during his contribution, such as the financial impact, particularly in the context of student fees having been frozen.

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

**Mr Buchanan:** I thank the Member for his intervention. It is unfortunate that Mr McDevitt sought to turn the debate in that direction, where it was not meant to be turned at all.

I would like it if we were in a position to support the new places at Magee without that having a detrimental effect on the other universities and colleges. However, in the current climate, that is simply not possible. The moment we do that, however, I can see those in the other universities and regional colleges in Northern Ireland being up in arms crying discrimination and inequality, and rightly so, for why should we

as an Assembly give precedence to one college or university over another?

In my constituency of West Tyrone, I have been lobbied by the regional college in Omagh for an increase in the MaSN cap to allow it to increase student places so that it, too, can develop its STEM subjects, which are the key driver in our economy. I am sure that Members right across the House face exactly the same situation in their constituencies. If we as an Assembly are serious about STEM delivery across Northern Ireland as the key driver for the economy, we need to broaden our focus so that all our universities and regional colleges will benefit from any increase in student places. We will not stand guilty of creating a situation where one college takes precedence over another.

I know that the Minister has pledged to make a modest increase in student numbers in this CSR period, but, in doing so, he has also sounded the warning bells that they will only be in the low hundreds. Again, I call on the Minister to give serious consideration to this issue so that all universities and colleges can benefit and continue to prosper.

## 12.00 noon

I have heard the argument made by Members that any available student places should be focused towards the expansion and development of Magee owing to the benefit that that would have for the north-west, as that is where the maximum benefit can be found. Although that may be a legitimate argument, I again bring the focus back to the other regional colleges, especially in the south-west, where extra student places in the likes of Omagh, Enniskillen and Dungannon would make a huge difference, enabling colleges there to expand on the courses offered and allowing students to study much closer to home. Let us remember that it is the students from that rural area who have, for years, been the victim of travel — they have always had to travel to study. The courses were not available for them in those areas but were in Belfast or Londonderry.

I note that, in June, in answer to a question from a Member regarding the viability of expanding the Magee campus, the Minister stated that that would be viable only:

*“if the University of Ulster could attract sufficient students who meet the entrance criteria and*

*secure a sustainable funding stream to meet the infrastructural and teaching costs involved”.*

I also note that the capital cost alone of expanding the university currently stands at some £200 million. That begs the question of whether the college has the capacity and a funding package to sustain the viability of the creation of the 1,000 extra places proposed in the motion.

I urge the Minister to ensure that the provision of any extra student places is of equal status across Northern Ireland universities and regional colleges, including the Magee campus, and is focused on the STEM subjects —

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Bring your remarks to a close.

**Mr Buchanan:** — in order to provide a key driver for the economy and the regeneration of all our constituencies right across Northern Ireland. On that basis, we cannot support the motion.

**Dr Farry:** I understand very well the wish of the Members posing the motion. It has long been a strategic aim of the University of Ulster to increase its undergraduate student numbers at the Magee campus. The university first outlined its plans for expansion in 2009 when it indicated that it would like to expand the campus by 1,000 undergraduate places over a five-year period. The expansion would also see the creation of two institutes on the campus: the institute of health and well-being and the institute of sustainable technologies.

In 2009, my Department did not have the funding available to commit to the expansion. Estimates put the cost of the 1,000 places at around £8 million per annum. That was a recurrent cost that would need to be found each year as long as the additional places were offered by the university. The cost comprised institutional funding to the university and funding to each of the 1,000 additional students by way of maintenance grant and student loan subsidy costs. The university has not approached my Department for any capital funds in relation to the proposed expansion. However, my Department undertook to submit a bid for the increase in numbers in the 2010 comprehensive spending review. I understand that, at the same time, the university was working closely with Ilex, as an expansion of that size could potentially have a considerable impact on the local economy.

The recently published regeneration plan for Derry/Londonderry states that higher education expansion is recognised as one of the key drivers in the successful regeneration of the city. According to the plan, an increase in student numbers has:

*“considerable potential to expand and generate a significant and catalytic impact on the local economy in terms of skills and jobs”.*

I congratulate Ilex and all who contributed to the plan, as the vision contained in it transcends traditional academic and cultural boundaries as a proven agent for equality, inclusion, regeneration and participation. I understand that the plan has been fully adopted by the University of Ulster and now forms its vision for development of university provision in the city. The expanded university would not only provide higher education in Derry/Londonderry but encourage demand for, and supply of, higher education for local people in their own university.

The plan for expansion of the university has identified mechanisms for targeting its operation at areas of particular disadvantage. Those include the expansion of the internationally recognised Step-Up programme; the encouragement of the uptake of economically relevant study; the provision of an enhanced range of cultural and academic activities and programmes for the community of the north-west; the use of social clauses in specifications for public procurement tendering in further and higher education institutions; and the potential for business creation in the form of spin-out companies. The plan sets out how an investment of such a scale would bring the forecast benefits. I empathise with Members who now feel that those benefits will be forgone if the planned expansion does not take place.

Members know that my Department is facing an extremely challenging financial position. That is due to two factors: first, the overall budgetary settlement coming out of the latest comprehensive spending review; and, secondly, the decision not to increase tuition fees in Northern Ireland. Moreover, the situation is compounded by the rising number of unemployed people over the past few years. My Department needs to achieve savings of £150 million annually by 2014-15 to address extant pressures. Some £68 million of those savings have been targeted at the higher education sector, which is proportionate to the level of investment in the



higher education sector relative to other DEL business areas.

The sector is contributing £28 million in cash savings over the next two years by way of a 12% reduction in teaching and research grant, which impacts on all higher education institutions. The balance of the £68 million was expected to be funded by an increase in the level of tuition fees. The decision to hold fees at their current level, with only inflationary increases, means that the balance of £40 million has to be found through other measures.

In approaching the issues around the future of higher education funding, I had three priorities in clear order of importance. The first was to sustain the level of funding for universities, given their central position in the future development of the economy through research and development and producing a critical mass of skilled graduates. The second was to preserve access and maximise participation in higher education for students from Northern Ireland, because going to university should not be determined by the ability to pay. The third was to seek to expand the number of university places to address the anticipated enhanced demand from Northern Ireland residents to study locally because of the decision to maintain the level of tuition fees and the differential with the level of fees that they would face in other jurisdictions.

It was always going to be difficult and challenging to address all three objectives on the basis of a fixed block grant for Northern Ireland. Given that the decision to freeze fees meant that additional sources of income had been forgone, the £40 million gap could be addressed only through shifting resources from other allocations in line with the new set of priorities as determined by the Executive.

My Department had set aside £2.5 million, £5 million and £10 million over each of the next three years to fund an expansion in student places, which we regarded as being an inescapable consequence of the decision to freeze fees. However, in the absence of evidence of the changes in student flows that will begin to become clear in 2012-13, the Executive felt that it would be more prudent to use those resources to address the £15 million, £30 million and £40 million gaps in funding over the next three years.

**Mrs D Kelly:** The Minister outlined some of the Executive's priorities and how other moneys are being spent. Does he regard the money set aside in the Budget for the social investment fund as a priority for the Executive? Does his party subscribe to that expenditure?

**Dr Farry:** That is slightly off-topic, but if the Principal Deputy Speaker will allow me the liberty, I will say that that money can make a real difference in communities. There are issues about how it is spent and its accountability, but the expenditure of that money can make a real difference across a range of issues, including those of employment and employability, which are of great interest to my Department.

I will return to the topic, which is the issue of student places. The Executive realised the potential for increased demand as the result of lower fees here and provided £1 million, £2 million and £3 million over the next three years for a more modest expansion in student places. I also have the option of returning to the Executive to make the case for additional resources as soon as the evidence of the scale of increased demand becomes clear.

At this stage, I want to stress a number of points. The available resources, which I have just set out, are incapable of meeting the terms of the motion. Had those proposing or intending to support the motion explained where they saw the additional resources being found, either from other aspects of my Department or the budgets of other Departments, that would certainly have been helpful. Indeed, some Members actually argued that my Department should have cut the budgets of the universities further or raided their reserves as a means of paying the price of freezing fees. The effect of that approach, of course, would have been to shrink the quality of the universities and to limit rather than expand the number of available places. That comment applies most to the party proposing the motion.

As much as I support the regeneration of Derry and the north-west, and the expansion of Magee in particular, I have been very careful to make clear that those outcomes will not happen on the back of the current financial arrangements. I do not want any misunderstandings or false expectations to arise around that. I will address the point raised by Mr McElduff: it is, indeed, something that my party was keen to see, and I

congratulate him on getting as far as page 57 of our manifesto.

**Mr B McCrea:** Will the Minister give way?

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

**Dr Farry:** I will give way to both of you in a second. I share other Members' frustration and disappointment about the fact that that aspiration is, obviously, on hold. However, my party remains committed to it.

**Mr B McCrea:** Minister, you said that you have £1 million, £2 million and £3 million, I think. I know that it depends on where the places are allocated, but what sort of number of currently available places are we actually talking about? To remove any doubt, will you confirm that, without additional resources from the Executive, you cannot provide any more?

**Dr Farry:** I thank Mr McCrea for his intervention. We are discussing the allocation of those places with all higher education providers. The resources that have been made available would equate to several hundred places. At this stage, and pending the outcome of those discussions, we cannot be more precise. As Members will appreciate, the cost of different courses varies, and each different institution has its precise priorities within the broad framework of economically relevant subjects, so the number of places will be determined by where they wish to invest those resources. However, we want to be in a position to make a clear announcement about that within the next number of weeks.

**Mr McCartney:** Will the Minister take the opportunity to say whether or not the university has presented a business case for the expansion, and, if so, did he accept it? The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning seemed in some doubt about that, so we need some certainty and clarity from you.

**Dr Farry:** During the most recent Budget process, the Department, through my predecessor, made a bid for additional places, but it was not accepted. I am conscious that the University of Ulster made a strong case for the additional places, but I have a duty to take all of the interests of higher education providers into consideration. In doing so, I do not seek to diminish the strength of the case made by the University of Ulster, but we expect there to be demand right across the board, and I have a duty to take the interests of all providers into consideration.

It is also worth stressing that my Department can award additional places to the various providers as institutions, but not to individual campuses. Therefore, in the event of additional places being awarded to the University of Ulster, it will determine where they go. However, the vice chancellor has already publicly stated that the expansion of Magee is the priority. That is a decision for the university, not for me, although I would welcome that course of action.

### 12.15 pm

There have been calls for me to allocate all the additional places to the University of Ulster and, indeed, directly to the Magee campus. However, I have to consider the needs of all the higher education providers, and the additional places will be allocated across them all. The rationale for the additional resources for university places is to manage demand across the system. That would not be achieved through concentrating the additional places in one location. As sympathetic as I am to the Magee campus's case and to the regeneration of Derry, I cannot commit to doing something in the context of the current comprehensive spending review for which I do not have the resources. Should the Executive make the additional resources available to my Department, the issue of increased student numbers at the Magee campus in Derry can be re-examined alongside the case for additional resources for all the other higher education providers. I will have no hesitation, if the evidence is there, to go back and make that case to the Executive.

For now, my Department will continue to explore what it can achieve with the resources available to it and what that will mean for the University of Ulster. Unfortunately, as sympathetic as I am to the motion and the motives behind it, I am not in a position to support it today. However, I certainly hope that we can re-examine this issue in the future and, indeed, potentially, in the context of this Assembly, but until we have those additional resources available — and that involves having the evidence — we cannot commit to it at this stage.

**Mrs D Kelly:** I welcome the Minister's presence throughout the debate. It is very disappointing that some of the political parties represented on the Committee for Employment and Learning and the Ilex regeneration project team find themselves unable to support the motion, given that they and their party colleagues supported

this development in the past. It is important to put on record that the previous bid by the Committee for Employment and Learning for the additional places at the Magee campus, which the Minister and others mentioned, was led and submitted by an Ulster Unionist Minister. I am very confused today by the stance taken by the Ulster Unionist Party, given that it joined us in voting against the Budget, which has seen the downgrading of the DEL budget in particular, and, therefore, the resources that would be available to our young people.

Many commentators refer today to a lost generation of young people, who through no choice or fault of their own —

**Mr B McCrea:** Will the Member give way?

**Mrs D Kelly:** I will give way in a second. A lost generation of young people has been placed on the scrapheap. They had applied with extremely good grades. There are young people in my constituency who travelled down to Belfast Metropolitan College and, in their own words, threw themselves on the steps and on the mercy of the authorities there to try to get a place and were turned away empty-handed.

**Mr B McCrea:** Just to be clear, because we have been brought into the debate, we support the Magee campus and we want to see good things happening in that area. However, we voted, like you did, against the Budget. The natural consequences of the Budget decision by the Executive to freeze the fees at a certain level leaves the Minister with no option but to say that we cannot put through those places. That is the way that it is. We wish that it were different, but we will have to go back and look at the issue again.

**Mrs D Kelly:** Unfortunately, my confusion has not cleared in any way. It was my understanding that, although the Ulster Unionist Party had concerns about a different approach being taken on GB students compared to students from the North who want access to universities here and who will have to pay different fees, all parties were united around the freezing of tuition fees. That was something that all here welcomed.

A number of contributors to the debate focused on the reduction of the DEL budget for tuition fees without paying much attention to the ability of other Departments to identify where other priorities might lie. That shows up the weakness in the Executive, because five or six

months on, although we had agreed a Budget in the absence of a Programme for Government, all we have is one that, on every page, says “officials’ version only”. In other words, it is a civil servant’s Programme for Government. That is what parties have been asked to respond to as of yesterday, which is very poor.

The contributors from the DUP referred to how money should be ring-fenced for other universities that provide extra places for STEM subjects. That is a valid point. There are other ways in which STEM subjects could be promoted. The former Deputy Chairperson of the Committee, junior Minister Bell, and I attended various meetings at which we heard those who advocate the use of STEM subjects proposing ways in which they could be encouraged in our schools. One was to have a different grade of tuition fee, or no tuition fee at all, for students who wish to study those subjects at university, in the same way as other disciplines provide bursaries to students who study subjects for which there is a particular market demand.

My party colleagues and members of Sinn Féin pointed out the glaringly obvious fact that the north-west, and the city of Derry in particular, has been discriminated against historically by the previous Stormont Administration and throughout direct rule. The figures are clearly seen in the range and the community background of the applicants to the University of Ulster at Magee and the very high unemployment that persists in Derry today.

**Mr Campbell:** I thank the Member for giving way. I apologise for not being present earlier in the debate. The Member referred to different ways in which the STEM subject issue could have been dealt with. Does she accept that there are different ways in which the overall issue could have been dealt with, such as using different wording in the motion? We tried to propose an amendment, but it is not on the Marshalled List. I do not think that anyone in the House is opposed to development at Magee; the Minister’s overall problem is that there is not enough money to meet the demand. The proposal, as it is currently worded, appears to offer no such advantage to other campuses. Although we all want to support Magee, I do not think that anyone wants to do it at the expense of other campuses, particularly because of the limited amount of money that the Minister has available.

**Mrs D Kelly:** I appreciate very much that, for many years, the Member has been a champion for Derry or Londonderry, and — *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Campbell:** Not bad; not bad.

**Mrs D Kelly:** Don't you worry; I am very easy about interchanging those terms.

The DUP seems to have done an about-turn in relation to the concerns that it raised about the social investment fund. I accept that the Minister says that the money could do good if used correctly. However, there was an announcement last week by OFMDFM about the social investment fund, to which no other party was invited. Only a select few community groups were invited. That is my understanding of it. I understand that members of the OFMDFM Committee knew nothing about it, so is it any wonder that those of us in parties that have been excluded from those decisions are fearful of how that money will be used?

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** You probably need to come back to the motion. *[Laughter.]*

**Mrs D Kelly:** Thank you, Principal Deputy Speaker. My colleagues Mr McDevitt and Mr Eastwood referred to the legacy of the SDLP in standing up for Derry, to use a phrase that was used elsewhere, particularly in ensuring that the north-west region was properly resourced, promoted and invested in to tackle the crippling unemployment and lack of opportunity that still persists to this day in that part of the North.

I want to put one other myth to bed. I am sure that Members will acknowledge that, although the numbers of places at Magee would increase, the students who apply for those places will come from right across the North. Mr Buchanan referred to the investment that is required for colleges in his constituency, and none of us disputes that. However, I am sure that he will acknowledge that the ability of young people to live outside their own tight neighbourhood and to have the level of independence that is needed to live away from home is, in itself, an educational and, quite often, enriching experience for all.

Minister, you said that this was an Executive decision, so we are disappointed that parties were unable to support the motion. Those who are interested can look for themselves to see why it has not been supported.

**Mr Douglas:** Will the Member agree that I said clearly that I support the people of the north-west and the Magee campus? The main question was raised by her colleague Mr McDevitt, who talked about the elephant in the room in terms of sectarianism and about how the north-west had been let down by the Assembly. Perhaps we can ask the Minister at some stage to show —

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Bring your remarks to a close.

**Mr Douglas:** — how the Committee for Employment and Learning has let the people of the north-west down.

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

*Question put.*

*The Assembly divided: Ayes 27; Noes 49*

#### AYES

*Ms M Anderson, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr W Clarke, Mr Doherty, Mr Eastwood, Mr Flanagan, Ms Gildernew, Mrs D Kelly, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mr McGlone, Mr McKay, Mrs McKeivitt, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr Ó hOisín, Ms Ritchie, Mr Sheehan.*

*Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Eastwood and Mr McDevitt.*

#### NOES

*Mr S Anderson, Mr Beggs, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mr T Clarke, Mr Copeland, Mr Craig, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Hussey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Ms Lewis, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr McClarty, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr McGimpsey, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Mr Ross, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr Wilson.*

*Tellers for the Noes: Mr Buchanan and Mr B McCrea.*

*The following Member voted in both Lobbies and is therefore not counted in the result: Mr Agnew.*

*Question accordingly negatived.*



**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** The Business Committee has arranged to meet during the lunchtime suspension. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm, when business will resume with Question Time.

*The sitting was suspended at 12.38 pm.*

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

**2.00 pm**

## Oral Answers to Questions

### Education

**Mr Speaker:** Order. We come to Question Time. Questions 5, 10 and 14 have been withdrawn and will require written answers.

#### **Primary Schools: Village, Belfast**

1. **Mr Spratt** asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of whether a new primary school in the Village area of south Belfast is necessary to promote a fresh approach to learning and to tackling underachievement. (AQO 456/11-15)

#### **Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education):**

The Belfast Education and Library Board is responsible for determining the appropriate primary provision in the south Belfast area to meet the needs of the pupils. I am aware that work is ongoing on the potential amalgamation of Blythefield, Fane Street and Donegall Road primary schools.

In my statement to the Assembly on 26 September, I indicated that the boards would be taking forward area planning. Central to that work will be enhancing the quality of education for all pupils through a network of viable and sustainable schools. The key aim is to ensure that schools are fit for purpose and that they will be able to deliver the full suite of Department of Education policies in an efficient and effective manner. That will ensure that children and young people have access to a curricular offer and educational experience that best meets their needs. In taking action to improve education outcomes for all our young people, I will continue to implement the school improvement policy, which sets out our overarching approach to raising standards and tackling underachievement.

**Mr Spratt:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he accept that in order to tackle underachievement among working-class Protestant males it is vital to inspire young people to learn and achieve from the earliest point of their development? With regard to the

three schools, does he not feel that a newbuild and a new start would be a good point to begin?

**Mr O'Dowd:** I agree with the Member that we have to instil confidence in our young people. That is achieved in a number of ways: in the family home, the community and the school. With regard to the specific amalgamation of those schools, I have to wait for the Belfast Education and Library Board to report back to me on how best it believes that we should move forward with the project. As I said in my statement of 26 September, I am keen to see the amalgamation of schools, especially small schools. It has been proven that children who attend larger, properly resourced schools with the good leadership of enthusiastic teachers and staff achieve better. That is true in the Protestant community and any other community.

One of the schemes that I intend to bring forward is a public information programme with regard to regaining the gift that is education and giving information to parents and community leaders on how they can encourage young people to achieve everything that they can.

**Mr McNarry:** The Member who asked the question talked about opening a new school in south Belfast, and with good reason. Will the Minister guarantee to the House today that no functioning school will be closed until the viability audit is complete?

**Mr O'Dowd:** I cannot guarantee that to the House. A number of development proposals are well advanced. I cannot indicate the decision that I will make on those viability audits. However, I will put it in these circumstances to the Member: may I be excused for saying that if the Health Minister was aware of an unfit or unsafe hospital, should he keep it open until he ensured that the entire estate was safe and well, or should he deal with that hospital right away? In my view —

**Mr McNarry:** Is there a list?

**Mr O'Dowd:** I have to deal with education centres and with schools. If it comes to my attention that a school is not safe, in education terms, for the young people who attend it, I will take the appropriate action ahead of the viability audit.

**Mr McDevitt:** Is the Minister aware that we need leadership in the Village area of south Belfast to be able to provide the community with some certainty — a historic community that is

entitled to it? Will the Minister join me and my colleagues who represent that area in coming urgently to meet those communities so that he can see the urgency of progressing to a new school build?

**Mr O'Dowd:** I thank the Member for his question. Yes, as with all areas, leadership is required, and that is delivered in different ways, whether through the elected representatives of the area, the community or whatever it may be. I would be keen to take the Member up on the invite to visit the Village area to look at education attainment. However, I put the marker down now: on that visit, I will not be indicating, ahead of any viability audit, whether I believe that any school should go ahead or whether any school should be closed. A programme of work is going ahead, and I have asked the boards, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools and the other sectors to be involved in that. It would be unreasonable of me to interfere in that process ahead of its reporting.

## Schools: Statutory Starting Age

2. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Education to outline his position on changing the statutory school starting age. (AQO 457/11-15)

**Mr O'Dowd:** A key aspect of the draft 0-6 early years strategy is the transition from preschool to the foundation stage of the revised curriculum, which aims to ensure that children are introduced to education in a way and at a pace that takes account of their age and level of maturity. The draft strategy acknowledges the flexibility provided by the foundation stage of the curriculum in providing a range of educational approaches to meet the needs of individual children, who learn at a different pace and in differing ways.

Therefore, although I have no plans to make a change to the school starting age, I will study the comments made and issues raised as part of the early years strategy consultation, including any implications that those might have for the school starting age.

**Mr McGlone:** Go raibh maith agat, a Aire, as ucht an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his response. Further to the study that he referred to, is he prepared to draw on the well of experience at international level, particularly from the EU, on the matter?

**Mr O'Dowd:** Yes. I think it is important that we are not insular in many aspects of our life and that we look beyond these shores for inspiration on education and other matters. Substantial studies have been carried out on the school starting age, and we have one of the lowest school starting ages in western Europe. However, as I said, the early years strategy and the consultation responses are still being analysed, and I will take further views on the matter when those strategies have been analysed.

It is not as simple as changing the school starting age. A lot of research work would have to be completed, and the financial implications and those for teacher training and the schools estate, etc, of revising the school starting age, would also have to be considered.

**Mr Lynch:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Does the Minister agree that children here enter the formal education process at too young an age? What steps have been taken to address that issue?

**Mr O'Dowd:** Some research indicates that we are starting our children in formal education too young. Through the foundation stage in our primary schools, we have tried to ensure that the education system meets the needs of the individual child, rather than our children meeting the needs of the education system. Therefore, the foundation course in education is better than what we once had in place. As I said to Mr McGlone, we await the outcome of the early years review and the consultation responses to that. Following that, we will decide on what action, if any, is required on the school starting age. We have to ensure that we are not in danger of sending our children into the preschool programme even younger than we are currently, whether that be in the community and voluntary sector or the nursery school sector. The preschool setting is about encouraging learning through socialisation and play, and we do not want that to become overly formalised to such a degree that we are starting children at the age of three instead of what we do currently.

**Mrs Overend:** I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Is the Minister open to hearing individual cases from parents as to what age their child should start school, as they will be in the best position to know the ability and readiness to begin a formal education?

**Mr O'Dowd:** Current legislation does not allow for any leeway on that. A number of parents

have been in contact with the Department to raise that issue and to state that they wish to start their child at school at an appropriate age. However, unless legislation is brought before the Assembly to change the school starting age or to give more parental choice in that matter, circumstances will remain the same. I do not wish to be repetitive, but I think it is best that we await the outcome of the early years review. Following that, we will take decisions on a number of matters that have been raised in relation to that question.

**Mr S Anderson:** What consideration has the Minister given to the potential impact on nursery school provision if the school starting age were to rise?

**Mr O'Dowd:** That would certainly have to be taken into consideration. We would have to replan or redraw our schools estate to meet the starting age. It would impact on teacher training and on how we fund our schools estate. It is a complicated equation, although one that, in my view, could be overcome over a period of years. It should, perhaps, be introduced over a period of years, rather than as a blunt instrument. All those aspects, whether they relate to nursery school or primary school provision, would have to be taken into the equation, if such a decision were reached.

### Schools: Maintenance Budgets

3. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the Minister of Education to explain the significant differences in the schools maintenance budgets across the education and library board areas. (AQO 458/11-15)

**Mr O'Dowd:** As part of their landlord responsibilities, education and library boards are responsible for undertaking maintenance work for the controlled and maintained schools estates. They are also responsible for the maintenance of other non-school premises.

Although my Department determines the overall central budget allocations for the boards, it is for each individual board to determine, along with other services to be provided, how much funding they attribute to their maintenance budget. The budget for maintenance will, therefore, be considered in the context of demands from competing priorities, including front line services and the extent to which obligations in meeting health and safety



requirements are reached in conjunction with other planned maintenance work programmes.

My Department continues to provide as much additional support to meet maintenance needs as is financially possible. This year, we have allocated a further £5 million to the boards on top of the budgets that they have set in their resource allocation plans.

**Mr Nesbitt:** I thank the Minister. Are schools with major maintenance backlogs now at risk under the criteria that the Minister announced in his recent statement? That statement has, of course, given rise to the suspicion that there is a closure hit list.

**Mr O'Dowd:** No; schools with a major maintenance backlog will not be at a disadvantage. Viability audits will be based on the quality of education that children obtain in schools. That is not always attributed to the quality of the school buildings, although there can be a correlation between them.

In response to your second point, there is no hit list. Research and a detailed programme of work will be undertaken to look at the viability of our schools estate and to ensure that the schools in which our children are taught are educationally safe. The schools maintenance programme is designed to ensure that the buildings and fabric of the schools estate are safe. I accept that there is a major backlog in the system, but, with competing priorities in the education budget and, indeed, across the Executive Budget, we have to allocate funds as fairly as we can.

**Mr Campbell:** Like all Ministers, the Minister has a finite budget. The Minister has been in his role for a few months, and he will have had the schools estate before him and will have seen the extent to which some schools are severely in need of maintenance. Given the multiplicity of roles that he currently holds, what effort has the Minister made to get out and identify those schools and see them for himself?

**Mr O'Dowd:** As the Member said, I have been in post for around five months. I have visited a number of schools, both new and old, and I have inspected, at close quarters, some of the poor conditions that pupils, staff and teachers are working in. I am acutely aware of that matter. Even before coming into post, I was aware of the standards of some of the schools in our schools estate, because, like the Member, I am a constituency MLA.

We have a maintenance backlog of £311 million, and, to the best of our ability, we have put money into the education and library boards so that they can deal with maintenance. We put in a further £5 million this year, and, as the spending rounds come round, I will examine whether it is feasible to bid for further maintenance funds or whether there are other priorities at that stage. However, I am acutely aware of the state of our schools estate.

One of the reasons why I made my statement last week was to ensure that we do not spread our financial resources so thinly that we are being completely ineffective. I want to minimise our schools estate to ensure that each school we have is viable into the future. The money that we have can then be invested in the upkeep of those schools and in the education of the children in them.

**Ms Boyle:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Does the Minister have any plans to allow each school to utilise its maintenance budget more strategically?

**Mr O'Dowd:** An element of each school budget is set aside for maintenance. However, that is more for the wear and tear of schools, and it pays for things such as painting and interior decoration, rather than any structural defects. School governors decide how that part of the budget is spent.

There is a valid argument for having a more strategic use of our minor works programme and an examination of how we spend that considerable amount of resource going into the future. I am keeping all those things under close observation, and I will make further statements and responses to the Assembly in due course about how I believe the minor works programme should be used.

## 2.15 pm

**Mrs McKeivitt:** How much has been invested in school maintenance?

**Mr O'Dowd:** I do not have in front of me the exact figure for this year or for the last number of years, but I will ensure that departmental officials forward that information to the Member.

## Primary Schools: North Down

4. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Education what plans he has to ensure that there are

enough year 1 places in north Down schools to meet demand for the 2012-13 school year. (AQO 459/11-15)

**Mr O'Dowd:** Current primary-school provision in north Down will provide a total of 1,167 year 1 places for the 2012-13 academic year. Birth statistics for children in North Down indicate that there is a cohort of 933 children eligible to begin school in year 1 in September 2012. There is no question of there not being enough places; rather, there is the clear prospect of a surplus of 234 places, which is a 20% surplus. That will be similar to this year, in which 1,167 places are occupied by 952 children, leaving 215 places vacant, which is an 18.5% surplus.

Of course, I am aware that, despite the fact that there were more than enough places in north Down for 2011-12, there was still disappointment from some parents at the outcome of their application for a primary-school place. The issue appears to be that, alongside high levels of vacancy, there may be insufficient availability in the provision that parents want. My statement of 26 September was, in part, about our need to address that twin issue: we have surplus where we have no demand, and where we have demand we have limited capacity.

**Mr Easton:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Parents in Groomsport had to endure a wait until the last minute for their children to get a year 1 place, and, although three local primary schools were right next door to them, they were more or less forced by the Department to send their children to the far side of Bangor, because the spaces were there. Will the Minister give me a guarantee that that fiasco will not happen again next year?

**Mr O'Dowd:** I am not familiar with the detail of the particular matter that the Member raises. However, as shown by the figures that I have cited, there is a 20% surplus of primary 1 places in Bangor. How those are distributed may be open to question: are they in the right locations? That is something we can look at. There is parental choice in our system, but there is no guarantee that any parent will get a child into the place of their first or second preference, or even into that of their third preference in areas of high demand. That is how the system works. However, we can look at the distribution of places in the Bangor area. As I said in my statement of about a week ago, one of the reasons for area planning is to ensure that

we have schools in the right places and that popular schools that are in high demand are allowed to expand within the capacity of budget and other factors.

**Mr Agnew:** I wish to follow up on my North Down colleague's point about the children in Groomsport. For the Minister's information, it was a situation where two or three families could not be accommodated at their nearest school. I would be happy for the Minister to come to North Down and take the bus journey that those kids would have had to take to get to the schools that were recommended to them. Would the Minister's Department be prepared to apply common sense in future when a small number of children will be greatly inconvenienced and to be flexible about the limit of the number of places at local schools?

**Mr O'Dowd:** I encourage common sense, whether in my Department or the Assembly. The first port of call for this matter is the relevant education and library board. It is the provider. No doubt it has been involved and has carried out the necessary groundwork in regard to this matter. As I said, it is clear that across primary and post-primary sectors we may not have our schools located in the right areas. That is due to population shifts, etc. However, with regard to the Bangor area, it is clear that we have 20% of places vacant in P1. That is a matter that we must take into consideration in planning for the future.

**Mr D Bradley:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra a thug sé. Tá ceist agam air faoi áiteacha in earnáil na réamhscolaíochta.

Earlier this year, we had a crisis in the provision of preschool places. Can the Minister tell us what action he is taking to ensure that there will be no recurrence of that situation in the coming year?

**Mr O'Dowd:** I do not accept that there was a crisis. We placed nearly 25,000 children in preschool places; more than 90% got into their first or second preference, so it was certainly not a crisis. Some parents were disappointed and were rightly frustrated, but, as I said during a debate on the matter, the tens of thousands of satisfied parents do not call into your constituency clinic. The parents who are dissatisfied call into your constituency clinic, but there is a duty on us to look at the entire picture.

I indicated during that debate that I would have a report prepared and brought to the Assembly on how I believe matters will be brought forward. That report is currently with me. I am taking time to examine it in detail, and, when I am satisfied that it meets the needs on the way forward, I will deliver it to the Assembly.

**Mr Speaker:** Questions 5 and 6 have been withdrawn.

### Education and Skills Authority

7. **Mr B McCrea** asked the Minister of Education what is the total expenditure on the Education and Skills Authority since its establishment. (AQO 462/11-15)

**Mr O'Dowd:** The Education and Skills Authority (ESA) has not yet been established, so it has not incurred any expenditure. The costs up to 31 August 2011 for the preparation for the authority amounted to £12.1 million. A considerable amount of work has been completed in preparation for the implementation of the Education and Skills Authority, including the design and implementation of common ICT platforms across the education sector; the centralisation of software licensing; the creation of a single finance system with the ability to provide access to a range of important management information across the education sector; the development of service delivery models for major functions; and the broad design of an organisation structure.

Additionally, work to establish common terms and conditions of employment and various other HR issues is well advanced, in liaison with the relevant trade unions.

**Mr B McCrea:** I keep hearing that we are making progress and that a decision will be announced shortly. Can the Minister tell us when he expects the announcement to be made that the ESA will be set up? When that happens, what does he anticipate the total cost will have been to set up that body?

**Mr O'Dowd:** First, I am conscious that the costs are rising in regard to a body that we have yet to establish. I am minded of that, and that is keeping me focused on the time frame within which we can allow discussions to continue on the establishment of the ESA. The Education and Skills Authority is in our Programme for Government, and I hope that a future

Programme for Government will retain a focus on it. That is why the spend was made.

The Member will be aware that legislation was at an advanced stage when it was stalled; that was part of the reason why spend was made around that matter. However, I have never said that we will make a decision shortly; what I have said is that we will be required to make a decision. It is only fair to staff in the education sector to allow a focus and vision to return to the drive towards education. Therefore, I am acutely aware of all the pressures bearing down in regard to the ESA project, and I am keeping them in mind in respect of the time frame within which we are working to reach agreement.

**Mr Speaker:** Before I call Alban Maginness for a supplementary question, I have to say to Members that they need to rise continually in their place. Rising once or twice will not get you in.

**Mr A Maginness:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank the Minister for his answer. In order to establish the ESA, it is necessary to encourage and bring about political consensus. When will the Minister convene a meeting of all the political parties to thrash out this issue and to establish the ESA?

**Mr O'Dowd:** Mr Speaker, I did not realise that I was dealing with such a shy group of individuals in this Assembly or with people who were afraid to knock on my door. My door is open to any party or individual MLA to discuss any matter with me. I have not refused talks about the ESA. Indeed, during all-party talks in the run-up to the establishment of the current Executive, it was agreed that parties should come forward with papers on the establishment of the ESA. Following public responses to the Programme for Government, I am aware that some parties have indicated their views on the ESA. However, I am still awaiting papers and documents from other parties, even dating back to May before the Executive was re-established.

### Education and Skills Authority

8. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Education for an update on the development of the Education and Skills Authority. (AQO 463/11-15)

### Education and Skills Authority

11. **Mrs McKevitt** asked the Minister of Education what discussions he has had with

relevant bodies about the introduction of a new Bill on the Education and Skills Authority. (AQO 466/11-15)

**Mr O'Dowd:** With your permission, Mr Speaker, I shall answer questions 8 and 11 together.

I remain committed to the establishment of the Education and Skills Authority, for which the case remains as strong as ever. I raised the need for reform with political parties, education and library boards, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools and stakeholders, including the Commission for Catholic Education, the Transferor Representatives' Council, trade unions and CnaG. Political agreement is required to allow me to bring proposals to the Executive as soon as possible.

**Mr McCarthy:** I thank the Minister for his response. Is he disappointed about the time that it has taken the Assembly to get to where it is on the issue? The time for talking has long since passed. The community wants and needs action immediately.

**Mr O'Dowd:** At the heart of it, there is frustration as we try to move forward with the review of public administration in education. In my view, that should have been resolved a long time ago. Since the elections and the summer recess, there has been political agreement on a number of matters that were sticking points in the political system. Those matters have been moved on, and we are now moving towards the Programme for Government. If there is political goodwill, I believe that we can quickly resolve the outstanding issues relating to the ESA.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Karen McKeivitt to ask a supplementary question.

**Mrs McKeivitt:** Sorry?

**Mr Speaker:** Your question was grouped with question 8.

**Mrs McKeivitt:** Sorry; I am not ready.

**Mr I McCrea:** The Minister referred to the fact that decisions that were held up in the Executive have been moved on in the political arena. Can he confirm that he had discussions with my colleague, the Chairman of the Education Committee, about the issue to ensure that any problems that exist can be overcome and resolved?

**Mr O'Dowd:** I can confirm to the House that I had discussions with Mr Storey. I am more than

willing to have discussions with any other Member of the House who is interested in the matter.

**Mr Speaker:** Is the Member all right?

**Mrs McKeivitt:** Yes. The Minister answered my question in his answer to Mr Maginness.

**Mr Speaker:** OK. Thank you.

## Education: Ministerial Meeting

9. **Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Education for an update on his recent meeting with the Dublin Government's Minister for Education and Skills. (AQO 464/11-15)

**Mr O'Dowd:** I met the Minister for Education and Skills at the North/South Ministerial Council in education sectoral format on 21 September. The meeting provided a valuable opportunity to review progress and to consider the scope for strengthening deepening North/South co-operation for the benefit of all our children and young people. I intend to make a statement to the Assembly on 10 October that will cover the outcome of the meeting in detail.

**Mr McKay:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he update the House on the North/South Ministerial Council's discussions about the IBEC/CBI study, which revealed the extent of the barriers facing young people across third-level education on a North/South basis?

**Mr O'Dowd:** Although the matter does not necessarily fall under my remit, Minister Quinn actually took the opportunity to raise it with me at the last sectoral meeting. He, too, was of the view that, given some students' lack of ability to incorporate student fees into their thinking, there was an opportunity for them to travel to universities in the South. I asked him to raise that matter directly with my counterpart Minister Farry, and he undertook to take up that offer.

## Environment

**Mr Speaker:** Questions 6 and 7 have been withdrawn and require written answers.

## DOE: Legislation

1. **Ms Lo** asked the Minister of the Environment what new primary legislation his Department intends to introduce in this Assembly mandate. (AQO 471/11-15)



**Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment):**

I thank Ms Lo, as a private Member and in her capacity as Chair of the Committee, for asking that question. In my view, we need to be judged and to judge ourselves, even more than was the case in the last mandate, against the legislation that we get over the line quickly and throughout the next four years.

**2.30 pm**

I confirm that I am currently minded, subject to Executive agreement, to bring before the Assembly at least eight Bills. Those cover the full range of departmental functions, including national parks, marine management and road traffic legislation, about which there was publicity last week. A second piece of road traffic legislation would introduce the mutual recognition of penalty points on the island of Ireland. A planning reform Bill would potentially devolve planning functions to local councils in advance of the review of public administration (RPA). Given that Ireland is a green island, a climate Bill would demonstrate that the Assembly embraces fully the green agenda and wants to include in legislation challenging emissions targets beyond those to which it is already committed. I hope that that gives Ms Lo some indication of the scale of my and the Department's ambitions.

**Ms Lo:** I thank the Minister for his answer. I very much welcome that list of legislation. Will he assure the House that all of the proposed legislation will come forward in a timely manner, unlike the rush of legislation towards the end of the previous mandate?

**Mr Attwood:** That is a timely and worthwhile advance. As consultation on the national parks legislation is about to end, I expect the Executive to endorse an approach to that within the next four or five months. A marine Bill has already been tabled for Executive consideration. Although not tabled at meetings, it has been circulated to Executive colleagues since June. I am minded, and have instructed the Office of the Legislative Counsel (OLC), to draft additional clauses to enhance that Bill through the establishment of a marine management organisation. Members will know from last week that I want to table a road traffic Bill at the Executive within the next four or five months. Within a short time, I want to table a planning reform Bill, which has been substantially drafted. Therefore, I give an assurance that, unlike in the

previous mandate, the Committee and the Executive should anticipate that, during the next few months, three or four pieces of substantive legislation that have been or are being drafted will be before them for their attention.

**Mr Boylan:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the Minister outline when he will bring forward proposals for a reorganisation Bill, so that the Assembly can advance the governance structures needed fully to implement the Planning Act 2011 during the current mandate?

**Mr Attwood:** I thank the Member for his question, which he would not give to me as we came through the door. Members are aware of the RPA situation. I want to create certainty, not doubts, about the reorganisation of local government. That is why I am minded to bring forward a planning reform Bill to devolve some planning functions to local councils in advance of the RPA. That would enable councils to build up their capacity for dealing with that essential political and operational responsibility before 2014 or 2015.

Through the improvement, collaboration and efficiency (ICE) programme, I am working with councils and their management in an effort to bear down on council expenditure to reduce costs, improve services and achieve better value for money. I am not behind the door in taking forward local government reform in the here and now, unlike previously, when people sat on their hands and did not apply their minds to it.

As Members know, the First Minister and deputy First Minister have reached an understanding. Although I have not seen that understanding, I believe that it has been reduced to writing, and I look forward to its receipt. I will consider seriously and diligently what they have to say about the RPA. However, I am the Minister. I will take on board all the best advice, including that from the First Minister and deputy First Minister, on taking that forward. Ultimately, my Executive colleagues and I should be judged on making the right and best choices for ratepayers across the range of functions that councils might enjoy in the future.

**Mr Beggs:** Does the Minister feel aggrieved that he, the Minister responsible for local government, does not know, just like the rest of us, what has supposedly been agreed in the Programme for Government? Does he agree that that does not show collective governance?

**Mr Attwood:** I am too thick-skinned to be aggrieved by the behaviour of any party, Minister or politician. However, the community might feel aggrieved if we do not step back, even for a moment, and make a judgement on whether we are going forward on the basis of the best model, given that we have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to get this right.

I say to all my ministerial colleagues: let us decide this matter very quickly, but let us decide it so that we do not squander the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, we get the number of councils right, we get the transferred functions right, and we have a qualitative change in local councils and local government. That is how we should all judge ourselves. We should not delay, but we should ensure that we get it right.

**Mr Agnew:** I welcome the Minister's ambition about the legislation that he hopes to have enacted. Does he agree that Northern Ireland playing its part in tackling climate change is a key issue, even in a time of economic scarcity? In fact, the Stern review states that it is even more important in a time of economic scarcity. Will he put that forward in his proposals for the Programme for Government?

**Mr Attwood:** I agree with the sentiment behind the question. The pace and scale of climate change is deeper and quicker than was imagined, even a short time ago. Whatever the circumstances that brought that about — some in the House would dispute those circumstances — that is the harsh, brutal, bitter reality. The pace, speed and scope of climate change are greater now than was anticipated, even four or five years ago. I understand that scientific evidence will confirm that assertion in the very near future.

If we, as a small jurisdiction with 1.7 million people and the power that we have in our capacity, do not embrace and lead the green, climate and environmental agendas on these islands, we will be letting down the citizens of this part of these islands. That should be the touchstone against which we all judge ourselves. Are we going to put challenging emission targets on the face of a climate Bill? Are we going to put much more challenging recycling targets into policy? Are we going to scope out, with the Agriculture Minister and all relevant Ministers, a marine management organisation that deals with the proliferation of marine responsibilities around our coastal

waters in a cohesive and coherent way? Are we ready to face up to those challenges, or are we going to drop the ball again?

## Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSIs)

2. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of his Department's plans for the protection of areas of special scientific interest. (AQO 472/11-15)

**Mr Attwood:** I thank the Member for the question, given his constituency interest in the matter. What are we talking about when we talk about areas of special scientific interest (ASSIs)? We are talking about the Pettigo plateau; the fringe areas of Lough Neagh and Upper Lough Erne; the mudflats in Strangford; our peatlands; the Mournes; and 330 other ASSIs. The fact that we in the North of Ireland have so many ASSIs is an expression of how wonderful and dramatic our scientific areas of natural heritage and appeal are.

Although we should not over-manage those ASSIs, and scientists should not have a veto over how we progress various matters, we should be careful about how we manage them. That is why a stocktake of each and every ASSI is carried out annually. Every six years, a scientific survey is conducted to find out whether further damage has been caused.

**Mr McCarthy:** I thank the Minister for his detailed and knowledgeable information about ASSIs. He may or may not be aware that, when the ASSI designation was first introduced, there was enormous opposition from landowners and farmers. I recall the situation at Strangford Lough, where a notice was put up by the farmers to keep officials away from their land. Given those concerns, is the Minister convinced that he and his Department are doing all they can to preserve not only the ASSIs but their environs? Will everybody be treated equally, so there will be no disadvantage for anyone in relation to developments, etc, adjacent to ASSIs?

**Mr Attwood:** I thank the Member for his question. I concur that, looking beyond this particular matter, part of the character of our society has been resistance to change. However, as we know from many other aspects of political life and community experience, better judgement eventually prevails, often at too high a price and too high a cost. I think that there is now a

much more settled view on the importance of scientific designations of environmental quality.

In answer to the latter part of the question, I do not believe that scientific advice should, in all circumstances, prevail. Sometimes, scientific advice is too exacting, even, at times, to the point of being precious when it comes to a planning application. It might be the case that I will have to make a judgement that, whatever the scientific advice might be and while listening to best advice and taking it fully on board, nonetheless there are wider considerations that would see a planning application here or there be permitted.

The question is very valid. We need to be vigilant in managing ASSIs. As I indicated, we do that on a rolling basis every six years and on an annual basis in a more limited way. There will be a new strategy coming forward, to ensure that the other Departments measure up in relation to their responsibilities within scientific zones of special character, and I think that they can. My colleagues in the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) have shown that its countryside management schemes, which are relevant to areas of scientific interest, have demonstrably and positively helped the management of those areas, given the history. Let us be honest about it: there have been some tensions between the agricultural community and the environmental lobby. It seems to me that you can resolve that. Countryside management schemes suggest that. I think that that is the way forward.

**Mr Weir:** The Minister mentioned that there are about 330 ASSIs across Northern Ireland and that there is a need to employ better judgement. Does the Minister agree that a one-size-fits-all attitude is not always helpful? There may be occasions when we are a bit too rigid in what we look at and other occasions when there needs to be a bit more flexibility around what additional protections can be put in place for some ASSIs.

**Mr Attwood:** I agree with one point that the Member made: there is a sense, whether it is fully backed by evidence or not, that there is some rigidity when it comes to, for example, the advice of scientific officers in the Environment Agency who deal with these sorts of issues and their advice to the Planning Service when it comes to a planning application within or adjacent to one of these areas. I have drilled

down on that matter and have told Planning Service officials that they have to make the calls. They hear the advice from all the relevant agencies, all the consultees and the public, and, ultimately, they must make the call about what is the balanced view to take, given all the potentially competing advice that they might get. In that way, I agree.

We must not overload government and the community with so many designations that we get to the point where there is a muddle or confusion. However, one point that I cannot agree with relates to the fact that, when you analyse the ASSIs, you find that over 30% of them are not deemed to be healthy. Looking in particular at habitat ASSIs, over 55% of them are deemed not to be healthy. Therefore, although we have taken on board all the best advice from Europe and have given designations to areas of special character, including ASSIs, behind the scale and success of that, there are worrying trends, especially on the habitat side.

All that feeds into the wider narrative about Northern Ireland and what we offer when it comes to quality of life for our own citizens and the quality of tourist experience and spend going forward. I agree that we need to be balanced, but we also need to be vigilant where there are areas of risk.

**2.45 pm**

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I remind the Minister of the two-minute rule.

**Some Members:** Hear, hear.

**Mr McLaughlin:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answers so far, particularly that carefully nuanced presentation of the balance of issues that he has to consider. He mentioned Lough Neagh. Does he agree that the proposal to build a massive incinerator on the shores of Lough Neagh is a totally incompatible proposition?

**Mr Attwood:** I hope that my colleagues in the SDLP heard somebody from a different party say that he thought that I was being “carefully nuanced” in my political narrative. I could not agree more wholeheartedly with the Member. Thank you very much. I hear silence behind me. *[Laughter.]* You will note that it is Conall McDevitt who is laughing the most.

**Mr Weir:** He will have the last laugh.



**Mr Attwood:** Well, we will see about that.  
[Laughter.]

Was it Harold Wilson who said that when you are sitting in the Commons the Opposition are in front of you and other people are behind you? I have very few reasons to agree with Harold Wilson, and that is certainly not one of them.

I note the question, but I am not going to be tempted into an answer, because this is a live planning application. There are a lot of issues around the planning application: there is a very strong argument being presented for it and a very strong argument being presented against it.

Last week, I looked at every single one of the article 31 applications and spent two hours going through them with officials. All the other meetings were kicked back two hours, and I apologise to those who were kept waiting, but we drilled into and bore down on each of the article 31 applications to see what stage they were at. Obviously, given that that was part of my conversation last week, I am not going to be in a position to answer questions on it this week.

### Fuel Laundering

3. **Lord Morrow** asked the Minister of the Environment what consideration he has given to seeking the costs for repairing environmental damage caused by fuel laundering from the people found responsible for causing the damage. (AQO 473/11-15)

**Mr Attwood:** I thank the Member for his question. This touches on the debate in the Chamber yesterday. The power to take action on fuel laundering falls to councils. However, under legislation that was passed under the leadership of Edwin Poots last year, the power to take action when dealing with waste will, in due course and hopefully sooner rather than later, fall to the Department.

Secondly, as I indicated at my previous Question Time, the environmental crime unit is a part of the Department of Environment (DOE) architecture that I have a lot of faith and confidence in. It does great work, given the great challenges and limited resources. Without going into the detail of that, Lord Morrow, there are four ongoing and live investigations into those who may be involved in fuel laundering. If the evidence backs that up and the opportunity presents itself, there will be prosecutions. Those matters will go to the Crown Court and,

ultimately, may involve the proceeds of crime legislation, that is, the Proceeds of Crime Act.

The Department works very closely with the other agencies, especially Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC), in dealing with this matter. If you go behind what is happening, too many of the fuel laundering plants are identified because they have been abandoned by the criminals and the criminal gangs that have been involved in activity at those sites who then tip off the agencies of the state so that they can clear them up.

We need people's information and intelligence to deal with the issue, which may have been the case in County Monaghan last night. I acknowledge the work of the gardaí in dealing with a fuel-laundering plant and arresting two people — we must not anticipate what happens in that regard — and note that the Garda Síochána are not dismissing the involvement of dissident republicans.

**Lord Morrow:** I thank the Minister for his answer, but there is still some ambiguity about who really is responsible. Although district councils do have a responsibility, the Department also has a responsibility. Is the Minister prepared to give due consideration to applying to the perpetrators the costs of the damage? I acknowledge that very often the perpetrators are not found or brought before the courts. However, should not the costs of the damage be applied also to those who are caught and brought before the courts?

**Mr Attwood:** I agree with the Member's first point that a small number of councils are paying a heavy cost because of the activities of criminals and criminal gangs. Newry and Armagh is the most acute case, and I do appreciate what they are doing. However, sympathy will not be much of an answer to the demands on them.

The Member is also right that the perpetrators are simply not very often identified. I am not in denial that there is more that we could do between HMRC, the gardaí, the police and the agencies North and South. It is already the case under the 1997 Order that, where councils bring perpetrators to court for unlawful deposit of waste on lands, they have the ability to ask the court, and the court has the power, to impose costs for removal of the waste, to reduce the negative consequences of the waste — in other words, to clean up — and, indeed, to cover the costs of the DOE in respect of any action it

may have taken. The power is there. We need to interrogate the Member's point to see what more powers may be necessary.

I have been in very useful correspondence with the Lord Chief Justice in respect of his interventions in taking forward the issue of environmental crime. He is currently interrogating that issue and is awaiting proposals from the Judicial Studies Board to see what more can be done. As part of that exercise, I shall forward to the Lord Chief Justice a schedule of every prosecution for environmental crime handled by the Magistrate's Court over the past period. You will be able to see therein whether the courts are doing all that they should to impose on the perpetrators the full penalties, financial or otherwise, for their illegal activities.

**Mr D Bradley:** Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra a thug sé. Ba mhaith liom ceist a chur ar an Aire faoin méid atá á dhéanamh ag a Roinn le stop a chur le dumpáil neamhdhleathach dramhaíola, agus dramhaíl ón taobh ó dheas den teorainn san áireamh.

Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order.

**Mr D Bradley:** I thank the Minister for his answer. What action is being taken by his Department to counter illegal dumping, including waste that is coming from south of the border?

**Mr Attwood:** Go raibh míle maith agaibh go léir. I touched on this matter in the last questions for oral answer. We work with HMRC, which is the lead agency. We work as part of a subgroup of the Organised Crime Task Force. It is very difficult work. The people in the environmental crime unit carry a burden of personal safety issues because of the legal powers that they have, the forensic training that they have received from the PSNI and other agencies, the character of the work that they do and the risks that they are exposed to, and they carry that burden with great resilience.

There is more that we could do. I am not in denial of that. However, as we have demonstrated around the high profile, illegal waste dumps, including the one at Ballymartin — where progress is still being made — where there is an opportunity to repatriate waste, we have got into a relationship with the Southern

Government. Where we have an opportunity to go after those who are responsible, we are seeking that opportunity. That is why we are pursuing those four potential prosecutions.

Where we have the opportunity to do more joined-up working with the police and the crime assets agency in the South, we are doing so through the Organised Crime Task Force and other initiatives. We have the structures in place, we have good people in place and we are having a level of success, but you will not hear the argument from me that more could not be done to drill down in order to deal with this continuing threat.

**Mr Kinahan:** On a local matter, cat litter was dumped in the Sixmilewater. It happened on a Friday, and it took four days to get it cleared as the matter had to be resolved between the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) and the council. There was a danger of polluting the river. Will the Minister ensure that we have a speedier, if not instant, response to removing pollution that comes from fuel laundering?

**Mr Attwood:** I ask that the Member give further details of that particular case. I find that it is through investigating details about a particular case that you can identify whether best practice has or has not been deployed. If more details are provided, I will look further into that case.

When there has been an issue around a substance getting into rivers, the agency has advised me of any risk as quickly as any part of government has ever done. If there is ever a fish kill in any river in Northern Ireland, I know about it. I could even tell you the number of trout and others that are killed in each incident, so I must say that the communication from the agency about illegal waste or other damaging waste getting into our rivers is virtually instant. I have to acknowledge that. People go out instantly to make the assessment about what the risk might be to fish life, our waterways and watercourses and the wider community. The NIEA acts promptly in all cases that I am aware of where the problem has arisen. Therefore, I suspect that this case is either an aberration or the result of a territorial dispute between the DOE, the Environment Agency and some third party. There should not be territorial disputes; you need to create certainty immediately in order to reassure quickly. I will look at the issue further.

## Heritage Crime

4. **Mr McClarty** asked the Minister of the Environment how many incidents of heritage crime have been reported in the last year and what measures he is taking to prevent further incidents. (AQO 474/11-15)

**Mr Attwood:** The answer, which will surprise people, is that no structured record is held centrally of heritage crime and where, when and how often it occurs. That issue was identified in the heritage crime summit that I convened in Hillsborough in the middle of August, which will reconvene at Conway Mill in two weeks' time to make an assessment of what has been done across the range of heritage crime issues over the past month.

One issue that was identified at the summit was that the PSNI does not record in a dedicated way heritage crime and other types of damage from broader categories of damage to property. The PSNI, along with the Environment Agency, has begun to rectify that situation so that, if the numbers and the extent of damage to heritage property continue to spike, we will have a central database to show where, when and how often that happens and what the trends look like.

**Mr Speaker:** I will allow the Member to ask a very quick supplementary question.

**Mr McClarty:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank the Minister for his response, and I trust that the situation will be rectified as soon as possible. I understand that a voluntary national network called the Alliance to Reduce Crime against Heritage (ARCH) has been set up in England. Does the Minister have any plans to set up such an organisation in Northern Ireland?

**Mr Attwood:** I should have indicated that the number of reported heritage crimes that the Department has got a grip on over the past period is 11. Although that number is small when compared with the hundreds of heritage properties in the North, it is a lot bigger than it has been in previous years, and there may be reasons for that.

The Member is quite right to raise the experience in England. At the heritage crime summit in Hillsborough, we brought over a police officer seconded from an English constabulary to English Heritage whose job is to work with that organisation to identify what interventions might reduce or mitigate the risk of heritage

crime. He referred to the model that the Member has spoken about.

### 3.00 pm

At the heritage crime summit, we identified a range of possible interventions, including working with other agencies, working with owners and potentially increasing legal powers to reinstate or rebuild properties damaged by heritage crime. We have interrogated all of the opportunities to deal with that issue. We will have a further report on that on 14 October at Conway Mill, but the test is whether we are protecting the built heritage going forward, both in itself and because it is such a key feature of economic growth and tourist opportunity. That is why it is so important. Beyond its own value, the value to the Northern Ireland economy is something that we must be very attentive to.

*(Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Molloy]  
in the Chair)*

## Private Members' Business

### Roads Service: Weed Control

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

**Mr Spratt:** I beg to move

*That this Assembly expresses concern at the failure of Roads Service eastern division to adequately control weeds on footways and other public areas; and calls on the Minister for Regional Development to ensure that this problem is resolved without further delay.*

It gives me great pleasure to open the debate on this issue, which concerns an extensive area of the eastern division, which takes in a number of constituencies, not least South Belfast and East Belfast, as well as Strangford and North Down.

At the outset, I must say that I am disappointed at the attitude of one of the members of the Committee for Regional Development, Mr Stewart Dickson of the Alliance Party. He has made some statements to the effect that this is an utterly frivolous motion. It is a very serious issue that has plagued extensive areas of the city of Belfast and the other areas that I have mentioned for some considerable time. No one should know better than Mr Dickson that it is not an issue for local government but for the Department for Regional Development (DRD), and Roads Service in particular.

There are some very serious issues related to the motion. I hope that the SDLP is not also involved in a boycott of this business in the Assembly —

**Mr McDevitt:** *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Spratt:** Oh. I see at least one SDLP Member in the Chamber. The issue raises a number of questions that I hope that the Minister will be able to answer this afternoon about what appears to have been a failed procurement process for the original contract, which was

ended early by Roads Service because it claimed that the contract was not providing value for money. I hope that the Minister will be able to give the reasons for the failure of that procurement process and tell us why it was not providing value for money and, indeed, if it was not providing value for money at the outset of the process, why it was allowed to continue. Then, indeed, why did the Department not train its own staff adequately to deal with the problem, but instead allow the areas to get into the state that they are in?

It is very clear that eastern division's weed control on the streets and at the edges of the roadways in the entire area is totally out of control. That has had an impact on local councils, which have had to carry out significant work. Various council areas have been entered into competitions, such as Ulster in Bloom, at fairly great expense to the ratepayer. The judges come along and see the areas concerned in a total mess with weeds that the Department, and Roads Service in particular, have failed to clear.

It is clear that Roads Service is responsible for weed spraying, grass cutting, gully emptying and verge, tree and hedge maintenance. Roads Service states that, in rural areas, noxious weeds, such as thistles, ragwort, docks and wild oats, are controlled within the road boundary using a variety of methods. It states that, in urban areas:

*"all hard surfaces are sprayed to inhibit weed growth."*

At the start of this year, however, the Department for Regional Development made a number of cost-cutting proposals in the draft Budget 2011-15. The top priority, of course, is safety, and the Department said that:

*"The Roads Service maintenance guidelines for safety will be amended to reduce the frequency and range of maintenance activities, in order to ensure that more urgent / safety-related maintenance can be delivered."*

One of the areas it identified for those savings was weed control. However, it admitted in the document, which was provided to all Members, that the result of that would be:

*"longer grass and more weeds in road verges".*

It would also create access and transportation problems as a result of overgrown hedgerows, particularly in rural areas. However, the



Department has made the focus of its work in those areas clear. It admitted to the Committee for Regional Development, at its meeting on 26 January 2011, that maintenance will end up costing more in the long run as a result of its failure to deal with the problem. It is obvious now that, in some streets around the city, the weeds are two feet or three feet high. Even though those weeds are killed off with sprays, it will mean that someone will have to go out and scrape away what remains. That is something that the Department has been doing.

Perhaps the Minister can give us some idea about how the Roads Service division known as Roads Service Direct has dealt with the issue of spraying. Various Members, such as my colleagues Alex Easton and Peter Weir, have asked questions about the issue, as have a number of Members for Strangford. If it is a training issue, perhaps the Minister can tell us now whether the entire staff of Roads Service Direct has been fully trained to deal with it. It is an eyesore, no matter how we view it, and it still needs to be dealt with. The Department said that, last year, the amount of revenue that Roads Service paid out on claims for slips, trips and falls equated to £4 million. Does the failure of Roads Service and the Department to deal with weed control from a slip-and-trip perspective not increase the possibility of further claims? The fact that the weeds have been allowed to establish themselves and root in creates a problem because further maintenance will be required to open up the cracks in which the weeds are growing, and so on. That will have a further knock-on effect on the departmental budget.

The Minister is dealing with a very tight budget because of structural issues and the backlog in Roads Service. It is absolutely criminal that a part of the Department should add to that pressure by not dealing with issues that it could have dealt with adequately. I will go back to the initial failure of the procurement process and not getting value for money: why, when that firm was involved, were people not trained to take over the work? Why did the Department not try to bring someone else in? There does not seem to be a procurement issue in any other division in Northern Ireland, so what is the issue with the contract in the eastern division? Maybe someone will tell us today that it is an issue in other areas. A whole range of questions, Minister, need to be answered. It is a very serious issue.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Bring your remarks to a close.

**Mr Spratt:** It is an issue that is fairly and squarely for the Department. I hope that the Alliance Party is out with its spades and trowels and that Mr Dickson is leading the way in clearing some of the streets. I will show him a few.

**Mr Doherty:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. When I read the motion, I was a bit bemused by why it was confined to the eastern division of Roads Service. If weed control is an issue only in the eastern division, why was it not resolved among local representatives, MLAs, councillors and that division? If it is a more fundamental issue of weed control —

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

**Mr Doherty:** I will, of course.

**Mr Spratt:** The Member makes an interesting point. The matter has been raised continually over a protracted period by individual MLAs. At local council level, it has also been raised at the two-monthly briefings with Roads Service in council chambers. The eastern division of Roads Service has totally failed.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** The Member has an extra minute in which to speak.

**Mr Doherty:** Thank you. If there is a wider issue of weed control, the motion should have taken a more joined-up attitude and put responsibility not only on DRD but on the Department for Social Development, the Housing Executive, local councils, the Department of the Environment and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. There is an issue with weeds, and one Department's attempt to control them will not resolve it. A joined-up approach across a number of Departments will be required.

There is no doubt that weeds are very unsightly. Some more toxic weeds are dangerous to human beings and some animals, particularly horses and cattle. I was not sure why the content of the motion is confined to the eastern division, so I look forward to answers emerging in the debate. When the Minister responds, perhaps he will give us some information on the £4 million of claims against the Department and tell us how many of them are down to the lack of weed control.



**3.15 pm**

**Mr Beggs:** I thank Research and Information Service for its brief on this matter, because, along with other Members, I was a little surprised by the wording of the motion, and the brief has helped to shed some light on it. As has been said, there has been some controversy about the matter, and I share a degree of that concern.

I see that many questions for written answer on the matter have been tabled in the past, and detailed answers have been provided. It is interesting to note that the reply to question for written answer AQW 445/10 to Jim Shannon indicated that there had been an EU directive restricting the types of chemicals that could be used; perhaps they had been more effective in the past. Question for written answer AQW 1658/11-15 indicates that the contract for grass cutting and weed control in the North Down area was not extended because it had not been providing value for money. It would be helpful if the Minister could elaborate on exactly what happened and when that decision was taken. Question for written answer AQW 1716/11-15 is quite interesting, because it states that:

*"Roads Service has advised that every effort is being undertaken to catch up on outstanding work now that staff training is complete and new equipment is available."*

It appears to me that the contract has been taken into the service because of value-for-money considerations, and the work is being done by Roads Service Direct. There was a delay while equipment and training was being put in place, which was necessary, bearing in mind that hazardous chemicals were involved. Works seems to be under way now, albeit late. I acknowledge that everyone, ratepayers and councillors alike, value the appearance of their area. I also acknowledge that aesthetics are important, but I am surprised that the issue has reached the Assembly Chamber, given the answers that have been given already.

I notice that comment was made about the £4 million of personal injury claims that are made annually. Some press comments mentioned that that is the reason for the debate. I looked back at the Audit Office report about the personal injury claims, and I reminded myself of the Public Accounts Committee hearing on that matter. When I searched the report and the

Committee's transcript, the word "weed" did not appear in either, so some Members are perhaps looking for cover to justify their tabling the motion for debate. I see trying to keep weeds down largely as an aesthetic issue. Ultimately, weeds could result in the long-term problem of structural damage, but, hopefully, Roads Service has caught up with that already.

I looked at the draft budget proposal that the Department printed on 13 January 2011, and it makes interesting reading. It states that a saving measure would come from a reduction in maintenance activities and that areas where savings could be achieved include grass cutting and weed control. Therefore, there are pressures on the budget, value-for-money considerations in a contract, and criticism of Roads Service's activities. I find it particularly strange that the Members who voted for that budget are now complaining about it.

Furthermore, in that budget, some £800 million is earmarked towards the A5, which is a road in the west that could be described as a virtual motorway. I and many others argue that the building of that road is overkill. It is a road of 23 km and includes areas where speeds average 50 miles an hour already, and newbuilds are in places where they would not normally be warranted. A road and side roads are being created in addition to the existing road, which seems to be coping. Additional maintenance pressures are also being created, and the project is not making good use of our limited capital budget. So, I find it very surprising that those who voted for the ring-fencing of funding for that road are complaining about maintenance pressure.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Bring your remarks to a close.

**Mr Beggs:** I ask Members to think carefully about what they have done and to deal with those who are trying to address the situation with respect.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** For the remainder of the debate, I remind Members that the subject is weed control.

**Mr Craig:** I will start by clarifying something. I read with interest the article that said that this is an insignificant issue that should not be debated in this Chamber. I also listened to Mr Beggs's comments about claims. The reality is that, last year, over £4 million was

spent on claims, £1.6 million was paid out in compensation, and £2.2 million was paid out in legal fees. That is a significant sum.

I do not claim for one second that all of that was paid out because of weeds. However, the idea that weeds on our footpaths do not cause personal injuries needs to be nailed. My office and I personally dealt with an 84-year-old lady who fell outside her property, not due to the damage to the footpath but due to the amount of weeds and overgrowth on the footpath. That resulted in her breaking her hip and had a major impact on public expenditure because not only did we have to expend money to take her into hospital, we had to expend public money to put a new hip in that individual. So, the claims alone do not highlight the true cost to the public purse of certain cases. Not all cases are as dramatic or as simple as that. If allowed to grow out of control, weeds damage the footpaths and, in turn, lead to a number of claims from people who have been injured on those paths. That highlights where the issue eventually goes if it is allowed to get out of control.

However, there is not only a personal injury aspect. In my constituency, I could, Mr Deputy Speaker, take you to a number of areas where, quite frankly, weeds seem to be completely out of hand. That leads to the area being run down visually, and very dramatically in a lot of cases. It is primarily an issue for Roads Service, and I have noticed over the past number of years that it seems to continually be getting worse. I know that Roads Service subcontracts that whole facility to others in places, but I do not know whether the problem arises because of the financial pressure that the individuals who are doing this are under or because of the chemicals that they are using. However, over the past number of years, the means of dealing with the weeds has been ineffective in an awful lot of areas, and the Minister or his Department maybe needs to investigate that.

When all this was queried at a local government level, some of the Minister's departmental officials continually said that European regulations are forcing them to use chemicals that are no longer effective. I find that very hard to believe. I suppose that I am the world's worst person to speak on this subject because, if you ask my wife about weed control in our own garden, she will tell you that I am not very good at it. Plants, flowers and everything tend to get ripped out once I start. However, weedkiller

that meets all the EU regulations and is very effective can definitely be bought publicly on the open market. My feeling is that it is maybe too expensive for Roads Service to use and is part of the cost savings that are getting out of control. I do not believe that failing to deal with weed control properly is an effective long-term use of public money, so I appeal to the Minister to take the matter seriously and to question his Department on how it is tackling the issue, because — pardon the pun — that is where the root of the problem seems to lie.

**Mr Dunne:** I welcome the opportunity to speak in this important debate, and I thank the Minister for his attendance. This issue is ongoing and of great concern to people in the North Down constituency. It is certainly a grass roots issue, and Members who get away from that fact have lost touch with people. It is important that we keep our mind at grass roots level.

I fully support the motion and its expression of great:

*“concern at the failure of Roads Service eastern division to adequately control weeds”.*

I join those who today urge the Minister to ensure that we do not see a repeat of this in the future.

We all recognise that savings have had to be made across Departments, and DRD is no exception. The 2011-15 draft Budget has been mentioned a number of times, and it stated that a loss of front line services would result in longer grass and more weeds on road verges. However, we certainly did not expect it to happen to this extent.

As an elected representative, I have regular contact with the DRD section engineer in Bangor, who advised me that that the one-year contract for weed control and grass cutting for North Down was not extended to the 2011-12 season on the basis that it was not considered good value for money. Taking into account the fact that the lead-in time for developing and awarding such contracts is between eight and 12 months, Roads Service found it necessary to revert to doing that work in-house. As a result, the work was very late getting off the ground, and a lack of staff trained and equipped to carry out weed spraying was part of that delay.

Ever since, Roads Service has been playing catch-up, and it is clear that it has been working

overtime at weekends but it is now virtually impossible for it to complete the job. Previously, the work was carried out by contractors on two quads. In fact, people in the area complained about the quads racing each other. However, they were, after all, contractors who perhaps worked on a task-and-finish basis. Nevertheless, there were few complaints about the work that those quad operators did. If there were complaints from elected representatives, the contractors would return and deal with the areas as necessary.

The decision to cancel the contract for weed control this year has proved futile. Work has not been properly managed, and extensive overtime is being used to try to catch up on the backlog. How can that be cost-effective? Grass cutting in North Down has also been brought in-house, and it has proved to be expensive as well, with extensive coning operations carried out on the A2 dual carriageway at night. I ask again: how can that be cost-effective?

Finally, signage in North Down is poor. We are told that due to the lack of a contract, which had been in place for over two years, there is no maintenance or replacement of road signs. We have had little or no action on road signs for more than two years on the busy Bangor to Belfast dual carriageway. That is basically because DRD cannot get its contracts sorted. It is vital that roads and footpaths are properly maintained for safe use by ratepayers and taxpayers. They pay for and expect a basic service. It is the responsibility of Roads Service. We expect better. Thank you very much.

**Mr Copeland:** There are two essential issues at stake here today. One is the motion itself and the other is the right of those who tabled the motion so to do, without curious comments from people who have elected not to be here. A weed is just a plant that is growing in the wrong place, and there seems to be an opinion in here that this question has been put in the wrong place.

To be honest, I can understand some of the reasoning behind it, but I had the benefit, as did Mr Spratt, of being present in Castlereagh Borough Council when the matter was raised initially. I feel bound to say, with no hint of criticism but objectively stating the fact, that had the matter been dealt with more effectively on that occasion, we might not have found ourselves here today.

### 3.30 pm

It may be an inconvenience to the Alliance Party, but people worry about weeds growing at the side of the road. After the debate in Castlereagh Borough Council, I told Councillor Spratt that as I was approaching Ryan Park while driving there that evening, a young child had jumped out of the verge at the side of the road, which was very heavily weeded. I did not have to take avoiding action but, had he jumped out slightly later, I could have found myself having to swerve on a dangerous corner.

The issue that most concerns me — above and beyond the weeds — is the fact that any Member or group of Members in the Chamber must be allowed the right to bring forward motions that they feel are important, because they will be important to their constituents. Although I have some understanding, to a small degree, of “Is this the right place?”, I will forever support those who tabled the motion, because it is their right so to do.

We have developed a society in which responsibility, like the parcel, is passed. Things that used to be achieved relatively simply now appear to be extremely complex. During the flooding in east Belfast, I was approached by a man who had worked for Belfast City Council for years. He had a handcart and a long piece of wood with a scoop at the end of it, and it was his job to scoop the silt out of the road gullies. He knew what road gullies he had to clear, and if they were not clear it was his responsibility to clear them. Another old boy used to walk from Curry's shop at the corner of Church Road with a billhook, and if there were weeds in the side of the ditch, it was his job to get them out. He was probably paid pennies and he may not have been particularly well educated, but he had a job and he knew how to do it. Now, because of the requirements for public procurement and a whole range of other things, few people appear to be responsible for anything.

I have no doubt that the Minister, who is here and who, unfortunately on this occasion, is responsible, will react to the motion in a mature and sensible way. He will not try to avoid the questions: he will answer them. However, I suspect that the seeds of the problem were sown long before the current Minister took up his post. I share the concerns of those who brought the motion, and I honestly and sincerely

believe that the Minister will do what needs to be done. He will enjoy my support in so doing.

**Mr Agnew:** It is certainly true that over the summer in particular, residents' concerns about issues relating to weeds have been expressed to me. Indeed, it has featured heavily in our local paper in north Down. As Mr Copeland pointed out, we are here to represent our constituents and, if they have a concern, it is our responsibility to raise that concern at whatever level we as politicians operate.

I hope that the Minister will address the issue raised by Members about the north Down contract that was not renewed. It is clear that that decision has been to the detriment of the services that we receive in north Down. Now that the issue is, hopefully, resolved, I hope that he can guarantee that the issue will not arise again next year.

As well as being responsible to our constituents and raising their concerns, we must also be honest with them. There have been cuts and, as has been pointed out, the Members who tabled the debate passed the Budget that implemented those cuts. There will be a one-day strike tomorrow by our health and education services with regard to the cuts to those services.

I ask the Members who tabled the motion to be honest with our constituents and the people who elected us in their winding-up speech, and to ask themselves whether they think that this should be a priority. Do they think that money should be moved? I go back to the Research and Information Service brief that was provided for us. It is clear that weeds have been put down the priority list by the Roads Service, which has been clear that it is taking money away from weed control to put into other areas. Do the Members think that that is wrong? If so, where would they make cuts? It is very easy for me to tell the roads Minister where I think he should cut his budget and reprioritise, but I would like to hear the views of others on that.

This is definitely a concern. We are responsible for raising our constituents' concerns, but I think that we should be honest with them. I hope the Members will do that in their winding-up speech.

**Mr Weir:** I had not intended to speak in the debate, but a couple of points came up that need a response. I am very good at judging the mood of Mr Beggs. I detected a degree of

defensiveness around the motion and sensed that he thought that it should not be debated. I have to say that that contrasted with what Mr Copeland said. Let me make it clear: our motion is not in any way a criticism of the Minister. I am sure that he will be delighted to hear that. To be fair, the decisions were taken before he was in office and when another party held that portfolio. There is, therefore, no need for anybody to be defensive about this.

It is an issue of some importance. There have been challenges about whether this is the right place to discuss it. Instead of simply collectively moaning about this in our respective councils, or whatever, today we have the opportunity to hear from the horse's mouth. Maybe he can dispose of some of the straw that is lying around as well. We have the opportunity to hear the Minister respond on this directly.

It is clear from what has been said that there have been major problems this year. It has not been unique; this is not the first year we have seen problems. Judging by the level of complaints that a number of us have received from constituents, the situation has got a lot worse this year. We can look at blame apportionment. I think that there are genuine questions to be asked. People have mentioned the timing of this and the fact that there was a cancellation of a contract. It certainly seems to me that Roads Service had plenty of notice to get on top of the problem, and there are questions over the length of time they took to respond. I suppose that this is about receiving assurance from the Minister and others that a proper procedure has been put in place for future years. We cannot do anything about what has happened this year. We can, however, make sure that things are right for next year.

Some, particularly those from the Alliance Party, which seems to have lost touch with its grass roots on this issue, do not regard this as an appropriate matter for the Assembly. A lot of issues come up in private Members' business that are seen as grand issues of the day and about which we beat our chests, but, when the smoke clears, absolutely nothing changes as a result. This is, perhaps, one of the rare issues on which we will actually be able to hear a resolution and the specific action that can be taken.

It is an important issue for a lot of people. It is about their environment — not simply the



aesthetics of the area, but, as Mr Copeland mentioned, road safety.

**Mr McDevitt:** I appreciate the Member's valiant efforts to try to justify this debate. However, we have been back from the summer break for six weeks, and not a single piece of legislation has been brought before the House. The House is a legislative assembly, and we have a draft Programme for Government that does not make one commitment to one piece of legislation. With the greatest respect, do you not think this debate is more about covering up the inadequacies of this House than about addressing some of the problems in our society?

**Mr Weir:** Sorry, I was labouring under the illusion that the Member's party was a member of the Executive. Let us see the Ministers come back with a more challenging Programme for Government, as was highlighted by Peter Robinson and John O'Dowd. Let us see a high level of ambition. Perhaps the Member's party will put its money where its mouth is and commit to important pieces of legislation. I look forward to working with the Member's party on the reform of RPA, for example, but I suspect that that may be straying a little from the subject that is in hand. Today is about being able to achieve something. As indicated, weed control is important not simply because of aesthetics or the level of compensation claims. There are issues such as criminality to be considered too. When an area starts to go to waste and there are broken windows, vandalism and weeds, it can bring down an area and encourage other forms of antisocial behaviour. Therefore, the issue goes wider than the context that has been put forward.

Members mentioned the overall budget situation. However, the criticism is essentially not about the amount of money that has been spent. Roads Service, in taking this issue on board, because it felt that there was not enough time to have another contract — and it may be right on that front — did not react soon enough. This is not work that would not have been done, nor is it additional work that should have been done. The principal problem here is that the work was done ineffectively and too late. The issue is not about the budget, it is about the way in which this was organised. Many issues can be tackled without the need for high levels of additional finance.

Weed control is of genuine concern to many people. We may feel that there are more significant issues, but that is not necessarily what is being felt on the ground. I look forward to hearing what can be done to take things forward. I believe that there are sensible solutions that the Minister can reach. If he does respond in that way, this will be one of those rare occasions on which something will actually be achieved in the Assembly, rather than letting off steam, as we often do. I thank Members, and I urge them to support the motion.

**Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development):** I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to the debate, and I am perhaps even more grateful to those who did not come to the debate at all. As Members know, I am not a Minister who wants to let the grass grow beneath his feet. I want to get to the root of the problem. Also, following what Mr Doherty said about the west, my initial concern was that the debate was about the greening of the east. I thought that I should get all the very poor puns away at the earliest possible stage.

I want to address seriously the concerns that Members have brought to the debate. I thank everyone for their contributions, and I welcome the opportunity to clarify the situation, particularly on weed control in Road Service's eastern division. In doing so, I have asked my officials to take note of the Hansard report of the debate, and, if there are issues that I am unable to pick up, I will correspond with Members following the debate.

I do not want to diminish Members' concerns on the subject in any way, but it is important to set the issue in the context of the overall position in Roads Service. Roads Service is responsible for 25,000 km of roads and 9,800 km of pathways, which is a very extensive area in which to control weeds. The procedures for weed control are aimed at ensuring the safety of road users and preventing the deterioration of the pavements.

Roads Service has spent £1.2 million on average each year over the past five years on weed control. It should be said that Roads Service has no specific statutory obligation to remove weeds, other than in relation to the control of noxious weeds, and, in that, it treats invasive weeds such as the Japanese knotweed that are found growing on lands within its control, taking advice from the Department of



Agriculture and Rural Development or specialist contractors when required.

It is acknowledged that it is practically impossible to eliminate weed growth. Consequently, Roads Service, like many other road authorities, programmes chemical applications to footway surfaces, kerb edges and drainage channels on an annual basis as a curative measure.

Weed control in rural areas is carried out on the same basis and is generally undertaken by cutting. A schedule exists for those areas to be treated, cut or both. Persistent or new weeds are identified through routine safety inspections or the complaints process.

### 3.45 pm

Chemical control of weeds is necessary for curbed and paved areas. It is normally carried out in the spring, with any significant regrowth dealt with as necessary. Spraying of highway surfaces and edges is carried out by trained personnel in accordance with advice from manufacturers and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, using the minimum treatment necessary compatible with required results. Weed control is undertaken as part of routine maintenance activities, which include grass cutting, gully emptying, cleaning drains and sweeping.

Our resources are limited. Members have referred to the budgetary position of my Department. Our work in those areas must be prioritised. Roads Service actively seeks to control and manage routine environmental maintenance activities and rightly concentrates its resources on safety-related matters and improving the road structure rather than aesthetic or amenity issues. It should be noted that escalating environmental constraints create significant difficulties and impose an ever-increasing burden on Roads Service in dealing with weed control. Recent changes to environmental regulations do not permit the use of chemicals with a residual or systemic effect, and only chemicals that kill the visible weed are permitted.

Let me pick up a point made by Mr Craig. Roads Service and such agencies are greatly restricted in the use of chemicals in a way that private householders are not. That creates a very limited time frame within which to carry out effective action. Roads Service has to wait until the weeds appear and then treat them before

they get too big to cause concern. It reminds me of a couple of lines from the harvest hymn:

*"Give his angels charge at last*

*In the fire the tares to cast".*

Members are fully aware of how quickly weeds can grow and of how, therefore, for control to be effective, areas vulnerable to weeds may require a number of repeat treatments. I remind you of the extensive road and footway network, which, in the eastern division, amounts to 3,600 km of roads and 3,800 km of pathways or footways. I stress that Roads Service supports and complies with the environmental regulations.

However, I draw Members' attention to the increased difficulties posed and remind them that all road authorities face a struggle to control weeds and to have areas that are totally weed-free. The increasing effort to deal with weeds on this extensive and very busy road network has, and continues to, put pressure on an already tightly squeezed budget. In the eastern division, grass cutting and weed control is dealt with using two separate environmental maintenance contracts: EME1, which covers the north of the division, namely Lisburn, Carrickfergus, Newtownabbey and north Belfast; and EME2, which covers the south of the division, namely south Belfast, Castlereagh and north Down. I am aware of a number of complaints about weed control across Northern Ireland, but particularly in the Castlereagh and north Down areas. Roads Service responded to those complaints by explaining the ongoing contractual issues and advising that work would be completed using its internal contractor.

All available resources were deployed throughout June and July to address the various areas as identified by elected representatives and members of the public. A programme was put in place to ensure that the worst-affected areas were treated as a matter of priority, with staff working extended hours and weekends to complete that work as quickly as possible. In addition, squads were deployed to manually remove weeds where spraying would be less effective.

Roads Service regularly reviews the cost and performance of all contracts. A review of the EME2 contract for the south of the eastern division confirmed that Roads Service was not satisfied that it was achieving value for money. Therefore, a decision was taken not to renew

the contract for 2011-12, and that decision was formally ratified in January 2011. In carrying out our maintenance activities, we use a combination of private sector contractors and our own resources. Before making that decision, Roads Service had considered the options for dealing with grass cutting and weed control and decided to undertake the work using DRD's internal contractor, Roads Service Direct.

Although Roads Service Direct was able to prioritise, and successfully deal with, grass cutting, it was not able to reach full capacity on weed control until the start of August. Therefore, weeds were not treated during the early growth period at the start of the season, which is essential for effective treatment. That resulted in additional work to remove large and unsightly weeds.

Roads Service has sought to prioritise and respond to many individual issues raised by local representatives and has been commended for those individual efforts. I am able to advise the House that procedures are already well in hand to ensure that the issues that resulted in a late start to the weed control element of the contract this year will not be repeated next season. We will increase the manpower and provide additional training for our operatives. Additional machinery will also be available if necessary. However, Members should be aware of the difficulties that I mentioned about controlling weed growth and its relative priority, especially for the financial allocation given to the operation.

I acknowledge, and apologise for, the fact that service delivery in this aspect of my Department's work was not satisfactory this year. However, I hope that I have addressed some of the points. I will now attempt to respond to some of the questions that Members raised.

Mr Spratt opened the debate by saying that he was concerned about the original contract. The Department has sound procedures in place, but the assessment system failed us this year, and I have taken account of the Member's concern. It was important from a value-for-money standpoint that we move, intercept and make changes to the contract. Lessons have been learned, and action will be taken to ensure that we do not experience the same problems next year in the eastern division, which covers north Down, Castlereagh and Belfast south. Staff have been trained, but that took longer than

anticipated. As such, we did not get out to do the work as quickly as possible. However, that situation has now been resolved.

Mr Craig raised the issue of the £4 million in public liability claims. That, of course, covers a variety of claims, such as personal injury, vehicle damage and property damage. He referred to an unfortunate incident involving one of his constituents. I am very sorry that that happened to that lady, and I hope that she has recovered fully. There is no clear, significant trend of claims as a result of weed growth, but I accept the fact that it opens up the risk of such claims. Therefore, the ideal situation would be to ensure that there are no weeds. The Department is constrained in its use of chemicals, whereas private householders or commercial outlets are freer to use such methods.

Mr Dunne, whom I thank for his contribution, raised the issue of road signs. Indeed, there was a problem with the procurement of road signs not just in north Down but across Northern Ireland. Unfortunately, that led to a lengthy and complex legal dispute, which resulted in court action that had to be heard. I understand that it was recently resolved, and we can now move forward. I hope that we can do so on a basis that satisfies the Member and, indeed, all Members who have similar concerns.

I have attempted to take Members' concerns seriously and feel that I have done so. I recognise that weed control is aesthetically important for all locations. We are under pressure. There were particular circumstances that led to this year's events. However, I am confident that my Department has learned important lessons and will deal with the matter. I thank Members for their contributions.

**Mr Easton:** I thank Members for their contributions and the Minister for his response. My constituency of North Down has been dogged by weeds, because of a lack of control over their growth, especially in working-class housing estates and in villages such as Conlig, Crawfordsburn and Groomsport, in particular the Springwell area. The 'Environmental Handbook', published by Roads Service in 2010, states:

*"Most weeds ... seed late into the growing season. Cutting them early ... should stop their growth and control their spread."*

It is clear that that did not happen, given the extensive growth of weeds that I witnessed

across my constituency and based on the number of people who contacted my office to express their deep concern. Unfortunately, the mixed weather patterns during the summer created the perfect conditions for weeds to grow and flourish.

Roads Service advises that it is possible to eliminate weed growth with the use of chemical applications to footpath surfaces, kerb edges and drainage channels on an annual basis as a curative measure. The Noxious Weeds (Northern Ireland) Order 1977 places a responsibility on Roads Service to take action to inhibit the growth and spread of injurious weeds. Most noxious weeds seed late in the growing season, and Roads Service is supposed to prevent their spread by treating or removing weeds earlier in the season. That is done by spot cutting or pulling; cutting by mower, which is more economical; or chemical spraying.

The Department for Regional Development's budget, which was published in January, highlighted that savings could be achieved in grass cutting and weed control. It admitted, however, that that would result in longer grass and more weeds on road verges. That has been the most visible sign of the budget cuts that I have noticed when driving across my constituency, never mind other parts of the Province. It makes areas look very untidy and makes pavements and footpaths unsafe, especially in wet weather. Roads Service, however, says that it will attempt to mitigate the effects on the public by concentrating on those elements of its work that are more closely related to safety.

I want to praise those members of the public whom I witnessed cleaning their own streets and footpaths and removing weeds. I am concerned, however, about whether such action would make them legally responsible should someone hurt themselves, given that shop owners who brush or salt the ground in front of their shops in cold weather are held legally responsible if anyone slips or falls. That needs clarification.

The risk to road safety is between three and five, with five being the lowest and one being the highest. That is significant. During a Regional Development Committee meeting on 2 March 2011, it was pointed out that although cost-saving measures introduced by the Department

would save money in the short term, they would cost more in the long term.

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful to the Member for giving way. I know that it is slightly unusual for a Minister to intervene during a Member's winding-up speech, but I wish to respond to his reference to the legal position of people who clear away frost and snow.

I hope that, as part of our winter preparations, my Department will issue an advice leaflet very soon. In that leaflet will be advice from the Attorney General, no less, on how to handle and deal with such issues. I commend it not only to Mr Easton and all Members but to every householder all over Northern Ireland, who, I hope, will receive a copy of the leaflet and use it as a sensible guide.

#### 4.00 pm

**Mr Easton:** I thank the Minister for that intervention. In a meeting of the Committee for Regional Development held in March 2011, it was highlighted that, although the cost-saving measures that the Department introduced would save money in the short term, they would cost more in the long term. That is an issue of concern, and it needs to be dealt with. The Minister should be cutting weeds rather than cutting the budget for that service.

I will now move on to Members' contributions. Mr Spratt mentioned the Alliance Party's lack of support for important issues. He asked why the procurement process ended early. He said that weeds are getting out of control in his constituency. He highlighted that communities that had entered competitions had been let down by the Department for Regional Development (DRD) and mentioned Britain in Bloom. He also said that cost-cutting proposals for measures that include weed control have had a knock-on effect on the safety of footpaths. He discussed the risk from hedges that jut out on to roads and footpaths, saying that that is a health and safety issue.

Mr Spratt also asked about DRD's training staff to remove weeds. He mentioned claims of around £4 million, although he was not saying that they all related to people slipping on weeds. He also asked about the failure of the procurement process, saying that that needs to be sorted out for next year.

Mr Doherty did not like the wording of the motion. He believed that it should have included other Departments, such as the Department for Social Development. I will reply by asking him why, if that was his view, he did not table an amendment. Mr Beggs raised questions about the type of weed sprays that are used. He raised the EU directive, as well as training and new equipment for DRD. He also discussed the previous budget and said that questions must be asked about the previous Minister. He mentioned a road. However, we never got to the bottom of where that road is, because he ran out of time and never actually told us.

**Mr Beggs:** If the Member examines the Hansard report, he will see that the A5 will be mentioned.

**Mr Easton:** I thank the Member for that. Jonathan Craig raised the issue of claims. He said that an 80-year-old constituent of his had slipped and fallen on weeds and broken her hip. He said that not only was there the issue of her claim to consider but the cost of her treatment to the health service. He mentioned certain areas of Lagan Valley where weeds are a problem, which, he said, is getting worse. He said that there is a need to look at different weed killers because some are better than others, and the issue must be sorted out.

Mr Dunne mentioned that this is a grass roots issue that is important for his constituency of North Down, particularly Holywood. He said that he had been in regular contact with DRD on the issue. He mentioned that the current DRD contract is not good enough, is not value for money and should be brought back in-house. He mentioned that DRD staff had done overtime to try to tackle the problem, and he wondered whether it would have been more cost-effective to have done the work properly in the first place.

**Mr Spratt:** One issue that the Minister did not cover was the overtime cost that has been incurred by the Department. Perhaps that could be covered in any response from the Department.

**Mr Easton:** I thank the Member for that intervention. Perhaps the Minister could respond to him.

Michael Copeland had two essential issues to discuss. He mentioned that the issue had been raised in Castlereagh Borough Council; it must have been debated there. He said that people were worried about weeds on footpaths. He

mentioned an incident in which he had nearly been involved. He supported the motion. He said that the seeds of the issue had been sown before the current Minister took office.

Steven Agnew mentioned that the issue had been raised in the local 'Spectator'. In fact, it has been raised four times in the past four weeks. That shows how big an issue it is in North Down. Mr Agnew said that the issue had been brought to him by many constituents. He mentioned cuts, but he was not sure whether weeds were a priority for debate.

Mr Weir said that he was not criticising the Minister and mentioned that it was another party's responsibility. He said that the level of complaints made to him in north Down has increased in the past year. He feels that DRD could have got on top of the issue and said that we need to sort it out for next year. He told Mr McDevitt to put his money where his mouth was in bringing forward legislation and that his party is part of the Executive, which Mr McDevitt forgot to mention.

The Minister, Mr Danny Kennedy, said that he is grateful to certain Members for not coming to the debate. I think that he was referring to the Alliance Party. He said that he wanted to get to the root of the problem. He mentioned the size of the paths and roads network and that over £1.2 million is spent on weed control every year. He said that it was impossible to do away with weeds. He said that resources were limited and mentioned problems with certain weed chemicals and the need to look at that.

Mr Kennedy said that he is aware of the problems in Castlereagh and north Down, in particular. He said that overtime had to be done to get on top of the problem and that the DRD contract was not renewed because it had not been value for money. He mentioned that procedures are in hand for next season and that he will increase manpower and the training of DRD staff. He did not mention what type of weedkiller will be used next year to get on top of the problem. I do not know whether the Minister wants to come in on that.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Bring your remarks to a close.

**Mr Easton:** The Minister said that he takes the issue seriously.

The Alliance Party was not here for the debate, but I got elected to the House to take on small issues as well as large issues. This is an important issue for my constituents.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly expresses concern at the failure of Roads Service eastern division to adequately control weeds on footways and other public areas; and calls on the Minister for Regional Development to ensure that this problem is resolved without further delay.*

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

*Motion made:*

*That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [Mr Deputy Speaker.]*

## Adjournment

### Rathlin Island

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I remind Members that the proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes. The Minister will have 10 minutes to reply. All other Members who wish to speak will have seven minutes.

**Mr Storey:** I am proud to bring this Adjournment debate to the Assembly. Some might question the importance of the issue and whether we should have such an Adjournment debate. However, I want to place on record how important the community of Rathlin is, not only to themselves as an island community but to Northern Ireland.

Rathlin Island — the locals and some of the rest of us were always brought up to refer to it as Raghery — lies six miles off Ballycastle harbour and just under two miles from Fair Head. The Mull of Kintyre lies just a few miles further across on the Scottish coast. Rathlin has County Antrim to the south, Inishowen peninsula in County Donegal to the west, the island of Islay in the Hebrides to the North and the Mull of Kintyre and mainland Scotland to the east. Indeed, on clear days, Donegal, the north Antrim coastline, the isle of Islay and the Mull of Kintyre can all be seen.

In Rathlin's harbour is the boathouse, where visitors can discover some of the exciting history, learn about present day island life and see artefacts from the shipwrecks around the island, some of which are most significant. The tourism element of the dives that are made to those wrecks needs to be developed and encouraged. I always enjoy going to the island, and I always enjoy being in the company of those who have worked excessively hard on behalf of the island. When I visit the island, there is always one boat in the harbour and when you ask why it is there, you are invariably told that it is being used by someone who is doing a dive to some of the wrecks off the island.



At the other side of the harbour we have the two churches. Next to one of the churches there is a graveyard, with those who have lost their lives at sea in the services. At the west of the island is the renowned RSPB centre, where we have an array of the wildlife that is a trademark of the island. Nowhere else is there such an array of wildlife as on that part of the island. The island is small: about six miles long and just over a mile wide, but, as is often said, it is not the size that matters; it is what goes on in that island on a day-to-day basis that counts. It is a matter of how that community lives and how it is integrated with the rest of Northern Ireland.

When we look at the island's history, we might consider whether it was the location of Marconi's first radio transmission, what its role was in the First World War, and what role it played in the battle to free Scotland in the 14th century. Among the various elements of Rathlin's history, we think of Robert the Bruce. Not that many years ago we had the opportunity of celebrating the 400th anniversary of Robert the Bruce and his escapades on the island. Now, whether the story of the spider that was allegedly seen is true or whether it is good folklore, it all adds to the rich tapestry and the rich history of the island.

However, we need to come into the modern day, and we need to come up to where we are at this moment. There are those who believe that, because Rathlin is offshore, it is a matter of out of sight, out of mind, and it should not have the same access to services as the rest of us. Nothing could be further from the truth. That is why I want to commend the work of the Rathlin Development and Community Association, and I am delighted that David, the community worker for the association, is in the Public Gallery today. He brings the apologies of other association members who are unable to be here. I want him to bring back to the island the assurance that, for both the Executive, through the policy that they have devised, and the Members of this House, they are not a people forgotten.

I welcome the fact that the Minister is here to respond to the debate. I also welcome the fact that he was on the island recently and was able to chair the inter-agency forum that is now established. That was established as a result of the Executive setting up a policy for the island.

Let us look at some of the issues that are particularly relevant, and some of the modern

day issues that need to be continually addressed. I am proud and pleased to represent in my North Antrim constituency the island of Rathlin, but one of the concerns that I had when I became a public representative was that of joined-up government. We talk about it, we have debated in this Chamber on numerous occasions and we have numerous Ministers who talk about the importance of taking a joined-up approach to issues. It would seem that the only place where we have an active and joined-up approach to the issues of government is Rathlin Island. That came about as a result of the policy that was devised. That policy sets a framework for how Departments should interact with one another when delivering services on the island.

#### 4.15 pm

Let us look at a number of those issues. For a long number of years, it was a desire of the islanders to have a ferry system that was reliable, comfortable and would continue to attract tourists to the island. I am glad that over the past number of years, the figures for visitors to the island have progressively increased. I am delighted that those numbers continue to grow. However, I ask the Minister to ensure that any difficulties that are highlighted, as some have been over the past number of weeks, with regard to the contract for the ferry and the provision of that service will be taken seriously and considered and that the islanders will not be left in a situation, as they sometimes are, where they feel as though provision has been made, a contract has been issued, an organisation is providing the service and they are being told that, by and large, that is how things should continue. There are always issues that arise on a practical, day-to-day basis that need to be considered in a more proactive way, which would help in the delivery of that issue.

As I said, I welcome that the forum has been established and that we are working with other government agencies, such as the health service. Ensuring that we have 24/7 health cover on the island has been an ongoing issue for a considerable time, because taking seriously ill on Rathlin is not the same as taking seriously ill in the rest of Northern Ireland, where we have more access to medical provision. That is why it is so important that we continue to work on that issue.

I pay tribute to the previous Health Minister, who made efforts to ensure that work was

continued and that the service was increased. I am continuing to make efforts to ensure that the current Health Minister is well aware of the issues that pertain to the medical needs of those who live on the island.

We then come to an issue that needs to be seriously considered. A focus needs to be placed on proving how the policy translates into practice with regard to renewable energy and offshore exploration. Back in August last year, I wrote to the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Minister about this issue, and I wrote again in September of this year to get an update. You will be aware that the Crown Estate had planned to launch the process for the Northern Ireland leasing round. That was done in March 2011 by the Crown Estate and the Northern Ireland offshore renewable business supply chain. All of that is good and has the potential to open things up for organisations and companies that can come in and look at the viability of offshore projects. However — I ask the Minister to take on this point in particular — we need to ensure that in any exploration, whether it is the oil exploration that is being carried out by Providence, whether it is wind or whether it is tidal, there is a benefit that can be relayed to the islanders.

I will give you an example, and I say to the Minister that maybe this is something we could organise with the Rathlin community association collectively. Some time ago, members of the association visited Gigha, an island on the west coast of Scotland not far from Rathlin. On that island, the people have been able, through an arrangement, to have wind generation that not only puts money back into the local community to sustain and give employment to local people but also supplies energy to the national grid. I want to see the natural resources of Rathlin used to their full potential but not to the disadvantage of the people of the island.

If I have learned one thing from my years of working with the people of the island it is ensuring that you get their trust. They do not want to see you as someone coming to the island who wants to change their world because somehow you do it better on this side of the pond. They want to see someone coming who wants to get alongside them, work with them, be a champion for them and support them in their particular needs. I have endeavoured in my short time as a public representative to do that in a way that I trust has been constructive and

helpful to them. I ask the Minister to give serious consideration to those offshore projects.

There is also the issue of broadband on the island. There are people living on the island who have relocated and set up their businesses there. The population has slowly begun to increase and that is to be welcomed. However, the infrastructure needs to be in place. I have written to the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Minister, and I encourage the Minister with us today to be of whatever help he can in encouraging BT to try to ensure that that service is the best possible available to the islanders so it can be a help to them.

There is much more I could say, but I want to conclude on, I suppose, a sad note, but it needs to be placed on record. During the times that I had the privilege of visiting the island, I often used the services of the late Johnny Curry. It was always an experience to get into a rigid inflatable boat (RIB) in Ballycastle harbour and go over to the island. Unfortunately, as a result of an accident at sea just a few weeks ago, Johnny's life was taken. If nothing else, I want to ensure that this debate is a lasting memory to him, to all that he did for the island and to the many hundreds, if not thousands, of people who he conveyed from Ballycastle over to Rathlin Island.

I have invited every Minister in the Executive, and the Executive, to visit the island. To any Member who has not done so, I say do come, do visit and you will have a thoroughly enjoyable time.

**Mr McKay:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Member for bringing this issue to the Assembly. The Rathlin Island policy was introduced by the previous Minister, Conor Murphy, last year. He not only championed the policy at the Executive table but built relationships with the islanders through his interactions and visits there, as the Member outlined. Only last week, he was back on the island for a Rathlin ramble in aid of the RISE foundation, which raises money for addiction services.

What the Member said gives an understanding of Rathlin's diversity with regard to not only its environment but also its people, activities and how it is such a welcoming place no matter where you come from. The island is, of course, environmentally rich, with lighthouses at either end and many different walks. There is biodiversity; there are basking sharks and puffins and many different species on the island.

I echo Mr Storey's invitation to Members to visit the island, but not just for a day: there is great accommodation there. I took my holidays on Rathlin this year; not only is it relatively inexpensive, but you can spend a whole week taking part in many different activities, which I did. I invite Members to look up the accommodation and avail of it at any time of year.

Rathlin has much to offer and is rich in tourism potential. Mervyn referred to the many dives that take place there. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) and the Enterprise Minister could do more to market not just Rathlin but Ballycastle; that would benefit Ballycastle, which is a gateway to the island. People who stay in that area are more likely to take a trip to the island. The north coast is marketed through the Giant's Causeway and "the Port", and Ballycastle and Rathlin can be left out. We need to develop that to ensure that Rathlin is valued and that its value comes across in how it is presented by the Tourist Board.

There are a number of good points in the policy. The Executive are committed to enhancing community involvement; to improving public services; and to advancing policies for a sustainable island community. The action plan will be reviewed next year: that review takes place every two years, as outlined in the policy. The forum also meets twice a year.

Several issues need to be looked at and perhaps added to when the Minister reviews the policy and action plan, particularly energy and broadband provision. I have put a number of questions to the Enterprise Minister about getting fibre-optic broadband for the island. Present broadband provision is an issue for the islanders and needs to be addressed to help to build a sustainable community on the island and increase the opportunities for people from different types of employment to work there, as many people work from home these days. Bearing in mind the access areas, a good broadband service is important to people on Rathlin.

There are issues around energy: tidal energy, oil exploration and even fracking. The islanders have many questions about such issues. That is not to say that they are against those options, but it is important that those issues be explored. Rathlin's residents need to be central to the decision making, and any adverse impact needs to be taken into account. Perhaps when the policy is reviewed, the energy issue needs

to be examined once more to take into account recent developments around oil exploration and so on. Rathlin residents must be party to that decision making because energy decisions could impact adversely, not just on the islanders but on tourism, which would be a great tragedy.

I thank the Member for bringing the issue to the Floor. I echo his sentiments and offer my condolences on the death of Johnny Curry. I was on the island shortly after Johnny lost his life in tragic circumstances and came across a member of his family in one of the local businesses. It came as quite a shock to the island, although there is obviously always a risk of such tragedy in that way of life. Unfortunately, there have been a number of tragedies in the north coast area over recent months. Johnny was a good example to people and an example of the way of life of Rathlin. I add to that sentiment and pay tribute to him.

#### 4.30 pm

**Mr Swann:** We have already heard cross-party tourism broadcasts for the island. That shows the rest of the House just what a fantastic place Rathlin is, no matter who you are or where you come from. Rathlin is one of those places in my North Antrim constituency that is a must-see for anyone who visits the area. I thank the Member for securing the debate, and, in relation to Rathlin, I want to remind him of a few words that he said, which I hope that he can apply to other debates and issues in the House. It is not the size that matters, Mervyn, if you recall your comments yesterday.

As Mervyn said earlier, David from the Rathlin Development and Community Association was in the House today, and that is very welcome. I welcome him here to hear the debate and our best wishes to the islanders and their project. I had the privilege to be on the island in the past week or so, when I spoke to Noel, the chairman of the development association. That shows just how many of the islanders would have liked to have been here today to hear the debate, but realised that, when it finished, by the time they got back up to the ferry, there would be no service until the next morning. We should always bear that in mind when we speak of Rathlin and its inhabitants. As the only inhabited island of Northern Ireland, we should always bear that in mind when we refer to them.

As Mervyn and Daithí have both said, Rathlin is a fantastic place to visit. From Marconi's cottage

to Robert the Bruce's cave, it is a fantastic launching pad for invading Scotland. That is how Rathlin was described to me, but, as a North Antrim Member, I was not prepared to go that far at this time.

The Rathlin Island policy and action plan has already been referred to as a fantastic template for what many communities in Northern Ireland would wish to have. It is a template that shows that a community association can come together, tap into their elected representatives and set up a progressive, positive plan for engagement with Government Departments to ensure proper delivery and to enable them to access all of the services that are available to them.

One recent announcement that was welcomed by the islanders was that they have managed to retain their post office, which was under threat due to the retirement of the postmistress. That is one of the positive signals that can be sent out and echoed. When there are so many rural constituencies and areas across Northern Ireland, including areas in my own constituency such as Glarryford, which is losing a sorting office, those are positive notes for the islanders.

Mervyn also referred to the difficulties that the islanders face. I thank him for acknowledging the fact that it was an Ulster Unionist Health Minister who delivered the 24/7 nursing cover for the islanders. They were very appreciative of that, and they mentioned it during my visit.

They are now faced with another serious health issue in relation to their two social carers. That has been raised with me at a constituency level. Of the two home helps that they previously had, they are now down to one to deliver all of the service provision on the island. That delivery, no matter who lives in a rural constituency, always seems to rely on someone who can be drafted in from another trust area. However, when you live on Rathlin, there is nobody that you can draft in, because it is an island community. I ask the Minister — I am sure that I can get his support — to ensure that that provision of home help is increased back to two providers. I will be raising that at a meeting with the trust later in the week.

As other Members have said, there are good points that can be developed when we have a clear, concise, directed action plan. The islanders have secured a further 10 units for social housing, which are subject to planning application approval, but which they hope will

be delivered shortly. That will enable young islanders to stay on the island in their own community. They are very proud of that and hope that it happens.

Members mentioned the issue of broadband coverage. It is unfortunate that the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment seems to have declared that Northern Ireland has 100% broadband coverage. That may be in the title, but the delivery and provision that the islanders receive definitely does not match up to that claim.

Perhaps the Minister will give us some guidance about the concerns that have been expressed about the Minister of Education's recent announcement concerning changes to the school structure and education provision that would affect the future of the primary school on the island. I know that the people speak very highly of the primary education system, but when it comes to secondary provision, the pupils have to come offshore and board in Belfast and Ballycastle. It would be a great detriment to the island if the primary-school provision were ever under threat. The Assembly should try to ensure that the content of the policy action plan is delivered.

**Mr Storey:** That issue was raised at the Committee for Education, albeit through a political point made by a Member who is not in the House today. However, the Minister made it clear when he spoke to the Committee that there is no way that the policy will apply to Rathlin Island. The island has unique circumstances, which will be reflected. We are quite happy to say that the school will remain on Rathlin for many years to come.

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

**Mr Swann:** Thank you very much, Mervyn. That clarification will put a lot of islanders at ease. It is definitely a positive contribution.

Wind and wave renewables were also mentioned earlier. Rathlin, as we have all agreed, is ideally situated to take full advantage of that. However, like Mervyn, I also want to ensure that any wind or wave installations that are situated around the island are developed in a way that benefits the community.

The two previous contributors referred to the hardships that the islanders face. I want to take another moment to mention Johnny Curry, whom



we should all remember. We need to realise the dangers of being an islander and the many more daily threats that islanders face than we do on the mainland of Northern Ireland, in north Antrim or just across the water in Ballycastle. We should continue to bear that in mind when we progress the policy action plan or any further developments through the islanders' forum.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Member must bring his remarks to a close.

**Mr Swann:** The islanders are lucky to have a policy action plan and the continued support of an Ulster Unionist Minister as the Minister responsible for Rathlin.

**Mr D McIlveen:** I wish to congratulate my colleague for securing the debate. Before I begin, I believe that we should commend the people of Rathlin for their hard work in developing the island, much of which was done in isolation. I have visited the island on a number of occasions, and the islanders' work is very impressive.

I commend the work of the Rathlin Development and Community Association, which comprises an inspiring group of people. Through the Rathlin policy action plan, the association has developed some innovative plans. As I said, a lot of that has gone unnoticed and unsung. I was fortunate enough to be invited to the island earlier this year, and, despite the rather rocky crossing, I thoroughly enjoyed the visit. As the only inhabited offshore island in Northern Ireland, I truly believe that overarching Executive support for Rathlin is vital. I encourage the Minister to take that on board and ensure that the island is not forgotten in plans moving forward.

The policy action plan is a detailed and proactive vision for the future of the island. There are three main aims of the plan: the first is to enhance community involvement; the second is to improve the provision of public services for the islanders; and the third is to advance policies for a sustainable island community.

With regard to community involvement, around 100 people live on the island, many of whom are fifth and sixth generation islanders. The community association deserves our full support, most especially because you need to be a member of the community on the island to fully understand life there. That is well evidenced by a document that was published

by the islanders called 'A Place Apart: Island Voices'. If you have not already read it, I sincerely recommend that you do. Reading through the piece, you get a real sense of the passion, hard work and community atmosphere that exists on Rathlin.

The sense of community is particularly relevant when considering volunteering. In most communities, volunteering means working with senior citizens or helping out at the local youth club. On Rathlin, however, the notion of volunteering is quite different. In real terms, volunteering there is a way of life. One of the islanders is quoted in the document as saying:

*"We thought about how to encourage voluntary effort, we thought about celebrating it, having an award or something. But who would get it? Just about everybody on the Island. Just about everyone volunteers something."*

Ultimately, any form of volunteer work needs to have support and subsidy. I urge the Executive to support Rathlin's plans for community involvement.

The second aim is to improve public services for islanders. Island life has its own peculiarities, not least with regard to the provision of public services. We all take certain basics for granted, such as transport links, provision for young people, electricity generation and healthcare. On Rathlin, however, all those issues have to be carefully considered because there are some major difficulties with out-of-hours medical cover, a limited mains water supply and inadequate waste management and recycling provision. Although we pay tribute to the fact that ground has certainly been gained in respect of some of those matters, I highlight to the Minister that there is still more work to be done. Most specifically, there are problems with broadband supply on the island, as Mr McKay has mentioned. There is considerably slower broadband on Rathlin than on the mainland. We should be actively trying to change that. The most remote areas will benefit most from good broadband supply, and I hope that the Executive will support Rathlin in its efforts to improve it.

The final issue that must be addressed is policies in relation to a sustainable island community. Creating a sustainable community and economy on the island will be vital for its survival. Some useful work has been done on the social economy on Rathlin, and I congratulate my party colleague Arlene Foster,

who has done some work in that regard. In such a small economy, that kind of work can only be congratulated.

I also welcome a recent RSPB (Royal Society for the Protection of Birds) report, which concluded that the effect of the reserve on the island has had a very positive impact on the island's economy. In 2009, the reserve brought £230,000 of visitor spend to the island, and the conservation work has directly created three full-time jobs. However, with the exception of those jobs, the main benefit of the reserve is during the summer months. The residents are fully aware that a sustainable community must improve the environment, economy and community simultaneously. However, there are fears that grant money and tourism are being too heavily relied on. The residents would like to be more in control of their own economy, and, as such, would support a sustainable project from which the community could benefit long term. I urge the Executive to work with the island to ensure that that becomes a reality.

The three aims that I have outlined are all positive reasons as to why the Executive should support Rathlin Island. However, there is also one very simple reason why the island needs Executive support: it is the only offshore island that we have. The relationship between the Northern Ireland Assembly and the island should send out the very strong message that the Assembly is in touch with even the most remote parts of the Province. I encourage all members of the Executive to play their part in ensuring that government policy and support reaches all parts of Northern Ireland.

#### 4.45 pm

**Mr Ford:** Mr Deputy Speaker, you will see that I am speaking from the Back Benches, as I am happy to say that the Department of Justice has no direct involvement with Rathlin, although last year, not long after the House elected me as Minister of Justice, I arrived on Rathlin to discover that I had just missed the annual Rathlin meeting of Moyle District Policing Partnership. It was a fairly short meeting, and that says a fair bit about Rathlin.

Mervyn Storey started, and others joined in, with a description of the physical beauties of the island. Members covered almost everything except for the golden hare and the seals. Other Members then discussed the social aspects of the island, and almost everything was covered

except for the model yacht racing, which is fine if you get a nice summer's evening at Ushet lough, but not great otherwise.

As Members know, I do not represent North Antrim, but I have visited the island a few times, and I live only a few miles south of Robin Swann, so I think that I can get in on the act. However, I have visited the island on two occasions when I have been in the company of Ministers. Once was, I think, three years ago when the then Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety visited to discuss the nursing issue. Indeed, I think that that was the occasion when Robin Swann was paying his apprenticeship visit to the island as the understudy to Bob Coulter. The second time was to see Arlene Foster, as Minister of the Environment, open the new facilities at the west light for the RSPB. It is clear that there has been a degree of Executive engagement, and, indeed, the current Minister for Regional Development has played his part in that, so we should acknowledge that there has been some recognition, and there have certainly been improvements in recent years.

Yet, there is still the issue that that six-mile stretch of water leaves Rathlin cut off from basic services that the vast majority of people in Northern Ireland expect. I have crossed that stretch of water on the Canna, on the Rathlin Express and on a variety of rigid inflatable boats (RIBs), including that of the late Johnny Curry, and I join in the tributes that have been paid to him today. In what was probably my briefest visit, on a fairly bleak February day a few years ago, the Portrush lifeboat was stranded on the harbour wall. If that does not emphasise the isolation that can apply to a place such as Rathlin in bad weather, nothing will.

Improvements have been made to the ferry services, although they have not been without some problems. We have seen the provision of mains electricity and the enhancement of water services on the island, yet, at times, those things have gone wrong. I find it somewhat disappointing that, when mains electricity was put to the island, there was a cable that would more than cater for the needs of the island but which would not meet the potential need for the development of renewables on the island. It is clear that that is one way in which sustainable jobs could be provided.

There is absolutely no doubt that some incredibly good work has been done by the people of Rathlin, particularly through the Rathlin Development and Community Association. It is good to know that David Quinney Mee is here to hear the debate and report back to the islanders about it. Yet, there is still much more to be done to build on that volunteering spirit, the sort of spirit that sees Northern Ireland's only combined fire station and coastguard station. Indeed, it is described as the only volunteer fire crew as opposed to a retained fire crew. All of that is an example of how people on the island have had to develop their own resilience, yet, as we seek to provide modern services, we have to maintain the social fabric that has provided that sort of culture and ensure that we also provide the up-to-date 21st century services that every citizen has a right to expect. I am not sure that we have got that completely right yet.

David McIlveen talked about the development plan, and, if that were done, it would address things. Mervyn Storey talked about joined-up government, and Rathlin is a clear case of where a small community needs that to happen more and better than it has happened in every part of Northern Ireland.

One key area that has not been touched on is planning. You cannot meet the needs of a specific community such as Rathlin by applying the same kinds of policies that need to be applied in the rest of rural Northern Ireland to protect the environment and maintain the social fabric at the same time. Sustainable development has a strong environmental factor and a strong social factor, but it requires appropriate and sustainable economic development to be balanced with it.

Robin Swann highlighted the issue of the new social housing, and that is fine provided it gets planning approval and goes ahead. However, there are clearly examples where development of local indigenous business has not proceeded in recent years because of planning matters.

**Mr Storey:** I thank the Member for giving way. I want to go back to the point that I made about joined-up government. Islanders tell me that, prior to meetings of the forum, there is always a wave of activity from all the Departments because every Department feels that it has to get everything up to date for the meeting. However, as soon as the meeting is over, it

seems as though the waves calm again. We need a consistency of approach to the issues of the island, and the Member would do well to look at that.

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

**Mr Ford:** I take Mr Storey's point. There is a real need to ensure, as is often the case when ensuring joined-up government in every aspect of our work, that we do not just see a hive of activity when a meeting is coming up and then allow things to lapse for the next 12 weeks until the next quarterly meeting. I have no doubt that, given the enthusiasm that the current Minister has shown by his recent trip to the island, he will ensure that that will not be the case, and I have no doubt that the Members for North Antrim will ensure that he lives up to that challenge in the future.

As Mervyn Storey has mentioned over recent weeks, including in press releases, there is a suggestion that the Executive should be invited to hold a meeting on Rathlin. If I could don my ministerial hat briefly, I will say that, to some extent, that would be a waste of a good day on Rathlin. If I were given the opportunity of sitting at Ushet or Mill Bay watching the seals or, at the right time of the year, heading out to the West Light viewpoint to study kittiwakes and puffins, or sitting in the Manor House around an Executive table, I know what I would prefer. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Agnew:** I thank Mr Storey for bringing the debate to the House. As he recently spoke in a debate on schools in north Down, and was welcome in doing so, I hope that he will welcome my contribution to this debate today.

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

**Mr Agnew:** I will indeed.

**Mr Weir:** Would the Member be willing to facilitate a more permanent swap between the two of you? *[Laughter.]*

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

**Mr Agnew:** I am sure that I would be welcome as Chair of the Committee for Education, and I am sure that its members would welcome the break.

There is no doubt that Rathlin is an integral part of our tourism product in Northern Ireland.

As a member of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, I have heard on a number of occasions how the Northern Ireland Tourist Board plans to double the revenue that Northern Ireland receives from tourism. I hope that is supported and welcomed by the people of Rathlin. Indeed, I hope that, if we achieve that ambition, they will benefit from it.

To achieve such an ambition, we need joined-up thinking at government level, and that is why I chose to speak on the debate. On the one hand, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is trying to promote tourism in Northern Ireland, and, as I mentioned, Rathlin is a key part of that. However, on the other hand, as has been mentioned, licences have been granted for the drilling for oil and gas on Rathlin Island and the seas around it. If such drilling goes ahead, it will be a major threat to tourism on the island and across Northern Ireland.

Members referred to the potential for wind and tidal resources in the coastal waters of the island. I hope that such proposals are taken forward in a way that is sympathetic to the needs of the marine environment, the coastal environment and, indeed, to the people of Rathlin. I mentioned joined-up government, and I hope that the forthcoming marine Bill will ensure that any renewable energy proposals —

**Mr Storey:** I thank the Member for giving way. Based on my recent correspondence with the Minister about the activities of organisations, I can offer him some reassurance. In her reply, the Minister said that a strategic environmental assessment had identified the north coast marine environment as very sensitive. As offshore developers bring forward projects in relation to Rathlin, all those fishing and navigation infrastructure issues will have to be considered in detail. Given that the north coast is an area of outstanding natural beauty and has a nature reserve, those issues are of concern to the Minister, as she outlined in her correspondence.

**Mr Agnew:** I appreciate the Member's intervention, and I appreciate that the Minister is aware of the issue. Unfortunately, that does not allay my concerns. The simple reason for that is the track record of oil and gas industries in areas where they drilled in the past. In particular, it is accepted that the low-lying fruit of oil and gas resources has been reached, and, therefore, the majority of the forthcoming

proposals to drill for oil and gas seek to access the hard-to-reach resources. Diathí McKay mentioned fracking, which causes great concern to me and other environmentalists.

The RSPB report, 'Natural Foundations: Conservation and Local Employment in the UK', which was mentioned earlier, highlights the 9.3 full time equivalent jobs in wildlife and conservation on Rathlin. The proposals for oil and gas drilling could put those jobs at risk. I have been speaking to the RSPB, and a meeting has been organised for tomorrow evening to discuss oil and gas exploration in the wider Antrim area. Representatives of the marine task force will speak at that meeting to highlight their concerns about those proposals.

I contend that, wherever in Northern Ireland oil and gas drilling takes place, Northern Ireland will see little benefit from the profits, which will, inevitably, go to multinational organisations. We will, however, bear the brunt of the full cost of damage to the environment in which our constituents live and to our economy's promotion of its tourism product.

I urge the Executive to support Rathlin, and I urge Members to take such issues seriously when they arise in their communities and constituencies. I call on the various Ministers responsible to resist proposals for oil and gas drilling.

**Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development):** I am grateful for the opportunity to listen to Members' contributions to this important debate. I especially thank Mr Storey for sponsoring it. I know that he, along with the other Members who have the honour of representing Rathlin, visit often and know the island well. Mervyn painted the scene by detailing the history and story of Rathlin Island in his initial remarks.

I would like to deal with a number of points, including issues raised by Members. As Mr Storey is aware, my Executive colleagues and I recognise the challenges faced by the island community on Rathlin. We know that those need to be addressed differently from issues on the mainland. For that reason, we continue to progress the Rathlin Island policy, which the previous Executive endorsed in February 2010. My Department, though my predecessor, took the lead on that action plan, which was prepared within six months of that endorsement.



**5.00 pm**

Last week, I had the pleasure and great privilege of visiting the island to chair the Ministers' forum. Along with the many other tourists on the boat, I was extremely fortunate to have a smooth crossing on the Canna. It was a great honour for me to make my first official visit as Minister for Regional Development with particular responsibility for Rathlin. I had been there a number of years ago with my family on a private visit, but it was lovely to be there, particularly on such a glorious day.

Reference has been made to the tragic death of Mr Curry. I was able to pass on my personal condolences to members of his family, and I join with others today to place those on the record.

The warmth of the reception from the islanders and the hospitality shown to me and the numerous Government officials who were there to represent their Departments was very much appreciated. As you know, the forum was established to monitor progress against the Rathlin action plan, and it meets biannually. Officials from eight Departments and Moyle District Council met island representatives to discuss concerns and achievements to date. I take the point that it is important not only for officials attend and prepare for the meeting but for the outcomes of the meeting to be carried forward. I will ensure that that happens.

The action plan was produced as a result of extensive talks with the Rathlin Development and Community Association and a series of meeting with officials in other Departments and Moyle District Council. The plan, which seeks to address key issues of concern to islanders, has 12 objectives. Those include enabling the community to contribute to island policies; having a good ferry service, developing islanders' employability; ensuring affordable housing provision; and providing equitable access to health and social care. During the forum and in discussions with the islanders in the margins of the meeting, they assured me that they were happy with the progress made to date and the ongoing efforts made by the Executive on their behalf to improve services and the quality of life.

For an island community, links with the mainland are vital. My Department funds the Rathlin Island to Ballycastle ferry service, which is operated by Rathlin Island Ferry Limited. Since July 2009, there have been two vessels on the

route, one of which is a purpose-built passenger-only vessel, the MV Rathlin Express, and the other is the MV Canna, which has vehicle access. Usage of the service has experienced year-on-year growth and is expected to rise to over 90,000 passengers this year. The growth in visitor numbers as the result of the introduction of the Rathlin Express has delivered economic benefits, including increased employment to the island. My Department has also invested around £150,000 in new passenger boarding facilities at Rathlin and Ballycastle harbour, which has enhanced accessibility to the island for people with reduced mobility.

The environment forum, which is chaired by an official from my Department, brings together islanders, the RSPB, the National Trust and officials from the Northern Ireland Environment Agency. The forum provides islanders with the opportunity to contribute to policies that impact on Rathlin's unique natural inbuilt environment. It provides a useful platform for communication between islanders and key landowners. Work is ongoing to develop a biodiversity plan for Rathlin, which will be completed by March 2012 and will include two short DVDs to showcase the wildlife on the island.

As noted previously, my Department is not alone in progressing the action plan. We have been working closely with other Departments. Key issues that have been progressed to date include the participation of two businesses in Moyle District Council's Steps to Success programme. The Department for Employment and Learning held a careers clinic and information day on the island earlier this year, which provided an opportunity for residents to raise specific issues of concern with officials.

We recognise the importance of supporting and encouraging existing and start-up businesses in Northern Ireland and the particular difficulties experienced by Rathlin islanders. An extensive range of support is available, which islanders can access and which the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has made islanders aware of. In addition, DETI will hold a business surgery on the island shortly.

Tourism, as has been mentioned, is central to the economy of Rathlin. DETI officials advise that between 2006 and 2011, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board provided £180,000 of financial assistance for tourism product development on Rathlin through

its tourism development scheme. Projects include the Rathlin West Light visitor centre and infrastructure improvements at Rathlin harbour. The island has benefited from the capital investment as part of the continuing implementation of the Causeway Coast and Glens tourism master plan currently in operation.

From listening to the islanders, I know that a concern is the granting of a licence by DETI at the start of the year to PR Singleton Ltd to explore for oil and gas. I have heard Members express concern about that. DETI officials assure me that although the licence grants the company exclusive rights to explore for oil and gas under Rathlin, it does not automatically give them permission to drill on the island. Officials from DETI will closely monitor the process and keep islanders informed of developments.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I almost had a sleepless night when preparing for this debate, wondering if any Member would mention fracking, because I did not want to be suspended from the House for a very long period. *[Laughter.]* I assure Members that fracking is not permitted, and DETI will monitor the process closely and keep islanders informed of developments at all times.

The emerging offshore technologies that could contribute to Rathlin's becoming a carbon neutral island are also within the remit of DETI; offshore renewables are at a very early stage. If licences are granted, initiation stages for projects will not be expected until 2015-16.

Broadband was raised at the forum, and I have asked DETI officials to write to BT to ask it to review service on the island.

With regard to current housing need, the Department for Social Development has advised that a site has been identified and a price to purchase agreed to develop 10 social housing units on the island, subject to planning.

I am very pleased that medical care was raised, as it is an issue of concern. We will continue to work with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety on related issues, particularly the home help service, as raised by Mr Swann.

I was delighted to pay a visit to the school and to meet the supply teacher and pupils. My understanding is that Rathlin primary school is secure.

As Minister for Regional Development, and on behalf of the Executive, I assure Members that the Executive are completely committed to helping Rathlin Island. I intend to chair the next Ministers' forum on the island in early spring, but, in the interim, I will continue to monitor progress against the action plan and be kept regularly briefed on developments.

*Adjourned at 5.08 pm*









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