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Assembly Business

Dr McDonnell: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. It is with great sadness that I have to raise a point of order with you, but, during recent weeks, the Minister for Social Development's reactions to events in north Belfast have brought the House into serious disrepute. The Minister failed to give full support to the upholding of law and order. To my mind, Minister Nelson McCausland has clearly breached articles 1.4 and 1.5 of the ministerial Pledge of Office. Mr Speaker, is there any way in which you can take some action and sort this situation out?

Mr Speaker: I thank the Member for his point of order. As he will know, as Speaker, I have no role in deciding whether the Pledge of Office, including even the ministerial code, has been breached by any Minister. The Member will know that these are complex and difficult issues. As Speaker, I have no role whatsoever in that. However, I will be keen to talk to the Member outside the Chamber about the complex issues to do with whether a Minister has broken the Pledge of Office or with his role as a Minister.

Dr McDonnell: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker, I have discussed this issue with some of my colleagues, and we feel that this breach is very serious for the House. You rightly suggested that you do not have the authority on that matter, and we accept your wisdom on that. In that event, and because of the behaviour, we may have no option but to bring a motion of censure to the Floor.

Mr Speaker: Order. I listened intently to the Member, but, once again, I will say that these are complex matters. I say to all Members that, as Speaker, I have no role whatsoever in this issue. However, I am always keen to talk to Members outside the House on these issues, because they are complex.

Order. Before we proceed to today's business, I welcome Members back after the summer recess. As Members will know, I am so glad to see them in the Chamber this afternoon, and I also have a few announcements.

Budget (No. 2) Bill: Royal Assent

Mr Speaker: I wish to inform the House that the Budget (No. 2) Act (Northern Ireland) 2012 has received Royal Assent and became law on 20 July 2012.

Committee Membership

Mr Speaker: I have received the resignations of Mr Alban Maginness as Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment and of Mr Joe Byrne as Deputy Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee. Mr Patsy McGlone was nominated as Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment and Mr John Dallat was nominated as Deputy Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee, both with effect from 7 September 2012. Mr McGlone and Mr Dallat accepted the nominations. I am satisfied that the requirements of Standing Orders have been met and, therefore, confirm that the appointments took effect from 7 September 2012.

Matter of the Day

Michael McKillop

Mr Speaker: Mr Alban Maginness has been given leave to make a statement on the award given to Michael McKillop by the International Paralympic Committee (IPC), which fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. I recognise the huge success of many athletes from right across Northern Ireland who attended the Paralympic Games. I will be reasonably relaxed if Members want to widen the issue slightly, because I understand that there is a wider issue.

Members will be aware that I wrote to them on 3 July about changes to the arrangements for calling them to speak on matters of the day. I do not intend to revisit all the details of my ruling in the Chamber this afternoon. However, I remind the House that there will no longer be a speaking list at the Table. If other Members wish to speak, they should clearly indicate to me that they wish to be called by rising in their place and continuing to do so until they are called, as happens at Question Time. All decisions on who is called will be at my discretion. I will take a number of factors into account, as I always do. I do not expect most matters of the day to take much longer than they did before, but I have ruled that there will be a maximum time limit of 30 minutes.

Before I call Mr Maginness, I remind other Members who wish to be called that they should rise clearly in their place and continue to do so. All Members will have up to three minutes to speak. As I said, on this occasion, I will allow Members more latitude, within reason, to refer to the success of other Olympians. I will not take any points of order until the end. If that is clear, we shall proceed. The changes have come about because Members from various parties raised issues about getting the balance of business and party contributions right in the House. They have been made to streamline the business of the House as we enter the new session.

Mr A Maginness: I rise to speak about Michael McKillop and his extraordinary success at the Paralympics. I am also mindful of the many others from Northern Ireland who engaged in the Paralympics and, indeed, the Olympics. I have to say that they have done us proud. Their extraordinary efforts should be appreciated by all in the House. The courage and skill demonstrated and the entertainment and thrills that they provided us with are a matter of great celebration for all the people in Northern Ireland and in the House. I refer to not only Michael McKillop but to Jason Smyth, Bethany Firth and all those who won medals and participated in the Paralympics.

Michael McKillop is a lucky man: lucky because he lives in North Belfast and is one of my constituents. I know that Mr Ford has tried to claim him, but he has 200 metres of North Belfast to claim into South Antrim. North Belfast is a wonderful place, as we all know, because we have seen such extraordinary achievement from Michael McKillop — and, indeed, from Paddy Barnes, I hasten to add. It is a great honour for me, as a representative of North Belfast, to applaud the fact that Michael McKillop not only won two gold medals — he won both the T37 1,500 metres and 800 metres — but established himself as the world's greatest Paralympic middle-distance runner. Indeed, he had the honour of being presented with one of the gold medals by his mother, Catherine, and, of course, his father Paddy has been a wonderful coach in his athletic endeavours.

Michael is an extraordinary person, and the extraordinary zeal that he has shown for the Paralympic movement has been recognised by the International Paralympic Committee, and he was rightly honoured last night in London. The London Olympics and Paralympics have been a wonderful success.

Mr Speaker: I remind the Member of the time.

Mr A Maginness: The House should congratulate Michael on the honour that he has bestowed on all the people in Northern Ireland and in Belfast.

Mr Campbell: On behalf of my party and, I am sure, the rest of the House, I join the honourable Member for North Belfast in paying tribute to Michael McKillop, who was an outstanding Paralympian, and the other athletes. We do not want to go round the houses to say how tremendous each constituency is. Having said that, it would be remiss of me to ignore the Chambers brothers and Alan Campbell, who were absolutely magnificent in the Olympics, as were Jason Smyth and Sally Brown in the Paralympics. We undoubtedly have much to be proud of. We all sat and watched with awe as the

inspiring efforts of our Olympians and Paralympians brought success back to Northern Ireland. I understand that recognition for the athletes will be forthcoming, and that is right and proper.

Only a couple of days ago, the manager of the Russian football team, who was formerly a failed manager of England, Fabio Capello, when talking about the forthcoming match against Northern Ireland, said:

"Sure it is only Northern Ireland".

Well, it is only Northern Ireland that has the best Paralympian in the world in Jason Smyth, and it is only Northern Ireland that has the greatest boxers, rowers and other athletes from across the Province. We pay tribute to them, and we are exceptionally proud of them all.

Mr Speaker: I ask Members to continually rise in their places. There is a keen interest in this subject, and if Members continually rise, we will try to get all Members in.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I concur with what the previous Members have said and congratulate Michael McKillop on winning the Whang Youn Dai achievement award for the most outstanding Paralympic athlete of the games. Yesterday's all-Ireland hurling final brought together a wonderful summer of sporting achievement right across the island. It was a remarkable achievement for Team Ireland to win eight gold, three silver and five bronze medals. I think of Jason Smyth from my own neck of the woods who, of course, won double gold to follow the two that he had from Beijing.

I commend the Minister for putting together a reception this week. I wish her well after her recent hospitalisation and hope that she will make it on Thursday. I hope that Members here will attend the event in the Building on Thursday evening to mark the achievements of all the Olympians right across the board.

12.15 pm

There are also many who took part and did not win gold, and I congratulate them for their achievements. I think particularly of Sally Brown from Ballykelly. Last week was a very historic week for Ballykelly. Sally, of course, is the granddaughter of Brian Brown, who was a councillor of ours in Limavady Borough Council.

In fairness, perhaps this summer has changed people's attitude to sport. Particularly, and I heard this repeated on the radio this morning, it has changed people's attitude to disabilities. People have seen remarkable disabled athletes achieve goals that, a few short years ago, would have been beyond their reach. The House should join together and congratulate those people and mark that this week.

Mr Swann: On behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, I congratulate all our Paralympic and Olympic medal winners. I had the privilege to meet Michael McKillop at the LOCOG Inspire event held here in the Northern Ireland Assembly earlier in the year, and I had the chance to speak to him about his commitment to the positive promotion of Paralympic sports. He carries that to schools and community organisations throughout Northern Ireland. What I found especially significant with Michael was his unassuming, humble approach to his achievements. That night, he could not understand why he had even been invited here, never mind being on the stage. When Michael reflects this morning, he can look back at his two gold medals — a T37 1,500 metres gold medal and the world record and a T37 800 metres gold — and the fact that he was given the special award for male athlete who best exemplified the spirit of the Paralympics at the games in London. Having met Michael, I am under no illusion that he is well deserving of all those medals and the accolades.

Like Members who spoke previously, I add my congratulations to all the competitors who took part in the Paralympic and the Olympic Games. I also commend the game makers from Northern Ireland who went across to London and volunteered in various capacities to make the event the success that it was. There was a large commitment in dedication and time from people from Northern Ireland to make the Olympics the true success that we have seen.

Mr Ford: I join in the congratulations to Michael and to all our Paralympians and Olympians. I echo the words that were said by nearly every Member of the House, apart from the nasty border war that

Alban Maginness was attempting to wage with me. The key thing, and why he quite correctly highlighted Michael McKillop, is not just the issue of the medals or taking part, but the fact that Michael was recognised as truly embodying the Paralympian spirit, and that is a very significant statement for this society as a whole, not just for him. I remind Alban Maginness that, although the Sandyknowes area of Newtownabbey may currently be in North Belfast, he acknowledged that it is by only 200 metres, and we all know how quickly Michael McKillop could cover that if he wanted back into South Antrim.

On a serious point, as somebody who, in a past life, was a senior social worker in Newtownabbey and worked with groups assisting people with disabilities, it is a huge statement that one of ours achieved that award for embodying the spirit. It is recognition not just of what Michael and his family have done, which is clearly significant, it is also something in which all those involved in working to assist people with disabilities across Northern Ireland can take pride, especially those in Newtownabbey. Although we should recognise that the achievement of that special award is a victory for all of us, it is clearly a victory most particularly for Michael and his family, and it is something that we should all take pride in.

Last night, Lord Coe said that the Paralympic Games had changed the way in which we relate to disability. If that is the lasting legacy for all of us, that is something that will be truly worthwhile.

Ms P Bradley: I congratulate all the Olympians and Paralympians from Northern Ireland. From the very moment when we stood out on the steps on the Sunday morning when the torch came up to Stormont right through until the closing ceremony of the Paralympics last night, I was drawn in and truly addicted to it over those wet, horrible weeks in August. I especially want to speak as a Member for North Belfast and as someone who grew up in Glengormley, someone who represents Glengormley, someone who lives in Glengormley and someone who was the mayor of Newtownabbey and met Michael on several occasions. What a wonderful young man and what a wonderful ambassador for Paralympic sport in Northern Ireland and, of course, Newtownabbey. I offer him my wholehearted congratulations. I look forward to the homecoming party that he deserves when he arrives back in Glengormley.

Mr McNarry: I thank the Member for North Belfast for bringing the matter to us. What a way to start our new session, all together as we should be. Is it not wonderful how sport is the equaliser that brings us together?

I want to mention a couple of things. Having watched the faces of the athletes — just to be on the track; just to be in the auditorium; just to be doing whatever they were there to do — I can tell you that, for me, their expressions sold everything. In fact, at times, they really put me to shame, in that I did not recognise the disability that they had and how they were overcoming that. When I watched people play football, with a bell to direct them towards the goal, I said, "That is just astounding." We saw how people have overcome their disability to the best of their abilities and made the best out of them.

I will touch on the legacy. Much has been said about the legacy that the games will bring. Northern Ireland, on top of its victorious achievements, should now be laying claims for that legacy to make sure that we get a part of it and that funding is assured for the future. We end the games by looking forward to Rio de Janeiro in Brazil.

Finally, I say that we are a great country, Northern Ireland. We bump into people all over the world, holding positions in many, many spheres, who we can relate to because they come from a village or town or city that we were born in or know well. We have done well in these sports, at international and national level. I am very proud of all who took part and hope that they get the welcome they deserve. I hope that we remember what they have laid down for the young people coming after them. We have so much to look forward to.

Thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing the matter to be heard today.

Miss M McIlveen: Like other Members, I thank the Member for bringing forward the matter on the achievements of Michael McKillop. Those of us who were gripped by the Paralympics over the past couple of weeks were no doubt amazed at the victory over adversity that those who took part displayed. The efforts and achievements of Michael are certainly deserved in earning him the accolade of male athlete who best exemplified the spirit of the games. Michael utterly dominated both his races, but in his post-race interviews was truly magnanimous and gracious in victory, paying tribute to his fellow racers.

Although the Matter of the Day concerns the award conferred upon the Glengormley resident, I pay tribute to all the athletes from Northern Ireland who played a full and determined part in what was probably the best Olympic and Paralympic Games that I have ever seen. I thank James Brown, Sally Brown, Eilish Byrne, Bethany Firth, Laurence McGivern, Jason Smyth, Sharon Vennard, Paddy Barnes, Michael Conlon, Hannah Craig, Martyn Irvine, David McCann, Iain Lewers, Lisa Kearney, Alan Campbell, Richard and Peter Chambers, Ryan Seaton, Matt McGovern, James Espey, Sycerika McMahon, Melanie Nocher, Na Liu, Aileen Morrison and Gavin Noble for entertaining and inspiring all of us. They were all ambassadors for Northern Ireland on a world stage.

From the opening ceremony of the Olympics, when the Phil Kids' Choir sang on the Giant's Causeway, to Sir Kenneth Branagh's portrayal of Isambard Kingdom Brunel and Dame Mary Peters passing the torch to Katie Kirk to light the cauldron while Alex Trimble sang, through to the presentation of Michael McKillop's award, Northern Ireland was front and centre at the beginning, middle and end of both games. I pay tribute to the coaches, volunteers, schoolchildren, games makers and others from Northern Ireland who contributed to the outstanding success of London 2012, and, of course, all who made these the greatest Olympic and Paralympic Games.

Mr Speaker, I realise that the further achievement this weekend of Rory McIlroy should not go unmentioned and unrecognised. Yet again, he has made sure that Northern Ireland is at the centre stage of sporting success.

Mr McClarty: All of us have something in common this morning — all of us are back to school. However, we are also suffering from withdrawal symptoms from the Olympics and, latterly, the Paralympics. There were fantastic events on the world stage, and the Northern Ireland athletes proved themselves equal, if not more than equal, to others from around the world. I am talking not only about the medallists from Northern Ireland, but all the competitors, because even to achieve Olympic standard is a tremendous achievement for any athlete. Of course, I particularly think of the athletes from my own constituency. I remember particularly well standing in a church hall with the MP for the area and then at the Diamond watching our rowers bring honour and glory. They showed the real Olympic spirit. I think particularly of Alan Campbell who was on the point of exhaustion and was willing and able to give his very last to achieve his bronze medal.

I want to pay tribute to not only the athletes, Mr Speaker, but to their parents and families. They have made tremendous sacrifices over the years for their sons, daughters or whomever. Those people are not used to the limelight, but they had microphones thrust under their nose, and they represented Northern Ireland to the very best when they had to comment on national television.

Assembly Business

Extension of Sitting

Mr Speaker: I have been given notice by members of the Business Committee of a motion to extend today's business beyond 7.00 pm. Under Standing Order 10(3A), the Question on the motion will be put without debate.

Lord Morrow: I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 10(3A), the sitting on Monday 10 September 2012 be extended to no later than 7.30pm.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 10(3A), the sitting on Monday 10 September 2012 be extended to no later than 7.30pm.

Committee Business

Committee Membership

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

Resolved:

That Mr Declan McAleer replace Ms Michaela Boyle as a member of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development; that Ms Rosie McCorley replace Mr Pat Sheehan as a member of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure; that Mr Chris Hazzard and Mr Pat Sheehan replace Mr Phil Flanagan and Mr Daithí McKay as members of the Committee for Education; that Ms Sue Ramsey replace Ms Jennifer McCann, and that Ms Maeve McLaughlin be appointed, as members of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment; that Mr Barry McElduff replace Mr Chris Hazzard as a member of the Committee for the Environment; that Ms Megan Fearon be appointed as a member of the Committee for Finance and Personnel; that Ms Maeve McLaughlin be appointed as a member of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety; that Ms Rosie McCorley replace Ms Jennifer McCann as a member of the Committee for Justice; that Ms Megan Fearon and Ms Bronwyn McGahan replace Mr Francie Molloy and Ms Caitríona Ruane as members of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister; that Mr Declan McAleer be appointed as a member of the Committee for Regional Development; that Mr Phil Flanagan be appointed as a member of the Committee for Employment and Learning; that Ms Caitríona Ruane be appointed as a member of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee; that Mr Francie Molloy replace Mr Alex Maskey as a member of the Committee for Standards and Privileges; that Mr Phil Flanagan replace Ms Sue Ramsey as a member of the Committee on Procedures; that Mr Daithí McKay be appointed as a member of the Public Accounts Committee; and that Mr Gerry Kelly be appointed as a member of the Business Committee. — [Mr McCartney.]

Mr Speaker: We now move to the second motion on Committee membership. Again, this will be treated as a business motion. Therefore, there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That Mr Sean Rogers be appointed as a member of the Public Accounts Committee; and that Mr Alban Maginness be appointed as a member of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment. — [Mr P Ramsey.]

Mr Speaker: I know that this is the first day back, but the "ayes" need to be a wee bit louder.

Ministerial Statement

British-Irish Council Misuse of Drugs Sectoral Format

Mr Bell (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): Mr Speaker, in accordance with the requirements of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, I wish to make the following report on the eighth British-Irish Council ministerial meeting on the misuse of drugs, which was held in St Helier, Jersey on Friday 29 June 2012. Junior Minister Jennifer McCann MLA and I represented the Northern Ireland Executive at the meeting.

12.30 pm

Deputy Anne Pryke, Jersey's Minister for Health and Social Services, hosted the meeting. Jersey was also represented by the Minister for Home Affairs, Senator Ian Le Marquand, and the Assistant Minister for Health and Social Services, Constable John Refault. The Irish Government were represented by the Minister of State with responsibility for primary care, Ms Róisín Shortall TD, who chaired the meeting. Lord Henley, Minister of State for Crime Prevention and Antisocial Behaviour Reduction, represented the UK Government. Guernsey was represented by the Minister of Home Department, Mr Jonathan Le Tocq. The Isle of Man was represented by Honourable Juan Watterson MHK, Minister for Home Affairs. Ms Roseanna Cunningham, Minister for Community Safety and Legal Affairs, represented the Scottish Government. Finally, the Welsh Government were represented by Ms Joanna Jordan, director of corporate services and partnerships at the Health, Social Services and Children Department.

The main thematic discussion at the meeting focused on 'Young people and drugs — breaking the cycle'. During the discussion, Ministers shared evidence in relation to the trends in drug use among young people, and it was agreed that there is a need for an improved understanding of how the attitudes and behaviours of young people change and develop, as that is important in optimising the success of any interventions. Ministers agreed that the promotion of healthier lifestyle choices for young people through an improved focus on personal development and life skills is the key to breaking the cycle of substance use.

A graduated approach to prevention and education measures was favoured, ranging from universal approaches aimed at the general population, such as consistent education in the school setting and public information, to taking more targeted approaches, such as brief interventions and assertive outreach, aimed at those who are at greater risk. The importance of providing timely, age-appropriate treatment and support to young people who use drugs was discussed, together with alternative options other than incarceration for dealing with young offenders.

Discussions also focused particularly on how drug misuse can affect families and especially on addressing the increased risks for children in families that are experiencing problem substance use. The need for referral procedures across all service providers to ensure early and appropriate interventions for members of such families was also highlighted.

Concluding this section of discussion, the Council agreed on the importance of endeavouring to provide opportunities and experiences for young people that would lessen the likelihood of their becoming involved in drug use, as well as dealing with such issues for this age group in a way that increases the chances for long-term drug-free living.

During the meeting, Ministers also took the opportunity to discuss the use and misuse of alcohol in their jurisdictions. We exchanged information on the extent of problems relating to alcohol and the various approaches that are being taken to address the issues, including through legislative measures being explored in a number of member Administrations. Following the discussion, Ministers agreed that the use and misuse of alcohol should be included in the work of the British-Irish Council. Given the nature of alcohol use across the jurisdictions, we consider that this is a very positive and useful development.

We also reviewed the recent work carried out by the British-Irish Council in the area of the misuse of drugs. This included the summit meeting that took place in Dublin in January this year, where heads of Administrations and Ministers discussed 'Recovery from problem drug use' and agreed to encourage a renewed focus on recovery and to share successful approaches in that regard.

The 2012 programme also covered issues such as developing methods of assessing the progress of local drugs programmes to inform what is a wider policy development; the development and implementation of naloxone programmes to reduce deaths from opiate overdoses; and issues around the misuse of prescription drugs, in particular benzodiazepines.

It was agreed by Ministers that the meetings had provided a useful forum for sharing the detailed expertise and knowledge of those involved in the drugs sector across the British-Irish Council area. It was also noted that, in addition to exploring specific themes in depth, each meeting had facilitated the exchange of information on wider policy developments and initiatives.

We agreed that the work programme for 2013 would include sectoral group meetings on the misuse of drugs in Scotland, the United Kingdom, Guernsey and Ireland. That will help to continue the development of the formal and informal links that have built up between the Administrations to the benefit of the effort against drug misuse in all jurisdictions.

It was agreed that the next ministerial meeting of the work stream would be in late 2013.

Mr Nesbitt (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): I thank the junior Minister for his update on this important work. I go back to paragraph 11: did the junior Minister sense a meeting of minds from delegates on the issue of alternatives to incarceration? I have the impression, for example, that the tradition on the Isle of Man is what we might call a rather punitive physical intervention regime.

Mr Bell: In the criminal justice system, the 'New Strategic Direction for Alcohol and Drugs: Phase 2' outlines all the actions that we will take to reduce the harm related to alcohol and drug misuse, and the Northern Ireland Department of Justice has significant input to addressing alcohol- and drug-related offending. Through the 'New Strategic Direction for Alcohol and Drugs: Phase 2', a number of planned actions will assist offenders to overcome drug and substance misuse. They will include substance misuse programmes for those who are on probation and those in prison. It involves local policing and community safety partnerships working closely with drug and alcohol co-ordination teams to address substance misuse behaviour in communities. It includes the roll-out of a regional initial assessment tool into other sectors and the development of that tool as the first point of contact for all our agencies that work with young people so that they can identify, intervene early and signpost to the appropriate agencies so that young people can get the help that they need. It involves community organisations working in prisons to deliver psychological and educational programmes to all offenders, and it ensures that there is a continuum of treatment and support for those who are leaving prison and returning to the community and access to addiction services in the three custody suites. Those are the targeted measures that we will use to help young people to come through drug dependency and, in many cases, alcohol and drug dependency.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the junior Minister for his statement. He is quite right that early intervention is the key to this, and I agree entirely with him. The Minister will be aware that today is world suicide prevention day. He has visited my constituency of North Belfast and met those involved in trying to prevent the spread of the awful scourge of suicide, so he will know that a joined-up approach is —

Mr Speaker: I encourage the Member to come to his question.

Mr Humphrey: The connection between drugs, drink and suicide is well known. Does the Minister agree with me that the work of organisations such as FASA and church youth organisations is key to a resolution and that, as the Health Minister said this morning, a joined-up approach is absolutely essential.

Mr Bell: The Member raises two key points: joined-up working and early intervention. I am more than happy to place on record our thanks to the people in his constituency and to the churches and youth and community organisations, many of which work on an entirely voluntary basis, who work hard to give young people the opportunity, through, first of all, prevention and, secondly, early intervention, to receive the help that they need. It is important that we have targeted initiatives for those most at risk, including reaching out to the children and young people in North Belfast, Strangford and, I am sure, in all our constituencies who are not in education, employment or training. I pay tribute to those organisations and to all the organisations working across the constituencies, including my constituency of Strangford, where we have North Down Community Assistance, Scrabo Residents

Association and Ards Community Network, which worked in the Bowtown estate to transform murals and to ensure that young people got a positive message about abstaining from drug use. All those organisations deserve tremendous credit.

As I said in my statement, the important thing, in my view, is that the health and social care family has developed a regional initial assessment tool. That allows all those non-specialist workers to screen and assess a young person's drug and alcohol misuse, provide an initial intervention and signpost him or her to the correct service. That tool has been piloted and evaluated in the youth justice sector, and work is under way to roll it out across all the sectors: social services, education and the police. Over the past two years, the Public Health Agency has piloted the one-stop shop initiative to support young people around substance misuse.

As the Member for North Belfast pointed out, in his constituency, which is, in many ways, no different from all our constituencies, not only do young people have issues with substance misuse but there is the very serious issue of suicide. That is a priority for Jennifer McCann and me. Those of us who have worked with young people and lost some of them in our previous careers in social services know the impact that suicide has on social workers, the family, the loved ones and the surrounding families. However, there are also the issues of self-harm and mental health and well-being, and different pilot sites have been established in rural and urban areas. Each has taken a slightly different approach, but the initiative will be rolled out across Northern Ireland, and it will recognise that the misuse of drugs is often linked to the misuse of alcohol, self-harm and poor sexual and mental health.

Also as part of phase 2 of the new strategic direction, a range of local low-threshold counselling and mentoring services for children and young people is being commissioned and made available across Northern Ireland. Prevention is key, but it is key not only that we invest in services to prevent young people from engaging in substance misuse but that there is early intervention and a treatment and support service. I pay tribute to the local low-threshold counselling services, which are often the very first point of contact in the health service for children and young people with substance misuse issues.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his statement and answers so far. Given that the meeting focused on the issue of young people and drugs and breaking the cycle, what steps are the Executive taking to ensure not only that there is early intervention but that the signs of drugs misuse that the general public, schoolteachers and others can pick up on are reacted to? There should be a process that young people, particularly those at school, can go through to get support and intervention without being criminalised.

Mr Bell: The Member raises some important issues. There is a co-ordinated approach, initially with the Department of Education but also involving the Department of Health and the Department for Social Development. The key strategy that runs through all of this is the new strategic direction. As the Member states, it is important — the Executive are focused on recognising this — to realise that children and young people can be susceptible to the harm related not just to their own substance misuse but to that of others. We have to realise that a number of our young people have carers and parents who live with substance and alcohol misuse. It must be recognised that each individual has their own needs and will require a different approach from that taken with adults to address those needs.

12.45 pm

Therefore, two themes are being taken forward through the Executive: one is the theme of adults and the general public, and the second is that of children, young people and their families. As the Member alluded to in his question, the age of initiation can be critical. There is evidence that, sometimes, the earlier the young person starts drinking, the more likely they are to have serious alcohol problems later in life. Therefore, the focus on prevention work is being carried out to target a range of groups and through a wide spectrum of organisations, including not only the schools but the Youth Service and the wide body of community organisations that exist. However, a significant proportion of it is being taken forward in education settings. There is also a new focus on increasing the emphasis on developing and promoting prevention work in community settings, particularly for groups that are termed "hard-to-reach" and areas that are described as "disadvantaged".

The Member asked for specific initiatives. The key initiatives include the roll-out of the adapted school health and alcohol harm reduction project, which many Members will know as SHAHRP, in Northern Ireland. That project has already shown effectiveness in reducing alcohol-related harm among

schoolchildren in Northern Ireland, and alcohol and drug misuse remain mandatory elements of the school curriculum in Northern Ireland, as part of the wider personal and social development agenda.

Mr Eastwood: I thank the junior Minister for his statement. Has he or his Executive colleagues given any more thought to minimum pricing for alcohol?

Mr Bell: Yes. Minimum pricing for alcohol remains a very live subject that is under discussion. That is because of the significance of alcohol misuse to us in Northern Ireland. The research that we are looking at has shown that it costs up to £900 million a year and is a much bigger issue than drug misuse. I repeat: the cost of alcohol misuse is £900 million a year in Northern Ireland. The issues of particular concern are, as the Member says, first, how the alcohol is priced and, secondly, how it is promoted. Research has shown that alcohol is 62% more affordable today than it was more than 30 years ago in 1980 and that, as the relative price of alcohol falls, its consumption and misuse increase. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department for Social Development have been following developments in this area. In 2011, the Departments issued a joint consultation on the principle of introducing a minimum unit price in Northern Ireland, and they continue to work together on the issue. They are keen to assess and establish the impact that minimum unit pricing is likely to have in Northern Ireland. They are commissioning research to model the likely effect of minimum unit pricing in Northern Ireland, and that will help to inform the future decision in that area. I understand that we are also looking at the issues with colleagues in the Republic of Ireland.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the junior Minister for his update on the work that is being undertaken. What is his assessment of the extent and type of drug and alcohol misuse among young people and others in Northern Ireland? What practical and legislative measures are being explored in other British and Irish Administrations to address the misuse of alcohol in particular?

Mr Bell: It is important to note that, in Northern Ireland, the majority of our young people do not take drugs and that most of those who take those substances have done so recreationally. I do not like to use that term, as it can be misleading and lead to a false impression. In my view, any time that you take drugs, there is potential for harm. However, many of the young people who have experimented have not gone on to develop addiction or suffer significant harm. That having been said, as I know from my social work experience, there are many cases where young people have been at the very onset of starting to take drugs and have suffered severe health effects as a result. The message should go out to young people that there is no harm-free option in experimenting with drugs.

As the Member knows, drug misuse is only one issue that faces many of our young people. Alcohol misuse, obesity, sexual health, mental health, peer pressure and bullying all have an impact on our young people. However, research from surveys that have been carried out shows that Northern Ireland seems to be reaching something of a plateau in levels of drug misuse. We have real concerns about more young people involving themselves in drug use with the emergence of what are sometimes known as "new psychoactive substances" and sometimes mislabelled as "legal highs". I say that they are mislabelled as "legal highs", and I refer anybody who uses that term to the Medicines Act, which shows that it is illegal to provide drugs of that nature for human consumption. We need to avoid using the term "legal highs" or even dressing them up as "new psychoactive substances". These are drugs that are harmful, and young people appear to be using them, but, to answer the Member's question directly, overall drug misuse seems to be reaching something of a plateau. In my assessment, cannabis remains the main drug of misuse for our young people. Some 69% of the under-18s in treatment recorded cannabis as their main drug. Mephedrone is having an impact, with 17% recording that as their drug of misuse. Thankfully, we have very low numbers of under-18s either reporting the use of or seeking treatment for the use of heroin and cocaine. In addition, we see very low numbers of under-18s who are injecting any drugs.

As has been said by a number of Members, alcohol misuse among our young people remains the most prevalent issue for us to deal with. Some 46% of pupils report having taken an alcoholic drink, and of those who have had an alcoholic drink, 49% were aged 13 or under when they had their first drink. However, I am pleased to report that some progress is being made on reducing the percentage of young people who get drunk, which has fallen from 33% in 2003 to 23% in the last figures that I looked at, which are for 2010.

Overall, it is important that we do not overplay the figures or underplay the issue. Many young people will suffer real and lasting harm from drug use. There is no room for complacency. We need to

provide a range of services from prevention through to intervention and treatment services to support our young people not to use drugs in the first place and to assist them in their recovery when they do.

Mr G Robinson: I thank the junior Minister for his statement. Will he outline whether any proposals were made to ensure that local police forces work closely together to combat drug trafficking in the United Kingdom?

Mr Speaker: That is an example of a very focused question.

Mr Bell: Essentially, what has been done in police forces right across the jurisdictions is to focus on sharing good practice. Secondly, there is a focus on the fact that, as I said, it is not an issue for the police and the criminal justice system alone, although, when young people go on probation or are incarcerated as a result of a sentence, there is a co-ordinated approach to ensure that the cycle of addiction is broken, not only while they are in prison but when they are out of prison, through a continuum of progress. The focus was on multidisciplinary working, and that included the police services.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the junior Minister for his statement, which is on a hugely important matter. I remind him that, in what he is saying, there is too much on strategy, research, developing methods and informing wider policy, and there is a danger of referring to it as waffle again. We want to see actions, timelines and targets.

I will get to my question. Page 3 of the statement mentions legislative measures being explored in other Administrations. I think that that is also what Mr Lyttle was asking about and did not get an answer to. What other legislative measures are there or have been mentioned?

Mr Bell: Nothing was specifically identified as new legislation, as I recall. I will avoid point scoring because I think I have shown the clear and new processes that are taking place in dealing with young people. You may regard the work that is done on the school health and alcohol harm reduction project that I outlined as waffle, but I can assure you that, if you were to listen to the young people and schools in south Antrim, they would tell you, as they are telling me in Strangford and across Northern Ireland, that the school health and alcohol harm reduction project has already been shown to be effective in reducing alcohol-related harm in schoolchildren in Northern Ireland. If you had been listening, you would have heard that alcohol and drug misuse remain mandatory elements of the school curriculum in that part of Northern Ireland. If you had been listening, you would have heard the targeted initiatives that reach out to young people not in education, employment or training. If you had been listening, you would have heard the specific information on the regional assessment tool, which gives the non-specialist workers the opportunity of interventions and signposting to the correct service, and that that tool had already been piloted and rolled out across other key sectors like social services, education and the police. If you had been listening, you would have heard that the Public Health Agency has been piloting the one-stop shop initiative, which helps young people around substance misuse. If you had been listening, you would also have heard that it was helping with suicide, self-harm, mental health, sexual health, relationship issues, resilience and coping skills. You would also have heard, had you been listening, of the low-threshold counselling that has been rolled out across Northern Ireland. It is important that people, even those in their castles, do not refer to waffle when they look down but think for a second of the poor man at the gate dealing with families and children, and, instead of party political point scoring, focus on what has already delivered success to young people in Northern Ireland.

Mr Allister: I was listening, and I heard the Minister dodge the essence of the question from Mr Nesbitt, so can I take him back to that matter? What are these alternatives to incarceration? Fuzzy, liberal talk about alternatives to incarceration comes very easily, but what are the alternatives that have been discussed? Do they involve any element that is punitive, so necessary for deterrence? The Minister likes to cultivate a persona of being tough on crime, so let us hear from him. What are the alternatives to imprisonment for young offenders that he is thinking of?

Mr Nesbitt: Hear, hear.

Mr Bell: Mr Nesbitt said "Hear, hear"; I do not know whether he is proposing the model of flogging people. The TUV leader seems to act as the plenipotentiary for the absent Ulster Unionist leader on so many occasions. I do not know whether they are talking about bringing people out and flogging

them. The Ulster Unionist leader was talking about the Isle of Man: I am not sure what those initiatives were. Certainly, I spoke to people on the Isle of Man at the weekend about the initiatives that have taken place there, but, if it is now the TUV/Ulster Unionist policy to want people to be brought out and publicly flogged, it is up to them to defend that argument. I am interested —
[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Bell: If the TUV and Ulster Unionists want to go out and advocate public flogging, I think they will find themselves as embarrassed as they are now, which means they are trying to get out from their sedentary positions — [*Interruption.*] Look: those who are serious — and I mean serious — about helping young people avoid harm know that we have to do a number of things. First, we had to establish the regional assessment tool. We had to make sure that, whether you live in Dungannon or Ballyhalbert, when you come forward to the health service you can have a proper assessment, and that assessment could often direct you to counselling services that would prevent you going into a criminal career of drug misuse. That is the key.

The second initiative, if you had been listening —

1.00 pm

Mr Allister: Drug misuse —

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Bell: You and Mike can go and argue all you like that you want people publicly flogged in the streets — [*Interruption.*] He will be more embarrassed than you are, and that might be hard —
[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Bell: The initiatives are not about scoring points, Mike. They are not about flogging people in the centre of Newtownards. The initiatives are about a one-stop shop: young people getting the help where they need it; getting the pressure taken off them that has led many of them to attempt suicide and self-harm; getting help for their mental health and well-being and for the threat to their sexual health; and assistance with their relationships, resilience and coping skills.

I may not have spoken to them all, but I have spoken to many across Newtownards and right across the north, south, east and west of this Province. It may disappoint Mike Nesbitt and Jim Allister, but the focus of the Northern Ireland people is to assist young people, to intervene early, to give them the treatment that they need, to get them help when they fall into the criminal justice system and to ensure that they get help on a continuing basis when they come through the criminal justice system and out the other end, so that they can maintain their treatment and prevent recidivism. There is not a single person anywhere that I have travelled who goes for the Allister/Nesbitt approach of hang them and flog them in public.

Mr Nesbitt: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: A point of order from Mr Nesbitt, before we move on.

Mr Nesbitt: Will the Speaker go back over Hansard and contrast the words of the junior Minister to my words? He is making a connection that does not exist.

Mr Allister: Further to that point of order —

Mr Speaker: Let me deal with that point of order first. As the Member will know and I have said in the House on many occasions, I do not sit as an arbitrator in how a Minister might answer a question, but I am happy to look at Hansard for you. I call Mr Allister.

Mr Allister: I am obliged, Mr Speaker, and I am sure that you are anxious that no one is misrepresented. The Minister was asked a very simple question: what is he advocating as an alternative to imprisonment? We listened, and we heard no answer, because he has no answer. Instead, he seeks to misrepresent what I said, which was not "Let's flog them"; it was "What is your alternative to imprisonment?".

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us move on. Once again, as in a lot of these debates, I see it as the cut and thrust of debate. Members need to be continually reminded to be of good temper and show moderation in the Chamber. That goes for Ministers as well. Let us move on.

Mr Bell: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Can we also hear from the Ulster Unionist leader what he referred to when he talked about the excessive physical punishment on the Isle of Man?

Mr Speaker: Order. I am not prepared to open the debate again. Let us move on, but I will look at Hansard and come back to the Member directly.

North/South Ministerial Council: Agriculture

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement in compliance with section 52 of the 1998 Act, regarding the seventeenth meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in agriculture sectoral format, held in Armagh on Wednesday 25 July 2012.

The Executive were represented by Minister Sammy Wilson MP MLA and me. The Dublin Government were represented by Simon Coveney TD, Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, and Phil Hogan TD, Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government. Minister Coveney chaired the meeting. This statement has been agreed with Minister Wilson, and I make the statement on behalf of us both.

The Council discussed recent developments and next steps in the CAP reform process and noted the possibility that an EU agreement may be reached during the Irish EU presidency in the first half of 2013. The Council further noted the strong commonality between Agriculture Departments on the main issues. Ministers discussed the need for a sufficient period of transition towards flat-rate area payments and the importance of regional flexibility in implementing CAP proposals. It was also agreed that Ministers should host a joint CAP-themed event at the national ploughing championships. As the process develops, Ministers and officials will maintain close contact, with a view to maximising benefits for farmers and rural communities right across the island.

The Council noted that on 12 June the EU Council of Ministers agreed a general approach on proposals for a basic common fisheries policy (CFP) regulation and the Common Market organisation regulation. The Danish Presidency has also submitted a progress report for the EU Council to note on a proposal for a European maritime and fisheries fund regulation. The EU Council's agreed proposals for reform of the common fisheries policy will be considered by the European Parliament, and a final CFP reform package is likely to be agreed during the Irish Government's presidency in 2013.

Ministers agreed that officials from the two Agriculture Departments will remain in close contact to ensure that shared aims for fisheries reform are represented to the greatest extent possible in the final agreement.

Ministers discussed recent developments and opportunities in international trade, including the agrifood industry's strong record of export-led growth making the sector well placed to exploit opportunities for increased global trade. Ministers also discussed prospects for developing agrifood links between China and Ireland in areas such as animal health, equine studies and research and trade.

The Council welcomed progress on the delivery of the all-island animal health and welfare strategy action plan, including the submission to the EU by both Agriculture Departments of the applications for Aujeszky's disease-free status, with the aim of having both applications considered at the EU Standing Committee on Food Chain and Animal Health meeting; the hosting of an international vaccination experts' scientific symposium in May 2012 in Belfast, which considered the potential that vaccination could play in the eradication of bovine TB; further liaison between officials during discussions on the

proposed new EU animal health law; and a successful joint cross-border mapping exercise called Exercise Mirormap, which took place on 29 February 2012. Ministers also looked forward to receiving a further progress report at their next meeting.

The Council noted a progress report provided by the plant health and pesticides steering group on the implementation of its work programme, including an informal meeting in February 2012 to discuss potato and ornamental pests, surveys and the review of EU plant health legislation and two forestry meetings held in March 2012; facilitation, under the research agendas of the two Agriculture Departments, of a number of research projects, including projects on potato blight, blackleg and phytophthora ramorum, and the collaboration on the EUPHRESKO project on current and emerging phytophthora — I probably said that wrong — species; preparations for a trilateral meeting with the Food and Environment Research Agency to discuss areas of mutual concern, particularly the EU reform of plant health legislation; and agreement to establish an early incident warning protocol in relation to measures to control pesticide use.

The Council also welcomed the significant and ongoing cross-border co-operation to deal with the challenges posed by outbreaks of phytophthora diseases in forests. Ministers welcomed ongoing co-operation on rural development programme issues, specifically in relation to the support of cross-border engagement by local action groups. We also welcomed the progress of the €10 million INTERREG IVA funding for six strategic, cross-border rural development projects and the recent launch of projects such as harnessing natural resources, the Castleblayney and South Armagh rural investment initiative, and the river links and Clones Erne East Blackwater rural regeneration.

The Council also approved the InterTradeIreland 2012 business plan, recommended the budget and noted the Tourism Ireland annual report and draft accounts 2011. The Council agreed to hold the next agriculture sectoral meeting on 31 October 2012. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Frew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development): I thank the Minister for her statement. She noted that there were discussions on the CAP reform and on the progress, or indeed lack of progress, on the negotiations. There were discussions on the need for a sufficient period of transition towards flat area payments and the importance of regional flexibility within that. As well as discussions in the North/South Ministerial Council, can the Minister tell us what discussions she has had in Europe on those two issues and when she will be meeting the new Minister, Owen Paterson, on the issue of CAP reform?

Mrs O'Neill: Obviously, a lot of focus at the minute is on CAP reform. I take every opportunity. I have had meetings with the agricultural cabinet in Europe. I have also had meetings with Dacian Cioloș, the European Commissioner, and I will be meeting him over the next number of days to discuss further our proposals.

Obviously, for us, the most important thing was maintaining a decent budget as well as flexibility and simplification. They remain the three key tenets of the arguments that we are taking to Europe. In order for us to move forward, we need an agreement on the budget. Unfortunately, that has not happened yet. There were some indications that that would happen this side of Christmas, but it is now widely believed by many member states that that might not happen. That will push the whole timetable back.

All the negotiations will be ongoing over the next number of months. There will be the October, November and December Council meetings, in which we will actively engage. We have the new Minister in DEFRA; Owen Paterson is taking on that position. Hopefully, he will be able to reflect at any opportunity the views of the North and the farmers here and will have a bit more insight into the type of farming that happens here, given that he was placed here for some time. I will have a phone call with him later this week, and we will have to engage with him as I did over the past 14 to 16 months with the former Minister for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. When we go to Europe, we do not differ on the details; we differ on the overall budget and the arguments that we put to Europe. We have to continue to exploit that alliance.

Mr McMullan: I thank the Minister for her update. Will she update us on the position of the negotiations on the common fisheries policy (CFP) reform?

Mrs O'Neill: At this stage, things seem to be slipping, but there has been a bit more progress on CFP now that a general approach has been agreed. However, there is a lot more to be done before a final

decision can be reached. The intention, according to the timetable, is that an agreement will be reached by the middle of next year. The key issue that we need to press for is the need for regionalisation. The EU needs to recognise the diversity of the fisheries in EU waters. Obviously, fisheries vary according to location, so we need the Commission to take the view that one size does not fit all, that we need regionalisation, and that we need to be able to create our own management plans, which suit the needs of the industry, deal with the science, look at future sustainability and deal with the problems that we have with disregards.

Mrs Dobson: I thank the Minister for her statement. I note her emphasis on international trade, which is extremely important for the future of our local agriculture industry. Will she assure those companies and farmers who are thinking of tapping into new markets that they will not be treated by DARD in the same way as local potato producers were treated when their cargo was rejected in Morocco?

Mrs O'Neill: I am committed to making sure that our farmers reach their full potential and can exploit all the available opportunities for trade. That is why I established the Agri-Food Strategy Board along with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. We wanted to look at the challenges and barriers to growth and at how to work in partnership with industry to ensure that we reach our potential.

We have fantastic produce, which is well marketed and which people want. The clean, green image of our produce is something that people want right across Europe and further afield. I will continue to work with farmers and industry in general to make sure that we take up all those potential opportunities. One of those opportunities is the links with China, which I am keen to continue to explore.

The Member mentioned the seed potato and Morocco. I dealt with that issue in the House before and I engaged with the farmers concerned. The Chair of the Committee wrote to me on the issue and I am happy to discuss it further with the Committee if it feels it is necessary.

Mr Byrne: I, too, welcome the statement, but I am concerned about its lack of substance. On international trade, what sort of meaningful discussions are going on between the Republic and ourselves about opening up potential markets in China and Russia? Given that most of our beef and pig farmers are experiencing difficulties at the moment, all urgency needs to be applied by the Department to make sure that we have some meaningful marketing exercises.

Secondly, will the Minister assure us that the new INTERREG IVa programme will not be affected by the kind of bureaucracy that pertained in the past and which caused a lot of frustration for local groups?

Mrs O'Neill: As I said in my previous answer, I am committed to ensuring that we reach our potential and tap into the markets that exist. Our growth, and the success of the agrifood sector, has been in the export market, and we will target export-led growth in the time ahead. There are potential avenues in China and Russia, and there are many other directions in which we should be looking in order to market our produce. As I said, our produce has a fantastic clean, green image that people seek out.

I agree with the Member about our pig farmers. There are issues around getting pork products into China because of the export certificate. I am actively involved in challenging that situation, and I raised it with the First Minister and the deputy First Minister ahead of all their previous visits to China. I have raised it with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and I intend to take it up when I visit China.

1.15 pm

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for her statement this afternoon. My question is along the lines of Oliver McMullan's as regards the common fisheries policy. Will the Minister advise the House whether any joint representations have been made? We are coming up to the December meeting in Brussels concerning quotas, etc, and Northern Ireland has certainly been at the sharp end of cuts every December. I acknowledge that there has been a rise in the herring quota recently, and we thank the Minister for her efforts in that area, but can she give us any encouragement that perhaps a joint effort will see a relaxation in the quotas for our local fishing industry?

Mrs O'Neill: When I reported to the House after last year's December negotiations, I called it the "dance" in Europe, because it is an unacceptable situation that we have to go out every year and argue for our quota for the year ahead. It does not allow fishermen the opportunity to plan ahead. How can you develop a business year on year not knowing what the quota will be? This is something that I will continually argue with Europe. It is not even something that CFP will fix — it will not remove the need for the December negotiations. However, I will go to those negotiations with the interests of the industry, and I will make sure that I defend the industry and its right to fish.

We have been very positive in our engagement with the Commission. We have had gear trials, which have been very successful, and our industry is meeting the needs of the Commission with respect to dealing with discards. So, in preparation for December, I will meet with the industry and make sure that we agree our key priorities. As I said, we have to go to make our case every December, which is unfortunate; but I will continue to do so. However, alongside that, I will continue to argue with the Commission that we need longer management plans for the fishing industry in order that it can be sustainable in the future.

Mr Swann: I thank the Minister for her statement so far. As regards paragraph 7 of her statement, on all-island animal health, can I ask the Minister whether, with respect to the presentation on Aujeszky's disease-free status, she can give a commitment to the House that our submission on this matter was not held back and was submitted at the same time as that of the Republic of Ireland? Also, as regards the discussions on TB, did the Minister discuss her Department's wildlife intervention programme, and was that raised at the meeting?

Mrs O'Neill: As far as Aujeszky's disease-free status is concerned, we have an EU all-island animal health and welfare strategy. The principle behind it is to facilitate trade across the island. There should be no barriers to trade on such a small island. The presentations on Aujeszky's disease being submitted at the same time makes perfect sense. If we were to go ahead, and the South did not, trade would be affected. It makes good sense for us to put our submissions in at the same time. The EU Committee that will consider the matter will be doing so later this month, and we hope to have a positive outcome. I think that we are in a very positive position as regards increasing the trading opportunities that exist and not having to put in any silly controls with respect to movement across the island.

TB and brucellosis were not topics of discussion at the last meeting in any great detail. The Member is aware of my plans. I consulted with respect to compensation and decided to move forward just with the brucellosis compensation changes at this time. I will come back to the TB issue at a later stage. From 1 September, in-contacts will be treated in the same way as reactors, and the Member will be aware of that.

I think that we are doing a lot of positive work with respect to TB and the wildlife issue. It is a very emotive issue. There is no quick fix and no simple solution to TB; if there were, I would obviously take that route. We will continue with the hard work that we are engaged in as regards tackling all the factors that could possibly contribute to TB. However, there is not enough information out there, and this is an issue that we are going to have to continue to battle. I hope that we will get to the stage where we can be in a free status.

Mr Rogers: I thank the Minister for her statement. I note the Castleblayney and south Armagh rural investment initiative. Are any similar initiatives being drawn up or supported with respect to cross-border initiatives between the Mourne and Cooley regions? I believe that this would help to complement the strong cross-border and cross-party support for the Narrow Water bridge.

Mrs O'Neill: I am not aware of any such project at this minute, but I will be happy to make some enquiries and come back to the Member. They are beautiful regions. The mountains are lovely, and I will be climbing the Cooleys on Saturday. That is something I enjoy very much. I will look into it and come back to the Member if there are any potential projects.

Mr Allister: The statement refers grandly to promoting opportunities in international trade. Why, therefore, has the Minister persistently refused assistance to help with export costs, particularly transport costs, for our significant niche export market in pedigree pigs? Why is she not helping Northern Ireland producers with those exorbitant costs? Does that mean that all this talk about supporting international trade amounts to mere sound bites with no substance?

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. As I said in answer to an earlier question, I am very committed to making sure that our industry reaches its full trade potential, which is why I established the Agri-Food Strategy Board. Work is under way, and it is looking at all agriculture sectors. I am quite sure that the pedigree pig issue will be raised in that working group. I have given a commitment that when the report comes to me by the end of this financial year, we will look at all the challenges and barriers to trade and growth and at how industry and government, in partnership, can challenge each other to ensure that they reach their full potential. The growth that we are targeting is export-led, so trade links are very important. We need to remove all possible barriers to that growth.

North/South Ministerial Council: Aquaculture and Marine

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. With your permission, I wish to make a statement in compliance with section 52 of the 1998 Act, regarding the recent meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in aquaculture and marine sectoral format. The meeting was held in Derry City Council offices on Wednesday 4 July. The Executive were represented by Nelson McCausland MLA and me. The Dublin Government were represented by the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, Pat Rabbitte TD, and the Minister of State for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, Fergus O'Dowd TD. The statement has been agreed with Minister McCausland, and I am making the statement on behalf of us both.

We received a progress report on the work of the Loughs Agency from the chairperson, Winston Patterson, and the chief executive, Derick Anderson. We welcomed the development of a formal operational plan with the PSNI and an Garda Síochána to deal with assaults on agency staff, and we expressed our concern at two recent serious assaults in the Lifford area. Those assaults resulted in two members of staff being hospitalised. However, the chief executive reported at the meeting that both staff members had recovered and had resumed their duties. The agency reported that, with support from an Garda Síochána, court injunctions were obtained against two of the principal offenders, banning them from the banks of the Rivers Foyle, Finn and Mourne and from their having any contact with the agency's fisheries protection staff.

We noted the position on the survival of Atlantic salmon, which is causing significant concern, with less than 5% of the juveniles leaving the systems returning as adults. We received an update on the agency's work in conserving and protecting fish stocks in the Foyle and Carlingford areas, including work on the prevention of salmon poaching and pollution, and the agency's involvement in the recent North Atlantic Salmon Conservation Organisation (NASCO) conference in Edinburgh.

We welcomed the memorandum of understanding between the Food Safety Authority of Ireland and the agency and the positive impact that that will have on shellfish hygiene, and we noted the ongoing improvements in the Lough Foyle oyster fishery and the reduction in incidents of bonamia. The latest results of statutory testing from the Irish Marine Institute, from the south side bed in Lough Foyle, show that the level of bonamia infection is low compared with the levels detected by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) and the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) in 2010. Further testing will take place in late 2012, and mortality levels will be monitored once again in the autumn native oyster survey.

We welcomed the formal launch of the EU-funded IBIS project and heard that the project public website also came online in June to coincide with the official launch of the project. We also heard about the progress already made under the project. Twelve PhD students have taken up their positions, the first cohort of masters students has been appointed, and a full complement of support staff is in place. The agency reported that significant progress is being made on a number of research projects that will inform a number of cross-cutting management strategies.

We noted progress on marine tourism and angling development, including the completion of the pontoon at Meadowbank. We also heard about the agency's significant contribution to the Clipper Round the World event and saw the work at first hand immediately after the meeting, as we had an opportunity to visit the crew of a local vessel participating in the race. We also heard about the agency's preparations for the sea- and trout-angling events of the 2013 World Fire and Police Games.

The Loughs Agency gave a presentation on water framework directive fish monitoring, and we heard about the methods that the agency's field staff use to monitor fish stocks in the Foyle and Carlingford areas, including electrofishing and various types of netting. We noted the practical use of this information by the Loughs Agency and other statutory stakeholders and heard how the monitoring is managed through a collaborative, participative process, cutting across Departments and agencies.

We approved the Loughs Agency's business plan for 2012 and recommended budget provision for 2012 of €5.0525 million. We noted the agency's annual report and draft financial statements for 2011. We welcomed progress on the delivery of the Loughs Agency's legislation implementation plan and noted that further regulations will require NSMC approval later in 2012. We also approved, for a further year to July 2013, a procedure to support the Loughs Agency in dealing, through regulations, with emergencies such as pollution incidents. This procedure was initially approved by the NSMC in 2009, following several major fish kills that year. The agency reported at the meeting that since the initial approval of the procedure on 20 July 2009, it has not had to operate the procedure. It was agreed that NSMC will review the operation of the procedure, including its possible renewal, before 20 July 2013.

We noted that the Loughs Agency had reviewed pay and pension arrangements for its staff. A draft economic appraisal recommended that the agency take the necessary steps to join the North/South pension scheme. It was noted that, following consideration of the legal and financial implications of this, an update will be provided at the next NSMC aquaculture and marine meeting.

Finally, we agreed to meet again in aquaculture and marine sectoral format in October or November 2012.

Mr Frew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development): I thank the Minister for her statement on this very important issue. She mentioned the formal operational plan between the PSNI and the Irish police force for assaults on Loughs Agency staff. The Minister will be aware of incidents involving assaults on agency staff in Northern Ireland and, of course, all other illegal activity. Will she outline how many such assaults have taken place in Northern Ireland in the past three years and the outcome of any legal action taken as a result of these assaults and, indeed, in response to the wider issue of illegal activity? Will she also explain how things have improved, if at all, since we last debated the issue in the House?

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. First, I condemn the attacks on agency staff. In my statement, I referred to two recent attacks, and, since the meeting, I have been informed that the people involved received a custodial sentence. That is a positive step. I took up the issue with the Minister of Justice after the previous debate, particularly the fact that repeat offenders are not dealt with sufficiently by the justice system. I hope that the impact of those custodial sentences will be to act as a deterrent. The formal operational plan has now been signed. An Garda Síochána and the PSNI have been working together very closely on these issues, and the formal arrangement that is now in place is a positive step. I have regular meetings with the Chief Constable of the PSNI to discuss rural issues in general, and I took this issue to him on the back of a lot of discussions with the Committee and Members of the House. I am pleased that a lot of positive action has been taken, and I hope that it acts as a deterrent.

I have a list detailing the numbers involved, and I am happy to provide that to you. A number of seizures of vehicles, boats and nets have taken place, which is very positive. Loughs Agency staff have seized, for example, clubs with nails in them for attacking staff — that is ridiculous. We have to come down heavily on the people involved, because staff going out to do a day or night's work should not have to fear for their safety. As I said, I am happy to provide the Member with the figures.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her comprehensive report. Recently, Minister, we hosted a very successful stage of the Clipper Round the World Yacht Race in Derry. Was the Loughs Agency involved in the preparations?

Mrs O'Neill: You are absolutely right. The event was fantastic, and we were lucky enough to have the NSMC meeting in the council offices, which had a window overlooking the boats. The Loughs Agency was very involved in that it provided a new pontoon, which was invaluable, as it enabled people to access all the yachts that were coming in. We were able to walk down and have a look round one of them. The Loughs Agency provided all the temporary pontoons, as well as the permanent one. So, I

am delighted that it played a significant role, because it was a fantastic event for Derry in attracting tourism to the area.

1.30 pm

Mrs Dobson: I also thank the Minister for her statement. The Chair of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development referred to the creation of a formal operational plan between the police and the Loughs Agency following assaults on the agency's staff. The Chair also referred to the actions that are being taken to ban offenders in the areas that are affected.

I will expand slightly on the Chair's comments, if I may. I am sure that farmers across Northern Ireland would welcome a similar operational plan to stamp out rising rural crime, which often has a cross-border element. Can the Minister update the House on her discussions in that area?

Mrs O'Neill: The stats show that there has been a rise in rural crime. There is a difference between agricultural crime and rural crime. I now have regular meetings — almost quarterly — with the Chief Constable to discuss the PSNI's approach to rural crime and some of the developments that it is taking forward. It is obviously very keen to be involved. In the past, I sent to the Committee a list of all the actions that the PSNI has told me that it is involved in to tackle rural crime. I am happy to forward that list to the Member. It is an important issue, and it is vital that we are vocal about it. Sometimes where people live in a rural community can make them very isolated and an easy target. We saw the theft of sheep in rural areas over the past number of months. So, these are issues that we have to keep on top of, and I will continue to challenge the PSNI on its actions in dealing with them.

Mr Byrne: I, too, welcome the Minister's statement. I also condemn the illegal acts that have taken place in the Lifford area with the poaching of fish. How serious are the Department, the Minister and the Loughs Agency taking the concerns of the Foyle Association of Salmon and Trout Anglers (FASTA)? The FASTA officers, who represent over 2,000 legal anglers, are very disturbed because they feel that their case is not being listened to seriously.

Mrs O'Neill: I assure the FASTA members that I will listen to their concerns very sincerely. They have raised some issues and requested a meeting with me, and I intend to have that meeting. If they have reported issues with the Loughs Agency, I am happy to explore them. I want there to be a very positive relationship because it is in everyone's interest that that exists. As I said, I will be talking to them in the near future.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister once again. The Minister and our Committee Chairperson already condemned the assaults on staff who are going about their daily work. The statement refers to the group, noting:

"the Loughs Agency has reviewed pay and pension arrangements".

Is the Minister convinced that these people are suitably paid for the job that they do, bearing in mind the dangers that they offer themselves up to from poachers and whoever else?

Mrs O'Neill: I will just explain what is behind the review. There was a review of the overall pay and conditions of all the staff. The proposals are still under review, and we are seeking legal advice. As with any changes to pay arrangements, it is important that you consult with staff and are very sure of your ground. The problem here is that when the North/South Ministerial Council pension scheme was set up, Loughs Agency staff could not buy into it because of legacy pay arrangements. We are now trying to bring them in so that all staff are on the same pay and conditions. As regards whether they are well enough paid, I am sure that there are people who do not think that they are. I do not have a role in setting their pay; that is done outside my control. However, I hope that they are well enough paid. They do a fantastic job, quite often in very difficult circumstances, as you say.

Mr Swann: I thank the Minister for her statement. Minister, you referred to methods that the agency's field staff use to monitor fish stocks in the Foyle and Carlingford areas. Does the Minister see any advantage in expanding those methods into Lough Neagh so that we can establish a basic fish stock in Lough Neagh?

Mrs O'Neill: The NSMC is obviously confined to the Foyle and Carlingford areas. You are aware that we have a working group in place to look at all the issues around Lough Neagh, and I am sure that that will be one of the issues that is raised as a result of all that work.

That is about gathering information, because so many interests on the lough need to be taken into account.

Fish stocks is a DCAL issue, but I am sure that that will come out through the work of the task force.

Mrs McKevitt: I, too, thank the Minister for her statement. Will she give us further assurances that pay and conditions for agency staff in the North of Ireland will not be disadvantaged as a result of any decisions about public pay in the South and the threat of a review?

Mrs O'Neill: I will make sure that no agency staff will be disadvantaged. This is an attempt to improve conditions to ensure that everybody has the same pay and conditions. It is only right that there should be no differential across agency staff. This will bring things up to date. We are seeking legal advice and will consult staff to make sure that everybody is happy with the way forward.

Mr Allister: As a result of the review of pension arrangements, will agency staff now be treated in accordance with what prevails in the public sector in this jurisdiction, where pensions are linked to the consumer price index (CPI) rather than to the retail price index (RPI)? If that has not happened, when will it happen so that there is parity between the public service and these cross-border bodies?

Mrs O'Neill: Anybody who works under the remit of the North/South Ministerial Council in any of its forms should be on the same pension arrangements. There is a disparity, in that some staff, because of legacy pay issues, were not brought in under the scheme at the start. A review is going on at the minute, and legal advice is being sought. All that detail will be reported to the next NSMC meeting, and, at that stage, I am happy to talk to the Member about whether it is CPI or RPI.

Draft Strategic Framework for Public Health 'Fit and Well - Changing Lives 2012 - 2022'

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I wish to make a statement on the publication for consultation of the draft strategic framework for public health, 'Fit and Well – Changing Lives 2012-2022'. The framework is of importance to all of us for its potential to make a real difference to the health and well-being of the lives of our communities. The framework reflects a truly cross-cutting agenda, and, therefore, we need real involvement from all parts of government in Northern Ireland. Leadership from all Ministers will be paramount.

'Fit and Well – Changing Lives' seeks to reinvigorate action to improve health and reduce health inequalities. It builds on Investing for Health, the first public health strategy, which was published in 2002. In general, we know that health has been improving. Unfortunately, the rate of improvement has not been the same for everyone. Health outcomes are generally worse in the most deprived areas in Northern Ireland when compared with the region generally. Our state of health and well-being is the result of a complex interaction of influences on everyday life. It is not an accident that those living in different social circumstances experience differences in health, well-being and length of life. It is also clear that many inequalities in health arise because of inequalities in society and the conditions in which we live.

The factors that impact on health and health inequalities do not fall solely within the bailiwick of the Health Department to influence. They include community and social conditions, which, in turn, are influenced by wider political and economic circumstances. Population health also contributes to social outcomes. For example, economic growth improves health, and improved health enhances economic productivity and growth. Working together to secure targeted improvement in the health of the population, especially those most in need and those with the most to gain, is both the right thing to do and an essential priority if we are to limit the growth in the cost to our society and economy of avoidable ill health. Therefore, the proposed new framework will also contribute towards the achievement of a number of goals in the Programme for Government and the economic strategy. The intention is to encourage synergy between the framework and other key government strategies, such as Delivering Social Change.

'Fit and Well – Changing Lives' is a new, overarching framework that has been informed by up-to-date international and national evidence, particularly the Marmot report, 'Fair Society, Healthy Lives'. A review of Investing for Health, the previous strategy for tackling health inequalities, has also informed our thinking. The review reported that much of that strategy's approach remains relevant: for example, its values, principles and broad aims, and its cross-cutting focus on the broader social factors that impact on health, and those features have been retained. However, the review also recommended that the new strategy should take account of the current socio-economic context.

Although it is proposed that much of the approach advocated by Investing for Health is retained, the draft framework incorporates some new key features. The new strategy is built on the life course approach, which focuses on the social influences on health at every stage of development throughout life from early years. The framework is built on two underpinning themes that encourage interventions that affect health and well-being across the life course.

Engaging and promoting supportive and sustainable communities is an important tool in tackling the issues that affect health inequalities. Sustainable communities is, therefore, an underpinning theme, along with building healthy public policy, which aims to ensure that, at government level, potential health impacts are taken into account as part of the policy development process.

For each of the life course stages and themes, policy aims are identified, and long- and shorter-term outcomes have been agreed with other Departments. Two strategic priorities for tackling health inequalities are proposed. They are early years and supporting vulnerable people and communities.

We have chosen early years because of the now overwhelming evidence internationally that people's life chances are most heavily influenced by their development in the first years of life: positive and negative influences and impacts on behaviour and on social interaction, as well as on physical health, have consequences that can last a lifetime. If we are to break the cycle of disadvantage across generations, it is vital that our children are given the best possible start in life. That starts from antenatal care and includes childhood development, support for good parenting and opportunities for learning. What happens to children in their earliest years is key to outcomes in adult life, not just in relation to health but also to educational attainment and economic status.

The second strategic priority, support for vulnerable people and communities, continues the focus on those who are disadvantaged. It includes those who live in disadvantaged areas, and population groups who require additional or more specific support, for example those with disabilities. The framework reflects ongoing work across all Departments.

At the same time, the public health framework aims to enhance and add value to work under way or planned. It therefore proposes six priority areas for collaboration. Those areas are still at a developmental stage but have been included to seek views and further input during the consultation period. They are support for families and children — enhanced support through incremental development of targeted and universal programmes; employability — promoting opportunities to gain experience, particularly targeting the young and long-term unemployed; use of space and assets — considering the use of space, including premises, to build community capacity and maximise investment; promoting volunteering; working to ensure that children are equipped for life through achieving life skills; and considering the potential impact of using arts, sports and culture not just on physical activity but on mental health, inclusion, and other benefits.

Given the range of factors that influence health and well-being, partnership working will remain key. The Investing for Health review identified good engagement at local level but disconnection between local and regional implementation. Informed by those findings, the aim will be to promote a whole systems approach by strengthening the connections across policy areas and delivery structures and between regional and local levels.

For policymakers and practitioners, the framework provides strategic direction, to secure more coherence cross-departmentally and cross-sectorally with a focus on upstream interventions to improve health and tackle health inequalities. It should also provide strategic direction for work to be taken in support of this at regional and local levels, with public agencies, local communities and others working in partnership.

1.45 pm

It is intended to develop the proposals for implementation and governance by December 2012. Initial proposals in the consultation document include looking more closely at how to link at ministerial Executive level. I propose that the Public Health Agency should lead on regional and local co-ordination, ensuring that partnership arrangements are effectively linked. The priority that the Executive have given is indicated by our commitment in the Programme for Government to increase the proportion of the health budget that is allocated to public health. That will need to be supported by other Departments and agencies, working together with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) to achieve our objectives.

It is in our collective interests, as elected representatives, to ensure that:

“all people are enabled and supported in achieving their full health potential and well-being.”

That is the proposed vision of the framework. Although I believe that the draft framework sets a clear policy direction, it is intended to be a formative document. I am keen to engage with and take the views of a wide range of stakeholders. I therefore ask each and every member of the Assembly to consider the proposals contained in the draft strategic framework for public health, 'Fit and Well — Changing Lives', and help us to change lives, particularly for our young people and those who are most vulnerable.

Ms S Ramsey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Go raibh maith agat, a Príomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I warmly welcome the statement from the Minister. I was around when Investing for Health was published in 2002, and it is something that I kept raising over the years. I commend the Minister for getting to this point on 'Fit and Well — Changing Lives 2012-2022'. I thank him for his earlier briefing, which was important. I highlight the fact that the Health Committee as a whole takes the issue of public health and health inequalities very seriously. We have agreed to carry out a review into health inequalities, focusing particularly on measures that have been effective in other countries and regions. That fits in well with what the Minister has outlined in the statement today. We are keen that the work we do will assist, advise and even contribute to the final strategy produced by the Department.

Will the Minister advise us of the interest and support he has had to date from other Departments and the interest other Ministers have in taking the draft strategy forward? A lot of the issues you highlighted, Minister, are not necessarily health issues. It is other Ministers and communities that need to take responsibility for themselves.

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for the question. I welcome the work that the Health Committee is carrying out. We will give that report due cognisance when it is completed. We will certainly seek to marry that work with the work that we are doing.

We in the Department of Health lead a group on public health. Other Departments are well represented on that group. Separate from that, I have had separate meetings with the Social Development Minister, the Education Minister, the Culture, Arts and Leisure Minister and the Justice Minister. I have also met the junior Ministers. There is a strong body of support for improving public health. There is a very clear correlation between poor public health outcomes, poor educational outcomes and poor employability prospects, and, indeed, that links on through to justice. All those matters tend to be linked. The more we can work together as a Government on the issues, the greater chance there is of us tackling this particular issue and, as a consequence, having a knock-on beneficial effect on a range of other issues, and vice versa. So, if we have better educational outcomes, we will have better health outcomes, linked hand in hand. That will give people who go into the workforce a better chance of employment, which, again, will help us when it comes to justice issues.

Mr Wells: The Minister has highlighted the fact that access to tobacco is one of the reasons for the major health inequalities between deprived areas and the rest of Northern Ireland. What action will the new strategy take to try to reduce the incidence of people consuming tobacco?

Mr Poots: The new strategy is linked to a range of strategies. We published a strategy on tobacco earlier this year, which sets a strategic direction for tobacco control in Northern Ireland over the next 10 years. First of all, we recognise the high prevalence of smoking amongst those in areas of deprivation. About 24% of our population smoke — 25% of men and 23% of women — but that rises

to around one third in deprived areas. The Public Health Agency is responsible for developing the action plan to accompany the tobacco strategy, and that plan will contain a number of actions that will be specifically aimed at reducing the prevalence of smoking amongst those living in areas of social or economic deprivation.

Improvements have been made in increasing the number of pregnant women who are accessing smoking cessation services. If we can encourage women and, indeed, their partners to stop smoking before their child is born, we can improve the long-term outcomes for the parents and their children.

Mr Gardiner: May I first of all thank the Minister for his statement? It is very comprehensive and much welcomed. I know that the Minister will, perhaps, move immediately to put the recommendations in place, but how soon can all the recommendations be achieved?

Mr Poots: Today is the launch of a consultation, and we will want to get feedback from the community. I suspect that much of what we are proposing will be acceptable, but I will also be open to people's ideas on how we can make a real difference as they come forward during the process. Once that consultation is complete, we will move quite quickly to make our final assessment on it and then move this forward as a document. Once that comes into place, it will become a policy for the Department, the Public Health Agency (PHA), the Health and Social Care Board, the trusts and the entirety of the system to implement immediately.

Mr McCarthy: I welcome the Minister's statement this morning, but I have to say that there is very little new in it; we have heard it all before. The Minister talks about two strategic priorities: early years and supporting vulnerable people and communities. It is not so long ago that the House, to a man and woman, was fighting for the very existence of Home-Start, Sure Start and Life Start. Had it not been for that campaign, God knows where those would be. This is something for the Minister to do: tell the Assembly that those things will be funded sufficiently.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Please come to a question.

Mr McCarthy: We want to show our support for the Public Health Agency, but can the Minister assure the House that that agency will be properly funded to ensure that what he is talking about on these two pages will be fulfilled? I doubt it.

Mr Poots: The problem for the Member is that whenever it comes to public health, it is not something new. There is no magic bullet out there. The truth is that there were too many people smoking 10 years ago, and there are still too many people smoking. If it were down to 5%, there would still be too many people smoking. There are too many people drinking alcohol to excess and binge drinking. That was the case 10 years ago, and it is still the case. There are too many obese people and too many people not eating enough fruit and vegetables. That was the case many years ago, and it is still the case.

This is not a sprint; it is a marathon. The Member may think that he has some magic transformational trick. Given that this is a consultation, I look forward to hearing from the Alliance Party all the answers to the difficult questions that are being posed. We will look forward to its contribution and read it in-depth, because it appears that it knows all the answers that we have missed. I lay down that challenge. We will be coming back to the House with the final document, and I am sure that the Alliance Party will have made a major contribution to that final document in producing the right answers to the questions.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Minister for what I believe is a very positive statement this afternoon. In the statement, he talked about the two strategic priorities of early years and supporting vulnerable people and communities, as my colleague said. In our communities, we have very many young vulnerable people. To the best of my knowledge, the strategy for sexual health is due to end soon. Will the Minister please tell me what he is doing to address teenage pregnancy and teenage parenthood?

Mr Poots: I am very glad to say that the rate of teenage pregnancy has reduced quite significantly over the past 10 years. However, the rate of teenage pregnancy in neighbourhood renewal areas is over twice as high as the regional rate, sitting at around 6.2 births for every thousand. We need to be very cognisant of the issue, because sexual health is just as important as mental health and, indeed,

physical health. People need to look after their sexual health and recognise that they should behave responsibly.

The PHA has been asked to renew the focus on addressing teenage pregnancy through the Sexual Health Improvement Network. It is also working with partners in the Department of Education, Youth Service, voluntary groups and faith groups to support the development of relationship and sexual education programmes in all settings. I think that it is very important that we put "relationship" back into sexual education.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. Minister, you talked about the second strategic priority — support for vulnerable people and communities. You said:

"It includes those who live in disadvantaged areas, and population groups who require additional or more specific support, for example, those with disabilities."

Will the Minister comment on the impact of benefit cuts, particularly on groups of disadvantaged people and people with various disabilities? From a benefits point of view, support will largely be withdrawn from large groups of vulnerable people.

Mr Poots: Benefit cuts are a concern for us. I am deeply concerned about what has happened at national government level, where we have the Conservative Party, in association with the Liberal Democrats, voting through cuts. The Liberal Democrat party is the sister party of the Alliance Party, which is crying "shame" about benefit cuts. The reality here in Northern Ireland is that we will feel the impact of that. Should we not administer what is being done in Westminster, we will have to find hundreds of millions by stripping money from education, health, regional development and every other Department in order to meet the cuts that the Conservative-Lib Dem alliance is imposing on the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for his statement. What is he doing to tackle the ever-increasing problem of drugs and alcohol abuse?

Mr Poots: Alcohol and drugs have a real impact on the lives of individuals, families and, indeed, wider communities. The new strategic direction for alcohol and drugs phase 2 was launched in January this year to prevent and address the harm related to alcohol and drugs. The strategy recognises specifically the need to address health inequalities and to take forward actions in areas most at risk.

The amount that people in different groups drink is a key issue. For example, 70% of those in managerial and professional positions exceed the daily guidelines at least once a week, compared with 84% of manual workers. Binge drinking — consuming 10 units or more of alcohol in one session for males or 7 units for females — is more common among routine and manual workers at 36%, compared with 23% of those in the managerial and professional field. That will obviously lead to greater harm being suffered by those in the most deprived areas. Alcohol- and drug-related deaths, and admissions to hospital in those areas are around double the Northern Ireland average and three to four times the rates in the least deprived areas. The same pattern is likely to hold for drug misuse.

People sometimes say that cannabis is not a bad drug. Cannabis is a bad drug. We have seen evidence, even in recent days, of the impact that it has on people's brain development. From my Department's perspective, I have to say very clearly that we really need to reduce the usage of alcohol and drugs, illicit and prescribed, in Northern Ireland if we are to significantly improve people's mental health.

2.00 pm

All those drugs, whether alcohol or the other drugs, are doing people real harm. Therefore, we need to challenge that. One area we are looking at is minimum pricing for alcohol. Again, we are working closely with our colleagues in the Department for Social Development (DSD) and, indeed, keeping a very close watching brief on what is happening in Scotland and the Republic of Ireland on moving that issue forward.

Mr Craig: I thank the Minister for his very positive statement. Will he comment on the clear link that has been shown between health issues and poor educational achievement in socially deprived areas? That issue was clearly highlighted in a local report done between Barnardo's and Resurgam in Lisburn recently. Will the Minister outline what talks he has had with the Education Minister to move this whole issue forward?

Mr Poots: Certainly, the linkage between poor educational outcomes and poor health outcomes is very close, which will not come as a surprise to anyone. So, we are identifying that people are having poor educational outcomes. The Barnardo's report, in conjunction with the Public Health Agency, has been able to put some meat on the bones.

For example, when you are getting areas where you have up to 30% truancy or 75% of the mothers are single mothers, where 50% of them smoke during pregnancy, and where you are getting children at the other end leaving school with next to no qualifications, it should not come as a surprise to anyone. That is why we do think that more needs to be done in those early years; more needs to be done in the deprived communities to assist. If the Department of Education and the Department of Health cannot work together on these issues to make a real, tangible difference to the people of Northern Ireland, they will have failed.

I have had conversations with Minister O'Dowd on these issues. It is a course of work that both Ministers will need to drive forward to remove the silo walls that can very often appear between Departments and even within Departments in order to ensure that we get outcomes that will be to the wider benefit of our communities.

Mr Givan: I thank the Minister for today's statement. The Minister will be aware of the Early Intervention Lisburn project that he launched recently. In the course of the work that was taken forward by that community group, there was a clear demonstration that, to secure community buy-in to the process, community groups are key to driving forward all this change. It is not just something that comes from on high — from government — and is forced upon people, but actually the community will buy into it. So, in that respect, where does the Minister envisage a role in DSD in encouraging that community capacity?

Secondly, in all this, the investment required will need to be reprofiled where it needs to be front-loaded and, obviously, in this particular project bids will come in for substantial amounts of resources. So, how will the Government reprofile the current spend to ensure that early intervention can really work and be funded?

Mr Poots: The Member has put his finger on something that is a bit of a conundrum — a real difficulty for people who are in the Government and, indeed, for the Civil Service — in that it is obvious to us that we need to make an investment if we are not to keep replicating the same mistakes. We need to challenge where we are now. That can be very difficult to do whenever there are demands that need to be met now.

Nonetheless, we have to continue to focus on public health. I know that, for example, the Chief Medical Officer in Scotland gave up practising as a surgeon to go into public health because he believed that he was only fixing problems that could have been avoided in the first instance. We as a Government — not me as a Minister of Health, but we as a Government — need to take the decision that, yes, we are going to invest for the future and, yes, to invest for the future will mean that we will not deliver some of the services that we can currently deliver but we will make a real and meaningful difference to the next generation and generations thereafter if we do that.

That is the challenge, and I am up for it. It will be up to Members to ask whether other Ministers are up to the challenge.

Mr Allister: The strategic framework speaks of many laudable aspirations during the life cycle. The pre-birth stage is identified, but little is said about it. Will the Minister give an assurance that, from the moment of conception, the focus will be on the preservation of life, including for those with disabilities? Will he also give assurances that, far from any steps being taken to facilitate life-destroying abortion, his long-awaited guidelines will underscore the priority of the preservation of life and that truly accountable record-keeping will be put in place and the reasons for the termination of pregnancy recorded, so that the data will be transparent and clear to all?

Mr Poots: The Member has moved slightly off course, but I do not have a particular difficulty in answering the question. One of the reasons why I am thankful that the Assembly exists — I know that the Member would prefer that it did not exist — is that many of our direct rule masters were very keen to introduce abortion in this part of the United Kingdom, the only area where abortion on demand is not available. Although since 1967, 6.4 million abortions have taken place in England, Scotland and Wales, which is deplorable, we in Northern Ireland are not in those circumstances. It is because we have the Northern Ireland Assembly, which the Member so objects to, that we do not have abortion on demand. Had we listened to him, we may well have had abortion on demand, but, thankfully, the people did not listen.

Mr Agnew: I welcome the emphasis in the Minister's statement on early years. He will be aware of my private Member's Bill, which seeks to improve the co-ordination of early years delivery. I hope that he and his party will support it.

The Minister highlighted health inequalities in deprived areas and the disadvantage that those who live in such areas face. He linked that to income. Unfortunately, he suggested that economic growth improves health inequalities, but research does not back that up. In fact, in the period of economic growth that we had until the current recession, inequalities in wealth and health increased. Does the Minister believe that the Executive as a whole are doing enough to tackle the economic inequality that leads to health inequality? How can we do that given that, in an answer to me, OFMDFM —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Question.

Mr Agnew: — stated that information on wealth inequality is available only for GB? How can we tackle inequalities in income and health if we do not measure them?

Mr Poots: The Member is almost suggesting that we should keep everyone in an economic morass because that would ensure that we have a better distribution of inequalities. I would much prefer that people have the opportunity to get employment and the appropriate education to enable them to get jobs and to be attractive to employers that come to Northern Ireland. I would also prefer it if people did not object to every planning application, which could bring jobs to this country and this region, and focused on delivering a good and sustainable economy in Northern Ireland. All of that is positive.

I note the Member's piece of work, but I have to say that he does not have to create legislation to get me to work with other Ministers. That comes naturally, and we have to work with other Ministers and colleagues.

This is a health strategy; it is not an economic strategy. I will give the lead on health issues, and Minister Foster will give the lead on economic issues. However, the fact is that although the Member said that it did not demonstrate health inequalities, for every percentage that unemployment goes up, the incidence of suicide goes up by 0.9%. I am not sure where the Member gets his statistics from, but I am very clear that we need to have a stronger Northern Ireland economy. When we have that, we will have more to invest in our health services to ensure that we get the best outcomes for people.

Mr McDevitt: I welcome the Minister's beginning-of-session reminder to us all to get back in shape and do what we all do after the holidays. What absolute guarantee will the Minister give us that this is not like a New Year's resolution, whereby we say all the right things at the beginning of the session and then slowly, during that session, forget what we said? Specifically, will the Minister tell me how much more he thinks that his Department should be investing in public health to be able to realise even the most basic of the ambitions set out in the very good consultation paper?

Mr Poots: I have to say that the Member's point is fair. Often, we come here with very great and noble aspirations and a real commitment to get things done but, as time moves on, other things take our attention, and we do not give the same focus to the issues that we have just discussed. However, we have a Public Health Agency, and I am very supportive of it. Its current allocation is £81 million for the year 2012-13. Is that enough? To be honest, I would love to invest considerably more in public health. Currently, the Department spends around £4.5 billion. How do we make the savings elsewhere to enable us to put more money into public health? That is the challenge that we need to work towards. So when Members challenge me about the cuts that I will make in one area or another, I might remind them that it is necessary if we are to invest more in other things. If we have a budget that is pretty flat, we have to reduce budgets in other areas. So that will also happen throughout the

year. I remind the Member that, when we make cuts, we do so to enable us to invest more in other services in the Health Department.

Ms Brown: I welcome the Minister's statement and his answers to the questions so far. What monitoring will take place to ensure that there is progress as a result of the strategy?

Mr Poots: The data and research group has been established to identify a set of high-level indicators. That will facilitate our monitoring of progress on the outcomes of the framework and the wider health outcomes over time. Those indicators will also be included in the final framework. That is absolutely necessary because we could easily spend a lot of money on public health without identifying that we have achieved outcomes. It is essential that we are able to identify the outcomes associated with the investment of resource.

Mr Storey: I welcome the Minister's statement to the House and also the commitment by the Public Health Agency in areas such as those that my colleagues referred to in Lisburn and also now in my North Antrim constituency. That engagement with the Public Health Agency has been extremely positive, and I thank the Minister for it.

The Minister raised the issues of disadvantaged communities and early years when outlining the framework. I wish him more success than the Education Minister with early years, because that strategy in the Department of Education is in a shambles. On the transition point from the 0-3 age group, from health to education —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Question?

Mr Storey: Will the Minister ensure that the transition from early years is a very clear focus of this framework? We must ensure that those early years are appropriately dealt with.

Mr Poots: It is essential that the transition from early years is appropriately dealt with. We need to focus on ensuring that we have as close a correlation as possible between the two Departments. Sometimes, I suspect that the problem is not with the Ministers but with the civil servants.

2.15 pm

Again, we as Ministers need to stamp our authority on behalf of the Assembly so that if we want something to happen and are certain that it is the right thing to do, we do not allow processes to get in the way of outcomes. If we need to adapt, change or challenge processes, so be it, but we need to get to the outcomes. If we have identified that, for example, children who are involved in serious adverse incidents in their early years are far more likely to have suicide ideation at a later point in their life, it is critical, from my perspective, that social services are more effective and are working really closely with people in education to identify and deal with those problems. It is also critical to ensure that children are getting the right nourishment and the appropriate care and that parents, including many young parents, who wish to do the right thing, receive the appropriate education in parenting. It is vital to ensure that children receive appropriate nurture, with parents setting a child on their knee and doing a simple thing such as reading to them, for example. Those are all simple things that are critical to our future and that can make a real, meaningful change in those children's futures.

Mr Beggs: The Minister touched on absenteeism. In some areas, up to 30% of young people are referred to the educational welfare officer. Does the Minister agree that fresh thinking is required in a range of Departments to address that? It may be to do with engagement with the parents, which he alluded to, but it could also be about the curriculum that is mandated. Greater flexibility may be required to ensure that young people are enticed into and attracted to education so that they can learn, contribute and better themselves.

Mr Poots: I want to be cautious that I do not move on to territory that is not really mine to answer on, but I will make it very clear that a lot of the problems that will appear in the justice system, in schools and that teachers will encounter — for example, people criticise schools as failed schools — are not about the education but about the parenting. If the parenting is wrong at the outset, you will encounter problems all over the place, and we as a society will have to pay for those problems. In my own city, regrettably, a young man with disabilities was badly beaten in the past week. In the past few weeks, a dog was set on fire. What sort of people in our society do those things? You have to ask what way

those kids were brought up in the first place. I was certainly brought up in an environment where I would never have considered doing those things. I suspect that that is the case for the vast majority of the House — hopefully all of it. We as a society need to get parenting right in the first instance. Some people just do not have the skills and need help. Some people are beyond help, and we need to intervene in those instances. It clearly falls to my Department, through social services, to take action where things are wrong. I think that truancy and all those things will play their part at a later point, but those are just symptoms of the problems that happened in those early years.

Private Members' Business

World Suicide Prevention Day

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

Mr Rogers: I beg to move

That this Assembly unites in its support for world suicide prevention day; and endorses the recommendations contained in the Protect Life strategy to develop a cross-departmental framework to assist the community and voluntary sectors in suicide prevention.

Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, and I thank all parties for allowing this to be the first debate of our new term.

As well as thinking about what is happening outside, I think that it is important to have this debate in the Chamber today. My first experience of suicide was almost 20 years ago, when a relative died. I had the task of breaking the news to his young children to tell them that daddy would not be coming back. Last night, I attended a Mass for a relation who died in New Zealand. When I and every Member in the Chamber visit our graveyards, we see evidence of many young people and parents who have taken their own life.

As I was travelling to Newry one day a few weeks ago, I met a lady walking on the road who was wearing a T-shirt with the phrase "Ban suicide websites" on it. The lady is Patti Boyle. She lives in London but has roots in south Down. She is walking from the grave of her son in Burren in south Down to London. Some time ago, her son took his own life in London. His body was found 100 days later. When she and her husband were trying to tidy up his bits and pieces, they discovered that he had visited a website from which he bought a kit to assist him in his suicide.

This is an extremely important debate. The facts about suicide are, quite simply, that it is the third biggest cause of death after heart disease and cancer. More people die in Northern Ireland through suicide than in road-traffic accidents. In Ireland, two people die every day. A suicidal person may not ask for help, but that does not mean that help is not wanted. Suicide prevention starts with recognising the warning signs and taking them seriously.

Let us dispel the myths about suicide. The first myth is that people who talk about suicide will not really do it. That is false. Almost everyone who attempts suicide has given some clue or warning. Do not ignore suicidal threats. Statements such as, "I cannot see any way out of this", no matter how casually or jokingly said, may indicate serious suicidal feelings.

Secondly, if a person is determined to kill himself or herself, nothing will stop them. That is false. Even the most severely depressed person has mixed feelings about death, wavering until the very last moment between wanting to live and wanting to die. Most suicidal people do not want death; they want the pain to stop. The impulse to end it all, however overpowering, does not last for ever.

Thirdly, the idea that people who commit suicide are unwilling to seek help is, again, false. Studies of suicide victims show that more than half of them sought medical help in the six months prior to their death. The final myth is that talking about suicide may give someone the idea. Again, that is false. The opposite is true: bringing up the subject of suicide may give someone the permission to tell you how he or she really feels. People who have come through such a crisis say that it is a huge relief to talk about how they feel. When people start talking, they have a better chance of discussing options other than suicide. If you think that a friend or family member is considering suicide, you may be afraid to bring up the subject, but talking openly about suicidal thoughts and feelings can save a life.

We all have a part to play in preventing suicide. We in the Assembly must continue to ensure that every aspect of the Protect Life strategy is delivered, especially those areas on which there is still a lot of work to do. First, to restrict access to means and methods of suicide, we must recognise that cyberbullying is becoming a major problem and address the issue. Internet and social media can

have a positive influence on suicide prevention. We must eliminate the negatives, so websites that assist suicide, such as those that helped Patti's son to end his life, must be closed down.

We need to make suicide and self-harm training a priority for all our emergency services. We must develop a culture of help-seeking for those in high-risk occupations. The Executive must ensure that the health impact assessment of all policies is a priority for all Departments and all statutory bodies. Finally, we must develop mental health care services that actively seek out those recently released from custody.

There are also small things that would help, including more early intervention for cases of anxiety and greater access to counselling. Another little thing would be to make the Lifeline number freely accessible to all callers, irrespective of whether they are calling on a landline or a mobile, across the island. In Kilkeel and right around the border counties, we are subject to roaming charges. Crises do not occur just when we have landlines: having no roaming charges may save a life.

We also need to restore funding for the wraparound services of complementary therapies — the befriending and mentoring. Currently, funding is available only for counselling, but voluntary suicide prevention organisations need all the help that they can get. Every one of us can make a difference. We need to look for the warning signs: the statements about hopelessness; the loss of interest in things that one cares about; giving things away and, maybe, setting one's affairs in order. We must listen actively. Do not be afraid to ask questions. Stigma and silence can prevent saving a life.

In our offices and everywhere else, we need to promote the links to help that are out there, whether the health service, Lifeline, PIPS, Cruse, the Samaritans, Contact Youth or any of the many others that are in this Building today. I acknowledge the great work that all those organisations do. Really, the message is: if in doubt, act. Most people who die by suicide do not want to die; they just want to stop hurting. Talking about it, highlighting suicide awareness, ensuring that the Protect Life strategy is fully implemented and doing the small things can make a difference. We can all help to reduce the hurt. In ending the silence, we help to stop the stigma.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members, as Question Time is due to start at 2.30 pm, I ask you to take your ease for a few minutes.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Mr Deputy Speaker: Questions 9 and 10 have been withdrawn and will require written answers.

Broadband and Mobile Phones: Newry and Armagh

1. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on her efforts to improve access to high-speed broadband and mobile phone coverage in rural areas of Newry and Armagh. (AQO 2357/11-15)

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): My Department has contributed to improved access and quality of broadband services in rural areas across Northern Ireland, including Newry and Armagh. Under the Next Generation Broadband Services contract, some £19.8 million of government and EU funding leveraged £31 million of private sector investment, resulting in the highest level of fibre-to-the-cabinet technology in the United Kingdom. Alternative broadband services are available through high-specification satellite services or high-speed fixed-wireless services.

Building on its previous investments, my Department is scoping two projects, which are aimed at further enhancing the region's telecommunications capabilities by ensuring access to broadband services of at least two megabits per second to all premises and improving access to 3G mobile services. Under the proposed 3G mobile project, my Department aims to reduce the percentage of premises in Northern Ireland with no 3G coverage from any operator from the current level of 11.7% to at least the UK average of 0.9%.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her answer. I am well aware that there has been a lot of money invested in broadband provision. Does the Minister intend to carry out an assessment of those firms that have received money to provide broadband in rural areas? Clearly, that provision is not there, and I know that from some of the firms that I have dealt with. I would like an assessment of that. Also, how much more money is available to address the gaps in rural broadband provision?

Mrs Foster: Of course, any company that receives government money is assessed after the end of the contract to see whether it has delivered the targets that were set in the terms of reference. That is exactly what will happen with the sixth call for Onwave, if that is what the Member is referring to, as has happened with all the other companies.

We will continue to fill that gap. The Member knows that we have been working very hard in respect of that. In its latest research, Ofcom estimates that 94% of households could access a super fast broadband service of 30 megabits per second or better. It is important that we benchmark that against what is happening in the Republic of Ireland, where the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources estimates that just over 20% of households have access to a service of 10 megabits. So, things are a lot better in Northern Ireland in respect of broadband access. That does not take away from the fact that there is more that we can do, and we will be doing more in the future.

I am quite happy to say to the Member that we are accessing money from the UK for broadband infill, but, unfortunately, because we were so far ahead of other parts of the UK, we are now being penalised and are not getting as much money as we should be to follow up with broadband projects. However, we will keep fighting that battle.

There has been a lot achieved in respect of broadband provision, but there is more to do.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a freagra. I thank the Minister for her answer. Can she give us an assurance that the stated target of 95% indoor coverage for 4G services will be met in all areas of Northern Ireland?

Mrs Foster: This is the first time that a Northern Ireland target has been set for mobile services. Part of our difficulty with 2G and 3G was that the target was set at a UK level, and it was only because of lobbying by myself and others that we now have a Northern Ireland target. That is a target that will

apply right across Northern Ireland. It is a very high target, and I am pleased that it is a high target, but it is a Northern Ireland target. That is the difference, because, in the past, we have just had UK targets, and we have suffered as a result.

Mrs Overend: I refer the Minister to the Westminster Government's announcement in their Budget about the improvement of mobile network signals in specific areas of Northern Ireland. What discussions has she had with the Westminster Government on that issue? Will she remind the House of the details of that announcement and the expected timings for the realisation of improvements?

Mrs Foster: We have ongoing and very good relations with our counterparts at Westminster. Indeed, I pay tribute to the former Minister of State for Northern Ireland, Hugo Swire, who was very helpful in the negotiations with colleagues in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport at Westminster.

The plan is that we will get in the region of £6.6 million out of the fund. I had hoped, as I said in my answer to Mr Boylan's supplementary question, that we would have had in and around £10 million. We have been able to secure only £6.6 million, but I believe genuinely that that is because our broadband coverage is so far ahead of other parts of the United Kingdom. We should not be penalised like that; we should be encouraged to go further, better and higher. That is certainly what we plan to do under our telecommunications action plan.

Tourism: Genealogy

2. **Mr Swann** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what action she is taking to develop genealogical tourism through the promotion of Ulster-Scots culture, language and heritage. (AQO 2358/11-15)

Mrs Foster: There is potential to develop genealogical tourism through the promotion of Ulster Scots, particularly in the United States, where we have targeted this specific segment through Tourism Ireland's extensive marketing programme. I recently launched a free app that will help Northern Ireland to harness the tourism potential of the 30 million people worldwide who have Ulster-Scots roots.

Our tourism bodies continue to engage with the Ulster Historical Foundation, the Ulster-Scots Agency, the Orange Order and other agencies and bodies in Northern Ireland with a view to ensuring that all aspects of Ulster-Scots culture and heritage are reflected in our tourism offering.

Mr Swann: I thank the Minister for her answer. I am sure that she will agree that, as well as genealogy, piping and drumming is a major strand of Ulster-Scots culture that could be used as a potential tourism attraction. Has she any plans to further develop the piping and drumming successes that we saw over the summer, when the European championships were held here and in the world championships, so that we can use them as another way of attracting tourism to Northern Ireland?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. I declare an interest as the vice-president of the Royal Scottish Pipe Band Association.

NITB received an application for funding for the 2011 European pipe band championships, and I was very pleased that the Tourist Board was able to support that. I am sure that the Member was as disappointed as I was that we were not able to secure the European championships again and that they are moving back to Scotland next year for another three-year cycle. However, I want to say how proud I was of our pipe bands when I saw that the Field Marshal Montgomery Pipe Band from Lisburn had won its eighth world championship title this year. As well as that, we had two other world champions: grade 3B was won by Ballybriest, while grade 4B was won by Clogher and District, which, of course, gave me particular pleasure. We also had Northern Ireland winners in three drum major grades.

We have a very proud pipe band history, culture and heritage, and I pay tribute to the pipe bands for the work that they do, free of charge, to introduce young people to music and culture across Northern Ireland. We want to support pipe bands in any way that we can. We recognise that they bring visitors into areas for their competitions, and I hope that we can work with the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure to develop that more.

Miss M McIlveen: I thank the Minister for her answers so far. She mentioned specifically the potential for developing genealogical tourism through the promotion of Ulster Scots in the United States. What work is her Department doing to fulfil that potential?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her question. Tourism Ireland has, in recent years, specifically targeted this segment with extensive marketing programmes as part of its ongoing high-profile marketing activity, promoting Northern Ireland as a compelling holiday destination.

Last year, it ran an Ulster-Scots campaign entitled 'Come home to Northern Ireland this year', which reached up to three million people of Ulster-Scots origin in the southern states of the US through advertisements in specialist publications with strong Ulster-Scots demographics, online advertising and direct marketing focusing on Northern Ireland family names and ancestries and activity with the Smithsonian Channel. As well as that, they attend and will have a presence this year at the Stone Mountain Highland Games, which take place in Georgia. It attracts over 80,000 visitors of Scots and Scots-Irish descent during a two-day festival. We will be present there as well.

We continue to work with all the agencies. Those of you who have the time to do so should look at the new Ulster-Scots app for your iPad and iPhone, which we have launched recently. It has four driving tours: Londonderry and Donegal is one; there is one in north Antrim; and there are two in County Fermanagh. Members should spend some time in having a look at that.

Mr Flanagan: I was disappointed with the Minister because, until just now, she had not referenced Fermanagh in her discussion on the Ulster-Scots app. Of course, we all know that she went to Lisnaskea to launch it. I was surprised that she did not mention that until now.

When we are talking about genealogy, will the Minister provide the House with an update on her discussions with her counterpart in the Dublin Government, Leo Varadkar, regarding the potential benefits to the local economy of "The Gathering" of 2013 taking place on a 32-county basis?

Mrs Foster: I will answer that question when I come to it. It is number 11 or 12 on the list.

Corporation Tax: Job Creation

3. **Mr McGimpsey** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of how the continued lack of agreement on a reduction in corporation tax might affect her Department's job creation strategy and targets. (AQO 2359/11-15)

Mrs Foster: My Department's PFG target is to contribute to rising levels of employment by directly supporting the promotion of over 25,000 new jobs. I am pleased to say that, already, approximately 7,000 jobs have been promoted. I am confident that this target will be achieved irrespective of the outcome on corporation tax. That having been said, corporation tax is a powerful economic tool that has the potential to help us in our aim to transform the local economy. We are still pressing for the devolution of this power, and a further ministerial meeting is due to take place before the end of September 2012. Once the outcome of this work is known, the Executive will reassess and, if necessary, strengthen the ambitious nature of their economic goals.

Mr McGimpsey: Bearing in mind an unemployment rate of around 66,000 people, does the Minister believe that there are other measures that she can take currently, irrespective of any anticipated reduction in corporation tax, which is looking very slow? When does she think she can put other measures in place, and how much of a reduction does she anticipate seeing from the figure of 66,000?

Mrs Foster: If I knew how much of a reduction there would be to the unemployment register, I would have a crystal ball in front of me. We all want to see a reduction in unemployment. The House is united on that matter. Invest Northern Ireland has just informed me this week of its comprehensive plan to work with a lot of our indigenous companies.

Across the UK, we have seen a flattening out, indeed a depression going back into a recession, over the past number of months, and there is a great need to work with our local firms to give them the capacity to employ more people. I am pleased to say that we have seen that across Northern Ireland. We have small companies that are increasing their employment, and I am very pleased to say that we

are able to support them. Last week, I announced 70 new jobs at TES in Cookstown. Over the summer, we were able to announce a new package in Moyola Precision Engineering that safeguarded 20 jobs and meant 15 new jobs. Taxi and Bus Conversions in Dungannon is taking on 20 new staff. Benny O'Hanlon at Todds Leap Activity Centre is taking on 10 new staff. Across Northern Ireland, indigenous companies are working away and are taking on staff, bit by bit, and we want to support them as much as we can.

We are in a difficult place economically, and I do not think that there is anybody who can say that this is not a global recession that has gone on for far longer than people projected. However, we, in Northern Ireland, have to get alongside our indigenous companies and give them all the help and support that we can.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I place on record my thanks to the Minister for her involvement with TES in helping to support the creation of new jobs in my constituency.

As far as the devolution of corporation tax and its implications for the North are concerned, has the Department done any assessment of the beneficial consequences that such devolution might have for the local economy?

2.45 pm

Mrs Foster: We have had a few independent analyses taking into account what it would mean for the Northern Ireland economy. The economic advisory group has provided very strong evidence that it would give us the step change that we need in relation to employment, and that would make a real difference. Invest Northern Ireland has carried out detailed work on what it would mean for foreign direct investment, and, looking at the local economy, it really will be a case of a rising tide lifting all boats. It will mean more money in the economy in higher wages, and it will also mean that smaller companies will be able to get into the supply chain of larger companies, thereby allowing them to grow as well.

We have seen a lot of evidence. I do not think that there is any argument about the difference that a lower rate of corporation tax could make to Northern Ireland. Now, we just have to persuade the Treasury to devolve that power as soon as possible.

Mr Newton: I know that the subject of corporation tax is dear to the Minister's heart and she sees it, perhaps, as another tool in her toolbox to help attract, in particular, inward investment to the Province. When he was Secretary of State, Owen Paterson was also a keen supporter of the devolution of corporation tax powers for the same reasons as the Minister.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Can we have a question, please?

Mr Newton: Owen Paterson has now moved on, and we have seen the appointment of Theresa Villiers. Does the Minister see Theresa Villiers being as helpful as Owen Paterson?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. I would like to place on record my thanks to Owen Paterson for helping to put the devolution of corporation tax powers back on the agenda of the UK Government and, indeed, for working with us on the proposals that are now being discussed. Of course, I wish him every success as Environment Secretary.

I also wish to congratulate the new Secretary of State. We look forward to working with her on a range of issues of significance to the local economy. Of course, corporation tax is at the very top of that list, but there are other areas, such as regional aid, investment and tourism. We look forward to meeting her in the very near future. I very much hope that she will support us fully in our efforts to drive the local economy forward using a lower rate of corporation tax to accelerate the economic growth that everybody in the House so desires.

Mr McKay: There are clear indications that the British Chancellor's economic policies are slowing down growth across the board, and we now know that the tax take is down, with a lower return in corporation tax being part of the reason for that. Will the Minister indicate whether she has any read-

in to those figures for the North? Does she agree that the British Finance Minister is deploying the wrong economic policies for this economy and for job creation here?

Mrs Foster: It is worth reflecting on the progress. Sometimes the House looks at the negative aspects in relation to corporation tax. Yes, it has taken us a long time to get to where we are today, but progress has been made on a number of work streams, for example on economic impacts, and, although we and the Treasury will probably never fully agree, there has been substantial movement by the Treasury to better acknowledge the scale of possible benefits in jobs and investments. There remain significant differences on the cost of a reduction in the rate of corporation tax, and those have yet to be resolved, but we will continue to push very hard on that.

As regards our Chancellor of the Exchequer, it is not my job to tell him how to do his job, any more than it is his job to tell me how to do mine.

Employment: Golf Tourism

4. **Mr Campbell** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what job creation opportunities can be developed by promoting golf tourism on the Causeway Coast. (AQO 2360/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Finding the answer to question 4, as opposed to question 5, would be good.

The success of our golfers continues, with Rory McIlroy cementing his world number one status with his PGA Championship win last month, the Deutsche Bank Championship victory last week and, just last night, his BMW Championship win in Indiana. These wins, alongside the extensive positive media coverage received around the world through hosting the Irish Open, have increased Northern Ireland's profile as a major visitor and golf destination and for inward investment. Royal Portrush attracts golfers from all over the world. Forward bookings as a result of the Irish Open are very healthy, with the course practically fully booked until the end of 2012. Royal Portrush has also applied to host the British Amateur Championship in 2014. Maximising the economic benefit from golf also depends on the supporting infrastructure. The Bushmills dunes golf resort will bring an estimated 360 jobs to the area.

Golf is of great interest to many senior business executives. Northern Ireland's courses and the opportunity to play them can be a significant quality-of-life factor during inward investment visits. The Irish Open, in particular, was used to attract senior international business executives to visit Northern Ireland. The senior management team of Olenick and Associates from Chicago came to the Irish Open and chose the occasion to announce its new project for 55 jobs.

Events such as the Irish Open and the development of golf tourism are key towards meeting the ambitious target of over 50,000 jobs sustained in tourism by 2020.

Mr Campbell: I thank the Minister for all the work that she and her Department put in during the run-up to the Irish Open and its success in Portrush this summer. In the context of promoting jobs and golf tourism in Northern Ireland, I ask her to take account of the views of a number of traders who expressed concern that, when spectators arrived and went into the tournament, they were, unfortunately, unable to avail themselves of many of the sites and shops of Portrush until the tournament closed. Will she take account of that when she negotiates and deals with incoming tour operators to promote all of Northern Ireland and its tourist infrastructure when such events take place?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. He and others have raised the issue with me previously. The Irish Open was a phenomenal success. I recognise the fact that some traders did not have the retail experience that they thought they would have during the tournament. However, since then, Portrush has experienced a renewal — a revival, if you like. Many people who visited Portrush over the summer have told me that they think that the place has been transformed. A lot of work went into the area before the Irish Open. Its legacy is that people visit Portrush now and rightly so. I spent some of my summer holiday in Portrush and the north coast. It was a very enjoyable experience.

The important thing is that we were able to bring record crowds to Northern Ireland for the Irish Open; in fact, its attendance was double that of the Scottish Open. That really puts it into context.

Mr Dallat: I am absolutely delighted that the Minister spent some of her holiday in Portrush. I am sure that she thoroughly enjoyed it.

Does the Minister agree that retention of the Giant's Causeway's UNESCO world heritage site status is absolutely critical to the long-term sustainable development of tourism in that part of the causeway?

Mrs Foster: As someone who has some knowledge of UNESCO, I can tell the Member that that is not an issue that will materialise. There is no threat to the Giant's Causeway's UNESCO world heritage site status. People who say that there is actually cause more problems than anything else.

Mr Nesbitt: I join the Minister in congratulating Rory McIlroy on a most phenomenal run of success. Does she share my surprise that, when the words "Rory McIlroy" are typed into the search box on the Discover Northern Ireland website, the response is this:

"We're sorry. No matches were found"?

Mrs Foster: I am surprised at that. The Member must have a lot of time to type such things; it seems to be a recurring theme with him. If he has any technological expertise that could help the Northern Ireland Tourist Board to remedy that, I am sure that the board would be happy to speak to him.

Golf tourism currently generates £14 million a year for the economy in Northern Ireland. The key issue is that golf tourists normally spend £300 to £450 per visitor. That is significantly higher than for any other type of tourist. Therefore, we are, of course, working hard to get more golf tourists to come to Northern Ireland.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I agree with the Minister that golfing is a major tourist attraction. What worries me is that the other part of the brand name is being left out totally. It is the "Causeway Coast and Glens". Indeed —

Mr Deputy Speaker: May we have a question, please?

Mr McMullan: Will promotion of golfing in the area include its full brand name of "Causeway Coast and Glens"?

Mrs Foster: I am not sure whether the Member realises that, a short time ago, I was with Causeway Coast and Glens to help it to promote its new strategy. I have no difficulty in continuing to support Causeway Coast and Glens in its tremendous work.

Invest NI: South Antrim

5. **Mr Clarke** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how much funding Invest NI has provided for south Antrim over the last three years. (AQO 2361/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Between 1 April 2009 and 31 March 2012, Invest NI offered assistance or funding of £21.4 million to businesses in the South Antrim constituency, including £7 million to externally owned businesses. Since the start of the Boosting Business campaign in November 2011, Invest NI has added 114 prospective projects worth £4.4 million of support in the south Antrim area. These are at various stages of development and have the potential to generate £21 million of investment for the local economy and create 138 new jobs. The figure of £21.4 million assistance that I detailed contains 37 of these projects, amounting to £496,000 of support. The jobs fund was launched in April 2011, and, by the end of August 2012, it had secured 21 projects in South Antrim. These are at various stages of development and should lead to the creation of 117 new jobs, 22 of which have already been created. The figure of £21.4 million contains 16 of these jobs fund projects, amounting to £338,000 of support.

Mr Clarke: I thank the Minister for her answer. I also thank the Minister and her Department for their work with Invest NI in relation to the £21 million for South Antrim. Will the Minister give us her assessment of what part the banks played in that investment over the past two to three years and of the part that they continue to play?

Mrs Foster: The banks play a critical role, particularly for small businesses. I know that small businesses that were clients and customers of the Ulster Bank have had a particularly difficult period to deal with. Having read a survey of some of the Ulster Bank's customers in its purchasing manager's index (PMI), I am not surprised that the bank is predicting difficulties. The Ulster Bank, unfortunately, contributed to some of the difficulties that many small businesses across Northern Ireland experienced. My economic advisory group is embarking on an independent analysis of access to finance for Northern Ireland businesses. That group is supported by financial experts Philip McDonagh and Maureen O'Reilly, and it will hold a targeted series of meetings with key stakeholders, including business representatives from across Northern Ireland. The banks are telling colleagues and me one story about wanting to lend money to businesses, and our constituents are telling us a completely different story. Therefore, we need some independent analysis of access to finance, and I look forward to receiving that information.

Mr Byrne: In relation to some of the bottlenecks that crop up in different areas, what is Invest Northern Ireland doing to ensure that there is enough industrial zone development land in provincial towns such as Omagh?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Clearly, that question is much wider than the original question on south Antrim. If the Minister wishes to reply, she may.

Mrs Foster: That, of course, is led by Minister Attwood through area plans. When information is sought on area plans, we submit material to that.

Mr Gardiner: Will the Minister update the House on the Go For It programme, considering that £250,000 was reported to have been spent on advertising in late 2011?

Mrs Foster: As I understand it, the new procurement has now been settled, and we hope to make an announcement on the tender in the very near future.

Tourism: Our Time Our Place

6. **Mr Storey** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on the impact that the Tourist Board Our Time Our Place 2012 campaign has had in attracting visitors to Northern Ireland. (AQO 2362/11-15)

Mrs Foster: It is still too early to comprehensively assess the impact of the ni2012: Our Time Our Place campaign on attracting visitors to Northern Ireland. However, the signs are very encouraging. Belfast City Council has reported that the MTV Europe Music Awards in 2011 attracted 33,500 visitors during Belfast Music Week and generated a total economic impact of £22 million for Belfast, with £10 million being the amount of additional tourism revenue for the city. Titanic Belfast has reported welcoming in excess of 450,000 people to its visitor exhibition to the end of August 2012. Of those, 62% were out-of-state visitors from 109 different countries and 38% were domestic visitors. The Irish Open had a record attendance of 130,785 during the tournament. Up to 26 August 2012, the National Trust reported welcoming 192,000 visitors since the opening of the new Giant's Causeway visitor centre, of which 39% were Northern Ireland residents and 61% were out-of-state visitors.

2012 has not just been about those major international events. In the past few weeks, we have enjoyed the Happy Days Enniskillen International Beckett Festival, the 21st Bluegrass Festival, the East Belfast Arts Festival, the Hillsborough International Oyster Festival, BBC Proms in the Park at Titanic Slipways, Belfast, and, of course, not forgetting the Northern Ireland International Airshow. All that shows that 2012 continues to be our time to shine here in Northern Ireland.

3.00 pm

Environment

National Parks

1. **Mr McMullan** asked the Minister of the Environment whether he will be holding public information sessions on the Causeway Coast and glens to explain the rationale for the possible designation of a national park. (AQO 2372/11-15)

Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment): I thank the Member for his question, and I welcome everyone back to the Chamber. Quite clearly, I would not have been taking much note of what was going on in the North over the past number of weeks if I were not very aware of the ongoing debate, if not controversy, on national parks. I want to make it very clear that I am going to take stock of where we are with this proposal, and I ask everyone else inside and outside the Chamber to do the same. I stress that it is only a proposal in principle that has yet to earn support at the Executive or more broadly. We will see where that goes over the next period, never mind having legislation on the Floor or designation on the far side of legislation.

I make it clear that this is a conversation about a principle. I am going to take stock. I ask everybody else to take stock in the certain knowledge that, even if this principle were agreed, nothing would be imposed on any part of Northern Ireland. That would be antidemocratic and would not work in practice. If national parks were to happen, a sovereign principle at the heart of that would be that you would work with all the stakeholders, residents and farmers in any area to define what the shape of a national park might be. I think that that is a balanced, moderate and sensible way to go forward, and I hope that others concur.

Mr McMullan: I thank the Minister for his answer. However, we are seeing the cart being put before the horse. You have put something out that, as you said, will not be legislated for. When will we see a working model so that people can really look at the pros and cons of this aspiration for a playground for suburbia? *[Interruption.]* Secondly, Minister, will you come to the glens to —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that you are all entitled to ask a question of the Minister. Minister, answer please.

Mr McMullan: Will the Minister tell me today —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. A question has been asked, and a clear attempt to ask a second is now being made. Can I have the answer, Minister?

Mr Attwood: I concur with the initial thrust of the question, which was, namely, about a conversation on the pros and cons. The pros might be that there would be no additional regulation. A pro would be that planning would be vested in local councils under RPA and not in any other structure. A pro would be that no restrictions would be placed on livestock or on products that might be grown.

Mr Dallat: Hear, hear.

Mr Attwood: Thank you, Mr Dallat. Another pro would be that any restrictions will come from Europe and DARD and not from DOE and national park designation. We will see where things go between now and 2014 with the renegotiation of CAP, which will have a much more intimate and real-time impact on farmers and rural dwellers than anything that I, DOE or national parks might lead.

Will it be a playground for suburbia? We face a situation in the North where 80,000 people will be out of work on the far side of welfare reform, if it is imposed on the Assembly. On the far side of that, there could be more people unemployed, given that unemployment increased by 400 between the first and last day of July alone.

Therefore, we have to position the North in all ways to maximise the opportunities for work, given the scale of unemployment that we are about to face and the structural nature of it.

In that context, national parks may be an option. It may end up that they do not win favour in any one part of the North, never mind at the Executive or in the Chamber, but national parks are a proven model in other places. We would model ours in the image of our circumstances, given the scale of our rural community and the primacy of farmers. We would model it to the circumstances that suit the North of Ireland. Why? To bring benefit to all those who live in those areas. Why? To protect the farming interests going forward. Why? To grow tourism to a billion pounds a year industry, as is the ambition of many people over the next number of years. That is not a playground for suburbia; that is

...serving the interests of all those who live in such areas and, in particular, serving the needs of the many, many people who will be workless over the next five, 10 and 15 years.

Lord Morrow: I listened to the Minister reply to the original question and to the supplementary. Are you now telling this Assembly that you are not proceeding with a national park?

Mr Attwood: I said, and I will repeat it now, that I am taking stock. That is not saying that I will not proceed with anything. I am taking stock, as is my obligation as a democratically accountable Minister, to hear the many and differing voices on the issue of national parks. In one part of the North, legitimate concerns have been raised by the farming community. In the same area, there is legitimate support for the principle of national parks from the commercial community. Therefore, there are many voices on the issue of national parks. I would be reckless if I did not listen to and heed what people are saying. That is why, far from abandoning the proposal, I want to have a conversation with all those for and against it over the next number of weeks. On the far side of that, Lord Morrow, I will make a judgement about the best advice to give to the Executive and the House.

However, given the scale of worklessness that our people are facing, do we not have an obligation to interrogate forensically any and all opportunities to grow jobs in this part of the world? Do we not have an obligation to recognise that, given the scale, wonder and beauty of our natural and built environment, we need to grasp the opportunities for heritage-led development over the next five and 10 years? Deciding what vehicle to use to do that is the challenge to me as a Minister and to us as a legislature. I hope that, whatever way we do it, we measure up to that task.

Mr Elliott: The Minister welcomed us back after the summer, and I welcome him back, particularly after the two aggressive meetings about national parks recently, one in Cookstown that he attended and the other in Newcastle that he did not. The three areas that have been outlined as potential —

Mr Deputy Speaker: May we have a question, please?

Mr Elliott: — national park areas all have some protected designation. How would designations as national parks differ from those designations that they already have?

Mr Attwood: Yes, I was at one public meeting and not the other. I was invited to the latter at very short notice, and I had legitimate family commitments on that night. I will listen to people publicly and privately on the issue of national parks and the principle behind them; namely, what we can do to protect the assets of our natural environment, promote the farming community that lives therein and grow that as a marketing tool for tourist development.

What will be different? The level of designations in many parts of Northern Ireland is a reflection of, as I said before, the scale, wonder and beauty of our built and natural heritage. There are many designations in the North. Indeed, parts of the North have multiple environmental designations. What does a national park do? It says that one or two places from all the places of wonder and beauty have such a special quality that they have a special name, and within the special name follows resources, good management with the local community, especially farmers, and marketing opportunities on the far side.

I understand the worst fears about national parks, because there are models that, in my view, are not fit for purpose in the circumstances of the North. However, can we model one that is suitable for the circumstances of the North, that reflects the needs of the farming community in particular, given the scale and character of that community in Northern Ireland, and yet creates opportunities by defining one or two areas in such a special way that people internationally will say that if you go there, you will have a special and particular experience?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I advise Members that question 3 has been withdrawn and will require a written answer.

Beaches

2. **Mr McDevitt** asked the Minister of the Environment to outline any positive outcomes arising from his initiative on better beaches. (AQO 2373/11-15)

Mr Attwood: In a way, this is a supplementary question to the one on national parks, and it is simply this: given the wonder of our natural heritage, what do we do to better manage it and better promote it? The purpose of having four beach summits to date and one in October is to see how we can better manage our water and beach quality to protect what we have and enhance it as a tourism and jobs opportunity going forward. I will give you some small examples. There is now a website that enables citizens and tourists to access in a moment the quality of water at any one beach named on the website. We are developing a marine litter strategy, which will be the first ever in Northern Ireland. Given the scale of rubbish found on our beaches — and I hope that Members will go out on beach watch this weekend to events organised by the Marine Conservation Society; I certainly will on Saturday morning in Bangor — having a beach litter strategy to protect the beaches as part of a wider litter strategy in the North, which we do not have in a strategic way, is an opportunity going forward. Even having a plastic bag levy, which will be in force from April next year for single-use plastic carrier bags and thereafter for cheap multiple-use carrier bags, is a means, through the beach summit and elsewhere, to protect our beaches, water quality and sea life, and to grow opportunities economically.

Mr McDevitt: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he agree that there is a need to be relentlessly positive about the opportunity for the positive development and sustainable development of our beaches as amenity centres, tourism opportunities and places where our society can become much more in tune with just how fragile the environment is? Will he indicate whether there are further measures that he anticipates taking in the year ahead to provide us with a greater opportunity to ensure that the beaches are maintained in pristine condition?

Mr Attwood: I endorse the comments made by Mr McDevitt. There was coverage over the weekend about the scale and speed at which climate change is damaging ice packs in other parts of the world. We need to be very aware that the speed at which the waters are warming and the impact that that might have on low-lying areas, and so on and so forth, is, perhaps, beyond even what people imagined heretofore. In my view, there needs to be a strategic shift in the ambition and intentions of government. That strategic shift needs to be in favour of heritage-led development. Historically and currently, people know that there are various ways to lead development in the North of Ireland: there is economic development through foreign direct investment and through retail. In my view, we need to grasp much more fully the opportunities of heritage-led development, which is all about the character and scale of our natural-built archaeological and Christian heritage.

The beach summit is only one expression of how we can better protect our heritage to create opportunities going forward. If the Government and ourselves embrace much more fully the concept of heritage-led development, then, at the far side of that, not only will we protect the wonderful assets that we have that Mr McDevitt referred to, but we can positively use those assets to deal with the issues of joblessness that we are about to face.

3.15 pm

Mr Campbell: Will the Minister continue to build on the good work that he undertook this summer along the north coast, where, from Benone right round to the Causeway, excellent work was done in promoting what are very, very good beaches, among the best on these islands? Will he develop the relationship between his Department and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to ensure that we build on that for the future and get more tourists to enjoy the best beaches on these islands?

Mr Attwood: Without stretching the point, I say that the beaches Mr Campbell refers to are the best beaches on these islands. Every beach under council management in that particular area is a Blue Flag beach. No other seaward-facing county on the island of Ireland has that record. The area has more and a greater concentration of Blue Flag beaches than any other part of this island. So, the point is well made.

To emphasise the point, in my view, a second strategic shift has to be to recognise that a lot of our coastal towns — be it Portrush or Portstewart; be it Newcastle or Ballycastle — have built environment issues that affect the quality of life there and the quality of the tourist experience for those who go there, not least to visit the beaches. If you invest in the built environment — what I mean by that is not just heritage buildings but other sites of decay and dereliction — to deal with those issues of decay and dereliction, as happened, to a scale, up in Portrush and Portstewart, and multiply that practice around those coastal towns, you will stabilise trade in those towns, improve the tourist and visitor appeal of those towns and, in that way, build up the tourist product and respect for the natural heritage

in those towns. That is why I will be putting forward a bid to the Executive in the September monitoring round to escalate the proposal that I made for Portrush and Portstewart, which was not accepted for Derry in the June monitoring round, to deploy moneys for that very purpose over the next short while.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his responses to date. Would he consider working with local councils to ensure that our beaches are kept to a better and proper standard?

Mr Attwood: I do work with the local councils. I wrote to all the councils a short while ago encouraging them to submit the beaches within their control and responsibility for assessment under the Blue Flag and other awards. As part of the beach summit, we encouraged councils to standardise rescue facilities at our beaches by employing established authorities for lifeguard duties. That is beginning to be deployed in Portstewart and Dundrum and at Murlough Bay, which I visited a number of weeks ago. We already work with the councils, and they work with us through the beach summit. I agree with that.

I need to put down a health warning. Given the difficulties with water infrastructure and the scale of the weather that we experienced, especially in June and late August, it may be that, on the far side of the summer, water quality at a number of beaches is not of the quality of last year. That is why we need to keep the attention on Northern Ireland Water to improve infrastructure where there are acute and difficult circumstances. Beyond that, because of the weather conditions, there may be some bad news about beach water quality and standards on the far side of the summer.

School Buses: Western Education and Library Board

4. **Mr Allister** asked the Minister of the Environment why it has taken the Department years to address the issue of unlawful school bus contracts with Republic of Ireland companies operating in the Western Education and Library Board area. (AQO 2375/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for his question. It is my understanding that, in years gone by, the information and advice to the Department on school bus contracts was that there was not a legal issue. However, when the matter was brought to my attention, and when I interrogated the information and evidence and looked exhaustively at the legal advice — it was an exhaustive process — I found that, when it comes to the issue of cabotage, although there are EU regulations, there is no guidance on the interpretation of those regulations. Consequently, as you will appreciate, Mr Allister, this is not a straightforward legal issue. Nonetheless, on the far side of my interrogation of all that information, it was my view that in order to create greater certainty around the issue of cabotage, there would be a requirement for bus operators in the Republic of Ireland, for example, who wish to tender for business in Northern Ireland to fulfil certain standards with regard to their performance, their financial standing and their operation generally. Whatever about the history of this, I assessed the matter when it was brought to my attention, made a judgement on it, and, consequently, there has been a new regime in place as of the beginning of the school term.

Subject to this comment, Mr Deputy Speaker, there are people who differ with the legal advice that I have got. Consequently, I, through the Department for Transport in London, and Leo Varadkar, the relevant Minister in Dublin, have written to the European Commission to ask it to give further guidance about the issue and about what are or are not temporary contracts when it comes to the school bus business in the north-west, for example.

Mr Allister: I commend the Minister for addressing an issue that his predecessors failed to address. However, having found that Republic of Ireland operators did not have the relevant licence in Northern Ireland, has his Department, in fact, circumvented the issue by fast-tracking Northern Ireland licences for them, rather than ensuring that the matter went out to retender so that local companies could be eligible for the work? De facto, is it the case that the same Donegal operators are back in place for September, or have local operators had a look-in?

Mr Attwood: I want to say categorically that there was no fast-tracking of any applications from Republic of Ireland operators when it came to the new licensing requirements — none whatsoever. They had to jump all the hurdles that any domestic operator has to jump when it comes to the appropriate licence requirements.

I fulfilled my responsibilities when it came to this issue in respect of the legal queries that were raised around the principle of cabotage and how that was operating. Thereafter, I gave advice, including advice to the Department of Education, on what I considered to be the right regulatory framework for operators from the north-west from outside Northern Ireland in respect of providing cross-border services on a temporary basis. I am not going to get into the wider legalities of all that in the Chamber. I gave my advice. I believed that it was proportionate and proper advice in the circumstances that I faced. That said, my intuition is that good, proper and legal process has applied, be it in my own side in the Department of the Environment or in respect of other Departments or agencies.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. I also welcome the fact that the Minister has taken action to rectify a situation that has been in existence for some 17 years, I believe. I know some independent bus operators in the north-west —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Can we have a question?

Mr Durkan: — who believe that they should be compensated for potential earnings that they have lost due to erroneous contracts. Can the Minister outline his view on that?

Mr Attwood: There are a number of things. First, I welcome the fact that it is acknowledged that this issue has been around and that I pushed it forward in order to get some sort of conclusion. That conclusion may be revisited on the far side of Commission advice. I encourage the Commission to bring forward that advice as soon as possible, because there could be an issue of some further delay before that advice is received.

I am not going to comment on compensation. The legalities and technicalities around cabotage are very complex. Therefore, any associated issue, such as compensation, is going to be very complex. Therefore, I am not going to offer a view one way or the other in respect of that issue. If people are minded to say that they were disadvantaged because of the management of the contract over the past five, 10 or 15 years or whatever, they should take appropriate advice and act further to that advice. These are very difficult matters, given the legal complexities, technicalities and difficulties around all this, and I was trying to find a pathway through all that. Therefore, the sense that there might be compensation payable to someone or other seems to me to be somewhat problematic.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister clarify what steps his Department took, working with either the library board or the Department of Education, to ensure that there were no gaps in service for pupils starting school in September in areas where operators from the rest of Ireland had been operating? Were contingency plans put in place to fill those gaps?

Mr Attwood: My guidance was issued towards the end of the last school term in late June. Consequently, the possibility of a gap in service did not arise in respect of the provision of school services under public contract during the school term. That issue did not arise. There was sufficient time, consistent with proper process, to have the matter regularised — if you wish to choose that word — between the end of June and the beginning of the new school term. As I understand it — in answer to an earlier question — three contractors from the South have applied for and been granted the appropriate licences in order for the existing tenders to continue.

This was managed in a way so as not to create a gap in service and further disproportionate problems, and upset families, teachers and children. It was managed in a way that was consistent with legal advice and proper process in order to ensure that such a situation did not arise, and one did not arise.

Landfill Tax

5. **Mr Girvan** asked the Minister of the Environment what was the total amount of money collected through landfill tax in Northern Ireland in the last three financial years. (AQO 2376/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for his question. Landfill tax is a reserved matter, which is managed by HMRC. When you quiz HMRC about the Northern Ireland take when it comes to landfill tax, it advises that the figures are not broken down in that way. Therefore, the answer is that we do not

know. There may be some good reasons why we do not know. For example, there will be operators in Northern Ireland who will have businesses in Britain, and their contribution to landfill tax is, therefore, the aggregate of all their operations.

That said, there is a Barnett consequential in the block grant on an annual basis. The latest figure I could find — this may be somewhat dated — is that the Barnett consequential coming back across the Irish Sea to recognise the payment to HMRC through landfill tax is in and around £3 million.

Mr Girvan: I thank the Minister for his information. I appreciate the guidance that HMRC seems to be responsible for this. It acts on figures that are put together by the Department of the Environment on estimates of the volumes that are put into certain sites.

Further to that, is there any indication of the amount that we can draw back and are drawing back? I know that you mentioned that. We fall badly behind other areas of the United Kingdom particularly in respect of the amount of landfill tax money used in community projects in Northern Ireland. What mechanism is in place to encourage and ensure maximum drawdown?

Mr Attwood: I acknowledge the point that money is claimed back for projects in the North through the landfill communities fund, which is one of the mechanisms whereby landfill moneys are dedicated to community projects. I am going to have a conversation with London about our share of the landfill communities fund to see what opportunities there may be.

There are other issues that we also need to address. I am actively considering borrowing from the Scottish experience of landfill bans when it comes to food products in a further effort to ensure that landfill is used only for those products that should properly and legitimately go to landfill. That includes inert products, rather than those such as food waste, which, clearly, will only add to our carbon footprint, add to environmental damage and have all sorts of environmental consequences. So, we will look at a landfill ban on appropriate waste products. I will have a further conversation with London about the landfill communities fund, and I hope that, on the far side of the recent enquiries that we made, we will get a much more accurate figure of what the landfill take might be for companies registered in the North of Ireland.

3.30 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: That concludes Question Time.

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I want to raise an issue that has been raised before in this House, and the Speaker has made certain comments, which seem, again, to have been ignored. Once more today, rather than inside this House, which is supposed to be an accountable Chamber, we have had important announcements made outside this House touching on a critical issue.

I refer in particular to the announcement about the composition of the so-called Maze regeneration board. We have the First Minister making a statement, we have the deputy First Minister conducting a press conference in the Hall, but no one comes to this House to tell this House what is going on.

We had the same thing last week when, just days before the House came back, it was announced that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development is moving to Ballykelly, but no one thinks to come to this House. Why is there such disrespect for even any semblance of accountability in respect of this Chamber?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I thank the Member for raising it. I would concur with your views. However, we do not have control over where Ministers make their statements. It would be good if they had due regard for the Chamber, but we have no control over them. You have made your point, and I think that the message will have been carried.

Mr Campbell: Further to that point of order. Mr Deputy Speaker, I am sure you, like others, will find it ironic that the honourable Member for North Antrim raises the issue of the Maze panel whenever he said it would be judged by how many former convicted terrorists would be on it and it would appear there are none on it, so it seems very ironic that he is raising it as a point of order.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. That, clearly, is not a point of order. Question Time is now over, and we will return to the debate on world suicide prevention day.

World Suicide Prevention Day

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly unites in its support for world suicide prevention day; and endorses the recommendations contained in the Protect Life strategy to develop a cross-departmental framework to assist the community and voluntary sectors in suicide prevention. — [Mr Rogers.]

Ms Brown: I speak in favour of the motion on the tenth anniversary of world suicide day. Before I say anything else, let me please offer heartfelt condolences to all those families that have lost loved ones to suicide.

Although this day is aimed primarily at raising awareness and support, it must also be bittersweet for those who have suffered loss personally and will, no doubt, today be remembering that loss. All of us have experienced the death of a loved one, and some of us in the Chamber have, sadly, been touched by suicide and attempted suicide by a family member or friend. Although all deaths bring a sense of loss, despair and heartbreak, I often thought that suicide, when it happens, can be one of the most traumatic of all types of death for a family to cope with. The questions, no doubt, begin to flow: why, how, could I have done more, is it my fault? The years of suffering that follow are, no doubt, compounded by the additional burden of the questions and, perhaps, the guilt of those left behind.

Sadly, in Northern Ireland, we seem to have a greater number of vulnerable people who take their own life in the most distressing circumstances. During the summer break, a report by an academic at Queen's University Professor Mike Tomlinson was published and reported on in the media. The report found that suicide rates amongst those directly affected by the period known as the Troubles was particularly high. It found that those who grew up between 1969 and 1978, the most violent period of the Troubles, have the most rapidly increasing suicide rate of any age group in the Province. The highest age bracket for suicide is among men aged 35 to 44, followed closely by men aged 25 to 34, and 45 to 54. Turning to the figures for women, as an advocate for the charity Women's Aid, I am very disturbed at the high rate of suicides among women in Northern Ireland at 7.3 per 100,000, which is significantly greater than the UK average of 5.3 per 100,000.

Of course, behind each statistic is a human tragedy and the question of what makes someone reach that point of despair. Professor Tomlinson's report highlights the Troubles as one key factor. There is no doubt that over 30 years of violence have left our communities badly scarred, and many of those who are affected by those events are dependent on alcohol and prescription medicines. Many more suffer from poor mental health as the result of trauma or loss. I suspect that each of those underlying causes is a sufficient factor on its own, but in some cases people suffer from all of those and are some of the most vulnerable people in our society. We must not forget them or leave them unsupported.

I am struck by the number of young lives that have been lost to suicide in recent years. Those are young people who were not even born when the Troubles took place, so we must look beyond that period in our history when we examine the subject. The pressure on our young people has never been greater. Many of our communities face real deprivation, which brings a host of difficulties. There are also no employment opportunities, poor educational achievement, high levels of drug and alcohol abuse and the pressure of social network bullying.

The Northern Ireland suicide prevention strategy was published in 2006 and subsequently revised in June this year. The strategy has made significant steps to highlight the impact of suicide, with more awareness of mental health and its close connection to suicide, especially when targeting young males. In the way that we have seen media campaigns aimed at young male drivers, perhaps we should consider campaigns that are aimed at supporting the mental health of young men and women who are vulnerable and at risk.

Given the rise of cases of suicide in recent years, especially in many parts of Belfast and beyond, many locally run voluntary groups have emerged. Those organisations have responded to what has been happening on the ground, and they seek to help those who are struggling with mental illness. Those groups complement the work of many other existing organisations such as the Samaritans, which all do tremendous work. To date, the suicide prevention strategy has assisted the work of many

locally led community support groups, and funds have been invested to support them. I welcome the funding, but, equally, I believe that we must continue to ensure that moneys are targeted at the right areas and the groups that are shown to make a real difference. Therefore, I welcome the support and encourage the Department to continue to work with the community and voluntary sector in whatever way it can to prevent suicide and reduce the level of devastation felt out there among families and communities at the loss of a life to suicide.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I want to speak today on behalf of my colleague Sue Ramsey, who extends her apologies as the Chair of the Health Committee. Unfortunately, Sue cannot be in the Chamber to speak to the motion as she is currently involved in the Committee's event to mark world suicide prevention day. As the Chair of the Committee, Sue has had meetings with a number of Ministers, including the Health Minister, the Education Minister, the Agriculture Minister and Ministers from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), to discuss various issues concerning suicide prevention.

In April 2012, the Committee wrote to all the Departments to ask for an update on what they were doing to address the issue of suicide and self-harm, as the Committee will take evidence from the Department on the issue in the coming months. The Committee then held an evidence session on the suicide prevention strategy on 30 May 2012 with representatives of the Department, the Belfast Trust and the Public Health Agency. The Committee received several responses on the strategy from Departments and letters from a number of groups, including the Niamh Louise Foundation, the Nexus Institute, the Voice of Young People in Care (VOYPIC) and FASA. The Committee will hold a further evidence session in the autumn on the outcome of the independent evaluation of the strategy.

The Committee has held a few pre-legislative evidence sessions on the mental capacity Bill with representatives of the Department, NICCY and the Children's Law Centre. The Children's Commissioner, the Children's Law Centre and Committee members voiced their concerns about the exclusion of children under the age of 16 in the Bill. Further evidence sessions on the Bill will take place throughout the autumn session.

The Committee is holding an event today to mark world suicide prevention day, and 80 young people who are linked to various suicide prevention charities have been invited to the Long Gallery to talk to political representatives about the issues that concern them. The event is called "Youth Talks", and there will be 10 bus stops, with Ministers, Committee Chairs and Health Committee members at each bus stop. The 80 young people will be divided into groups of eight, and each group will have the chance to spend 15 minutes at three bus stops. A member of Assembly staff will be on hand to take a note of the issues discussed at each bus stop, and a report will be produced after the event. The young people, who are collectively known as Hope for Youth, have produced a pledge, which they will encourage MLAs to sign on the day.

Speaking as an MLA for South Down, I want to put on record my support for the motion. My colleague Sean Rogers spoke earlier of the intense sadness and grief that grips too many families across Ireland as suicide knocks on their door. Speaking to a PIPS (Public Initiative for the Prevention of Suicide and Self-Harm) instructor yesterday in Ballynahinch, I was shocked to learn that, across Ireland, there will be far more than 1,000 suicides in 2012. That is a rate of more than four a day. Undoubtedly, those who take their life suffer from a wide diversity of problems: financial difficulties, unemployment, broken relationships or, indeed, loneliness and isolation. However, one constant remains: a shattered family and a life lost. I call on all MLAs to sign the pledge and work towards putting the needs of young people at the very heart of all that we do in the Assembly. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr McCallister: Like others, I support the motion. I was encouraged when approached by my constituency colleague Mr Rogers to sign the cross-party motion and get this very important issue debated in the Assembly on our first day back after the recess.

I apologise for my Committee colleagues who are at the Long Gallery event or out at the marquee, where they are speaking to various groups, listening to them and, I hope, asking what changes we need to make as a Committee and an Assembly.

I agree with the earlier comment of Minister Poots that this has to be the business of all in government. It has to come before the Executive so that they can tackle the absolute plague and heartbreak that the tragedy of suicide visits on so many families across Northern Ireland.

I was also involved in the Health Committee when suicide was one of the first issues that it looked at after the restoration of devolution. The inquiry into the prevention of suicide and self-harm was one of the first undertaken by any Committee. It looked at the figures and at what interventions were useful.

We must never stop challenging ourselves. If something works, we must continue with it. We must robustly evaluate what interventions we should make and continue making them. We must never be scared to challenge ourselves and stop interventions that are not proven to work but make interventions that work, keep on with them and invest in them.

We must also recognise that many of these issues affect us and our society. Sadly, like many societies, we had a lower suicide rate when we had a much higher homicide rate. That is a strange phenomenon that occurs in almost every society. Somehow, at that time, people had a sense of belonging or purpose. How do we get that back and channel it in a useful and meaningful way to stop this scourge?

Unfortunately, suicide occurs in areas of deprivation. I have always supported the early intervention that was very much to the fore in the earlier ministerial statement. It is to be encouraged and welcomed. We need to provide early interventions and coping mechanisms. We need to help and support, and we need good parenting and good schools. We cannot devolve all our issues to the school system and hope that it can sort everything out. We need to give our young people coping mechanisms.

I accept that suicide is a particularly huge problem in areas of deprivation and among certain age groups. However, I make the Assembly aware that the problem is not confined to areas of deprivation or to certain age groups. This problem can and does affect everyone and every age group. Someone in a much higher age group and living in a rural area, for example, may be affected by loneliness. It affects all our constituencies, all our constituents and all age groups. During the Committee's inquiry, it visited Scotland to look at the problem there. Something that emerged strongly from the Scottish strategy was that suicide is not confined to areas of high deprivation — it affects all of us. We should not take our eyes off the ball in rural and other areas. Suicide can affect all classes and creeds in every part of Northern Ireland. That is something that we, and, I am sure, the Minister, will be aware of as we try to build a collective approach in the Committee, the Assembly and, indeed, the entire Executive, to try to do whatever we can as a Government to lessen and reduce as much as possible —

3.45 pm

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

Mr McCallister: — the horrible impacts that suicide has on our society.

Mr McCarthy: On this world suicide prevention day, I am very happy to have my name added to the motion. I thank Sean Rogers for asking me, on behalf of the Alliance Party, to speak and give our wholehearted support to this very important motion.

This is a very difficult subject to discuss. Every Member will have known someone or some family who have had to suffer the sudden loss of a loved one. All the questions that are asked after such a horrendous happening and all the soul-searching that families will do, such as asking whether something could have been done and whether there were any signs that should have alerted them, come after every incident. Let us, as Assembly Members, dedicate ourselves to endorsing the recommendations of the Protect Life strategy, as well as all the other efforts that many voluntary organisations make. The desired end result for us all is to see suicide overcome and, indeed, made a thing of the past.

I pay tribute to the various organisations right across Northern Ireland that work tirelessly to help prevent suicide. Indeed, those same organisations provide a back-up service to families and loved ones when, completely out of the blue, they have to face the loss of a dear one. Other Members quoted facts and figures on how suicide affects us here in Northern Ireland, and, on the back of those, we must strive to get on top of a scourge that is visited on families and communities.

As with so many aspects of life and health, I contend that it is vital that early intervention and counselling support are readily and easily available to prevent suicide. I believe that that has been

provided successfully. The Protect Life strategy first came out back in 2006, and, it has to be said, many improvements have indeed come about, but there is yet more to be done. More than 60 recommendations were proposed in the document. I am not sure how many of those actions have been fulfilled today, but it is the desire of us all that we continue to make progress on all 60 recommendations that were made in that report.

The refreshed Protect Life strategy, which was published in June this year, mentioned the problems of young males who come from areas of high unemployment and high housing density and who have a low level of sporting and recreational opportunities. It is recognised that that is more than simply a Health Department problem and that most other Departments have a real role to play. Surely our Executive, collectively, must encourage every Minister to play their part in leading change to attitudes, thus stamping their authority on and, indeed, resourcing means to prevent further suicides in Northern Ireland.

In conclusion, I applaud everyone who will contribute today to world suicide prevention, including the young people who I have just left up in the Long Gallery and whom other Members are engaged with. I am informed that something commenced early this morning, when many groups across Belfast started the walk 'Out of the Darkness and into the Dawn'. What a very appropriate title. Let us hope that, in future, we can leave the darkness behind, that a bright new dawn will prevail for everyone in Northern Ireland and that suicide can be a thing of the past. On behalf of the party, I fully support the motion.

Mr Dunne: I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion, which addresses a very important matter on this very special day across the world. It is crucial that, on such a day, we take time to reflect on and remember all the victims of suicide and their families who are left behind. Few can begin to imagine the pain of the families and friends of those who have, very sadly, taken their own life.

The World Health Organization states that almost 3,000 people commit suicide daily across the world and that 300 people do so every year in Northern Ireland. That highlights a very real problem, and the figures show the need for more to be done to tackle it. Surely more can be done to tackle the problem in order to reduce the figures. The evidence highlighting the stark reality of how suicide rates have risen over the past 40 years is very alarming indeed. Much good work is under way across the country, and I commend the work of the Minister and the Department to date on this very sensitive issue. I welcome the ongoing work on the Protect Life strategy.

The community and voluntary sector has a key role to play, as it is often at the forefront of dealing with people vulnerable to suicide. It must continue to be supported and protected as it works alongside charities and support groups designed to help reduce the risk of further suicides across our population. I personally know of groups such as the north Down Samaritans, based in Bangor, which does a tremendous job in supporting vulnerable people. I feel that it would be remiss of me not to pay tribute to those who give up so much of their time daily to help those most vulnerable in our society and to tackle issues around suicide.

Unfortunately, no area is immune to suicide. Sadly, it has touched some of my constituents in recent days, as a young woman took her life, leaving behind a young family, a loving husband and heartbroken parents.

There is room for improvement in further promoting public awareness. Campaigns should be run to highlight the issues around suicide, and I believe that they could be better targeted at those most at risk. Our young people must be made more aware of the devastation that suicide can cause for those left behind. Support structures must be put in place, but people must also be made aware of them so that those most in need can easily and readily access them. As with many health issues, early intervention and detection is crucial to help reduce suicide rates across Northern Ireland.

We have seen how effective public awareness campaigns have been in helping to reduce the number of road accidents. I feel that more could be done to highlight issues around suicide across the media through public awareness campaigns. Through the very visual TV adverts, we have all become familiar with the devastation of those left behind following road-traffic accidents. That is an area that could be subject to debate and further discussion.

As the previous Member said, we have just left a group of young people who are lobbying us today. One important issue that was raised is the need for awareness of, and clear points of contact for, counselling services; more activity at community level; and more resources for services. Suicide is a

cross-cutting issue, and we must continue to work together on a cross-departmental basis. I believe that we can do more to help reduce this ever-growing problem in our community. I support the motion.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion and welcome the fact that we have a world suicide prevention day. Anyone who attended the event in the Long Gallery could see the interest generated by the subject. Certainly, in my previous occupation as a welfare rights worker dealing with benefits, particularly appeals, an upsurge in mental health problems in young people was clear to see. There is a sense of hopelessness and futility and a sense that the adult world has in many ways forgotten about them. That can reflect itself in the lack of education and work opportunities, and so on. The fact has been referred to, and statistics are quoted, that it is mostly young people who take their own lives. Yet, in my constituency, fairly recently, an 82-year-old man took his own life. You can only imagine the hopelessness and despair that was generated before he took that decision.

To go back to measures that may go some way towards alleviating the problem: again, in my constituency, in a local housing estate in Newry, three men in their 30s took their own lives within eight to nine months. These were men who had no apparent reason to do so. We talk about the impact, guilt, etc and the traumatic effect that it has on families, but this case galvanised the whole area and the whole estate, particularly the men's contemporaries. I attended meetings convened and facilitated by PIPS, which is a suicide prevention and awareness group that works well in our area and does tremendous work.

PSNI attended those meetings, as did Lifeline and social services. So, there was a coming together of various agencies. People were initially given the opportunity to have an outpouring of grief, if you like, about the events that had occurred, and then there was a lot of discussion in subsequent meetings about what people could do most to prevent this. Many of those young men's contemporaries have gone on to attend suicide awareness courses, suicide prevention courses and counselling courses. That seems to be a good way of, as I said, galvanising a community and actually doing something practical that will go some way to help in the context of that community.

However, I urge the Minister to look at the whole area of mental health, particularly of young people, because there is a degree of despair and hopelessness among many of the young people that I have spoken to and continue to speak to. Mental health is very much a feature, and prescription medication, other sorts of drugs, etc, and alcohol are such a disturbing, wrecking mechanism, if you like, in their lives. I certainly ask the Assembly to support organisations such as PIPS and the Samaritans, which do great work in doing their best to counsel people and to prevent young people in particular, and others, from taking their own lives and to relieve the trauma on both the community and their families.

Ms P Bradley: I also thank those Members involved in bringing this motion to the House. As a society, we often shy away from the things that make us feel most uncomfortable or that bring up feelings that we would rather not address. Sadly, suicide falls into that category for many of us. Few of us are fortunate not to have been touched in some way by suicide, and the vast majority of us will have someone in our life who has thought of suicide, attempted suicide or, sadly, completed suicide. While we continue to see this cause of death as a taboo subject, we cannot hope to reduce the number of people who feel that it is the only option available to them.

Yes; the statistics are astonishing, and I am sure that we have all read them. Globally, daily, around 30,000 people attempt to take their own life. Think about that figure for a moment: it is 10 times the number of people who perished in 9/11. It is almost 10 times the number of people who perished as part of our 30-year conflict. Yet, there is still little reporting, and we avoid talking about this issue. We, as a society, must be aware of our own risk factors and our own protection factors. More than that, we must be aware of our friends, relatives and neighbours. We should not be afraid to ask people how they are feeling or to raise concerns with those we live and work among; and we should be encouraging more people to undertake courses such as applied suicide intervention skills training (ASIST) and the mental aid first aid courses, to help to increase protective factors for all in society.

There is no easy answer to the difficult question of how we support those considering suicide to see other options. Suicide is a result of such wide-ranging factors that it is important that any action be cross-departmental, cross-party and across all of our society.

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

4.00 pm

We need to address the stigma attached to people admitting to having mental ill health and seeking early, adequate treatment, help and support for those issues before they get so bad that suicide is considered a viable option.

We must also be sure to offer additional support to those whom we identify as being at particular risk, such as those who have been bereaved by suicide or those who have suffered hidden harms. We must also have a strategy that works with employers to ensure that they are aware of the risk factors and protection factors in their workforce. We must ensure that people have the right access to support and that there is help, not just for those who are at risk but for those around them who feel that they might find themselves at risk through trying to protect someone contemplating suicide.

Protect Life is a cross-departmental strategy aimed at helping to reduce the number of suicides and attempted suicides that we experience every year. As has been said by my colleague Pam Brown, in Northern Ireland we still have the legacy of the conflict and the resulting substance abuse issues, mental health issues and families that are dealing with emotional and financial challenges. We must work to ensure that peace does not leave individuals floundering, regardless of their experience of the conflict.

We must ensure that those in our most vulnerable group, young males, are encouraged to discuss and engage with the agencies and family members about how they are feeling and remove the stigma about doing so. I fully support the motion on world suicide prevention day.

Mr P Ramsey: I commend Sean Rogers, the proposer of the motion. Sean worked at an accelerated pace last week to try to get the motion before the Business Committee, and I commend him for that.

Many in my constituency and most elected representatives will welcome the motion. I pay tribute to the excellent services in my constituency that help those who are in despair or who are contemplating suicide, particularly what we deem to be our fourth emergency service, Foyle Search and Rescue.

According to our own Minister, 600 people took their own lives in 2010 and 2011. That is 600 families that have lost a loved one, and communities have lost real talent and potential. We in this House must stand with those communities and offer as much support as we can for preventative services. As most Members have said, one life lost is one too many.

If I may, I will speak about some of the services available in my constituency, some of which worked previously with what was the equivalent of the Protect Life framework. Hopefully, in doing so, I can raise awareness of the fine work that they do and spread the word that help is available in Derry. Organisations such as Zest, the Samaritans and Foyle Search and Rescue go well above and beyond the call of duty to safeguard people, particularly our young people, at times when they feel there is no other option than drastic measures to escape their dilemma. Those organisations are the very embodiment of the joined-up approach set out in the Protect Life strategy.

Zest has been doing sterling work and has been managing and operating the SHINE project in the Western Trust area for the Public Health Agency (PHA) for the past five years. That project has produced statistically significant improvements in the number of self-harm readmissions to hospitals in the Western Trust area. I commend the Zest model to the PHA as a project that should be made permanent in the Western Trust area. The PHA should take all the necessary steps to have the Zest model of self-harm intervention rolled out to other trust areas. I commend Geoffrey Kissick and his colleagues at Zest for ensuring that Derry is a shining example to other constituencies in this regard.

We all know the good work and name of the Samaritans. Their listening ears and compassionate methodology has me in no doubt that they have saved lives in our communities. Those are lives that we could have lost due to despair and suicide. Whether it is through their famous telephone service or via face-to-face support in one of their branches, they are embedded in our community, and I urge anyone who feels the need to talk through any problems or difficulties they may be having to contact them.

For the record, Mr Deputy Speaker, I want to read the telephone number into the Hansard report. It is 08457 909090. The Samaritans have branches right across Northern Ireland.

In my constituency we are very lucky. We benefit from warm people, beautiful scenery and a thriving cultural sector. A city that was once divided by the River Foyle is now working towards a better future, and the river is watched over by people whom I can only describe as our guardians. The brave men and women of Foyle Search and Rescue — people like Paddy Wilson — have served Derry and the north-west for many years by protecting and saving lives and preventing suicides in and around the River Foyle.

We owe them the thanks of a grateful region and city. They provide constant service to those in distress in or near the river and, indeed, they were the focus of a recent BBC documentary, which most Members will have seen, that showcased their dedication and courage. Their joined-up approach with the Western Trust and the PSNI is a testament to their commitment to our people, and I applaud them for that.

If we are to ensure that those services are maintained and can grow, we must provide best practice and ensure that agencies are working in partnership to assist and, above all, fund programmes that promote suicide awareness. We must ensure that those agencies that are at the coalface are supported effectively.

I support the motion. I hope that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, who is with us today, and the Public Health Agency can take a closer look at organisations in my constituency that use good practice and see the quality services that they provide.

Mr G Robinson: Every Member of this Assembly is aware of the trauma that suicide creates for families and the personal torment that must lead an individual to take that course of action. It is a topic that we must address, and we must try to minimise this unfortunate and traumatic occurrence in our society, given that every year in Northern Ireland over 300 souls take their lives.

I congratulate organisations such as the Samaritans, the search and rescue crews and others who do so much sterling work in trying to protect and save lives. I am therefore pleased to support world suicide prevention day and to highlight this delicate issue.

In June 2012, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety said that the refreshed Protect Life strategy aimed to:

"reduce the differential in the suicide rate between deprived and non-deprived areas ... particularly for males in the 15 to 45 age group".

He went on to say:

"I believe that reducing this differential has the best potential to save lives."

To have such a highly focused approach to suicide reduction shows that the groundwork has been done and that the areas that are in greatest need of resources have been identified and targeted.

It is a problem that not just one Department can solve. I hope that all Departments will play a role in tackling the issues. Suicide is a reality across all levels of society, so there must be a cross-societal approach to ensure that everyone is aware that help is available.

I particularly welcomed the identification of rural areas in the Minister's statement in June and interventions that would improve mental health by providing community-based health checks in rural areas. Tackling suicide in our society must be an absolute priority. I believe that world suicide prevention day is an important event in keeping what is a tragic and difficult topic in the public arena.

I have no hesitation in supporting this essential and necessary motion.

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I thank everyone who has spoken today on this important health issue, and particularly the Members who tabled the motion.

Despite the progress in the delivery of suicide prevention services and projects since the Protect Life strategy was first published in 2006, suicide remains one of the biggest public health challenges that we face. Why people take their own life remains a mystery, but evidence tells us that there are key

risk factors, which, if addressed early enough, can help reduce the likelihood of a person going on to die by suicide. These include alcohol and drug misuse, social isolation, unemployment and deprivation, relationship problems, existing mental illness, child abuse, being in the justice system, restricted educational achievement and a history of deliberate self-harm. Many of these issues cut across a number of areas of government. Effective solutions will, therefore, require enhanced joint working across Departments, agencies and sectors.

Early intervention for positive mental health and wider measures to improve the quality of life are, undoubtedly, part of the long-term answer. However, we must also bear in mind that the specific circumstances of every person who becomes suicidal are unique. Front line preventative action to care for people who are in emotional despair will, and must, remain essential.

Voluntary and community groups have a vital role in delivering this type of front line support. They are very often the first port of call for individuals and their families when facing these daunting circumstances. This is underlined by evidence published last year, which showed that 70% of people who died by suicide in Northern Ireland in the previous decade had not been in touch with mental health services. Clearly, a lot of people in serious emotional crisis are not accessing statutory mental health services, and this is something that needs to be looked at. It is also a reason why it is vital for the statutory and community sectors to work together to provide a range of suicide prevention services that reach out to all people who are at risk.

The original Protect Life strategy was published in October 2008. On 31 May 2012, the Executive endorsed and approved the publication of the refreshed strategy. Earlier, a question was asked about how many of the 60 recommendations of Protect Life were implemented. The traffic-light system shows that 11 have been fully implemented; 36 are on amber, which means that they have been partially implemented; and 13 are on red, which means that they need to be done. So, a considerable amount of work has been done, and a considerable amount of work is still to be done.

The community and voluntary sectors and bereaved families have been to the fore in the development and implementation of Protect Life. It is important, therefore, that I put on record my appreciation for the central role that they have played in the process to date. Maintaining this commitment and energy will be a priority for the future.

Suicide prevention is at the very top of my priorities. That is why I have protected the suicide prevention fund, which amounts to £6.7 million in the current financial year and of which over £2.2 million is invested to support the community and voluntary sectors.

The Public Health Agency works with local implementation groups in each of the health trust areas to encourage greater collaboration amongst community and voluntary groups and to advise on the development of local action plans to ensure that those plans take account of local needs. They also oversee the allocation of the suicide prevention funding within local communities.

The community and voluntary sectors are also represented on the regional suicide strategy implementation body, which provides an advisory and challenge function. The family voices forum has been established to give families bereaved by suicide a strong voice in the implementation process.

We need to be innovative in our thinking about what more we can do and how we can do things differently to maximise the return from our combined efforts and consider what more can be done to help tackle the high levels of suicide and self-harm in our local communities, particularly amongst young males in deprived areas who are more vulnerable. In light of the key role played by the community and voluntary sectors in the development of Protect Life, an extensive process of engagement with representatives of those sectors was undertaken as part of the refreshed strategy.

Last September, I invited key representatives of suicide prevention and mental health support groups to a workshop in the King's Hall in order to listen and hear their personal experiences, as local community and voluntary groups are often best placed to know the issues that are specific to their own areas. Community feedback about such events has provided key learning when considering how best to improve the co-ordination and delivery of the Protect Life suicide prevention strategy at local and regional levels. Many of the recommendations put forward by the community and voluntary sectors have been incorporated into the refreshed Protect Life strategy. The findings from the overall evaluation of the strategy, which will be published shortly, will help to inform the development of the next phase of suicide prevention policy from 2014 onwards.

4.15 pm

The community and voluntary sector has also been closely involved in the exercise, and I hope that it will continue to influence the development of suicide prevention policy, and, through our combined efforts, we shall continue to work together to achieve our shared goal of helping to save lives and to tackle the high rate of suicide and self-harm in our local communities.

Mr Wells: I wish to express my appreciation of the work of my colleague in South Down Sean Rogers, who had the tenacity and drive to ensure that the motion was put on the Order Paper today for the obvious reason that it is world suicide prevention day. I also pay tribute to the content of his speech, which raised many important issues. He has apologised because he has had to move on to a prior engagement.

In Sean's contribution, he emphasised the importance of the Protect Life strategy and of ensuring its delivery. He also raised a novel and important point, which is the recent trend for suicide kits being made available through the internet. The internet is an important tool for society, given that it leads to an airing of views and opinions throughout the world, but there are times when the internet goes too far. Some procedure or legislation is required to stop such kits being made available, because they can lead, as we heard, to tragic situations. Clearly, internet service providers (ISPs) must exercise some restraint to stop this happening. Young, vulnerable people, who are going through great emotional difficulties, could be tipped over the edge if they knew that they had access to the means to commit suicide.

Sean also said that there should be a health impact assessment on all policies. I agree with him because the issue about suicide is that it affects us all. No one Department or individual, or even one health trust, can tackle the issue. It is all-pervasive and widespread, and it needs an entire community to get behind change to prevent it from happening. Therefore, I agree with Sean that, to prevent suicide from arising as an option in the first place, we need assessments of all our policies.

He also suggested that we need more early intervention, which is a theme throughout much of society in Northern Ireland. If proper nurture, care and attention are not given to children by the age of three, they will, unfortunately, be on a downward spiral that can often lead to tragic circumstances.

I also appreciated Sean's useful comment: "If in doubt, act." If there is any susceptibility to or potential for someone going downhill and spiralling towards suicide, we should act immediately.

Sean was the first of many Members who raised the issue of statistics, and 600 suicides have been recorded in Northern Ireland over the past two years. We must regard those statistics as the absolute minimum. In my constituency of South Down, we often come across a situation in which someone has inexplicably died as a result of a road traffic accident late at night, and there has been no logical explanation as to why that happened. I suspect that many of those people used their vehicle to commit suicide. So the whole situation may be an awful lot more serious than we believe it to be.

I was shocked by Paula Bradley's statistic that, every day, 30,000 people throughout the world attempt suicide, which is 10 times more than the number who died in the awful tragedy of 9/11. That gives an indication that the problem affects not only Northern Ireland and Europe but pervades the world, and we have to act on the problem.

Pam Brown took a different slant when she looked at the impact of suicide, of young people in particular, on parents. A common theme that I have encountered throughout South Down is the dreadful trauma that a suicide causes to the parents, grandparents, friends and relations of the person who has taken his or her own life. They are haunted for the rest of their life, thinking, could I have done something to prevent my loved one from taking this dreadful course of action? It is important that we provide support not only to those who are going through difficult times but to those who have encountered the dreadful realisation that someone whom they love has died.

My colleague from South Down Mr Hazzard mentioned the issue in Ballynahinch. I must say that it surprises me that it is a problem there. Even Ballynahinch, which one might think is a quiet, peaceful and relatively settled community, clearly has a suicide problem, particularly among young males. Ballynahinch does not stack up against the normal indicators: there is not huge deprivation, and there

is large family support. Yet, sadly, we still read regularly in local newspapers that young people, in particular, have committed suicide.

John McCallister raised an interesting point, although I hope that he does not quote me in the 'Mourne Observer' as saying so. On a more serious note, he raised the fact that it is ironic that suicide rates in Northern Ireland were lower when homicide rates were higher. Surprisingly, during the dreadful times of the Troubles, there were fewer suicides than there are now. Academic studies must be undertaken to find out why that is the case. Has the legacy of the Troubles left many people in a desperate state of mental health? Are we now seeing the realisation of what happened and, therefore, more suicides?

Mr McCallister also made a point, as did many other Members, about the direct link between suicide and deprivation. The Minister quoted the shocking statistic that for every one percentage point rise in unemployment, there is a 0.75% rise in the suicide rate. That can be tracked with certainty. That worries me because, of course, Northern Ireland is going through a very difficult economic situation. Indeed, some argue that the situation has not yet bitten as deeply as it will, because only now are we beginning to see the impact of cuts in the public sector on which the Northern Ireland economy is so dependent. There is, therefore, a real worry that the outworking of those cuts could be further suicides.

As usual, Kieran McCarthy came to the issue from a different, and very welcome, angle in that he paid tribute to the many organisations in Northern Ireland that work in the field. We congratulate and support those organisations. Often, they sprung up as a result of a tragedy in their community, and they are determined to try to ensure that it is not repeated. Those organisations deal with terribly difficult situations and people who are at their lowest point. The Samaritans, for instance, do Trojan work throughout Northern Ireland as they try to provide a listening ear and prevent people from taking the ultimate step of ending their life. I know people who have volunteered for the Samaritans and could not cope with the terribly difficult stories that they heard from people who were very close to the edge. That indicates just how important that work is.

Gordon Dunne emphasised the families who are left behind. He welcomed and supported the work of various charities and emphasised the cross-cutting nature of suicide. The Minister was absolutely right to say that it is not a burden for him to bear alone: it is one for all members of the Executive and, indeed, the entire community. It is cross-cutting with a capital "C", and we must ensure that that is taken seriously in future.

Mickey Brady from Newry and Armagh has worked extensively on social welfare issues. I have known Mickey Brady for 32 years. He has always been the font of all knowledge on social security issues in Newry. He deals very much with people at the front end. He emphasised the futility that young people feel, particularly due to lack of work or education. I was quite shocked when he said that he had come across an 82-year-old who had committed suicide. It is equally dreadful to hear that someone at the very end of life, who should be enjoying retirement, has been driven to such despair as to take his or her life at such a late stage. Mr Brady also emphasised the work of PIPS. I concur with his comments on an organisation that also works extensively in South Down.

Paula Bradley was quite right to say that suicide is, often, regarded as a taboo subject. Therefore, it is absolutely right that MLA Rogers felt that it was necessary to highlight it publicly. Most of us have been in the Long Gallery and met young people who no longer regard suicide as a taboo subject. They want the importance of the subject to be highlighted. It is absolutely right that we do not shy away from the issue, but face up to it and do what we can to protect lives, particularly of young people. Paula also mentioned the Mental Health First Aid programme, which should be rolled out throughout the Province.

Pat Ramsey, who always has an angle from his constituency of Foyle, mentioned the excellent work carried out by Foyle Search and Rescue. Indeed, when the stats are added up, I think that they will show that that organisation has saved so many people from taking the ultimate step of using the River Foyle as an option for committing suicide. It has been able to literally pull people back from the brink or rescue them after they have jumped. Many of those folk are alive today and are thankful for that organisation's work. It and many others have a role in suicide prevention. Indeed, Mr Eastwood has invited us to a meeting with Foyle Search and Rescue, which will take place tomorrow, I think.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member draw his remarks to a close, please?

Mr Wells: Finally, I thought that the Minister tackled the issue very well and raised the importance of us all working together to stop this scourge on our society.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly unites in its support for world suicide prevention day; and endorses the recommendations contained in the Protect Life strategy to develop a cross-departmental framework to assist the community and voluntary sectors in suicide prevention.

Question for Urgent Oral Answer

Ralph's Close Care Home, Gransha

Mr Deputy Speaker: Ms Sue Ramsey has given notice of a question for urgent oral answer to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps will he take to ensure that the residents of Ralph's Close in Gransha are not subjected to further risk or potential harm following the recent suspension of staff as a result of allegations of abuse.

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): In the first instance, I must make it clear that the allegations of abuse at Ralph's Close are being investigated by the PSNI, and, until that investigation is completed, we must all be very careful about commenting on that aspect. My paramount consideration and that of Health and Social Care (HSC) is the safety and well-being of the residents in Ralph's Close. In relation to ongoing safeguarding arrangements, I advise the Member that, following the receipt of the first anonymous allegation of abuse on 24 July, the key agencies involved have all taken appropriate steps to safeguard the residents of Ralph's Close. In the intervening period to date, that has included the precautionary suspension of some members of staff pending PSNI investigations and the inspection of Ralph's Close, both announced and unannounced, by the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) during August 2012, which resulted in a number of recommendations for improvement.

The trust has also instigated a series of unannounced visits to Ralph's Close by senior staff, and those are continuing. Key workers were briefed to inform and liaise with families. Independent monitors from other trust facilities for people with learning disabilities have been placed in Ralph's Close on a 24/7 basis, and the trust is actively seeking an additional external monitor from another trust. Two advocates are available to the residents at any time. To replace the staff who are under precautionary suspension, a manager who is very experienced in looking after people with challenging behaviours in a residential setting has been put in charge. That manager is supported by experienced staff from other trust facilities. The trust has now achieved compliance with two of the RQIA failure-to-comply (FTC) notices and has developed an improvement plan to meet the recommendations of the three remaining notices and those of the reports of the reviews that were carried out by the HSC Board and the RQIA. Implementation of that improvement plan will be overseen by a project board that will be made up of senior managers in the trust.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. I take on board that the Minister said that a PSNI investigation into this case is ongoing, and I know that we cannot prejudice that. I appreciate that, but I brought this question for urgent oral answer to the House because there is huge interest, including media, in the case, Minister. I know that you cannot get into specifics, but recently, the RQIA was involved in a home where the indications seem to be that it was a year before there was any movement. Can you highlight the exact involvement that the RQIA had, when it made the original recommendations and when recommendations were moved on? Was there a long time frame for people to make changes and improvements?

4.30 pm

Mr Poots: There was certainly not a long time frame in this instance. Ralph's Close has been open for less than two years. Many of the staff who previously worked in the hospital were transferred to Ralph's Close for continuity of supply. We received the anonymous letters in the recent past, and the matter has been investigated by RQIA. There has not been an excessive period in this instance.

RQIA raised specific issues in the FTC notices, including its view that the unit's managers were working too long hours and that the trust's protection plan had not been actioned as committed and its concerns about the seniority of the monitoring officer's brief for the role, the capacity to fulfil the role in two houses at one time, a lack of daily activity plans and meaningful activities for residents, excessive use of agency staff, and staff supervision, appraisal and training. It also identified a failure to report injuries and incidents involving residents, as required under the regulations, and the use of restraint without appropriate consultation, record-keeping or notification to RQIA. Those are the sorts of things that RQIA identified. They are certainly things that need to be taken very seriously in conjunction with the efforts of the whistle-blowers in bringing the matter to our attention.

Mr Wells: Obviously without making any comment whatsoever on the validity of the complaints, does the Minister agree that the fact that the RQIA has acted so quickly indicates that when allegations are made — of course, all that we are dealing with at this stage are allegations — there is a robust and very effective system, in the form of the RQIA, acting immediately to ensure that the public are protected?

Mr Poots: What we need to do is recognise that the people involved are vulnerable. They are more than likely unable to put the case for themselves. This was drawn to our attention by people who engaged in whistle-blowing. It was whistle-blowing in the proper sense, in that they brought it to the attention of the trust. The trust has responded quickly by bringing in RQIA and introducing the PSNI to conduct an investigation. It is very clearly not a matter of covering things up. It is a matter of seeking to get to the truth and dealing with the problems. It is about ensuring that, if they break the law or the rules of the trust, individuals are dealt with appropriately.

It is important that the message to the public and our staff is very clear: if there is wrongdoing in a facility, bring it to our attention. I encourage any other member of staff who witnessed things while working in Ralph's Close to come forward and tell us, because we need to get as strong a picture as possible to identify the truth of what happened. The PSNI is conducting an investigation. We need to ensure that it gets all the information available so that it can arrive at the proper and correct conclusions to resolve the matter.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. It has been a very stressful few days for patients and their families and for the staff of Ralph's Close. However, I would much rather discuss the actions of the trust today than be standing here in a year or two condemning the inaction of the trust in this case. Further evidence must be obtained to assist the police and the trust with their inquiries. The Minister spoke of whistle-blowers. Can the Minister give assurances that whistle-blowers in this case, and any other case, will be fully protected?

Mr Poots: Not only can I give him that assurance but I can tell him that I wrote to everyone in the health and social care system and the Fire Service about this matter some time ago. It is not a matter of their being protected. It is a matter of it being their duty to come forward with the information. If people see wrongdoing, it is wholly wrong for them not to pass that information on to their senior managers.

In this case, someone has, and action is being taken on the back of it. I can give absolute assurance that if people bring forward issues of concern to the Western Trust, they will be dealt with properly and by the appropriate channels, whether that is the PSNI, RQIA or the trust itself, and will be properly investigated. The individuals who bring those matters to the Western Trust will suffer no consequences as a result of telling the truth about what has happened.

Private Members' Business

VAT: Hospitality Sector

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has allowed up to one hour and 30 minutes for this debate. The proposer will have 10 minutes to propose the motion and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members will have five minutes.

Mr Hamilton: I beg to move

That this Assembly welcomes the strong commitments contained in the Programme for Government and the economic strategy that are aimed at developing tourism potential; notes the key role that the hospitality sector will play in achieving tourism targets; further notes the Republic of Ireland's reduced rate of VAT for some tourism-related services; and calls on the Executive to pursue the case with HM Treasury for a reduced rate of VAT for tourism-related services in Northern Ireland.

It is a pleasure to move the motion that stands in the Order Paper in my name and in those of Mr McIlveen and Mr Campbell. We are starting a new session in the Assembly today, and I do not think that a session has gone by since we returned in 2007 where the issue of how tourism relates to the economy and economic growth has not been discussed at length in the Chamber, whether through motions, Adjournment debates or questioning of the tourism Minister. The importance of tourism to the Northern Ireland economy goes without saying. Even though we have some of the most beautiful landscapes in the world, over the past number of decades, that has not, for understandable reasons, been exploited to its full.

Nonetheless, Northern Ireland is growing increasingly dependent on tourism for employment and economic growth. It is already worth about half a billion pounds to our economy annually, has huge potential to grow and has bucked the trend over the past number of years where, while a lot of our traditional sectors have been on the slide and have seen decline, tourism has seen roughly a 2% growth. Instead of seeing Northern Ireland as somewhere that people do not want to come to, we have become accustomed to seeing it as somewhere that people should come to, and we have a product to sell.

Sometimes I think that, in a UK context, tourism is not seen as being as important as other heavy industries or the financial services, but, in the UK, tourism is the third largest export industry and is worth some £17.7 billion per annum to the British economy. As an Assembly, we have underlined the importance of tourism to economic growth through targets set in the Programme for Government. Targets have been set to increase tourism revenue to £676 million and to increase visitor numbers to 4.2 million by 2014. They are fairly ambitious but realisable targets, given the product that we have and given the massive investment in the tourism sector in Northern Ireland over the past number of years from the public sector and the private sector separately and in conjunction.

In the past year alone, Titanic Belfast has been opened and has already had in excess of half a million visitors; it is well on course to reach its first-year targets. The Giant's Causeway visitor centre opened over the summer, and it is having an exceptionally good start and exceeding its initial targets. We have held great events such as the Irish Open. Those are just a few of the things that we have done this year. There are more things to come next year, and there has been a huge investment in the infrastructure that is required to draw people to Northern Ireland. So far, the Northern Ireland 2012 campaign has been a great success in creating a product that is sellable and making Northern Ireland a prime-time player when it comes to tourism.

Private sector investment is coming on as well, and, since 2007, even in the midst of a recession, 1,000 additional hotel beds have been added in Northern Ireland. Only last Friday I performed the official opening of a £300,000 investment by the National Trust in Rowallane gardens outside Saintfield. There is private sector investment and public sector investment, and the two working together to get the product, which is undoubtedly there.

However, in spite of all that, the tourism and hospitality sector is still struggling, like a lot of sectors. Today, after I brought the motion forward and got some publicity in the press, people from the hospitality sector have contacted me to say, "Well done for putting it forward". They are having a difficult time. Even with all the investment that has gone into the infrastructure, there is still some

difficulty. What we are proposing today would greatly assist the sector with moving forward. If we want to achieve the targets that we have set in the Programme for Government, we need a hospitality sector — hotels, restaurants and pubs — to deliver that. It is not just about having attractions for day trips for the people of Northern Ireland; it is about having things for a weekend, a long weekend or even for a week's holidays in Northern Ireland, and the hospitality sector is key to that.

There is a demand to look at things that could be done to assist the sector. One suggested solution is to reduce the rate of VAT for the hospitality sector and some tourism-related services. That issue has been pushed by the likes of the Pubs of Ulster, the hotel sector and others. I have been encouraged by the contacts that I have had over the past few days from people in the restaurant sector, pubs and hotels.

The context for that is that a unanimous decision was taken by all 27 EU Finance Ministers who use reduced VAT for restaurants and catering. Governments have been able to reduce VAT for hotels since 1975, and they have been able to make decisions on food in restaurants and catering since 1 January 2010. Some say that our Government at Westminster are not interested in this subject. Our Government at Westminster and the representatives in the EU voted for this. If they think that it is good enough for the whole of the EU, you would think that they might be interested in it for the UK. Twenty-one EU states have lower VAT for hotels and 13 have availed themselves of the ability to reduce it for the hospitality sector and have lower VAT for food. The simple question is this: why would so many EU member states pursue a policy of lower VAT for hospitality and tourism-related services if it did not work and did not have a meaningful and positive impact on their economy? Germany has VAT of 7% for food in hotels, France has 5.5% for restaurants and hotels, and they have seen an increase in the number of apprenticeships and jobs. They have also seen wages go up and staff turnover go down.

However, we do not have to go to France or Germany or any of the mainland European countries to see the benefit of reduced VAT for the hospitality sector; we just have to look south of the border to the example and experience of the Irish Republic. It has reduced its VAT down to 9% for quite a range of goods and services related to tourism. That was originally due to run out in July 2011. However, so positive has the impact been that it has been extended to the end of 2013. The Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport in the South has estimated that somewhere in the region of 6,300 jobs have been created in the first year that the VAT reduction has been in operation.

Research in the Irish Republic has shown that, in general, its tourism sector does better when the VAT rate is lower. Obviously, allied to that is a wider agenda of trying to create a low business tax environment in the South, coupled with the €3 air tax, compared with our fairly high levels, which we are doing something about in Northern Ireland, at least for long-haul flights. The Irish Republic brought that forward as a short-term stimulus. It appears to be working, and it is honing in on tourism as a key sector for its economy.

It is very clear that Northern Ireland is at a distinct disadvantage in comparison with the Republic of Ireland in competing for tourists. Tourist Board research in Northern Ireland shows that one third of businesses believe that high rates of VAT are an impediment on them having growth in their business.

There are a wide range of benefits to having a reduced rate of VAT, many of which are quite obvious. Hospitality services are highly price sensitive, so higher prices decrease demand and have a reduced yield in VAT. Therefore, the opposite is obviously the case: if you reduce tax and reduce prices as a result, you can increase demand, and with that comes more recruitment. For many, jobs in the hospitality sector are that important first rung on the ladder towards other jobs and future employment. Research commissioned by Pubs of Ulster has estimated that if we were to have a reduction down to 5%, a fairly conservative estimate is that it could produce over 3,000 jobs for Northern Ireland as a share of an overall national increase of nearly 300,000 jobs in the sector. It is an easier sector to start a business in, and this, along with the Finance Minister's empty property relief and small business rates relief, which have also assisted people in lowering their costs, would be another attraction for people to start a business in the hospitality sector. It would see some reinvestment in business, as not all the benefit would be passed on through reduced prices. Others might invest in training staff or expanding and extending their properties. It would encourage improvements in the sector. We have seen that in the likes of pubs moving towards food. Something like 70% of tourists now go to pubs for food, not just for drinking. It would help to encourage that movement towards food and a more responsible attitude in that sector.

4.45 pm

I am not oblivious to the cost argument that will come back from the Treasury in response to representations by the Finance Minister. There are varying estimates to say that a reduction to 5% VAT for tourism-related services in Northern Ireland could have a cost as high as £10 billion, but that would be for the very full programme of cuts that the Irish Government have brought forward. A much smaller programme would obviously cost much less to the British Exchequer. For a Government that are increasingly talking about growth and less about austerity, this is a potential stimulus package measure that they could bring forward. Deloitte research has shown that £2.6 billion of net benefit could be achieved over 10 years of a reduction and 78,000 jobs, just for hotels and tourism attractions. There is potential for a virtuous circle: instead of high tax, low demand and reduced yields in tax, we could actually have lower prices and increased demand leading to recruitment, investment and expansion.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mr Hamilton: I call on the House to back the motion, back our tourism sector —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your time is up.

Mr Hamilton: — and give the Minister the power to go to the Treasury to make representations on our behalf.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion and very much welcome the debate we are having today. I hope that we get support for the motion from across the House.

Tourism and hospitality, like agrifood and other sectors of our economy, have been identified in the past few years as potential green shoots of economic recovery. To be quite honest, it is an area in which we do not punch at our weight, never mind above it. It is something that does need a particular focus. There is no point in the big marketing drives, in promoting golf tourism or areas of outstanding natural beauty if visitors have nowhere to stay and no great choice of accommodation, entertainment or dining out. I look to places such as Ballycastle and the Causeway Coast — not just because they are in my constituency — and see that the fact of the matter is that there is so much unrealised potential. They need incentives and government policies that are going to help local businesses in the sector to grow for employment to grow so that people can get jobs. It is not rocket science, as the Member has already said. When the rate is reduced, there will be more money to reinvest in businesses and more opportunity for employment and businesses to grow, so that we can have a much better tourism sector, more in keeping with the rest of Ireland, where things are much further on. So, we need incentives to encourage economic growth.

The problem with the British Government's approach is that they do not carry out any specific actions in our economic interest unless we, who are making the decisions much more quickly, put them under pressure. Corporation tax is a case in point. We need further investment to stimulate the economy and measures to bring us more in line with the rest of Ireland. This measure would also stimulate the economy through job creation. Of course, economic growth could stall. Recently, there has been much commentary about that, as a result of the present British Government's austerity policy and their fixation on debt, which might actually result in a higher rate of debt in relation to GDP in the longer term. That is bad for all of us, given our economic connections.

The VAT rate here is 20%, with a reduced rate for some goods. VAT generated in 2008-09 was estimated at £2.4 billion; quite a significant amount of money. Any proposed changes will have an impact on that figure but will also stimulate new sources of revenue. As the Member has already said, everyone else in Europe seems to have caught on to this initiative. Germany reduced it to 7%, and it is 9% in the rest of Ireland. Our rate is holding back and stifling the growth of tourism and hospitality in the North.

Tourism in the North accounts for about 8% of employment, but it has not expanded as it should have in comparison with other sectors. That is concerning, given the potential that I outlined. It is also clearly an indicator that there is a need for a stimulus, especially given the fact that tourist numbers are growing. There was a 6% increase in the number of overnight stay tourists between 2010 and 2011. The number of facilities to accommodate them, such as hotels, B&Bs and hostels, needs to grow with that demand, and we need to ensure that there are policies in place to support that.

In the rest of the country, there is a VAT rate of 9% for such tourism-related activities as restaurants, hotels, cinemas, etc, and that has been in place since 1 July of last year. As the Member said, the employment rates within tourism have increased. Prices have been reduced, and, of course, that has encouraged more trade.

My party and I agree with the general thrust of the motion. I believe that it is important that there is a united voice in the Assembly stating that there is an economic need for this policy change. I get a sense of déjà vu here, because we have had this debate with regard to fuel duty, corporation tax and this particular part of VAT. As is the case with all those things, it is a calculated risk. There may be an initial cost, but that can be met through additional moneys that are generated from more productive business and more people being employed.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close, please.

Mr McKay: Of course, that is about keeping the economic wheels in motion. I support the motion and urge the House to do likewise.

Mrs Overend: This is our year, Mr Speaker — 2012 is Our Time Our Place. If, like me, you were celebrating our Olympians and Paralympians, you will agree that we are rightly proud to be from Northern Ireland. It has been said many times in the Chamber, including by myself, that this is a unique time for Northern Ireland in respect of maximising the potential arising from tourism. The opening of the £76.9 million Titanic building and the Irish Open golf tournament, which 130,000 people attended over the four days, are recent examples. Those have been two major shots in the arm for tourism.

Next year presents equally important opportunities, with Londonderry as the UK City of Culture, and the World Police and Fire Games, which, hopefully, will attract 25,000 visitors, including 10,000 competitors from around 70 countries. Allied to that, we have ongoing initiatives, such as the five signature projects, as well as the decade of historically important centenaries, including the signing of the Ulster covenant, which the House will debate next week.

Back in 2004, it was the Ulster Unionist Party that raised this issue at Westminster. Our East Antrim MP, Roy Beggs, tabled an early day motion, supported by 67 signatures, to bring this idea to the Treasury. I welcome Simon Hamilton's decision to back that campaign. Back in 2004 was when Northern Ireland could have made better use of the shot in the arm that could accompany a reduction in VAT on tourism.

I find it quite astonishing that during our first plenary session back, following a number of major announcements by the First Minister and deputy First Minister in July and yet another consecutive month without growth in the purchasing managers' index (PMI), as detailed by the chief economist of the Ulster Bank, Richard Ramsey, we are not focusing on what we can do here in this place and on what we can do to help the local economy, rather than lobbying the Treasury in Westminster.

Referring to the PMI figures released this morning, Mr Ramsey stated that, prior to the current downturn, Northern Ireland's private sector firms enjoyed 56 consecutive months of expansion from April 2003 to November 2007. He said:

"Since then the PMI survey has failed to signal growth for 57 consecutive months. Meanwhile, exports, which are viewed as the economy's escape route to recovery, have been falling continuously since February 2008."

That is the economic reality in which we live.

I turn now to tourism. Given the sheer volume of events that Northern Ireland can offer, the Programme for Government targets have rightly been set at a challenging level. The aim is to increase visitor numbers to 4.2 million and tourist revenue to £676 million by December 2014. That has been set out as one of the commitments that matters most in the Programme for Government. The economic strategy also marks out tourism as one of the sectors that has made and will continue to make important contributions to the development of the Northern Ireland economy. It also identifies the importance of the infrastructural investment in key tourist attractions such as the Giant's Causeway visitor centre. However, there is cause for concern on this front. The Programme for Government

targets for 2007-2011 were not met, with visitor numbers and revenue falling. More recently, the number of overseas visitors to Northern Ireland in the first quarter of this year fell by 13% compared with the same period in 2011. During the same period, tourism was up 4% in England and remained unchanged in Scotland and Wales.

Given the various opportunities that I outlined, questions must be asked about whether we are capitalising on this unique time in our history to the extent that we should be. Figures suggest that we are not doing so. What we desperately need is a tourism strategy and an accompanying action plan to facilitate joined-up government and produce real outcomes.

In conclusion, I believe that we must look carefully at what sectors are in need of our support. A lot of resources have been devoted to tourism, and although that is appropriate, and the hospitality sector must be supported, other industries are also suffering as a result of the recession. I am thinking specifically of construction. The PMI survey to which I referred earlier stated that the construction sector's —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mrs Overend: — output has fallen at its fastest pace in the past 12 months. The Ulster Unionist Party has previously advocated a reduced 5% VAT rate for repair maintenance —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up.

Mrs Overend: — and improvement of existing dwellings. That area should be given consideration.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the proposer of the motion, which our party will support. I proposed an amendment calling for the establishment of a commission, in the style of the Calman Commission on Scottish devolution, to assess the devolution of further powers, including fiscal powers such as VAT, which would have enabled the Northern Ireland Assembly to serve the people of the North better. However, that amendment was not accepted.

The motion refers to the strong commitments in the Programme for Government aimed at developing tourism potential. It would be more accurate to describe those commitments as targets. The targets are to:

"increase visitor numbers to 4.2 million and tourist revenue to 676 million by December 2014".

Unfortunately, the programme is short on detailed proposals for achieving those targets in a sustainable manner. Likewise, the economic strategy identifies tourism as providing "enormous opportunities for our economy". However, it offers little more than timely:

"further opportunities to showcase the region to visitors from across the world".

The motion has the benefit of being a policy proposal. However, it would be better if it were framed within a wider policy of seeking the devolution of greater and wider control over fiscal mechanisms in the way that the Scottish Government have sought. That said, the currently stalled attempt to devolve the setting of the rate of corporation tax might suggest that some parties are not yet ready to take control of those economic levers.

The hospitality sector contributes £1 billion annually to the Northern Ireland economy. It employs around 35,000 people and is the highest-grossing tourism sector, with 33% of all spending. In 2010, the EU allowed member states to reduce VAT for hotels, restaurants and catering. Since then, 21 European countries have reduced VAT for hotels, and 13 European countries have reduced VAT for restaurants and catering. In the South, the VAT rate in the sector is 9%. It has been estimated that a reduction in the VAT rate to 5% could generate 3,300 new jobs for the hospitality sector in the North.

This is where I urge a note of caution. In taking forward the proposal, the Assembly and the Executive must think carefully about the direction in which the policy should be developed.

We should not seek a race to the bottom against the Government in Dublin. We should, instead, seek further and deeper co-operation on this and other tourism-related matters with them. We should seek

to benefit from all visitors to this island, wherever their point of entry. In practical terms, that means removing as many disincentives as we can for visitors to one jurisdiction on our island to travel to the other.

The disparity in VAT rates in the hospitality sector is an example of the increased cost imposed on tourists coming North. It may seem to be only a minor inconvenience, but it is enough to affect the decision-making of some visitors. We should, as the motion calls for, pursue with the Treasury the case for a reduced rate of VAT for tourism-related services in Northern Ireland, but we should also seek to maximise the benefit to our economy from all visitors to this island, North and South, by deepening the co-operation with our counterparts in the rest of the island.

5.00 pm

Mr Lunn: There is no doubt that the UK is a wee bit out of line on VAT rates in the hospitality sector, but I have a query about the wording of the motion, which appears to ask for a reduction in the VAT rate purely for Northern Ireland. Are the proposers asking for a reduction across the UK or just in Northern Ireland?

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for raising that point because it allows me to correct an omission. Ten minutes was not long enough to make all the points that I wanted to make, as the Member will know. My understanding is that EU regulations mean that any reduction would have to be for the whole of the United Kingdom; it could not be specifically for a region such as Northern Ireland.

Mr Lunn: Yes, precisely. I am not aware of any EU sovereign Government ever seeking to vary a VAT rate for one of their regions or, indeed, whether they could do so under EU regulations. I see the Minister shaking his head.

We will support the motion. Frankly, it would be difficult to make an argument for not doing so. It is one of those motions that you just could not —

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): Try.

Mr Lunn: I do not want to, although you might wonder why I said that by the time I have finished.

We could argue, for example, that each devolved country in the UK should set its own VAT rate or, perhaps, a proportion of it, with appropriate adjustment to the block grant. However, we would then be back to the argument on corporation tax, which the First Minister said was the only thing for which he wanted further devolution. So I wonder why, if VAT could be such a key tool, he is restricting it in that way.

I doubt that the Treasury, in present or future circumstances, would contemplate a reduction for the UK or would be allowed to. Other Members touched on this point: why should we stop at the hospitality sector? The argument seems to be that other countries such as the Republic do so. I must say that the way in which the Republic of Ireland is dictating DUP taxation policies these days is ironic. Just because other countries target the hospitality sector that does not mean that it is necessarily right for Northern Ireland. Frankly, it does not even mean that it was right for the Republic of Ireland. Today, I heard that there had been about a 6% increase in tourism following a similar reduction in the Republic. However, that coincided with the fact that the Celtic tiger had hit the buffers big time and the hospitality sector in the Republic, particularly in Dublin, just could not sustain the prices that they had been allowed to get away with. For several years, it was rip-off time and nobody cared, but now they are having to trim their cloth. I fancy that the eventual increase in the past 12 months came about as a result of a good dose of realism, not purely a reduction in the VAT rate, which is, in fact, as another Member said, temporary.

I do not want to underestimate the contribution of tourism to our economy. I have heard different figures: I heard £1 billion a minute ago, £500 million before that, and I think that another Member said £676 million. It is a substantial amount. However, in the richest countries in Europe — in Scandinavia and Germany — tourism makes a tiny contribution to the national output. Real wealth creation requires a long-term investment of time and money in the right areas and not necessarily short-term tax breaks. The ones that might seem obvious to the public are not, in fact, huge wealth creators. That is not to diminish the point, and I do not want to sound at all negative. However, we need to keep the thing in perspective.

Going back to the feasibility argument, which has now been confirmed, I will quote from a letter that Naomi Long received recently from the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury:

"There is no evidence of a causal link between the VAT rate and tourism activity...industry comparisons do not include the significant VAT reliefs that we have for cultural attractions and public transport, or the local bed or other tourism taxes that other EU countries...choose to levy. The UK's VAT registration threshold is the highest in the EU, meaning...many small hotels do not have to charge...VAT to their customers.

A reduction in the rate of VAT for hotel accommodation cannot be applied exclusively to the tourism sector and would have to extend to the whole of the catering industry. Much of the expenditure in the catering sector is from the domestic population and not from foreign visitors. Whilst I understand the particular position of Northern Ireland, it is not possible to provide the VAT relief on a geographical basis."

Moreover — these are his words not mine — he continues:

"providing citizens with a tax incentive to devote a greater proportion of their spending and time on leisure seems unlikely to raise UK productivity.

In this context, I have seen no compelling case for VAT relief for the tourism industry instead of other sectors."

Frankly, that does not appear to give us much room for manoeuvre, but that is not to say that we will not support the motion. If he has not seen a compelling case for VAT relief so far, it is possible that, as a result of this motion and perhaps some pressure being applied in Westminster — that is probably where this should have been brought in the first place — it may be possible to do something. We will support the motion —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close please.

Mr Lunn: I just did that. We will support the motion.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. First, I welcome the debate and thank those who proposed the motion for bringing forward what is a sensible debate. We firmly believe that VAT is a regressive form of taxation that does not fairly reflect the ability of citizens or businesses to pay it. As a result, a high rate of VAT has an overly negative impact on low and middle earners compared to top earners, as a higher percentage of their income will be spent on VAT.

I set that point aside. The motion deals primarily with the impact that such a reduction in VAT would have on our tourism industry. It is clear that, despite all the money and the positive energy that has gone into promoting this region, many businesses in the tourism sector are struggling. Other factors need to change to support the sector, and exploring a potential reduction in VAT is something that we need to look at. I am more than open to exploring the impact that a reduction in VAT would have on visitor numbers and on our tourism industry as a whole, and I am happy to support the motion. However, I must point out that, when Sinn Féin tables similar motions to look for an amendment in a rate of tax, we are immediately hit with shouts from the DUP of "What would this cost?" , "How would we fund that?" and "Where would we get the money?". We will not resort to similar tactics today but will send a clear, unified message from the Chamber that we are all in favour of exploring this further.

There is a clear need to tackle the cost base that our businesses face, of which VAT is only one part. I know that a number of cynical people pointed out this morning that, if the DUP was serious about this, it would have explored amending the rates structure. That is a separate argument. We recognise from the lessons in the South that there is a challenge to the sector to deliver quality and to provide value for money. We welcome the acknowledgement that there are lessons to learn from the South, and we believe that there is a need to share good practice, particularly with the finite resources that we have on this island. In particular, we need to ensure that there is a joined-up approach, so that visitors who come to this island do not merely stop in Belfast or Dublin, as is becoming a trend. We need to get them out to explore all that Ireland has to offer. When we are trying to harmonise things across the island, why should we simply stop at VAT? There are far greater issues than VAT. A foreign visitor who comes to this island and wants to book hotel accommodation in County Cavan

has to go to one website, but, if they want to book a hotel across the border to Derrylin, they have to go to a separate website. That is complete madness. We also have the same issues in and around how this island is promoted and how visas are allocated to people from certain countries.

Although the motion is welcome and topical and has a lot of support from the hospitality industry, it lacks ambition and demonstrates a lack of confidence on the part of its supporters. It lacks ambition in that it merely seeks to lobby the British Treasury to act on behalf of our businesses and our tourism sector. I can only guess that that is due to the supporters' lack of confidence in our ability to make decisions as an Executive and Assembly on behalf of our people and business community. We should be more ambitious. We need to clearly set forward the argument to transfer relevant fiscal powers so that this Chamber can make decisions and not become merely a lobbyist.

We are confident that all the parties in the Executive and, indeed, in the Assembly would make the right decisions to promote growth and deliver prosperity for all our people. However, we have to point out the course of action that we would take if the British Treasury were to simply respond in the negative. What would we then do? Would we simply say, "Well, we tried, but that is it"? Although we are all unified in support of this call, we need to set up a sort of plan B approach to deal with what we would do if this comes back in the negative. Would the DUP then be willing to support looking at the option of devolving the power to set this rate of tax?

We also support the motion because we favour direct over indirect taxation. We believe that those with the ability to pay should pay their fair share. We support the motion, but we believe its supporters need to be more ambitious, take a holistic approach and be more confident. That is what our sector needs and our economy demands.

Mr Cree: Although setting the rate of VAT is not a devolved issue, as we heard from some Members, I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate as a member of the Finance Committee.

We can, of course, lobby for changes to be made, and that is why this is a useful motion. However, as Mr Lunn, I think, asked, why should this not be for the UK as a whole? There is a lot of logic in that. If the European Finance Ministers have already agreed this approach, how come the UK Minister did not pick it up?

I reaffirm the importance of the hospitality sector, as outlined by my colleague Sandra Overend. Tourism is a key driver of the economy, and we have many fine initiatives ongoing, including the signature projects. However, there is little point in seeking to attract more visitors to Northern Ireland if our hospitality industry does not have the capacity to deal with them. The motion proposes a means of improving that capacity, and, for that reason, it has my support. It is however important that we know — *[Interruption.]* There was a bit of a shock there for somebody. It is, however, important that we know the background and have a grasp of the figures that we are dealing with today. Many of my colleagues also mentioned those figures.

So, what benefits could stem from a reduced rate of VAT for the hospitality sector? The rate of VAT in the UK is currently 20% on goods and services, including hotel accommodation etc. Only Denmark and Lithuania charge a higher rate than the UK. Competitors such as Italy charge 10%, Spain charges 8% and France and Germany charge just 7% on hotel accommodation.

Mrs Overend also mentioned the construction industry. That is another very deserving sector that needs our help, and we should consider some positive action to try to alleviate the problems of that industry. VAT also has to conform to EU regulations; therefore, every member state in the EU must apply VAT at a standard rate that can be anything between 15% and 25%. All countries can also have up to two reduced rates between 5% and 15%. Reduced rates can be applied only to a limited range of goods and services that are specified in the regulations, and hotel accommodation and restaurant services are certainly included. Therefore, taking that into account, my party would ideally like to see us push for the biggest reduction of VAT possible — a reduction to 5% — for the hospitality sector.

5.15 pm

The motion uses the phrase

"pursue the case with HM Treasury",

and that is vital. The links to Westminster are fundamental, and we must be able to negotiate at the highest level in arguing the case for Northern Ireland. I note that, in the past, we have been successful at that. I think specifically of my time on the Policing Board, when an extra £100 million was secured for the Chief Constable to marshal effectively the growing and severe dissident threat. Another example was the Budget exchange scheme, which replaced end-year flexibility and improved the management of public spending across years. However, the current situation with corporation tax does not bode well.

The First Minister and the deputy First Minister, along with the Finance Minister and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, went into negotiations with the Treasury with a view to delivering on the devolution of corporation tax powers, something that, most of us in the House agree, would greatly help in promoting growth and rebalancing our economy. The Treasury report in March 2011 looked at the cost of devolving corporation tax, as has the Finance Committee, but, following meetings of the ministerial working group, various reports now put that cost at as much as £700 million. If we are to successfully lobby the Treasury for the reduction of VAT for the hospitality sector, it will need to be handled more effectively than the corporation tax negotiations.

I want to develop a point that was raised by my colleague, which is that the rate of VAT is declining in the Republic of Ireland.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close, please.

Mr Cree: In July 2011, the VAT rate for hospitality and tourism businesses was cut from 13·5% to 9%.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your time is up.

Mr Cree: I will leave it there.

Mr A Maginness: I am not certain that there is much left to be said in the debate. I think that we should just hear from the Minister.

There is an irresistible argument that a reduction in VAT in the hospitality sector will in fact produce jobs. The evidence is there in the Irish Republic, as Mr Hamilton referred to in moving the motion; in Germany, with an increase of 10,000 new jobs; and in France, with an increase of 53,000 jobs since 2009. Therefore, the argument is very clear: it will act as a stimulus for additional jobs in the hospitality sector here in Northern Ireland and, indeed, in the rest of the UK.

I suppose that it has to be said that, because VAT is a national tax in the sense that it has to be spread throughout the state, you could not have a regional variation of that particular tax. We must therefore request that the British Treasury reduce the rate of tax for the hospitality sector. I doubt very much whether we will succeed in that. It seems very clear from the Treasury Ministers at Westminster that they are not in favour of it and, indeed, that they would resist it because of a loss of revenue in the region of £1 billion per annum. That is a real difficulty, but it is a difficulty that we have encountered with many other things, such as air passenger duty and fuel tax. I refer to it as the dead hand of the Treasury, which is very restrictive not just of the level of taxes but of the way in which we administer our moneys. That kills innovation at a regional level, and we should examine that on a holistic basis some time in the future, à la Calman commission in Scotland, which dealt not just with tax but with powers for the Scottish Parliament and was not simply referable to fiscal policy. At some stage, we as an Assembly should set up some sort of body to look at fiscal powers and how we can administer the moneys that we receive from Westminster.

The same argument applies to the point that Mrs Overend made about the construction industry, particularly the renovation of houses: there should be a lower rate of VAT. That would of course stimulate a lot of building work, particularly for small firms in Northern Ireland, and we have many small construction firms. The chances of getting that, I think, are remote, given the way in which the Treasury is strapped for money and in which it seems to control the way government actually performs, not just simply the rate of taxation.

It has to be said that my party supports a reduction, and we see the good example south of the border. We see the necessity of this. We see the Pubs of Ulster, the Federation of Small Businesses and indeed other organisations asking for the reduction. I hope that we can persuade Westminster, but the signs are not good at this moment. We will have to exert massive pressure.

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

Mr A Maginness: I ask, in that spirit, that the whole House support the motion, which is timely and helpful —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up.

Mr A Maginness: — and give it our full support.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion. I think that Members will be familiar with the Sinn Féin position. We believe that the Assembly should pursue the devolution of full fiscal control if it is ever to successfully address the number one objective that we have set ourselves: rebalancing the economy. You will be glad to hear that I will not rehearse that argument in detail, but I support the motion on the basis that there is something we should continually remind ourselves about. It is a two-stage process, the first stage being that we debate, consider and then pursue the objective of acquiring the powers, and the second stage is our consideration as an Assembly of how we would apply them, whether we would use them at all, whether we would introduce them in an incremental, phased fashion or whether we would do our own economic modelling as to the impact of initiatives that, at least in the circumstance of the devolution of fiscal powers, we would have the option of. We do not have them at present.

I listened with some interest to the letter of reply to Naomi Long that Trevor Lunn read out. It was familiar territory. That was exactly what they said when corporation tax was first mentioned and we were told that the Azores ruling prohibited the devolution to regional Assemblies, when in fact the opposite was true.

I strongly welcome having an all-party position because we are told in engagements with the British Government that the transfer of fiscal powers is an available option and is not an excepted matter but would require all-party agreement. We have to work towards that and iron out whatever issues are between us in achieving that unanimous position. The motion is important in addressing that overall objective.

The question of the ability to devolve VAT powers to regional Assemblies, for me, given the lessons of the corporation tax debate, is not a given. I want to take a look at that. I am reminded that, within the structures of permanent government, you will always find that they will give reasons why you cannot do things. Sometimes, you have to pursue, confront and challenge them to give you options of how you can achieve what you want to. Often, they take the easy option of trying to dissuade and to steer us past it. However, we have set proper goals to rebalance this economy. We have to take cognisance of our nearest neighbours. We have to recognise that this is a time for coming up with ideas to stimulate economic recovery or, indeed — to get us past the global recession — economic activity. That is because each daily, monthly and quarterly return tells us that we are on a very slippery slope indeed, and it is a dire and very worrying perspective, particularly for our young people. So, the Assembly has a responsibility and the Executive have a direct opportunity to bring forward proposals that are designed to change that perspective and to give hope and expectation where there is, at present, despair and economic gloom.

I will continue to argue the case for devolving the powers, but I will do so on the common sense basis that devolving the powers to the Assembly does not cost a penny of the block grant. It is how we decide to take forward proposals to apply those powers that would have to be carefully calculated and agreed among ourselves.

Mr Agnew: In the short time that I have been in the Assembly, I have heard calls for cuts in corporation tax, air passenger duty — on both long-haul and short-haul flights from some — and on fuel duty. We have a cap on rates and a freeze on regional rates, and, to date, we have refused to introduce water charges. Many of these measures have been quite regressive, in which case I have opposed them. The proposed cut in VAT, as was pointed out by Mr Flanagan, could be a progressive measure in that VAT is a regressive tax. We have to be mindful that these actions and proposals from the Northern Ireland Assembly have come on top of the cuts from Westminster that we have little or no say in.

There are many benefits to reducing the VAT rate for the hospitality sector — they have been mentioned by many others — especially as the UK is one of only three countries in the EU to charge the full VAT rate on the hospitality sector. So, clearly, other nations have seen the merits of the proposal in increasing incoming tourism and staycations, but we have to ask what this measure will cost us. I am surprised: I do not think that anyone has raised in the debate the cost of this to the public finances. Research for the British Association of Leisure Parks, Piers and Attractions estimated the cost to be £1 billion to the UK Treasury. The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury, David Gauke, stated that the cost to the UK Treasury would be between £8 billion and £10 billion. We need to know what the direct impact would be on the Northern Ireland block grant through the Barnett formula or at least have an estimation, so that, when we propose this, we know the benefits. Those benefits have been laid out by everybody else, but, to date, I have not heard the costs.

We need to know what Northern Ireland's share of this will be. I would like to hear from the Finance Minister where the axe would fall in terms of the cuts to public expenditure that may result and, to use his oft-repeated phrase, how we will pay for this. At what point do the Assembly and its Ministers think that the cuts, the tax reductions that we propose, the money that resultantly comes out of public expenditure, the consequent loss of public sector jobs and the reduction in the spending power of public sector employees are having a detrimental impact on the Northern Ireland economy overall? Indeed, to go further, what are the social consequences? What is the cumulative effect of the proposed tax cuts on social issues?

We have heard the Health Minister talk today about how health inequality is a major issue for the Assembly to tackle, but many of the inequalities that we face are due to a lack of public services and lack of quality public service provision. So, again, we have to make sure that we have a holistic approach to taking forward those issues.

5.30 pm

We have other issues and priorities that we could take forward as an Assembly to help to promote the tourism sector, such as national parks, which the Environment Minister talked about today and which many in the Assembly have resisted and dragged their feet on. We do not have a regional aviation strategy. We have two airports in Belfast that are continually having to try to undercut each other, when we could be co-ordinating better to improve the aviation industry in Northern Ireland. Indeed, we could be investing in our public transport infrastructure. As a member of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, I have heard the Tourist Board citing our poor public transport infrastructure as a barrier to us meeting our target of doubling tourism revenue by 2020.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close, please.

Mr Agnew: I find it hard to support something when I do not know the full detail, and I will be interested to hear from the Minister what the cost of this move might be.

Mr B McCrea: I asked to speak at the end of this debate not knowing what my colleague from the Green Party was going to say. I, like him, share some of the concerns. For example, we have talked long about what we would like to do, but nobody is able to quantify the costs or the benefits. If the benefits are so strong, as various Members have said, why would we not just say to the Treasury, like we did on the issue of corporation tax, "We will give you a contribution because the benefits are so strong. Let's work out what the cost-benefit analysis is."?

When I saw the motion on the Order Paper, I was somewhat surprised that my colleague from Strangford had tabled it at all, because, as Mr Lunn outlined, there is very little chance of it going through. It seems to be another case of, "We're back here at the Assembly, we had better be seen to be doing something." There are better ways in which we might tackle the downturn in the hospitality sector. I listened to the arguments that were put forward, and there were some quite interesting ones. However, I do not understand why Mr Flanagan ducked the issue. He said that on other issues we would have been demanding a business case and saying, "Who is going to pay for it? Where is the money coming from?" That is proper order.

Mr Flanagan: In fairness to the proposers, and I am not speaking for them, the motion calls for the Executive to explore this with the British Treasury and lobby it. It is at that stage that the full facts will be disclosed, and we can then make a full and frank decision on what to do.

Mr B McCrea: I have to agree with my colleague from the Green Party, and I do not agree with everything that Steven says. How can you support something when you do not know how much it is going to cost, how much it is going to benefit you or whether the particular issues are doable at all? What argument are we going to deploy to the Treasury? The argument about corporation tax is not going terribly well, is it? People have been signalling for ages that that is dead in the water because the Treasury is not going to respond. Mr Lunn, in his helpful contribution, highlighted exactly what the Treasury thinks: it is not going to happen.

On the Benches opposite, I noticed that Mr McLaughlin declined to rehearse his arguments but then gave them to us anyway. He said he wanted to rebalance the economy. How can you rebalance an economy when it is costing approximately £20 billion to run the place, but we are raising only £12 billion in tax? If you take more fiscal responsibility, you are going to be left with a great big hole. Of course, the one way to fill the hole is by raising tax, but we are not talking about raising tax, we are talking about cutting tax. We always talk about cutting tax. We say that we will not charge for water or raise tuition fees or anything else, yet we will not give up any of the programmes that we want to do. We want to find ways of doing more and more.

There are Members who sometimes lecture us about responsible government, but we have to realise that there is a massive deficit in the fiscal position and that what we are trying our best to do is to hang on to the United Kingdom's triple A rating because it lowers the cost to business of borrowing.

Mr Hamilton: Who are the "we"?

Mr B McCrea: I will be more than happy if Mr Hamilton wishes to intervene. He used to be called the Finance Minister-designate or the Finance Minister in waiting. I do not know whether he is still called that. I am not sure whether those plans are still on hold. On the basis of this motion, I am not sure that that advances the particular case.

All I would say on this particular point is that there are important things that we in this part of the world need to address. Of course we support the hospitality sector, but we also support the construction sector and other areas. How do we generate an economy —

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

Mr B McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I took an intervention.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I do apologise.

Mr B McCrea: I apologise for drawing it to the attention of the Deputy Speaker. *[Interruption.]* Since I am getting cheers from all around, I will continue just for a moment or two longer.

It is not that this issue is not a good thing to discuss. I am interested in hearing what the Minister has to say in his response. Nevertheless, if we are going to talk about these issues, particularly in one of the first motions on the first day back in a new session, surely we need to take a more concerted and strategic point of view on all this.

At best, my overall position on the motion will be to abstain because I do not know enough to make a proper argument, nor do I think that we can say what we are going to do next until we have that information. If you want to send out a message, by all means let us see what Mr Hamilton does with the Treasury and watch how it progresses. I wish him all the best and no doubt he will keep this horse — I am sorry, this House; the horse has bolted — informed of his progress. *[Laughter.]*

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

Mr Wilson: First, I welcome the fact that we have had this debate, despite some of the negative attitudes that have been demonstrated during it by those, incidentally, who will probably go through the Lobby and support the motion anyway.

I congratulate Mr Hamilton for securing the debate. It is important because, as Members pointed out, the tourist industry is important to Northern Ireland and it is one of the industries that the Programme

for Government identified as a growth industry. It is, of course, already a major employer and revenue raiser in Northern Ireland.

Many people have asked what impact changing the VAT rate would have and whether it would be positive. I suppose that, as with all these things, if we change an economic variable, whether it is a tax rate or spending or whatever, while there are lots of other things happening in the economy, it is not always possible to identify the cause and effect or the size of the effect. What we do know, however, is that a number of governments across Europe have changed the rate of VAT on tourist products and that there has been a change in the industry. I will give Members one example of that. In France in July 2009, the VAT rate was changed to 5.5% and the economic statistics indicated that, as a result, probably about 15,000 bankruptcies and 30,000 job losses were avoided, while 35,000 apprenticeships and 25,000 jobs were created in 2010. It could be argued that other factors influenced those figures. However, the change in the tax rate was bound to have contributed to those statistics. We could give examples in Germany, the Irish Republic, and so on. It is not an exact science. When I taught economics, a central precept that I taught youngsters was always to remember *ceteris paribus* — all other things being equal. All other things do not stay equal, because we live and work in a dynamic economy. Nevertheless, there is bound to be a positive effect, and the economic evidence shows that there is. Can it be measured totally? The answer is probably no.

A second question was asked: why bring the issue forward at this time? Is it not just a cynical exercise by Mr Hamilton, knowing that there is no chance of its being accepted by the Treasury? It is important that the issue be brought forward at this time. I do not believe that it is a cynical exercise, because Mr Hamilton, unlike me, is not a cynic. He is an idealist and too young to be a cynic. *[Laughter.]* There is a huge debate going on in the coalition Government at Westminster, where even those who were dyed-in-the-wool austerity economists in the Conservative Party and their natural supporters, the CBI, the chambers of commerce and the Institute of Directors, are beginning to say that maybe austerity has gone too far. An economic debate is going on, and Mr Hamilton was right to bring the matter forward, because it is not only here that I have heard this suggestion. I have heard MPs at Westminster ask why we do not have targeted interventions. It is not simply a case of bringing tax down generally but looking at where it could be targeted and have a major impact. The call from the Assembly, added to the calls and debate from inside and outside the coalition Government, is worthwhile. It adds to the debate. There is no doubt that the Chancellor is starting to look for things that he can do to stimulate the economy, and it may be that he will dismiss this idea and say that if he were to reduce taxes, he would reduce them on something else. He may say that if he were to invigorate the economy, he would spend money on something else. However, the call and the debate in the Assembly today is useful in contributing to the issue.

A third point was made, mostly from the Ulster Unionist Benches, that we need to do something now. There were three contributions. Mrs Overend took us back to Mr Beggs in 2004 calling for a reduction in VAT.

Mr Hamilton: Whatever happened to him?

Mr Wilson: I would not like to say what happened to him.

She went back in history. She then said that we should focus on what we can do. That is right: it is about what we can do now rather than waiting for the Treasury. What was her suggestion? Her suggestion was an action plan. I then waited for suggestions about what might be in that action plan; there were no suggestions. However, Mr Cree had the opportunity to remedy the situation. He called for some positive action. What was that positive action? I heard no examples of positive action. Mr McCrea came in at the end — Mr McCrea always comes in at the end. He really should learn not to come in at the end of a debate without first having listened to the debate. Had he listened, he would at least have understood that one of his very first remarks was a nonsense. He said that we should find out the cost, after which we will make our contribution. Had he been in the House during the debate, he would have found out from the eloquent Mr Lunn, and from Mr Maginness, that you cannot simply change VAT for a particular region, even if you want to make a contribution. It has to be done nationally. However, he did not hear that because he was outside and then came in and waffled. What was his suggestion?

5.45 pm

Mr B McCrea: On a point of information —

Mr Wilson: I do not have time for a point of information. Had the Member been here for the whole debate —

Mr B McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I hope that it is a point of order.

Mr B McCrea: The point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, is that I was present to hear Mr Lunn and Mr Maginness speak.

Mr Wilson: That is even worse. *[Laughter.]* He had the benefit of their knowledge, and he still got it wrong. At least I was giving him the benefit of the doubt. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. I am sure that the Minister will allow me the luxury of responding to the point of order. *[Laughter.]* Mr McCrea has made his point, and it is on the record. Minister, you can now continue.

Mr Wilson: We have had an "action plan" and we have had "positive action", so what was Mr McCrea's suggestion? It was that we should look at things. What things did he want us to look at? I do not have a clue.

Mrs Overend: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Wilson: No, because I am about to give the Member some information that she might find very useful. She rightly focused on the fact that if we cannot get this matter devolved now, we should concentrate on what we can do. Let me go through some of what the Enterprise Minister and some other Ministers are already doing and the impact that they have had. There has been £300 million worth of investment in infrastructure, £60 million investment by the Tourist Board, which leveraged another £90 million into investment projects, which, for example —

Mr B McCrea: Why are the numbers wrong?

Mr Wilson: Let me give some numbers. The Titanic signature project, for example, had 450,000 visitors in its first three months, 67% of whom were from outside Northern Ireland. The Giant's Causeway signature project has had 192,000 visitors, 62% of whom were from outside Northern Ireland. There is investment in projects that are bringing new spending power into Northern Ireland. As a result of promotions and the money that the Executive have put into various projects, such as the MTV awards, the Titanic signature project, the Open golf championship at Portrush, etc, hotel occupancy in June in Northern Ireland was the same as in parts of central London — nearly 80%. Those are the kinds of things —

Mr B McCrea: So we do not need to lower VAT?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. Sorry, the Minister will take his seat. I must emphasise that Members, especially on the first day back, must make their remarks through the Chair.

Mr Wilson: It is not just a case, Mr Deputy Speaker —

Mr B McCrea: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Wilson: No, I will not. Look, will the Member sit down. He is up and down like a blooming jack-in-the-box. If he wants to take part in the debate, he should come in at the start of the debate —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Wilson: — and stay for the debate. Then we might have some respect for him.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. Minister, will you be seated? I asked Members to make their remarks through the Chair. The same applies to the Minister.

Mr Wilson: I stand corrected, Mr Deputy Speaker. Of course, I will make my remarks through the Chair. In fact, I was making them through the Chair, but I will not be making them through that chair over there, anyway. I can tell you that much. *[Laughter.]* I want to come to Mr Flanagan in a moment.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Minister for giving way. I was here from the beginning of the debate, and I appreciate that point.

I just want to clarify that what I was calling for, and have continually called for, is for the Minister to provide a tourism strategy. The likes of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and the National Trust are making plans and promoting Northern Ireland, and they are basing their decisions on a draft tourism strategy.

Mr Wilson: I would have thought that the results of actions taken by the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, some of which I have already spoken about here today, such as the number of new visitors, and the increased hotel occupancy and the money that they generate, are much better than some paper exercise, which is what the Member seems to want. I would have thought that, at least, if she was going to talk about a strategy, she would have given us some idea of what she wants in a strategy, rather than empty words and paper exercises for this and paper exercises for that. That does not bring people into Northern Ireland. It is the real actions of Ministers and their vision and foresight that will do the job.

The next point was that if the Treasury will not give us this, we should demand full fiscal control. That is Mr McLaughlin's favourite theme. I was going to call Mr Flanagan "the wrecker", but I know that Sinn Féin has changed, turned a corner and everything else. It seems that, for Mr Flanagan, it is hard to make the change. He got so excited that he broke a chair. At least I have never done that; I have broken people's hearts on occasions, but I have never broken a chair. *[Laughter.]* Mr Flanagan and Mr McLaughlin talked about getting the full devolution of those powers. If Westminster will not give us it, they said, let us take it ourselves. Mr Hamilton has been responsible in the way that he has tabled the motion. It is one thing to say that the powers should be devolved and that the cost be borne as a part of a decision at Westminster either to borrow more or to spend less to fill the initial gap that there might be in tax revenue. It is a totally different thing for Northern Ireland to ask for that devolution and then to bear the costs ourselves. I do not even know whether you could ask for the devolution of VAT powers just for tourist purposes; it would probably be the devolution of VAT powers totally. Mr Agnew and Mr Lunn both made the point that every time we talk about the devolution of tax, it is about devolution so that we can reduce the tax, but no one ever tells us where the gap will be filled. Mr McLaughlin did not want to get into discussing full fiscal control; that does not surprise me because I suspect that when we start examining the devolution of full fiscal control, Sinn Féin might have some difficulty in explaining how we will fill the £9 billion fiscal deficit in Northern Ireland.

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

Mr Wilson: Let me conclude. The motion is sensible, but we should not ignore the fact that we can do things ourselves. That is exactly what we are doing, and that has had some success, even in a period of recession. This is an industry that demands our attention because it is one that has potential for growth in Northern Ireland.

Mr D McIlveen: It is never an enviable task to follow the Minister of Finance and Personnel, so I will keep my remarks brief. As a number of Members said, most of the comments on this important issue have been made already. It has been an interesting and constructive debate, and I thank and congratulate my colleague for bring the motion to the Floor of the House.

We cannot dispute that this idea has already been tried and tested, and a number of reports have been done around Europe that suggest that there is merit and mileage in looking at this. For example, the Copenhagen Economics study looked at six countries where the VAT rate had been lowered, and it was affirmed that there was a full pass-through of the benefits as 50% of the money that was previously spent on VAT would be used to lower prices. That, in turn, would increase demand in the hospitality sector, and new businesses would open, which would generate work opportunities.

Some Members asked how we will pay for this, but, as the Minister said already, it is effectively a defunct argument, bearing in mind that it would be a national initiative if it were to go through. That said, we cannot deny that creating over 3,000 jobs will bring more money and more spending into the economy is basic economics. Bearing in mind that our pubs, in particular, already pay a 30% social levy, it is also securing businesses that are ultimately giving back to the economy. So, I think that the arguments that are coming from some parts of the Assembly are somewhat lacking in detail. We have to look at the detail of this quite seriously. I encourage the Minister to urge the Treasury to look at this, and I thank him for undertaking to do so.

We sometimes underestimate the power of devolution. We have other devolved Administrations in Scotland and Wales. If we were to be able to set the wheels in motion here in Northern Ireland, other devolved parts of the United Kingdom — Scotland and Wales — would, hopefully, then take forward the proposals. We could go forward with one voice and try to encourage the Treasury to take a very serious look at this to benefit our local hospitality industry in Northern Ireland.

I also have to say that some unexpected political steps have been taken here today, particularly on the opposite side of the House. The Member for North Antrim articulated very clearly that Northern Ireland is not punching at its weight as far as tourism is concerned. Mr McGlone mentioned that we should not be in a race to the bottom when it comes to competing with the Republic of Ireland. Mr Flanagan said that it has to be Dublin or Belfast. It is very good that there is a recognition that we are competitors with the Republic of Ireland rather than partners. I welcome that, as we are obviously in a competitive market when it comes to our tourism.

This may even open up the debate on how long term we look at tourism in this part of the United Kingdom. We have to acknowledge that Tourism Ireland has not been delivering, particularly where the amount of traffic that comes from the rest of the United Kingdom is concerned. The facts on that speak for themselves. We could perhaps even open up a further conversation on how that will look in the future.

I thank everyone who contributed to the debate. I welcome the apparent united response in support of the motion, which we certainly commend to the House. I look forward to hearing the results when the Finance Minister returns.

*Question put and agreed to.
Resolved:*

That this Assembly welcomes the strong commitments contained in the Programme for Government and the economic strategy that are aimed at developing tourism potential; notes the key role that the hospitality sector will play in achieving tourism targets; further notes the Republic of Ireland's reduced rate of VAT for some tourism-related services; and calls on the Executive to pursue the case with HM Treasury for a reduced rate of VAT for tourism-related services in Northern Ireland.

Adjourned at 5.58 pm.

The content of these written ministerial statements is as received at the time from the relevant Minister. It has not been subject to the official reporting (Hansard) process.

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Removal of Individual from a Non-executive Director Post at the Health and Social Care Board and as Chair of the Northern Ireland Social Care Council

Published on Thursday 19 July, 2012

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I wish to make a statement to the Assembly to advise of my intention to remove an individual who holds a post as a non executive director on the board of the Health and Social Care Board and the Chair of the Northern Ireland Social Care Council.

It has recently come to my attention that Mrs Lily Kerr emailed documents to third parties outside the HSC that were, at that time, for the sole consideration of the Health and Social Care Board. It was made clear that a number of these documents were being shared strictly in confidence and were not

for wider circulation. This is a very serious matter, which undermines the public standing of the HSC Board and breeds suspicion and mistrust.

Public service values must be at the heart of Health and Social Care. Non executive members, whom I appoint to boards of HSC bodies, are in positions of responsibility, and as such must demonstrate the highest standards of corporate and personal conduct based on a recognition that patients and clients come first.

Three crucial public service values must underpin the work of the HSC, and I am quoting directly from the Code of Conduct which is issued to non-executives upon appointment:

Accountability – everything done by those who work in the HSC must be able to stand the test of Assembly scrutiny, public judgements on propriety and professional codes of conduct.

Probity – there should be an absolute standard of honesty in dealing with the assets of the HSC: integrity should be hallmark of all personal conduct in decisions affecting patients, staff and suppliers, and in the use of information acquired in the course of HPSS duties.

Openness – there should be sufficient transparency about HSC activities to promote confidence between the HPSS body and its staff, patients, clients and the public.

I regret that the actions of Mrs Kerr on this occasion, and for whatever reasons she had, fell short of the standards expected by those holding public office. I must acknowledge that Mrs Kerr has been both an effective board member and chair, but it is my responsibility to do my utmost to maintain the integrity of our public services and the confidence of this Assembly, patients, clients and the wider public. It is for that reason that I have decided that her appointment as non executive director of the Health and Social Care Board and Chair of the Northern Ireland Social Care Council will be terminated with immediate effect.

My Department will now move to fill the vacancies.

Regional Development

A5 Western Transport Corridor: Publication of Notice of Intention to Proceed

Published on Tuesday 31 July, 2012

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): On 14 February 2012, I announced a programme of improvements to our strategic road network over the next four years. This programme included two sections of the A5 Western Transport Corridor project, subject to the outcome of public inquiries. Public Inquiries have been held and the Inspectors submitted their report to the Department on 24 February 2012.

The Inspectors recommended that the scheme should proceed as proposed by the Department, subject to a number of key recommendations, including the postponement of the Ballygawley to Aughnacloy section of the scheme and retaining the A4/A5 Tullyvar Road roundabout at Ballygawley.

Having discussed the Inspector's report with my Department's officials and having given the matter due consideration, I concur with the main recommendations made by the Inspectors.

I am satisfied that the proposed scheme will help to improve road safety and provide a more appropriate standard of road on this key strategic route. There are almost 1400 junctions and accesses onto the existing A5 which contribute to the potential for accidents along this route. The collision history is a factor which cannot be ignored and the A5 upgrade will help to reduce the number of collisions by providing improved cross sections, forward visibility and alignment as well as separating strategic and local traffic.

In making this decision I am also well aware of the strong local opposition to some elements of the scheme. I can assure Members that Roads Service will continue to have discussions with affected landowners with a view to resolve, where possible, any outstanding individual difficulties.

The strategic road network comprises the main arteries of the Northern Ireland economy, linking towns, cities, air and seaports to help boost industry and commerce as well as facilitating tourist travel. The A5 Western Transport Corridor is one of five key Transport Corridors in Northern Ireland and this

upgrade will not only have positive economic and construction industry benefits but also help towards balancing regional infrastructure.

As well as providing much needed jobs within the construction sector, the scheme should also lead to an increase in demand for local suppliers of construction material as well as giving a significant boost to commercial trade in the surrounding area.

Funding in the current Budget Period is committed to constructing the 2 stretches of the scheme between New Buildings and north of Strabane, and from south of Omagh to Ballygawley. Timing of construction of the remainder of the scheme will be dependent on the availability of funding through the Investment Strategy for NI 2011-21, further contributions from the Irish Government and subsequent budget settlements beyond 2015.

I have therefore asked my Department to publish Notice of its intention to proceed with the scheme and to make the necessary statutory orders. The Vesting Order will cover the 2 stretches of the scheme the Department is progressing at this time. Also, in line with the Inspectors' recommendation to postpone the Ballygawley to Aughnacloy section of the scheme, I have decided that the Direction Order should only be made for that section of the scheme between New Buildings and Ballygawley.

The northern section of the scheme between New Buildings and Strabane will be constructed by the Balfour Beatty/BAM/FP Mc Cann Joint Venture and will provide 15 kilometres of new dual carriageway. Construction of the southern section between Omagh and Ballygawley will be carried out by the Graham/Farrans Joint Venture and will provide 23 kilometres of new dual carriageway. At the southern end it is also proposed to upgrade the link between the new road and Ballygawley Roundabout to dual carriageway status thus ensuring continuous dual carriageway/motorway entirely between Omagh and Belfast. Work on both stretches is expected to start in the autumn this year and will take around two and a half years to complete.

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Paediatric Congenital Cardiac Services

Published on Wednesday 1 August, 2012

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I wish to make a statement to the Assembly following receipt from the HSCB of the report of the external review of paediatric congenital cardiac services (PCCS) in Northern Ireland.

I have received the report of the external review of paediatric congenital cardiac services in Belfast which was commissioned by the HSCB.

Paediatric Congenital Cardiac Surgery is a highly complex specialist service affecting a small number of children. In Northern Ireland, only around 90 paediatric cardiac surgical operations are undertaken each year, with a further 40 undertaken in England or Dublin.

In March this year, when I announced the review being undertaken for the HSCB, I advised members that such a highly complex specialist service is inherently vulnerable mainly because of the low activity levels. As a result there are significant challenges in attaining and sustaining quality against rising standards. Standards for this service are increasing across the UK with a move towards surgeons working in larger teams delivering higher volumes of activity, and ensuring a rota that can provide 24/7 surgical cover. Available evidence and professional consensus is that larger teams deliver better outcomes. In light of these increasing standards the HSCB commissioned an Expert Panel from the "Safe and Sustainable" Team in England to consider how we deliver the best service for children in Northern Ireland.

This report is timely, following the recent decision by the NHS in England into how it delivers congenital heart services to children in England, where some major centres will no longer have this specialist surgery on site (following previous decisions, it is already the case that Wales has no centre providing this service and patients from Wales access surgery at Bristol and Liverpool). The challenges we face are similar, that is to deliver services that are safe and sustainable and deliver the best outcomes for patients, and it has been known for many years that it would not be possible to

maintain a free-standing service, with 24/7 surgical cover, in Belfast, and hence the work that has already been done to develop networking arrangements with Dublin.

The Report recognises that children in Northern Ireland with congenital heart disease are well served by a dedicated and experienced team of consultant paediatric cardiologists and nurses. The report highlights many excellent features in the current service that presents opportunities for the development of a future model for children's cardiology.

I wish to put on record my appreciation of the team delivering this service in Belfast. Their dedication and commitment has clearly been evident to the Review Team. I had the opportunity to meet with the paediatric cardiologists in Belfast Trust recently to hear at first hand their views on the options for the future provision of this service.

It is reassuring that the Report shows that the Review Team found no immediate safety concerns presented by current arrangements. That said, the Review Team has stated that the paediatric congenital cardiac surgical service is not sustainable in Belfast and the Review Team's view is that it should cease.

Their view is that potential safety risks needs to be addressed within six months.

I have therefore asked the HSCB, working with the PHA, to develop proposed criteria to provide a clear objective basis for future decisions on this and related services, and to draw up a commissioning specification for the delivery of this service for Northern Ireland. In doing so, first and foremost I expect the HSCB to consider the safety and sustainability of the service in Belfast and the findings of the Report. In addition I want to ensure the HSCB robustly considers all options available including the potential for an all-island service and/or networking arrangements with other centres in the UK. It is also essential that the impact of any proposed service change on patients and their family is carefully considered. In that regard I expect the HSCB to give full consideration to accessibility of the service and the impact any proposed service change would have on other paediatric and cardiac services. In addition, I also want the HSCB to take forward work to ensure we have the most robust retrieval and transport services to ensure we have safe retrieval and transfer arrangements for sick children particularly in emergency situations.

Recognising that the Report suggests a period of six months for the sustainability issues to be addressed I expect the HSCB to establish with immediate effect, a working group to propose clear criteria for decision making, and develop a detailed service specification for the commissioning of paediatric congenital cardiac surgery and interventional cardiology against which the service must be delivered. I expect patient representatives, parents and clinicians to be part of that group. A full, open and transparent public consultation on the criteria, service specification and potential impact on service model(s) will be carried out. This will help inform the way forward to identify the preferred service model for children in Northern Ireland who need specialist cardiac care. I expect consultation to begin in September 2012.

I fully appreciate that parents and children living with congenital cardiac problems may be anxious about any changes and how these might impact on the care provided to them.

I want to reassure families that my aim is to ensure a safe, sustainable service into the future. I hope to be in a position to announce the model for Paediatric Congenital Cardiac Services for Northern Ireland in early 2013.

Justice

Publication of Consultation Paper: 'Damages Act 1996: The Discount Rate, How should it be set?'

Published on Wednesday 1 August, 2012

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): I am pleased to inform Assembly Members that the Department of Justice, the Ministry of Justice and the Scottish Government have today jointly published a consultation paper "Damages Act 1996: The Discount Rate How should it be set?"

The paper seeks views on how the Department of Justice in relation to Northern Ireland, the Lord Chancellor in relation to England and Wales and Scottish Ministers in relation to Scotland, should set the rate of return to be prescribed under section 1 of the Damages Act 1996.

The prescribed rate is taken into account by the court in determining the return to be expected from the investment of a sum awarded as damages for future pecuniary loss in actions for personal injury. This rate of return is referred to as 'the discount rate' and is currently 2.5%.

The consultation period will be 12 weeks from and including today and expire on 23 October 2012.

The consultation paper is available on the DOJ website www.dojni.gov.uk or from the Department's Civil Justice Policy and Legislation Division.

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Abortion Statistics in Northern Ireland: Results of Audit on 2008-09, 2009-2010 and 2011-12 Data

Published on Wednesday 22 August, 2012

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I wish to make a statement to the Assembly following receipt from the HSC Board of a report on the audit of abortion information collected by HSC Trusts.

Earlier this year I asked officials to develop options for introducing a new data collection and reporting system on termination of pregnancies. As a result of their investigations, concerns were raised around the reliability of previously published data on abortions in Northern Ireland.

On 24th May 2012 the Department instructed the HSC Board to undertake an audit of the clinical coding related to abortions in Northern Ireland to assess the accuracy of the data produced.

The audit has clarified the structure of the terminology within the UK National Clinical Coding Standards ICD-10 4th Edition Reference Book, in relation to coding practice for code 'O04 – medical abortion'. The structure of the terminology used within the UK National Clinical Coding Standards ICD-10 4th Edition Reference Book is as follows:

Abortion: The term abortion means the expulsion or extraction of all (complete) or any part (incomplete) of the placenta or membranes (products of conception) without an identifiable foetus or without a liveborn infant, or stillborn, before the 24th completed week of gestation. This covers a range of codes within the ICD 10 structure and includes 'missed miscarriages' [1] (the retention of a dead foetus before 24 completed weeks of gestation, with no signs of abortion), spontaneous abortions (known miscarriages) and terminations of pregnancy.

Medical Abortion: The term medical abortion within the confines of the use of the ICD-10 code 'O04 – Medical Abortion' equates to (i) the interruption of a live pregnancy for legally acceptable, medically approved conditions, (ii) re-admissions with retained products of conception following a previous termination of pregnancy, missed miscarriage or a spontaneous abortion that had been treated in the first admission with an evacuation of the products of conception and (iii) a patient who had a termination of pregnancy and had retained products of conception in the same episode that required surgical treatment.

Termination of Pregnancy: For the purposes of the audit and any future issuing of statistical information, 'termination of pregnancy' will define any patient who has a live pregnancy terminated for Northern Ireland legally acceptable, medically approved conditions. This is a subset of the term 'medical abortion'.

In previously released responses to assembly questions on abortion statistics, the Department had used the code 'O04 – medical abortion' to produce the statistics required. However, given the clarification contained within the above definitions, and following careful discussion with medical colleagues, the Department has accepted that those people requesting statistical information on the number of abortions in Northern Ireland, should in future be provided with the subset of data for 'termination of pregnancy'.

As a result of this clarification, I am advised that it is more appropriate to provide statistics on 'termination of pregnancy' rather than previously published data on 'medical abortion'. As a result, the revised figures on termination of pregnancy in Northern Ireland are as follows;

	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	
Pre Audit Medical Abortion		77	67	75
Post Audit Medical Abortion		71	64	73
of which: Termination of Pregnancy			44	36 43

The Department is, of course, content to provide figures on both 'medical abortion' and 'termination of pregnancy' in the future, in accordance with the definitions, as appropriate.

The HSC Board continues to audit 2006/07 and 2007/08 data and any amendments to previously published data will be published on the Department's website at:

http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/stats_research/hospital-stats/inpatients.htm

[1] CKS Clinical Knowledge Summaries

http://www.cks.nhs.uk/miscarriage/background_information/definition