

Official Report (Hansard)

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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 13 March 2012

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Campbell: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Yesterday, at Question Time for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, I submitted a supplementary question to question 2 that related to a peace report. In my supplementary question, I quoted directly from the report, which was referred to in question 2 and involved dealing with the past. I then put a question to the deputy First Minister about his past. At that point, according to Hansard, the Deputy Speaker said:

“The Minister may or may not wish to answer that question.” — [Official Report, Vol 74, No 1, p36, col 1].

There is an implication there. That language is normally used when a supplementary questioner departs from the substance of the question. My strong contention is that I did not. May I ask you to examine Hansard, Mr Speaker? I know that you normally write to Members after you have done that, and I would be content with that. Just as we in the House are planning for the future, we must not allow those who are guilty to escape from their murderous past.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Member for his point of order. As the Member will know — he is a Member of another House — these issues can sometimes be difficult to judge. It is really up to the Deputy Speaker who is in the Chair at the time to try to judge these issues. When it comes to supplementary questions, that is sometimes not easy; it is difficult. I am certainly happy to look at Hansard and come back to the Member.

Executive Committee Business

Economic Strategy

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to three hours for the debate. The Minister will have 15 minutes to propose the motion and 30 minutes to wind. All other Members who wish to speak will have up to eight minutes.

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): I beg to move

That this Assembly endorses the Northern Ireland economic strategy agreed by the Executive.

Yesterday, the Assembly approved the Programme for Government, which set out the Executive's key objectives for the next few years. I now wish to bring the economic strategy to the Assembly.

We are all familiar with Bill Clinton's famous phrase, which he used during the 1992 presidential campaign: “It's the economy, stupid.” That phrase is now well worn, but the sentiment remains, for the economy impacts on all of us, especially at the moment, as we work to secure greater and more sustained economic growth. That is why the Executive, in their Programme for Government, have made the economy their number one priority, with the economic strategy being published alongside the Programme for Government.

It is clear that the outlook for the local, regional and global economy remains uncertain. In Europe, we have seen the ongoing crisis in the euro zone and the European Union's attempts to reach a stability pact. We have still to see a full resolution of the problems facing Greece and some other European countries. President Obama said recently that Europe is going through a financial crisis that is scaring the world. The uncertainty is having an unwelcome but inevitable impact on many businesses here in Northern Ireland.

Equally, however, I know that many parts of the global economy are growing, and it is important that we work to build trading relationships and secure new orders in those markets.

To support our local companies, Invest Northern Ireland has strengthened its global footprint, with enhanced representation in the United States, Canada, Russia, Latin America and South Africa. Such on-the-ground representation will be supported by an extensive programme of 60 business missions this year, which will have a key focus on the emerging BRIC economies — Brazil, Russia, India and China. We will also continue to monitor and target opportunities in other emerging markets, including our focus on the cash-rich countries of the Gulf, where Invest NI recently strengthened its presence by opening an office in Jeddah. Along with the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, I will shortly join Invest Northern Ireland's latest business mission to the United Arab Emirates and India to further develop the already strong trade, investment and education links that exist and to explore new relationships. All that activity is designed to help us to identify new sources of investment and opportunities on which Northern Ireland can capitalise. However, to maximise the benefits of that work, I recognise that we need to ensure that our local companies are aware of the trading opportunities in those countries. We will do all we can to help them to enter those markets and to succeed in them.

We should also be confident in the potential of our local companies to rise to the challenge. I recently visited CEM Systems in Belfast to learn how it secured business worth £500,000 for a high-tech security system at a huge gold mine in Mongolia. Another local company — Fast Engineering in Antrim — is providing its portable water storage tanks to the Antarctic survey, and Muldoon Transport Systems in Dungannon and Bubble NI from Belfast have both recently won business in Saudi Arabia.

While exports in the manufacturing sector remain resilient to global trends, it is important to recognise that Northern Ireland has also experienced record investment in research and development. That success must be built on. By increasing R&D support for companies that have never undertaken R&D or have not been active for some time, we are encouraging more and more mainly small businesses to become innovation-active. We must also continue to invest in our first-class education establishments,

which continue to produce important skilled labour for our economy. Our people remain our key asset, and it will be the skills of the workforce that will underpin the necessary innovation and export capability to drive economic growth.

Many more people will visit us over the coming months, as we mark hugely important events, and we need to build on that for the wider economy. However, I recognise that many people have been personally affected by the recession, and our unemployment levels are too high. Part of the economic strategy is to work to provide suitable and sustainable employment opportunities for everyone, especially our young people. It is also worth remembering that, despite the growth in unemployment, the latest labour market figures indicate that our unemployment rate of 7.2% is still below the rest of the United Kingdom at 8.4%, the Republic of Ireland at 14.3% and Europe at 9.8%.

Today, I have published an updated slide pack on the Northern Ireland economy that can be accessed on the strategy's website. It outlines the challenges, opportunities and strengths facing the economy, and I hope that it will be a useful source of information to many Members. The Executive and the subcommittee responsible for implementing the strategy will, later this year, publish their assessment of the wider health of the economy.

Around this time last year, we finished a consultation on a framework for the economic strategy. It was a framework that prioritised the need to improve the competitiveness of our economy. It had a focus on export-led growth and contained the twin objectives of rebalancing and rebuilding. It was built on a number of themes, such as stimulating innovation, encouraging business growth, building exports and enhancing skills. I was pleased that the framework received widespread support. That enabled us to use it as the basis of the draft economic strategy, which we launched alongside the draft Programme for Government and investment strategy last autumn.

We put the document out to consultation, and we received almost 100 responses to the draft strategy. I very much welcome those. In general, the feedback has been very positive and constructive. There has been strong support for the cross-departmental approach, and the aim of focusing on export-led growth, even with its challenges, has been welcomed. I could not

reflect on every comment, but I have published today our responses to the comments received. Again, that can be accessed on the strategy's dedicated website.

The economic strategy launched today sets out a number of more ambitious and stretching targets than were in the draft strategy. We are committing to securing £1 billion of investment to the economy. That will lever in £375 million from new and growing externally owned companies, £400 million of investment from locally owned companies and £225 million of investment from externally and locally owned firms through the jobs fund, which supports our rebuilding priority.

We are committed to having a higher target on manufacturing exports and to increasing the value of manufacturing exports by 20% by 2014-15. We have introduced a new and stretching target to increase the value of manufacturing exports to the emerging economies by 60% by 2014-15. We have a new commitment around youth employment, under the rebuilding theme. It aims to deliver, by 2015, 6,000 work experience and training opportunities for young people in priority sectors. Given the tourism potential, we have also upped our targets to increase visitor numbers and revenue by 4.2 million and £676 million respectively.

I realise and accept that access to finance remains a key challenge for many businesses throughout Northern Ireland. Having a local banking sector that meets the needs of consumers and businesses and provides bank lending on a competitive basis to local SMEs is vital to economic recovery. Only last night, I met a businessperson who raised with me very real concerns about securing adequate finance to grow and expand her business. The issues raised were not new or unique, but they represent the wider need to do all we can on improving access to finance. Ministers have been engaging with local banks, the UK and Irish Governments and regulatory authorities to press on the issue.

In the strategy, we have outlined the actions we are taking as part of Invest NI's access to capital strategy. Two weeks ago, I announced the manager for the growth loan fund, which is part of Invest NI's access to finance strategy. The growth loan fund will provide loans of between £50,000 and £500,000 over the next five years to businesses with growth projects in the manufacturing and tradable services sectors.

Last week, I also announced the appointment of Clarendon to deliver the co-investment fund, which is a £16 million equity fund aimed at stimulating the availability of risk capital to SMEs across Northern Ireland. Those measures will help our local companies to grow and meet our Programme for Government targets.

I can announce today that the economic advisory group chaired by Kate Barker will undertake a focused and short-term exercise to examine whether there are any gaps in the provision of finance and what might be done differently by the Executive to ensure that our SMEs have the necessary access to finance to start to grow their businesses.

10.45 am

We must recognise the impact that high energy prices have on many businesses, especially on their cost competitiveness. We have to be realistic: the principal elements of energy prices are set on the world markets, and, being on a relatively small island, we do not have the economies of scale that other jurisdictions enjoy. Although we certainly have a more competitive market than we had a decade ago, we need to continue to develop competition in the sector through increasing our connections with the rest of the United Kingdom and the wider European market in future years. However, that will not solve the immediate pressures. Therefore, I have asked Invest Northern Ireland to work with my officials to see what more we can do in this area. I am pleased to announce that Invest will consider providing financial assistance on a pilot basis under its normal selective financial assistance schemes to large energy users that bring forward proposals for capital expenditure on equipment that will make a significant impact on energy efficiency and, by extension, reduce their energy costs and improve their competitiveness.

I am clear on the priority that we attach to the implementation of the economic strategy. We have developed a comprehensive action plan that we have consulted on. The Executive subcommittee will work to ensure that the actions and targets in the strategy and plan are implemented. We have, of course, made good progress in many areas. To support the economic strategy, we are drawing up supporting strategies that will include steps required to boost the key priorities of innovation and enterprise. We will continue to work with the

United Kingdom Government as part of their initiative to rebalance the Northern Ireland economy. We had a good meeting last week as part of the joint ministerial working group that is examining how the Executive and Assembly could have the powers to set their own rate of corporation tax. We look forward to the successful conclusion of those discussions in the summer.

The UK Government are devolving powers on air passenger duty to the Assembly through the 2012 Finance Bill. That will allow the Executive to bring forward legislation to reduce air passenger duty for direct long-haul flights departing from Northern Ireland to zero. We will work to use that policy lever to develop new direct links with international long-haul markets that will ultimately support increased inward investment, exporting and inbound tourism.

In summary, despite the current economic situation, I believe that there are grounds for optimism. We have set out in the strategy some ambitious objectives and targets. We are promoting over 25,000 new jobs. We want to see more of our young unemployed move in to work. We are investing in innovation and skills to accelerate our export performance. We are leveraging significant investment into our economy to support business growth. We continue to invest in our economic infrastructure to help underpin economic growth. The Executive's economic strategy sets out how we are working to rebalance and rebuild our economy, and I ask the Assembly to endorse the motion.

Mr A Maginness (The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment):

I thank the Minister for her detailed speech on the economic strategy. The Committee welcomed the draft strategy and provided recommendations to the Department on how the economic strategy and associated draft comprehensive plan could be enhanced and bettered. The recommendations were based not only on the Committee's consideration of the draft strategy but on the views and comments of other relevant Committees in the Assembly, the business community at large and its support organisations.

Comparison of the final economic strategy with the draft strategy reveals a number of changes, which, of course, we in the Committee very much welcome. We note that the Minister has taken on board the views that we and, indeed,

others expressed to the Department. First, there is the increase from £330 million to £400 million in the investment to be promoted from locally owned companies. Secondly, there is an upward revision in the target for the promotion of inward investment from £300 million to £375 million and a commitment under short- to medium-term rebuilding measures to promote £225 million of investment. Furthermore, there is an upward revision from £110 million to £140 million in company investment in skills to be delivered. Again, that is welcome. There is an upward revision from 15% to 20% in the target for increasing the value of manufacturing exports and new commitments to increase the value of exports to the emerging economies, which the Minister referred to, by 60% by 2015.

I particularly welcome the measures to address youth unemployment. They include a strategy for skills, training, incentives and job creation; consideration of options to address the vexed problem of graduate unemployment; and a new key performance indicator to deliver 6,000 work experience and training opportunities for young people by 2015. There is a commitment to work with employers on education and training in priority sectors to address skills issues and the inclusion of an action to develop direct air links with international long-haul markets, which is particularly relevant to the development of our tourist industry.

The Committee welcomes the inclusion of those commitments, which, in some cases, include more specific and more stretching targets in the economic strategy. However, a number of commitments were included in the draft strategy that are not present in the final document. They include a plan to encourage first-time exporters by promoting 60 new start-ups selling outside UK markets and a further 440 selling to Britain; a commitment under key performance indicators to enhance regional connectivity to key gateways and to markets; and a commitment to ensure that a large proportion of school leavers have key literacy and numeracy skills. Those are very important issues that need to be addressed. Therefore, the Committee would like to hear from the Minister in due course why it has been considered appropriate to remove references to them from the final strategy.

Although I welcome the economic strategy and efforts by the Department to include distinct, measurable, time-dependent targets for many actions for which it and Invest Northern Ireland

have responsibility, the Committee highlighted the existence of significant gaps in a number of actions. Those actions do not include specific measurable targets either in the economic strategy or in the draft comprehensive action plan. The Committee has asked the Department to include robust, outcome-based targets against all actions because, without that, appropriate monitoring and management of the delivery of the action plan is not possible.

Targets are also required to enable full accountability for those charged with delivering the actions in the strategy. The Committee's view on that was supported not only by other Statutory Committees but by the Federation of Small Businesses, Manufacturing Northern Ireland and the Confederation of British Industry. The Committee looks forward to seeing the revised action plan for the economic strategy in the near future and will want to see it address the issues that it has brought to the Department's attention.

Many of the actions in the economic strategy require a commitment from a number of Departments to co-operate across government to achieve outcomes. The Committee noted that, in the past, that may have resulted in frustration from some Departments that they could not achieve a high-priority objective as a result of delays in another Department for which the objective was a lower priority. The Committee agreed that assurances must be given that delays will not occur in the implementation of the economic strategy due to the misalignment of priorities between and among Departments.

The economic strategy contains a specific key action under "Business Growth" to:

"Encourage and develop the green economy and develop the sustainable energy sector."

Despite that, there is no specific reference in the economic strategy or the draft action plan to the green new deal or to any plan to encourage energy efficiency. Given that £12 million has been allocated to the green new deal, the Committee has asked the Department to include a reference to the green new deal in the action plan for the economic strategy. In reply to a query from the Committee, the Department said that the Minister for Social Development and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment had been working closely on the development of the green new deal, but there needs to be a greater commitment and

specific action. Considering the time that has elapsed since August last year, the Committee would expect to see some reference to it in the economic strategy and would expect to see a specific reference in the final action plan for the economic strategy when it comes to the Committee. I just hope that the green new deal has not gone AWOL.

Members will be aware that the Committee is conducting an inquiry into research and development. I do not want to pre-empt the outcomes of that inquiry, but it would be appropriate to comment on the references to R&D in the economic strategy.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is almost gone.

Mr A Maginness: Research and development is an important element, and the Department needs to place particular emphasis on it.

Mr Buchanan (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning):

I wish to comment on the elements of the economic strategy for Northern Ireland that fall within the responsibility of DEL. The Committee welcomes the emphasis on acknowledging and prioritising skills as a key driver for the future of a sustainable economy. That emphasis is central to the rebalancing and rebuilding measures.

Theme A of the key rebalancing measures highlights the vital importance of stimulating innovation, research and development, and creativity. The Committee has been made aware of the key role played by research and development in its engagements with the universities and further education colleges. The vice chancellors of both universities have detailed the contribution to the local economy of their combined research income of just under £100 million per annum, and members saw at first hand the world-class research being carried out at the Institute of Electronics, Communications and Information Technology at the Northern Ireland Science Park recently.

The Committee is also aware of the job creation that flows from the translation of research into the local economy through companies such as QUBIS, where high-value research jobs are generated as well as a corresponding number of ancillary posts. The Committee also welcomes the collaboration between the universities, FE colleges and the business sector and has seen real-life evidence of the effectiveness of that in

the showcase event it held jointly with Colleges NI in the Long Gallery in October 2011.

The work of a possible innovation council has been briefly outlined to the Committee by the Minister, and it appears that the establishment of the council, together with the work of MATRIX and the foresight programme, has been largely within the remit of DETI so far. The Committee gave a cautious welcome to the idea of an informal body drawing together business and academic figures with the Executive to promote research and development and creativity but believes that such a council would benefit from the additional input of trade union representatives.

Theme B relates to the identification and improvement of the provision of relevant workforce skills and tackling barriers to employment. It also encompasses the delivery of essential skills and foundation degree qualifications and the maintenance of tuition fees for students in higher education at current levels, subject only to inflationary increases. The Committee believes that the policy of keeping fees at the current level will encourage young people to enter into and remain in higher education, although the Department's ongoing review of widening participation in higher education is yet to highlight the underlying issues discouraging those from lower socio-economic backgrounds from accessing university education.

11.00 am

The legal aspect of introducing a fee differential between Northern Ireland- and GB-domiciled students remains untested in a court of law. Similarly, the impact of a fee differential on student flows to and from the Republic of Ireland and Great Britain has yet to be determined. Such flows are not necessarily elective, and the Committee expressed concern regarding the situation of students who opt for courses, such as veterinary studies, which are not available in Northern Ireland.

The Committee supports the expansion of existing foundation degrees and the inception of foundation degrees under the apprenticeship scheme at levels 4 and 5 for engineering and ICT, which is to be introduced as a pilot scheme. The Committee also welcomes the focus on science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) through the draft economic strategy and notes that the relatively small number of additional places in higher education announced by the Minister recently is to be

offered to STEM subjects. The Committee appreciates the vital economic role played by STEM subjects in achieving the goals set out in the Northern Ireland skills strategy. However, on a recent visit to the Queen's cancer research centre in Belfast, the Committee was concerned to learn of the reduction in funding for PhD students in such a vital area. The Committee was also disappointed to learn that DEL has been unable to secure funding under recent monitoring rounds to fund the run-through costs of the additional 300 PhD students recruited under the previous Programme for Government.

The Committee also heard from the DEL employment service on how it is developing tailor-made situations for employers to address their recruitment needs. The Committee endorses the close working relationship with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and Invest NI in providing the cohesive approach for skills advocated in the draft strategy. The Committee expressed some concern that the role of timely and professional careers guidance had taken a higher priority in the strategy and that no specific targets in that area had been allocated to DEL in the related action plan. The Committee recognises that the provision of high-quality careers guidance is also vital for adults over the age of 16 in the existing workforce and those seeking employment.

The proposed Pathways to Success strategy to address the number of young people not in education, employment or training (NEETs) is included in the theme as an action to address barriers to employment and employability. The Committee fully endorses the need for the strategy and has urged the Department to expedite its development and implementation, the set target date for which is, of course, April 2012. The Committee has expressed concern about the protracted pace at which that is progressing and about the fact that the related research has not yet been completed.

The Committee was particularly concerned that the Minister indicated that there was no dedicated budget in the Department for the implementation of the NEETs strategy. The Committee also expressed concern that, under the same objective of tackling barriers to employment and employability, there is a specific priority for developing employment strategies for Belfast and Londonderry but there is no such provision for rural areas. The Committee, therefore, recommends that barriers

to employment for people of all ages in rural areas, such as the cost and availability of public transport, should be given specific recognition in the strategy. Similarly, the Committee feels that measures to combat the impact of the downturn in the construction industry should also be included in the strategy. Members are concerned that that is having a disproportionate effect on rural towns —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is almost gone.

Mr Buchanan: — and on areas where large numbers of young people are emigrating or are considering emigration.

I wished to raise other issues, but given the time, I cannot do so. We support the motion.

Mr Doherty: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I speak as Deputy Chair of the Committee for Regional Development. I thank the Minister for bringing the economic strategy to the House.

It is telling that transport measures are contained in the economic strategy in such categories as “Competing in the Global Economy” and “Economic Infrastructure”, because that, quite rightly, elevates them to an appropriate level. The transport sector is a very important component of the economy, as it impacts on the development and welfare of populations. When transport systems are efficient, they provide economic and social opportunities and benefits that result in positive multiplier effects, such as better accessibility to markets, employment, tourism and additional investment.

As far back as 1994, the World Bank Group, in a world development report, noted that the provision of infrastructure services to meet the demands of businesses, households and other users was one of the major challenges of economic development. It is, therefore, most welcoming to see transport infrastructure take a pivotal position in the strategy. I include the commitment to the abolition of air passenger duty as being a key ingredient of the transport mix.

Central to that are the road and rail networks. They are paramount to facilitating transport and are the base of any developed economy, as they constitute the heart of the supply chain. Roads are the crucial link between producers and their markets. The dense road network guarantees better access to customers. They are the backbone of the economy as they connect almost any

location and guarantee cost-efficient delivery of goods and services and, importantly, transport of people.

With the Ceann Comhairle's permission, I will divert for a moment to ask the House and the Executive to take on board that the constituency that I represent, West Tyrone, and the constituency that the Minister represents, Fermanagh and South Tyrone, do not have one yard of a rail system. Nevertheless, the rail system will be key to facilitating access to major events, such as the Irish Open, the City of Culture and the Titanic celebrations. I, therefore, congratulate the Minister and her Executive colleagues for ensuring that investment in transport networks is included in the economic strategy. Investment in roads together with sustainable transport initiatives approaches £1 billion.

Obviously, concerns that I raised during the debate on the Programme for Government remain valid, particularly the reduction in capital funding for water infrastructure. Adequate investment in that area would also have met the objective of aiding the construction industry. However, just as the Committee has called on the Department to develop road schemes to shovel-ready status should additional investment become available, I also issue that challenge to NI Water. There is, of course, work to be done on its governance process, which might result in efficiencies for reinvestment. That should be a priority, particularly as the asset base will be increased should the measures for social and affordable housing in the economic strategy be implemented.

I can only reiterate the importance of transport infrastructure in positioning the North in the global marketplace. The very significant investment in that is essential to kick-starting economic recovery. We have a strategy in place. Now, we need to see its measures being enacted. I am content that I and my Committee colleagues are keen to work with the Minister for Regional Development to ensure that those measures are implemented.

Mrs Overend: The economy is, rightly, the Executive's number-one priority. Therefore, the ‘Economic Strategy’ is one of the most important documents — if not the most important document — that the Assembly will scrutinise. I have looked at the strategy carefully. I welcome the opportunity to put forward

my thoughts on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party as its enterprise, trade and investment spokesperson.

First, I want to deal with a particular issue: the consultation on the draft economic strategy closed on 22 February, and we are debating the economic strategy on 13 March. I assume that a wide range of responses was received from the business community, the community and voluntary sector and political parties, amongst others. Indeed, we heard that there were almost 100 responses. The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment assured us that she took full account of all those responses in such a short time, and I assure her that I will read her responses with interest. Moreover, the fact that the updated document was only published yesterday leaves Members with little time to consider any changes.

The first substantive point that I want to raise about the document concerns job creation or, should I say, job promotion. The strategy sets out how 25,000 jobs can be promoted. That is the headline figure of the strategy, and one that could make a real difference to the lives of people in Northern Ireland. That figure is broken down as follows: 6,300 jobs from locally owned companies; 5,900 from inward investors; 6,500 from start-up businesses; and 6,300 from the jobs fund.

There are two ways of approaching that target. First, given that about 61,500 people are claiming unemployment benefit in Northern Ireland, we are saying, in effect, that people have less than a one in two chance of getting a job. That is not good enough. Secondly, given the failure of Invest Northern Ireland, its handing back of £38.1 million in the past two monitoring rounds and the relative failure of the jobs fund thus far, changes must occur if we are to meet the targets. Indeed, I understand that the Federation of Small Businesses considers that target to be aspirational. The Ulster Unionist Party will take a pragmatic approach to that target and will support and scrutinise to ensure delivery.

I want to consider the key sectors that are identified in the economic strategy.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. Can the Member explain to the House how she can say that the work of Invest NI has been a failure? Was the return of the money not evidence of good governance? That money can now be spent in other areas, such as roads,

which will help the economy in Northern Ireland. How does the Member see that as a failure?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mrs Overend: I have spoken to local businesses that have tried to get funding from Invest Northern Ireland. Considering the economic environment, I feel that Invest Northern Ireland needs to be more flexible in how it hands out its money.

Moving on, again. I want to consider the key sectors that are identified in the economic strategy. The Ulster Unionist Party endorses the sectoral approach. Given the Budget reductions and the scarcity of resources across the board, it is important that we select the right areas to allocate sufficient resources to.

Given the context of the visual statement, the Ulster Unionist Party would have liked to have seen the construction industry on the list of key sectors. Construction is a fundamental industry in my constituency of Mid Ulster, and just last night, I chatted to a colleague who works in that industry. He told me that on his weekly early morning flights to England — I understand that that is where the majority of the work is these days — he counted between 12 and 16 other managers who are also travelling to England. Yes, I said “managers”, which means that there are between 12 and 16 teams of construction workers in one particular area. However, for every construction company that travels to England, there is another at home in Northern Ireland.

Perhaps even more important, we should ensure that the sectors that are selected are adequately supported. In our response to the economic strategy, the Ulster Unionist Party took the creative industries as an example. Despite being a key sector, the creative industries innovation fund has been allocated less money over a shorter time, and despite the ongoing success of projects such as ‘Game of Thrones’, there is no mention of the screen industries or NI Screen in the economic strategy.

Tourism is another sector identified in the strategy, and it is fundamental as a key driver of the economy. We must take advantage of the unique circumstances that accompany the decade of centenaries and continue to build on the work of the five signature projects. However, if we are to reach the goals of the Programme for Government of increasing visitor numbers to 4.2 million and tourist revenue to £676 million by December 2014, a tourism strategy is a

necessary requirement. We have a draft tourism strategy, and the Minister has indicated that the full strategy has been delayed due to the changed economic times. In order to maximise potential in this area, the Minister must bring forward an updated strategy as soon as possible.

11.15 am

The Ulster Unionist Party has supported the devolution of corporation tax and played a major part in getting that important issue on the agenda. I welcome the fact that the economic strategy sets out the potential benefits of a reduction in corporation tax. That being said, however, we have still not established the cost to the Northern Ireland block grant of a reduction, with estimates from the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Treasury differing by nearly £200 million. The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment recently attended the second joint ministerial working group meeting on rebalancing the economy. She could update the House today on whether there were any indications at that meeting of associated costs.

I am also mindful of the role that the third sector can play in rebuilding and rebalancing Northern Ireland's economy. I am keen to stress that that sector should not be underestimated. An example of that in my constituency of Mid Ulster is Opportunities for Older People, which is an independent charity that works with and for older people and provides essential support services. The company's profits go back into supporting older people in the Cookstown area. We must provide substantial support to social enterprises such as that.

The strategy avoids a number of areas, including addressing the perception of Invest Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, the role of banks in rebuilding the economy, the tendency to gold-plate EU regulations, and tensions with cross-border bodies, including Tourism Ireland and InterTradeIreland. Those issues need to be addressed if we are to make best use of Northern Ireland's economic potential.

In conclusion, I welcome the publication of the final economic strategy and reiterate that it is a fundamental document as we move forward. It must be delivered effectively, and for that reason, I ask the Minister how ongoing scrutiny will be achieved. I know that the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment will play

an important role in that, but other formal mechanisms must be put in place.

Mr Lunn: The Alliance Party welcomes the publication of the strategy. We see it as a genuine attempt to plot the way forward for Northern Ireland plc, and we acknowledge the efforts of everybody involved in putting the document together. If it has taken a bit longer than some of us think it should have, well, that is government for you. In a way, the inevitable delays that we suffer in getting anything done here reinforce the need, as evidenced in the strategy, to involve the private sector fully and to give it the tools, incentives and freedom to operate, which is what the sector needs.

If, as a result of this document, the private sector can drive forward to produce jobs on the back of government-inspired training and education initiatives, which should be targeted following consultation with that sector and with the needs of industry, it will be deemed a success. The private sector lives in a different world from us; we live in the Stormont bubble here. The private sector would like to see things being done much more quickly than we ever seem to be able to do them and it would need no second bidding to make them happen.

The Northern Ireland entrepreneurial spirit, which produced great industries in the past, is very much alive and kicking, the difference being only in the types of products involved. I note the references in paragraph 1.14 to the growth areas of telecommunications and ICT, life and health sciences, agrifood, advanced materials and advanced engineering. In the same section, the document highlights the potential for business services and financial services — something close to my heart. In all those areas, if we can get our skills and training base right, the opportunities to build on what has already been achieved are vast.

I will not dwell on the contradiction between the need to produce skills and the current political moves to change the status of the Department that has been charged with producing those skills. Let me just record my surprise that anyone would consider that to be anything other than an ill-judged and hasty decision taken for entirely the wrong reasons and generally now recognised as such.

The strategy notes vaguely the need for co-operation and input between the private sector and government. I hope that that acknowledgement

will translate into more than a concept, and that serious consultation with the private sector will happen. This was envisaged way back in 2006 in an Alliance Party proposal — before I came along — for an economic forum consisting of independent economists, business representatives from across the board, voluntary sector leaders, trade unionists and political advisers, designed to come up with an economic strategy for the Executive to which all the parties could sign up.

The underlying ambition of such an approach was obvious. A strong Executive economic policy will inevitably mean economic reform, which will mean tough decisions, not all of which will be popular. However, civic buy-in and the establishment of an economic contract, if I can call it that, would enable such decisions to be made with broad support. Therefore, in supporting the strategy as far as it goes, I must say that it is a document that is written by public sector officials for the private sector. The need for private sector buy-in and consultation remains paramount, as we expressed six years ago.

I query whether the consultation, conducted over a holiday period alongside a raft of other complex documents, was really sufficient. I accept the Minister's comments that the framework of the document was put out to full consultation. We are where we are, and we will vote to support it.

One of the striking aspects of this and other initiatives is the fact that the Northern Ireland economy performed poorly after the Good Friday Agreement, in a situation that might be called a perfect storm. We had international goodwill, local peace, a booming Southern economy, strong growth in public spending and sound global economic growth. In the face of all that, our economy performed no better than average, and it probably should have done better. That is why we argued for a proper economic agreement that could be set alongside the political agreements of 1998 and 2006, and I would like to see that emerge from this document. I would never want to give the impression of talking Northern Ireland down. There have been recent well-documented successes in the area of the arts and sports. We have world-class companies such as Almac, Norbrook and Wrightbus. The Minister mentioned CEM Systems and Muldoon Transport Systems, and Mivan comes to mind. We have nothing to be ashamed of. We will have to learn from the past, and you will find little, if

any, reference to the economy in the text of any of our political agreements. The lessons are there for us.

As Mr Maginness did, I highlight the potential of the green new deal. I really wish that we could come up with a different title for that, but we all at least know what it means by now. I wonder why some of us find our eyes glazing over when the green new deal is mentioned. Perhaps the Minister will tell us her attitude to that later. Given our ideal placement to benefit from our natural resources and geographical situation, the potential for jobs is enormous, yet we are falling behind our international and European competitors, who invested heavily in that area in the aftermath of the economic downturn of 2008. In the areas of renewable energy, wind and wave power, energy from waste, biomass and the retrofitting of our housing stock, there are opportunities for the construction industry and our agriculture sector that have enormous job creation potential. I saw a recent survey that talked about 30,000 potential jobs. I do not know whether that is accurate, no more than I know whether some of the other job creation figures that are mentioned in the strategy are achievable, but we have to take note of a report that indicates such massive potential. Therefore, I wonder whether the figure of £12 million that is mentioned in the strategy gives sufficient priority to that area.

Lastly, I did not intend to mention Invest NI, but Mrs Overend and Mr Frew mentioned it. Invest NI is a success story. It has had its ups and downs and has had to return some money this year and last year, and that is a pity. The strategy contains some mention of a bit more flexibility and a bit more room for innovation with Invest NI and how it uses its money. I really hope that that can be developed, because we need Invest NI or something very like it. We will, of course, support the strategy.

Mr Frew: We come to the Chamber today with reality about where we are economically in our country and, indeed, the world. Indeed, on Friday past, I spoke to some constituents whom I have known all my life and who I have known to be in work all their working life. They came to me seeking help and advice on being unemployed for the first time in their life. They do not really know where to go, who to speak to or how to avail themselves of benefits or seek out further work. So, when we talk in this House, we should

always been mindful of the effects that the economic downturn is having on our population.

I am sure that no one in the House needs to be reminded about my links with the construction industry and how it has been hurt over the past number of years by the economic downturn. There are tradesmen out there who are struggling to get work and have had to go abroad to find work at not very good pay. We all know about the pressures at the minute on our retailers in our town and city centres, and that was highlighted today.

All those people I talk about, whether it be my constituents who are out of work for the first time, the tradesmen whom I have worked with for many years or the retailers who own shops in our towns and city centres, tell me one message consistently, which is that when we are in this Chamber or are doing press, we should make sure that we are positive. The message must go out from this House today that we are positive about our economy, are confident that we can do the job of work that we have to do and can perform to assist growth in our business community to make it take off in ways that it never has before. There will be opportunities out there for our businesses and our people.

It really irks me when I hear Members in this Chamber being so negative just for the sake of it and just to see whether they can maybe squeeze out a press statement to rubbish something in the economic strategy.

Mrs Overend: I agree that we have to be positive and have to give a positive signal to the Northern Ireland community, but Northern Ireland will thank us for ensuring that we can scrutinise what is being done by this Executive to make sure that we are doing the best that we can.

Mr Speaker: The Member has a minute added to his time.

Mr Frew: The Member will know, as a member of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, that she will get the chance to scrutinise this, as we all will.

The Member said that the construction industry was not mentioned or named as a priority in the document. Let me read out some of the commitments in this economic strategy. It states:

“Maintain, manage and improve the road network with an aim of reducing journey times on key transport corridors”

Will that not assist the construction industry?

“Improve the strategic transport network by the advancement and completion of a range of major works projects”

Will that not help the construction industry?

“Develop Regional Sports Stadiums by 2015 as agreed with the IFA, GAA and Ulster Rugby”

Will that not help construction?

“Legislate to modernise the planning system, resulting in faster decisions on planning applications, faster and fairer appeals, and stronger and simpler enforcement”

Will that not help the construction industry?

“Maintain and improve the Health and Education Estate infrastructure”

Will that not assist the construction industry?

Maybe some Members in this Chamber think that we are falling down because the document does not mention “the construction industry” in every bullet point. In case people did not realise, on page 84, the construction industry is named. It aims to:

“Help the construction industry by delivering key road and rail projects and approximately 8,000 social and affordable homes over the budget period”

I do not see how that could be any clearer. The strategy will assist the construction industry and all our industries.

I will move on to agrifood, which is sprinkled right across the economic strategy. Some of the commitments for the agrifood industries are as follows: to provide funding of up to £3 million a year for new R&D projects through the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute research programme; to secure up to £5.6 billion additional investment in agrifood R&D through the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development’s (DARD) research challenge fund by March 2015; to ensure the adoption of at least 1,500 technologies in the land-based and food sectors on an annual basis; and to continue to invest £18 million a year in education, knowledge and technology transfer to the land-based food and rural sectors.

11.30 am

The strategy helps not only the construction industry and our exporters but our agrifood businesses, which have done a tremendous

job over the last number of years and were supported by the Assembly when they did not really need support because they could do it on their own. We, as a Government, have to be careful that we do not get down, deep and dirty, into business when businesses sometimes just want to be left alone in order to grow the way they would like.

We have to be confident and assured that what we can produce in a document, we can deliver. I am confident that we can do that and that the Minister who will be in charge of it can do it, but, of course, other Departments have to weigh in, too.

Yesterday, I was scathing of our Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for not having targets that are ambitious and can really stretch our resolve in this. I believe that we have targets, and we have increased targets from the draft economic strategy to make it harder for us to achieve. Why? Because we think we can and because we need to. We need to be progressive and ambitious, because that is what our private sector is. It is positive and ambitious, so we, as a Government, must be the same.

A strong economy is vital to the future prosperity of Northern Ireland and its people. We need to be positive and in a position to deliver and to help businesses take off when they are able to do so. I believe that the economic strategy does that. It lays down the platform and the runway for our businesses to take off. There is no doubt that export-led economic growth will be the key in all that, and it is right that the Minister and the strategy target and prioritise that, because that will bring greater things to Northern Ireland. It will bring growth and wealth to our people.

I say that because it is not just about making wealth or making people rich. It is about enhancing people's confidence, helping them to become healthier in spirit, mind and body, and giving them a greater standard of living. Even the most socialist among us should realise how important the economy is to providing all of that to our people. With wealth comes all things. I believe that it will help our education, and it will certainly help our health and our waiting lists and everything else along with that, if we can get people into productive working. That is something that we must ensure happens. We must increase the confidence of our people and our businesses at this time.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh an straitéis

eacnamaíochta atá anseo inniu. As Sinn Féin's enterprise spokesperson, I warmly welcome the publication of the economic strategy. The achievement of the challenging targets that are set out in it will ensure a real and meaningful difference in the day-to-day lives of the citizens we represent. That is not to say that there are not things that I still believe are missing from the strategy and that could still be actioned over the course of this mandate, but I am satisfied with the main thrust of the strategy, particularly with regard to the ambitious targets that have been set for job creation over the next number of years.

Once again our society is being blighted with emigration. Many commentators have focused on the huge numbers of people who are leaving the South, but the reality is that the situation is not much better in the North. At least 500 people leave every week and, unless something radically changes, that will simply continue and we will have another lost generation of Irish men and women dotted around the globe. Hopefully, the publication of the economic strategy will help us to turn that corner and provide a bit of hope to our society. What Mr Frew has just said with regard to people being positive is right. One of the major problems we face is not just about a lack of jobs but about a lack of hope in our society. We need to be here as leaders and to deliver that hope.

History tells us that it is often our best and brightest who leave our shores and embark on a new life elsewhere. They often achieve great success, fame and fortune. We should do everything in our power to keep as many of our most able people as we can here to help us to begin the process of rebuilding our economy. What was largely a construction boom on this island saw huge dependence on private residential development to keep our young people in work. Too many people embarked on education courses that were suited to that boom. That boom has well and truly gone, but we still have those skills and we still have many of those young people, with all of their drive and determination, who want to make a difference and make something of themselves. We need to facilitate their transfer from traditional construction employment and skills to growing sectors such as renewable energy, where there are huge opportunities if we can simply tap into the global market properly.

In order to identify such traits and opportunities, Sinn Féin believes that we need to see an Executive-led job creation strategy, which would join the work of all Departments and arm's-length bodies and work with the private sector to create a single programme designed to create much-needed jobs for our citizens. Without such a focused strategy, Departments will continue to be allowed to operate in silos, which rarely delivers for our people.

One of the huge problems that faces our local economy is the sheer cost of doing business. If we are serious about expecting our indigenous business base to expand, begin exporting and compete in the global market, we need to reduce its operating costs and improve its level of competitiveness. That can be done through a range of measures that should be explored. Of course, the devolution of corporation tax is one of those, but it is only one of a number of options.

Huge energy costs are crippling local businesses, regardless of their size. I welcome the proposals of the Minister concerning the renewable heat incentive, but I have concerns that the tariffs here are much lower than were previously announced for a similar scheme in Britain.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for giving way. On the issue of access to energy, does the Member share my concern that there is no commitment in the document to expanding access to the natural gas network?

Mr Speaker: The Member has a minute added on to his time.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The expansion of the natural gas network is a clear policy that the Executive are looking at. I do not know whether that can be delivered in the time frame of this strategy; it is another thing. I am happy for the Minister to come back on that point.

Rises in regressive taxation measures such as VAT are having a massive impact on our local economy. Proposals have been brought forward by employers' groups about reductions in national insurance contributions for new employees for a short period. However, as an Executive and an Assembly, we do not have the power to implement those proposals. The Finance Minister has shown a clear lack of willingness to pursue any measure that might give us greater fiscal autonomy. If we are serious about delivering for our citizens, we need to see

the devolution of all fiscal and economic levers to the Assembly, with decisions being taken by local Ministers.

The economic strategy is lacking in proposals for greater all-Ireland co-operation and the benefits that would derive from it. I do not make that as a political point. One practical example, which should not present a political difficulty for anyone in the House, is that, right around the globe, there is huge duplication and competition between Invest NI and IDA Ireland in where they locate offices and base staff. Surely, with greater integration between those organisations, huge sums of money could be saved, which could then be put back directly in to creating jobs.

Mr Frew: Does the Member agree that although there are times when we can tie up with our neighbours in the Republic of Ireland, there are times when we have to compete against the Republic of Ireland? It is very important that although we are a large economy in this world, being the UK, we, as Northern Ireland, go out there and sell our own wares and do our own business deals, rather than relying on a neighbouring state. I point out to the Member looking towards a neighbouring state that we have an unemployment rate in Northern Ireland of 7.2%. The Republic of Ireland has an unemployment rate of 14.6%. Does the Member agree that that is not somewhere where we would like to go?

Mr Flanagan: I thank the Member for his intervention. It all depends on what he wants to go for. If he wants to seek a job, it is definitely not the place to go. However, if he wants to benefit from higher levels of innovation and foreign direct investment, it is somewhere that we need to co-operate with. I do not make the point for political reasons. I have no problem with co-operating with anybody. If we are to see increases in foreign direct investment and more businesses locating here, we need to see greater opportunities explored. I suggest that Invest NI and IDA work better together in where they locate offices, because huge sums of money could be saved. At this stage, they can run separate organisations, which, as an Irish republican, I do not agree with. However, in the short term, there is no problem with the two of them working out of the same office and having the same staff doing the same job. That would present massive savings for the Executive and is something that I seriously think should be explored.

I will touch next on an issue that was raised by the Committee Chair — the green new deal and the lack of reference to a “retrofitting” programme, as Trevor Lunn appears not to be satisfied with the title “green new deal”, or has at least identified that others are not satisfied with it. The lack of reference to such a programme is also worrying. Perhaps, in closing the debate, the Minister will outline her Department’s plans for the green new deal or similar scheme. Such a retrofitting scheme could improve people’s homes, reduce our energy usage and, at the same time, leverage funds from the private sector to create much needed construction jobs.

I want to raise concerns about support for businesses in financial difficulty but that remain viable. The trait across government seems to be that Departments do not intervene until too late. For example, the Rivers Agency cannot take action to stop a river becoming blocked until it becomes blocked. I would like to see government agencies play a more proactive role and put in place an emergency task force to assist firms in financial difficulty. Such interventions may prove to be as useful as creating new jobs.

The strategy’s commitments to broadband and telecommunications are also welcome, with every premises guaranteed an internet connection of at least 2 megabit per second. Moving on from that, we need to see more fairness in the price paid by people in different areas. The prices paid by people in rural Fermanagh and in greater Belfast are not the same. Ofcom’s proposals to auction the 4G mobile phone licence presents us with an opportunity to ensure that all communities have access to adequate mobile phone coverage and high-speed mobile broadband. However, with a target of coverage for 98% of the population across Britain and the North, many in my constituency will remain without coverage. So, what we should push for —

Mr Speaker: The Member’s time is almost gone.

Mr Flanagan: — is coverage based on each postcode district.

Mr Dunne: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the economic strategy, which is an important issue for everyone in Northern Ireland. Although there is no doubt that we live in difficult global financial conditions, there is room for optimism. The economic strategy provides a positive,

progressive and practical road map for the long-term growth of our economy.

I commend the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Minister for leading on this significant document and for the work that she and her Department have done to date; I also commend the job creation targets that they have set. Some criticise those targets as being too ambitious, but it is important to set challenging targets that we aspire to achieving. Everyone recognises that we need actively to seek ways of growing, rebalancing and rebuilding our economy, and the strategy certainly seeks to do that.

We have much to be optimistic about, not least our potentially great tourism industry. Often referred to as a year of opportunity for Northern Ireland, this year is exactly that. I am sure that we all look forward to the opening, shortly, of the Titanic signature project, which highlights all that is good about Northern Ireland and promises to be an example of how to turn a negative story into an exciting and progressive project. Tourism has begun to play an ever increasing role locally; I trust that we will continue to maximise its potential. More than ever, we are now in a position to promote Northern Ireland, the brand. It is also vital to put in place the right infrastructure for tourism to flourish to its potential.

Golf tourism has great potential, with our home-grown champions, including world number 1, Rory McIlroy. We in north Down want to gain from the spin-off. With Rory’s home course being Holywood, North Down Borough Council is already trying to maximise tourism opportunities in a project that has great potential.

11.45 am

There is also huge potential to grow our export base. Given that we are not large enough to rely solely on domestic markets, we need to actively grow and expand our export base both to developed and developing countries throughout the world. I know of one local architect in my constituency, North Down, who went on a recent trade mission to Kurdistan and greatly benefited from his visit. That is just one region where great potential markets exist for local businesses to export to.

I am glad that tackling barriers to employment is a central theme of the strategy and I welcome the ongoing work of the social investment fund, which I trust will be of great practical benefit to areas that suffer high unemployment and deprivation. I also welcome the commitment in

the strategy to deliver 6,000 work experience and training opportunities for young people by 2015 in priority sectors. Employers also need incentives to start apprenticeships and give young people purpose, discipline and a reason to go to work. Business support is also crucial to grow our economy.

One area of concern that was brought to my attention recently is that crime is one of the main barriers to running a successful business. Unfortunately, crime can have a crippling effect on businesses and is often underestimated as one of the major barriers to business growth and sustainability. Energy costs continue to be yet another barrier to business growth and we need to do all we can to minimise the ever-increasing costs of energy supplies and ensure competition right across the spectrum. Alternative supplies such as renewables and a further extension of the gas network are realistic measures that will help to grow our economy. Electricity costs are excessive and that highlights the need for progress on the North/South interconnector.

I also welcome the £50 million growth loan fund set up by Invest NI to help our small businesses, particularly those that are keen to export but are often unable to access funding through our non-risk-taking banks. That will provide crucial financial support to those companies, which are keen to take that risk to remain sustainable and competitive.

More support is needed to allow companies, universities and colleges easier access to R&D funding. During the ongoing Enterprise Committee inquiry into R&D funding in Northern Ireland we learned that many firms, large and small, have not availed of themselves of the European funding through framework programme 7. They see the process as too difficult, restrictive and not worth the effort, and we are losing out in access to European funding for R&D. An alternative system is required and the new tranche of funding, Horizon 2020, must be smarter and more accessible to manufacturers and service providers.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Member for giving way. He raises a very important point about Horizon 2020 and access to those funds. Does he agree that it is now up to the Executive to use all their energy and authority to influence the development of that fund so that we have an accessible fund for local businesses in Northern Ireland?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an added minute.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Chair of the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee for his comments. I agree with him wholly. The evidence to date is significant, and the Horizon 2020 fund must be put in place in a way that is smart and attractive to our local businesses. We have clear evidence that that is not the case with present funding.

We need to continue to invest in infrastructure, and recent announcements on improving roads infrastructure and the investment in our hospitals is good news for everyone. I trust that we will continue to see positive announcements that will be followed up on the ground by delivery, sooner rather than later. Northern Ireland has a lot of attributes and skills already in place to help us to grow the economy. It is important that we continue to build on what has already been achieved and look forward to a positive and economically vibrant Northern Ireland in the future. I support the economic strategy and commend Minister Foster in her commitment to deliver for Northern Ireland.

Mrs Dobson: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this economic strategy, and I congratulate the Minister on bringing it forward.

Although rebalancing the Northern Ireland economy at a time of sustained uncertainty will be no easy task, I am encouraged by the Minister's statements that the overarching goal of the strategy is to improve the economic competitiveness of the local economy. I have called on the Executive to create a strategy targeted at developing the economic potential offered across rural Northern Ireland. This strategy does that to an extent. However, I urge the Minister to work closely with her Executive colleagues to ensure that this is not merely a papering-over exercise.

As my party's spokesperson on agriculture and rural development, I can see great potential yet to be realised in the agrifood and wider rural sector in driving economic growth, creating wealth and providing much-needed private sector employment. The agricultural sector has an annual output of some £1.5 billion and is one of Northern Ireland's largest employers when taken together with the production and processing industries. The agrifood sector alone sustains one in five private sector jobs in Northern Ireland. Indeed, it is one of the Northern Ireland economy's greatest strengths, and we should

be seeking to exploit it constructively at every opportunity.

There is great potential to be realised within agriculture and the agrifood sector with regard to driving economic growth, creating wealth and providing much-needed private sector employment. With a coherent, forward-looking strategy, the agrifood sector has the ability to rebuild and rebalance the Northern Ireland economy by creating jobs, encouraging research, increasing exports and improving our economic competitiveness as well as helping to ensure more balanced sub-regional growth.

Education and skills are an important part of that process. We need to have people equipped with the correct skills for the sector, while a diverse agrifood sector will increase opportunities and, potentially, increase participation in the education system, particularly in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects.

There is recognition of a need to fund studentships, and, in that, we lag behind our competitors in the Republic of Ireland, who annually fund 120 studentships compared with only eight funded by DARD. Graduates in agrifood-related subjects are highly sought after, and intense competition between businesses means that those individuals are highly employable and have good prospects.

Within agriculture and the agrifood sector, we already have some of Northern Ireland's most innovative entrepreneurs and businesses. As was mentioned in the economic strategy, innovation is a key part of moving forward to a more economically diverse and prosperous Northern Ireland.

The European Commission recently published its annual research and innovation scoreboard, which uses 25 indicators to assess how successfully member states foster research and development and how quickly that is translated into products and services in the marketplace. Denmark, Finland, Germany and Sweden were deemed to be the best innovators and made up the first of four groups, referred to as innovation leaders. The UK and nine other member states followed in the second tier, which contained the so-called innovation followers.

The study showed that although the EU is improving in how it fosters innovation, the rate of improvement is slowing. The EU continues

to lag behind international leaders such as Japan, the USA and South Korea. Furthermore, countries such as China, Brazil and India have become more competitive over the past five years and are rapidly closing the gap between them and more-developed nations.

In an increasingly globalised world, where the pace of change is ever increasing, it is vital that Northern Ireland strives to become an innovation leader. That requires co-operation between government, the academic sector and industry to harness all the skills we have in research and innovation and successfully translate that research to the marketplace. Improving how we draw down European funds from the likes of FP7 and its planned successor Horizon 2020, which was mentioned earlier — programmes specifically designed to increase innovation and global competitiveness in the EU — is a key part of such a strategy. We have not been getting our fair share of these funds. There are tens of billions of euro on offer, and the Northern Ireland Executive's efforts to address this vital engagement are to be encouraged. This is needed for increasing our drawdown as per the Barroso task force recommendations.

The Commission's proposed reforms for the common agricultural policy (CAP) post-2013 have a competitiveness agenda, with a focus on improving research and development, innovation and knowledge transfer. The existing proposals are that rural development funding is channelled into improving communication to help close the gap between the scientists and the farmers who are actually involved in the production of the food. There is an opportunity to feed into how that funding is designed, and by engaging now we can help to ensure that the end result is more appropriate to the needs of the industry.

The recent creation of the Agri-food Strategy Board goes some way towards recognising the importance of the agrifood sector in Northern Ireland. The Ulster Unionist Party believes that bringing a strategic, holistic approach to this part of the economy will pay dividends. Indeed, the economy as a whole would benefit from such an approach. However, the existence of such a body is, in itself, no guarantee that the agrifood sector here can achieve its full potential. Past incarnations have often had their recommendations left sitting on a shelf gathering dust.

Given the current economic realities, it is vital that this time around the Agri-food Strategy Board is industry-led and is given all the tools necessary to drive expansion, develop new products and tap into new markets. We do not have far to look in order to see what can be achieved when it comes to agrifood. In the Republic of Ireland, Bord Bia is working towards targets set out in the Food Harvest 2020 strategy, which aims to grow food and drink exports by 40% by 2020. Scotland Food and Drink has an ambitious target of growing food output by 60% through its strategy, 'A Land of Food and Drink'.

Ambitious targets are needed for the agrifood industry in Northern Ireland. Put simply: given the need for Northern Ireland to drive private sector enterprise and growth and pick up the slack from the public sector, an ambitious strategy must be developed and implemented without further delay. This economic strategy is a welcome recognition, albeit far too late, of the opportunities for our local rural economy.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is almost gone.

Mrs Dobson: I hope that the Minister takes on board the comments being made here today. However, for now, I congratulate her for her commitment shown thus far.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak on this very important strategy for the local economy. As other Members have said, there are a number of sectors, a number of green shoots, in the economy — the agrifood and tourism sectors. There are a lot of opportunities that we need to avail ourselves of.

We should not underestimate the challenges that we face, and we should face up to them in a positive way. There is rising youth unemployment. One of the starkest images I saw in recent weeks was the queue outside the RDS for a conference on employment abroad, in places such as Canada and Australia. There were people from across the island at that event. So, it is a challenge. There are people from my community, particularly in construction and from construction backgrounds, who are going to Australia in increasing numbers.

However, we should not be too negative, as Members have said. We should recognise the challenges that are there for us. As far as construction is concerned, we need a long-term plan not just for regaining the momentum

that construction had, to a certain extent, and regaining employment within construction, but for ensuring that, for those coming through the education system, communication between the colleges and business enables the appropriate skill sets to come out of that system to meet the needs of the local economy. Ultimately, this is what will help to stem the flow of young people to other countries.

The education system is an important and key economic driver. GCSE figures are improving, and we should aim to better those figures. We need to close the skills gap with the top-performing Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries.

12.00 noon

I welcome the mention of STEM in the strategy. It is identified as a key rebalancing measure. The Enterprise Committee went to the South Eastern Regional College and had a presentation from Ken Webb and Thompson Keating on the environmental skills centre. It is a great example of the strong relationships between further education and the renewables and environmental sector. It flagged up how we can create jobs, build economic growth and gain social benefits and, possibly, benefits in respect of fuel poverty. We were told that we should take a focused approach. There are construction workers who have many years of experience and skill sets that would fit perfectly into certain parts of the renewables industry. We have to match those construction workers, who are out of work but have those skill sets, to employment opportunities in the renewables industry.

The economic strategy is vital to tackling disadvantage, which is a primary focus of the Programme for Government. The full potential of economic development needs to be realised and explored. As other Members said, there is a lack of detail on the green new deal. There is a need to look at regional inequalities and the mutual benefits of North/South initiatives. I will go back to the example of the relationship between the South Eastern Regional College and the renewables industry. It is exploring opportunities across the island from Cork to Donegal. I am sure that there are also east-west linkages. We should not cut off our nose to spite our face in respect of North/South links, east-west links or whatever. The economy does not recognise any border. We need to explore all opportunities

to ensure that we have economic growth in our communities.

What is missing is the ambition for the Assembly to gain more economic levers. As time goes on, everyone sees, more and more, the benefits of having at our disposal economic tools in respect of, for example, air passenger duty and corporation tax. A more recent example that I raised with the Minister is the visa waiver scheme in the South. It has benefits in attracting to the South tourists from Asian countries who are coming from the North and Britain. That is not in place vice versa. To be fair to the Minister, she raised the issue with the British Secretary of State. However, what we have always found with the British Secretary of State and direct rule Ministers is that they do not respond with any great urgency. We know that Ministers here will act urgently on economic matters. If those powers rested here, that issue could have been resolved by now. There needs to be a greater debate about the variety of available economic levers. We need to take a mature approach because, ultimately, the strategy is about benefiting our communities and creating employment and economic growth. If those levers lead to greater economic growth for our people and communities, we need to grasp them, regardless of what the British Government have to say.

SMEs play a substantially beneficial role for the public sector and the economy as a whole. Social clauses should absolutely be introduced into all public contracts.

I welcome the commitment to increase visitor numbers to 4.2 million and tourist revenue to £676 million by December 2014. The latest figures show that tourism in the North forms 4.9% of GDP and 4.7% of all jobs. We can all agree that we can increase those percentages significantly. The north coast is a good news story, but it could be a better news story if we had more hotels in Ballycastle, for example. We will return to that issue later. Golf tourism, the Giant's Causeway visitor centre and all of that will lead to further employment, revenue and economic growth in that part of the North. There needs to be further joined-up working across the north coast. Look across to Donegal: there are twice as many hotels there as there are in Belfast. Obviously, there are difficulties in respect of tourism there, but we should not fail to recognise that there are opportunities in respect of the tourist traffic that goes to

Donegal. We need to bring that traffic across the north coast to benefit north Derry and north Antrim. Therefore, we need to take a look at that and ensure that the infrastructure is in place.

Mr Dallat: Does the Member agree that it would be a massive step forward for the Assembly to assume responsibility for the financing of the Greencastle to Magilligan ferry, which brings loads of tourists to Northern Ireland but is currently tied up because of lack of agreement between this Assembly, Dáil Éireann and local councils?

Mr McKay: Absolutely, and that goes for all forms of transport — the A5, the A6, the Atlantic corridor in the west of Ireland and, of course, the A26. We need to decrease travel times between Dublin and the north coast, and we need to decrease travel times between the Belfast airports and Ballycastle, Portrush etc. As the Member for West Tyrone said, investment in construction, roads and infrastructure is an economic multiplier, and we should not fail to realise that.

I am conscious of time, so I will conclude by saying that economic growth is vital for raising standards of living, and it can be used to address social inequalities, which will improve everyone's quality of life. However, it is important that we have a mature approach to the economic debate in respect of North/South opportunities and opportunities between this island and the neighbouring island. We need to grasp all those opportunities. The business community is still ahead of many politicians in that regard, and we need to catch up.

Mrs D Kelly: The SDLP broadly welcomes the economic strategy, which has, as its central core, the rebuilding and rebalancing of the economy, with an emphasis on supporting job creation, innovation and exports. We believe that it is the right overall approach, and we draw a clear distinction between the economic strategy, which is a decent effort overall, and the Programme for Government, which is simply not up to standard. However, we also acknowledge the difficult challenges that face the Northern Ireland Executive and, in particular, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment during this period of unprecedented global recession. Only yesterday, a report by the Ulster Bank noted that business activity has weakened in recent months, which indicates that we are still in recession.

The coming onslaught of welfare cuts, which is predicted to result in a loss of £110 million to the Northern Ireland economy — money which, as we all know, given the nature of welfare payments, is additional to the Northern Ireland block grant — can only have an adverse impact on our local economy. When you take that into account, alongside the large-scale job losses that are anticipated as a consequence of the budget cuts in health and education, a very bleak picture is painted indeed. Therefore, there is a responsibility on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to deliver a job creation strategy that also ensures equality in this time of austerity.

Other Members, yesterday and today, have noted the importance of collaboration and co-operation across the Northern Ireland Executive. That is critical if we are to do the best for the people we represent.

We are pleased to see that the final document has taken on some of the SDLP's good ideas, in particular our call for a financial capability strategy for consumers. We also welcome a higher level of ambition for the economy in setting higher targets. The SDLP called for greater priority and recognition for tourism in the economic strategy. That is reflected in the higher targets for visitor numbers and visitor spend. However, it is unclear whether that increased ambition is to be backed by additional resources. Perhaps the Minister might clarify that.

The higher targets for investment by locally owned companies and externally owned businesses are also to be welcomed, but are those targets to be supported by additional resources? The increased targets for exports and increased spend on research and development are also positive changes.

As I said, the strategy was quite good to begin with, and it has improved as a result of the consultation. I trust that it will be a living document that will be subject to monitoring, evaluation and amendment during its lifetime. However, at the outset, there are deficiencies that the SDLP wishes to point out to the Minister and to the Executive. I hope that my comments will be taken in the spirit in which they are made. They are also reflected in the contributions of some of the key stakeholders, not least the CBI.

The scale and challenge of access to finance, for instance, is well recognised. Although we

welcome the £50 million loan fund, we do not think it is sufficient. There are distinct challenges facing the Northern Ireland economy, such as the implications of NAMA and other legacy issues from the 2000-07 property boom, which left a disproportionately distressed property market; the lack of an indigenous banking sector, with key lending decisions taken outside Northern Ireland; and a weak and underfunded venture capital market. Therefore, there is a need to improve, as much as possible, access to finance. I ask the Minister, in collaboration with the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, to look at how small businesses, particularly those in rural areas, might be assisted to access soft loans, so that they can draw down European funding under the rural development programme. That would be critical to our rural economy.

We recognise that the central plank of the economy has to be about rebalancing from the public to the private sector. However, the strategy refers to only one half of that equation: growing the private sector. There is nothing about the reform or restructuring of the public sector. The strategy is to take us to 2030, after all, so it should not be silent on public sector issues, such as water reform. Leaving public sector reform to the Programme for Government, as if it is nothing to do with the economy, is a complete and utter cop-out. With regard to water reform, we would like to see engagement with the SDLP mutualisation proposal.

Alongside the higher output targets for tourism, the economic strategy should have committed more resources to investment in the Northern Ireland Tourist Board's signature projects.

Apart from corporation tax, there is no commitment in this long-term strategy to further devolution or further freedom around tax-varying powers. Those could be vital economic levers into the future.

The Minister will know that it is important that there is a childcare strategy sitting alongside the economic strategy, because it will help it work. It is important that there is an affordable and accessible childcare strategy, particularly for women returners, because we know that women still have the main responsibility for childcare. It is disappointing that we do not yet see a strident childcare strategy. I note with concern that, although a commitment was given to ring-fence £12 million for childcare, the figure

given in the draft Programme for Government was £9 million. We are concerned that £3 million has been set aside for this year and may or may not be lost. We would welcome any comment from the Minister on that.

Other Members talked about youth unemployment. Contributors talked about the importance of education, the skills strategy and meeting the needs of industry, particularly growth industry. There is also a cry for greater assistance from Invest NI with regard to the export market and the need for greater market intelligence. It was also said that not all of Invest NI's workload should be committed towards the start-up but should look at the needs of medium-sized enterprises. Greater commitment to that would be very much welcomed.

Despite our criticisms, we see this as a good attempt at an economic strategy, especially compared with previous efforts. That is probably because those who knew something about the economy were given their head, and the document was protected from more cynical influences at the centre. If we give OFMDFM's first draft of the CSI strategy one out of 10 and the Programme for Government three out of 10, the DETI economic strategy is a good six out of 10, and we look forward to its implementation.

12.15 pm

Mr G Robinson: I commend the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment on her efforts for Northern Ireland and its economy to date and thank her in anticipation of more success to come, in tandem with all our recent sporting achievements and tourist achievements, namely the Titanic Quarter, the new Bushmills golf course and the Causeway centre, to name a few. All Members should be proud of them. They are projects that have created much-needed employment in our construction industry.

In the development of an economic strategy for Northern Ireland, a balancing act was undertaken to ensure that small and medium-sized local businesses do not lose out to multinationals. The Minister and the Executive have done an excellent job in protecting local SMEs from some of the economic crisis to date and have pledged continuing support for them. That is a major part of our strategy. Keeping regional rates low and the creation of a loan fund to help cash flow for SMEs will hopefully result in the expansion of firms and

will definitely secure a short-term future for endangered jobs. That is a positive element of the economic strategy that the Minister and Executive are following. This, though, cannot be the sole basis for the economic future that many of us desire to see. Foreign investment is part of it. Inward investment is essential. That has to work alongside our local businesses, but not to their detriment. The only way that that can be satisfactorily dealt with is through good communication. Only two weeks ago, the Minister took time out from her busy schedule and came to Limavady to speak to some of our local businesspeople. That is how an approach from the ground up has been undertaken and implemented. The Minister listens to the concerns and needs of our local business sector. I commend the Minister for that, as it lets businesspeople throughout Northern Ireland realise that they can be heard at the highest level by a proactive local Minister who is working for our entire business sector.

The Executive and the Minister have adopted a strategy that is adaptable, positive and, best of all, workable. Due to the adaptable nature of the strategy, it is an evolving thing, changing as and when necessary. I urge every Member to get behind the strategy. Investors will watch and listen to debates such as this, so division and argument in the House will do Northern Ireland no favours. We must be positive in our outlook for our entire business sector, as my colleague Paul Frew said not so long ago.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I start by welcoming the opportunity to speak in the debate and broadly welcoming the economic strategy. I really welcome the commitment by the Executive, yesterday in the Programme for Government and today in the economic strategy, to build a strong economy and to deliver a better quality of life for all our people. I welcome their commitment to ensure that the wealth and prosperity that is achieved through that will be used to reduce poverty, promote equality and tackle existing patterns of disadvantage and need.

Some people have already mentioned the gaps in the strategy. I do not want to concentrate too much on that — I want to stay positive — but there are gaps. There could be more in the strategy about achieving tax-varying powers for the Executive. The benefits of all-island economic initiatives have been missed to some degree, as has the green new deal. That said, I

see that there is a commitment to preventative spending and early intervention spending. It is not actually mentioned, but some of the initiatives include that.

I especially welcome the inclusion of social clauses in public procurement contracts for construction, services and supplies. That is a key achievement. It presents the Executive with a real opportunity to address economic and social inequalities while promoting sustainability. It also helps in the regeneration of communities. However, we have to go further and look for a clearer definition of social clauses. I do not think that that is there yet. Contractors entering into the contracts need to be sure that they are adhering to the social clauses. That needs to be strictly monitored.

Most Members have already talked about it, and job creation is probably the key priority of the Executive at the moment. We cannot build our economy in any way unless we create jobs for people. We also need to sustain the jobs that are already there. We all recognise the need for foreign direct investment. However, we also have to look at the development of our local small and medium-sized businesses and the social economy sector. For instance, there is a huge opportunity to develop R&D if we go out and target proactively, and those local enterprises could become more involved in export markets. There are opportunities, particularly as regards export markets, and, therefore, we need to focus on that.

I welcome the focus on the connection between business and the further education sector. Recently, members of the ETI Committee visited one of the regional colleges and saw at first hand how that works for young people, in particular. Young people go into the colleges to train and get skills. Businesses work in partnership with the colleges, and, hopefully, those young people secure jobs after their training. That is a good demonstration of how the connection works in practical ways.

We need to look at how we tackle educational underachievement. Many of our young people from disadvantaged backgrounds still have little or no hope of securing work or even further education or training, and we have debated that many times in the Chamber. However, 80% of that comes from outside the classroom. It is not just about what those young people do at school or in the classroom; it is also about what

happens in their life outside school, in their family and community life. That is where early intervention comes into play. If we can build the wrap-around service that those young people and their families need so that everybody has the same opportunities in life, we really need to do that. It is not an option to let young people from a disadvantaged background or those who underachieve fall into a black hole somewhere. We need to help them and to target and focus that help.

I welcome the commitment to develop the social enterprise sector and the creative industries. I particularly welcome the commitment to develop the framework for asset transfer to communities. That community asset transfer will help people in the social economy sector, in particular, as land, buildings or whatever that are no longer of use to the Executive or Departments can be handed over for community use. I would like to see that developed and rolled out.

There should be new ways of accessing finance, and, again, we have come up against that before. We have debated in the Chamber for several years the issue of giving credit unions extra powers, and it has also gone to Westminster. If that was developed, it would provide a way for credit unions to help social economy enterprises or small and medium-sized businesses to access finance. I would like to see the credit unions become central in that debate and feature in the economic strategy.

I do not want to go on and on and repeat what other Members have said. I broadly welcome today's strategy. It offers a way forward to build the economy and to deliver the Executive's commitments. When we are building a strong economy, it is important to ensure that it is a balanced economy. We need to work in partnership with everyone. All the stakeholders, businesses and training organisations need to work alongside government. It is also important to ensure that, when building our economy, we tackle and challenge poverty, deprivation and need. There is too big a gap between the disadvantaged or those in poverty and need and those who are affluent and OK, and we need to tackle that. There has to be a more equal distribution of income. We, as an Executive, have a strong responsibility to ensure that everybody, no matter what social, economic, cultural or religious background they come from,

has the same opportunity to access the life opportunities —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is almost gone.

Ms J McCann: That opportunity should be given particularly to our children and our young people.

Mrs Cochrane: I, too, gladly welcome the motion before the House. The document itself has arguably been a considerable time in the making, but I give due recognition to the labours and compromises of the Executive and the departmental staff involved in its design for agreeing to the proposed strategy and thus enabling this legislature to progress in a structured and guided manner during this mandate.

There is much to welcome in the document, including strong commitments to research and development, improving our economic skills base, encouraging export-driven companies and the proposed overlap with the Programme for Government. By and large, we support the direction and targets contained in the strategy.

As I have said with reference to other government initiatives, directives are too often progressed in departmental silos, when best practice would indicate that a cohesive, joined-up approach could be employed to much greater effect. We believe that the best approach to reinvigorating the local economy is by encouraging a collaborative effort, and so we welcome the general approach in the strategy, with the hope that it will encourage a significantly improved collaborative framework to guide the main economic drivers.

There is much of merit in the strategy, but the one slight concern I have is evident very early on: the lack of consideration given to a shared future. Many parties do well to pay lip service to that, as and when the situation requires it or when headline opportunities present themselves. However, the language employed from the outset of the strategy is notably lacking. For example, it commits to building

“a safe, peaceful, fair and prosperous society”

with the obvious omission of the word “shared”. Further to that, little credence is given to the ever-present elephant in the room — the cost of division. The term “division” is referenced only twice in the document, with no real attempt made to address the cost of division and the impact it has on our economy and economic

development. The greatest distortions in our local expenditure relate to the costs of managing our divided society. That division manifests itself in the ways in which some businesses provide their goods and services, in obstructions to labour market mobility, in deterrents to inward investment, in restrictions on internal investment decisions and in the absence of a cultural environment that can attract and nurture creativity. There is, therefore, a clear relationship between a shared future and the onset of economic prosperity, and, while I appreciate that this economic strategy is intended to be a positive document that will encourage all sectors to work together, clear targets for breaking down divisions would not necessarily be seen as negative.

Mrs D Kelly: Does the Member share the surprise of many in the community that, in the last mandate, Sinn Féin and DUP members of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister voted against the publication of the report on the cost of division and wanted to suppress it?

Mr Speaker: The Member will have a minute added to her time.

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Member for her intervention. I am not surprised at that. It is something that we would want to see taken forward.

Delving further into the document, I am encouraged by the inclusion of goals and milestones in relation to Northern Ireland's tourism potential. More than £300 million has been invested in our tourism infrastructure in anticipation of this year, delivering architecture that is transforming our skyline and our prospects. Building on such a landmark year and encompassing events in 2012-13, we have the potential to challenge and change global perceptions of our society, to market Northern Ireland as a destination in which to live, work, invest and learn and to grow our economy. From a tourism perspective alone, we have the capacity to attract an additional 833,000 visitors over the next 18 months, and, if we are to continue along such a proactive path, we could generate an extra £140 million of revenue and create an additional 3,570 jobs over the next three years.

12.30 pm

Although the goals and milestones listed in the economic strategy are welcome, there is an uneasy feeling that they may not go quite far enough and are too short-term in focus. The opportunities that will come from 2012-13 should be fully embraced. However, we cannot be so naive as to think that such mainstream and unifying events and celebrations will last for ever. There is a need to develop a full and comprehensive tourism strategy, laying out a long-term action plan along with specific economic targets. In addition, such a plan could include the protection of natural, built and archive cultural assets; the development of cultural tourism; and recognition of the important economic role played by Northern Ireland's airports. Although the recent gains made in relation to the devolution of air passenger duty are to be welcomed, there are many other important factors that will have an impact on our success in attracting visitors. A comprehensive aviation strategy is essential if we are to credibly compete nationally and internationally, and any long-term growth in tourist potential largely depends on the success of our airports. I wish to highlight several areas of need to illustrate the point. There should be a genuine commitment to develop route access by connecting Belfast International Airport with key markets in Germany, Austria, Canada and the United States. Consideration should also be given to enabling travellers with onward connections in the US to clear customs in Northern Ireland, as is the case in Dublin. We boast a colourful, capable and captivating society in Northern Ireland, and we owe it to ourselves to be ambitious and not to rely solely on attracting tourists from other airports —

Lord Morrow: I thank the Member for giving way. I have listened diligently to what she has said, without necessarily agreeing with everything. However, I am interested to hear her views on the extension of the runway at Belfast City Airport. Would you see that as an important part of the infrastructure and a way to encourage further investment in Belfast and in Northern Ireland generally? Would you support such a venture?

Mrs Cochrane: I would focus more on developing routes at the international airport. I think that that is the most important thing at the moment.

I conclude by saying that, on the whole, the strategy should be welcomed, and the Alliance Party endorses it.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately upon the lunchtime suspension. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. Of course, the first item of business when the House returns will be Question Time.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.32 pm

On resuming (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Dallat]) in the Chair —

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Culture, Arts and Leisure

Sport: Adult Participation

1. **Mrs Overend** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, given that the target of halting the decline in adult participation in sport by 2011 has not been met, what new targets have been set for the next Programme for Government period. (AQO 1533/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. No specific targets for participation in sport and physical activity are expressed in the Programme for Government. However, addressing the decline in the rate of participation is identified as a key issue in my Department's strategy for sport, Sport Matters. The strategy contains specific targets aimed at stopping the decline in adult participation in sport and physical recreation by 2013 and delivering at least a three percentage point increase in the rate by 2019. Participation in sport, therefore, remains an important measure of success of the implementation of strategic sport objectives in the North. My Department will reflect participation in its corporate and business plans.

On a more positive note, a report published by my Department on its website this morning indicates that 97% of young people surveyed in 2010 as part of a young persons' behaviour and attitude survey said that they had participated in sports or physical activity in the seven days prior to the survey.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Minister for her answer. Given that the 'Bridging the Gap' report highlights the fact that, weekly, tens of thousands of people cannot take part in activity due to a lack of facilities, what action will the Minister take to improve that situation?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have seen aspects of that report and many others. Not only was a lack of facilities expressed as an issue, but even

getting access to facilities was seen as a problem. Economic decline was also seen as a barrier to involvement in sport and physical activity. Recently, I was in discussions with Belfast City Council, and I know that some local authorities are looking at improving outdoor facilities and bringing gyms outside, for example. We discussed how they — with the Department of Education and others — can increase physical activity and participation in sport. That will be ongoing. However, I hear what the Member says and share some of her concerns.

Lord Morrow: With regard to participative sports, does the Minister accept that angling is one of the most accountable and one in which there is most participation by individuals throughout Northern Ireland? Does she accept that any steps that she might take on salmon fishing will impact on that recreational activity? Will she assure the House that she will bear that in mind in any decision that she might make?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. I accept that angling is one of the best forms of participation in sport and physical activity and, indeed, of just taking time out. The Member was in the Chamber yesterday and at the debate on 21 October 2011 when he heard the proposals on catch and release for salmon fishing. I am sure that, yesterday, he heard the position with regard to netsmen. I am mindful that anglers need access to waters; that angling clubs have been in discussion with the Department; and that the Department needs to assist, rather than curtail, any additional fishing on our waterways and rivers.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. In the absence of a PFG target, what action has the Minister put in place to ensure full participation in sport among those with disabilities and those from socially deprived areas?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Programme for Government looks at sporting facilities, particularly stadia. However, Sport Matters, which is a 10-year strategy, already targets people from socially deprived backgrounds and, particularly, people with disabilities. As part of the implementation of that strategy, a Sport Matters action plan has been produced and published. In October 2011, that plan was approved by DCAL's Sport Matters monitoring group, which I chair. With regard to

some of the points that the Member raised, actions include Sport NI's continuing promotion of increased participation, investments such as the active communities programme, the Awards for Sport programme, the Countryside Access and Activities Network, Disability Sports NI and Special Olympics Ulster. If there is anything else that the Member thinks the Department could do to increase participation, particularly for people from excluded backgrounds and socially deprived areas or who have disabilities, I would welcome those suggestions.

Atlantic Salmon

2. Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether she can confirm that all methods will be used and all efforts made to ensure the survival of the Atlantic salmon. (AQO 1534/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: DCAL will endeavour to do all in its power to contribute to the conservation of the wild Atlantic salmon. We have developed a salmon management strategy for the DCAL jurisdiction in line with the North Atlantic Salmon Conservation Organization's principles. The Department undertakes programmes of work to restore and enhance in-river habitats and implements and enforces the Fisheries Act (Northern Ireland) 1966 and its associated regulations.

I will be going to public consultation on options for wild Atlantic salmon conservation in the near future. The outcomes of that consultation will inform policy development and potential legislative changes. It is also incumbent on all Departments and agencies to play their part during that consultation.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagra. Given the importance of the Atlantic salmon to our ecology and history and to angling and tourism in areas such as mine in Fermanagh, what additional conservation measures can DCAL put in place?

Ms Ní Chuilín: There are additional conservation measures that the Department can consider for commercial salmon fishing and recreational angling for salmon. The Member will be aware that the requirement for and scale of additional conservation measures are informed by robust scientific evidence and stakeholder consultation. The Department can

also introduce further temporary measures. For example, it could limit the times that salmon may be caught by shortening the fishing season; it could restrict the number of salmon caught by introducing quotas; and it could place restrictions on the methods that are used to catch salmon, such as requiring the use of barbless hooks and increasing the size of net meshes. I know the Member is greatly interested in recreational angling. The compulsory catch-and-release period for that could be extended, or it could be made mandatory at all times. The Department could consider banning any or all forms of salmon exploitation within its jurisdiction.

As I announced yesterday, we will be going out to consultation on this issue. I look forward to hearing the views of Mr Flanagan and other Members.

Mr Kinahan: I am a little concerned and muddled about where we are with salmon. The Minister said that she would adopt a can-do approach, but I wonder where we are with licences and netting on Lough Neagh, on both the legal and illegal sides. Will the Minister clarify that?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am not sure whether the Member was aware of the announcement yesterday. If he was not here, he should —

Mr Kinahan: I am asking about Lough Neagh.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Yes. He should familiarise himself with that statement. We are looking at salmon conservation in DCAL waters and in the DCAL jurisdiction. The Loughs Agency and the different Departments have supported the initiatives that DCAL is taking.

I will get back to the Member in writing, but I can assure him that the Department is doing everything that it can to prevent illegal fishing. It is also providing care and support to those who police our waterways. There has been an issue of late, and we need to assure those people that we are doing everything that we can to protect them in the pursuit of their jobs and duties.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for dealing with the issue of salmon. Can the Minister provide any recent statistics — if possible, for the past three years — on the amount of Atlantic salmon in our waterways?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. I can provide those statistics, but I do

not have them with me. I am happy to furnish the Member with them in writing.

Film: 'The Shore'

3. **Mr McDevitt** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans her Department has to recognize the achievement of the short film 'The Shore' at the Oscar awards. (AQO 1535/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am very proud that a film that was funded by Northern Ireland Screen, filmed in the North of Ireland and written, produced and directed by someone from this country has achieved such an accolade. I sent my congratulations to Terry George and his daughter Oorlagh on hearing of their remarkable achievement. I also met them on their return to Belfast and again at Parliament Buildings to convey my appreciation of their work and the positive contribution that it has made to our film industry. I am also aware that the First Minister and deputy First Minister hosted a reception on Thursday 8 March for Terry and Oorlagh to pay tribute to their Oscar success. I fully supported that well-deserved recognition, as, I am sure, did Conall McDevitt and other Members.

Mr McDevitt: I join the Minister in sending my congratulations and those of my party to those who have brought such great success to our shores. Given that we spend only a fraction per capita on the promotion of film of that which would be spent in any other jurisdiction in these islands, what specific targets can the Minister point to in the Programme for Government and how much extra money has she secured in the forthcoming Budget to ensure that the success of 'The Shore' can be built on in future years?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I anticipate a report from NI Screen that will lead to a continuation of its robust and aggressive marketing to the global screen industry, and I am confident that our growing reputation for film and television production in the North will increase. We have secured a range of television productions that have been very successful, and I am waiting for the result of Northern Ireland Screen's negotiations to secure a number of additional significant productions in the new year. I will be happy to bring that information forward.

Mrs Hale: The Minister has partly answered my question, but will she assure the House that her Department will do all that it can to support the

critical and commercial success of films made in Northern Ireland and help promote Northern Ireland as a place to invest in and visit?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Yes, absolutely. The Department and the Executive are keen to capitalise on the success of the Georges at the Oscars, previous successes such as 'Game of Thrones', other television and film productions and the ongoing interest in the creative industries and to make sure that we take advantage of the Oscar success and bring other productions to our shores.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra a thug sí dúinn. The Minister covered some of the specifics of building on the Oscar success of 'The Shore', which was filmed in a beautiful part of Ireland. Will she outline some of the specifics of her plans to build on that success?

Ms Ní Chuilín: As I said, we are waiting for the results of NI Screen's negotiations for television and film production here. We are also looking at other possibilities through the creative industries, and we are having discussions with counterparts from the Irish Government. I also plan to talk to colleagues from England, Scotland and Wales about support for film and television production.

Community Relations: Sport Matters

4. **Mr S Anderson** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how her Department's Sport Matters strategy will contribute to the wider government agenda in the area of community relations. (AQO 1536/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Sport Matters strategy recognises that well-organised sport can make a significant contribution to community relations. It commits government to promoting community cohesion through sport in the context of a shared and better future, and it contains a number of actions to help achieve that. These include actions to encourage under-represented groups to participate in sport and the provision of shared spaces for sport that promote community integration. These Sport Matters actions support many of the themes in the emerging Programme for Government. The strategy is a building block under priority 4 of the Programme for Government in the areas of building safer and stronger shared communities. Sport Matters also supports the delivery of

other PFG priorities, including, in priority 1, growing a sustainable economy and, in priority 2, tackling disadvantage.

Mr S Anderson: Sport as a means of improving community relations is part of the wider government agenda and is part of the Minister's oversight of her Department. Does the naming of GAA grounds after people who have been convicted in the criminal courts make a positive or a negative contribution to community relations?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I think that the Member's question has absolutely no bearing on the work that the Department is doing, and I would —

Mr Wells: You are scared to answer.

Mr Allister: She does not want to face it.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Well, I am aware of only one GAA ground named after Kevin Lynch.

2.15 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. Members know that they have to make their remarks through the Chair. There is no other way that we can do it.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Tá mé déanta. I am finished.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. What specific examples can the Minister give of interventions that promote community integration?

Ms Ní Chuilín: In the development and promotion of better community integration, sport has made a positive contribution to creating a shared and equal future in the North of Ireland. The GAA's Belfast Cuchulainns hurling team comprises under-16s from Corpus Christi College, St Patrick's College, Bearnageeha, Belfast Boys' Model School and Ashfield Boys' High School. Many Members will also be aware of the IFA's World United intercultural football project, which is based in Belfast and is designed to increase participation in organised football by players and coaches among refugees, asylum seekers and members of the settled minority communities. The introduction of rugby into schools that are traditionally known for playing Gaelic games and, indeed, the work of the Ulster Council on outreach and engagement has helped to promote good and positive relationships.

Mr Swann: Will the Minister support the development of a greater number of shared facilities using artificial surfaces, thereby increasing the overall use of such facilities?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Yes. I recently visited Cookstown in mid-Ulster and saw the excellent sporting facilities there. Some of the artificial surfaces have encouraged and provided greater access for small and bigger clubs and individuals. As I said, I have also spoken to Belfast City Council and am speaking to other local authorities that have responsibility for providing pitches. Indeed, some have used Sport NI money for the provision of 3G pitches across the North, and it is good that there is more usage. More groups and individuals get access, and there is greater participation in sport.

Mr Eastwood: I note that the Minister mentioned the Boys' Model School in Belfast. I am sure that she will join me in congratulating St Joseph's Boys' School from Creggan, which beat the Boys' Model School in the Northern Ireland Schools' Cup semi-final last week. Aside from that, how much has her Department invested in the Unite Against Hate campaign, and will that investment continue?

Ms Ní Chuilín: On the Member's second point, I am not sure. I will get him the figures, but the Department should definitely support that campaign, if it is not doing so already.

I congratulate St Joseph's and the Boys' Model. I am not being mealy-mouthed, but it is good that school competitions in particular are raised in a positive way on the Floor of the House, unlike the contributions of Members who have commented previously. Work on sport goes on in the House without recognition and proper respect.

Tourism: Coleraine

5. **Mr Campbell** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans she has to promote Coleraine as a historical and cultural destination in 2013 as it celebrates the 400th anniversary of the signing of its charter. (AQO 1537/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department, through the Ulster-Scots Agency, will be developing a series of activities to mark a significant number of plantation anniversaries in 2013, including the 400th anniversary of the town charter of Coleraine. The Public Record Office has yet to finalise plans for 2013, but it holds a number of records relating to Coleraine in the 17th

century, which are available for consultation at its headquarters.

Mr Campbell: Hopefully, the Minister will ensure that her Department, her officials and her ministerial position will get behind all the events enthusiastically. Will she ensure that, when she looks at promoting the 400th anniversary of Coleraine, it will be incorporated into the wider context of Northern Ireland, particularly when we look at the first inhabited piece of land on this entire island, incorporating Northern Ireland and the Republic, which is, of course, in Mount Sandel in Coleraine?

Ms Ní Chuilín: You learn something new every day. Any celebration or the marking of significant events, regardless of whom they are done by or where they happen, will receive my full support and that of my Department. Indeed, as the Member knows full well, the Public Record Office is a member of the DCAL family. If there are PRONI records that could be used in Coleraine to help the town to celebrate that anniversary, I will be happy to facilitate that. Indeed, the suite of commemorations and significant events that the Executive will bring forward will be done on a broad base and in a respectful manner.

Mr McClarty: Any good history book on Ireland will always mention Coleraine first because of what Mr Campbell said. However, given Coleraine's hugely significant contribution to British and Irish history, would the Minister support a call to restore the old county name of County Coleraine?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am always happy when Members from the unionist community want to go for a thirty-third county in Ireland; it is quite appropriate. I appreciate the Member's interest in history and what he has outlined about the history and value of Coleraine in marking significant centenaries, but I cannot comment on going back to any names. However, I assure the Member from East Derry, from Coleraine, and others from that constituency that, given the facilities that DCAL has, including libraries, museums and public records, if suggestions are brought forward that are in keeping with the respectful and broad-based approach that we are taking to the commemoration of significant events, we are really keen to hear them and will try to give them support.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhim buíochas leis an Aire as an

fhreagra sin. What role do museums, libraries and archives have in marking commemorations?

Ms Ní Chuilín: As I mentioned, there is a broad range of facilities in the DCAL family. For example, resources have been made available at PRONI, in our museums and in our libraries that provide all of us with a rich pool of knowledge that can inform an understanding of historical events and their significance to us today. The covenant is held by PRONI, with an online database resource on all those who signed. The former home of Mr George Shanks of Bedford Street is where DCAL is now. A copy of the proclamation is held by the Ulster Museum along with the pen that Edward Carson used to sign the covenant. Exhibits and programmes provided by museums, libraries, PRONI and, indeed, the arts help us to tell a story behind those historical facts.

Mr Allister: Does the Minister also look forward to celebrating the fact that, on 29 March 1613, King James I granted a charter to the nearby settlement that contained these immutable words:

"that the said city or town of Derry, for ever hereafter be and shall be named and called the city of Londonderry"?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am not getting into answering questions about specific place names. I know Derry city as Derry city in the county of Derry. The articles, including the King James Bible, are also in my Department, and, if the Member is interested, I would be happy to escort him to show him the King James Bible, and we both can look at that quote. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please.

Rathfriland Health Centre, Library and Leisure Complex

6. **Mr Wells** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what action her Department has taken to facilitate the proposed health centre, library and leisure complex in Rathfriland. (AQO 1538/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: All providers of public services have a duty to work in partnership with each other and to join up services wherever possible. It is quite clear that the public expect government to work in a more joined-up and seamless way. The accommodation of individual libraries is an operational matter for the board

of Libraries NI, which is always looking for opportunities to work in partnership with other service providers to improve access to library services. I understand from Libraries NI that the development of the project is at a very early stage. Although some very initial discussions have taken place, Libraries NI is not aware of any formal proposal on the project at this time, and, therefore, that is not a capital priority for Libraries NI.

Mr Wells: I noticed that the Minister deliberately avoided the very pointed question from my colleague Mr Anderson about the Kevin Lynch GAA club. I hope that she will not, therefore, avoid my supplementary question in the same way.

It is absolutely imperative that her Department gets in behind this project with enthusiasm. Unless Libraries Northern Ireland —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Wells, can we have a question please?

Mr Wells: — and the other authorities get together, the project will not proceed.

Ms Ní Chuilín: There was no question there, but I assume that the Member was asking whether I am going to ask Libraries NI to make sure that the library that he has mentioned is on its capital programme. Libraries NI gives me advice. If this is not on its capital programme as a priority but it is looking at some medium-term work, I am happy to see what that medium term is. If the Member was asking whether I should insist or whether we should all collectively try to provide a better suite of public facilities and a more joined-up approach, I am happy to do that, but there is nothing specific on the library.

Mr McCallister: With regard to Rathfriland specifically, Banbridge District Council has a keen interest in progressing that one single place with health service provision in there as well. Will the Minister instruct Libraries NI to get in contact with the council and make sure that this gets progressed further and off the ground?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member — possibly the new leader of the opposition, if the media are to be believed — for his question. I will talk to Libraries NI about the question you have raised, because I think that beneath it is a concern that public services are not joining up together to provide a better suite, better access and a more cohesive approach to make sure that people get the best out of

their public investment. I am happy to forward the comments, with a recommendation that Libraries NI should have discussions with libraries in County Down.

Boxing: Strategic Implementation Plan

7. **Miss M McIlveen** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what is the timescale for the completion and publication of the strategic implementation plan for boxing. (AQO 1539/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I welcome the Member's question on the strategy for boxing going forward. I have previously stressed in the House the importance of boxing as a sport and, in particular, the benefits and opportunities it offers to young people, especially in areas of high social need. It is for that reason that I have agreed that Sport NI should assist the Ulster Provincial Boxing Council in the development of a strategic implementation plan for the sport, which will give effect to the Irish Amateur Boxing Association's five-year strategy for boxing across Ireland.

Miss McIlveen: In order to ensure that boxing in Northern Ireland is as open and inclusive as possible, has consideration been given to an initiative along the lines of the IFA's Football for All?

Ms Ní Chuilín: In fairness to the boxing fraternity, it has been one of the sports that have done a very good job behind the scenes in crossing communities and providing a better direction in terms of cohesiveness. People involved in boxing, like many other sports, need to acknowledge the fact that reaching out and engaging with other members of the community has to be encouraged, and they have to demonstrate how they do that. Part of the strategy and of any additional investment in boxing will have to include how they do that and what lessons we can learn from other sports. The IFA and the GAA are two of the best examples of how to go forward — as is rugby — that we could offer boxing or any other sport.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle, agus a Aire. I would be interested to know about the Minister's sporting initiative in regard to boxing. Boxing is usually the second cousin of other sports here when it comes to support. What benefits does she think her initiative will give to boxing?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Boxing may not have received the support that it should have, but it will on my watch. I share that enthusiasm and interest with many Members in the House. I will make sure that it is brought up to a level that it deserves. Part of the investment in boxing and the business case will look to see where the gaps have been, what we can do as an interim step and what we need to do for the future.

Education

Schools: Viability Audit

1. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Education when he will publish the details of the viability audit. (AQO 1548/11-15)

5. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Education for an update on the viability audit. (AQO 1552/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): Go raibh maith agat as an cheist sin. With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 1 and 5 together.

The viability audits were published on Tuesday 6 March by each of the education and library boards on their websites. Overall, the findings of the audits showed that a range of schools, both primary and post-primary, are evidencing stress at this time.

I will seek assurances from the managing authorities of the schools that evidence the greatest degree of stress in educational attainment that steps are being taken to protect the educational well-being of pupils. The viability audit data will be combined with a wide range of other educational, demographic and economic data to provide detailed area profiles that will provide the information base for the area planning process.

2.30 pm

The overall picture is a serious one. It confirms the need to move quickly on the area plans to put in place a network of viable and sustainable schools that will deliver high-quality education for all pupils.

Mr McGlone: Mo bhuíochas leis an Aire as ucht an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for that response. Given that the viability audits were conducted against only three of the sustainable

schools criteria — many in the House would see them as a thinly veiled threat to our schools — does the Minister accept that he has, effectively, put a closure sign on many of our schools, particularly those in our rural areas?

Mr O'Dowd: The threat in the debate is not to schools; it is to young people's education. That is where all Members should concentrate their minds. The viability audit used three of the sustainable schools criteria. No action will be taken against any school based on those three criteria alone. Action will be taken only after closer examination of the sustainable schools policy, which has six criteria, by and large, against which a school is measured.

No one in the House should choose to ignore the findings of the viability audit. It is clear that a number of schools are evidencing educational under-attainment levels, about which everybody should be concerned. Action needs to be taken in those schools. After the full process has been gone through, including the development proposal, which includes a two-month consultation process, if the right thing to do to protect the educational attainment of young people is to close the school, that action will be carried out.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Minister for his response. Does he acknowledge that little new material has come out of the viability audit and that it continues to list a high number of schools — I think that it is 84% of post-primary schools and 47% of primary schools — as stressed, which causes unnecessary stress to communities, school staff, parents and pupils?

Mr O'Dowd: You are correct: a significant amount of the information that is before us is not new. However, it has been collated at a central point and it is now open to public examination. Is the Member seriously suggesting that the general public are of such a nervous disposition that they cannot handle the information? If we live in an open and democratic society and our politics and government are to be open, democratic and accountable, it is only right and proper that information, unpalatable as it may be at times, should be in the public domain. Parents and pupils have a right to know the information about their local school. The information will help to inform the debate about the future of education. Going in to the future, we require an informed debate about education.

Mr Storey: Does the Minister not agree that he has created a very difficult situation, given that he and his Department did not use criteria that were comparable? For non-selective schools, he used a benchmark of 25%, which is lower than the Northern Ireland average, based on five GCSEs at grades A* to C; and he used a benchmark for the grammar schools of 85%, which was above the Northern Ireland average, based on seven GCSEs. The data for educational attainment was from 2008-9 and 2009-2010, so it is out of date and is not information that can be used in a way that is fair and comparable.

Mr O'Dowd: The data for 2010-11 has not yet been verified. If I were to use the 2010-11 data — the boards and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) collated the information — I would be accused of using data that had not been verified. The figures were gathered in agreement with the boards and the CCMS. The grammars are on a higher level than secondary schools because grammars tell us that their academic ability outstrips all other sectors, so why should they not be measured against a higher plane? Seven GCSEs for a grammar school pupil is perhaps a medium measure; perhaps it should be higher. Grammar schools practise academic selection because they tell us that they want to bring the brightest pupils in to their schools and they offer higher quality education than any other system. Therefore, they should be measured against a higher benchmark than any other sector.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. What analysis has the Minister's Department done on the disparity between controlled and maintained schools, and is he concerned by the trends seen in the audit?

Mr O'Dowd: The audit highlighted that educational attainment in the maintained sector is marginally higher. However, no sector can be overly proud of the progress thus far. There are serious concerns in the controlled sector — highlighted in Dawn Purvis's and other reports — about educational attainment, particularly of working class Protestant boys. I believe that the suite of policies that we have in place is a significant challenge to that trend continuing and that we can significantly change it. Within the Catholic sector as well, however, a significant number of young people still leave education without proper qualifications or value added to their lives.

Schools: Computer Science

2. **Mrs Cochrane** asked the Minister of Education whether his Department will introduce a separate computer science GCSE subject to address the skills shortage in this sector. (AQO 1549/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I noted with interest the Secretary of State's decision in England to disapply the national curriculum programmes of study and the associated attainment targets and assessment arrangements for ICT from September 2012. Should that decision lead to changes in ICT-related qualifications, including GCSEs, I will, of course, want to consider the implications for pupils in the North. Indeed, I have asked the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) to consider the developments in England and provide formal advice on whether similar GCSE and GCE specifications should be developed for use here.

My Department is also a member of the ICT working group that was established by the Department for Employment and Learning in response to the ICT sector's concerns about skills shortages and mismatches here. Computer science is a specialised field, and the flexibility already in place within the revised curriculum enables schools to teach the subject at any key stage, if they feel it appropriate. At Key Stage 4, GCSE, some awarding bodies offer computing in addition to ICT. The revised curriculum has been designed to provide flexibility for schools to develop experiences that suit the needs of their pupils. The revised curriculum embeds mandatory cross-curricular skills and keeps prescribed content to a minimum, allowing schools to choose the most appropriate approach to take to ensure that pupils are engaged and challenged to reach their full potential.

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Minister for his answer and for the progress that is being made. Given that the school viability audits use the percentage of pupils attaining grades A to C at GCSE as an indicator of a quality educational experience, and that it is generally recognised that ICT would give a better chance of pupils achieving a higher grade than other subjects such as computer science, does the Minister agree that schools are unlikely to choose to offer the more challenging option, unless they are actively encouraged to do so?

Mr O'Dowd: No, I do not think that is the case. The measure across the five GCSEs is a basic measure of skills. Many young people display a great interest in ICT. We have to focus now on whether the coursework and provision are adequate and meet the sector's needs. I, too, have been approached by pupils and teachers — you have been in regular correspondence with me, as has the sector — to say that the skills base that is laid down at schools may not meet the needs of the ICT sector. The establishment of a task force by the Minister for Employment and Learning is a valuable step forward. I and my Department are happy to engage fully with that working group. I am happy to work on and move along any of its findings, which will be evidence and research based, to ensure that we have the skills base required to build the ICT sector.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. It is important that the education system has the responsibility to provide the skills base for the economy, moving forward, which was debated by Members earlier today. As it beds in over the next number of years, how will the entitlement framework help schools develop a curricular offering that is relevant to a modern economy?

Mr O'Dowd: The core principle of the entitlement framework, and the counterbalance to the revised curriculum at Key Stage 4, is to guarantee equality of access for all pupils, from Key Stage 4 to a broad and balanced, more economically relevant curriculum, with clear progression pathways.

I also want to ensure that, at schools level and in my Department, we build up a working relationship with industry and business; that we have a close working relationship with DEL as regards that matter; and that we constantly review and reassure ourselves that the curriculum and the courses delivered by our schools and further and higher education are relevant to the economy now and in the future. The revised curriculum gives us a basis to do that, but we must also constantly challenge ourselves to ensure that it is relevant to a modern economy.

Mrs Overend: I appreciate the Minister's responses so far. Does the Minister appreciate that computer science, as opposed to ICT, is a vital subject that needs to be taught at GCSE level so that pupils may progress to further

education and A levels in order to provide those skills for the workforce? Will he assure us that he will work on that sooner rather than later?

Mr O'Dowd: As I said in response to previous questions from Members, we are involved with the Department for Employment and Learning's working group as regards that matter. I recognise that computer science is distinct from ICT. Indeed, when I talk to the ICT sector and to the industry, they emphasise that point time and again. We need young people who can build a computer from the computer chip right through to all its working mechanisms, not simply work the software programmes in the computer. We want a generation of young people who are not only building new computers and ideas in computer science but moving beyond where we are now. So, yes, I recognise that wholeheartedly.

I have a keen interest in the matter because it has been raised with me, as I said, by parents, pupils, teachers and the sector. I think that we can get it right, and the Employment and Learning Minister's programme of work will allow us to do that. However, let us move forward on the evidence base that will come out of the working group. As I said, I am happy to move forward with any proposals coming from that group that are based on evidence and research.

Education: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development Report

3. **Mr W Clarke** asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the latest Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report, which confirms that successful education systems worldwide prioritise teaching and leadership standards and do not employ academic selection. (AQO 1550/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I am not surprised by the findings of the latest OECD report. Inspection and research evidence shows that good school leadership is central to school improvement. Research also shows that improving the quality of teaching has a positive impact on all pupils. However, pupils who are underachieving or who are from disadvantaged backgrounds benefit most.

The school improvement policy, which I continue to take forward, sets out the characteristics of a successful school. They include high-quality teaching and learning, effective leadership, child-centred provision and a school connected

to its community. The latest OECD report also states that selection widens achievement gaps and inequalities. Pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds are the pupils most adversely affected by selection. That mirrors the findings of previous OECD reports, which found that selection does not raise standards overall but increases the difference in performance between schools.

I want all our young people to achieve to their full potential. Therefore, I want to drive out the inequalities that exist in our education system. That is why I am opposed to academic selection and why I continue to work to bring it to an end.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. How do education systems that operate academic selection and do not prioritise teachers, teaching and leadership damage economic standing?

Mr O'Dowd: This is not the only reason, but it is one of the reasons highlighted in our recent audit. One of the findings shows that around 40% of our young people are leaving school without the proper qualifications. Young people leaving school without the proper qualifications are less likely to gain employment, more likely to suffer from health and social problems and more likely to end up in the justice system. That alone has a detrimental economic effect, not only on the individual but on broader society.

Academic selection has been highlighted again in the OECD report. The OECD is made up of 30 countries, including the UK and Ireland. It is a highly respected body that has influenced government policy across Europe with regard to educational plans. Thus far, unfortunately, parties in this House have refused to recognise the benefits of ending selection. I believe that a sensible debate on academic selection needs to take place. We need to challenge each other on it and ensure that our education system benefits all the young people involved, not just some of them.

If we had a world-class education system, we would have a world-class economy. I do not believe that we have a world-class education system. We could have one, and we certainly do not have a world-class economy. If we secure a world-class education system, however, we will go a long way towards securing a world-class economy.

2.45 pm

Mr Elliott: Given that it is obvious that the Minister does not have any power to remove the academic selection that is in place, would it not be better that he put a practical, regulated system in place until there is an alternative way forward, without the unregulated tests that are currently there?

Mr O'Dowd: There may be merit in that argument if this debate had not been going on for five decades. Those within the grammar sector have been telling everyone else for five decades that if they were given a wee bit more time, they would move from the position they are in. In fact, they have entrenched their position without any challenge to them.

The Member is right: on my own, I cannot change the position on academic selection. However, we should have a mature, sensible debate about the way forward around academic selection, how we ensure that we retain a system that has academic and educational excellence, and how we benefit all the young people in our education system. If we have that debate, I believe that, collectively, we can move beyond academic selection.

You may say to this or any Minister, "Oh, you don't have the power to do something; we have got you in a corner." You may have got me in a corner but all the young people who are losing out because of academic selection are also stuck in that corner. I do not mind whether you keep me in the corner as long as you let the young people out of the corner. I will then be happy enough.

Mr McDevitt: I welcome the Minister's challenge to us all to enter into this debate in an informed way. Will he confirm that the OECD does not say that academic selection is always socially regressive but does say that the type of academic selection that we have in this region is very socially regressive? Therefore, would it not be in the best interests of this region, our pupils and this Assembly to start a debate about a new system of education that understands that it is possible — the OECD would reinforce this — to select kids at, for example, age 14 and still have a world-class —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question, please.

Mr McDevitt: — socially equitable education system?

Mr O'Dowd: I will quote from the OECD report and maybe quote from the SDLP's election manifesto. The SDLP is opposed to academic selection as well. I know it is silent on that and likes to keep it in the background but it is opposed to it.

I will quote from the most recent report, which makes five recommendations that help to prevent failure and promote completion of upper secondary education. Those recommendations include avoiding early tracking:

"Early student selection has a negative impact on students assigned to lower tracks and exacerbates inequities, without raising average performance. Early student selection should be deferred to upper secondary education while reinforcing comprehensive schooling."

Further Education: Key Stages 4 and 5

4. **Mr P Maskey** asked the Minister of Education what discussions there have been between his Department and further education colleges in relation to the curriculum at Key Stages 4 and 5. (AQO 1551/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The delivery of the curriculum at any key stage is a matter for individual schools to ensure that the statutory requirements are met. At Key Stage 4 and post-16, schools must deliver access to a range of broad, balanced and economically relevant courses that have clear progression pathways and meet the needs of pupils. Post-primary schools can work together on a local basis in area learning communities. Working together allows them to plan their curricular offer, maximise resources and minimise duplication of provision.

I am pleased to note that further education colleges are members of, and play an important part in, those area learning communities. They can offer high-quality specialist and technical facilities and industry expertise, which can complement schools' own provision. I welcome the engagement and good partnership working between post-primary schools and acknowledge the valuable role that further education colleges can play in the delivery of the Key Stage 4 and the post-16 curriculum.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle Go raibh maith agat, a Aire. Further education colleges have an educational and economic role. A number of them are looking at different developments

with regard to industries, including some of the renewable industries. How is the curriculum kept up to date with new economic drivers?

Mr O'Dowd: As I said in response to a previous Member's question, the curriculum is flexible enough to allow schools to adapt to the changing economic circumstances. It is a good sign of co-operation between the sectors that area learning communities are involving themselves with further education colleges in a productive and collaborative way.

Many further education colleges are in modern new buildings and offer excellent facilities for young people. I think that it is only right and proper that those facilities can be, and are, used rather than our duplicating those services within the schools estate. I think that the work that is going on in the area learning communities between schools and further education colleges continues to be of benefit to our young people.

Mr Copeland: Thank you so far, Minister. Will you update the House on the recommendations of the Costello report on the minimum number of courses, which I understand are set at Key Stage 4 and Key Stage 5 at 24 and 27 respectively?

Mr O'Dowd: The Member may be aware that as a result of my September statement, in which I set out the future of education, I said that the entitlement framework would become law. The order was signed off in December. As we move towards 2013, I have introduced a staged process for completion by 2015. I did so because I recognised the budgetary pressures that are bearing down on our schools. I wanted to give them further time to plan for the full entitlement framework. The entitlement framework is now law and will be implemented in full by 2014-15.

Mr D Bradley: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as na freagraí a thug sé go dtí seo. Ba mhaith liom an méid seo a fhiafraí de. I thank the Minister for his answer. Given that further education has a role in building the new economy, what is the Minister's view on the possibility of locating further education within a new Department of the economy?

Mr O'Dowd: If that new Department of the economy is the Department of Education, I am all for it. I believe that responsibility for the natural progression of education from preschool

through to university and further and higher education should be within one Department; the Department of Education. However, a number of proposals have come forward, all of which are workable in their own way: all have their own positive and negative attributes. I have made my pitch known, and I will be happy to work with whatever proposals come forward following OFMDFM's deliberations on the matter.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 5 has been dealt with.

Special Education

6. **Mr McCartney** asked the Minister of Education what he is doing to ensure that special education schools receive adequate support and funding. (AQO 1553/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I am aware of the value and importance of the support provided by special schools to some of our most vulnerable children with special educational needs (SEN) and their families. They play a vital role within the SEN framework, and this is underpinned by legislation. In recognition of this, when setting Budget 2011-15 allocations, I agreed that a number of front line services should be afforded protection. This includes funding for special educational needs. As a result, no reductions in funding allocations for special schools have been included in my Department's savings delivery plan.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his answer. Can he give priority to special schools that are in substandard accommodation?

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist sin. One of the pleasures of my job is to visit schools and meet educators and pupils. I have to say that I have visited a number of special educational needs schools in which the staff, on a daily basis, go above and beyond the call of duty and provide an excellent service to our young people. However, they are being let down by the facilities in which they are operating. Some of the situations are heartbreaking, when you see the facilities in which some of our most vulnerable young people are being catered for. I have asked the education boards to come back to me with area plans for special educational needs schools by the end of this month.

I have a limited capital budget going into next year. I have said that we live in difficult times but not impossible times. I want to be able to announce a building programme for the 2012-13 financial year. I would like to include in that programmes of work for special educational needs. I am not yet in a position to confirm how many we will be able to go ahead with, but I want to do that. I am also aware that there are many schools in our schools estate that require refurbishment, repair and, indeed, rebuild.

In short, what I am saying is that in the 2012-13 financial year, I want to reopen the building programme for new schools. I may have to make an announcement ahead of the conclusion of area planning, because with public consultation and everything else, area planning may not be completed until October. I may have to make a statement on building core schools ahead of that. I would like a number of special educational needs schools improved under the building programme.

Mr G Robinson: Does the Minister agree that funding for special education can help to realise the full potential of children with a disability and enhance their quality of life?

Mr O'Dowd: Without doubt. That is one of the reasons why I excluded special educational needs from any savings delivery plan proposals. These are some of the most vulnerable young people in our society, and they deserve every chance that the state and government can give them. I want to secure funding for our special educational needs schools, and I want improvements to the estate of special educational needs. If there are further funds available as I review my budgets in the years ahead, I will also want further investment in special educational needs.

Ms Lo: I am not sure if the Minister is aware that, last month, six special schools in Belfast organised a very successful fashion show in Belfast City Hall, which was part funded by the extended schools programme and supported by Belfast City Council and the business sector. Will the Minister assure the House that such wonderful initiatives that build the children's confidence will be fully supported by the Department?

Mr O'Dowd: I am aware of the event. I am renowned for my fashion sense but, unfortunately, I was not able to attend. Schools across our society use many initiatives to raise

funds, to raise the profiles of the schools and also to raise the confidence levels of the young people who attend those schools. The event that you talk about is one of those initiatives. You mentioned extended schools. My budget has been under internal review. I hope to be in a position to announce the outcome of that review later this month. I will place particular focus on the extended schools programme to see what added benefit we can bring to it.

Educational Disadvantage

7. **Mr Swann** asked the Minister of Education what action his Department is currently taking to tackle educational disadvantage in Protestant working-class areas. (AQO 1554/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I am determined to take action to break the link between social disadvantage and educational underachievement for all pupils. The recent OECD publication on supporting disadvantaged students and schools reported that the highest-performing education systems across OECD countries combine quality with equality. In particular, the report found that academic selection exacerbates inequalities without raising average performance.

It is those pupils from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who are most adversely affected by selection. Therefore, I continue to work towards the end of that practice. I also continue to implement 'Every School a Good School: A Policy for School Improvement', which stresses the central role of well-led schools with high expectations for all their pupils. It is supported by a range of policies aimed at raising standards, including the literacy and numeracy strategy, the revised curriculum, the entitlement framework, and work to finalise strategies on early years and special educational needs and inclusion.

At the same time, we are providing additional support for schools that serve some of our most disadvantaged communities, including programmes such as extended schools and full-service schools. I also want to stress the value of education to ensure that all young people, especially those in deprived communities, understand the importance of doing well at school.

Executive Committee Business

Economic Strategy

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly endorses the Northern Ireland economic strategy agreed by the Executive. — [Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment).]

Mr Moutray: When devolution was established and the current arrangements were set up five years ago, many people were greatly encouraged. Many were even surprised that the Executive, in their first Programme for Government, agreed to make the economy their number one priority.

3.00 pm

That was indeed a very challenging and important move. The regeneration of the economy was correctly recognised as the key to building a better future. The task was massive and daunting. Years of terrorism, underinvestment and economic decline had left our economy very weak and largely dependent on the public sector and on help from West . Our economic base had shrunk and withered.

Over the years of the Troubles, our overdependence on the public sector was perhaps understandable, but it was, and is, a foundation of sand. Northern Ireland was once famous for its skills, innovation and manufacturing, but the days of heavy engineering and manufacturing are largely gone. Ships, rope and linen are all but a distant memory.

Times have changed radically, but we are still people who are instinctively business orientated. I see it in my constituency, particularly in Craigavon, where we have Almac, Kingspan and Moy Park. Those are all committed, leading businesses employing vast numbers. We also have smaller family-run businesses that are key to economic growth and job creation. I also see it in our young people, with more and more becoming entrepreneurs. For example, we have SlurryKat in Waringstown and Green Energy Technology, which is a leading renewable energy systems company in the Craigavon area. Many young people are also embarking on business-orientated educational courses at university.

I feel that we have a great opportunity now to build on the progress that has been made in the first five years in Government. Those five

years have not been easy. Just as we emerged from the Troubles, we were hit hard by the world recession and banking crisis. As we all know, that has shaken business confidence to the core and left us reeling. The global economy remains volatile and could be affected by any number of world developments. We are not yet out of the woods. However, I believe that the proposed economic investment strategy will give us very clear goals — many of them challenging — to work towards.

I warmly welcome the draft economic strategy document, which has been out for consultation and is before us for consideration today. It charts a very clear path for the next two decades. The paper builds on the good work undertaken by the independent review of economic policy, which was set up by my colleague Minister Arlene Foster. Several of IREP's key recommendations are being implemented, and they provide the context for much of what is recommended in the strategy paper.

The document before us does not offer a quick fix. That is good, as there is no quick fix that will stick. The strategy looks ahead to 2030, which is 18 years down the road. In setting out its vision for sustainable growth and prosperity, the document is realistic. It faces up to the fact that we are not completely in control of our local economy.

I have already referred to the world economy. The old saying “no man is an island” seems very apt. We are in a global village and are affected very quickly by a whole range of economic and financial developments and trends. As the strategy document points out, we need to rebalance the economy by reducing dependence on the public sector and the public purse and growing a strong, dynamic and vibrant 21st century private sector, which will generate wealth and bring prosperity for all.

I am glad that we are part of the UK economy. It has left us in a much stronger and better position than the Irish Republic, but, as a devolved region of the United Kingdom, our economic and fiscal levers are limited. I commend my Executive colleagues for their hard work in relation to negotiations with Her Majesty's Treasury on corporation tax-varying powers, but, as we all know, it will take more than that. That, in itself, is no silver bullet.

The draft strategy also makes clear and sets out a range of other levers. Inward investment

is crucial, but even more crucial, I think, is the development of our SMEs. They are the backbone of our economy. They must be given every encouragement, and they need to take every opportunity. Let us ensure that we offer them all the support that we can. We must raise our game in relation to exports, as the strategy document makes clear that export-led growth is the focus of the economic strategy.

We must also improve in areas such as R&D, innovation, creativity and skills. Northern Ireland is building a head of steam in respect of the creative industry, and I commend Terry George on his recent Oscar win for the top short film.

I believe that strides are being made in incubating new business start-ups and supporting young people in start-ups. I know that many Members in this Chamber are concerned about the high rates of unemployment, especially among our young people. It goes without saying that we need a skilled and trained workforce, and we need to focus on the sorts of skills and training that will ensure good quality jobs.

I am glad to note that the strategy document regards the promotion of employment and the development of employment opportunities as a short- to medium-term theme. I stress the need for cross-cutting between Departments and all key agencies; that is absolutely crucial. Every Department has a role to play in helping to take the economic strategy forward. The Executive's subcommittee on the economy is a good example of the sort of joined-up approach that we need. We must continue to involve key players, such as the CBI, chambers of trade, district councils, trade unions, etc.

As we approach Northern Ireland's centenary, let us revive the entrepreneurial spirit of 100 years ago and adapt it to today's challenges and opportunities. We are not interested in doing all of this just to make some people very rich; we are doing it because we want to improve the quality of life of everyone across the community and at all levels in society. We must try to build a better future for all of our people. I commend the economic strategy to the House.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom cúpla focal a rá faoin straitéis. I would like to say a few words on the economic strategy. The Member who has just spoken talked about not relying on the public sector. From my point of view and that of my

constituency, Armagh city and district is heavily reliant on the public sector.

I welcome the document and the points on page 49 about the promotion of jobs and the new business start-ups. The Minister is only too aware of the situation regarding the potential job losses in Armagh. So, I would like her to comment on that in relation to the promotion of jobs and inform us of what work she is doing with the local authorities, because they have drafted their own master plans. I would like the Minister to outline what work is going on within local authorities.

I also welcome the loan fund. From my experience with some of the companies that I have been working with recently, it seems that Invest NI has been working with the businesses. I certainly welcome that, and I would promote more of that in the North.

There is talk about the promotion of rural businesses. Rural businesses have a big part to play in the economy, and I like the intention expressed in the document relating to microregeneration and support for rural businesses.

I want to talk about tourism. Recently, we have seen announcements, even in the Programme for Government, about programmes for the north-west and the north-east. The promotion of the golf tournament in Portrush is welcome. It is great that this island has had four major champions over the past four years. It is good that Pádraig Harrington led the way and that, subsequently, three northerners followed suit in the past couple of years. That is most welcome. I want to mention to the Minister that Armagh city has a good par 70 parkland golf course, if she ever wants to promote golf in the Armagh city and district area.

I know rightly that Armagh city has a total reliance on tourism, and it is a good tourism product. It has the likes of Navan Fort and the two cathedrals. However, every time I see advertisements for tourism, it is the Giant's Causeway that is being shown. I would like the Minister to look at promoting tourism in the Armagh area; it would be most welcome. I hope that the Minister will look at that within the economic strategy.

While promoting tourism, we have to look at planning policy. I want to mention the angling side of tourism. There is a planning policy

statement, PPS 16. Fermanagh and Armagh have a lot of lakes, and there is a keen interest in angling, but PPS 16 does not afford the opportunity for that aspect of tourism. I would like the Minister to comment on that and, perhaps, to work with the Environment Minister to look at the policies to see whether we can look at that tourism aspect.

I welcome the announcement of funding for broadband. There are businesses in my area that rely on broadband. Recently, one of the industrial estates had to turn down business because it could not get the required broadband speed. The business had to renege on the advances from customers. Although, Minister, you have done a lot of work to promote broadband and there is now satellite and the new antennae system, a lot of people, especially in rural areas, are calling for fixed-line broadband. I would like the Minister to maybe touch on some of that. There is a responsibility on BT. I would like more talk with BT and more consideration to be given to the commitment to provide broadband. There are areas of the North that are remote and may not be able to facilitate fixed-line broadband, but I think that more can still be done. I would also like the Minister to talk to the local council areas about the Armagh/Monaghan digital corridor and to utilise that more.

There is mention in the document of planning and planning reform. It is key that we work together, across the Departments, to develop that. Planning is being transferred to the local authorities. The development plans that come out of that will lead to mainly economic drivers.

With that, let me say that I support the strategy.

Mr McDevitt: I am happy to have the opportunity to contribute to this debate. I would like to comment on just a couple of aspects of the strategy, which is, of course, a very welcome document and, undoubtedly, a step forward for us all in economic planning at a regional level. That said, when you look at the visual representation of our economy and the SWOT analysis behind the strategies conducted on the Northern Ireland economy, as illustrated on page 27, you will see all the stuff that we know. You will see all the issues around some of the weaknesses in our economy. However, there is, in my opinion, quite a lot missing. We identify as our second-last external threat rising or volatile energy costs, but nowhere in the analysis do

we see energy as a key economic opportunity. That is interesting. When one looks at the economic planning of other very progressive regions or nations in the past decade, one sees that the cost of energy, security of energy supply and the promotion of energy independence at either a regional or national level tend to nearly dominate economic planning. Yet this strategy does not really go there. In fact, it is rather silent on that. It reduces energy to being a series of targets on renewables. It reduces the issue to energy costs. Given that we are practically entirely dependent on —

Mr Moutray: I thank the Member for giving way. Given what the Member says, will he then support the North/South interconnector for energy?

Mr McDevitt: That is a very interesting point. The document is also exceptionally silent on the practicalities of developing a sustainable energy infrastructure across the island of Ireland. It talks about need in general terms but does not talk about specifics. My opinion is that, when looking at a document like this, a strategic economic plan, everything needs to be on the table.

Mrs Foster: Does the Member accept that one of the building blocks of the Programme for Government and, indeed, the economic strategy is the strategic energy framework? The framework sets out the 10-year plan for the Executive and Assembly in dealing with energy matters. The Programme for Government was published on the same day as the economic strategy. In my closing remarks, I will be making the point that those documents are to be read together and not in isolation.

Mr McDevitt: I am glad that I got a debate going, Mr Deputy Speaker. Yes, it is in the Programme for Government, but it is not in the economic strategy. The point that I was making — *[Interruption.]*

The Minister shakes her head, but this is a very important point.

When you look at the most progressive economic planning around the world in the past decade, you see that it involves taking ownership of energy at an economic level. It sits inside the Minister's Department, albeit buried down the back of a corridor at the end of another corridor —

3.15 pm

Mrs Foster: It is in the strategic energy framework.

Mr McDevitt: — and the strategic energy framework, as the Minister says, which also sits inside her Department. I am entitled to my views around here, and I would like to see it as a much more central driver in economic planning and to be explicitly laid out there. When you look at the opportunity for us to develop a sustainable smart grid for electricity, and when you look at the opportunity for us to be more resilient in respect of natural resources and to be able to tap into the much greater renewable opportunity, you see that we will have to plan our economy around that.

I am not going to speak for too much longer. In a recent book in which he talks about the future of the American economy, Bill Clinton talks about the three Es: economy, energy and the environment. He basically says that any modern or progressive economy should be planning itself around a test applied against those three Es. Employment: are jobs energy efficient? In other words, do they produce things using less energy than jobs previously required to produce things? Is it a more sustainable type of manufacturing? Energy: is the type of energy we use more environmentally friendly than energy in the past decade? Is it employment creating? You can conceive of energy that is environmentally friendly — energy that does not use an awful lot of carbon in its production — but does not create any jobs. Nuclear energy, for example, is a type of energy that we would never entertain on this island.

If we are serious about tapping into energy as part of our economic plan, we have to see the opportunity in energy as an employment creator, and that is where renewable energy fits in with so much else of what is written in this document — all the stuff that I would like to really commend: the stuff about innovation and joining up the dots in respect of our other economic planning.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I am going to sit down, because that was the only point that I really wanted to seriously make. I am very glad that the Minister intervened, and I appreciate her remarks. However, I stand by my remarks. I think that we should and could see a much greater focus on the energy opportunity, as well as the cost of higher energy, in the document.

Mr Hamilton: I congratulate the Minister and her Executive colleagues on producing the economic strategy for Northern Ireland. A lot of

effort and hard work was put in by the Minister, her colleagues on the Executive subcommittee and, indeed, right across the entire Executive. A lot of work was put in across Departments and across parties to come up with this document, which everyone here in the Chamber, or most of us anyway, will agree to. Some people might think that an arrangement where various parties come together and come up with a strategy for the next 20 years of Northern Ireland's economic development is too cosy. I happen to think that it is something that the people out there, particularly those who have been badly affected by the economic downturn, want to see us doing in this place. What we have here in this very thorough and comprehensive piece of work is exactly the sort of thing that the people of Northern Ireland not only want but need.

As the Minister just said, this must be taken alongside the other documents, including, primarily, the Programme for Government. I am glad that we, as an Executive and as an Assembly, have resisted the temptation to go in a different direction as a result of the ill effects of the economic downturn and that we have retained, as we did in the previous Programme for Government, the focus on the economy. Every one of us should believe — if we do not, we ought to start to believe — that the best way out of the ill effects of the downturn and the best way to get people out of poverty in the longer term is to provide them with jobs — sustainable, meaningful, long-term employment. That is exactly what this strategy is all about developing.

I welcome the structure of the document. Perhaps if it had been penned a number of years ago, there would have been less of a focus on the need to rebuild the economy and more on rebalancing. However, economic circumstances have prevailed, and we have to have a balance in the document between rebuilding our economy in the short term and rebalancing our economy in the long term.

I am glad that there is a focus in the document on the agrifood sector — a focus that was highlighted by other Members in their contributions. I know from my constituency that agrifood is the growth sector, as it is across Northern Ireland.

I was recently at the opening of an extension to Willowbrook Foods. It has invested in the region of £5.5 million in an extension to its factory

that has allowed the company to get more multimillion pound contracts from supermarkets across the water in Great Britain. It is a growth sector in my constituency, as it is in many others.

Agrifood is already a big sector, with around 20,000 employees and three times that in the supply chain. It realises £3.2 billion of economic output every year. It is a big sector that has the potential to get bigger, and this document recognises and builds us towards that. It has bucked the trend of the past number of years. Whereas the construction sector and retail have had a very bad time, the agrifood sector in Northern Ireland has grown. It is rightly identified as a key growth sector, and it has the potential to help in the aims of rebuilding and rebalancing, because it is growing and can therefore provide additional employment here and now for people, as in the example of Willowbrook Foods in my constituency. It can provide opportunities where that may not be the case elsewhere, and, because it has that growth potential, it has the opportunity to play its part in helping to rebalance our economy. I welcome the fact that agrifood is in the economic strategy as a key balancing measure and that it has been identified as one of those five key business areas that we can further exploit as an economy.

There are ambitious targets, and I heard other Members say that we need to follow the ambitious targets of other devolved regions in the UK. I agree with that; we should be going in that direction, and I welcome the commitment to develop a strategy to take the industry towards 2020. I do not think that the growth targets of 60% in Scotland are overly ambitious for Northern Ireland, not least because there is an increasing global demand for food, with changing habits, particularly in areas such as China and elsewhere, where huge populations are becoming more westernised in their food consumption. That creates opportunities for some of those companies here in Northern Ireland. I welcome that focus on the agrifood sector from a constituency basis and from a wider strategic Northern Ireland basis. It has been treated sometimes as a bit of a Cinderella sector, yet it is one of the pillars of our economy now and will, hopefully, remain so.

The second issue I wanted to focus on is more on the rebalancing side, namely the correct focus in the document on our pursuit and hopeful attainment of the power to adjust corporation tax here in Northern Ireland. Some

Members, particularly from the SDLP and Sinn Féin, have spoken in the debate about a desire for tax-raising or revenue-raising powers. One Member was critical about this document not having a focus on getting tax-raising powers, but it has a key focus on getting corporation tax powers.

When arguments are put forward for strategic reasons for getting tax-varying powers — I am thinking primarily of air passenger duty — they get an open and welcome reception from all Benches. I am still mystified and perplexed that, when these issues are raised by some Members opposite, they are just thrown out there with no explanation as to what tax-raising power the Member wants to have devolved to Northern Ireland, and, more importantly, what they would do with it if they got it. In Mrs Kelly's contribution, I noted that she mentioned the need for increased resources here, there and everywhere, and then started talking about getting more tax-raising powers for this Assembly. That concerns people like me because, if we were to get those tax powers, it would mean that taxes would go up to fund all the things that she wants to give increased funding to. That is a cause for concern for those of us who want to keep a low tax base here in Northern Ireland.

I want to draw Members' attention to the importance of keeping the focus on corporation tax. A report published by 'The Economist' magazine over the past few days includes a survey of key FDI decision-makers with knowledge of Ireland and businesses that are already in Ireland. Around 350 key people who take decisions on existing or future developments in Ireland were surveyed by the magazine.

Nearly half of those quizzed said that a low corporate tax base was a key cornerstone — that is what they called it — of the Republic of Ireland's ability to attract FDI. We know that there are obviously other factors involved in attracting foreign direct investment; we are not delusional. It is absolutely no use having a low rate of corporation tax and having people interested, if you do not have the skills and the infrastructure to capitalise on that. But for half of those taking the decisions, who are from key, big North American companies, in particular —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up.

Mr Hamilton: — said that a low corporation tax rate was the key to their decision. As I say, it was described as a cornerstone —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Sorry; time is up.

Mr Hamilton: — of Ireland's foreign direct investment proposition. The other key components are things that we already have such as access to EU markets and so forth.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time.

Ms Ritchie: First, as a Member for a constituency that is celebrating a very important event this week, I would like on behalf of all the people of South Down to wish everybody a very happy St Patrick's Day for Saturday. After all, tourism is a principal driver of the local economy. In that respect, I was very happy to see the President of Ireland, as well as the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in south Down last night celebrating Patrick. I want to emphasise that Patrick began and ended his ministry there. The Minister will know that I want to see full development of the assets and the product in relation to Patrick. That means that an investment of resources to do the simple things well and to ensure that tourists have access to those products.

On another point to do with another economic driver, the document says:

"Move 114,000 working age benefit clients into employment".

Everybody knows that to have a successful economic strategy — I welcome the economic strategy — you have to have job creation. So, in respect of that figure, I would like the Minister to clarify where those jobs are. Are they real? Are they new? Are they existing jobs being filled by new recruits, because the original occupants have either retired, moved to another post or died? Are they permanent positions? Are they work placements? Are they for a trial period? What is the nature of those jobs? Above all, are they secure and pensionable? Are they worthwhile? Are they reasonably paid? What is the position? Are they paid at the minimum wage or below it?

There are references to that not only on page 14 but on pages 16, 84 and 88 of the document. So, it is important that that issue be clarified, because we do not want to see any distortion of the figures. We want full clarification. In her winding-up speech, the

Minister need not revert to suggesting that this is a matter for the Department for Employment and Learning. It is very much a matter for the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, as she has direct responsibility for the job creation agencies.

From taking a cursory look at the document, I do not see much reference to the enterprise companies. I have to say that the enterprise companies located in each of the district council areas performed a very useful function for start-up businesses by ensuring that they were based on the bedrock, that they grew, that they had adequate job creation targets and that they developed new business ideas before they moved on to another location either in self-bought premises or in another industrial park. Will the Minister clarify the position on those enterprise companies and what funding will be made available for them?

Renewable energy is another new driver for the economy. I note the target of 40% by 2020 and the intermediate target of 20% by 2015. So, we are going to add 20% between 2015 and 2020.

How and will that happen? Is it a realistic figure? What is the evidence base upon which that figure is classified?

3.30 pm

I realise that other Members might wish to speak and that the Minister is due to respond in five minutes' time. Although I commend the document, I want to see clarification on actual jobs because it is not good enough to replicate figures in a document without a proper evidence base. Therefore, we want to see the evidence base on that issue, Minister. Although we want to be positive about the economic strategy, we want to see real jobs to improve people's lives.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr McGlone, I will stop you at 3.35 pm.

Mr McGlone: I will try to rattle through my speech as quickly as possible. The SDLP fully recognises the need to rebalance the local economy in order to:

“improve the wealth, employment and living standards of everyone”.

We fully support the NI economic strategy's stated goal, albeit for 2030, of:

“An economy characterised by a sustainable and growing private sector, where a greater number of firms compete in global markets and there is growing employment and prosperity”

Those aims are laudable. With regard to R&D, creativity and improving the skills and employability of the entire workforce — in particular, on the skills issue — the need for skills development in the software sector is increasingly being drawn to my attention. The absence of those skills appears to be inhibiting growth and to be making the North less attractive for software jobs.

None of us could argue with the aims of competing effectively in the global economy, encouraging business growth and developing a modern, sustainable economic infrastructure. Whether the strategy's key rebalancing initiatives will be delivered and succeed in achieving those aims remains to be seen. After all, the previous Programme for Government did not exactly deliver on all its objectives. The Federation of Small Businesses has observed in the latest Executive documents that many commitments have already been announced, with some progressing towards delivery while others are more aspirational.

By no means do I wish to belittle the ambition behind the economic strategy. Indeed, we can fully support its objectives. However, a number of unknowns have not been taken into account fully. By 2015, there will be another UK Government spending review; the strategy acknowledges that it will have to be updated in light of it. We do not yet know any details of the timely and affordable manner for devolving the power to vary corporation tax that the Executive are to agree with the UK Government. In six months' time, we might do.

Perhaps the most honest aspect of the economic strategy is its setting out of the critical factors that combine to form the economic context in which the Executive find themselves, such as continued uncertainty in global and national economies and the capacity for companies to access suitable finance. I would appreciate it if the Minister could provide details of the loan fund, which is a good idea with great potential for small business.

The impact of the UK-wide welfare reform agenda, which has implications for people in the North, the scope of the NI Executive to support company development under revised EU regional-aid guidelines, and longstanding structural issues will continue to hamper economic growth in the North. We all know that there is significant decline in economic output in most advanced economies throughout Europe. The global recession has contributed to a marked reduction in output in most sectors of the economy, particularly construction. The number of unemployed people has grown. It is astonishing that the economic strategy consultation document's assessment of the impact of the UK Government's welfare reforms was simply that it would produce an increase in the pool of labour that is available for work. My colleague Ms Ritchie referred to that. Those welfare reforms will create a major challenge for the economy. However, cheap labour is hardly a benefit.

In a global climate of uncertainty, the depressed housing market, cuts in public spending and banks' unwillingness to lend for private development all contribute to an increasingly gloomy economic forecast. The principles in the economic strategy are fine, but we need to see the outworking of the details.

I referred to the construction industry earlier, and as the chair of the Assembly's all-party working group on construction, I am very aware of the severe difficulties that that key sector of our economy faces. The measures that the economic strategy commits to in order to assist the construction industry are to be welcomed. For example, there are plans for key road and rail projects and the building of approximately 8,000 social and affordable homes over the next four years. Nevertheless, as identified in the economic strategy, there is a 34% fall in capital departmental expenditure limits between 2010-11 and 2014, which has resulted in the postponement of a number of key capital projects.

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

Mr McGlone: In conclusion, given its reference to "renewable energy" and "sustainable development", a glaring omission from the economic strategy is the green new deal. The continued absence of a properly funded green new deal demonstrates a lack of commitment to sustainable investment by the Executive.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your time is up.

Mr McGlone: That matter needs to be addressed seriously as a potential source of economic growth and job creation.

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): The Executive have taken the important step of again making the economy the top priority in the Programme for Government. As I said at the outset, the economic strategy is a key building block in the delivery of that commitment and sets the direction of the Executive's economic policy until 2030.

I thank Members for the points that they raised, many of which echoed what we heard during the public consultation exercise. As I said in my opening remarks, I have worked to ensure that the main points raised by stakeholders were addressed in the final version of the strategy.

To recap, we have increased the targets for the growth of manufacturing exports, the investment that is leveraged through Invest Northern Ireland's support of foreign and locally owned companies and, of course, tourist numbers and revenues. The final version of the strategy also includes additional commitments for youth unemployment, exports to emerging economies, investment supported through the job fund, and economic inactivity. We have had very little discussion about economic inactivity today. That was slightly disappointing, but I will return to it later.

I welcome Members' support for the economic strategy and, in particular, the priority that has been attached to the economy by the Executive in the Programme for Government and economic strategy. I also welcome the support for the strategic focus on export-led economic growth and, importantly for me — I am sure that it is also important for the rest of the Executive — the fact that the strategy was developed across the Executive and was led by the Executive's subcommittee on the economy.

I want to return to some of the specific points that Members raised. As I said, I particularly welcome Members' endorsement of the increased targets; that reflects the need to be more ambitious in our economic strategy, and we have tried to do that. The Chair of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment raised the issue of certain commitments that were included in the draft document but were not present in the final economic strategy. He specifically mentioned the removal of a

commitment to support first-time exporters. However, that commitment is on page 63 of the strategy, which states that we will:

“Encourage first time exporters by promoting 60 start ups selling outside UK markets” ,

and:

“Promote a further 440 new start ups selling to GB”.

The commitment is there. It may have moved from where it was in the draft strategy, but it is still present in the current document. I want to assure Members that we are fully committed to the delivery of all our commitments, whether they are in the strategy document or in the comprehensive action plan that was launched on the strategy’s website today.

The Chair also commented on the need to have outcome-based targets and to monitor the strategy. I would have thought that he was best placed to do that, given that he is Chair of the Committee. We have an action plan that is open and transparent, and the strategy is a living document, which, I am sure, will be looked at time and again.

He raised the issue of cross-departmental delays as a concern. I can understand why he would have that concern, and I am sure that other Members share it. However, I take comfort from the fact that the Programme for Government’s first priority is the economy, and, therefore, across government, the economic strategy should be a priority not only for my Department but for every Department.

There has been a lot of talk from the opposite Benches that we do not include the green new deal in the strategy. That is not correct. Indeed, throughout the economic strategy, we have made many mentions of the green economy and the need to develop a sustainable energy sector. If Members wish me to take them through that page by page, I am happy to do so.

Tom Buchanan, the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning, endorsed the close working relationship between DETI and DEL in a number of areas. Indeed, just yesterday, I had a further meeting with the Minister for Employment and Learning to discuss matters of mutual interest. Mr McGlone made a point about ICT skills, and that is certainly one of the issues on which we are focused at present. As a Mid Ulster MLA, he will be interested to know that we are also

focusing on skilled engineering because we feel that there is a gap at present in the number of skilled engineers who are available for many of the engineering companies, particularly in County Tyrone, which is the hub of our engineering focus. There is work to be done on that, which we will develop.

Pat Doherty, the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development, said that the importance of the economic infrastructure in a global market is vital to the economic strategy, and I agree with him entirely. He mentioned, in particular, the importance of the abolition of air passenger duty on international long-haul flights. That was a huge success for us, which we should recognise. Economic infrastructure is vital, and one of the benefits of a cross-departmental approach is that we can include those sorts of things in the economic strategy.

Sandra Overend expressed concern that the consultation had finished only towards the end of February and yet here we are with our strategy. As I said in my opening comments, the framework for the document was consulted on a year ago. We had a three-month consultation period, which was over Christmas, but it lasted longer than Christmas. Perhaps some Members had longer Christmas holidays than others. It was suggested that I had little time to consider changes. I say to Mrs Overend and to the rest of the House that I do not wait until the end of a consultation period before I know where a document needs to be changed or looked at again. I had been considering what was being said very early on in the consultation and whether there was a continuing trend through those discussions. I had many meetings with the Business Alliance and the Federation of Small Businesses to keep alongside businesses and know what they thought was needed in the economic strategy so that we could make changes in a focused way at the end of the consultation. That is precisely what we were able to do.

I turn to the target for 25,000 jobs. I recall that when I launched the draft economic strategy, some Members felt that the target was much too ambitious. Some Members are now saying that it is not good enough. Mrs Overend said that Invest Northern Ireland had been a failure, despite the fact that — she should know this because she sits on the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment — between 2007-08 and 2009-2010, it had secured almost

£2.6 billion in investment commitments and £487 million in annual salaries, promoted 15,565 new jobs, safeguarded 5,329 existing jobs and supported 8,267 new local business starts. It hit every single one of its targets. If that is the Member's definition of failure, I would have thought that, coming from the Ulster Unionist Party, she would have had a better definition of failure. However, I certainly do not believe that that is the definition of failure.

Mrs Overend: Will the Minister give way?

3.45 pm

Mrs Foster: I see that as the definition of success. I will support Invest Northern Ireland as it continues on with that success, and I will give way to the Member.

Mrs Overend: Thank you, Minister. I am sure that when she has a look at the Hansard report later, she will see that I did not say that Invest Northern Ireland was a complete failure. I said that it had failed in that was handing back £39.1 million to the Executive. That was a specific failure of Invest Northern Ireland.

Mrs Foster: I do look forward to reading the Hansard report because I distinctly recall that she said that Invest Northern Ireland was a failure and then went on to say why she felt that it was a failure. She also said that the jobs fund is not working, and I firmly reject that assertion. The £19 million jobs fund consists of a range of job creation measures to include support for new business starts and young people not in employment, education or training and broader support for social enterprise. It has already created almost 900 new jobs across various measures and there is a good pipeline of over 125 projects. Collectively, those projects have the potential to create over 1,600 jobs, and, in addition, the Member should note that the PFG and the economic strategy now contain a clear commitment to develop a new strategy for tackling economic inactivity through skills, training, incentives and job creation. That is a new target that has been put in there as a result of the consultation that has taken place.

It is also suggested that we have not made much progress with our own national Government on the issue of corporation tax. As I indicated in my opening statement, we have had two very productive meetings with the Exchequer Secretary and progress is being made. Of course, we are talking about the cost, which is a

key issue for us, but I remind Members that that is a United Kingdom Government initiative and that they are leading on the matter. However, I look forward to a successful outcome on the discussions with Her Majesty's Treasury by the summer.

Many Members mentioned construction. I pay tribute to the work of Mr McGlone and the all-party working group on construction. It is an absolutely key sector, and that is why, only last month, we put out a capital programme of £580 million. The key element to that is that it is shovel-ready, and that is what the construction sector needs to see. Social enterprises were also mentioned, but they are, of course, heavily referenced in the Programme for Government and in the economic strategy at page 59.

Mr Lunn welcomed the strategy. He mentioned the green new deal, and as I said, the document makes various references to it. He said that Invest NI is a success story but that there is a need for flexibility, and I could not agree more. If we were to have that flexibility, other Members would not be able to misrepresent, in the crass way that they often do, what was happening with money that was handed back. A fuller understanding is needed of why we are restricted in that fashion, and I wish to see more flexibility in that. I know that that is the issue that Mr Lunn was referring to.

Some Members said that more should be done about the green economy. In paragraph 1.16 of the strategy, we have indicated that the MATRIX group is conducting analysis into the market opportunities that are presented by the green economy sector and, indeed, how the Executive can further support business in that area. In the past, a MATRIX study on other sectors has been hugely beneficial to us, and it will be vital in supporting the commitment that we have already made in the strategy to encourage and develop the green economy and the sustainable energy sector.

Mr Flanagan, a Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone, said that he did not want us to operate in silos and felt that that was a possibility if we did not have a dedicated jobs strategy. The importance of the strategy is that it is a cross-departmental strategy and, therefore, the risk of operating in silos should be minimised. He welcomed the work that we are doing on energy costs and the fact that we

are working with Invest NI on a new way of trying to help companies with those costs.

Dolores Kelly, in an intervention, said that there was no mention of the natural gas pipeline. I refer her to page 70 of the document, which talks about further development of the natural gas network.

A common theme from Sinn Féin Members during the debate was the need for greater fiscal autonomy. Indeed, reference was made to the fact that when it does not suit, NIO Ministers and direct rule Ministers are not really interested in talking to local Members about tax powers. It is rather unfair to say that. I have already mentioned air passenger duty, and it is simply not true to say that they were tardy when we look at the joint work that took place between Her Majesty's Government and us on air passenger duty. That was a success. It is in this year's Finance Bill, and I hope that it will give us the opportunity to do more about international travel to Northern Ireland.

Mr Flanagan made his usual comments about Invest Northern Ireland and the IDA having joint offices. It will simply not work. We are in competition with the Republic of Ireland for foreign direct investment. The Member and I live in the same area, and the issue is brought home to me when I am told of local companies and foreign direct investors in Northern Ireland being approached by the IDA to move their facilities to the Republic of Ireland. I do not know how he thinks that would work when they are trying to poach some of our companies. However, maybe he would like to develop that issue further in the future.

Mr McKay made comments about tax-raising powers and mentioned the visa waiver scheme. He has mentioned that to me before, and I have answered questions on it. The fundamental issue with the visa waiver scheme is that I am told by our Government that the Republic of Ireland needs to come up to the level of UK protection and status so that visitors can move throughout these islands.

Paul Frew, the Chair of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, indicated that there was a real need to be positive about the economy to engender confidence to assist growth. I could not agree with him more. That is true whether I talk to the retail sector or to big business in Northern Ireland. They all mention to me the problems that they encounter

because of a lack of confidence in our economy. He mentioned the construction industry and the need for us to be proactive, and I know that the Member is aware that we had a Crossrail event in the House of Lords recently hosted by none other than Lord Empey, one of the former leaders of the Ulster Unionist Party, to assist us to get companies to engage with big business in Crossrail so that they could get into the supply chains. That was a very worthwhile event, and I would like to see that replicated on other large-scale construction sites.

He said that there was a need to have confidence in the agrifood sector. That is one of our hidden growth stories, and I have consistently tried to support it and will continue to do so. I know he is aware that the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development and I appointed a chair of the agrifood strategy board, and we look forward to working with Tony O'Neill and the other members of the board when they are appointed so that we can grow the agrifood sector even further.

Mr Dunne mentioned tourism and talked about the Titanic signature project and the importance of golf, particularly to North Down. He mentioned the 6,000 work experience places and the need to have the employer subsidy. He mentioned the impact of crime and the fact that energy costs were really a barrier to business growth, and we are trying to deal with that through what we are doing with Invest Northern Ireland. He also commented that there was a need to progress with the North/South interconnector. That is absolutely critical.

He referred to the research and development funding and the barriers that were visible to him and the other members of the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee under framework programme 7, the need for Horizon 2020 to be more attractive to local businesses and the need to be smart. That is something that the Chair of the Committee mentioned to me this morning.

Mrs Dobson concentrated her comments on the importance of the agrifood sector and the fact that it is one of Northern Ireland's largest employers. I agree with her that it is one of the sectors that can give subregional growth in a way that some other sectors cannot, and it can, therefore, help us with our economic competitiveness. I thank her for her comments welcoming the strategy.

Mrs Kelly had a very definite theme. It was, "Please can we have more money and more resources?" However, there was no indication of where the money and resources were going to come from. She indicated that she felt that it was the right overall approach. However, she went on to talk for seven minutes about the gaps in the economic strategy. She asked whether it was going to be a living document. It is. Mr McGlone also referred to the need to reflect other issues that would happen in the future. Those will be reflected in the fact that it is a living document.

She asked about access to finance and felt that the growth loan fund on its own was not enough. Of course, it is not there on its own. We have the growth loan fund of £50 million, the microloan fund of £5 million and the Clarendon co-investment fund of £16 million. Apart from all that, we have the support and advice that is available under the jobs fund, particularly the focus on finance seminars, which offer free consultancy to firms right across Northern Ireland.

Aligned with all that, we will continue to push the banks and to work together in relation to HMRC. It is an issue that the Finance Minister and I have discussed almost daily in the past couple of weeks, as to how we can intervene in relation to those companies that are under increasing pressure from banks and, indeed, from the good old taxman.

Mrs Kelly also raised the recently published Ulster Bank Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI), which suggested that business activity was weakening. Of course, I welcome any analysis of the local economy, but as many have indicated today in our debate, it is vital that we do not talk down our own economy and that we do all that we can to support businesses to grow. That is what we are seeking to do in the Executive, and I am sure that it is what all in the House seek to do.

The question is what our local banks are seeking to do. The banks that are bringing out those gloomy predictions in relation to our local economy also need to rise to the challenge of doing more to improve business access to finance. I have yet to be convinced that they could not do more to help our small and medium-sized companies to access finance.

Turning to the actions and targets for the tourism sector, it is important to recognise

the investment that is already going into that important sector. For example, over £300 million of infrastructural investment combines with a number of distinctive events that will deliver increased visitor numbers and revenue, as outlined in the strategy. We have also taken steps to ensure additional resources for the tourism sector, with £4 million being directed to Tourism Ireland for international marketing and £1 million to the Northern Ireland Tourist Board.

Mr Robinson thanked me for my work on the economic strategy and in relation to sporting achievement. George, I do try to take credit for a lot of what is in the economic strategy but I am not sure that I can take credit for Rory becoming the number one golf champion. I am not sure that I can take credit for Ulster reaching the Heineken Cup semi-finals.

Ms Ritchie: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs Foster: I will give way. I am not even sure that I can take credit for Rory Best's absolutely outstanding captaincy of Ireland on Saturday. However, if he wishes to give that to me, I am happy to take it.

Ms Ritchie: I thank the Minister for giving way. Notwithstanding the wonderful sporting achievements that have taken place in the North over the past number of weeks, perhaps the Minister will be in a position to answer my query about how 114,000 working-age benefit claimants will move into employment. If she could give a reason for and clarification of that, I would welcome that.

4.00 pm

Mrs Foster: If the Member waits until I get to her contribution, I am sure that she will get the clarification that she wants. Maybe the Member is in a hurry to leave the Chamber. If she waits for another six minutes, I am sure that she will get her clarification.

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

Anyway, George, I will get back to the positive issue of sporting excellence in Northern Ireland. Our sporting champions have given us the opportunity to put Northern Ireland on a global stage. I look forward to working with colleagues to raise the game of Northern Ireland in the way in which they have raised their game.

Ms McCann referred to the need for the by-product of a strong economy to be the reduction of poverty.

She was pleased to see the inclusion of social clauses, but she felt that there was a need for a definition of social clauses. She referred to the social economy and the importance of community asset transfer. She also referred to the credit union reforms that we hope will come to a conclusion in the near future.

Judith Cochrane talked about the need to have directions and targets, particularly in relation to the costs of division. Of course, the costs of division are covered in the Programme for Government's priority 4. As I said at the beginning of my contribution, the documents need to be cross-read so that we look at all of them in context. It is important that we have a positive note in our economic strategy because we are trying to change global perceptions of our society in Northern Ireland rather than reinforcing perceptions that some people may have.

Mr Moutray talked about the fact that we were operating in a global village. I demonstrated that by the fact that I talked about Mongolia and Saudi Arabia this morning. He felt that our strength was in the United Kingdom economy and that there was a need to have export-led growth.

Mr Boylan, understandably, again raised the situation in Armagh. As he knows, Invest NI officials are proactively engaged with existing and prospective investors to encourage them to consider the Armagh site and the associated infrastructure. He referred to angling; I thought that he said "Anglicans" at one stage but I am reliably told that it was "angling". I am very happy to look at that area with the Minister of the Environment and, if necessary, the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure. He asked me to look at new solutions for broadband difficulties. He felt that fixed line was the best way to go but he must realise that, in some areas, it is cost prohibitive. New mobile technology is the way to find a solution to some of those problems.

Mr McDevitt felt that energy was not a priority in the strategy. I totally disagree. I referred to 1.16 of the document, the building blocks of the Programme for Government and the strategic energy framework. I refer him to page 42 of the document, where we encourage business growth through the green economy and developing economic infrastructure through energy. Energy and the green economy are very much in the economic strategy, but one has to read the

strategy to find the references to the green economy.

Simon Hamilton referred to the agrifood sector, particularly Willowbrook Farm and the potential for growth in a very real and meaningful way. He referred to rebalancing the economy and the importance of corporation tax to the Republic of Ireland economy, as referenced in a recent survey in 'The Economist'.

Ms Ritchie wished us all a happy St Patrick's Day. She has obviously lost that willingness to be positive about things. She asked where the evidence base was in the strategy. I refer her to page 59 of the document, where I detail where all the 25,000 jobs are coming from, including 6,300 jobs in locally owned companies, 6,500 jobs in new start-up businesses and 160 social economy start-ups. In addition, we will enable 300 SMEs to access funding and to grow. All that is set out in the economic strategy. In the jobs to which she referred, there is a misunderstanding about people coming off benefits and into employment. Those targets are a repeat of those in the previous Programme for Government. DSD measures the number who have come off benefits and gone into employment. It is not a measure of jobs created. The figure for jobs created with Invest Northern Ireland support is 25,000. The figure of 114,000 that she referred to is the number of people who have come off benefits and gone into employment in a different fashion.

Ms Ritchie: I thank the Minister for giving way. Will she further clarify whether those are new jobs or is it a case of filling jobs with people who have come off benefits?

Mrs Foster: That is what I said. The 25,000 jobs are new. The 114,000 jobs are a target that was set by DSD and, indeed, by DEL —

Mr Deputy Speaker: May I remind the Minister to draw her remarks to a close, please?

Mrs Foster: Yes, I will draw my remarks to a close.

The 114,000 figure is a direct repeat of the same target from the previous Programme for Government.

In closing, I thank all my colleagues on the Executive subcommittee for entering into this cross-departmental work in the way that they did. I also want to thank my departmental officials for their focused work on the document and for their work with officials from other

Departments. Despite the economic conditions in which we find ourselves, there are grounds for optimism. We have set out some ambitious objectives and targets in the strategy, and I believe that we are on the road to delivering the Executive's economic vision for Northern Ireland.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly endorses the Northern Ireland economic strategy agreed by the Executive.

Ministerial Statement

North/South Ministerial Council: Environment

Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment):

With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, in compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, I wish to make the following statement on the fourteenth meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in environment sectoral format, which was held in the joint secretariat's offices in Armagh on Friday 2 March 2012. The statement has been agreed with Minister Kennedy. Danny Kennedy MLA, the Minister for Regional Development, and I represented the Northern Ireland Executive. I wish Mr Kennedy, Mr McCallister and any other candidates for the leadership of the Ulster Unionist Party the best of luck.

The Irish Government were represented by Phil Hogan TD, the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, who chaired the meeting. It is worth pointing out that the Irish Government will take the chair of the presidency of the European Union for six months on 1 January 2013. That will be a critical period in the development of the European Union. We are actively looking to second people from the Department here into the Department in the South to contribute to the Irish EU presidency. That would be of mutual benefit to all.

The Council received a presentation by the Geological Survey of Northern Ireland and the Geological Survey of Ireland on the £4 million — approximately €4.4 million — Tellus border project. The project is being carried out under the EU INTERREG IVa programme and will provide invaluable data to support sustainable environmental management in both jurisdictions. All those present were mightily impressed by the work of the Tellus project, which will be completed in the near future and then be launched publicly. The project will give an intensive picture of the geology of these islands and be an important pathway for mineral development and other environmental issues.

Ministers noted that the North/South working group on water quality met in February 2012. The group will continue to drive and oversee co-ordinated implementation of the river basin management plans under the EU water framework directive. The group will report its progress at a future meeting.

The Council welcomed proposals for Ministers' involvement in the blue flag and green coast schemes awards, including the General Assembly of the Foundation for Environmental Education event in June 2012. I hope to join Minister Hogan on that occasion in order to advertise more fully the quality of the beach environment on the island of Ireland, including here in the North, and how that is important for tourist numbers, tourist spend and the quality of life.

Ministers also noted that ongoing co-operation between officials, including the sharing of lessons learnt and best practice in developing and administering the plastic bag levy in Ireland, had greatly facilitated progress with policy and operational development of a carrier bag levy in Northern Ireland. I want to acknowledge the assistance of Dublin in that regard and note that in the years since the Republic introduced its levy, it has seen a reduction in the use of plastic bags by 90% and a revenue income of around €130 million.

The all-island tyre survey, led by the Department of the Environment (DOE), was welcomed by Ministers. Officials continue to explore opportunities for greater engagement to maximise the environmental benefits and deter illegal operators. I raised with Minister Hogan the ongoing inquiry by the Environment Committee into the issue of tyres and we hope that that work informs the work that the two Governments are taking forward at present.

The Council also noted that the North/South market development steering group had met and concluded that work on joint quality protocols should not proceed, as that work has been overtaken by the development of end-of-waste criteria at EU level. The commencement of the bulky waste reuse management feasibility study, which aims to develop a common approach to bulky waste reuse management in both jurisdictions, was welcomed by the Governments.

The Council also welcomed measures being taken to add value to the 'Irish Recycled Plastic Waste Arisings Study', such as the Plastics Recycling Business Forum held in Dublin in January 2012. The forum provided an opportunity to promote the study and receive feedback from the industry. As I have said before, 70% of plastics on the island go into landfill and only 30% are recycled, and of that

30%, only 30% are recycled on the island of Ireland and 70% are exported for recycling.

Ministers noted that the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government has engaged with the Department of the Environment and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in relation to trans-frontier shipments, movements of mixed municipal solid waste from Northern Ireland to Ireland.

The Council noted that the removal of waste from a site at Ballymartin near Kilkeel was successfully completed in October 2011 and that the total combined tonnage of waste removed from sites at Ballymartin, Slattinagh and Trillick was in the region of 49,000 tonnes. It was reported that it is planned to deal with two further sites in 2012 and a new procurement process is being developed to deal with the remaining sites from 2013 onwards. That is important because the procurement is undertaken by Dublin City Council, which has operational responsibility to move waste from the North to the South and to dispose of it in a responsible manner. The Council noted that the joint enforcement actions dealing with illegal operators are a priority for both Environment Ministers and that Departments continue to target resources on that

The Council also discussed the problem of fuel laundering, which may be placed on the agenda for the NSMC plenary meeting later this year.

The Council welcomed the latest 'Northern Ireland Environment Statistics Report' published on 26 January 2012, which included common environmental indicators, and the forthcoming publication of the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) 'State of the Environment Report, Ireland's Environment 2012: An Assessment' and Ministers looked forward to the publication of joint environmental indicators in 'Ireland North and South: A Statistical Profile', which will be published next year.

Ministers also welcomed continued co-operation between both agencies on identification of emerging research needs and strategic planning of research funding programmes. It was noted that discussions are taking place with Intertradelreland to organise a targeted framework programme 7 (FP7) environment workshop and that a more general information and guidance day on FP7 for the environment will be hosted by the EPA in June 2012.

4.15 pm

As Members know, FP7 is a €50 billion fund up to 2014 for R&D and innovation. We have not had a good record in the North of Ireland in respect of drawdown from that fund. The notional drawdown from the fund by the Dublin Government is around €600 million over a six-year period. There may still be opportunities to exploit that fund. One of the reasons why I went to Brussels last Friday to engage with senior officials and Ministers was to identify where opportunities may be for FP7 and other EU funding mechanisms.

Under “any other business” during the meeting, Minister Hogan and I discussed fracking, and there may be questions in that regard moving forward. The council agreed to hold the next environment meeting in summer 2012.

Mr Deputy Speaker: There was interference at the start of the Minister’s statement, so I ask Members to check that their mobile phones are off. We do not want to interfere with Hansard’s recording. Thank you.

Ms Lo (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment): On behalf of the Committee, I welcome the Minister’s statement, and I am very pleased to hear that cross-border co-operation on environmental issues has been productive and constructive.

The Minister said that a North/South working group on water quality will continue to drive and oversee co-ordinated implementation of river basin management plans. However, the Committee has been very concerned at the lack of funding for river basin management north of the border, where funding to date seems to be based on piecemeal allocations of tiny grants to groups doing isolated bits of river restoration. That is not the Committee’s definition of co-ordinated management. When will we see a fully funded and well-funded programme of integrated river basin management that will deliver the water framework directive requirements for good ecological conditions of Northern Ireland’s fresh water by 2015?

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for that question. It is in respect of water management that North/South co-operation over the past number of years has been at its most extensive. Although there may be questions about funding down the stream, to borrow a phrase, nonetheless, the co-operation on management

of water on the island of Ireland has been one of the better all-island initiatives arising from the North/South Ministerial Council sectoral meetings and the Good Friday Agreement generally.

As I indicated, I think that that work will escalate and intensify. The conversation that I had with the Minister in respect of fracking, given that the Lough Allen basin is a shared basin, given the need to have as mutual an approach as possible on the planning and environmental side, mindful and respectful of our different authorities, and potentially our different attitudes to fracking, in my view will demonstrate further that on the island of Ireland, there is a co-ordinated approach to water management.

When we see the publication of the Tellus geological survey in a matter of weeks, that will demonstrate, in an explicit, three-dimensional way if you like, how the water on the island of Ireland is a shared resource. Indeed, it may have some application when it comes to fracking because the Tellus mineral survey and images will enable us to identify the way in which water may be extracted from the earth as a consequence of fracking.

To answer the Member’s question in particular: I believe very firmly that if we have put in place a working group on water quality, if we have put in place river basin management plans, if we are beginning to work up second-cycle plans for December 2014 and 2015, and given the more demanding water management directives on their way from Europe, it follows that when you have created that narrative and evidence base, money should follow. It is a matter for not just the DOE but the Government to acknowledge that water is a precious resource that we have in abundance — unlike so many other parts of the world that have gone to war over it. I would like to think that as I shape the Department over the next period of time, water management will be something that government will embrace more fully and that money will follow.

Mr Hamilton: A constant feature of the discussions at North/South Ministerial Council meetings on the environment is the need to repatriate to the Irish Republic waste that is dumped illegally in Northern Ireland. Will the Minister update the House on the number of sites that have been identified in Northern Ireland where there is the need for repatriation

of waste? Will he also update the House on the cost of that exercise to the Northern Ireland Executive to date?

Mr Attwood: Now you are going to test my memory, but that is typical of Mr Hamilton. As far as I recall, there are 13 sites of illegal dumping. However, I will verify that and let the Member know. There have been three sites where repatriation has occurred. There was meant to be a fourth site in the latter part of last year. However, it did not happen because although there was a small illegal dump off the Belfast Road in Newry, when it came to the removal of the material, it was discovered that it had been moved already. So, not only had it been dumped illegally, it had then been moved illegally. There are ongoing investigations on both sides of the border in respect of that matter.

The cost is borne heavily by the Southern authorities. Under the framework agreement reached by the two Governments on the matter, the obligation fell to the Southern authorities primarily to the scale of, I think, 90% of total expenditure, because the waste had been moved from the South to the North. I hope that there will be prosecutions in the fullness of time arising from one or more of the repatriated sites, including ongoing live investigations at Ballymartin. I cannot recall the total cost involved but it runs into millions of pounds ultimately.

We need to ensure that we push on with the repatriation of waste. That is why I raised with Phil Hogan the need to ensure that, whatever procurement exercise is ongoing in Dublin on this matter, there was no uncertainty that the two sites identified for repatriation this year will be cleared, that there should be alternative mechanisms, including landfill if necessary, to accommodate that waste, and that no uncertainty should arise as to the accommodation of waste.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh ráiteas an Aire. I welcome the Minister's statement. Point seven relates to exploring opportunities. Does the Minister have any more details about that? Point nine concerns the feasibility study. Is there a timeline or finishing date for that?

Mr Attwood: My statement did not have the numbers that you referred to. Mr McGlone is

giving me a copy. Point seven relates to the all-Ireland tyre survey. The situation is that a tender has been awarded and the contractor appointed for the tyre survey. That work will commence, and there will be a report in the fullness of time. That work, as well as the Committee for the Environment's investigations into issues around tyres, will help inform how we move that forward. At the same time, the Department is independently identifying any and all opportunities that might arise for the proper disposal of tyres, whether it is crumbing, export or alternative uses.

I will have to come back to the Member with the details in respect of the second issue — the feasibility study. I undertake to do so.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for the statement. It is always good to see people working together. You mentioned that there was sharing of lessons learnt and best practice in delivering and administering the plastic bag levy. Will the Minister expand on what those lessons were and what we can gain? We need the funding from the plastic bag levy to deal with the matters that Anna Lo raised.

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for his question. The scope of the current and future law in Northern Ireland is more extensive than it is in the Republic and Wales. We have drawn conclusions about their experience, especially the Republic of Ireland, given that its law has been in existence for a period. The Southern law covers only plastic bags. It does not extend to the scope of the current law in the North, namely single-use bags. It does not extend to the forthcoming law, which is subject to the agreement of the Assembly, in respect of lower-priced reusable bags. The scope of our law is much more extensive than current provisions in the Republic of Ireland. Nonetheless, on the operational side of the levy, we have learnt from the South about how to collect and administer the levy and advertise the fact that the levy will be in place from April 2013, with an enhanced levy process from April 2014.

It is on the operational, management and logistical side that we have learnt most. If that leads to a revenue stream for government in the fullness of time, it will be welcome. However, that is not the primary purpose or ambition of the legislation passed last year or the scheme to be implemented next year. It is an environmental measure, and that is its primary

focus. It may well be the case that, in year 1, year 2 and year 3 of the new levy regime, the revenue will not be what we would like it to be, which will prove that this is an environmental intervention as opposed to a financial one. However, if, in the fullness of time, we are able to reduce single-use and cheap reusable bag use by 90% and attract some revenue at the same time, that will be a win-win for all.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagraí. I thank the Minister for his answers to questions on the joint meeting. Minister, you referred to the emphasis on the water on the island being a shared resource, and it most definitely is. Indeed, given your own very welcome Marine Bill here in the North, what about the marine area and the water around the shores of our island, which, in its entirety, is likewise a shared resource? Has your Department considered doing any work with the authorities in Dublin and Minister Hogan, the responsible Minister, to harmonise a marine Bill or marine management for the entire island?

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member. I share the aspiration, if it is implicit in the question. The opportunities to manage resources on the island of Ireland are, to borrow a phrase, yet untapped. Those include issues around environmental management, marine management and other possible interventions. I advised the Dublin Government that we tabled and have had the Second Stage of a Marine Bill. Given the issue of water management and marine management, there is an obligation on me to inform all those who use, or have responsibility for, marine waters on these islands of our intention to have a Marine Bill.

I would like to aspire to a marine management organisation as part of the Marine Bill in the North of Ireland. I would like to aspire to a marine management organisation for the island of Ireland, but the Dublin Government have indicated to me that they are not inclined to go down that road at this time.

In the economic context that the island faces, the judgement of the Irish Government is that they are not inclined to go down that path. I have explored that opportunity and had a conversation at official level. It may be that, in the fullness of time or with some political input, they might be minded to move from that position.

4.30 pm

That said, if I cannot take this matter further with the Irish Government at this stage, it falls to the Northern Ireland Government and to the parties in the Assembly to get their thinking clear on a marine management organisation as part of the Marine Bill. Perhaps those who are nationally minded on this side of the House would like to see the outworking of that in all-Ireland management of various issues, but, if that is not where Dublin is, it falls to parties in this House to recognise that the height of our ambition may be a marine management organisation for Northern Ireland and managing our coastal waters out to 14 miles. I urge parties, including those on this side of the House, to recognise that political reality, not to abandon any future all-Ireland aspiration but to establish mechanisms that best manage our marine waters as part of the Marine Bill and to encourage people to do so.

Mr Weir: I thank the Minister for his statement. Earlier on, you were complaining about interference in his statement. On behalf of this side of the House, I reassure the Minister that we have no desire to interfere with him in any way, shape or form.

It is good to see our southern friends taking a sensible attitude towards a marine management organisation, but I refer the Minister to the important issue of the cross-border movement of waste. We all welcome the moves that have been made to date, but the statement says that the intention is to have a new procurement process to deal with the remaining sites from 2013 onwards. Can the Minister clarify whether there is any projected end date for that process? We all want to see a situation in which all waste is got rid of.

Mr Attwood: I may have been able to give some reassurance to Mr Weir in relation to the Irish Government's ambition about a marine management organisation, but I do not want to give him any reassurance in respect of the ambition about North/South matters generally. I have a sense — I put it no higher than that — that the delay in the roll-out of the St Andrews review, which is now approaching five years, in terms of the assessment of current North/South structures and the potential for future North/South structures, is beginning to cause frustration. I do not know how many times I have heard that the next NSMC plenary will address

the matter, and that is what I hear in respect of the plenary in June. I hope that it will address the matter and that the consequence is that we grasp the opportunities that clearly exist on a North/South basis, not least on the issue of health, at a time of economic need when we can improve services, reduce costs, protect jobs and serve the interests of all. That is not political or party political; that is looking at the realities of the situation in respect of the North.

I welcome Mr Weir's comment that he does not interfere with the operation of a Ministry. He might want to tell some of his Executive colleagues that when it comes to the review of public administration, but that is for another day. However, the point around procurement is well made and timely. Given the number of sites that we have and the commitment and urgency to repatriate, there needs to be certainty about the processes around repatriation.

I said to Minister Hogan at the NSMC meeting two Fridays ago that we needed to have certainty. Given that there will be a new procurement process in the South in respect of various matters, including the repatriation of waste, we need to ensure that, whatever happens around that process, whatever time it might take, whatever legal challenge may arise — procurement exercises are sometimes subject to legal challenge — we need to have certainty that this year and next year, while they work through the procurement exercise, we will have alternative methods for the disposal of waste. I am pleased to say that Mr Hogan acknowledged the point. While they hope to create certainty around procurement sooner rather than later, they recognise the need for certainty when it comes to the repatriation of waste. So, this summer and into the autumn and next summer and into next autumn, procurement will not get in the way of repatriation, and the repatriation schedule will be honoured over the next two years and beyond.

Mr Dallat: I thank the Minister for his statement. A lot of discussion has taken place on the illegal waste coming north. I would like to focus the Minister's attention on the used tyres that have been going south, largely to the beautiful boglands of Donegal. Does the Minister agree that there is an absolute need for the closest co-operation between North and South to ensure that the used tyre industry does not become as lucrative as fuel laundering

has for the criminal element who make their fortune out of moving stuff across the border, one way or the other?

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for his question. The environmental crime unit of DOE/NIEA, as I have said, is the environmental police officer of the Northern Ireland Government, trained to policing standards and with policing powers and the rigour of good policing behind it. I assure the Member that, where there are serious issues around waste, including serious issues around any element of waste, the ECU is on top of the matter, subject to the resources that it has. That is why, over the past number of months, it has conducted an employment exercise to bring 11 specialist staff into the organisation to bring it closer to complement. The purpose of that exercise was to ensure that serious environmental crime in the North, whatever its character, is interrogated, pursued and prosecuted. That, if necessary, will extend to the issue raised by Mr Dallat, namely the disposal of tyres in an illegal way, if that is the case. The illegal disposal of tyres on a cross-border basis will involve the EPA in the South, the Garda Síochána and other relevant agencies. Beyond that, I will not say anything, because, as you will appreciate, there are ongoing investigations into serious environmental crime and ongoing cases before the courts. I am aware of those investigations and the cases before the courts. Due process must prevail at all times in respect of all those matters. I endorse, in principle, the point that the Member made.

Executive Committee Business

Dog Control Orders (Prescribed Offences and Penalties, etc.) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012

Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment):

I beg to move

That the draft Dog Control Orders (Prescribed Offences and Penalties, etc.) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 be approved.

The draft Dog Control Orders (Prescribed Offences and Penalties, etc.) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 are made under sections 40(4), 41(1) and 41(3) of the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act (Northern Ireland) 2011. The Act requires that they be laid in draft and approved by a resolution of the Assembly.

I acknowledge the work of the Environment Committee on 8 March and the support of my Executive colleagues at the Executive meeting on 23 February in respect of the regulations. I am pleased to bring forward the draft regulations, which form an important part of the new dog control order regime that has been introduced under the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act (Northern Ireland) 2011. The Act strengthened the powers available to district councils to help them to deal more effectively with a range of local environmental quality problems.

District councils receive hundreds of complaints about dogs every year and spend thousands of pounds cleaning dog fouling from our streets and public spaces. At present, district councils can make use of dog fouling provisions in the Litter (NI) Order 1994 and can make by-laws to control dogs on certain areas of land. That system is onerous for central and local government, with each by-law having to be examined individually. It often results in delays and extra work for councils and the Department. The Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act repeals the dog fouling provisions of the Litter Order and replaces the dog by-law system with a new simplified system that will enable district councils to make dog control orders to apply offences aimed at the control of dogs to specified land in their area. To fully establish the new system, additional subordinate legislation is required to provide more detail on the offences, penalties and forms of order for the new system. That is today's business.

The draft regulations provide for five offences that may be prescribed in a dog control order. The offences are failing to remove dog faeces; not keeping a dog on a lead; not putting or keeping a dog on a lead when directed to do so by an authorised officer; permitting a dog to enter land from which dogs are excluded; and taking more than a specified number of dogs onto land. There are defences, in all dog control orders, of having a reasonable excuse for failing to comply with an order or acting with the consent of the owner or occupier of the land or any other person or authority that has control of the land. The Department has drafted the regulations to take into account the needs of those with disabilities who rely on assistance dogs by providing exemptions from certain dog control orders in such cases.

To ensure consistency and clarity between councils, the draft regulations specify the content and form of the types of dog control order. The draft regulations also prescribe the maximum penalty that may be provided for in a dog control order, which is, on summary conviction, a fine not exceeding level 3 on the standard scale, currently £1,000. Councils will also have the option of offering someone who commits an offence under a dog control order the opportunity to pay a fixed penalty in lieu of prosecution. The Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act enables a council to set its own rate of fixed penalty within the range of £50 to £80. If a council chooses not to do so, the rate will be automatically set at £75. That is a 50% increase in the current rate of £50 and aims to serve as a stronger deterrent to potential offenders. Councils will, of course, be able to retain the receipts from fixed penalties and use them for local environmental quality functions.

To allow district councils to phase in the new regime in a way that suits their particular circumstances, the dog fouling offence in the Litter Order will remain in force until such time as a dog control order is made for the same land; thus, there will be no vacuum. Similarly, existing by-laws will continue in force indefinitely and continue to be enforced as normal, until a council makes a dog control order dealing with the same offence on the same area of land. At that point, the by-law will cease to have effect.

Public consultation on the draft regulations took place between 23 March and 15 June last year. We received 31 responses, and, in the main, consultees were supportive of what is

proposed. The regulations will assist in targeting irresponsible dog owners who fail to clean up after their dogs and will help to ensure that dogs are kept adequately under control so that people and dogs can live happily and safely together. I am confident that the regulations will contribute to an improvement in dog control and, therefore, an improvement in the quality of our towns, cities and countryside. I ask the Assembly to approve the draft regulations.

Ms Lo (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment): The Committee considered initial proposals for the regulations on 22 September 2011. Members were content for the Department to proceed with the policy. The regulations are in accordance with the overarching primary legislation, the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act. In general, the Committee is very supportive of the Act and recognises its potential to improve the local environment by giving district councils additional powers to deal with problems such as litter, graffiti and fly-posting, abandoned and nuisance vehicles, noise and dogs.

4.45 pm

At Committee Stage, the previous Committee sought advice from the Examiner of Statutory Rules on the powers that the Bill contained for the Department to make subordinate legislation. Regulations involving the creation of criminal offences were already subject to affirmative procedure in the Bill, and the Committee felt that that was appropriate. In addition, the Examiner of Statutory Rules drew the Committee's attention to the fact that the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Bill provided for regulations that would allow the Department to make orders substituting a new amount for fixed penalty payments specified in the Bill. The Examiner suggested that there was a strong argument, based on the precedent of other Assembly legislation, that these regulations too should have the highest level of Assembly control. The Committee agreed, made a recommendation accordingly and subsequently welcomed the Department's amendments to that effect at Consideration Stage.

As we have heard, the regulations being considered today set out the procedures under which district councils are empowered to make dog control orders. That covers offences that range from failing to keep a dog on a lead to taking more than the maximum permitted

number of dogs onto restricted land. It sets the maximum penalty that can be enforced for those offences at level 3, which is currently £1,000.

The Committee considered the draft statutory rule on 8 March, and members were content for me to recommend to the Assembly that it be affirmed.

Mr Hamilton: I support the dog control orders. They are a welcome addition to the powers that local councils will have to deal with the issue. We are told that we are a nation of dog lovers, and ownership of dogs in Northern Ireland is very high, certainly if the amount of dog fouling that goes on is anything to go by.

We are all elected with very high ideals, and we want to do this and we want to do that. We want to talk about health or education. I survey people in my constituency, as do many others, and I get feedback through my mailbag and through people stopping me in the street. There is absolutely no doubt that the issue that angers people and elicits the biggest response is the state of our streets, particularly dog fouling. Anything that streamlines and simplifies the process that allows councils to designate areas has to be welcomed. Anything that raises the fine levels, as these orders will, must be welcomed.

It remains to be seen whether the increase in the fixed penalty notices to a maximum of £80 or the maximum fine of £1,000, if it goes to court, is sufficient to deter people. There is absolutely no doubt that the public out there want to see this issue dealt with. There is a swathe of ways in which it can be dealt with, and education is the primary one. However, we want to see punitive disincentives for people. It remains to be seen whether this is enough to deter the thoughtless individuals who let their dogs do their business wherever and do not clean up after them.

I appreciate that dog control orders do not deal solely with dog fouling, although, when you look at it, it is the biggest issue contained in the five powers. It remains to be seen whether it is enough to enhance what is already there. We as an Assembly, the Minister, his Department and officials should continue to monitor whether it has been a success and whether it needs to be built on. The principles inherent in the dog control orders are to be welcomed, and I look forward to seeing them in action in the community.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I also support the regulations. There were a lot of complaints from local authorities when the regulations came to the Committee for consultation. This will be an extra mechanism for them to use, and it will hopefully go some way in supporting councils in implementing the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act (NI) 2011.

Mr Kinahan: I, too, welcome the dog control orders, although I wanted to say one or two other things. I hate seeing too much regulation, and, if common sense had prevailed among people and councils, we would not have had to go down this route, but we do. One of the biggest complaints that we hear is about dog mess and the lack of control of dogs, as we have heard. We want to see a hard attitude taken on dog mess, but we also want to see the wisdom of Solomon being used about dogs being walked. Not every dog needs a muzzle or a lead, and I think we are passing the buck to our very good dog wardens who will have to enforce this. However, I also hope that we will keep an eye on how successful it is and how much it costs councils. We had a battle in my days as a councillor over a litter fine that was going to cost the person paying it £75 but would cost the council £800 to take it to court. The cost of this must be monitored through the councils. I look forward to seeing the legislation working, and I welcome the regulations.

Mr Dallat: Like my colleagues on the Environment Committee, I support the introduction of the regulations. They will be welcomed by everyone, including dog owners, because they are in the interest of the wider community and the environment in which we live. Simon Hamilton is absolutely right that there is no complaint we hear more about than dog fouling, particularly in our towns. We are not passing the buck to our dog wardens; we are passing the buck to the people who own the dogs. The test of the legislation will be its enforcement, and local councils will have a major role to play in that.

The people who will benefit most from this legislation are those who use a wheelchair. It is absolutely disgusting that they have to navigate through dog faeces time and again. People with impaired eyesight are also victims, probably even more so, of those who walk their dogs and do not carry with them the scoops that they should have.

Mr Deputy Speaker: There are a few conversations going on. I ask Members to give their attention to whoever has the Floor.

Mr Dallat: I know, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am disappointed. I spent so much time preparing this exciting speech, and there they are, having wee conversations of their own. *[Laughter.]* I jest only.

The control of dogs in the rural community is a major issue. Most owners keep their dogs under control, but, sadly and regrettably, a few do not, and they will go to the ends of the earth to ensure that the dog warden is not able to prove who owns the dog that went out and massacred a flock of sheep. Those people are small in number, but they have caused thousands of pounds' worth of loss to farmers, and we cannot quantify the suffering to the animals that have been killed.

All in all, the legislation is an important addition to our armoury in ensuring that people can have a pet dog or two, although I note there is a provision not to have a dozen of them on leads. That is welcome, but, at the end of the day, this law will be as good as those who embrace it. The plea we make to dog owners is that they make their contribution to the environment by ensuring that, when they take their dog out, they keep it on a lead, clear up after it, keep it under control and know exactly where it is at all times. I think everybody will then be happy.

Mr Attwood: I thank all the Members who contributed to the discussion on the regulations. I again acknowledge the Committee's work in reviewing the regulations and echo the points made by the Committee Chairperson. On a day when there has been some publicity about the principle and practice of accountability of Ministers in the Assembly and the role of third parties, including the media, in respect of accountability, I sympathise with the view that proceeding by way of affirmative resolution is a process of accountability and of monitoring government actions, and I think that it is useful. The bad news is that, over the past short while, I have instructed my officials to table more oral statements and written statements where it is justified and appropriate to do so, the consequence of which is that Mr Hamilton and his colleagues will have more opportunity to question and cross-examine me on the Floor of the Assembly.

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome the Minister's commitment to transparency and, indeed, participative democracy. I share his concerns about those who wish to drive us into a fascist state, and I hope that other Ministers learn from what he said this afternoon. Does he agree that Committees are there to scrutinise as well as to support Ministers?

Mr Attwood: The primary role of scrutiny in the Assembly falls to the Committees. There is an argument, which I do not intend to open now, for modelling Committees in the image of the Public Accounts Committee, which more rigorously calls to account the actions of government and, in particular, accounting officers in Departments, namely the permanent secretaries. I agree that we will need to face up to the issue of accountability more and more.

Mr Hamilton rightly pointed out that we all get calls to our constituency offices about dog fouling. I remember a survey being carried out at the height of the years of terror and conflict in my constituency of West Belfast, where the worst things were happening. However, when people in a certain part of the constituency were surveyed, they named dog fouling as the primary issue in that area. So, although people clearly had enormous concerns about the many things going on in their neighbourhood and estate at that time, they also had grave concerns about other issues, and, of all issues, they named dog fouling. As the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment said earlier in respect of the economic strategy, if we are to grow the North's economy through our built and natural heritage, of which the built environment is part, we must realise that the quality of our streets and the issue of dog fouling is part of that narrative and is part of that wider strategy.

I agree with Mr Boylan that the legislation is an extra tool for councils. Although the Department provided a lot of guidance to councils on how the new scheme might operate, we anticipate that this tool will be cost-neutral because, as indicated, it simplifies the process and no money is following the adjusted power to councils. I concur with Mr Kinahan: built into the architecture and practice of the legislation is the fact that councils and the responsible officers in councils will have the discretion to ensure that they get the balance right between, on the one hand, dog control orders and, on the other hand, the needs of dogs to enjoy a healthy lifestyle, just like humans. As Mr Dallat indicated, this

is not about passing the buck to anybody, save irresponsible dog owners. That is what the legislation intends to capture — irresponsibility. It will not capture the responsible actions of those who value and love dogs.

I thank Members for their contributions and ask them to support the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the draft Dog Control Orders (Prescribed Offences and Penalties, etc.) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 be approved.

5.00 pm

Ministerial Statement

Community Pharmacy

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): With permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I wish to update the Assembly on the way ahead on the issues affecting community pharmacy services. Due to events that happened in the previous mandate and with the judicial review, I was not able, until recently, to get involved in identifying a solution. This is a matter that has caused me considerable concern. However, I remain strongly committed and hopeful that we can establish a progressive and sustainable way forward.

As a measure of my personal interest and commitment, I met Community Pharmacy NI (CPNI) on 14 February, which was the earliest opportunity that we had after the final order was made in respect of the judicial review. Since then, there have been several further meetings between representatives of CPNI, my Department and the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) under the chairmanship of my permanent secretary. With my support, a package of measures was offered to CPNI. However, I regret to say that, after consulting its membership, CPNI rejected those proposals. I am disappointed that we could not reach an agreed way forward for 2011-12, but I am hopeful that the measures that I am announcing today will go some way to allowing for a constructive and positive discussion in respect of 2012-13 and beyond.

I want to brief Members on how I intend to proceed. On the immediate issue of the remuneration of pharmacists in 2011-12, it has been necessary to move very quickly as only a few weeks remain in this financial year. Up to this point, some £83.5 million has been provided through the arrangements that were put in place early last year. Today, I am announcing the release to community pharmacies of a further £8 million for 2011-12. That funding will support new services, improve premises and support staffing of community pharmacies, particularly in rural and deprived areas. That investment represents a substantial package for community pharmacy businesses in

Northern Ireland in the very difficult budgetary circumstances that face all public services.

The £8 million investment will bring the total to be provided to contractors for remuneration and for aspects of reimbursement in 2011-12 to £91.5 million, which is a further 10% more than the £83.5 million provided to date. The investment includes an additional £4 million in recognition of the concerns raised about the vulnerability of pharmacies located in rural and socially deprived areas. I have been mindful of the specific concerns of the Committee and other MLAs around seeking to preserve services in isolated communities.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) and HSCB have attempted to stretch as far as possible to reach an accommodation with CPNI in a very difficult context. I can advise that other proposals were made to CPNI. Indeed, I was willing to endorse an expanded package of measures that would have provided substantially more in facilitating cash flow and offering the opportunity to generate further income.

I am aware of the difficult testimonies, sent to the Health Committee, about the circumstances that face many individual pharmacy businesses. I made a real offer of assistance, though it was clearly never going to be possible or appropriate to provide additional resources on the full scale sought by CPNI.

I want to step back from the difficult issues that have been in dispute and look ahead, because it is essential that we do not lose sight of the significant opportunities for positive change that exist at present. I welcome the view that CPNI has expressed, which is shared by many in the primary care and other sectors of the health and social care service, that the future of community pharmacy is to play a vital and fundamental role as part of a patient-centred, locally based care system.

It is, clearly, highly regrettable that the reimbursement and remuneration of the community pharmacy sector has been the subject of two recent judicial reviews. I want to make clear my commitment and determination to find a fair and appropriate way ahead on this difficult issue. I have instructed officials to engage as constructively and positively as possible with CPNI in making a difference to the approach to these issues. I have agreed that the most recent judgement should be

subject to appeal because of its effect across government. However, my emphasis and priority is to seek agreement and a way ahead that will recognise and support the new and evolving role of community pharmacists in the new world of reformed health and social care services.

In reaching the funding position, we have had to proceed on the best evidence available. What has been missing is evidence from Community Pharmacy NI itself, particularly transparent evidence in the public interest, of the acquisition costs of medicines for use in the health and social care system. I believe that, had it been made available, wider evidence would have aided us in negotiations; without it, we have operated on evidence-based assumptions. Although the Department considers those assumptions to be realistic, if evidence were produced, we would be best placed to identify conclusively what the financial needs of a sustainable pharmacy supply would be. I call on Community Pharmacy NI to provide the further information that the Department requires to move forward. The longer it is withheld, the longer it will take to reach a solution.

I want to assure community pharmacists that I am committed to ensuring that the information-gathering exercise that is now beginning will be conducted in a fair, open and transparent manner. The two key elements are surveys of the profits actually accruing to pharmacists in the present financial regime and the costs of providing those services in Northern Ireland. The surveys will help us to move beyond a dispute over the facts, and the results should provide a single view of the truth and remove the need for further litigation. CPNI will be able to conduct a margins survey without interference on an agreed basis, and I expect that the parallel calculations and assessments by HSCB will produce similar results. I have asked HSCB and the Department to give CPNI the fullest possible opportunity to comment on and influence the conduct of the additional cost survey investigations. However, I have had to insist that those surveys be kept under my final control; otherwise, there would be unacceptable risks to the timetable required under the recent judgement.

The Department will now act under its statutory powers to initiate a survey, which, in the interests of greater transparency in the use of public money, will validate the level of profit available to pharmacies as a result of

pharmacy contractors purchasing medicines on behalf of the health service. I have also asked HSCB to develop and undertake a further study to assess the cost of providing safe, high-quality community pharmacy services in Northern Ireland. That will take account of the pharmaceutical care needs of the population and reflect the views of a number of organisations, including CPNI.

In future, pharmacists will play a much greater role in providing front line care in the community, and it follows that their reimbursement and remuneration need to be modernised to promote and support a new vision and a major new opportunity. That is a clear and vital element of my vision and strategy in 'Transforming Your Care: A Review of Health and Social Care in Northern Ireland.'

I believe that the 'Transforming Your Care' proposals offer community pharmacists the opportunity to strengthen their role in improving medicines management for patients, particularly for those with long-term conditions; help to minimise waste; contribute to the avoidance of unnecessary hospital admissions due to medicines-induced morbidity; and prevent conditions deteriorating by improving concordance. It is a model of care based not on prescription volume and product supply but on health outcomes for patients and on working as a member of the integrated primary care team. The proposals also hold an expanded role for pharmacists in the arena of health promotion in community pharmacy settings and the wider community. That should embrace a community development approach to health and well-being, for which there is good practice and evidence in the building the community-pharmacy partnership programme.

I call on the representative body of community pharmacy contractors to engage with the Department and HSCB in agreeing a new contract that will allow pharmacies to offer help to patients in areas such as medicines management, smoking cessation, health screening and medication reviews in care homes. Those are very much in line with the proactive community-based approach set out in 'Transforming Your Care' .

I believe that the approach that I have set out today provides an important step in the right direction towards a better future for community pharmacies. It will provide a foundation for

constructive discussions that will maximise the contribution that that group of skilled and dedicated professionals can make to improving the health of the population and to providing local, high-quality advice and support to patients and the wider community.

Ms S Ramsey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety):

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for the briefing on the statement that he gave to me and the Deputy Chair earlier today. I agree with the Minister that the future of community pharmacies is vital and that it plays a fundamental role as part of the patient-centred, locally based care system. I am disappointed that no agreement has been reached between the Department, the Health and Social Care Board and Community Pharmacy NI, and I am concerned that there has been a breakdown in negotiations.

The Minister mentioned the pharmacists' testimonies that were sent to the Committee, which described what they were going through and what they were facing. Those testimonies made stark reading. The Minister's statement outlines less than was offered last week to CPNI. The £8 million that has been released today, although it should be welcomed and we should not knock it, represents only an extra £1.5 million. Will he outline how he proposes to allocate that to community pharmacies? Will he also outline how he proposes to take forward the margins survey and the cost survey in a truly supportive role and in a partnership approach with CPNI?

Mr Poots: I will outline the breakdown of the allocation. Compliance with and support of, for example, the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, which will reduce reliance on multiple dispensing functions and ensure that individuals' needs are addressed, will be allocated £2 million. Rural pharmacies — those which are located at least 1 kilometre from the nearest premises and which dispense fewer than 5,600 prescription items a month — will be given £1.25 million. That accounts for approximately 73 pharmacies. Grants totalling £1.75 million will be allocated for improved security measures, etc, for pharmacies in deprived areas, accounting for around 340 pharmacies. The rural contingency fund will receive £1 million, and transitional support to contractual arrangements to include

grant support for premises and staff training will be allocated a further £2 million.

All those allocations were focused on the problems that the Assembly has been telling us about, particularly in relation to community pharmacies in deprived areas and in rural areas. That is why we have sought to put as much money as possible in those directions. I should say that that was resisted by CPNI, which wanted it spread across all locations, but I think that a pharmacist in west Fermanagh probably needs that money more than does Boots at Sprucefield. That is why we have sought to skew the money towards those whom we believe need it most to help to sustain them until we get a better and more comprehensive deal. It is very important that we work to get that deal in 2012-13 and beyond.

Mr Wells: There seems to be a fundamental disagreement between the Department and community pharmacists about the actual figures involved. I understand that there was an intent that, before this stage, a survey would have been carried out of the actual retained profits that pharmacists accrued as a result of the purchase and dispensing of drugs. Why has that survey not been carried out up to this point?

Mr Poots: We sought to carry out a survey after the first judicial review. However, we did not have the co-operation of the pharmacists in conducting the survey to determine the costs associated with the running of pharmacies or for a separate survey of the profits that can be derived from the business. We sought that information but it was not forthcoming. Therefore, we have had to make evidence-based assumptions, which are the best possible assumptions that can be made by the Department at this point.

I want to make it absolutely clear to the Assembly that pharmacists are looking for one figure and the departmental officials are referring to another figure. I can know the exact figure of what it should be only when the evidence is provided, and without the evidence being provided by the pharmacists, I cannot move this forward in that respect. If pharmacists are coming to their MLAs and saying that they need a further £38 million, that may be reasonable, but they have to provide evidence to support that. To date, they have not provided the evidence to allow the surveys to be conducted, and until or unless they do, pharmacists will

continue to be in the same position as they are now. Therefore, it is absolutely critical that that evidence and material is supplied so that a proper margins survey can be conducted into the costs and the profits, as by the direction of the courts.

5.15 pm

Mr McCallister: Minister, it is a little unfortunate that you are laying the blame with pharmacists, considering that your Department has lost two judicial reviews on this issue. The Minister had hinted at one time that he was considering whether to appeal the judicial review. Has he now ruled that out completely and could he give us a timeline for when he hopes the margins survey will be completed?

Mr Poots: First, the Department did not lose a judicial review on the basis of the drugs tariff. The drugs tariff stands, and that is a very important ruling by the courts. Where the Department did lose was in how it arrived at all of this. Of course, all of this happened before March 2011, and with the best will in the world, I do not think that Mr McCallister will want to hold me responsible for the activities in this Department before 2011.

Mr McCallister: You have had nine or 10 months to sort it out.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Poots: Mr McCallister makes it very clear what the reasons are and who was responsible for it. We intend to move ahead straight away with the surveys. We intend to use the statutory powers that we have to ensure that we get the appropriate information, and, indeed, we intend to comply with what the court has instructed on that issue. We will be appealing, and we will announce that at the end of this week. I am surprised that Mr McCallister asked the question, because I said that in my statement.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for his statement but I fear that it will be greeted with disappointment and, indeed, anger by those in the community pharmacy sector and the wider community. To lose one judicial review can be regarded as a misfortune, but to lose two can only be regarded as carelessness. Now the Minister, who had said previously said that CPNI could not put up roadblocks to negotiation by lodging and coming through with a judicial

review, may be in danger of being accused of putting up a roadblock —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Could the Member ask the question, please?

Mr Durkan: — to negotiation himself. Given that the Minister previously stated that CPNI may have been ill-advised and that the Department has now lost two judicial reviews, will the Minister accept that it may be he who is being ill-advised?

Mr Poots: The important issue here is the drugs tariff. The drugs tariff is what was being questioned, and the drugs tariff stands, so there is a basis for moving forward. Therefore, Members should not get too hung up on some of these issues.

Looking to the future, it is important that we find a new way. It is wholly unfortunate that this megaphone diplomacy has happened and that we have engaged in the courts rather than engaging in negotiations. As Churchill said, jaw-jaw is better than war-war, and it would have been in everyone's interest for more negotiations to have taken place and to have had fewer battles in court. We would have found solutions at an earlier point, and where some pharmacists are genuinely suffering, perhaps they would be in a much better position today.

We have to move away from a situation where pharmacists are being rewarded almost exclusively for the dispensing of drugs. The work that they have provided in, for example, smoking cessation and a number of other areas will be expanded greatly over the next number of years. Those are the negotiations that we need to have and that will bring about sustainable pharmacies that can provide a far higher level of care for our community and, at the same time, ensure that people have a sustainable business model as opposed to fighting over drugs tariffs and other issues.

Mr McCarthy: The Minister is making me angry as we go along here. He acknowledged the horrendous testimonies that were presented to the Health Committee from pharmacies right across Northern Ireland very recently, and it was his Department, regardless of who was in charge, that took some £38 million out of the pharmacy budget in April 2011. That is exactly why we are getting the problem, and the pharmacies are now left demoralised and on their knees.

Throughout the past two judicial reviews, the departmental officials and the Minister refused to engage with Community Pharmacy NI or, indeed, this Assembly and hid behind the cloak of legal proceedings. The Community Pharmacy NI representatives are due to meet the Health Committee this week. Can the Minister confirm that that meeting will continue and that the timing of the appeal that he is now telling the Assembly will take place is not another cynical attempt to silence Community Pharmacy NI while pharmacies that are providing an excellent service in the community are closing?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I think that the Member has asked his question.

Mr Poots: Yes, the meeting can certainly take place tomorrow, and discussions will take place on how future reimbursement of pharmacists can happen, irrespective of any appeal against the judicial review. I certainly was not hiding behind any cloak. I was following very clear legal advice, and it would have been foolish to do otherwise.

The Member talks about £38 million of cuts. Let me just run through the figures. Dispensing fees for 2010-11 were £41.9 million, and for 2011-12, £41.9 million. Professional allowance for 2010-11 was £9.6 million, and for 2011-12, £9.6 million. Other fees for 2010-11 were £9.5 million, and for 2011-12, £9.6 million. Minor ailments for 2010-11 were £3.5 million, and for 2011-12, £3.5 million. Pre-registration training was £3.6 million in 2010-11 and £3.9 million in 2011-12. Retained purchase profit in 2010-11 was £22.5 million, and that was reduced in 2011-12 to £16.5 million. So Mr McCarthy's figures are clearly wrong; £38 million was not taken out of the system. I see him shaking his head: perhaps he can count better than I can. However, that falls considerably short of £38 million and is more around £6 million.

Mr Deputy Speaker: An additional 11 Members have indicated that they wish to ask a question. I ask everyone to be as concise as possible in order that as many as possible can ask their question in the time available.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Minister for what he has said thus far. Given what he has said, is there a suspicion that Community Pharmacy NI simply will not, or perhaps cannot, lend its name to any resolution of the impasse and is putting itself in the position of possibly resisting change?

Mr Poots: I trust that that is not the case, and I hope that we do not get bogged down exclusively on the issues of money, because wider opportunities exist for community pharmacists.

I value community pharmacists. They carry out a very important role and provide a front line level of care that is very readily accessible to the wider community. I would like to see that role expanded, and for the skill base that they have, I want them to have the opportunity to carry out a lot of the work that they have been educated to do. That is why I want to move away from continually arguing about drugs tariffs, and so forth, to identifying a business model that will support local pharmacies and provide an enhanced level of care to our communities. That should, in theory, help to avoid visits to GPs and to hospitals and, hopefully, reduce hospital admissions. That is the work that needs to be done, and that is the conversation that needs to be had. The focus of the argument was wrong in the first instance. I inherited the issue, but I trust that in due course, we will get to the point at which a long-term future for pharmacists is set out and that short-term issues will be dealt with.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement, in which he said:

"The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) and HSCB have attempted to stretch as far as possible to reach an accommodation with CPNI in a very difficult context. I can advise that other proposals were made to CPNI. Indeed, I was willing to endorse an expanded package of measures that would have provided substantially more in facilitating cash flow and offering the opportunity to generate further income."

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

Mr Brady: Why did that not happen?

Mr Poots: An offer was on the table that related to the work that would need to be done on the margins and cost surveys. That offer would have extended the funding profile and taken it closer to £100 million than to £90 million. However, pharmacists decided to reject that. For whatever reason, they did not want to accept the proposal on the cost and margins surveys that was being put to them, which was that they would carry out their survey independently, we would carry

out our survey independently, using the same model and assessment tool, and we should have arrived at similar outcomes. For whatever reason, they do not want to do that. One must question what there is to hide. I suspect that it would suit many pharmacists to have those surveys conducted and that they have nothing to hide. Some of the bigger groups may not like it, and perhaps they are driving the issue.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for his statement. Will he outline how the required cost and margins surveys will be carried out and what the time frame is? Is it the case that pharmacists are legally obliged to comply?

Mr Poots: For the margins survey, the discount survey first quarter analysis for 2011-12 should be available within the next six months. The cost survey is scheduled to report by June 2012, and the Department and the Health and Social Care Board will take forward the discount and cost surveys. It is the judge's direction that we have to conduct those surveys, so it is imperative that they happen. We will use statutory powers to ensure that they happen. We will not allow the situation to continue. It is not acceptable to withhold information so that we cannot make our decisions based on empirical evidence, as we would like to do.

If we were making our decisions based on that quality of evidence, we would be in a position to offer pharmacists sustainable remuneration. If that comes out at considerably higher than is currently on the table, we would have to find it in our health and social care system, which would involve cuts elsewhere. If it comes out with a figure that is closer to the one that we have produced, that is factual, and pharmacists can operate sustainably within it. However, we cannot elicit that information at this stage, but we intend to deal with the issue over the next few weeks.

Mr Gardiner: I join with other Members in thanking the Minister for his statement. I was greatly encouraged by his opening remarks, but somewhere along the route, his statement seemed to dip somewhat. Has the Minister considered differentiating between pharmacists' community activities and their normal activities? Will he consider funding their community activities separately?

5.30 pm

Mr Poots: The Member is quite right. In the negotiations that take place on the future

of pharmacies, it is absolutely critical that we identify the community services that pharmacists can provide so that they can bring a skill set to the community in healthcare that can help us to implement 'Transforming Your Care'. I am very keen to provide them with fair reimbursement for doing so. That is certainly something that I want to negotiate and have talks about. I am very keen that that continues to be the case. I will ensure that my officials continue to engage with CPNI on that issue.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. Like other Members, I am disappointed that this issue has not been resolved. Will the Minister tell me how much the judicial reviews have cost his Department? When we talk about pharmacies in rural areas and deprived areas, how will that be attained? Will we use the deprivation levels or how will the Minister go about deciding on the deprived areas?

Mr Poots: The deprived area definition certainly covered a lot of pharmacies; it covered 340, and there are only 520-odd pharmacies. A fairly wide tool was used. Rural areas were identified by pharmacies that were at least one kilometre from any other premises and dispensed fewer than 5,600 prescriptions a month. That is certainly something that would have helped around 73 pharmacists.

The judicial review cost around £153,000. That money would have been better spent on pharmacy itself. When I came into office, had I had the opportunity to negotiate with pharmacists, I would have been very happy to do so, as opposed to spending money on lawyers.

Some of the rural pharmacies would have received upwards of £30,000 each as a result of what we were doing. Some Members sneer and deride additional moneys going to pharmacies. Many people would appreciate that level of support coming into their business at this time. It was a stop-gap measure until we negotiate a way forward for the future. That was something to help pharmacies through this year and through a difficulty that I inherited rather than created.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for his statement. Does he accept that there are some single manager/owner shops in which between £500,000 and £1 million has been invested and that they are under real financial stress at

the moment? Can he give some reassurance to those chemists that their plight will be understood? They will be concerned about the money that will be spent on a judicial review.

Mr Poots: Although I have a lot of sympathy for the individuals whom Mr Byrne may be talking to, obviously, people take a business decision. They make a business case and they move forward on that basis. It is not my responsibility to cover pharmacists who invested in property and the acquisition of the building, and so forth, during the property boom and for the repayments that they might have, and so forth. My job is to ensure that the pharmacy sector as a whole in Northern Ireland is properly and adequately reimbursed.

Members must remember that we are accountable to the public for our spending. The prescribing cost per head of population in Northern Ireland is £244.67; in Wales, it is £195.85; in Scotland, it is £192.25; and in England, it is £169.13. Wales is the best comparator because it has a rural/urban split that is not dissimilar to the circumstances in Northern Ireland. If Members think that we are providing good value for money in the current system and that, therefore, we can just throw more money at this issue, they should recoil from that position. It is not one that the House should adopt.

Ms Lewis: I thank the Minister for his statement and answers so far. There are pharmacists who indicate that there has been a substantial decrease in their funding from one year to the next. Will the Minister tell us what the figures from the Department indicate the change has been in annual recurrent funding for community pharmacies over recent years?

Mr Poots: I indicated that there was a £6 million difference in what was available at the outset of last year and this. It is important that pharmacists recognise that we have not made the £38 million cut. I do not know where Mr McCarthy or anyone else got that figure, but it is just not factual. There may be other reasons for pharmacists' incomes reducing, and they may have reduced by considerably more than £6 million. I am not in a position to dispute that at this point. However, we need to look at that and see what the reasons are, and look at the costs associated with running a pharmacy.

In 2005-06, a joint survey was carried out by the Department and the predecessor to CPNI — the

Pharmaceutical Contractors' Committee (PCC). The cost survey that was agreed between the PCC — the representatives of the pharmacists — and the Department, just six years ago, was £65 million. The scheme today costs over £90 million. That is a substantial rise that is well above the current rate of inflation, and we need to reflect on why the costs have increased so much. Therefore, we need to go back to the evidence base that I have talked about so much in order to establish the current, true costs of running a pharmacy.

Mr Ross: Can the Minister confirm whether the extra money offered, and that CPNI failed to approve, was of the same scale as the money that he announced today for rural and disadvantaged areas? Would that have brought the overall sum closer to £100 million, with an extra £8,000 for each pharmacy?

Mr Poots: It certainly would have come closer to £100 million and would have been a considerable boost to pharmacies. We have on the table today an average of an extra £16,000 for each pharmacist across Northern Ireland. What was on the table would have increased that substantially further and is closer to £100 million.

Mr Elliott: Obviously, any additional funding for pharmacies is welcome. He said that this funding would support new services. Given that the financial year ends in a couple of weeks, what new services can be put in place in that timescale?

Mr Poots: At the start of the year, £83.5 million was on the table. Services were to be carried out, but that will not now be available. We have offered compliance support in the amount of £2 million. We also offered rural support of £1.25 million. Deprived areas were offered £1.75 million, a lot of which can be spent on, for example, better security measures — it is important that, given what they deal in, pharmacists operate in a safe environment. A rural contingency fund, which I am sure that Mr Elliott will welcome, was to cost £1 million. Transitional support for contractual arrangements — to train staff, support premises, and so forth — was worth £2 million. That money did not have to be spent retrospectively. Pharmacists would have got that money this year and could spend it in the future.

Ms Ritchie: I thank the Minister for his statement. I have been presented by community

pharmacists with schedules that show that variable amounts of funding have been reviewed annually over the past couple of years out of their schedule of moneys that should have been paid to them annually. However, a recent meeting of community pharmacists, with a turnout of 511 contractors, which represents about 96% of pharmacists in Northern Ireland, voted unanimously to reject the Department's offer, saying that it was not the issue of additional funding —

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

Ms Ritchie: Yes. Does the Minister agree that the offer does not address the difficulties of the community pharmacy sector and that the officials in his Department are out of touch with the needs of community pharmacists throughout Northern Ireland?

Mr Poots: It is easy for a politician to attack officials. As to reductions in funding, I do not have the figures for 2010-11 at hand, but in 2008-09, the cost of prescription drugs, for example, was £388 million, which went up to £404 million. The cost of remuneration, £53 million, went up to £55 million, and the total cost of pharmaceutical payments went up from £441 million to £459 million. So, I hear people talking about cuts, but we are looking at figures that are increasing, for example, by £16 million for that year. That does not indicate to me that my officials are out of touch, but that, perhaps, some of the representatives in the Chamber are.

We need to ensure that pharmacists are given a reimbursement or remuneration that ensures that they can carry out a sustainable service within the community. I want the empirical evidence base to be able to do that. I am very willing to ensure that we get the funding package put together to do that. So, when the evidence comes forward, I will be very happy to move this forward and will do so.

Mr Allister: I must express considerable disappointment at the Minister's statement. On the one hand, I hear him affirm that he wants an early resolution, progress and the matter settled. On the other hand, he tells us that he is going to appeal the case that the Department lost on the regulation requirements. Thereby, of course, he adopts and endorses the stance of his predecessor, which got us to this point.

I bring him back to the very first question that he was asked. The £8 million was mentioned, but is it not the case that, for this financial year, the financial envelope that was agreed and decreed was £90 million? He had paid only £83.5 million, so of the £8 million that he will now pay, £6.5 million is money already promised and due. So, there is not £8 million of extra money; there is, at most, £1.5 million of extra money. Is that not factually correct?

Mr Poots: I will deal with two issues. One of the key reasons why the judicial review is being appealed is that the noble judge indicated that we should carry out a regulatory impact assessment. That has an impact on all the other Departments in Northern Ireland, as relevant decisions will all have to be subject to regulatory impact assessments. Colleagues in other Departments have their concerns that that will have a detrimental impact on the good and efficient working of government. Therefore, I am obliged to do this on behalf of others.

Mr Allister was patently wrong when he said that £90 million was on the table. That £90 million would have been on the table for a number of key services to be carried out. The baseline figure was £83.5 million, and there was £6.5 million for new services. Those services have not happened. If Mr Allister, for example, were to leave his vehicle into a garage but the work was not carried out on it, he would be unlikely to pay for it. So, we were only legally obliged to pay £83.5 million because that was the level of service that was supplied. Services that were to be supplied were not carried out. Therefore, the additional money is additional money because pharmacists are getting that over and above the service that was provided. It is £83.5 million plus another £8 million and, unfortunately, CPNI rejected a deal that would have taken the total, as I said, closer to £100 million.

5.45 pm

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

Ballycastle: Hotels

Mr Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the motion shall have 15 minutes in which to speak. The Minister will have 10 minutes to respond. All other Members who wish to speak will, on this occasion, have six minutes.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. A debate on hotels in Ballycastle is fitting given that this is being promoted as the year of tourism. A large part of that will be about promoting the north coast. We have had recent developments in respect of golf tourism, with the coming of the Irish Open to the Port and, most recently, the passing of the Runkerry application close to Bushmills. However, the lack of a hotel in Ballycastle or even the prospect of that by the end of 2012 would, indeed, put a dampener on all that.

We need a comprehensive tourism package right across the north coast. Ballycastle is a hub town. It is a gateway to Rathlin to the north; the Giant's Causeway, Carrick-a-Rede and the Port to the west; Armoyn, the Dark Hedges and the Armoyn races to the south; and to the east, the glens of Antrim. In putting a tourism package together, we also need to think of infrastructure. We need to think of the A26, and the proposed upgrading of the A26 to the Drones Road turn-off needs to be a priority in order to reduce journey times to Ballycastle.

There is huge potential that remains untapped. There is frustration as well, because it would be unthinkable not to have a large, quality hotel in similar hub towns in tourist hotspots in countries across the world. The Marine Hotel is, of course, in a great location on the seafront. It has 32 bedrooms, but there are fewer than 100 rooms in the Moyle District Council area and only 40 with 4-star provision, so there certainly is a deficit there.

A delegation of business representatives from Ballycastle and I met the Minister last year, and we found that quite helpful and positive,

certainly with regard to the work that has been carried out since. The business community in Ballycastle and those involved in trying to develop hotels there also very much welcome the Runkerry application and recognise that there will be a positive knock-on effect for the town of Ballycastle.

However, there is concern that Runkerry being passed by the Planning Service may have an adverse impact on hotel applications in Ballycastle, even though in one case an application is much further down the pipeline than Runkerry. In response to a recent Assembly question, the Minister indicated that a promoter of a hotel seeking Invest NI support would need to demonstrate that the business would be clearly differentiated from existing and competing projects. The answer continued:

"Projects that simply displace visitors from similar projects will not be considered. ... With reference to whether such an application would be affected by planning applications for hotels elsewhere in the Moyle council area it should be noted that any application is looked at on its own merits but an appraisal will take into account a range of factors when considering the future viability of the project."

I do not think that hotel applications in Ballycastle will be affected by this, but the concern is there in the local community. It would be quite helpful if the Minister could allay that concern today.

I do not think that anyone wants to see a plethora of hotels on the north coast. What we do want to see is provision that is sustainable and will turn those single-day-trippers that we have had in north Antrim for so many years into overnight-stay tourists. That would increase revenues for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Ballycastle, create long-term tourism jobs throughout the area, and have the obvious multiplier effect with regard to other employment.

The application for a new hotel on the Whitepark Road has been passed for almost five years. Certainly, there is some opinion that that investment could have been secured many years ago if it had been passed quicker by the Planning Service. So, there is an issue about ensuring that we move quickly because when businesses declare an interest in developing hotels, they quickly move on elsewhere if they find that they are coming up against brick walls and doors are not being opened by government.

We need to be wary about that in the months ahead.

We want to see the first sod being cut on this project in the next few months, and with a little support from Invest NI, we could see this project over the line. The money should be available for this development, especially since those behind the Runkerry development have indicated that they do not need any public funding for their proposal. The Whitepark Road project's costs are £10 million to £12 million. This significant investment will create 50 construction jobs for a year, along with 70 full-time and 35 part-time jobs for the local area thereafter.

The Marine Hotel is another source of frustration. Its sale has yet to be completed nearly a year and a half following the business going into administration. It lies at the very heart of Ballycastle, at the sea front. Some interest has been shown, and relayed to me, in trying to have the hotel reopened for this summer to offer rooms for the Irish Open and other events. There is no doubt that that is ambitious. However, it shows that people are willing to invest in the site to make it a success and part of this successful year for tourism.

However, it has also been relayed to me that Invest NI cannot help whoever takes over the hotel with refurbishments and in getting it operating for the summer if a purchase is completed shortly. So, it would be beneficial if the Minister will indicate whether her Department is in a position to offer immediate support post-purchase to get the venue reopened and operating by the summer, particularly as there are a number of major events in the area relating to golf and to the new Giant's Causeway visitor centre.

There are always rules and regulations that have to be adhered to in these cases. However, political will and a little flexibility are needed, in my opinion, to deliver on the tourism targets that we talked about earlier today. Other jurisdictions can be flexible and can open the doors for the business community and show a positive approach. My concern is that if we do not take a more proactive approach with hotel development in Ballycastle, businesses will move on. It would be a great shame if business interests, particularly in the Marine Hotel, were to dissipate because processes were not moving quickly enough. That comment also refers to the delayed movement of the receivers.

I will conclude. There are concerns that opportunities will be missed in the coming weeks and months, and I will give the Minister an opportunity to speak about those concerns and see what can be done to ensure that opportunities for Ballycastle are grasped. It is clear that, with a bit of focus, hotel provision in Ballycastle can be secured. I have no doubt that securing it will lead to further provision being sought there in the years ahead and that Ballycastle, at long last, can realise its true potential. There is a view, with some justification, that Ballycastle has been neglected historically and that focus along the north coast has rarely strayed beyond the Giant's Causeway. That is regrettable, but we are moving forward with a positive attitude on the economy and tourism, and there is an opportunity to develop a new, more advanced tourism product for the north coast so that the entire north coast moves forward with vigour and success.

To make the north coast a success, Ballycastle needs to be at its heart. If any of the opportunities that I have outlined can be grasped, it will lead to greater things for the entire area. Therefore, I urge the Minister to ensure, as much as she can, that Invest NI invests in hotel provision in the town and secures some much needed employment and economic prosperity. The most pressing issue is time. If those opportunities are not grasped in the months and weeks before the summer, some interests will move on and Ballycastle will miss the boat again. I do not think that anybody in the Chamber wants to see that happen. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Storey: I welcome the opportunity to take part in the debate. I can recall many happy days spent in Ballycastle. It was a time when my family went to Ballycastle on a Saturday to — as we would say — do the local groceries. The place was thriving; it had businesses and hotels, such as the Marine Hotel and the Antrim Arms, and it is not that many years ago that a family event was held in the Antrim Arms. However, there has been change in Ballycastle in recent years.

Although many of the concerns that the Member outlined hold some validity, it would be remiss of us to discountenance the excellent accommodation in the Moyle area, which is demonstrated by the 2011 accommodation guide issued by Moyle District Council. Many small businesses, such as bed and breakfasts,

have an invaluable contribution to make to the tourist product. In fact, some of them have benefitted and grown by concentrating on a niche market and delivering a high-class, high-quality service. We need to pay tribute to those businesses. There is always a risk in these debates that we look only at the negatives, try to find somebody to blame and overlook a product that is already there.

We need to raise our disappointment that one development, namely the Marine Hotel, has, to date, been unable to find a purchaser and that the administrator has been unable to get the facility over the line. I also ask the House to consider that this is not a problem unique to Ballycastle. Some years ago, a survey in Ballymoney, which is only a few miles from Ballycastle, found a huge accommodation deficit in the town. A number of generic concerns were raised in the survey that are also applicable to Ballycastle. Those who carried out the study said:

“The policy context, however, in particular the priorities set out in the Causeway Coast and Glens Tourism Masterplan for the development of the tourism product, is particularly supportive.”

The Causeway Coast and Glens Tourism Masterplan should be given the impetus and focus set out in the document. With the opening of the Causeway centre and the various elements of the masterplan that have been delivered, we are beginning to see a context in which it is surely easier for a private developer to justify making the investment.

Just this week, I picked up that the average hotel room occupancy in December 2011 was some 47%, which represents a 5% increase on the rate published in December 2010. There is clearly a niche and a need. However, the Minister, the Department, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and everybody else needs to be conscious of displacement, which the Minister addressed in an answer to the Member some time ago.

There is also an onus on Moyle District Council. Regrettably, in the same week that this issue is being debated to try to promote Ballycastle and to paint its positives, Moyle District Council considered it more appropriate to pass a resolution linking Ballycastle with Gaza — not the football player but a geographical location.

If that council is really serious about promoting Ballycastle and about attracting people to what

I believe is an invaluable asset on the north Antrim coast, a town that we ought to cherish and that ought to have an infrastructure that is welcoming and accommodating to visitors, as it has been in the past, it did not send out the right message this week. The Member who brought this issue to the House will need to tell some of his colleagues or even his former colleagues in Moyle that it is important that Ballycastle is promoted in a positive way that encourages people to come and stay in the town, rather than discouraging them by doing things that will not bring any added value to the tourism product on the north coast.

6.00 pm

Mr Swann: I will not delay the House for long, because my party colleague Danny Kinahan is keen to get in and match Mr Storey with his childhood memories. When most North Antrim MLAs — or any MLAs — start to talk about the Causeway, the glens and Rathlin, they can paint a scenic picture of a fantastic tourist attraction. However, one thing that is missing is a niche hotel in the middle of the town. A number of my constituents from North Antrim got in contact with me to raise that exact point when they realised that this matter was being debated. However, I endorse some of the comments of Mr Storey in regard to the image and the message that the council portrays when it sends out those relationships. It is not just damaging to Ballycastle; it is damaging to the whole of north Antrim and to this Assembly when we send out those mixed messages. Individuals who try to do their best to promote Ballycastle and the north Antrim Causeway are not in any way being helped by the council doing that.

There are plans for two newbuild hotels in Ballycastle — one in Clare Park and the other in Straid Road, Moyarget. Therefore, there is an indication that the private sector is willing to support tourism potential there and to support another hotel. However, as has already been touched on, the major problem with hotel provision in Ballycastle is that the Marine Hotel occupies a prime, prominent location in the middle of the town on the seafront. However, it is lying empty and derelict, so it does not help to attract tourism potential. When we think of Ballycastle, we have a picturesque portrayal of the Ould Lammas Fair and the tourism potential that can come in there. As Mr Storey has already said, the administrators have had trouble selling the hotel. I welcome

the opportunity for someone to open it for the summer to see if there is potential to move forward and to portray it. Members of Invest NI, the Tourist Board and Moyle council and its responsible members and officers could come together and enhance the Marine Hotel and reopen its doors, even for a short while.

My memories of the Marine Hotel may be somewhat different to those of other Members. The glens young farmers used the hotel to hold their club meetings because it was somewhere in the area that was non-denominational and could reach out to all sides of the community. That is why the Marine Hotel was vital to them. I was going to say, "On the other hand", but that is not strictly true. I also have a friend from the GAA who said that there is a lack of provision now that the hotel has closed. It leaves the GAA with nowhere to hold its sporting dinners and all the rest of it. Another friend came to me and said that the hotel is a great loss to Ballycastle, as there is nowhere to hold funeral dinners any more. You can really portray three alternatives there.

One of the big problems about hotel provision in Ballycastle and the north Antrim coast is bed space. There is no hotel, including the Marine, big enough to hold coachloads of tourists. As was said earlier, if they come for a day trip, they could be enticed to stay overnight. We could get an extended stay out of them and get the overnight spend that is critical to Northern Ireland tourism at the moment. We have an opportunity to look to that niche market. We do not have to concentrate on four-star or five-star accommodation, which the Causeway Coast and glens tourism master plan portrayed in 2003 for 2013. There is provision for a budget hotel that can attract people as a stopover while they travel the entire north coast. What I say to the Minister — it has been portrayed here already — is that hotel provision in the Ballycastle area has to look to that niche market, and it need not be four-star or five-star accommodation. People can look to the budget end, which can cope with budget tourists. It must also be borne in mind that we should not take away from the local provision — the bed and breakfasts. They are the mainstay for a lot of rural families and families who work in agriculture up round there. Bed and breakfasts get that spend over the summer, which makes their businesses viable.

I am asking the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, who has a tourism role, to see how we can facilitate the local economy, the

local council, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and Invest NI in coming together, if there is a will for a private operator to move in, and to support and endorse them as much as we can. Earlier today, we talked about our economic strategy. Let us develop the entire tourist potential in the area, from the golfing potential to the Giant's Causeway when the new visitor centre opens next year, and make the most of what we have to offer in north Antrim.

Mr Frew: I welcome the debate on hotel provision in Ballycastle and the surrounding area. My constituents have mentioned the issue to me over the past number of months, certainly since the Marine Hotel closed down. It is regrettable that Ballycastle does not have a major hotel within its limits, but, when you think about it, it is the day and age that we live in. It is about market forces and private finance, which has to be the driving force. Any project has to be viable, be a business, earn money and provide wealth. That is the problem for those of us in government. We can assist where we can. We can certainly try to smooth out the runway for businesses to take off, but that is basically all we can do. However, we can promote the area, be positive about it and enhance our towns and landscapes to attract more people. That would make hotel provision more viable and economical.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Frew: I will, certainly.

Mr Storey: The Member who secured the debate referred to Runkerry. Surely that is an issue because it is an example of a private developer not asking for one penny from the public purse. He stuck it out for 10 years. There was delay after delay with planning and so on, but the developer saw the potential in the area and stayed with it. We need to ensure that we can encourage people — other private developers — to do the same in Ballycastle.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for his intervention because he raises a valid and important point about our planning processes. When that man came with his plans initially, he was 10 years younger than he is now. That is a scary thought. It is good that he has persisted and stuck with his plan, which I hope will come to fruition. Not so long ago, a constituent complained to me that the application hurt Ballycastle with regard to hotel provision. I cannot agree with that. It will help to enhance the area and the town,

which will benefit from the development and the people whom it will attract to the area.

We have to be careful that we do not think in small terms. The type of tourist whom we want to attract to Northern Ireland thinks nothing of a five- or 10-mile journey. Such tourists would be fit to travel for 50 or 100 miles without any problem, because they come from much larger areas and think in longer distances. We have to consider that.

Ballymoney is another example of a fine town that could do with more hotel provision, which would also enhance the north coast. I am aware that, over the years, hotels have gone out of business in the Coleraine, Portrush, Portstewart and Ballycastle areas, so there is a job to be done, and whether it will work depends on the economic climate.

A good point was raised about what the Marine Hotel meant to Ballycastle. The only thing that has not been mentioned is the fact that a 12 July parade is also held in Ballycastle. Again, hotel provision would be very much needed, wanted and used if available. It is important that all that is taken into account.

Ballycastle is no different from any other town at present. There are pressures on our town centres, retailers, cafes, bars and restaurants. That is not unique to Ballycastle. Ballycastle is in a great position because it is located right up on the north coast. It can attract people who come to visit the strand, the beaches, the Portrushes and Portstewarts of this world and then want to travel round to the Causeway and the glens, and people travelling the other way, up through the glens. It is in a unique position and should be utilised more.

One thing I should mention before I come to the end of my time in this debate is the excellent provision, which my colleague Mervyn Storey raised, in the hotels, bed and breakfasts, guest houses and self-catering accommodation. There are over 650 bedrooms in Moyle. In Coleraine, there are over 1,500 bedrooms. The majority of those are, of course, self-catering and bed-and-breakfast establishments. That goes some way towards telling the story of the people we have been attracting to Northern Ireland and, in particular, to the north coast.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close, please.

Mr Frew: I will. Thank you.

Mr D McIlveen: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this topic. The issue is very important, particularly to the people who live in the area. A couple of months back, I had two young ladies from one of the schools in Ballycastle with me on work experience. In the course of finding them something to do and keeping them interested, I asked them to go away and think of some questions that we could put to Ministers. The overriding issue that came up, time and time again, was tourism provision in Ballycastle. I do not think we can ignore the fact that this is an important issue for the people who live in the area. Certainly, the closure of the Marine Hotel was a body blow to the area. There is no doubt about that. For no other reason than the message that that closure sent out, it created a confidence blow, if nothing else.

This is an important issue. However, I agree with what my colleague Mr Frew said. This is largely down to private finance. We have to be wary, sometimes, I suppose, of establishing what we do and do not have control of in this Assembly. When it comes to banks and their ability to lend, that is something that does, unfortunately, rest with the banks. All that we can do is lobby and pressurise. Unfortunately, we cannot force their hand. My good friend and colleague Ian Paisley, MP for the area, has lobbied the banks extensively around this issue. There has been no lack of representation given to the people of the area to try to get this issue sorted out.

The Member for North Antrim who brought the proposal forward touched on one very important thing that I do not think any of us can take away from: the resilience of the people in this area. In the time that I have been working with the people of Ballycastle, particularly with businesses in the area, I have been hugely impressed by their resilience. I pay tribute to Mary O'Driscoll, who has just taken over the lead of the Chamber of Commerce. The drive is there to make Ballycastle bounce back from the blow it has had from the hotel closure. When I speak to business owners in Ballycastle, I hear that, although the hotel issue was a disappointment, it is not the biggest issue or biggest threat that they face at the minute.

The Minister is here, and I urge her to try to continue to pressurise the Northern Ireland Tourist Board to encourage the tourists who are coming over to Northern Ireland to

see Ballycastle, Ballymoney, Ballymena and Bushmills not just as through towns on the way to the north coast, but to stop and get out and enjoy the local shops, cafes and restaurants. The provisions that we have in our towns and villages are exceptional in this area, particularly in Ballycastle.

6.15 pm

I pay tribute to Moyle District Council in some respects, although I share concerns about one of the points raised by Mr Storey, and I may come back to it if time permits. I agree with the assistance that Moyle District Council is giving to try to establish a new market in Ballycastle. Again, coming back to the resilience of the people, they are being creative and innovative. With the right support and help from the Assembly, the town will continue to flourish and do well.

The Northern Ireland Tourist Board continues to give us statistics on how tourism is growing. We encourage that and are greatly appreciative of the work that it does. However, we want the Northern Ireland Tourist Board to encourage the buses to stop, because, until that happens, the people who work and have their businesses in those towns around the main attractions on the north coast will not see the full benefit of tourists coming in. I pay tribute to the council for the way in which it has tried to help to establish the market and, hopefully, give people more reasons to stop on their way through.

I believe that Moyle District Council is going down a very dangerous road and sending out a very negative message in what it is trying to pursue with the twinning project. We are not deviating off the point. We are looking at how we can encourage tourists to come into the area. Whether we like it or not, the reality is that, in the past 48 hours, 60 rockets have been fired from Gaza into Israel, one of which hit a school, which, only by the grace of God, was empty at the time. Is that really the type of place that we want to associate ourselves with? Do we really want to send out the message to potential tourists that those are the people and that is the place that we want to partner with? Moyle District Council has to be very careful. It has a responsibility to send out the right message. We will do our part, and we will support the people —

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

Mr D McIlveen: We will support the people who are working hard to try to promote North Antrim in a positive way. I will close with those remarks.

Mr Allister: We all share the frustration and disappointment that a beautiful setting such as Ballycastle does not have a hotel. Undoubtedly, a vibrant hotel is a hub and an attraction for any town of that size. However, we also have to be realistic and recognise that, no matter how generous grants or encouragements of one shape or another might be, at the end of the day, the defining issue for long-term sustainability of a business is that it is commercially viable. Although Ballycastle is in a beautiful setting, there must be reason why the Marine Hotel, in its prime location, was not capable of succeeding. Therefore, there is a certain naivety in thinking, "Government can fix this for us". Whatever the tourism Minister's powers and, indeed, her charms might be, she cannot deliver commercial viability to a hotel if it is not sustainable.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. Added to that, Moyle District Council has not provided extensive leisure facilities. That hotel was providing leisure facilities, but it was still unable to meet the criteria that the Member mentioned.

Mr Allister: That is really the same point. No matter how much we might flood the issue with goodwill or how much we might prime it with assistance, if that is possible, at the end of the day, it will either be commercially sustainable or it will not. Of course, we all hope that the exciting new developments on the north coast will float many boats, and that Ballycastle, too, will benefit from that; but we have to be realistic. The primary responsibility is on Moyle Council, which, contrary to what Mr McKay says, is very Ballycastle-centric. Its largesse is experienced much more in Ballycastle than it ever will be in Bushmills, and it is quite wrong to suggest otherwise.

Someone made an analogy about Gaza and football: there is a football analogy in that the council has scored a massive own goal with the preposterous decision that was made in the face of the advice that it was given and the knowledge that it was wholly divisive and would be prejudicial to the image of Ballycastle and of Moyle. Driven by the chairman no less, the council has insisted on a ludicrous twinning with Gaza. That insistence of twinning with

the Hamas-led Gaza council, driven through by one community against the wishes of the other, has brought and will bring increasing opprobrium upon the council. That tells me that Moyle Council is sadly not motivated, as I would like it to be, by the overriding desire that could manifest itself in tourist and commercial success through a new hotel. It seems to have a different agenda, and last night's narrow decision was an indication of a very wrong-headed approach that does much damage.

Ballycastle's natural amenity is its beauty. My, oh my, when you drive down the hill into Ballycastle and look across to the headlands, it is magnificent; the beach is magnificent and you would wish to be there as often as possible. However, it is hard to take seriously a council that drives wedges into the community in this way instead of lobbying for and devoting its time and energies to things that matter. It is hard to take it seriously when that council says that the whole world is at fault, that it owes us an hotel that we do not have and never mind what we have done to drive tourists away.

The chairman of the council, who has driven this issue, needs to catch himself on. I am sure that such help as can be given will be given; however, at the end of the day, commercial success will determine whether Ballycastle needs a vibrant hotel.

Mr Dallat: Members may wonder why somebody from County Derry is taking part in this adjournment debate, but I remind them that Ballycastle is synonymous with the name Dallat. My eldest son was very fortunate to meet a Ballycastle girl, and he lives there. As grandparents, we look forward to visiting Ballycastle on a Sunday, and we have a closer-range experience of the town's uniqueness.

One thing that has always struck me about Ballycastle, having represented Coleraine for over 30 years where tourism is a big thing, is the absence of an hotel. Having listened to the debate this evening, I will not get drawn into the quagmire of politics. We have been very critical of the media because of its negativity to the Assembly, but, my goodness, having heard some of the statements this evening, we do not need the media.

Of course, we welcome the proposed 120-bed hotel development at Whitepark. My party was very much involved in the creation of the Marine Hotel. I do not know the circumstances of why it

is not functioning, but that is a matter of regret. Certainly, the SDLP was involved in promoting tourism in Ballycastle and elsewhere when it was fashionable for some to blow up hotels, but that is in the past.

We had some references to guest houses and so on, and they are, of course, the backbone. However, let us face it: any town of any significance needs a hotel for conferences and other activities. We heard that the Marine Hotel in Ballycastle was used by the Orange Order, the Young Farmers' Club and the GAA and for funeral dinners, and I have been to funeral dinners there. However, I know from my involvement in Coleraine that a million other things can happen in a hotel.

My colleague Councillor Donal Cunningham told me in an e-mail just this morning that the local economy needs people to stay overnight. That was the main problem we had in the Causeway in Coleraine as well: creating the incentive for people to spend bed nights in the hotel. So, there is no need to apologise for asking the Tourist Board, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment — I am delighted that the Minister is here — Invest Northern Ireland and any other relevant organisation to promote and help with the creation of the bed nights that are badly needed in Ballycastle, which, of course, is the gateway to the glens of Antrim.

There has been a lot of hype about the Irish Open coming here. I spent yesterday in Portrush and Portstewart with the Minister, who was doing her utmost to promote the area in order to ensure that that opportunity is not missed. There are several other new items on the tourist agenda this year such as the Titanic project, as well as the Milk Cup and the North West 200, the benefits of which spin out into Ballycastle and the surrounding areas. I know from experience that the North West 200 brings people back time and time again. Even during the worst of the Troubles, relationships were formed between people from here and people from England, Scotland and other places. So it is a serious business.

As I say, my heart is in the Sperrins, but I absolutely love the glens of Antrim. I will finish up by entertaining you with a little poem, 'The Nine Glens of Antrim':

*"There are nine Glens in Antrim,
Nine great glens in all;
Glenarm is the first one*

*And near Cushendall
There's lovely Glenariff, Glenaar and Glendun
And nestling between them
Glenballyemon, Glencorp and Glenshesk
Come on, don't be lazy
There's only Glencloy and the last one, Glentaisie."*

My colleagues from North Antrim, for goodness sake, put your full weight behind the issue, back it 100% and make it a success.

Mr Kinahan: I am incredibly pleased to be able to speak on what I regard as my second home. Following on from the comments of Mr Dallat, who mentioned so many of the things that draw everyone there, Ballycastle is the first place that I take people to see in Northern Ireland after they fly into the country. There, you have the beach at Fair Head, the glens that we just heard about and the golf course. Given all the changes that we are about to make along the north coast, let us make sure that we link them up with Ballycastle, and yet somehow find the right balance so that we do not destroy all that is Ballycastle and the surrounding area.

Like my parents, I have been going to Ballycastle from the age of seven, and I have an album full of photographs from the 1920s, when the town and hotel were thriving and bringing people in. I remember staying there as a child, and every single weekend, which seemed to start on Thursday and carry on to Monday, buses arrived on their tour around Ireland — I do not whether they were from Ulsterbus Tours — and people filled that hotel. That is what we have to see back in Ballycastle. We have to find the right balance, and I urge everyone to get involved in pushing for that.

I am up there in summer mainly for the tennis. Two years ago, for one week in August, there were 370 children playing.

If you go back through the history of tennis there, you will see that in 1936, according to 'The Coleraine Chronicle', 750 people played in the tennis tournament. There is a lot to go back to. It is a centre that we want to see everyone going to.

6.30 pm

Sometimes, we wait for tourism to come to us. Instead, we should look for reasons to go to a place. I have said that before. If you look at the other things that happen up there, you will see that the council has cleverly used the legend of the children of Lir and the link with Moyle.

However, there is also the history of the Spanish galleons. Here we are, this year, celebrating the Titanic, but the Girona is wedged in up there. There is a mass of other little things that are buried around it. You have Dunseverick and Carrick-a-Rede. The easiest place to get to all of them from is Ballycastle. Therefore, let us look at that.

I ask the Minister and the council to push as hard as they can to get a working hotel back into that key slot in the middle of the town. I congratulate the council on many things that it has done up there. It keeps the area very clean and tidy during the tourist season. There is a lot of very good work. Yes, there are political points to score on it. However, it does good work in Ballycastle. I long to see the Marine Hotel working as part of the balance and Ballycastle thriving.

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): I thank Mr McKay for tabling the Adjournment topic and allowing me to update the House on my Department's involvement in the development of tourism on the Causeway Coast and in Ballycastle in particular.

By now, everyone in the House should be aware that 2012 sees the start of what I truly believe will be the most important stage in the growth of tourism in Northern Ireland. The Department and NITB have been instrumental in delivering and, indeed, encouraging the delivery of a large number of projects and events that will allow us to market ourselves as the not-to-be-missed destination. It is also a momentous year for the Causeway Coast and the glens. In June, we will welcome some of the world's top golfers — and, indeed, the top golfer — to the fantastic Royal Portrush links. The success of all of our golfers has done much to raise our profile. Hosting the Irish Open will afford us a major opportunity to take advantage of that. As Members know, we have spent a lot of time and effort promoting the Irish Open and the success of our golfers in order to get visitors to come here, particularly to the north coast.

Obviously, the Giant's Causeway visitor centre is due to open. Of course, it is situated in the district of Moyle. We are working hard to ensure that it will be open on time, ahead of schedule, and that we will be able to showcase it to the influx of visitors that we expect in Portrush

for the Irish Open. We look forward to a lot of tourists coming into the area.

Mention has been made of the accommodation that we currently have in Moyle and Coleraine. I want to pay tribute to the many owners of guest houses and bed-and-breakfast facilities in and around the Causeway Coast and glens. A lot of them have a special relationship with the tourists who come to visit them year on year. I know that because, around two months ago, I had a very useful meeting with them to discuss their position on the tourism offering. I take up the point that has been made around the Chamber: those little accommodation providers are sustainable and are very much part of the offering along the coast and glens.

Despite what Mr McKay said, we have spent a lot of money in Ballycastle through infrastructural and interpretational enhancement at key sites, such as the seafront, the harbour, which, not long ago, the council invited me to visit, and, indeed, the ferry terminal. Great strides have been made around that area to lift it up with public sector works. Investment of over £300,000, of which £150,000 was funded by NITB, has been made to improve car parking, visitor access and landscaping. Two pieces of public art have also been installed on the Ballycastle seafront.

Although it is right that we recognise the efforts that have been made by government and its agents, we also know — it is a key point — that, if we are to achieve our ambitions for growth, it is essential that the private sector is encouraged and supported to deliver the infrastructure. I said “encouraged and supported”, and that is the key point. We want Ballycastle to have a hotel, and I told Mr McKay that when he visited me with some of his constituents. However, it has to start with the private sector, and we need to take full advantage of any private sector interests and work with them. When visitors come to Ballycastle and the Moyle area, we want them to have every opportunity to stay in the area and to spend money there. Therefore, as well as the need for accommodation, there is a need for restaurants, coffee shops, bars and things to see and do, and all of that is the role of the private sector. I have no doubt that, as Mr Allister said, where there is a commercial opportunity, the private sector will intervene and try to make it work.

It is obvious that a growth in tourist numbers will lead to an increase in the need for tourist accommodation. I have no doubt that there will be an increase in visitor numbers, and that is why NITB has commissioned Oxford Economics to model future tourism accommodation needs and to align those with future demand. Although that study has not yet been completed, it is reasonable to expect that it will confirm the belief that there is a need for additional hotel capacity on the north coast.

I listened carefully to the debate and to Members’ reminiscences of the Marine Hotel in Ballycastle. I did not know where some Members were going with those, but, on some occasions, I was glad that they stopped. Ballycastle certainly has a lot of character, and the independent retailers should be proud of the retail offering in the town. They have kept all the old shopfronts and it gives the place a great deal of character.

Mr McKay referred to the concerns that what was known as Runkerry but is now called the Bushmills Dunes resort will damage the prospects of other hotels attaining assistance from Invest Northern Ireland. However, the promoters of that hotel have publicly stated that they do not require any public funds, and its presence should not impact on other hotels that come forward for assistance. He also made the point about the need for the Marine Hotel to have assistance post purchase. I assure him that, if proposals are made by the purchasers of the Marine Hotel, INI will consider an application for refurbishment after the new owners are in place. That will obviously have to be within the current restrictions, but there is nothing to stop them looking at that proactively.

As far as I am concerned, Ballycastle is far from ignored. It has had a lot of public sector investment, and rightly so. As we have heard around the Chamber, it is a beautiful place. It is also the gateway to Rathlin Island, and Members have reflected on what it means to them. However, I would say to Members that Moyle District Council has an important role to play in sending out a positive message about the Ballycastle area. I question — that is all I will do — the sensitivity and sensibility of twinning Ballycastle with an area with great safety and security issues. As the Minister for tourism, I am trying, through NI 2012: Our Time, Our Place, to challenge many of the global perceptions of Northern Ireland. Therefore, I

question whether twinning with Gaza would send out a positive message about Ballycastle and Northern Ireland. It runs contrary to what we are trying to do with those global perceptions.

Robin Swann indicated that he wants to see a hotel in the middle of the town. However, again it is down to the commercial viability of the private sector coming forward with proposals to Invest Northern Ireland. Invest NI knows that it is to be as proactive as it can with any proposals that come its way.

Mr Frew mentioned that the hotel needs to be viable. He talked about smoothing out the runway, and, at one stage, I thought that there was going to be a proposal for an airport in Moyle. However, thankfully, there was not. He went on to say that it is important not to think in parochial terms and talked about the many uses of the Marine Court hotel.

Mr McIlveen talked about the resilience of people in the area and made special mention of the chair of the Ballycastle Chamber of Commerce. He raised the issue of trying to get people to stop on the route of the Causeway Coast and glens, and I know that he has raised it directly with NITB in his role as chair of the all-party group on tourism. There are plenty of places to stop along the Causeway Coast and glens — hotels and other facilities — and that is a work in progress for him. Mr Allister mentioned the frustration of not having a hotel in Ballycastle, but again, indicated that commercial viability was the key issue. It is my hope that, with tourism on the north coast rising to the top of the agenda, it will raise all boats and we will see a commercially viable hotel back in Ballycastle in the very near future.

Mr Dallat reflected on the importance of a local hotel and talked about the importance of events such as the North West 200 and how it impacts on the whole of the north coast. He also gave us a little poem about the nine glens of Antrim, so much so that I thought that we would have had someone singing 'The Ould Lammas Fair'. We did not, which was a bit disappointing. Perhaps not everyone knows the words. Mr Kinahan finished off the debate by saying that his family had been visiting the area since the 1920s and had played tennis and what have you. He wanted the council, the Tourist Board and others to work together to ensure that we had as positive an image of Ballycastle as we could. I entirely agree with him that that is what

we want to do. We want to work together to ensure that we can do as much for Ballycastle as we can.

I am happy to reassure the House that I recognise Ballycastle and the Causeway Coast and glens as having a major part to play in the future success of tourism for the Northern Ireland economy. I look forward to continuing to work with colleagues in the North Antrim constituency to do just that.

Adjourned at 6.42 pm.



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