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to arrive not later than two weeks after publication of this report.

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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 15 May 2012

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Dickson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I ask you to compare the public record of my party's attendance at the cohesion, sharing and integration strategy working group with the First Minister's comments in the House yesterday, as recorded in Hansard. Following your examination of the records, will you advise the House whether you consider that the First Minister misled the House in his description of our attendance record?

Mr Speaker: I thank the Member for his point of order. First, I assure the Member that I do not dwell on Executive business; that is not my responsibility as Speaker. Secondly, I read the First Minister's remarks yesterday in Hansard and have to say to the Member, with the greatest respect, that that is very much the cut and thrust of debate in the Chamber. What I read yesterday and this morning in Hansard tells me that there was nothing out of order in what the First Minister said yesterday. As the issue raised concerns Executive business, I respectfully tell the Member to raise it at Executive level, as that is where it sits.

Ministerial Statements

North/South Ministerial Council: Transport Sectoral Format

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): Mr Speaker, in compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, I wish to make the following statement on the twelfth meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in transport sectoral format held in Armagh on Friday 20 April 2012.

I attended the meeting with the Environment Minister, Alex Attwood MLA, who will make a separate statement covering issues that relate to his Department. That will follow directly after my statement and question-and-answer session. I chaired the meeting, and Alex Attwood MLA, Minister of the Environment, and Leo Varadkar TD, Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, were in attendance.

On the Belfast-Dublin rail link, the Council discussed progress by Northern Ireland Railways (NIR) and Irish Rail on improving the performance of the Enterprise service and noted the following: reliability and punctuality had improved significantly in recent months; the companies are exploring the possibility of providing an hourly timetable, although that will require additional subvention beyond what is available within current budgets; further short-term improvements to the service are due for completion in 2012, including work to improve locomotive reliability, reduce fuel consumption and equip Enterprise trains with Wi-Fi; subject to the availability of funding, NIR has plans in the medium term to improve existing track quality; NIR is developing a business case for a multi-modal transport hub in Belfast's Great Victoria Street, which would improve city centre access for Enterprise passengers; and longer-term investment possibilities could be considered in the context

of forthcoming EU decisions on the next Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) programme.

We discussed progress on the work of the All Island Freight Forum and noted the actions that were taken by the steering group following the plenary event, which was held in Belfast on 7 November 2011.

We also discussed sustainable travel and transport. We noted continued co-operation between the National Sustainable Travel Office and the Travelwise initiative in promoting walking, cycling, public transport and car sharing throughout both jurisdictions. The success of the Walk to School Week 2011 cross-border schools' challenge event was mentioned, and planning is under way for the 2012 event, which is scheduled for 23 May 2012. We noted the growth of car sharing throughout both jurisdictions and noted the recent launch of the carsharing.ie website and joint promotions on car sharing. We also discussed the progression of workplace travel planning throughout both jurisdictions and noted that a pilot personalised travel plan initiative is under way in Galliagh and that one has been undertaken in Adamstown. A new personalised travel project is to be launched in late 2012. An active travel strategy for Northern Ireland under the title 'Building an Active Travel Future for Northern Ireland' will be finalised shortly. We also noted the success of all-island Bike Week 2011, which was held between 18 June and 26 June. Partnership arrangements are being put in place for a 2012 event, which will be held between 16 June and 24 June 2012.

Some £3 million will be invested in active travel demonstration projects in Northern Ireland from 2012 to 2015, and the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (DTTS) will invest €23 million in three smarter travel areas between 2012 and 2016 to identify and develop best practice. Some €13 million will be invested in infrastructure to support active travel towns in the same period.

I am fascinated by the conversation to my right, Mr Speaker. It is far more interesting than what I am saying, clearly, but anyway.

The Council also discussed the success of the Dublinbikes public bike hire scheme and the commitment to seek to extend the Dublinbikes scheme across the wider Dublin area and to other cities. It was noted that a similar project is under consideration in Belfast. We also discussed the official opening of the Waterside

Greenway project, the Canal Way and the Great Western Greenway and the co-operation of the Departments for Regional Development (DRD) and the Environment and the Electricity Supply Board (ESB) in managing the installation of electric vehicle charging infrastructure.

The Council approved the appointment of Éamonn Ó Gribín to the board of the North/South Language Body, with responsibility for the exercise of the functions of the body through Foras na Gaeilge — I think that was put in deliberately — and the appointment of John Corbett to the board of InterTradelreland.

The Council agreed to hold its next NSMC transport meeting in October 2012.

Mr Doherty (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development):

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. I note that he discussed progress on the work of the All Ireland Freight Forum and noted the actions agreed by the steering group. Perhaps, the Minister will give us more detail on what those actions are. I am sure he is aware that the Committee was in Europe recently for meetings on the potential of the TEN-T programme, particularly in relation to the movement of freight. Europe feels that, by and large, freight should be moved by rail, but the reality is that on the island of Ireland freight moves by road. The Committee was concerned that the opportunity of attending the stakeholders' meeting was not taken up by your Department, but, thankfully, it took up the opportunity that the Committee identified in making the submission, on 8 May. We have a view that we simply cannot have enough engagement with Europe and that the question of over-egging the dialogue with Europe does not exist. Will you make some comment on that?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. The organisations involved in the freight forum are DRD, DTTAS, the Department of the Environment, the Freight Transport Association, the Road Safety Authority, the Irish Exporters Association, the Irish Maritime Development Office and the Central Statistics Office in Dublin. An administrative steering group meets quarterly to receive updates from each of the working groups. This is important work that is being carried forward, and I hope that it will continue.

In relation to the issue that the Member raised on engagement at European level on TEN-T matters, the Committee Clerk, the Deputy Chair and I have had discussions over recent days about the event that was held in Brussels yesterday. My Department and I, as Minister, did not receive a formal invitation to attend that event, although the Committee managed to get one on its recent trip to Europe. It was described as a key stakeholders' event, and my understanding is that no representatives at departmental or ministerial level were present from the Welsh devolved Administration or from the Scottish devolved Administration. Therefore, I welcome the fact that two members of the Committee attended the briefing yesterday, along with the Clerk, and I am very interested in getting an update on that.

I can tell the House that, entirely separate to the arrangements that the Committee had, it is my intention to visit Strasbourg early next week to meet senior officials and MEPs in relation to TEN-T issues. Therefore, there will be a combined strength in the representations. I take the point that it is important that we, as an Assembly, and, indeed, as an Executive, punch above our weight, if possible, on European matters.

I am happy to continue to work with the Committee in respect of these issues, and I assure the Member that, yet again, I will be putting strong representations — I think for the third time as Minister — on behalf of Northern Ireland's position in respect of TEN-T issues at the heart of Europe early next week.

Mr Speaker: Before I call Stephen Moutray, I wish to say to the House that Pat Doherty has had some latitude this morning as Deputy Chair of the Committee, and rightly so. It is the convention that Chairs or Deputy Chairs have some latitude when it comes to formulating their questions to the Minister, but that is where the latitude ends. There is a pattern in the House where Members feel that they also should deliver statements before they come to their question, but that applies only to the Chairs or vice-chairs of Committees. From here on in, it is one question to the statement, not further statements.

Mr Moutray: I thank the Minister for bringing the statement to the House. I welcome the improvements that have been made in relation to the Enterprise service and the timings of it. Will the Minister outline what discussions there were in respect of minimising delays for

road users and pedestrians at level crossings? I am thinking particularly of the William Street crossing in Lurgan, which is in my constituency, and its daily impact on the people who live and trade there.

Mr Speaker: I insist that the Member finishes.

Mr Moutray: Yes. What plans does the Minister have to alleviate problems at that crossing, given that we are now talking about the possibility of an hourly service from Belfast to Dublin?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member who has not missed his opportunity to raise a key constituency issue. The honourable lady to my right, Mrs Dobson, and other Assembly colleagues, including Sam Gardiner, continually remind me about the difficulties of the William Street junction, and rightly so. At this point, we are a very long way from the North/South ministerial sectoral meeting, at which the specific case of Lurgan railway station was not raised. However, I will undertake to update the Member on current plans, and, if that is helpful, we will do that as quickly as possible.

10.45 am

Mr Beggs: In his statement, the Minister indicated that consideration is being given to an hourly service for the Enterprise but that that would require significant investment that he does not have. Does the Minister acknowledge that there is already considerable pressure on Translink, and will he assure us that existing rail services, such as Whitehead to Larne and other rural transport routes, will not suffer as a result of some sort of political direction of investment in improving our rail service?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. Yes, he is right: Translink, in conjunction with officials from my Department, is looking at the challenging financial scenario over the next two years. I know that the Regional Development Committee is due to receive presentations again from Translink on that situation. It is my hope and expectation that we can work through those issues and that any necessary finance can be found to maintain the level of services. However, it is challenging, and it may well be that I will have to turn to Executive colleagues and the Finance Minister for some additional relief on those matters. Nevertheless, we will continue to constructively work to ensure that front line services are not impacted on.

Mr Dallat: The Minister has identified all the things that need to be done to improve cross-border rail services. Does he agree that it is time to build up a head of steam in Europe to ensure that we have a decent service not only between Belfast and Dublin but between Derry and Dublin?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his pun and his supplementary question. As Minister, I have already proved my commitment to rail and to improving links between Belfast and Londonderry. Work is scheduled to commence in July to upgrade the Coleraine to Londonderry section of line. Obviously, we will also look for further improvements, not only to that section but to other sections. If it is at all possible, we will avail ourselves of any possible opportunity that Europe may provide to do that. Hence, it is important for the Committee to be involved, as they are and as members of the Committee were yesterday. When I go to Strasbourg, hopefully next week, I will further advance the claims on behalf of the Executive and the Assembly to improve our rail and road infrastructure.

Mr Dickson: Minister, you commented in your statement on the Active Travel strategy. Do you accept that one of the main barriers to active travel is the lack of adequate infrastructure? Will you commit yourself to formulating a detailed plan for the development of infrastructure to facilitate more walking and cycling and integration with public transport?

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. I very much agree that active travel should be to the fore. Not only will it enhance travel as we know it, it will also enhance the health of our population. I am pleased that DRD will provide £3 million in the current financial year in capital funding to support the development of innovative demonstration projects. Sorry — not just £3 million in one year, but over the three years between 2012 and 2015. I realise that that is not an enormous sum of money. Nevertheless, it is clear that our intent is there. Even in financially challenging days, we see the benefit of the Active Travel strategy, and I am particularly interested in carrying it forward.

Mr Campbell: I do not know whether it is coincidental that the Minister is talking about transport today after his Stig-like performance at Parliament Buildings yesterday. My question is specifically on the comment in the statement

regarding the Belfast to Dublin service between this country and the Republic, which everyone supports. The Minister said that providing an hourly service:

“will require additional subvention beyond what is available within current budgets”.

Can he assure the House, particularly those of us who represent the north-west, that if that occurs, it will not be at the expense of services to the north-west?

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for his compliments. Dressing up, it seems, is sometimes popular.

The Member makes a very good point. Certainly, when seeking to avail myself of additional funds, be it from Europe or the Executive, I as transport Minister look at how we can enhance the entire rail network, and not at the expense of one area. As I said earlier, I think that I have shown a very strong commitment to the north-west through the upgrade of the Coleraine to Londonderry line. It seemed that that scheme was not going to take place. However, we were able to bring it forward, and with Executive agreement and approval, work will commence on it later this year. It will hopefully be completed early on in the celebration of Londonderry as the UK City of Culture. I hope that that ongoing commitment not only to the north-west but to rail, and to transport generally, will be a hallmark of my tenure as Minister.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his extensive statement. Given the tone of his response to Mr Moutray, I fully expect him to pay tribute to his former party leader, who has just entered the Chamber, as I ask this constituency-related question. On the topic of the growth in car sharing, which he raised, there have been limited improvements made to the A4. Although those improvements are to be welcomed, perhaps further improvements could be made to the A4/N16, as set out in the regional development strategy. Can the Minister provide an update on the publication of a preferred route for the Enniskillen bypass?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his question. I am happy to confirm that his constituency colleague Tom Elliott has very often raised the issue of the Enniskillen bypass and, indeed, of every road that starts and finishes in County Fermanagh. That is not unhelpful.

The matter that the Member raises was not discussed in detail at the NSMC. I will provide him with a written update as quickly as possible.

Mr P Ramsey: I welcome the Minister's statement. On a number of occasions, he referred to the north-west, and rightly so, particularly the upgrade of the Derry to Coleraine line. Will the Minister indicate to the House whether there was any discussion about the proposed new terminal in Derry? Given the developments in the lead-up to the City of Culture celebrations and for its legacy, such a terminal in the city would maximise cross-border trade and passenger flow. Can the Minister indicate whether that is being brought forward at all?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his question. Again, we seem to be straying from that which was talked about in Armagh. I can say — I might as well share the congratulations here this morning — that the Speaker himself asked for a meeting with me to discuss the railway station in Londonderry. It is difficult, given the financial situation in which Translink finds itself. I know that a study being undertaken at the moment is identifying options. We will seek to get an update on where that is and likely timescales, and provide that information to the Member.

Mr Allister: Did the Minister find time to discuss the continuing blight on the freight industry, caused by the widespread use of illegal fuel and by contraband smuggling, which is driving honest operators out of business, because they refuse to so subsidise their business?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. That is indeed a very significant issue and, representing a border constituency as I do, I am well aware of the abuse that takes place and the impact on not only the environment but the Exchequer. Because it covers issues of the law and therefore of justice, there was no detailed discussion at the North/South sub-plenary in Armagh on this occasion. However, I am happy to raise it at the next plenary and subsequent meetings of the NSMC to ensure that proper attention is given to it.

Mr Speaker: I call Conor McKeivitt.

Mrs McKeivitt: Thank you, Mr Speaker. The McDevitt and McKeivitt names sound alike. I also thank the Minister for his statement this morning and the extensive list of things that were discussed at the meeting, including

walking, cycling, public transport and car sharing throughout the island. I will pick on car sharing, with the website and the joint promotions of car sharing. Has the Minister any plans to extend existing and more popular car sharing schemes throughout the jurisdictions, particularly around Sheepbridge in Newry?

Mr Kennedy: I am very grateful to the Member. Tip O'Neill was absolutely right: "all politics is local". As the Member knows, and wants me to explain again, I recently met her in relation to that issue of park-and-share and park-and-ride facilities at Sheepbridge off the A1 bypass. I also had the opportunity to meet members of Newry and Mourne District Council — of which she is a former member, like me — to discuss the issue. Officials are looking at how we can improve the existing situation, given the financial constraints that we face, and I will seek to update the Member accordingly.

Mr McNarry: I thank the Minister for his statement. I am glad to see that he is as nimble as ever, even without his crash helmet on today. When he was discussing the Belfast to Dublin rail link, were salary increases and job losses for Translink employees on the agenda? If they were not, does he expect them to be on the agenda soon?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. I regard such issues as matters to be dealt with primarily by Translink, and therefore they would not, and should not, fall under the remit of North/South ministerial sectoral meetings. I can tell the Member, as I think I indicated last week at Question Time, that, so far, Translink has successfully avoided compulsory redundancies in all of the changes that it has brought forward and efficiency drives that it has had. I hope that, by working with Translink through my departmental officials, we can ensure that that remains the case.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for his answers. In relation to the electric vehicle charging infrastructure, are there any proposals to increase the number of provincial towns that will be used as charging points like Strabane and Omagh? Secondly, what proposals are there to have any joint promotion for the greater use of electric vehicles on the whole of the island?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. The Member will know that we have publicly launched the e-car. Alex

Attwood and I had the opportunity to use the vehicles, and they are very impressive, both in terms of their low emissions and their driving capacity. We have installed charging points at various locations all over Northern Ireland, and we will be seeking to extend that over the next few months.

I note the Member's particular interest in Strabane and Omagh, which, conveniently fall in his constituency. I will seek to update him with the number and location of sites, as well as proposals for any increase.

11.00 am

North/South Ministerial Council: Road Safety

Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment):

In compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, I, too, wish to make a statement on the twelfth meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in transport sectoral format, which was held in Armagh at NSMC headquarters on Friday 20 April 2012. As you heard, the meeting was chaired by the Regional Development Minister, my colleague Danny Kennedy, and attended by Minister Varadkar TD, the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport and me. I will address the agenda items for which my Department has responsibility: road user safety, vehicle safety and the mutual recognition of penalty points.

The Council welcomed continuing collaboration on the delivery of road safety strategies and the complementary approach to the Crashed Lives road safety campaign. On my behalf and, clearly, that of the House, I convey sympathy to the families who have lost a loved one in recent days in road collisions. At the same time, I acknowledge that, in the North and in Ireland, significant reductions are now being demonstrated in the number of road traffic fatalities and serious injuries. In my view, that is all influenced and encouraged by the complementary approach to road safety campaigns, North and South.

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

At the meeting, we discussed the recent introduction in Ireland of lower blood:alcohol concentration levels for drivers, which came into force on the October bank holiday last year. I also set out the primary objectives of the draft road traffic amendment Bill. Subject to Executive agreement, I will issue the relevant provisions of the Bill for consultation soon. Hopefully, that will be imminent. As Members know, the Bill will provide the powers that are necessary to introduce similar lower blood:alcohol concentration levels in Northern Ireland for, on the one hand, novice and professional drivers and, on the other hand, all other drivers at appropriate concentration levels.

The Council welcomed the sharing of knowledge and experience to improve new driver safety.

There is strong mutual interest in driver training and testing and in graduated driver licensing, as well as in the effectiveness of measures in those areas and how best to implement and evaluate them. I intend to make an announcement very shortly on additional driver licensing changes, further to those that have already been announced, in an effort to ensure that driver licensing is upgraded to improve safety and provide opportunities for drivers.

The Council welcomed the ongoing work to implement the Goods Vehicles (Licensing of Operators) Act (Northern Ireland) 2010.

On vehicle safety, the Council welcomed the continuing co-operation to proactively target a wide range of illegal activity in the goods haulage and passenger transport industries. That includes an increased enforcement focus on bus and coach operators; discussions on a further series of cross-border enforcement operations in 2012 in both jurisdictions, of which at this time it is intended there will be eight; co-operation on vehicle standards, including the mutual recognition of vehicle type approval, review of the use of agricultural vehicles in Ireland and the exchange of data on unroadworthy foreign vehicles; and excellent co-operation on the enforcement of EU tachograph and driver hours rules and proposed training exchanges for enforcement officers.

There was a further conversation on proposals from the London Government on charging for foreign haulage coming into Britain and Northern Ireland. Given the particular circumstances on the island, where there is a land border, and the movement of vehicles north and south, the London proposals to charge foreign hauliers using roads in Britain and Northern Ireland will be more testing and challenging in our circumstances than might be the case in Britain.

The Council also noted that nominations to joint steering and working groups have been sought from representatives of relevant interests in both jurisdictions to take forward work on the mutual recognition of penalty points. It was further noted that the terms of reference for the joint steering and working groups have been prepared and that the timetable for delivery and implementation by 2014 will be prepared following the first steering and working group meetings.

Minister Kennedy will confirm Minister Varadkar's strong and growing commitment to achieving the proposed recognition of penalty points by 2014.

I welcomed that. I also welcomed the advance on that work, and progress will be reported to the next NSMC transport meeting, to which Minister Kennedy referred, in October of this year.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister of the Environment. Sorry: I call the Chairperson of the Environment Committee, Ms Anna Lo. That was a promotion for you, Anna.

Ms Lo (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment): Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

I thank the Minister for his statement. I very much welcome the forthcoming consultation on a Bill to reduce blood:alcohol concentration levels for drivers. Did the Minister discuss with his counterpart advances in detecting the increasing problem of people driving under the influence of drugs and deterring them from doing so?

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for her question and for her support for the consultation that is about to commence on the Executive-endorsed proposals to reduce the blood:alcohol limits for novice and professional drivers and all other categories of driver.

At the meeting, there was no particular discussion about drug testing. However, as Members will be aware, proposals are emanating from London that, it is hoped, will be in place within the next two or three years to facilitate the roadside testing of people who are believed to be under the influence of drugs. I want to make it very clear, because there may be some confusion, that it is already an offence to have drugs in your system, whether illegal or prescription, if they impair your ability to drive. However, it is difficult to assess whether someone is suffering from impairment. It is part of our road safety strategy, the Department's commitment and London's commitment that, within the next two or three years, there will be sufficient scientific advances to allow the roadside testing of drivers' saliva. Four pilots of equipment are being worked through. People would be tested at the side of the road and, on that basis, a judgement made on whether they were under the influence of drugs. Therefore, we will move beyond a test of impairment to a test of science, and that saliva-based test will give rise to potential prosecutions. However, that is still work in progress. How, for example, will you differentiate between people who legitimately have prescription drugs in their system and

those who have taken illegal drugs; what drugs will be covered; and what further tests will be carried out when someone is brought back to a police station? Those are issues of science. However, I welcome the fact that the London Government agree that we need to get to a point at which roadside science-based tests determine whether someone is under the influence of drugs and that penalties will arise in those circumstances.

Mr Weir: I welcome the statement and the Minister's indication that, in the near future, he will provide more information on the driver licensing system. I will not press him directly on that today.

What timetable does the Minister envisage for the implementation of the change to the blood:alcohol level?

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member. I intend to have consultation on the blood:alcohol proposal within the month. The consequence of that is to have legislation in the House by the autumn so that we will have the First Reading and the other stages of the Bill thereafter as part of the road traffic amendment Bill that I propose to bring forward. I have an ambition to have a second road traffic amendment Bill further in the mandate. If that arises, it is in that legislation that we would park any further legislative requirements in respect of drug testing for driver capability.

I do not mind touching on the issue of changes in the driver licensing regime. We have an opportunity to have the most radical reconfiguration of driver testing in a way that potentially can work itself through in reduced insurance costs for everybody, particularly new drivers, and improve road safety and driver capacity. For example, I am inclined to go down the road of allowing learner and restricted drivers to drive at a speed of 70 mph rather than 45 mph. I am inclined to agree that learner drivers should be able to go on a motorway in a dual-controlled vehicle with a qualified driver instructor in order to learn how to drive on motorways. When Mr Weir and I and everybody else in the House passed the driving test, we could have been on a motorway within five minutes, having never been on a motorway before. That does not seem to be a sensible way to proceed. I am looking at more radical changes, including the potential to allow people to get a licence before the age of 17 but not being allowed to take a test for

a period, potentially up to a year, after they get their licence. In all those ways, we can create opportunities for young drivers to drive and have a better training regime in preparation for qualification in a way that can work itself through to reduce insurance costs.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I take the opportunity to offer my sincere sympathy and condolences to the family of young Gary McNaughton, who was tragically killed on the roads over the weekend in Armagh city and district.

Minister, you talked about graduated driver licences, and you explained some of the measures that you intend to introduce. You mentioned 70 mph on motorways and that type of testing for learner drivers. Will you consider looking at a speed inhibitor in some cases? You talked about introducing the tests to young people, perhaps of 16 years of age. Will you look at speed inhibitors being fitted to some cars?

11.15 am

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member. As I indicated in my opening remarks, I, too, send my condolences to all those who have recently lost a family member as a result of a road traffic accident, particularly given that, in the first four months of this calendar year, there was a further demonstrable shift downwards in the number of road fatalities and serious injuries arising from road collisions. There seemed to be a further shift in driver behaviour. As part of that, on 23 May, my Department will roll out the next phase of the 'Crashed Lives' 45-second slot TV advertisements, which, on this occasion, will be about the risk to pedestrians. There was evidence of a spike in recent times — certainly during the course of last year — of pedestrians, especially on unlit rural roads, being at higher risk and with higher levels of fatalities. I hope to be joined on that occasion by the Minister of Justice and the Minister for Regional Development, Mr Kennedy, to show a corporate responsibility across Departments in that regard.

I noted what the Member said about speed inhibitors. They need to be considered by car manufacturers. Mr Kennedy referred to the option of driving an e-car. One thing about e-cars is that they are so silent that you cannot hear them, inside or outside. In America, they have begun to fit noise boxes to electric cars to let people know that there is a car about. It is not just our sight that guides us in road safety but

our hearing. If you do not hear something, there is an increased risk. I think that issues around speed inhibitors and other manufacturing interventions can be part of the roll-out of increased road safety measures.

I am looking at driver behaviour, which is a variation on Mr Boylan's proposal. There is greater opportunity to put black boxes in cars that monitor driver behaviour, especially that of a novice. There is evidence that insurance companies will reduce premiums where they are satisfied that a newly qualified driver such as Mr Eastwood — despite his longevity, he is a recently qualified driver — is of a sufficient standard. There was an article in 'The Irish Times' yesterday — I cut it out but did not read it — about how advances in technology mean that black boxes can be put in cars in an effort to monitor driver behaviour, especially that of young and novice drivers. That could result in reduced premiums for young and novice drivers as a result of high standards of driving. Those are the technologies of today that we need to have in the cars of today.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for the detailed information. I note that his statement mentioned a review of the use of agricultural vehicles, and I wonder exactly what that entails. My ears light up when I hear that, simply because we sometimes feel that there is too much legislation on that. I want to get to the bottom of what the review will entail.

Mr Attwood: When I was referring to that in my statement, I knew that there was bound to be a question. I have not had any briefing on it, so I will have to go on recall. One issue raised by Mr Varadkar, subject to Mr Kennedy's recollection, was that there is evidence of agricultural vehicles being used for non-agricultural purposes in difficult times, although I think that the evidence comes from the Republic and not here. That has an impact on other vehicle suppliers — for example, suppliers for the construction industry — because, if agricultural vehicles are used, generally or widely, on public roads for the movement of building materials, there are issues around road safety and whether that constitutes proper use. Mr Varadkar raised that issue, although we do not seem to have the scale of problem that appears to exist in the Republic. Further assessments are being made on that issue, but they escape my mind at the moment. I will have to write to the Member.

Mr Dallat: I welcome the Minister's statement and his indication that there is collaboration with the Republic. Does he agree that there should be no opportunity for people on either side of the border to take the life of others or cause serious injury? Will he indicate how, through collaboration, we will arrive at a situation in which the border will not be an excuse for lawbreakers to take other people's lives?

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for his question, and I fully endorse the sentiment that he expresses. It may seem beyond our reach, but the target should be zero road deaths. In a place like here, given the ability to roll out public policy on an all-Ireland basis, the aspiration should be to have zero deaths on the roads. In parts of Europe, the ambition to have zero deaths on the road is publicly stated, and, whilst that might be seen to be overreaching, I have no doubt that, if you look at the figures from when they were first collected and go back over the decades, when hundreds of people were being killed on our roads, you will see that it seemed beyond our capacity and ambition to get down to where we are today. Over the past two years, there have been fewer than 60, and, in the first four months of this year, there was a further appreciable shift in the volume of deaths on our roads. I say that cautiously, because it only takes one tragedy or a series of tragedies, as we have had in recent days, for those figures to begin to spike again.

I acknowledge that there is a lot of joined-up work on road safety. The Republic of Ireland has learned from our Crashed Lives campaign, and we have learned from the fact that it introduced lower alcohol limits in October last year. The Road Safety Authority in the Republic is led by Gay Byrne, and I hope that there might be some event for which Mr Byrne might come north to further manifest and give expression to the shared strategy and workings that we have on an all-Ireland basis. All that work is ongoing day and daily, but, to escalate that work, we are taking forward the mutual recognition of penalty points, not for every offence but for the critical offences of drink-driving, car phone use, no seat belt, excess speed and careless driving. Careless driving is the single biggest factor that gives rise to serious injury and death on our roads. That is why, Mr Dallat, we are taking that forward, despite some initial advice to me that we could not do this working with Dublin. I checked out the legal advice and found out that we could do it. I then spoke with Mr

Penning, one of the Ministers in the Department for Transport in London, to invite him into a shared enterprise with Dublin and ourselves to have all-islands recognition of penalty points. He was not inclined to go in that direction this time, but he offered his support and said that he would watch it closely. So, Mr Varadkar and I have taken the initiative forward to have mutual recognition of penalty points for critical driving issues on the island of Ireland. That, allied with mutual recognition of driver disqualification and other interventions, will, hopefully, fulfil the ambition of Mr Dallat's question.

Mr P Ramsey: I commend the Department and the Minister for the Crashed Lives programmes, which he has spoken about a few times. I particularly commend the participants in the programmes whose testimony and witness has been a powerful message in itself. In my constituency, there is a family who lost their son and a young lady who is quite badly disabled and in a wheelchair. As someone who has lost a brother and his wife, killed by a drunk driver, I understand the trauma and difficulties experienced by families. Is the Minister confident that the recognition of penalty points North/South will be firmly in place before 2014?

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for his question. Personally, he speaks with more power and eloquence than arguably anybody in the Chamber about the impact on families of road traffic collisions. I also agree with him about the testimonies of the two young people in the Crashed Lives ads who will carry with them a severe disability for the rest of their life and of the two sets of parents who will carry with them the tragedy and trauma of the loss of a young child: they are very powerful. I had the honour of meeting all of them, including the people from Derry, when the Crashed Lives advertisements were launched earlier this year. It leaves you speechless. The scale of their trauma and the power of their message are so great that, even when the adverts come on TV now, you stop to hear the message from the voices of those parents and young people.

It will not be an easy task to have all this in place by 2014. There are legal issues and administrative arrangements, and there is a requirement to share data and to have the IT architecture in place to ensure that we can go live in 2014. However, for an idea that was only born six months ago, it is clear that, at an official level, the Administrations North and South have interrogated what needs to be done

and have developed work streams to make sure that it gets done. There are no ifs or doubts in the views of Minister Varadkar, Minister Kennedy and me: we want to get it done and to send out the message that there will be enforcement of the penalty point regime across the island for anyone who is guilty of serious offences.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an ráiteas a rinne sé. Ba mhaith liomsa a fhiafraí den Aire cad iad na tionscnaimh nua a bheas sa phacáiste nua aige le feabhas a chur ar shábháilteacht ar bhóithre do thiománaithe nua agus an mbeidh dea-thionchar ag na moltaí seo ar chostas árachas gluaisteán do na tiománaithe nua? What initiatives will be included in the Minister's forthcoming package of measures to improve road safety for new drivers? Is it likely that such measures will contribute beneficially to a reduction in insurance premiums for young drivers?

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for his question. I touched on some of the question in earlier replies, and I will enlarge on some of those replies. Other initiatives that I am inclined to bring forward would be, for example, to increase the restriction period from one year to two years. If there is to be a more liberal approach in some aspects of novice driving — for example being able to drive at 70 mph — it may be necessary to extend by a year the period of restriction to fully and better monitor new drivers' performance. In that way, we can give some flexibility to new drivers while creating new discipline. There will also be a proposal — newer drivers are much more aware of this than my generation — to have a syllabus-led training regime, whereby people would be obliged to record how their training proceeds in order to self-assess and be externally assessed on the quality of their driving during the training period. I also intend to change R-plates to N-plates to demonstrate that drivers are new drivers and give expression to that in that way.

There are other more controversial proposals that I will think about, but I am far from satisfied that they are the right way to go in our particular circumstances. For example, in other jurisdictions, there is a ban on night-time driving for new drivers, let us say between 1.00 am and 6.00 am, and there is an argument and evidence from Australia, New Zealand and states in America that that has an appreciable impact on road safety, especially for new drivers. However, in our circumstances, our diverse rural

community and the need for younger people, in particular, to work part time at night, it seems hard to see how that could work.

11.30 am

A proposal strongly made to me by insurance companies is to put restrictions on who new drivers can carry. That is, again, because there is good evidence that new drivers carrying people of their own age group are involved disproportionately in serious and fatal road traffic accidents. To consider restricting who new drivers can carry, particularly applying it to their own age group, and the number of passengers they would be allowed is a bold step. That is the radical, bold, cutting edge of a driver regime, and I am considering those proposals. Whatever I come up with in the coming weeks will be measured by the concern for road safety, flexibility for new drivers and reducing insurance costs.

Lord Morrow: The Minister speaks about driver training and testing. Does he envisage a part of testing being carried out in the hours of darkness, as driving in daylight and at night are entirely different? Does he plan to increase the motorway speed limit from 70 miles per hour to 80?

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for his question. The speed limit on motorways is Mr Kennedy's responsibility. Without presuming to speak for him, I think that our common view is that increasing the speed limit to 80 is not desirable. The evidence from Britain is that the consequences in a motorway collision of moving to 80 miles per hour are disproportionate to the increase of just 10 miles per hour. I know that London has been thinking about changing it, but I am not inclined to agree with it. I have stated that publicly; Mr Kennedy can answer for himself in the fullness of time, but I think that we probably share that view.

In respect of night-time driving: 21 proposals were brought forward to me. My officials were inclined to recommend six. I have gone beyond those six to bring forward probably 12, 13 or 14 of the various recommendations that arise from the consultation. Among them is whether we can operationally, logistically and managerially introduce night-time driving as part of the training regime. You will hear further about all that in the near future.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes questions to the Minister of the Environment on his statement.

Education: Further Funding Allocations in 2012-13

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education):

Go raibh maith agat a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. A Phríomh-Leas Cheann Comhairle, ba mhaith liom ráiteas a dhéanamh ar na Leithdháiltí Breise Cistithe atá á ndéanamh in earnáil an oideachais i 2012-13. I would like to make a statement on further funding allocations that I am making to the education sector for the 2012-13 financial year and a number of announcements for the period beyond that.

In January this year, following discussions with the First Minister, the deputy First Minister and the Finance Minister, I announced that I had secured an additional £120 million over the next three years to be allocated directly to schools. The underlying details of this were notified to the chairpersons of all grant-aided schools at that time. The following month, I advised schools of their individual delegated budgets, distributed under the common funding scheme arrangements, for the 2012-13 financial year.

Although I was able to provide early notification to schools in January of the overall delegated budgets available to them over the next three years, it was equally important that the remaining 40% of my budget was reviewed to ensure that resources were being utilised in the best way. In that context, I had previously announced that I had asked my officials to carry out an internal review of budget allocations to identify further savings for allocations to priority funding areas. This review has now been completed, and I am announcing the results today.

The review has released funding for key areas through further reductions in bureaucracy and savings from other educational services. Today's allocations have been made possible only by my efforts to drive out inefficiencies. The internal budgetary review identified a range of funding areas where further savings can be delivered. All the savings that have been identified are over and above those already published in my Department's savings delivery plan. For example, I am tasking the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) with delivering a further £2.9 million of savings this financial year. In addition, £1 million is to be realised from the entitlement framework budget in 2012-13. Other areas where savings have been identified in 2012-13 are a saving of £0.5 million from the school improvement

programme and a saving of £1.4 million from the school development fund. I will arrange for details of the revised budget lines to be sent to the Education Committee in due course.

However, let me be clear: despite announcing these further funding allocations today, education continues to face tough financial challenges. As Minister, I am fully committed to ensuring that I make the best use of the funds that are available to me. I have repeatedly made it clear that I will continue to seek further funding for education. However, I do not simply look towards the Executive for extra funds. I fully recognise the fiscal climate in which allocations across the Budget 2010 period were set, so I have reassessed my own planned budget allocations to allow me to identify further savings so that I can reinvest them in front line education and youth services and in areas where real differences can be achieved.

Our children deserve the best environment in which to learn. However, the maintenance backlog in schools remains significant, and failure to progress work now will compound the problem through further deterioration of the education estate. I am, therefore, ring-fencing £27 million for that purpose in 2012-13 in the education and library boards' resource allocation plans. That will allow early commissioning of work in this area, and it will also go some way to providing support to the construction industry.

I recognise fully the benefits of early intervention for the educational outcomes of our children, and in support of that, I announced a range of measures in the Assembly last month. As well as providing an additional £150 per annum for each preschool place in the voluntary and private sector and expanding the Sure Start programme to reach 25% of the most disadvantaged areas, I am providing the funding that is necessary to allow me to meet the Executive's commitment in the Programme for Government of providing at least one year of preschool education for every family who wants it. Those measures amount to a further £13 million, which is broken down as follows: a total of £3.9 million over the next three years to fund an additional £150 payment to the voluntary and private sector; a total of £4.4 million over the next three years to fund the expansion of the Sure Start scheme; and a total of £4.8 million over the next three years to provide at least one year's preschool education. If it is established that further investment is needed

to deliver this Programme for Government commitment, I will not be found wanting.

I am also allocating an additional £1.2 million per annum, amounting to £3.6 million over the next three years, for the extended schools programme. That will allow for a co-ordinated approach to involving parents in the life of the school and will provide programmes to allow parents to support the development of their child's literacy and numeracy skills. For youth services, I am providing an increased investment of £1 million this year, rising to £2 million per annum from 2013-14. That is a total of £5 million of additional investment over the next three years. That additional funding will be used to support youth services in disadvantaged areas by increasing access to mainstream youth services and outreach and detached youth work. It will also target provision to help meet the needs of specific groups of young people, such as those in the section 75 groupings or those who may be at greater risk of social exclusion, marginalisation or isolation because they experience a combination of barriers to learning.

I remain fully committed to tackling social need and disadvantage. Hence, I am providing a further £1.3 million over each of the next three years, which is some £3.9 million in total, to ensure that the rising numbers of children in lower-income families receive the uniform grants and free school meals to which they are entitled. I strongly encourage those families to claim their full entitlements to ease the financial burden that is placed upon them.

I have been impressed by the work of the area learning communities and the potential contribution that they can make to the education system, particularly as we move forward with area-based planning. I have set aside £0.5 million per annum, amounting to £1.5 million over the next three years, to develop a more meaningful role, and I have asked my officials to work up proposals for that.

The role performed by our school governors should not be underestimated. I will give these volunteers the help and support that they need to carry out their crucial role. Hence I am setting aside funding of £0.5 million per annum — up to £1.5 million over the next three years — to improve the quality and responsiveness of training and support to help governors in their focus on raising standards and promoting effective management within schools.

Today, I am also announcing financial support for a number of other areas. That support includes a total of £2.2 million over the next three years to ensure that all dedicated school buses have the appropriate signage and lighting; setting aside provision of up to £6 million per annum for special schools to recognise increasing demand and costs in that area; and support of up to £0.5 million per annum for a project in Belfast that focuses on raising standards and achieving the Programme for Government commitment on tackling disadvantage.

On capital allocations, I am looking at how best to allocate the reduced funding available to me. I propose to announce the outcome of that shortly.

Real progress has been made in delivering the savings delivery plan targets to date, but it is clear that we still face significant challenges over the next three years in balancing the books. It will be important in the weeks and months ahead that school budgets are closely managed and that boards of governors continue to exercise good financial management.

By announcing these further allocations today, I have demonstrated my commitment to ensuring that the funding available to me is directed to areas where the greatest benefit can be achieved. At the heart of my proposals are the twin aims of raising standards and providing for the most vulnerable in society. However, let me assure you that I will not rest on my laurels and that I will constantly seek to increase the funding available to education to ensure that our young people get the world-class education they so richly deserve.

Mr Storey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education): On behalf of the Committee, I thank the Minister for the briefing that he gave to me and the Deputy Chair prior to his coming to the House this morning. I also thank him for giving a commitment that his officials will send the details of the revised budget lines to the Education Committee so that they can be further scrutinised.

I would caution the Minister that neither he nor we should make the mistake of trying to link the additional money that he secured in 2012 as a result of the intervention of the First Minister and the Finance Minister with the reallocation of the 40% of his budget that he had delayed allocating. We should make that clear distinction because the Minister is, I think, trying to link two things that are not inextricably linked.

However, in light of what the Minister has said to the House today, will he clearly explain to the House, on the back of what he told us a few weeks ago, how this particular reallocation will deal with the disparity around the percentage figure relating to the delegated budget, which, according to his own words, was somewhere in the region of 59%? How will he ensure that that money will go directly to schools? On the one hand, he says that it will, but on the other hand, he tells us today that another £1.3 million is to be released from the entitlement framework budget, which will put additional financial pressure on schools. That is not a help, and that is not welcome. However, no doubt much more will be said about the statement made to the House today.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Chairperson for his question. It covers a wide range of issues. I often find it remarkable that when he refers to the meeting that took place between the First Minister, the deputy First Minister and the Finance Minister, he cannot bring himself to mention the deputy First Minister. The deputy First Minister and the First Minister are inextricably linked, and they were both present at the meeting with the Finance Minister.

I can assure the Member and the House that I am fully conscious of the terms upon which that agreement was reached. I welcome the fact that the First Minister, the deputy First Minister and the Finance Minister recognised the reality that, without their intervention of £120 million for education, education would be in a worse place than it is now. I am in no way using that investment so that I can futter about with the other funds within my budget and make allocations. That £120 million is there for schools and is going directly to schools. However, schools on their own cannot deliver education, as strange as that may sound. It is widely recognised that 80% of learning takes place outside the school environment and 20% within the school environment. I believe that the initiatives that I announced today will make schools' task of delivering education to young people that bit easier and allow them to raise their standards, which will allow young people to be everything that they can be.

11.45 am

This is not new money. I have never suggested that it is new money. When I came into office

approximately one year ago this week, I said that I was going to review my budget. I reviewed my budget — the 40% of the budget that does not go directly to schools. Through that review, I identified moneys that I believe should be spent elsewhere. I stand by the decisions that I made. Those moneys have now been identified for areas that will assist in the education of our young people and improve their lives and assist our schools in delivering education.

I reassure the Member and the House that I am fully conscious of the terms of the £120 million funding. I have no intention to move away from those terms. I also want to make it clear that, by the end of this financial term, this comprehensive spending review (CSR) period, education will have £216 million less to spend than it did at the start.

As Education Minister, I could come into office, sit back, allow things to happen and accept that we live in very difficult circumstances. Or, as Education Minister, I could come into office and make interventions where I can. I believe that the interventions that I announced today are the correct ones.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement. I believe that it will also be welcomed by low- to middle-income families and a beleaguered construction industry because of the £27 million investment in maintenance. On that point, how important was it for the maintenance funding to be ring-fenced?

The Minister also mentioned capital funding in his statement. Will he let us know when that capital funding is likely to be announced?

Mr O'Dowd: Last year, I think that we allocated £17 million to the boards for maintenance programmes. Through the monitoring rounds, we achieved an extra £10 million. The boards have leeway around how they spend funding, which is allocated to them through the assessment of relative needs (ARNE) formula. However, I believe that the school maintenance programme is in a dire state. That is why I announced today that £27 million has been set aside. I used £10 million of my own budget; I did not rely on the monitoring rounds. I made a definite decision that the £17 million that was available last year will be available this year and I included £10 million from my own budget; I did not rely on the Executive or on monitoring rounds. I made the decision to put £27 million into school

maintenance, and I ring-fenced it to ensure that the boards are aware that it has to be spent on school maintenance. That allows the boards to start planning school maintenance programmes that can be rolled out over the summer and into the autumn so that the money is spent in a planned way.

I accept that the boards, being the delivery agents of education, have their own financial difficulties and issues. I will work with them throughout the year, as I did last year, to assist them with the financial pressures that bear down upon them.

I am continuing to engage with my officials about the capital builds programme. I am looking at how we can make an announcement as regards capital builds in line with the principles of area planning, but it will be ahead of area planning because of the time frames involved. I want to be assured that the capital budget, limited as it is, will be spent in its entirety before the end of this CSR period.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for the meeting beforehand and for the statement. I very much welcome a great deal that is in it. It is good to see a Department constantly reviewing its spend. However, it would be better if it were done earlier so that people could budget properly for some of the things that they want to do. However, that is not what I want to go into today.

I welcome the announcement of £27 million for maintenance. I wonder how much of that money is going to go to which boards. When you spend that money and look at area planning at the same time, it will become evident that certain schools will not be getting money for their maintenance, which will show that those schools are threatened with closure. As I have gone round schools and met people, I have noticed that there is a feeling that the Department is not talking to or communicating with teachers and the boards.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Question.

Mr Kinahan: Will some of the money be used to make sure that the Department communicates properly with boards and teachers before the consultation stage to ensure that the threat hovering over so many schools is lessened?

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Member for his question. The boards, through their work and engagement with schools over many years, have information

available to them on which schools are priorities as far as maintenance programmes are concerned. A number of schools have question marks over their future. However, they may still require health and safety work to be carried out, and that work should go ahead. It is right and proper that boards, when planning significant spends on schools, take into account their own information and data on whether particular schools have a future. We are talking about only a small number of schools at this stage.

The area plans that have been drawn up are with my Department, which is scrutinising them and will ask the boards to issue them for public consultation. Not only will schools, teachers and parents have an opportunity to engage, and have all the information and facts in front of them, but the broader community will be able to engage in the area planning process. Everyone will have the plans in front of them and will be able to comment on them. The area planning process has been, and will be, open and transparent.

Of course, if there are communication issues between boards and schools, I would like there to be improvement. Good communication between schools and boards is vital and, I believe, exists in the vast majority of cases. However, if there are issues pertaining to a number of schools, and the Member would like to bring those to my attention, I would be happy to discuss them with him.

Mr Rogers: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, and I thank the Minister for his statement. I, too, welcome more money for schools, but if you really want to raise standards, the money must get to the classroom. I hope that the Minister will look at the age-weighted pupil unit in future. I would like clarification on whether there is any additional funding for special units.

Mr O'Dowd: My response to the Member's first point is that we have to come at raising standards from a multifaceted point of view. It is almost equivalent to asking the Health Minister to improve health and imposing on him a method of building a new hospital in every town. Health will not be improved by building hospitals in every town, and education will not be improved simply by concentrating all resources in the classroom. I would like more resources to put into the classroom — I am in no way stating that enough funds go there — but I have to deal with the budget in front of me and use

it in a strategic way. The money made available by the First Minister, the deputy First Minister and the Finance Minister has gone some way to alleviating the pressures on schools, but it by no means eradicates them. Today's allocations to the broader education regime will assist in delivering and supporting young people through their educational journey.

The Member asked a specific question about the age-weighted pupil unit. I have asked a number of people, whose names I will announce in the time ahead, to conduct an independent review of the common funding formula. They will engage with stakeholders and the various sectors and come back to me with a report on the best way to use my current budget to support my Department's policies. One criterion that I will place in the terms of reference is the more effective and efficient targeting of social need.

All areas of my budget have been or will be reviewed. Indeed, my budget will be constantly under review. I review programmes of work as they progress, and if not satisfied with their progress, I may change budget lines. I may also decide that a programme of work requires further investment to move forward. So it is important that Ministers are given the flexibility to review their budgets and make changes when they believe it necessary to do so.

Mr Lunn: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I welcome the Minister's statement today. I will never be disappointed to hear that a Minister is squeezing money out of bureaucracy and putting it into front line services. I want to ask the Minister specifically about the section in his statement about setting aside £6 million per annum for special schools. There is a demand from some special schools to establish post-16 provision. Could some of that £ 6 million be used for that purpose?

Mr O'Dowd: A number of boards have identified to the Department that pressures are bearing down on them in respect of special education. The Belfast Board has reported significant pressures that are bearing down on it. I have set aside the £6 million for the boards to deal with those pressures. As far as I am aware, there are no proposals before me at this stage for special schools to expand beyond 16. I will look favourably at any proposal that comes to me. We will look at the budgetary lines and requirements when proposals are made.

The Member who asked the previous question referred to special units in schools. I have to say that I do not like that term. I am not criticising the Member for using it, as it is in the dialogue of education, but I do not favour it overly. The £6 million has been set aside to assist the pressures that are being felt in special education provision, whether in mainstream schools or special schools.

Mr G Robinson: Will the Minister outline whether there are any plans in his capital allocations for new school builds at Millburn Primary School in Coleraine, which is very deserving and long overdue a newbuild, and Rossmar special needs school in Limavady, which is also very deserving of a newbuild? I welcome the funding of preschool provision and urge the Minister to look at Harpurs Hill preschool, which does so much good work.

Mr O'Dowd: The Member is perfectly entitled to raise schools in his constituency; that is the role of an MLA. I have not made any announcements of capital allocations today. I am involved in discussions with my departmental officials. We are looking at all the applications for newbuilds on my desk to see how we can use my very limited budget to fulfil a demand that far outstretches the budget available to me. Newbuilds will be announced when I make my statement. The building programme will facilitate the schools that are announced, and, of course, there will be disappointment among the schools that are not announced at that time.

Each school will be allocated its early years funding through a recognised and accepted funding formula.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I join other Members in welcoming the Minister's announcement of the allocation of funding. Will he clarify the impact that it will have on the viability audit that commenced following his statement to the House in September, given that the main assessment to date has been in financial terms? Will this allocation of additional funding have any impact on that process?

Mr O'Dowd: No, it will have no direct impact on that funding. The viability audit was carried out using three criteria: financial, exams and enrolment. The funding that I announced today is for the broader family of education. For instance, extended schools funding will go to schools, but it is not directly associated with the aggregated schools budget connected with

schools. What I have done today is to set out a package of funding for the broader remit of education. I believe that all of that will be for front line services and will assist in the improvement of educational outcomes for young people. It does not have a negative or positive impact on the viability audits.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister for his statement. I, too, welcome extra funding going into education through Sure Start, the extended schools programme, youth services and preschool education. However, the Minister will be aware of the low educational attainment in the greater Shankill. He responded to my colleague on capital allocation. He will be aware that two schools in the greater Shankill area, Springhill and Glenwood, have been waiting for newbuilds for some time. Those would be a massive boost for the local communities, the boards of governors, the parents and, most importantly, the children of those schools. Can the Minister give any comfort to those schools that have been waiting for new schools for a long time?

Mr O'Dowd: Let me clarify this on the record. I have not announced extra funding today. I have announced the reallocation of funding, which has come as a result of a review of my budgets. There will be winners and losers, as there are in all such matters. I am dealing with a budget. I have reviewed it very closely and looked at where we need to inject finances to make programmes of work more effective and efficient. I have also looked at areas in which we can reduce bureaucracy.

I am aware of the proposal for the Shankill. My response to the Member is the same as it was to his colleague. I have not made capital announcements today. I will make capital announcements in the future, but I do not have the capital resources available to fulfil the demand that is out there.

In broader terms, I would say that we have to get to a system in which the building and capital programme is much more streamlined than it is now.

It can become a very complex and convoluted process to work your way through. The way it happens is that the schools that can go ahead are those that are built, and the projects for schools that are caught up in a multitude of planning matters, discussions between schools, discussions between Departments, and land swaps, etc, face further delay. I am working on

that with my Department. I appeal to all: let us make the process of building new schools as streamlined as possible to ensure that, when moneys become available, the schools are put on the ground as quickly as possible.

12.00 noon

Mrs Dobson: I thank the Minister for his statement. I welcome the additional funding announced today, especially that targeted at preschools. However, does the Minister agree that a piecemeal approach is not the best way forward for our education system? I have been contacted by principals who have already set their budgets. Therefore, a back-of-the-sofa approach to funding education is potentially damaging for its long-term health. I also note, Minister, that £6 million of savings are detailed in the review. Can you provide further clarity on how it has come to that amount?

Mr O'Dowd: I will begin by addressing your last point. I am going to provide the Education Committee with the full list of new budget lines that have come about as a result of my review.

You referred to this as a piecemeal approach. I have been in Ministry for just going on a year. I made it clear when I came into Ministry that I required more funding to deliver education. In fairness to the Executive, they stepped up to the mark on that, and they are also dealing with a very restricted Budget. I also said that I wanted to review my own budget, and I have done so. I have made funding available to education. That comes from my own budget, and, as I said to other Members, there will be winners and losers in this. If there are school principals out there who are saying that this is no way to run the Department or that giving them money late in the year is not the way to work, they can return it to me if they want. I will then give it to a principal who can spend it. That is the harsh reality of the matter.

Announcements of funding are welcome to schools at any time of the year. I believe that my approach here today, in the second week in May, allows the notification to go out to all the funding authorities so that everyone knows what the funding picture is over the next three years. I will issue a caveat with that by saying that I will keep my budgets under review constantly, and if I believe that a programme is not delivering to its ability or that it requires further funding, I will adjust my budgets accordingly.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. I particularly welcome the £5 million support for youth services over the next three years. Are there any plans in the outreach/detached youth work to address good relations and sectarian issues among young people in our schools?

Mr O'Dowd: Yes. The community relations and equality diversity (CRED) policy, which is at the centre of my Department's work, facilitates that ongoing work. The additional £5 million for youth services is recognition that those services are an integral part of our education system. They are there, and they provide education in a different way, but they also provide fulfilment to young people and give many young people who are perhaps detached from formal education an opportunity to grow as an individual. The way in which that money will be spent will be outlined in discussions with providers, and my Department will be entering into discussions with them. We want that funding to be targeted specifically in areas of social disadvantage to assist not only the young people in those areas but the communities in those areas where there may have been a breakdown in relationships between young people and the overall community. Community relations work is an integral part of youth work, as it is an integral part of education, and that will certainly feature in it as well.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Thank you very much Mr. Principal Deputy Speaker. Siar i Mí na Samhna, d'fhógair an tAire go gcuirfeadh sé airgead breise ar fáil sa dóigh is nach mbeadh ar mhúinteoirí atá ar pá íseal an t-ardú sa liúntas pinsin a íoc. Ba mhaith liom a fhiafraí den Aire anois, ar cuireadh an t-airgead sin ar fáil go fóill? Back in November, the Minister announced that he would make money available to remove the costs of increased pension contributions for lower paid teachers. What progress has the Minister made on that issue, and when can we expect an announcement? Go raibh maith agat.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat. Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil leis an chomhalta as an cheist. I am not sure what package the Member refers to. If I have picked the Member up wrong, I will clarify it for him at a later stage. He may be referring to proposals that I brought forward in regard to the Executive's decision

to implement pension changes as a result of those being imposed on the Executive by the British Government. I brought forward proposals for discussion during the consultation period that we could place teachers in a number of bands, protecting those lower paid teachers and teachers who are just coming into the service. However, I regret to report that the unions rejected my proposals outright. Indeed, I could not make any progress around those proposals with the unions, and I took them off the table. There was no point in me moving forward with proposals that I could not receive agreement with the unions on.

I am trying to resolve a dispute with the trade unions over industrial action that they are taking regarding their concerns over pensions, but the Executive have decided what path they are going to follow because of the severe financial restraints that have been placed on them by the British Government's decision. I am still willing to engage with the unions on how to resolve the current industrial action, but the proposals that I made during the consultation process were rejected by the unions. I hope that I have picked the Member up right, but if I have not, I will be more than happy to clarify the matter for him later.

Mr McQuillan: I also thank the Minister for his statement. What impact will it have on schools when he removes £2.9 million from the budget of CCEA, given the interaction that it has with schools?

Mr O'Dowd: Any savings that I have announced today have been made on the basis that services can continue to be delivered effectively and efficiently in the absence of the moneys that I have removed from that allocated fund. Therefore, I do not believe that the redistribution of the moneys that I have made today will have a detrimental impact on any of the services. I have reviewed the budgets closely. My officials have been engaged in discussions with internal and external bodies, and I do not expect a downgrading of any service to our schools.

Mr Byrne: I welcome the Minister's statement and the reallocation of money to different services. In relation to the £5 million for youth services, can the Minister confirm that existing well-managed and well-run youth clubs will be able to avail themselves of that extra money? Can it be used to sustain existing services in those youth clubs?

Mr O'Dowd: In principle, yes. Why would we not fund well-run and well-managed youth providers? I have visited a number of youth providers in the Member's constituency, and the work that they were involved in impressed me greatly. I have set out broad criteria under which I would like to see the money spent, and it is to assist youth in areas of social deprivation. That is the only broad criteria that I have put on that. My Department will speak to the funding bodies, and we will work from there.

Ms P Bradley: I also thank the Minister for his statement. Will the Minister confirm that the £0.5 million for a project based in Belfast to tackle disadvantage is not part of Making Belfast Work but is a new idea based in west Belfast?

Mr O'Dowd: I have not finished the specifications for the programme yet. The Department of Education funds integrated services in west Belfast, which covers west Belfast and the Shankill area. I am looking at how we will fund similar projects in the future. West Belfast, the Shankill area and north Belfast throw up areas where we have serious concerns about educational underachievement, particularly among socially deprived communities. I have put my cards on the table and said that I will make £0.5 million available each year for the next three years to assist in tackling that. I am open to discussions with my Executive colleagues if any of them want to come on board or feel that it is worthwhile coming on board with a project to cover whatever geographical area we believe is in most need at that time.

Mr Allister: Will the Minister's decision to require the inspectorate to spy on primary schools lest they should meet the expectations of their parents in preparing children for post-primary transfer add any costs? Are there any budgetary implications, or does this bully-boy approach come free at the point of delivery?

Mr O'Dowd: I am sure that the Member, who, I believe, is also a barrister of some renown — I will not mention what that renown is — will ensure that I, as a Minister of the Executive, live up to my ministerial code and uphold the law. The curriculum is the law. Therefore, I am sure that the Member would be the first to challenge me in the House if I were to have a quiet word in the ear of one of the agencies in my Department and say, "By the way, I want you to ignore the law when you are inspecting schools". Surely, the Member would be on his feet, there would

be points of order and written questions, there would be all sorts of materials flowing from the Member's office demanding to know why I had told anyone to ignore the law. Therefore, I have taken the responsible measure, I have lived up to my Pledge of Office, and I have said to all agencies of my Department, "When you are carrying out your duties, ensure you carry out those duties to the letter of the law".

Committee Business

Tyres: Committee for the Environment Report

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer will have 15 minutes to propose the motion and 15 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Ms Lo (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment): I beg to move

That this Assembly approves the interim report of the Committee for the Environment on its inquiry into the management of used tyres in Northern Ireland and calls on the Minister of the Environment to bring forward a timetable for implementing the recommendations contained in the report.

I am delighted to open this debate on behalf of the Committee for the Environment. I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Committee's inquiry into the management of used tyres. The issue was brought to the Committee's attention by the legacy report of the previous Committee. Towards the end of the mandate, it had started to look into the problem of tyres being dumped, but it was very quickly clear to me and my colleagues on the current Committee that more needed to be done to address the issue. Every member had experience of tyres being dumped inappropriately, and some had even witnessed major tyre fires in their constituency.

However, no sooner did the Committee announce its intention to conduct an inquiry into the management of used tyres than the Department of the Environment (DOE) announced that it was going to conduct a survey of used tyres and prepare an action plan for their management. The Committee agreed to wait until the Department had gathered that information, but as that was back in September 2011 and it looks unlikely that we will see the data for another few months, members agreed that we should go ahead with an interim report and seek your support for the recommendations that we are making on the basis of the current information available, with the caveat that we will review the recommendations should the updated information indicate that that is necessary.

The report makes 20 recommendations. Some are general and call for a more proactive approach from the Department, but most are for specific

targeted actions to improve the way used tyres are managed in Northern Ireland. In fact, we might expect that many of the recommendations would be happening already, but they are not. For example:

“the Department should establish a robust method of quantifying the amount of waste tyres arising in Northern Ireland on an ongoing basis with a clear current indication of what proportion of these is not recovered”.

12.15 pm

The Committee was horrified — horrified — to learn at the outset of the inquiry that the latest information the Department had on the number of used tyres in Northern Ireland was well over 10 years old. I urge the Minister today to remedy that quickly, so that we all know the full extent of the problem we are trying to address.

The need for better information was a regular theme raised by stakeholders and, consequently, the Committee recommends that the Department should raise awareness of the need for better management of used tyres through a communications campaign and should ensure that people can readily identify those who are fully licensed to carry, reprocess or properly dispose of used tyres, by publishing lists of those holding the relevant licence on its website.

Tyre depots were a key area of concern. The risks to human health and the environment from fires in such stores are of paramount importance. The Committee heard that two major tyre depot fires in 2009-2010 cost the emergency services well over a quarter of a million pounds to extinguish. Consequently, the Committee recommends that tyre depots should be required to report annually to the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA), which should then conduct adequate checks to ensure that all tyres are accounted for. In addition, public bodies should be required to quantify the number of used tyres they have to remove from their premises, rather than just classifying them as fly-tipped material. In relation to fly-tipping, the Committee stresses the need for the Department to finalise its protocol for dealing with fly-tipped waste between itself and councils.

More generally, the Committee would like to see the Environment Agency develop a risk-based approach to enforcement, so that resources can be more focused on illegal activity than on monitoring compliance. The Committee

felt that much of the necessary legislation was already in place but that it needed to be better implemented in order to ensure proper management of used tyres. To progress this approach, the Committee recommends that all sectors of the used tyre chain be required to register with a compliance scheme. That should include manufacturers, carriers, importers, reprocessors and even second-hand car dealers. Although that appears to be taking place voluntarily elsewhere in the UK, it is not happening here in Northern Ireland. The Committee believes that the introduction of a mandatory registration scheme would free up the Environment Agency to focus on unregistered used tyre activity rather than checking up on those complying.

One of the reasons given to the Committee by stakeholders for the failure of voluntary schemes in Northern Ireland compared with GB is the ease with which tyres can be taken or brought over the border. The Committee recognised that it is important for the success of any measures introduced in Northern Ireland that used tyre management schemes in the Republic be taken into account. The Committee, therefore, notes that when considering any scheme for the better management of used tyres in Northern Ireland, there must be liaison with the Republic of Ireland to ensure that whatever approaches are taken on both sides of the border are compatible with each other.

The Committee saw considerable merit in a producer responsibility scheme, whereby responsibility for used tyres is given to those who manufacture, import or sell them. The Committee found out that producer responsibility is the approach most favoured by most other European countries. Although some stakeholders felt that the market was too diverse for such a scheme to work here in Northern Ireland, members felt that, provided that the definition of producer included all those involved in the tyre supply chain, the introduction of a producer responsibility scheme should be looked at in the longer term. However, as I mentioned earlier, it is essential that the Department liaises closely with the Republic when considering that approach to ensure that such a scheme would not end up being counterproductive.

Also on the subject of liaison, another of the Committee's recommendations is that the Department needs to liaise better with the police and local councils when issuing licences

for carrying, holding and reprocessing tyres in their area. The Committee believes that that will help to ensure better monitoring and, should the need arise, more effective enforcement.

The Committee noted with concern the ease with which a waste carrier licence can be obtained. It is currently set at £132 and can be applied for over the internet. With an average collection charge in Northern Ireland of around £1 for a car tyre, it would not take long for an unscrupulous operator to recoup that cost by setting up as a licensed collector of tyres with no verified, or verifiable, means of disposing of the tyres properly. The Committee would, therefore, like the process of obtaining a waste carrier licence to be made much more robust so that individuals could not simply present a waste carrier licence, charge to take tyres away and then dump them and run.

The Committee also felt that there was a lack of accountability on tyre retailers who charge a levy for the safe disposal of old tyres when replacing them with new ones. It seems that such charges are significantly higher in Northern Ireland than in most other parts of the UK, and the Committee recommends that the Department asks the Office of Fair Trading (OFT) to investigate that apparent discrepancy.

The Committee was also concerned about the complexity of exemptions to waste management licensing, several of which apply to the storing of tyres, and recommended that this be reviewed and updated to reduce the unsafe storage of tyres. Although the Committee stopped short of calling for farms to register with a compliance scheme, as required in the Republic of Ireland, it felt that farmers should be asked to indicate how many tyres they had on their farms on their annual integrated administration and control system (IACS) form.

One of the areas that most interested the Committee during the inquiry was what measures could be taken to encourage the better management of used tyres, rather than just putting in place more legislation. It soon became very clear that the existence and value of end-of-life tyre markets was critical in that process. Lucrative end uses for the recovered component parts of tyres or products created from them will pull used tyres through the system and encourage their proper disposal. However, that can easily be disrupted by global events, such as the tsunami back in 2010, which the Committee

heard had a knock-on effect on some used tyre markets and access to them.

It may seem that such incidents are totally outside the control of any measures put in place here in Northern Ireland, but research suggests that other parts of the UK are more proactive in determining the conditions under which used tyres and their by-products can be used, and, as a result, reprocessors are in a better position to take advantage of new and changing markets.

The Committee is, therefore, urging the Department to carefully, clearly and quickly identify definitions of “end of waste” in a proactive way so that recyclers can plan their marketing strategies confidently and respond rapidly to changing global markets. This will help used tyres be pulled through the market rather than being stockpiled while people wait for the market to recover.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I have covered most of the Committee’s recommendations. I hope that I have demonstrated the importance of the issue. I urge the Assembly to support the measures we are proposing to address the problem. I look forward to the rest of the debate.

Lord Morrow: At the outset, I want to pay tribute to the Chair, who led the Committee very valiantly on this issue. I also pay tribute to the Clerk and other staff involved —

Mr Hamilton: And the Deputy Chair.

Lord Morrow: I will include you, the Deputy Chair. It is due in no small part to their tenacity and leadership that we are able to come to the House today with this interim report. Like the Chair, I commend the report to the House.

The depositing of tyres means that tyres very often find their way into many and various places. We find them in our rivers and streams. We find them on our bonfires. We find them, unfortunately, illegally dumped across our beautiful landscape. A greater awareness is part of the way forward on this issue. We have to be very proactive. We have to get the message across to the public at large, in particular to those who indulge in this sort of activity, of the real damage that this causes to our environment.

Tyres are burned on fires — I certainly do not encourage that, and I ask anyone listening who may be doing so to desist from that — but that is not the only place that they end up causing a nuisance.

Mr McCarthy: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. I speak as a member of a local council. Does the Member agree that councils throughout Northern Ireland deserve great credit for the work that they have done hitherto in reducing by a large volume the unlawful burning of tyres on bonfires?

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

Lord Morrow: The point is well made. I have no hesitation in agreeing with the Member. Councils are doing great work, but there is much more to be done. They cannot do it all on their own.

If enforcement is going to mean anything, it must be robust and tackle the real issue. If that can be stepped up, I hope that, in the not too distant future, we will see the problem, if not totally eradicated, at a level at which we feel we have it under control and are beginning to manage it.

Although there is rightly concern about the number of tyres being deposited illegally, it seems, from the evidence that the Committee garnered, that the situation is not as serious or bad as it once was. We do not take any great comfort from that. However, it is worth saying. For instance, one council in its submission said that the issue of the illegal burning of tyres had, over the past five years, reduced by something like 80%. That is considerable, but it does not mean that the problem is now resolved. However, we have to acknowledge that the issue is going in the right way.

I am concerned about the enforcement of the rules around burning tyres. I believe that responsibility for the investigating and enforcement aspect of those rules lies with NIEA. In some cases, NIEA has not stepped up to the mark. It may well say that it does not have the resources, and maybe that is correct, but the point I want to make is that the Committee, the Assembly and the people of Northern Ireland are looking for more from NIEA in relation to this matter.

12.30 pm

I want to draw the House's attention to another part of the report. One submission from a council was quite startling and yet encouraging. That council intimated:

"Incidents of large scale illegal dumping of tyres such as 300+ tyres dumped ... are always passed

through to the NIEA as the agency responsible for investigating and prosecuting ... Unfortunately in this case the NIEA failed to react to the matter."

I think that that is quite telling. If you have a pile of tyres accumulating to a total of some 300, just imagine what the outcry would be if it were another type of waste. Those are not my words; they are from a submission addressed to the Chair of the Committee. It is their words, the Committee says, but the NIEA did not deal with the issue in this particular instance.

If you cannot deal with an issue as glaring and large as that, I suspect that the ones, twos and dozens of tyres, here and there, will be much less successfully dealt with. That is regrettable, and these are the issues that the Committee will be looking into as the inquiry goes on, because it must be remembered that, as the Chair has already stated, this is an interim report. We felt that it was proper that we should come to the House with it at this stage. We are only at an interim stage, and we will be coming to the House with a further report in relation to this.

Chair, are you going to tell me that my time is up?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Yes, your time is up.

Lord Morrow: I thought that. I was under the misguided impression that I had at least 10 minutes. There are so many other things that I would like to have said and which I have prepared. However, I have misjudged it, and I did not realise that I was confined to five minutes. Thank you.

Mr Principal Deputy 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. The first item of business on our return will be Question Time.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.32 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Mr Speaker: Before we move into Question Time, I remind the whole House once again of a convention in the Assembly. Members still seem to have some problems with rising in their place continually to catch the eye of the Speaker or Deputy Speaker to be allowed in for a supplementary question. There is no point, Members, in rising once in your place and then not rising again. Some Members rise in their place, and they get up and almost sit down again. Members must continually rise in their place because, if they do not, I believe that their question has been answered. Some Members believe that, once they have caught the Speaker's eye, that should be good enough and they should not have to rise again. The convention, by now, should be very clear. Secondly, I warn Members that supplementary questions must be short, focused, clear and relevant to the lead question. That is very important.

I remind all Ministers of the new Standing Order that was created some time ago. It was agreed by the Committee on Procedures and then by the House that a Minister has two minutes to answer a question. I understand that, sometimes, Ministers need more time to provide clarity around the question because of its nature. Members will know that I do not like interrupting Ministers when they are making a contribution in the House. However, I remind all Ministers — this is not identifying any Minister — of the two-minute rule. Standing Orders are also clear that, if a Minister needs extra time and they indicate that to the House, they will be granted an extra minute. I hope that that is clear and that we can proceed.

Employment and Learning

Employment: Key Skills

1. **Mrs Hale** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline how his Department consults with businesses, employers and their representative bodies to identify and deliver the key skills required to support current and future business needs. (AQO 1957/11-15)

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): I thank the Member for her question. Having a workforce that is equipped with the skills required to support current and future business needs is at the heart of the skills strategy. As key stakeholders, employers and their representative bodies played a vital role throughout its development. My employment and skills adviser, Bill McGinnis, meets businesses regularly to discuss their skill needs. Currently, he is meeting businesses in the engineering sector to determine their specific skills issues and how the Department can address them.

I recently launched the employer engagement plan, which sets out a range of actions through which my Department will engage with businesses to help to deliver the key aspects of the skills strategy. The Department has worked in close collaboration with employer stakeholders to address the skill needs of a number of identified economic priority sectors through the development of sector-specific action plans.

Employers are also able to avail themselves of a number of services provided by my Department to help them to address their skill needs. They include the skills solutions service, which helps employers to upskill their existing workforce, and the employers' service, which works with employers to advertise and manage their job vacancies through Employers Online or through the network of jobs and benefit offices and jobcentres. An employer engagement team has recently been established to develop and implement an enhanced service to employers. The innovative Assured Skills programme, run in conjunction with Invest Northern Ireland, significantly boosts our offer to potential inward investors and growing indigenous businesses by working with them to develop a workforce with the specific skills that they need.

Mr Speaker: Before I call Brenda Hale, I should indicate to the House that questions 5, 8 and 9 have all been withdrawn.

Mrs Hale: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he agree that, where businesses, employers and representative bodies have identified the need for crucial skills development, appropriate funding should be granted from his Department to fund initiatives that look to maximise current and future opportunities?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for her supplementary. I have always been clear in

stressing that skills are a key driver of the Northern Ireland economy. It is critical that we match demand with the appropriate supply. In doing so, we have to tailor our programmes very much to the needs of employers. Often, the employers are most direct in articulating what the current and future skill needs of the economy will be. What the Member has suggested is what we practice in DEL.

Mrs Overend: Recently, businesses in my locality have told me that education does not always equal skills. Will the Minister tell the House what he has been doing to address that issue and the need for young people to get practical work experience that will enable them to transfer their educational achievement into jobs?

Dr Farry: The Member is right. We have a very good system in Northern Ireland, particularly at the FE and higher education end of the spectrum. The system provides good education, but we must also ensure that young people have employability skills that are particularly relevant to the needs of businesses.

The Assured Skills programme is a good example of how we try to provide bespoke offerings. The Member will also be aware of the software testers' academy, now on its second cohort, which turns graduates in general subjects into IT specialists over a very short period.

The Member also mentioned work experience and placements, and I am keen to stress their importance. We seek to develop those through the further and higher education systems. Apprenticeships are very much about hands-on work experience, and we are talking about our various employment programmes offering that type of experience as well.

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Given the important role that the South West College plays in my constituency, will the Minister outline the role played by regional colleges in identifying and delivering the key skills needed to support current and future business needs?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for her question. I pay particular tribute to the South West College, which is international in standard, particularly its STEM offerings. On Friday, a reception in the Assembly will recognise the Beacon awards that the South West College recently acquired.

More generally, the further education sector is our default provider of skills across a broad range of sectors and at wide-ranging levels of attainment. It is important, particularly when we look to the future, that we have a joined-up approach, working with employers on skills and integrating that work with what is provided through the further education network.

Mr Dickson: Minister, will you tell the House what the level of interest has been from businesses and employers, particularly in the measures that you have taken to tackle youth unemployment?

Dr Farry: As Members are aware, we have agreed a policy framework through the Executive for a new set of programmes to address youth unemployment. We are in advanced discussions with the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Executive on their financing. A key element will be engaging with employers to offer work experience placements. I am very encouraged by my discussions with employers and their representative bodies over recent weeks. There is a real appreciation of their direct interest in getting good people skilled up in their companies and of the importance to the wider economy of having a skilled workforce.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat a Cheann Comhairle, agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. Agus ba mhaith liom an méid seo a fhiafraí de. Has the future skills group been consulted on the higher education strategy?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. I think that he is perhaps mixing up a couple of concepts. We run a number of future skills action groups, and the one that we are working with currently is in the food and drink sector, which is an important area for the development of the economy. We are also running an ICT working group, and my skills adviser is carrying out a scoping exercise on engineering skills.

The higher education strategy has been developed over a number of years, and the business community has been a key partner in its development. That strategy is very focused on higher education delivering for the future needs of our economy, and the vice chancellors of the two main universities in Northern Ireland are very much aware of their responsibilities to deliver the Programme for Government and the economic strategy.

Further Education: Protestant Working-class Communities

2. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans his Department has to encourage more people from Protestant working-class communities to go into further education.

(AQO 1958/11-15)

Dr Farry: As I indicated in a recent response to a similar question from the Member, further education colleges have a number of strategies and a wide variety of provision to encourage people from working-class communities to go into further education. Typically, around 22% of their enrolments are from Northern Ireland's 20% most deprived areas, compared with 14% from the 20% most affluent areas.

Specifically, in the 2011 academic year, 45% of 16- to 21-year-olds in further education enrolments and 38% of higher education enrolments were from Protestants. Also, over the entire period of the essential skills strategy, 42% of essential skills enrolments in further education colleges have been from those with a Protestant background. Those figures compare with a Protestant representation of 41% in the school-leaving population here and of 40% of 16- to 21-year-olds recorded in the Northern Ireland census. Therefore, the Protestant background is represented strongly in further education provision, including essential skills, and is just slightly under-represented in higher education. However, the aim of my Department's widening participation strategy will be to develop and implement initiatives to raise aspiration and attainment among those students to enable them to progress to higher education. The strategy will also seek to improve higher education recruitment and selection processes through, for example, the development of alternative entry routes into higher education for people with non-traditional and vocational qualifications.

As the main providers of adult education, further education colleges are committed to encouraging people from all working-class communities, including those with a Protestant background, to avail themselves of learning opportunities. Their network of campuses and outreach centres across Northern Ireland, in partnership with organisations that have access to hard-to-reach learners and involvement in the European social fund programme, will help colleges to achieve that aim.

Mr Easton: I thank the Minister for his answer. Why has his Department failed to work in partnership with the Kilcooley Women's Centre to help improve educational attainment in the Kilcooley area? What plans does he have to address that relationship and to look at funding for the Kilcooley Women's Education Group?

Dr Farry: The Member is well aware of the situation with the Training for Women Network, which bid for money from the European social fund and was unsuccessful. It appealed and, again, was unsuccessful. I very much regret that organisations are unsuccessful in competitive bids, but those are the confines in which we operate. We are very sympathetic towards future bids. They will all be scored objectively by my officials, and decisions will be made accordingly. It is worth stressing that we have an open system of further education in Northern Ireland and a very strong emphasis on outreach. The Department is determined to engage with every community, including Kilcooley in Bangor, across Northern Ireland.

Mr McLaughlin: Thank you very much, a Cheann Comhairle; I hope that you enjoyed me and my comrade doing the Mexican wave.

I am reassured, to some extent, by the Minister's very extensive answer. I ask him to state in the clearest terms that we can address the issues that were named in the original question by having rigorous and objective criteria for making judgements on where investment should go.

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. I am happy to give that reassurance. My Department, like every other Department in Northern Ireland, is very much aware of its equality responsibilities. We treat everyone, irrespective of their background, the same, and we will treat every group that makes an application, irrespective of its community background, the same. Everyone will have an equal chance on a level playing field.

2.15 pm

Mr Kinahan: The Minister touched on the fact that alternative entry routes are one reason why Protestants in working-class areas may not be going into further education. What studies or pieces of research have looked at the other reasons why people do not go into further education?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. It is worth stressing that we have a balance of representation in Northern Ireland. We have an equitable outcome in the further education sector, and the community is properly represented in that cohort. In the higher education sector — it is important that Members understand the distinction, as I make this point — the religious background of that cohort is also broadly representative. There is a specific pocket of under-representation among young Protestant males from a working-class background in higher education, and that is the target that we need to address. There is not the same issue of representation in further education.

Mr P Ramsey: I welcome the Minister's response, particularly regarding young Protestant males. Has the Minister had any discussions with the Minister of Education about developing a wider participation strategy? That will ensure that there is a more formal approach and that the obstacles and barriers for young Protestants can be lifted.

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. I am pleased to inform him that the Executive are considering a draft widening participation strategy. That cross-cutting strategy will be led by my Department. The Department of Education also has some responsibilities under that strategy, and it has been very much involved in its development. Once the strategy has been approved by the Executive, I intend to come back to the Chamber and make a formal statement on its contents.

Employment Law

3. **Mr Flanagan** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the terms of reference for his Department's review of employment law.
(AQO 1959/11-15)

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. At this stage, there are no fixed terms of reference for the Department's review of employment law. In the Executive's economic strategy, I committed to a review of employment law, which will seek to stimulate business confidence while maintaining the rights of individual employees. I issued a discussion document to all key stakeholders on 1 May, which I hope will encourage meaningful discussion about the policy and practice issues that need to be considered. I wish to ensure that we review our employment law in a way that meets the specific

needs of our regional economy. The responses to the discussion document will determine the scope of the employment law review.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. I come back to the discussions that he has had with stakeholders. Will he assure the House that, as part of that process, he will have discussions with organisations such as the Irish Congress of Trade Unions and the Law Centre?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his supplementary. I assure the Member that those discussions are under way and that we recognise both the stakeholders he referred to as critical to the process. It is worth stressing that this is very much a preliminary process. It is not yet a formal consultation process but a scoping exercise. Given the particular economic and political circumstances in Northern Ireland, it is important that, as we develop policy, we build as much consensus among stakeholders as possible.

Mr B McCrea: Minister, at a recent meeting of the Committee for Employment and Learning, your officials presented your discussion document. They also indicated, because of advice that they had received from across the water, that it might be some time before the United Kingdom introduces this legislation. Given the comments in the Queen's Speech, do you still think that it is important that we deal with this and that Northern Ireland takes the lead?

Dr Farry: I thank the Chair of the Committee for his question. It is important that Members understand that Northern Ireland is the only part of the UK that has had employment law devolved to it. Decisions will be taken in Great Britain for Great Britain. We will, of course, be mindful of those, but, ultimately, we will take decisions in Northern Ireland that suit our particular circumstances. Reforms — if we can call them that — in Great Britain will move at their own pace. We have an independent and separate process in Northern Ireland. We will take note of what happens in Great Britain, but we will not be bound by it.

We also have to be quite practical. We have a range of opinions in the Assembly, and, given the nature of the structures that we have in Northern Ireland, it is important that, as well as having consensus among the stakeholders, we try to build as much political consensus as possible.

Universities: MaSN

4. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the timescale for the commencement and completion of the review of the maximum student numbers policy. (AQO 1960/11-15)

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. At present, the higher education system's capacity is managed through the maximum student number or MaSN, as it is known. It is a control mechanism under which the number of full-time undergraduate students at each institution is restricted. MaSN's purpose is to contain expenditure, in particular that associated with student support costs. Although the system provides for some tolerance at its upper limits, it offers little flexibility to institutions in responding to changes in demand. MaSN does not apply to part-time students, and it applies only to Northern Ireland universities and colleges. Changes to the fee regime elsewhere in the UK may impact on demand locally, but that is difficult to gauge at this stage. In view of those issues, I have undertaken in Graduating to Success, the higher education strategy for Northern Ireland, to review MaSN, beginning in 2014 and concluding by 2016. The rationale for the exercise lies in a number of factors, including the removal of GB students from MaSN, the move towards increased part-time and modular learning, and issues with retention levels.

Distinct from a review of MaSN as a mechanism, I am conscious of the pressures on MaSN numbers. I have been able to increase by 700 the number of full-time undergraduate places at our local higher and further education institutions through to 2015. All those additional places, which have been made possible by funding provided by the Executive, will be in the subject areas of science, technology, engineering and maths. The Department will continue to monitor the position and the impacts on costs, and I am committed to seeking additional resources, should demand warrant it.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for his answer. This issue is crucial to the future of our universities. Has the Minister had in-depth discussions with the local universities about it? If such discussions took place, what did they achieve?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. The review's status is that it has been highlighted as a key action

point in the higher education strategy, which was, of course, developed in conjunction with the higher education sector. It is fair to say that all institutions are aware of MaSN's limitations and the need to consider a different way forward, particularly as the higher education system and the way that people interact with the institutions change in the next number of years. Back in 2007, a review of MaSN was considered but did not go anywhere. I think that enough has changed in the past number of years to justify this as we move ahead.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. If the Minister is committed to having balanced economic development in the North, will he ensure that MaSN places are distributed with an eye to regionally rebalancing the economy?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. It is important that we appreciate that MaSN is allocated to institutions. We have MaSN for the higher education institutions, and an element of it is included for further education. We announced recently how those additional FE places are to be allocated. I was pleased to see that South West College did well in that exercise, particularly in the light of its strong STEM offering. MaSN control also applies in further education places across the board, and we work with all FE colleges on that. Members will be aware that, as part of the higher education strategy, we are looking to pilot one of the universities having a base in rural Northern Ireland, which I also think fits the spirit of the Member's question.

Mr Nesbitt: I refer to the Minister's original answer to Mr Maginness and to the emphasis that the Minister puts on part-time and modular education. Does he accept that MaSN, which, as he said, applies only to full-time students, is now obsolete and irrelevant and that he should simply get on with introducing a new regime?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question and, perhaps, his endorsement of what we are doing.

Mr Speaker: Question 5 has been withdrawn.

Higher Education Strategy

6. **Mr Eastwood** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how he intends to give support to the growing cultural and agrifood sector in terms of the higher education strategy. (AQO 1962/11-15)

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. The higher education strategy reaffirmed my commitment to help the higher education sector become more responsive to the needs of industry. In support of the Northern Ireland economic strategy, I have identified a number of sectors as priorities for my Department. Among others, they include the agrifood sector and the emerging sector of creative industries. My Department, alongside the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and Invest Northern Ireland, has been working with employers in the food processing sector and with education providers to address identified skills issues within the sector. This is being taken forward through the development of a future skills action plan for the food processing sector. This plan details a number of targeted interventions to be taken forward over the next three years. These include a number of initiatives to raise the management and leadership skills of managers at all levels and commitments by third-level education providers to investigate ways to make degree pathways more relevant to employers. It is my intention to launch this action plan within the next few weeks.

In addition, I am fully committed to further education colleges delivering higher education courses. All of the FE colleges in Northern Ireland provide intermediate-level higher education qualifications in a wide range of information technology, media and performing arts subjects. Support for the creative industries will continue to be a key component of the FE colleges' curriculum offer.

Mr Eastwood: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he intend to support the legacy of the City of Culture 2013 by granting extra assistance to local cultural educational groups?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. If bids come in under the various programmes that we offer, we will certainly assist in that regard. The Member and others will also be aware of the importance of the tourism aspects of a whole series of events that are being held in Derry over the coming years and that we, as a Department, are supporting the WorldHost programme throughout Northern Ireland with the relevant sector skills council. I am particularly keen to inform the Member that the level of demand from people and businesses in the Derry area has been outstanding. We are very keen to build on that work further.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat a Cheann Comhairle agus buíochas leis an Aire. Is the Minister satisfied that there is sufficient concentration on courses in further and higher education to meet the future needs of the agrifood industry?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. It is important that we stress that the FE colleges set their own curriculum and course content, but, in government, we can work with them very closely to guide the development of their courses. It is fair to say that the FE sector in Northern Ireland is very much in tune with the needs of business. The sector is very sensitive and flexible about shifting its offering to meet the evolving needs of businesses. The FE sector is very much in tune with reflecting the needs of the agrifood sector.

Mr Storey: I understand that the Northern Regional College, which covers my constituency, is conducting a review of technicians, particularly in regard to certain areas of service provision. Will the Minister undertake to look at the issue of members of staff who are employed to be able to deliver courses in agrifood, given the importance that he placed on the issue in his answer?

Dr Farry: I thank the Minister for his supplementary question. It is important that we are conscious that, as a Minister, I do not micromanage the FE colleges in how they employ their staff. However, we set very broad objectives for them. As I have said to many other Members, the FE colleges in particular are very sensitive to the needs of the economy. They are very aware of the targets that we have set in the Programme for Government and the economic strategy and of the priority skills areas that we have. They will be and should be moving their resources and how they invest in staff to meet those objectives. Right across the board, we have colleges that are very high-performing.

Students: Irish Passports

7. **Mr Elliott** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his assessment of students from Northern Ireland with Irish passports qualifying for free university education in Scotland.

(AQO 1963/11-15)

15. **Mr I McCrea** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his assessment of the decision made by the Scottish Government

to provide free university places for students from Northern Ireland who hold an Irish passport.
(AQO 1971/11-15)

2.30 pm

Dr Farry: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 7 and 15 together.

I am aware that, under current student finance arrangements in Scotland, eligible Scottish domiciled students studying full-time undergraduate courses in Scotland qualify for free tuition. I am also aware that, in accordance with European Union law, eligible European Union nationals studying in Scotland must also receive free tuition.

In order to be eligible, the European Union national must have been ordinarily resident in a member state of the European Union or elsewhere in the European Economic Area and Switzerland for the three years immediately before the first day of the first academic year of the course. Similarly, European Union nationals studying in Northern Ireland will qualify for tuition fee support, provided that they have been ordinarily resident in the territory comprising the European Economic Area and Switzerland throughout the three years preceding the first day of the first academic year of the course.

My Department has been advised by colleagues in the Student Awards Agency for Scotland that Northern Ireland students who hold Irish passports can apply to Scottish higher education institutions as European Union nationals and apply to have their tuition fees paid, provided they satisfy the eligibility requirements of the Student Awards Agency for Scotland.

As that is a matter for the relevant Scottish authorities, Northern Ireland domiciled students who hold non-United Kingdom European Union nationality are advised to contact the Scottish higher education institution where they intend to study and the Student Awards Agency for Scotland to clarify their fee status and eligibility for tuition fee support.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he confirm whether the Scottish Executive will cap the number of places for EU students and leave more places for the higher-paying English students?

Dr Farry: Unfortunately, I cannot confirm that. That is very much a matter for the Scottish Executive; it is not a matter for the Northern Ireland Executive. It is fair to say that when

we, as devolved regions, take decisions to vary the level of tuition fees, anomalies will arise from that. In Northern Ireland, we took the right decision. We made that decision for the best reasons: to invest in our students and to maximise the number of people going through higher education for the good of our economy. However, in taking that decision, we had to be aware of anomalies on the sidelines, which we have to live with and manage as best we can.

Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Credit Unions: Legislation

1. **Ms J McCann** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an estimated time frame for legislation to be introduced in the Assembly to enhance the services of credit unions.
(AQO 1972/11-15)

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): My Department is scoping out new legislative provisions in relation to Northern Ireland credit unions, with the aim of aligning Northern Ireland credit union legislation with that of Great Britain. It is intended that the proposed legislative provisions will provide new opportunities and greater clarity for the Northern Ireland credit union sector.

The new Bill is scheduled for passage through the Assembly in the 2013-14 legislative session. The draft policy proposals will be subject to the full statutory consultation process in spring 2013, with the aim of introducing the Bill in the Assembly in November 2013.

I recognise that the recent development of moving from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) regulatory regime to the Financial Services Authority (FSA) regime may represent a challenge to a number of credit unions. For that reason, I have requested that my officials consider options for providing financial support to the Northern Ireland credit union movement to help it to develop the capacity required to comply with the transfer to the Financial Services Authority.

Mr Speaker: Question 10 has been withdrawn and will require a written answer.

Ms J McCann: I thank the Minister for her answer. She will be aware of the economic and

social benefits of credit unions being able to invest in social enterprise projects. Therefore, can she give us an assurance that that will be one of the services that she will look at when she is bringing the legislation forward?

Mrs Foster: One of the issues that came to the fore during the credit union debate in the Committee was whether credit union organisations would be able to offer a wider range of services, including investment in the social economy. Obviously, when we bring forward the Bill, that will be one of the subjects that will be there. It is important to say how much we appreciate the fact that the credit union movement across Northern Ireland has been working very closely with the Department. It has worked very well in moving across to the Financial Services Authority. That will give consumers access to the financial services compensation scheme and the Financial Ombudsman's scheme. I think that that will protect a lot of consumers, and it should be very much welcomed.

I hope to make a statement on the progress of credit unions in the House next week. I know that there is great interest in the issue right across the House, so I hope that Members will take the opportunity to come here to listen to the statement.

Mr McQuillan: Will the Minister update the House on any recent meetings that she has had with the FSA regarding the credit unions?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. As I said, this issue has generated interest right across the House. Indeed, Northern Ireland MPs recently met the FSA to discuss credit union concerns that had been raised directly with them. In addition, just last month, I met Andrew Bailey, the FSA director, to discuss a number of credit union-related issues, in particular the limit that the FSA has introduced for the investment period for surplus funds. The meeting was very constructive, and it provided us with an opportunity to address a number of concerns that local credit unions have raised with me either directly or through Members. I intend to maintain a very close and keen interest in Northern Ireland credit union matters, and I am sure that that interest is shared right across the House.

Mr Cree: I know that the Minister is aware that the credit unions have had a very good relationship with her Department. Does she have any plans to maintain that relationship? Could she perhaps explain a little more about

the short-term loan issue, which seems to be the single biggest problem facing the credit unions at this time?

Mrs Foster: That is an issue that we raised with the FSA, which has made a number of movements from its initial provisions for credit unions here. It has moved in so far as it originally said that it would put in place a limit on shares of £10,000 or 1.5% of total shares, and it has now raised that to the greater of £15,000 or 1.5% of total shares. So, we were able to show the FSA that the Northern Ireland credit union system was more mature than that which exists in the rest of the United Kingdom and that that should therefore be reflected in the regulation of the Northern Ireland credit unions.

As for the length of time that credit unions are able to invest, the Member will know that the system now allows for tier 2 and tier 1 credit unions. Credit unions can move between those two tiers, and, if they are in the tier 2 system, they will be able to invest for longer.

I must say that I thought that the FSA had a very good understanding of the credit unions in Northern Ireland. I have to say that that is down to the close relationship that my officials have developed with the credit union movement over the years. They have been able to communicate the benefits and strengths of the credit union movement. It is very much the case that my Department will continue to be there for credit unions, and, if they want us to remain the point of contact, we will do so. I hope to be able to say more next Tuesday about what we are going to do to assist the credit union movement.

Mr Dallat: I welcome the very positive response from the Minister. I particularly welcome the suggestion, although it is perhaps more than a suggestion, that there will be financial help for those credit unions that find it difficult to meet the FSA's requirements. However, there will still be people who are not members of a credit union. Will the Minister tell us whether she will lobby the Westminster Government to reduce the excesses of the loan sharks and the gombeen men who, day and daily, rip off poor people who do not have the resources to pay the high interest rates?

Mrs Foster: The Member's point is very valid, and I know that it was raised with the Finance Minister when he was asked about payday loans at his previous Question Time. Certainly, if people bring complaints forward, Trading

Standards will investigate all of them thoroughly. However, I realise that people are at a very low ebb when they resort to borrowing from those sorts of people, so it is a matter of trying to make alternatives available to them before they get into that situation.

I know that the House is aware that, for the majority of credit unions, the requirements of the FSA regulation will be no greater than they were under DETI. However, I am aware that some credit unions might need some assistance to document their policies and procedures. I hope to be able to outline in the House next Tuesday what we intend to do to try to assist those people.

Business: Financial Assistance

2. **Mr Rogers** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on representations her Department has made to the banks, Westminster and the Oireachtas regarding financial assistance to boost local businesses. (AQO 1973/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Although DETI has no statutory control of the banking sector, I and my officials have met representatives of the main banks in Northern Ireland to emphasise the importance of supporting business development and growth. Most recently, on 5 March 2012, I met senior Northern Bank representatives, and I will meet senior representatives from the Bank of Ireland on 16 May. Those meetings provided the opportunity to highlight the importance of access to finance for Northern Ireland businesses, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and to encourage banks to assist indigenous businesses in the current economic climate.

DETI, through Invest Northern Ireland, continues to develop and implement an access to capital strategy that supports the availability of capital in the local SME market. I and the Finance Minister will continue to make representations to the banking sector, Westminster and the Irish Government to highlight the importance of access to finance in supporting local business.

Mr Rogers: Thank you, Minister, for your response. Does the Minister feel that enough is being done by the banks, especially those that have been assisted by taxpayer bailouts, to help to support our local economy?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. This subject comes up

for me during every Question Time and, I think, during every Question Time for the Finance Minister. That tells me that Members do not believe that banks are doing enough to help the local SME community.

I continue to engage with the banks. I know that other Ministers and, indeed, Committees do likewise. On 20 March, for example, I spoke at the launch of the Bank of Ireland's new export initiative. Where banks try to make new inroads and have new initiatives, I will certainly support them. I thought that the export initiative was good because the Bank of Ireland was trying to bring their companies along and encourage them to export to new and diverse markets.

I am sure that a lot of Members will have read in the *agrip* over the weekend that the banks are keen to lend money, particularly to the agrisector. There were a lot of glossy ads in our local press. I have to say that that has not entirely been my experience at a constituency level. Just last week, when I had a meeting with a bank and a constituent, the attitude was less than helpful, and I await the outcome. However, that is me wearing a constituency hat. Wearing my ministerial hat, I can say that we will very much continue to press, and I hope that Committees will continue to bring the banks before them and forensically ask them what they are doing to help small and medium-sized businesses here in Northern Ireland. It is critical that we have the capital available to grow the economy, and that is why Invest Northern Ireland has put forward various schemes, which I very much hope will help in some way to plug a gap that we have identified.

Lord Morrow: My experience is not dissimilar to the Minister's, nor, I suspect, to that of many Members. We have constituents coming to us to say that the banks are unco-operative, to say the least. Can the Minister give any assurance today that things may be different in future? What steps can she take to ensure that banks are in the business of lending money, particularly to small businesses? As Mr Rogers said, many of those banks got a public bailout, and they have some responsibility. It strikes me that, in many cases, they are ducking their responsibilities.

Mrs Foster: I hear what the Member is saying very clearly. It is one thing for banks to say corporately that they are open for business, but it is quite the opposite when Members go

along with their constituents to look for money for perfectly reasonable projects and are given reasons why banks cannot support them. It is hugely frustrating for those businesspeople, whether they are in the agrisector, the manufacturing sector or whatever sector. The Member asked what I can do about it. As I indicated, I can keep lobbying Westminster. I know that the Finance Minister has been in negotiations and met the governor of the Bank of England in November last year. He then took the opportunity to follow that up with the Chancellor of the Exchequer to point out the unique banking system here in Northern Ireland.

He pointed out at that time that we were marginalised from the mainland UK banking system and, indeed, from our Irish counterparts as well. So, there is a big job of work that we continue to have to do to lobby, to use the power of this place to expose, and to shine a light on what is going on in the banking sector, and I hope that Members across the House will continue to do so.

2.45 pm

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Minister is aware of the very important role that the SME sector plays in Fermanagh and South Tyrone. Will she give us an update on the roll-out of the Executive loans scheme, when she expects applications to open, and when we can expect businesses to start getting loans from the scheme?

Mrs Foster: The Member is absolutely right. I am, of course, fully aware of the importance of the SME market, and the small loans fund is just one of a number of capital investment programmes that Invest Northern Ireland is rolling out. The growth loan fund is anticipated to be open by the end of this month. It is a £50 million fund. It is unsecured, and because of that, it will have slightly higher interest rates than the banks. However, we intend to try and help companies that want to grow but cannot access the money to do so from their banks. I very much hope that this will fill the gap that we have seen developing over such a period of time. I know that, like me, Members have been to companies that want to grow but simply cannot get the amount of money they need to do so, and that is what this growth loan fund intends to do.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for her answers, and I echo Lord Morrow's comments. In

discussions with the Treasury, will Northern Ireland be given targets for lending? That might be one way through the impasse.

Mrs Foster: I think that the Finance Minister, when he spoke to the Chancellor of the Exchequer — he has copied me into a number of letters that have been going back and forth — said that he wants the Treasury to acknowledge the unique situation that we have here in Northern Ireland. Because of that unique situation, he wants tailored remedies. For example, the enterprise finance guarantee scheme, which was very much heralded as an answer to some of the problems we faced some time ago, still has not really taken hold in Northern Ireland. Although the banks say that they continue to offer the enterprise finance guarantee scheme, there must be a reason why it has not been taken up in Northern Ireland. We are continuing to try to get to the bottom of that issue, and I know that it remains a very live issue for the Finance Minister.

Broadband: Onwave

3. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many people from Northern Ireland have signed up to Onwave since it was awarded the contract to deliver broadband via satellite. (AQO 1974/11-15)

Mrs Foster: At 11 April 2012, 44 customers had signed up for Onwave's services under DETI's remote broadband service contract. A further 18 customers had acquired services outside the scope of the contract.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for her reply. Is she happy with the number of customers who have signed up to date, and with the manner in which Onwave is looking for new customers in Northern Ireland?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. I have to say that I am disappointed with the number of customers that Onwave has been able to sign up. From what I can see, the company offers a very good service. I believe that the company could do more. The contract is very heavily supported and is given subvention by government through my Department. I think that there is a role for the regional press, which has huge coverage in rural areas throughout Northern Ireland. It is a good contract, and the company delivers a

good service, but it could do more in and around offering the service across Northern Ireland.

Mr McLaughlin: Thank you very much, a Cheann Comhairle. In acknowledging what I think has been a key role of this Minister and her Department in rolling out the telecommunications technology, will she indicate whether she has given consideration to levelling the playing field, given the expense of the set-up costs and the monthly charges for this service, although I know that it is a genuine attempt to provide service to those who fall outside standard communications? I think that we need to deal with an injustice that has emerged.

Mrs Foster: The Member will know the reasons why it costs more to deliver the service in rural areas. Some Members have made the point that they believe that fibre to the cabinet should be made available to everybody in Northern Ireland. Of course, if that were the case, it would cost tens of thousands of pounds for individual houses.

The Onwave contract and, indeed, others before it have been attempts by the Department to deal with that issue. When we met representatives of Onwave a number of months ago, we asked them whether there was a role for doing some loss-leader work, and they explained to me the cost of their equipment and so on. However, I think that that is something that we can talk to Onwave about again. It is delivering the service, and, as I said, I think that it is a good service, but we would like to see more rural dwellers being able to avail themselves of it.

Mr Gardiner: Will the Minister update the House on the delivery of the four proposals that are outlined in the telecommunications action plan for 2011-15?

Mrs Foster: I do not have the four proposals in front of me. I would be obliged if the Member could come back to me in writing with the four proposals, and I will certainly update him on where those stand.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for her answer and for her efforts in trying to make sure that there is a better broadband service throughout Northern Ireland. Does the Minister accept that speed and volume are crucial for many businesses, particularly SMEs? Does she intend to introduce a universal service for broadband provision for students and businesses? They are awaiting a service they can afford.

Mrs Foster: The Member mentions a service that they can afford. Again, that goes back to how we subvent and assist those areas where, if we put in the broadband in the ground and through fibre, it would cost tens of thousands of pounds. That is why we often say that people get their Sky reception through their satellite and there is no reason why broadband cannot be delivered in a similar fashion, through satellite or digital mechanisms. That is what we have been trying to pump-prime through some of our broadband fund applications.

This question is about mobile operation. The Mobile Operators Association attended an event that I hosted here on 2 May. I was somewhat disappointed that very few MLAs took the opportunity to come along on that occasion. I think that six attended part or the whole of the event. It was a good opportunity to engage with the providers and to challenge them about the provision of services right across Northern Ireland. However, I understand that they left their contact details, so Members who have issues around coverage of mobile operation should contact the Department, and we will pass on their information.

Invest NI: Business Start-ups

4. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on the tendering process for Invest NI's business start-up programme. (AQO 1975/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Invest Northern Ireland is currently finalising internal approvals for future start-up provision and is working with the Department of Finance and Personnel's (DFP) Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) to finalise the terms of reference for a new tender process. The tender is expected to be issued in May 2012 — that is, this month. The tender will be required to be published in the Official Journal of the European Union, and potential bidders will have 40 days from the date of publication in which to submit their tenders. Invest NI will then assess the tenders, and it is anticipated that an award decision will be communicated in July 2012. A new contract for delivery is expected to commence as soon as practicable thereafter.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Minister for her answer. In the past, the GO for it programme provided an accessible, intensive and detailed training programme of essential business skills. There has been a gap in the service as a result of a

hiccup in the tender. Can the Minister advise us what lessons have been learned in this tender process, so that such a failing will not be repeated in the future?

Mrs Foster: The hiccup that the Member refers to was caused by the fact that Enterprise Northern Ireland did not allow Invest Northern Ireland to continue to deliver a full business-start programme whilst taking its legal challenge. Due to the legal action instigated by Enterprise NI, Invest NI has been prevented from providing a business-start programme. However, we continue to advertise under the wider GO for it brand to stimulate public interest in enterprise, entrepreneurship and business start. From 1 October 2011 to 31 March 2012, we responded to 3,627 enquiries, held 135 business clinics, which were attended by 940 individuals, and met another 499 individuals.

We cannot stop people challenging procurement decisions. The project has brought us problems because we could not deliver the wider Go for it programme, and we are disappointed about that. However, I read out those figures because I want the House to understand that work is continuing. We are still working with small and medium-sized businesses and with people who want to start their own businesses. I hope that we can put all this behind us and start on a new process, which we will have in place in the near future.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Minister for her answers thus far. What will she be doing to compensate the local business sector?

Mrs Foster: As I indicated, we will try to work with it and provide an interim service until a further tender process and award of contract for a business-start process is in place. The situation was not edifying, and we wish that we could have avoided it, but we are where we are, and we now need to move on and deliver that programme for small businesses.

Mr Agnew: In referring to the challenge of the procurement procedure, is the Minister saying that no fault at all lay with her Department? If that is the case, how can we be assured that mistakes will not be made again?

Mrs Foster: As the Member will know, procurement is run centrally by the Central Procurement Directorate. Invest Northern Ireland will continue to work with CPD, and if there are any lessons to be learned, those will be learned. It is hoped

that the new process will be launched this month, and I hope that that can happen as soon as possible.

Mr Flanagan: I thank the Minister for her responses. We all welcome the fact that we are going to get back to a situation fairly soon in which the service can be provided to businesses. Does the Minister think that the new tender document will have a similar outline to the original one or will it be amended in some way to suit one of the original applicants, either the successful or the unsuccessful?

Mrs Foster: As the Member will know, when both parties came together at the end of the case, they agreed a public statement on the outcome, and that was all that was to be said on the matter. They agreed that they would terminate the current procurement procedure and that we would start a new procurement procedure. If Central Procurement Directorate has lessons to learn from the procedure that has happened to date, I am sure that it will take those into consideration. However, that is a matter not for me but for the Finance Minister, as he has control of the Central Procurement Directorate.

Saint Patrick Centre, Downpatrick

5. **Mr Hazzard** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline any plans her Department has to assist with the ongoing difficulties at the Saint Patrick Centre, Downpatrick, which is currently at risk of closure.

(AQO 1976/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Downpatrick is one of the key hubs on the Saint Patrick's Trail driving route. The Northern Ireland Tourist Board has offered over £2.1 million of financial support to the Saint Patrick Centre since 1998.

The issue of ongoing Down District Council support for the Saint Patrick Centre is a local one. However, given the importance of the centre in telling the St Patrick story, the Tourist Board and I hope that a positive solution can be reached locally to ensure that the centre continues to offer a high-quality visitor experience.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her answers thus far. Will she detail what talks have taken place between her Department, the Saint Patrick Centre board and Down District Council? If talks have not taken place, can the Minister ensure

that such engagement takes place as a matter of urgency to help save that signature project?

Mrs Foster: The signature project is the entirety of the Saint Patrick's Trail and not just the Downpatrick heritage centre. That is not to take away from the importance of the Downpatrick centre, because it is one of the key points on the trail, along with others in Armagh and further up the coast.

It is an issue for Down District Council, and I understood from my Tourist Board colleagues that the matter was progressing well. Indeed, I had a meeting with the MP for the area just last week, and she indicated that, as she understood it, things were progressing well with Down District Council. However, if the Member has particular issues that he wants to bring to me, I have no difficulty in meeting him and having a discussion.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for her answers to date. I understand that St Patrick travelled beyond Downpatrick.

Will the Minister advise on infrastructure improvements for the rest of the trail, including north Down?

3.00 pm

Mr Speaker: The Member has been very unique with his question.

Mrs Foster: We are now going to take a tour around Northern Ireland with St Patrick, as we normally do. I have been very encouraged by the investment to date in the St Patrick/Christian heritage signature project. As I said to the Member in answer to the substantive question, it is about much more than Downpatrick, although I am quite glad that the Member of Parliament for that area is not here because I think that she would take exception to that. The Tourist Board has issued 23 letters of offer to date and is considering further applications for investment. The offers to date represent a grant commitment of £3 million. Some of the infrastructure that has been put in place has been excellent. As well as the work at the Saint Patrick Centre, work has gone on in the Church of Ireland cathedral and No 5 Vicars' Hill in Armagh, as well as the work in Greyabbey, the North Down Museum and the Nendrum monastic site. Capital work has been carried out right across the trail, and I am sure that people will all want to make it their business to holiday

along the Saint Patrick's Christian heritage trail in the coming months.

"The Gathering: An Irish Homecoming"

6. **Mrs McKeivitt** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, following the passing of the motion on "The Gathering: An Irish Homecoming", what discussions she has had and intends to have with officials and the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport about future planning for the event.

(AQO 1977/11-15)

Mrs Foster: I have not been asked for nor had any discussions with officials in the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport about future planning for "The Gathering". I do, however, welcome any scheme that has the potential to bring more tourists to Northern Ireland. With the hosting of the World Police and Fire Games and the first ever UK City of Culture in Londonderry, 2013 is going to be an exciting year for tourism in Northern Ireland.

Mr Speaker: I will allow the Member a quick supplementary.

Mrs McKeivitt: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Given the fact that the Irish Government are planning for "The Gathering" to be the biggest tourism event that they have ever staged in Ireland and are aiming to attract 325,000 overseas visitors, does the Minister agree that the Executive and her Department in particular should be making every effort to ensure that the maximum number of those visitors travel north of the border during their stay, to benefit our tourism sector and economy? That, in my eyes, would help complement the Assembly's endorsement of "The Gathering".

Mrs Foster: Of course, anybody who wants to visit Northern Ireland in 2013 will be made wholly welcome. We look forward to welcoming them to another spectacular year, with the UK City of Culture in Londonderry and all that that has to offer, as well as the World Police and Fire Games. We hope that we will see many of them in Northern Ireland throughout the year.

Committee Business

Tyres: Committee for the Environment Report

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly approves the interim report of the Committee for the Environment on its inquiry into the management of used tyres in Northern Ireland and calls on the Minister of the Environment to bring forward a timetable for implementing the recommendations contained in the report. — [Ms Lo (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment).]

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate on the report. I thank the Committee staff and the Clerk for compiling the report. I also thank the stakeholders who contributed and the research team. I also take this opportunity to thank my former colleague, Willie Clarke, who sat on the Committee and worked on the report with me and took the lead. I wish him well in his council career. He has definitely left a positive mark in relation to the report, and I thank him for that.

The Chair outlined a lot of points in her remarks, and I do not propose to go over them. The key reason for bringing the report was that, at one time or another, most of us, as public representatives, have been contacted about the illegal dumping of tyres. On many occasions, I have been contacted about tyres being dumped in nature spots or over country ditches in my constituency, and the local council has footed the bill for that. Therefore, we had an investigation into what was happening and who was responsible.

The Chair mentioned the fact that we were disappointed when the Department came back with figures, as it did not have any recent figures. The latest figure it had was 10 years old. However, that did, at least, encourage the Department to collect statistics.

I know that a lot of the local authorities came up with stats and figures. The number of tyres has been reduced, and following the implementation of the recommendations, I hope that we no longer see them being brought out at Halloween or at any other time. I think that there is a lot of common sense in the Committee's recommendations, and I do not think that they will have a big cost or resource implication

for the Department. I think that some of the suggestions can be carried out very quickly. I encourage the Minister to take the lead on this and to work with all the other bodies concerned to resolve some of the issues.

I want to make two points. First, many people who have contacted me about this believe that the £1, £1.50 or £2 that they paid covered the cost of the disposal of their tyres. Even though they got their tyres changed in good faith, they then found out that they have to pay an extra cost in their rates for the disposal of any tyres that are found. I hope that, as a result of the relevant recommendation on that, there will be a paper trail. I also hope that consumers get value for money and that they are protected.

I am glad that the Minister is attending today's debate. The other issue is about the fact that we should encourage firms to try to recycle and reuse tyres. I just wonder what the market is for doing that. I also wonder whether the Minister has any plans to work with firms. The Chair mentioned the tsunami incident. There has been a decrease in the need for recycled tyres, be it in the equestrian field or whatever. I know that firms have been stockpiling tyres, and I also know that there have been fires in recent years. I just wonder whether the Minister will look at that to see whether there is a proper market for such tyres. I know that the market has meant that firms have had to stockpile in some instances. I encourage the Minister to take the lead on that and to look at taking a common sense approach to dealing with it.

I welcome the report.

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

Mr Boylan: I hope that the recommendations can be implemented fairly quickly.

Mr Kinahan: The Ulster Unionist Party certainly supports the motion and agrees with the call on the Minister of the Environment to bring forward a timetable for putting the recommendations in place. Our Chair certainly set out the key issues for everyone. I thank everyone in the Committee for all their hard work in pulling the report together. I am sad not to still be on the Committee. I feel that this is a case for which we should not have had to produce a report. However, it will prove very valuable and will help the Department. Nevertheless, I felt that the Environment Agency and all those concerned really should have been looking at a better way

of dealing with the issue of illegal tyres without the Committee having to produce a report.

In one area of my patch a few years ago, we had to place skips around the bottom of bonfires to stop burning tyres from bouncing past and into houses. At the same time, houses close by were losing their windows and doors because of the heat. So, we definitely had to deal with the issue of illegal tyres.

While shooting in Tardree — I share the same pastime as Jim Shannon — we found 200 tyres that had been rolled down a hill and into the forest. We reported the incident to the council, and within a week, it had moved the tyres. Those are just two examples of the illegal use of tyres, which is going on all the time. We really need to find a way of dealing with the issue as quickly as possible.

Whenever tyres appear, the PSNI, NIEA and councils are there to deal with them, but somehow that just does not work. We have to find a way to deal with it. We have to find a way to give NIEA the necessary powers because once those tyres arrive at a bonfire site, it is too late. We have to find a way to stop them getting out of the system. We have got to have a licensing system and a paper trail — something that allows us to deal with the whole mechanism so that the tyres never get to those sites.

I must add that we want the eleventh night bonfires to go ahead. They are very much part of a tradition, and they can go ahead. We have excellent Orange festivals throughout Antrim during those weeks, and I would like to congratulate the councillors, the bonfire groups and all the community groups that have worked incredibly hard to try to minimise the number of tyres while, at the same time, building up good festivals in their areas. I urge all politicians, wherever possible, to lead and show that they are helping to move forward so that we have those good Orange festivals with fewer tyres. We must remember that those tyres are polluting the environment. Those tyres are bringing the fumes and poisoned air that is all around us.

The highlights of the report show that the duty of care did not work, which goes back to my original point. We knew that things were not working and we had to go ahead with the report. We know that there are financial benefits to many if they can get the tyres out of the system and we have to deal with that, but, most importantly, we have to deal with enforcement.

The report highlights that NIEA concentrates on compliance and not on enforcement. We must see that changing. We also must see the fly-tipping protocol agreed, in place and councils working to it.

I gained — as I hope did anyone else who went to Dublin — from listening to DEPOTEC, which showed us that it was doing a three-year study, financed by the Government, Europe and the waste industry, on the very best way of dealing with all waste, particularly tyres, to see what is the most efficient way of producing energy and dealing with the side effects. I look forward to hearing what it comes up with, because that is exactly the sort of thing that we should be doing in Northern Ireland. We should get someone to look at the skills needed to use all our waste and get the very best from it in the most economical way. We may then find that three big waste companies with 25-year contracts are not the right way forward. We have got to keep studying things, and I think that the DEPOTEC presentation was one of the most interesting parts of the whole inquiry.

Mr Speaker: Your time is almost gone.

Mr Kinahan: We support the motion.

Mr Dallat: I also support the report. Indeed, I regard it as one of the most comprehensive and important pieces of work done in the Assembly in recent years. My thanks go to the Clerks who made it possible. Each of the 20 recommendations in the report is worthy of consideration and adoption by the Minister.

Members will know that, in the past, we had horrendous problems with toxic waste that was taken over the border and dumped by unscrupulous people who saw the opportunity to make a lot of money by allegedly dealing in the safe disposal of materials. I am pleased that that issue has been addressed in the report, with the recommendation that Northern Ireland should liaise with the Republic of Ireland when considering a suitable mechanism for dealing with used tyres. The report emphasises that a strict producer responsibility scheme would be counterproductive unless introduced in both jurisdictions, and that is important.

In the longer term, it is recommended that Northern Ireland should consider the introduction of a strict producer responsibility scheme, but the nature of such a scheme and its timing should, again, be developed in close liaison

with the Republic of Ireland. We must not allow the used tyre problem to drift on without a solution, and the recommendations are a clear pathway towards a policy that would avoid the opportunities seized upon by criminals in the past who dealt with the toxic waste in a disgraceful way. Already, there have been disturbing reports of used tyres being collected in the North and dumped in Donegal, and that is disgraceful. Crooks are not bothered which way the problem flows as long as they make millions. The public are left to clean up the environmental mess.

The Committee heard a lot of evidence as to how used tyres can be traced, and it is clear that there has to be an audit trail that is reliable and workable. That is not an easy task, given that tyres are imported from hundreds of sources across the world. Nevertheless, it is possible. Here, I refer again to the Republic of Ireland, where a great deal of work has been done to make tyre distributors accountable for their used tyre disposal. We must learn from that and work with those who have the experience and commitment to work with us.

3.15 pm

Mrs McKeivitt: I thank the Member for giving way. I acknowledge the points in the report that he raises, which call for the support of local authorities. For too long, the disposal of used tyres has gone unchecked. So, although the necessary legislation, in my eyes, is in place, it is undermined by lack of enforcement. Does the Member agree that it is vital that a stringent system is put in place to police the disposal of used tyres and that responsibility for carrying out checks lies with one body that can be held accountable? I speak on behalf of my constituents from the Mayobridge area outside Newry.

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

Mr Dallat: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I know well the problems that exist in my colleague's constituency, because the Committee paid a visit to that area and saw, at first hand, the problem she spoke of.

This interim report addresses the issue of the stockpiling of used tyres. We all know from news reports that large quantities of used tyres have a remarkable capacity to go on fire. One might suggest, cynically, that that is due

to spontaneous combustion, but I am afraid that it is much more obvious than that. Again, criminal elements have been involved and have been paid for collecting used tyres, only to set them alight and seek sunnier climates with their ill-gotten gains. That must be avoided, and the report sets out recommendations that, if implemented, would address the problem.

One question is asked again and again: how many tyres are there in Northern Ireland? The straight answer is that we do not know. The issue is put away at the back of our minds and emerges only when large quantities begin appearing on bonfires at traditional times of the year. After they have polluted the atmosphere and endangered the health of our people, particularly children and older people, the problem is forgotten for another year.

The report calls on the Department to re-establish a robust method of quantifying the amount of waste tyres arising on an ongoing basis, with a clear indication of what proportion of them is not recovered and utilised in a proper way. Other agencies, including local councils, which have been referred to, have an important role to play. Here, I would like to say a particular thanks to those councils that took the trouble to engage with the Committee, give evidence to it and make the report the important document that it is. However, I have to say that I am disappointed with other councils that did not respond, or responded to say that there is not a problem, when I and other Members know fine well that there is.

The report claims that compliance is best achieved by a partnership approach — and here, of course, I agree, as I am sure that other Members do. The challenge can be addressed successfully if everyone is pulling in the same direction and the gangsters are given no opportunity to exploit weakness, which exists and should be taken seriously as a warning sign that there is bad news ahead if the recommendations of this report are not acted upon.

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

Mr Dallat: Finally, I urge the Minister to give every encouragement to those recycling companies that have honestly invested in resources to do the recycling. That is equally important. Thank you.

Mr Beggs: As a former member of the Environment Committee, I remember coming across this issue a long time ago. I recognised at that time

the potential for profiteering that could easily happen, it struck me, through the mishandling of the storage of tyres being recycled — or not recycled.

I welcome the report that the Committee has made and the conclusions it has come to. The issue of ensuring that all sites are licensed is important. The public needs to be wary where illegal, unlicensed sites are used. There is a need to inspect licensed sites to ensure that they stay within their bounds and do not grow beyond the approved capacity. Continuing to do that will be a big issue, not only in managing the storage on the sites but, ultimately, there needs to be an economic solution that processes them. There is no solution if it is profitable to illegally dispose of the tyres and, on occasion, to have an accidental fire; there must be an economic solution. We all must work towards the development of that so that energy is reused in a constructive fashion. For instance, Lafarge Cement's Cookstown plant utilises some of that energy, but other methods must be found.

Something that I wish to highlight a little bit more in detail is the hazardous nature of tyres when they burn. Some people have mentioned it. The uncontrolled burning of tyres causes huge damage to local communities. I remember attending, a number of years ago, an Arc21 briefing on energy from waste sites. I was very struck by an almost throwaway comment after a slide; the expert said that fewer carcinogenic compounds were produced by a professionally run and monitored energy-from-waste site than would be produced by a small illegal bonfire with a lot of tyres thrown on it. We need to educate everyone about the damage that is happening to the local communities and the environment when tyres are burnt on bonfires. It is not insignificant. The release of those carcinogenic compounds into the local community must be avoided. As others have said, there is also the issue of the intense heat that can result and the damage that it causes to the immediate community. In my area, there has been a vast improvement in how cultural bonfire sites are managed, and all credit to all those involved.

I was shocked to learn about the illegal sites. I think that one million tyres were burned at one of those sites. Let us not focus on all the small bonfires, of which there is a relatively small number; there are some huge sites with hundreds of thousands of tyres being stored, some legally and some illegally. Ultimately, they

need to be processed. We must not create a system in which there is a financial benefit to illegally storing tyres on a site and having them burnt. You have to spend perhaps tens of thousands of pounds to get rid of the waste that is left. Maybe you can get money at the end of it. We must ensure that there are not financial incentives for the illegal storage and burning of tyres.

A system of recycling should be put in place. What happens to the £1.22, on average, that is paid when a tyre is disposed of? We must ensure that that money is used as was intended and that it does not simply appear as profit somewhere. We must ensure that those who benefit from it actually use it towards recycling the tyre rather than abusing the environment and profiteering from that contribution. Ultimately, there has to be an economic solution to ensure that the flow of moneys is virtuous and not corrupting. At one point, cars were being abandoned and burnt, which caused problems for the environment. There is now a virtuous cycle, in which there is economic benefit to those who recycle cars. It is important that that circle is also progressed in the world of tyres and that proper and well-managed businesses benefit.

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

Mr Beggs: I welcome the Committee's report.

Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment): I very much welcome the report. Parallel phases of work are going on in the Department, the agency and the Committee. If we manage those properly, they can converge to get a real grip on the issue. I acknowledge what Mr Dallat and Mr Beggs have just referred to: around the issue of waste and used tyres, there is threat and opportunity. There is the threat of the damage to the environment, but there is enormous opportunity to convert waste into energy or to convert waste products into valuable products. There is no better example than that of plastics on this island. As I said before, only 30% of the plastics generated on the island of Ireland are recycled, and only 30% of that 30% are recycled on the island of Ireland. That confirms that a lot goes to landfill and that anything of value is reused outside the country for other products. Similarly, with tyres, although there are threats that we must mitigate and areas that we must regulate, there are opportunities that we need to exploit and explore.

I confirm that my officials will respond to the interim report before recess. I will encourage those ministerial colleagues to whom some responsibility falls as a result of the interim report to work with me to provide that before the summer. I also welcome the fact that it is an interim report, which not only puts a spotlight on the issue but puts a spotlight on me and the Department. Interim reports from Committees are useful tools in the ongoing challenge to what any Department, including mine, is or is not doing.

However, there is no magic wand. The gathering of recommendations in this report and the work of the Department and similar agencies on the islands, including the island of Ireland, will see that the issue is dealt with. We have to acknowledge that there is not a bottomless pit of money and that the scale of ambition in some of the interim report, which I can support and justify, needs a scale of resources that is somewhat harder to justify in the current economic circumstances.

A number of Members, including Mr Boylan and Mr Kinahan, complimented the Committee Chair on the range of her interim report and were quite right to do so. The Chair put to me an exhaustive checklist of what a Minister should or should not have been doing. She included some leading comments, such as that she had been “horrified” by the Department’s response to one or two matters. However, I think that, in answering the points that she raised, I may begin to scope out the Department’s responses and obligations in respect of the content of her report.

I will address eight or 10 of the comments made by the Chair and echoed by other Members. It is true that a tyre survey has not been done since 2002. Back then, the assessment was that, each year, there were 1.75 million units in the North. Given the growth of traffic since and despite the downturn in the economy, I suspect that the ongoing all-Ireland survey will reveal that there are more than 1.75 million tyres in the North.

I reassure the House that the assessment is ongoing. There was quite a remarkable response rate from retailers who were consulted on the matter. The very few retailers who did not respond are being visited individually to extract the information from them. I am mindful that we are dealing with the legal part of the business

and that the illegal part of the business will not respond — nor should it, because we should not be consulting it. Nonetheless, by July, a new evidence bank will show what the picture on the island of Ireland is, and the Chair’s observation that she was horrified by the situation over the past 10 years might be rectified.

The Chair also raised the issue of better management of used tyres through better communication. She said that the list of those holding licences should be made public on the website.

That is the case already, and since last autumn, the website is updated on a daily basis to confirm who holds waste licences and the status of those licences, namely whether they are in suspension, surrender, revocation or are live. So, I endorse that recommendation because it is one that the Department is already taking forward.

3.30 pm

A number of Members raised the issue that the fly-tipping protocol, which creates obligations on fly-tipping and waste generally, will be reconfigured between the Department and the councils. Six councils have now agreed to participate in a pilot to take forward the new fly-tipping framework, and I hope that three more councils will join that. I wish that all the councils would join in the framework and work through the fly-tipping protocol so that, at the end of the year — it will be a year — we will have the evidence base to say how the fly-tipping arrangements can work best over the next number of years. However, councils need to step forward, and those few Members of the Chamber who are still in councils might encourage them to participate.

The report and the Chair referred to a risk-based approach to waste generally and tyres in particular. That approach has been adopted, but given the scale of the issue and the problems, we are escalating the approach of the Department — in my view, it is the right one — whereby the environmental crime unit (ECU) goes after serious criminal waste activities, organised crime and crime gangs that are involved in waste and, potentially, in the disposal of tyres in an improper way. In my view, that model of high-level enforcement against the worst offenders, be it on the environmental side or, in the fullness of time, on the planning side, is the right way to go. However, in the meantime,

we are in the process of employing 11 new people in the ECU to give it greater capacity. It will have a technical specialist capacity, because these are environmental police people who are trained to police standards and work with the police services, North and South, in real time and in real life operations against waste criminals. That will work itself through in the very serious court cases that are pending or ongoing.

The problem is that the Department has to escalate its response to other waste offences of — if you like — a less serious criminal nature as well. That is why the waste licensing unit, which previously had a regulatory approach, has, over the past two months, begun to put in place an enforcement approach. Therefore, when it comes to — if you like — lesser waste offences, rather than using the high level ECU, there will be a mechanism through the waste licensing unit to deal not just with issues of regulation but with issues of enforcement in order to send the message to those on the wrong side of waste requirements that that will not be tolerated.

I agree that, in so much of this, we have to proceed on an all-Ireland and, indeed, all-islands basis. Mr Dallat and others referred to the fact that if we are to go down the road of a producer responsibility scheme, it will not be feasible, on a lot of levels, for us to have a stand-alone scheme in the North, and it will not have the desired impact. I will look again at the issue of a producer responsibility scheme, and I will write to the Ministers in London, in the devolved Administrations and in the South to see how we might take forward the initiative. The British Government's previous view was to not go down the road of a producer responsibility scheme. However, given that that is the most favoured approach by most European countries, it clearly needs to be put in place in the longer term, either on the island of Ireland or on these islands.

The report refers to the cost of waste carrier licence fees, and I think the words the Chair used were that people had made their money, dumped the tyres and run before enforcement proceedings could be launched. Indeed, they did so at a very low cost. Going forward, the Department will review the cost of waste carrier licences and employ more technical staff in that part of the business. We will also look further at how to roll out compliance checks, mindful that the resource impact of doing some of what is indicated in the interim report is very

substantial and may mean that the Department overreaches.

The Chair also referred to the complexity of exemptions in waste licences. The exemptions, which arise further to the waste framework directive, have been interpreted by the London Government, but have not been reviewed since 2003. Consequently, I think that the recommendation to look at the current exemptions and licensable regime is good, timely and will allow us to see whether those matters should be further assessed.

I agree that there needs to be more certainty with respect to the report's recommendation to have a better definition of "end of waste". The Department has set up an end of waste group to work through that definition, as the report suggests, "carefully, clearly and quickly". My Department is also working up detailed guidance and procedures, and we hope to roll those out over the next year, mindful of and informed by the fact that the European Union is making recommendations on criteria that will inform waste streams in the future. Therefore, we will be guided by Europe and best advice, but I hope that, during the next year, there will be more certainty on that issue. However, we need to ensure that there is a minimum risk of pollution and to health. Given the character of some who are involved in the business, I know that they will put pressure on the Department to have more flexibility than I think is justified and legitimate: action that would, as a consequence, have greater risks for health and pollution than I think are justified.

I have not been able to respond as exhaustively to the remarks of the Chair as I might have liked. However, as I said, I will ensure that, before the summer recess, if not earlier, there will be a preliminary response from the Department on its behalf and hopefully that of the other Ministers who have responsibilities in respect of the recommendations. That response will ensure that the report and its recommendations converge with the ongoing work of the used tyres subgroup of the waste programme board, which has looked at all these issues. When the narrative of that is fully known by the Committee, I think that you will see a convergence between your recommendations and our ongoing work.

Mr Hamilton (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment): Before I

forget, I thank the Minister for his very positive response to the Committee's report. I also thank all the stakeholders who gave evidence to the Committee throughout its inquiry. If it had not been for their very detailed evidence over several months, we would not have been able to produce such a comprehensive report, which has now been lifted by my Committee colleague John Dallat to the lofty levels of one of the best pieces of work that the Assembly has ever produced. I also thank the Committee staff for their endeavours in making this happen and tying it all together in the end. I thank all Members who spoke in the debate, particularly Mr Beggs and Mr Kinahan. Mr Kinahan is lately of the parish of the Committee for the Environment, so I half expected him to contribute. However, Mr Beggs's contribution prevented me from feeling, as Jim Wells did, that the Committee was talking to itself. So, I thank Mr Beggs very much for his contribution, which provided a different perspective from those put forward by Committee members.

The report and the Minister's response to it show the value of Committee reports. At a time when there are some who question the value of the work that we do in this Chamber and almost ignore the work that goes on, unreported at times, in the Building's many Committee rooms, this shows that there is value in the work that Committees do, particularly in their inquiries and the reports and recommendations that flow from them. Here is an issue that, although important — and I will come to that — would not be at the top of everybody's agenda. It would not be one of the top 10 issues that Northern Ireland people would think of when asked what problems they face. However, it is a problematic issue. As outlined by Members and by the Chair in her introductory remarks, there is a problem here, and the Committee had the time, the resources and a unique ability to delve into the issue. That is what produced the positive response that we got from the Minister today.

It has led to the work that the Department has already begun, as the Minister said, to get as precise a figure as possible on the number of tyres and waste arising from tyres in Northern Ireland annually, as well as an action plan to deal with that. So, by starting its work, the Committee brought this to the attention to the Minister and Department and triggered that ongoing parallel piece of work. That shows the value of the report that we produced. Hopefully, that is a positive example of what the Committee

can achieve and to which we can refer people out there who argue about the value of some of the things that we do.

Many Members from all parties and all parts of Northern Ireland came forward and identified the problem and how it was manifested in their areas. During our evidence sessions, we heard of sheds being let to an individual and its owner returning, after the tenant had long since disappeared, to find thousands upon thousands of tyres in there, when they thought that the shed was being used to house agricultural equipment or something. Karen McKeivitt talked about problems in her constituency, such as the fire in the Mayobridge area not that long ago. A huge depot fire in Campsie also resulted in catastrophic environmental damage.

Cathal Boylan, Lord Morrow and Roy Beggs spoke of the concerns about bonfires. At the inquiry's outset, I made it clear that I did not want it to be a bonfire-bashing inquiry. Thankfully, it did not develop into that. Mr Beggs was absolutely right to make the point that bonfires may be one of the first things that people think about when they consider problems with tyres. However, a comparison of the volume of tyres now being burnt on bonfires, versus those deposited in these depots that sometimes, as Mr Dallat said, "mysteriously" go on fire, shows that bonfires are a miniscule part of the problem.

I also commend local councils that are doing sterling work in trying to address the problem of tyres making their way onto bonfires. We had great evidence from Ballymena Borough Council on how it has developed its own tyre-marking scheme, which has shown to be of some local success. I know from my time there that Ards Borough Council and other councils are developing schemes and working with local communities to ensure that tyres do not make their way onto bonfires that continue as part of the tradition and culture of some parts of our community. It is only right and proper that we commend those councils for their work.

Many Members identified that our used tyre problem is compounded by the fact that we do not have firm data. The only figures that we have are those from 2002, which the Minister cited, so we are 10 years behind on this. Those figures stated that we had roughly 1.8 million used tyres a year in Northern Ireland. As the Minister rightly said, that number has likely increased in the past 10 years. More worryingly,

only 17% of tyres at that time were recovered. Before we start to devise the best way to tackle the problem, we need much firmer data.

I do not think that consumers spend a lot of time thinking about tyres, other than when they have a problem with their car's tyres or when it is due for its MOT or a service and the garage person tells them that they need a new tyre. They pay for the tyre, or go to a tyre company and get a new tyre fitted, and most people do not think about it at all beyond that. Even if people notice that they are being charged an average of £1.22 in Northern Ireland for disposal, they pass over that money, as we have probably all done, in good faith, expecting that tyre to be deposited in an environmentally sensitive way. The truth is that, as the figures bear out, that does not always happen. The way in which the system is constructed means that the risk of misbehaviour is real. There is no audit trail, and no information is given to consumers about what happens to their tyres. The Committee found evidence that invoices did not always show the disposal fee but that it was included. Customers pay the fee in good faith but do not necessarily get what they expect for that.

3.45 pm

The Committee was encouraged that legislation is in place to deal with the problems with used tyre disposal. However, in equal measure, we were concerned about the lack of enforcement, a point that Karen McKeivitt made in her intervention. A lax approach to enforcement has developed almost by default. We do not know the size of the problem, but we know that it is a big problem that has almost become too big. It is much too difficult to get a grip of, and an impact is being made only around the fringes of the problem. The waste carrier licence is a very good example of how enforcement has not been carried out properly. The process has been too easy and too cheap, and there has been no checking of whether someone who has a waste carrier licence is compliant and behaving properly. Therefore, I welcome the Minister's commitment to increase staff in the environmental crime unit and focus on the problem.

The question is this: what should we do? The Committee favours a strict producer responsibility scheme, and when we look at the evidence presented, that is the only logical conclusion to favour, all things being equal. It is the approach favoured right across the European Union. Some

criticism was made of that type of scheme on the basis that it could not work in places such as Northern Ireland where a lot of tyres are available on the market. However, all the evidence from other European countries that have lots of tyres available on the market is that it does work, so there is no valid reason for not pursuing that. Although we operate a free market system in Northern Ireland, there is no responsibility, which produces the problem. As much as I am in favour of a free market, when there is market failure, as there appears to be in these circumstances, it is incumbent on us in government to interject and take action.

We cannot act unilaterally on this issue. Some Members, Mr Dallat and the Minister in particular, talked about the border. We need to consider the border as we devise any plan or scheme for Northern Ireland. If we go for a strict producer responsibility model in Northern Ireland, it will produce a pressure across the border. Companies in the South could register tyres as coming from Northern Ireland to manipulate their figures, or the scheme could have an impact on the price of tyres. It could be very bad for business, particularly around the border. It is the optimum solution, but it is one that we have to consider very carefully. The Minister is absolutely right, and I was going to make the point myself, that we have to look at this in a British Isles-wide context, because some of the problems that happen across the border can happen across the Irish Sea as well. I encourage, as does the interim report, the Department to get involved in the UK-wide Used Tyre Working Group and, in particular, to look at the best practice audit regime that it has developed.

The Committee was very enthused and attracted by the limited producer responsibility scheme that has developed in the South. All producers bought into creating a system, and all are very positive about it. They are making it work, and it is seen to be working and beneficial. It is not foolproof by any means, and it is not 100% successful, but it is much more successful than what we have. Therefore, it is worth exploring in a Northern Ireland context.

Many Members talked about the alternative uses for tyres. Just as we looked at evidence of very dodgy practice by some individuals in the used tyre business, if you want to call it that, equally we met a lot of people who are far from dodgy and are doing very good and positive things with used tyres. We met people who are

doing retreads and we looked at baling, which involves bundling the tyres together and putting them in landfill sites to keep the gases in. We looked at evidence on creating artificial reefs and on using used tyres for safety equipment in playgrounds.

We looked particularly at the use of used tyres in the energy sector. Mr Kinahan mentioned the scheme that University College Cork is taking forward. It seems that there is a possibility that something that we want to get rid of and see as being of no positive benefit can be used to the benefit of society by producing energy. As others said, our ability to do that in Northern Ireland is hampered by the fact that there is no clear definition of the end use of waste here.

I was very encouraged by what the Minister said about developing that in his Department. That is needed so that the market here can respond and develop more of those options. Some of the options for alternative uses of tyres that we saw simply are not available in Northern Ireland. Hence, you get the depots developing because there is no other market for tyres here.

All in all, the Committee has been very encouraged by the response from the Minister. As the Minister identified, the report is an interim one. We have not concluded our thinking on the issue, and we will continue to monitor the situation, particularly the work that the Department is doing on the audit of the volume of tyres and, most importantly, on the action plan that it will produce to deal with all the problems that we have identified in our report and that Members have highlighted today.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly approves the interim report of the Committee for the Environment on its inquiry into the management of used tyres in Northern Ireland and calls on the Minister of the Environment to bring forward a timetable for implementing the recommendations contained in the report.

DEL: Transfer of Functions

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to two and a half hours for the debate. The proposer will have 10 minutes to propose the motion and 15 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have seven minutes.

Mr Buchanan (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning): I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister, when considering the transfer of the functions currently exercised by the Department for Employment and Learning to other Departments, to take note of the views expressed by key stakeholders consulted by the Committee for Employment and Learning.

It gives me great pleasure to rise as the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning and move this very timely and relevant motion, which addresses the proposed dissolution and transfer of functions of the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL).

Throughout its existence, the Committee has worked closely with the Department to consider and advise on matters of policy and legislation. Members have become familiar not only with the issues under consideration but with the organisations that have translated those issues into real people with real concerns.

As soon as the announcement was made, the Committee felt that the views of the key stakeholder organisations should be considered in the drafting of any legislation to accomplish the transfer of departmental functions. Accordingly, the Committee wrote to 75 organisations and offered them an opportunity to put forward their views. Members were impressed with the number of stakeholders who not only chose to provide a written response to the consultation but were prepared to come up to Parliament Buildings to explain their views to the Committee. I put on record our thanks to those stakeholders who chose to put their views to the Committee on where the functions of DEL should go.

The majority of stakeholders believe that most, if not all, of DEL's functions would be best aligned with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI). That reflects the belief that the overriding focus should be on the economy and the drive for sustainable prosperity, which was expressed in the Programme for Government.

Some stakeholders went further than that and proposed merging DEL and DETI into a new Department for the economy, as recommended by the independent review of economic policy (IREP) report. That would result in complete integration of skills and training, job creation and employment relations.

The universities and the further education colleges were very much of the opinion that responsibility for third-level education should move to DETI and that, as they have such an intrinsic link in their provision, higher education (HE) and further education (FE) should not be separated. The universities and colleges reiterated that they have a decisive role as drivers of the economy, as well as a role in delivering skills and training. However, the two university colleges, Stranmillis University College and St Mary's University College, believe that teacher training is an integral part of education and, as such, would benefit from a move to the Department of Education (DE). The vice chancellors of the universities were content that such a split would not have an adverse impact if the remaining HE functions were to transfer to DETI.

Representatives of industry and commerce, as well as those involved with careers guidance, strongly supported transferring to DETI the DEL functions relating to skills and employment. They felt that this would create a closer association between the demands of the labour market and the supply of skills to meet those demands.

Virtually all the voluntary organisations that engage in vocational training with young people and adults agreed that they would prefer to work with a Department that is focused on the economy rather than on education. They felt that such a move would maintain the focus on job opportunities and the social economy — a focus they had worked hard to establish.

Although the First Minister and the deputy First Minister had not identified the possibility of DEL's jobcentre functions transferring to the Department for Social Development (DSD), that was discussed by a number of stakeholders. However, only one stakeholder favoured that option, arguing that it would put DSD in a better position to deal with the implementation of welfare reform. The majority of respondents believed that the association with benefits would be off-putting to jobseekers.

Many stakeholders placed an emphasis on the importance of joined-up government, and that

view is shared by members of the Committee. Strategies such as Pathways to Success, which addresses the difficulties faced by young people not in education, employment or training (NEETs), will require dedicated cross-departmental co-operation regardless of which Department is identified as taking the lead.

Another theme common to all stakeholders was a concern that service provision would be disrupted by transferring the relevant functions from DEL to another Department. Effective working relationships have been built up with departmental officials, particularly by representatives from the community and voluntary sector but also by staff within agencies such as Invest NI, and those relationships are greatly valued in achieving a successful outcome.

The Committee also believed that it was appropriate to seek the views of those who are tasked with delivering the DEL services: the departmental staff. Many stakeholders paid tribute to the dedication and expertise of DEL staff, and the Committee has benefited throughout its term from their advice and assistance. Despite a very pressured timescale, almost one third of DEL staff responded to the Committee consultation. That high level of response is indicative of the level of staff concern, and that concern has been heightened by the degree of uncertainty about their future.

Although departmental staff and the senior management team expressed their commitment to the successful implementation of the transfer of functions, whatever the outcome, their views on how that should happen largely reflected the views of key stakeholders. The majority of staff respondents believed that the functions they carry out would sit most comfortably within DETI and that such a move would maintain DEL's existing focus on jobs and the economy. Many staff already work closely with colleagues in DETI and Invest NI and have found that relationship to be useful and productive.

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

Careers Service staff identified the two different strands of their work — work with adults and work with children — and indicated that work with school-age children would fit best with DE, while careers guidance for adults would align better with DETI.

Jobcentre staff felt that a closer alignment with DSD would not be beneficial as they need

to get a wide range of clients, not just benefit claimants, into employment. Staff working with the FE and HE sectors, reiterating the views of the colleges and universities, emphasised the importance of the acquisition of higher-level skills in delivering on the economic targets of the Programme for Government.

4.00 pm

There was a clear and recurring theme running throughout the responses that the Committee received. Stakeholders and staff would welcome the transfer of the majority of DEL's functions to DETI. Such a transfer would continue to build on DEL's growing focus on economic matters and integrate its commitment to delivering skills with the creation of jobs now and in the future.

I commend the motion to the House and seek Members' support in calling on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to ensure that their Executive colleagues take into account the views of all stakeholders when resolving the future of the Department for Employment and Learning as soon as possible.

As we bring this motion to the Floor of the House, I am disappointed that there is no representative of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to respond to the debate. This is an important issue; we are seeing the Committee for Employment and Learning being dissolved. Its functions will go to one Department or will be split between a few Departments. That is all to come on trial. Given the importance of the debate, I would have liked someone to have been here to respond to it. However, we will wait to see the outcome of where this takes us and where the Committee goes. I commend the motion to the House.

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I also welcome the opportunity to participate in the debate. I see this as an opportunity to look at the future of higher and further education and the future of our skills sector in a way that does not just go back to the status quo with so much divided between DETI and the Department of Education. We should look at it in the round to see how we can improve on some of the services that are delivered by DETI, the Department of Education and even DSD.

It is widely accepted that education must also be an economic driver. The Department of Education has a critical role in producing young

people who are suitably qualified for the needs of the economy. This is an ongoing process from the cradle to the career, if you like. Therefore, it stands to reason that it would be better served under a single Department, allowing for more effective strategic planning, continuity, etc.

I know that the whole trajectory of education over recent years has been to drive up attainment across a range of areas, both academic and vocational. That is certainly the logic of the entitlement framework and has been the direction of travel for a period of time. So, to progress seamlessly, it would make sense for further and higher education to be aligned with the Department of Education, as that would enable us to work seamlessly through a young person's learning pathway. That would then ensure that the training and skills sector is equally valued within education and would assist us in enabling young people to add value to their lives and communities, as well as meeting the needs of the economy. We must remember that education is not just about meeting the needs of the economy but about the entire package that a young person goes through. However, it certainly has to do both.

Science, technology engineering and mathematics (STEM) are a major part of the curriculum. It does not make sense to have schools and the Department of Education divorced from the wider STEM agenda. Having been on the Committee for Employment and Learning for a short while, I recognise the great work that is going on. For example, we had a visit to Omagh last week where we heard about the 20 foundation degree courses, in a range of areas, that are being delivered at the South West College. I have been very impressed by the work of the regional colleges. They are no longer seen as the poor relation in further education. It is important to keep that educational package together in one block, if you like. I certainly would have no difficulties with a number of the functions that currently reside within DEL going to DETI. There is certainly a job of work to be done to see where the best match is. I do feel that, to get the maximum benefit out of a young person's education, higher and further education should be aligned with the Department of Education. That said, however, —

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. Will she clarify for the House whether she is speaking as a Member of the House or on her party's policy? When the Education Committee

tried to ascertain from the Education Minister his Department's view on the dissolution of DEL, it was told that he had not come to any definitive conclusion and was waiting to see what everybody else was saying. Can the Member clarify the position?

Ms Gildernew: This is a view that I have come to myself, having been at quite a number of the stakeholder meetings and having listened to many of them put their points of view across. Also, I have young children, and I recognise the needs that they will have. Hopefully, they will progress through their education. As a mother, I have no difficulty with them starting their higher and further education journey at a regional college, getting their foundation degree there, and then moving on to a university to continue their education, if that is the path that they choose to take. So, I am speaking very much on the basis of my own experience and on how I see a fit that will benefit the young people of the North.

Going back to the idea of there being an opportunity, there is a need to look further at how the Department of Education could refocus itself. We could look at models in the South or at that in Wales where the education departments include education and skills. One of the stakeholders talked about the absence of a skills strategy and how she felt that the skills agenda had slipped back within DEL as a result. Something that we should think about might be the expansion of the role of the Department of Education to education and skills. We should also think about ensuring that that fit and progression, and that holistic and very cohesive approach to education, is delivered through a Department of education and skills.

We have the opportunity to take a fresh look at some of the areas of work that are currently being carried out by the Department of Education, and, it has to be said, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. Could things be done better? Both Departments will have to be rejigged to accommodate the new officials and new policies, wherever they end up. So, I think that this is an opportunity — to use the Cathaoirleach's words — to see how we can do things better.

I recognise how important DEL has been in developing the economy and in ensuring that young people, at the minute, are doing their best. However, I have to say that I have been disappointed at times — not just by DEL, but

by a whole lot of Departments — about how our most vulnerable young people are treated. As far as DEL is concerned, young people who are not in employment, education or training (NEETS) are part of that category. There have been times when we have been fairly robust in our challenges to departmental officials about the priority that NEETS get throughout the Department.

At the moment, the training regime of young people with special educational needs is looked after by DEL. I know that there were very strong views at the stakeholder meetings about this, but we have a situation where young people have come through formal education and are now at the training stage. Given that, I would like to see some ring-fencing and a fresh focus and approach. I am sure that many of us have constituents who say that their young people do not get the stimulation or challenge that they need. They are not getting the training that they need to allow them to contribute to, and be a part of, society. Parents do not want their child, or their adult, with special needs to be a burden; they want them to make that contribution and to feel that they are doing so. We talk a lot about good mental health. You need to feel that you are making a difference and that you can impact on society and are not a burden on it.

So, I have been disappointed at times about how our most vulnerable people have been dealt with by DEL, and I would like to make the point that, whichever Department these areas end up in, there should be a fresh focus and ring-fencing to ensure that those people get the treatment and quality that they deserve. Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning for bringing forward this important motion. I also thank the Committee for Employment and Learning for its work in producing this report, looking at the transfer of functions following the proposed abolition of the Department for Employment and Learning and the gathering of the views of the Committee stakeholders.

To begin with, I will speak in my capacity as Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, and then I will say a few words as leader of my party.

On 5 March 2012, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) wrote to the Committee seeking the views of the Committee and other Statutory Committees on

the redistribution of the current responsibilities exercised by the Department for Employment and Learning. The letter requested that the OFMDFM Committee co-ordinate the views of Committees on the matter. At its meeting on 7 March, the Committee agreed to undertake the co-ordination role and wrote to all Statutory Committees seeking their views on the redistribution of responsibilities. The Committee also wrote to the Committee for Employment and Learning to request the names of stakeholders with which it had consulted and circulated that to the other Committees. The Committee wished to avoid duplication of any work being undertaken by the Committee for Employment and Learning. To that end, the Committee also checked with OFMDFM regarding the organisations it had consulted about the proposals.

Following consideration, the Committee agreed to write to the Equality Commission to seek its views on the redistribution of responsibilities. The Committee also agreed to request a briefing from the Department and to ask it to provide a summary and an analysis of the responses it received to its consultation process. The Committee received responses from the Committee for Social Development and the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, advising that they were content for the issue to be dealt with by political parties. The Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development responded by providing a copy of a response from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD), which advised that it did not anticipate any significant impact on DARD.

The Committee for Finance and Personnel provided a copy of correspondence from the Department of Finance and Personnel in which it advised that there will be a need to bring forward a Supplementary Estimate and associated Budget Bill for the Department or Departments gaining the additional functions.

The Committee received a response from the Equality Commission on 10 May. It has been circulated to Members, but the Committee was unable to discuss it at its most recent meeting on 9 May. The Equality Commission response stated that:

“The re-distribution of a number of the functions of the Northern Ireland Civil Service from one Department to others is unlikely of itself to raise equality issues, in circumstances where each public function will continue to be performed and

similar resources and staff committed to it. As we understand the position at this time, detailed proposals on the proposed new arrangements have not been published ... In the absence of any concrete proposals at present, it is not possible to reach a conclusion on any potential equality impacts.”

At its meeting of 9 May, the Committee considered the responses that I have referred to and agreed to forward them to the Department. The Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the Department also agreed that it would be more appropriate for political parties to address the proposals and that it would not, therefore, make any comment on them.

I will now say a few words as leader of the Ulster Unionist Party. I say this to the House and to the Executive: here we have an opportunity to prove to the citizens of Northern Ireland that we are relevant. To give context, let me take you back to 1998 and the Belfast Agreement, when, clearly, the objective was different from what it is today. The objective in those days was to take three groups of people and bring them together. There were those who saw our future going forward politically; those who saw violence as a way forward; and those who wanted to ride the two horses. We created a devolved Administration which was big enough to accommodate everybody. As some people might say, an exceedingly big cake needed to be baked so that everybody got not only a slice, but a large slice.

In 2012, we are in very different circumstances, not least economically. It is time to move forward from those transitional arrangements of 1998. It is time to look at a system of devolved government which is effective and efficient and which delivers value for money. I note that at his party's most recent party conference, the First Minister said that this mandate had a new priority: a priority of delivery, as opposed to the previous mandate, when the priority was survival. I accept that the last mandate was the first in 40 years to go full term and was the first ever cross-community power-sharing mandate to survive in the history of Northern Ireland. However, that was then, and you cannot take that message out twice to the electorate and ask for support.

4.15 pm

It is time to deliver, particularly on the economy. The economy comes first, according to the

last Programme for Government and according to this Programme for Government, and the economy comes first according to the report of the independent review of economy policy, which Mr Buchanan referred to. The report's key recommendation was that we should move to create a single department of the economy. Why wait any longer? That report was published in September 2009. In the Northern Ireland Executive report on unemployment in September 2009, the figure stood at 52,700, and a report on unemployment claimants in April 2012 stated that the figure is now 61,500. Therefore, it has gone up by 8,800.

How many more of our citizens need to be unemployed before we act? How many more recessions do we need to endure? How bad must it get before we act and do the sensible thing as recommended by Professor Richard Barnett and his team? The abolition of DEL is the opportunity for us to be relevant, and I call on this House to use it as the opportunity to bring forward a single department of the economy.

Mr P Ramsey: As Members will know, the Committee has been engaging thoroughly with stakeholders throughout all sectors to ascertain the strength of feeling and direction as to the dissolution of the Department for Employment and Learning over the past number of weeks. I want to take the opportunity, as the Deputy Chair has done, to thank our Committee staff for the work leading up to it and also all those who made written or oral submissions. The Committee undertook a very positive and constructive consultation. As a result of that, there are areas where there is clearly consensus.

Let me state categorically that it should not be an issue of carving up a Department for the benefit of a political settlement. We have tasked DEL with serious issues, and it should not just be a carve-up between the DUP and Sinn Féin. Interestingly, this carve-up has now become much more complicated. One could presume that that is one of the main reasons why we do not have either the First Minister or the deputy First Minister here to respond to this debate.

It should be a matter of providing a leaner, more efficient Government that is capable of delivering for our people — even more so now that times are hard. To do that, the serious work that DEL is undertaking now needs to be placed where the expertise is best placed to integrate those responsibilities.

We were given a wide range of diverse views by 29 organisations, and they addressed a huge number of very important issues within the current competency of DEL. I have said many times before and at the Committee that NEETs and youth unemployment needs to be the highest priority for DEL and among the highest priorities for whatever new Department takes on its responsibility. To that end, the SDLP, after internal discussions and intense discussions with stakeholders, has judged that, based on detailed analysis of responsibilities within the branches of DEL, many of the roles performed by the Department for Employment and Learning should now be exercised by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

We have taken a businesslike approach to this crucial proposal and have deduced branch by branch which Department would be best able to perform the roles soon to be transferred. Obviously, HR, corporate services and finance will be undertaken by a reorganisation of whatever Department undertakes DEL's respective roles.

The higher and further education divisions should be merged and retained together in a new branch within the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to ensure a link-up at source with the economic responsibilities of DETI and to maximise integration of key elements of the higher education strategy, such as knowledge transfer partnerships, as well as the commercialisation of more university-based research.

We believe that the skills and industry division needs to be split. The industry responsibility should be subsumed into DETI's economic policy division, in particular the business development and foresight units. That will add a specific economic focus to the work of that division and will enable DETI to integrate future needs in respect of skills gaps into its internal focus, alongside that of the outputs of our universities. We believe that the skills responsibility is best suited within the Department of Education. It is imperative, as we have seen with NEETs, that a preventative and forward-thinking focus is brought to bear with the skills of our young people. We believe that having that expertise and experience in the Department of Education will enable our young people to focus on their talents and to become more powerful economic drivers post-16 with the skills that the economy needs to recover and grow.

That having been said, the SDLP wants to be clear when it states that youth unemployment and young people not in education, employment or training pose huge problems for our economy going forward. As such, we must give it a primary focus. It is for that reason that we believe that a dedicated youth unemployment and NEETS division should be created, headed by both DE and DETI to give it the cross-departmental basis that it always needed and with its work being held to account by the ministerial subgroup on children and young people.

The final relevant branch in DEL — strategy, European and employment relations — should be merged into the European support unit in DETI, as well as the business regulation division and the economic policy division. While it is clear that there are major opportunities for us in Europe, it is imperative that those opportunities, including the European social fund, are used for the benefit of us all, as well as the economy at large.

It should be stated that some respondents were concerned about the expertise in relation to the employment relations aspects of DEL being lost and, perhaps, DETI being too concerned with employers. Therefore, any decision on those responsibilities should be taken in the context that workers are the drivers of the economy and their needs should be dealt with with the greatest care and efficiency, whichever Department they find themselves in.

A massive body of work has been carried out by the Employment and Learning Committee and by the respondents to our consultation over recent weeks, who have reflected on the future needs of DEL customers as well as the wider economic responsibility that DEL carries out. It is imperative that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister takes those into account if we are to have any confidence in the outcome of any moves to dissolve the Department. It is worth saying that delay without a final decision being made and the mutterings about political deals being done behind closed doors have caused great stress and anxiety to the community that relies on DEL for a range of services. That includes departmental staff who are demotivated and whose morale is not good. We have a duty to ensure that government reflects the priorities of the people we all serve. This is an opportunity to show that we are listening and have listened —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mr P Ramsey: I look forward to the contributions of other Members.

Mr Lyttle: I welcome the efforts of Basil McCrea, the Chair of the Employment and Learning Committee, for taking a lead on what was an inclusive and innovative consultation process. He showed a lot of leadership on the issue and had an innovative speed evidence session as part of the Committee, which is something that other Committees could learn from and utilise. Indeed, it is a significantly more robust consultation than that of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister at this time.

We managed to gain quite constructive ideas on this important issue as a result of the consultation on the future of one of the most important economic Departments in Northern Ireland. I will take away five key areas from the process.

First, one of the key points from the feedback was that Dr Stephen Farry is — to be frank — doing a particularly good job in his role as the Minister for Employment and Learning. There was a genuine sense of disappointment at the possibility of losing him as Minister. Secondly, there was an acknowledgement that the Department for Employment and Learning had developed particular expertise, and there was concern about how the delivery of those services will be protected.

Thirdly, they said that if DEL were abolished, a wider review of good governance and departmental structures should be conducted, with a more full and public consultation. Fourthly, they said that that wider review should seriously consider giving the majority of DEL responsibilities to a Department of the economy; that has been the Alliance Party's position for quite some time. Otherwise, the good work that has been done on skills — a skills strategy has been in place since May 2011 — is in jeopardy of being dissected.

Fifthly, they said not to neglect key areas for which the Department for Employment and Learning has been responsible, such as community-based education and adult learning. The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning launched adult learners' week in the Assembly today. A lot of the feedback from community groups doing vital work in community education on the ground was

that they are concerned about where their field will fall as a result of this process.

I am not sure whether the current process is about good or rational governance. From our perspective — if we are frank — this is more about reducing the number of Departments held by the Alliance Party. Let us be clear: the Alliance Party has put forward sensible and workable proposals that could deliver coherent reform and good governance. If proper reform and more efficient government for people in Northern Ireland were on the agenda, my colleagues and I would wholeheartedly endorse that. However, I do not think that that is what is on the table at the moment.

So what feedback are we getting? NIPSA, the union representing staff working in the Department, claims that it only found out about the process via the press. I am not really sure whether that is the way we want to conduct good governance via the Assembly. This creates the quite absurd situation where a Minister could become, as far as I recall, the first Minister on these islands to be removed from office because he and his party are doing a good job. Many organisations have also acknowledged how competent Stephen Farry has been as Minister in delivering change in a key economic Department and in improving Executive co-operation across other Departments. That was noted in particular by the Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (NIACRO), which acknowledged the good cross-cutting work being done by DEL and the Department of Justice. The action being taken on 'A Shared Future' was noted in particular.

Most notably, the Department has developed a shared future policy-proofing tool, meaning that all new policies introduced by DEL will be tested to determine whether they contribute positively to a shared society or inadvertently reinforce divisions by providing services on a segregated basis. DEL is the first Department to introduce that innovative policy-making process, which, I believe, demonstrates real delivery by an Alliance Minister to tackle the cost of division in Northern Ireland. Although all other Ministers talk about a shared future, Stephen Farry has initiated a meaningful review and taken action on the segregated nature of teacher training in Northern Ireland, with all its associated costs — an issue that has been ignored for too long by other Ministers.

Some of the other key concerns raised in the consultation feedback were about where skills will sit in any new departmental structure, where the key issue of getting young people into education, employment or training will sit, and the continuation of our higher and further education strategies. The Minister and his Department have not been found wanting on those issues so far. So, the question being asked is this: will that important work be affected by the dissolution of the Department that brings those key roles together? With that in mind, I say to those seeking to remove DEL for political ends that perhaps they should have a thought for that and should be careful what exactly they wish for.

I would also like to pay tribute to the Committee staff who oversaw this informative process and to the various stakeholders and numerous organisations that responded. The Committee has collected a wealth of information, and a full report is available via the Committee for Employment and Learning. I hope that the First Minister and deputy First Minister will take some time to read that, given that they are not here today.

4.30 pm

It is the view of the Alliance Party that it is the duty of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to provide a full, formal consultation and a wider review on an issue as important as departmental rationalisation for Northern Ireland. Alliance is well up for a reduction in the number of Departments and MLAs. We have made that clear, and we have specifically stated that we think that eight Departments and 80 MLAs is a good target to aim for, but the way this is being addressed by the First Minister and deputy First Minister is concerning. There is explicit concern that it amounts to political vandalism for political ends.

Mr D McIlveen: As has already been said, the amount of work that has gone into bringing the report forward is worthy of thanks. First, I want to thank the Chair and Deputy Chair of the Committee. I know that they have both been heavily involved in bringing this piece of work into existence. I also want to thank the stakeholders who responded in writing and particularly those who took time out of their busy schedules to come to address the Committee. We really did appreciate that. It was very useful in setting the context for where the

stakeholders see the functions of DEL being transferred to.

I think that the biggest thanks have to go to the Committee staff, who did a sterling service in co-ordinating everything. It was a mammoth task to get all those people into two rooms in one go. The whole process was efficient, and a big thank you and congratulations have to be passed to the staff, both the Clerk and the assistants, of the Committee.

Before we go too far down the road of the ins and outs of this debate, we have to remember that, from a public point of view, this is, ultimately, a good-news story. We have to accept that the Assembly is too big, it is over-governed, and there are too many Departments. If we are putting a message out to the public that you have to be more careful, watch your spending and be more efficient, surely it only makes sense that, in the Assembly, we are seen to be doing the same thing. I know that there were some issues —

Mr Lyttle: Will the Member give way?

Mr D McIlveen: Yes, I will.

Mr Lyttle: On that note of the public and efficiency, what would the Member say about the view that the Institute of Directors, which obviously represents a significant amount of the public, submitted to the consultation, namely that the process appeared to be motivated by political expediency rather than good governance, and that the impact on efficiency would be greater if the departmental structure were reviewed as a whole?

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the Member for his intervention. What do I think of it? I absolutely agree. I think that there have been some issues around communication. I know that the Alliance Party will have a party political problem with this because, ultimately, it will be that party that loses a Minister, but the fact is that we need to constrain what we have here. We need to be seen to be bringing our budgets under control as well. We concur with the Institute of Directors — there are no issues with that — but it was one of many organisations that brought their views forward on this particular issue.

Bearing in mind that it is, by and large, a good-news story, we have to be very careful that when it comes to the distribution of the functions of DEL, we do not very quickly lose that ground and turn it into bad news: something that is

embarrassing, on which the wrong decisions have been made, and on which we get to the end of the process and have ignored the stakeholders and public opinion. It is very important, now that we have taken that piece of work on board and we have the opinions of the stakeholders, that we listen very clearly to what they had to say.

I also concur with the Deputy Chair and others who have mentioned the ministerial response. I think it would have been worthwhile to have a ministerial response at the end of the debate. However, I am an optimist, and we can perhaps take their absence as a positive, in that the Committee has statutory functions and is there to advise the Executive, particularly — in this Committee's case — the Department for Employment and Learning. We can possibly take some heart that, despite the cynical view of the Alliance Party, decisions have not already been made and, perhaps, as the motion requests, they will take note of what has been requested by the Committee.

Mr Allister: Even you do not believe that.

Mr D McIlveen: I do, Mr Allister; I believe it with all my heart.

I return to the stakeholder responses. I agree with Mr Ramsey, who mentioned that the responses were very innovative. I was surprised by just how emphatic they were. It would be erroneous to say that everybody, 100% of the respondents, said that the functions of DEL should go to one particular place, but we were not expecting that. I do not think that anyone expected that. However, the vast majority, by a long, long way, wanted to see the functions of the Department for Employment and Learning either go into DETI or to a new Department of the economy.

I have some concerns about the comments made by Ms Gildernew on the seamless approach to education, how someone should start from the cradle and get into a career. The fact is that when someone in our education system gets to the age of 16, there is a natural seam: they have a choice to leave. We are not going to remove that just by having it all under one Department. If our drivers are towards the economy, surely it makes sense, when we are preparing for the next stage of a young person's career, that we ensure that they have the right grounding and the right support in place as far as support from the Department is concerned.

During the consultation process, we had a very interesting engagement with Bill McGinnis, who gave us what I believe to be a fairly comprehensive definition of DEL's main aims, which are to promote learning and skills; prepare people for work; and support the economy. I believe that those three fundamental aims are central to the whole ethos of DEL, and it is vital that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister keeps those aims in mind throughout the process of dissolving the Department for Employment and Learning. There is no doubt where those functions lie. It is common sense that those functions, on the whole, should be transferred to a Department of the economy or into the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

I really do hope that this does not become a political carve-up and that we take a long-term view on this and come up with the best results for the people we are here to represent.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Again, like the other members of the Committee, I am appreciative that the Committee, under the chairmanship of Basil McCrea, undertook a very important exercise when we provided an opportunity for the key stakeholders to express their views on the dissolution of the Department and the transfer of functions. I, too, want to thank the Chair, the Deputy Chair and the Committee staff, led by Cathie White in this exercise. I particularly refer to the day when 10 stakeholders met in one room, with a section of the Committee led by the Chair, and other stakeholders met another section of the Committee, led by the Deputy Chair. Tom managed to keep to time on that day; Basil, I think, ran over time, but there was always that danger. I was happy to be located in the room governed by the West Tyrone member on that occasion.

One of the key considerations, if we are to go to the heart of the matter, is the question of where higher education and further education should go. I argue for the provision of a continuum of lifelong learning under the auspices of a Department of Education or a Department of education and skills. I believe that those functions should be transferred to the Department of Education. Higher education and further education are part of a bigger administration of all education in Dublin, where there is the Department of Education and Skills; in Scotland, where there is the Department of Education

and Training; and in Wales, where there is the Department for Education and Skills. I think that that best practice needs to be mirrored in this region.

I am drawn to evidence that some groups provided on the matter, including, for example, the Ulster Teachers' Union. It stated clearly that the proper place for the higher and further education functions of DEL was the Department of Education. Similarly, the University and College Union made a very strong case and reminded us that its primary function was to be educators, not businesspeople. It expressed concern about shifting emphasis away from education and the area of learning on to the business and private sector. Of course, it is not irrelevant at all, but there is a shift away from an emphasis on learning and the unique educational needs of the individual.

The Alternative Education Providers' Forum argued strongly about that area as well. It is responsible for 14- to 16-year-olds and a small 16-plus group of young people who are very alienated from the education system. It stated:

"We have found that, once we transfer those young people into further education or training organisations, the support services that we bring have not found a continuation."

The Open College Network expressed the idea of a continuum of lifelong learning and emphasised that there was an opportunity for young people to establish themselves on a clear path of learning for life, including from the cradle to the grave. So, again, I am drawn to the evidence that those groups provided on the matter.

I note that even some of those that opposed the realignment of further education and higher education with the Department of Education found some justification for locating the teacher training function in DE, not least because the major policy drivers emanate from and are initiated by the Department of Education. I suggest that the Department of Education is the more natural home for higher education, because the primary and core function of higher education is learning, teaching and the student experience. It is not solely about economic development, although that is an important element. I remind people that the University and College Union wanted emphasis on the fact that its mission means that they are educators who are conscious of the needs of the individual.

A point that other Members made, including Michelle Gildernew, was that a number of contributors to the consultation said that the most important thing for them was that working among Departments and joined-up government needed to be central to all this. Those contributors were not prescriptive about the direction of the functions. Among the organisations that made that point was Include Youth, which works with young people who are not in education, training or employment. It said that it should be noted:

“responsibility for addressing the needs of that group lies with a number of Departments and, crucially, with the Executive as a whole.”

Include Youth’s message was that the ministerial subcommittee needs to work effectively on that.

There needs to be a review of the Careers Service as well. I am concerned that careers teachers in the North tend not to make students aware of options in the rest of the island, where, in very many cases, there are no student fees. I am told that there might be as few as 20 students from the Armagh area who study IT in Dundalk, where you might be able to complete a degree without paying fees for that type of higher education.

I will conclude —

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

Mr McElduff: I will conclude by saying that it is not all rosy for the Department of Education, because the FE sector says that it does not want to be Cinderella in any new arrangement. The Department of Education needs to ensure that that does not happen.

I welcome the fact that junior Minister Bell has joined the debate.

4.45 pm

Mr Douglas: I support the motion, and I welcome the opportunity to speak in today’s debate. Like many other people, I wish to pay tribute to all those who have been involved in this process, including the Chair and Deputy Chair, or Basil and Tom, as we call them. I think they have done an excellent job.

In one sense, it is a bit sad being here today, because we are talking about the dissolution of the Committee as well, and I have enjoyed being part of it. I also want to pay tribute to the

Committee members and all the departmental and Committee staff, particularly Cathie White and her team for the excellent job that they have done. They have helped us and have been invaluable in our research over the consultation period. I think that this is a good example of a Committee that has, by and large, worked very well together.

The motion asks OFMDFM to take into account the opinion of key stakeholders when transferring the powers of the Department. The Committee’s consultation found clear and uniform answers. The majority of stakeholders who responded, including businesses, community and voluntary groups, DEL staff and trade unions — although I think trade unions were split down the middle on a couple of issues — wanted to see most or all of the Department’s remit transferred to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. I do not believe that any of the respondents wanted to see all of DEL’s functions transferred to the Department of Education or any other Department.

Like me, the stakeholders agreed that the economic benefits of linking DEL and DETI are not only clear to see but would deliver real and tangible benefits for the Northern Ireland economy. The CBI, an organisation that represents around 60% of Northern Ireland’s biggest employers, stated that the:

“key functions of DEL are, therefore, unambiguously linked with economic development. We believe that their effectiveness will be enhanced through closer integration with DETI.”

To link the Department that is a vehicle for economic development, DEL, and the Department that delivers it, DETI, not only makes economic sense but provides an opportunity to further create economic drivers and, more importantly, keep Northern Ireland moving forward.

The Institute of Directors, which I think someone mentioned earlier, commented on another advantage of linking DETI and DEL, which is that it would allow access to information, skills and services to make economic development more simplistic and streamlined. I believe that all of us in this Chamber agree that confusion often arises when the services and roles of both Departments overlap. DEL is being dissolved: that is a fact. Let us make the most of it, as I think one of my colleagues said earlier.

It is clear from the consultation that the majority view is that the natural home of DEL's remit is the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. That is a fact. Enhancing the development of the economy can only be seen as advantageous and a welcome asset to Northern Ireland. In order to facilitate further enterprise, innovation and development, the only logical move, for me, is to ensure that DETI plays a major role in the transfer of powers from DEL.

I pay tribute to our excellent universities and further education colleges that have made exceptional efforts over past years to align themselves with business and the skills sector, thereby ensuring that they equip the Northern Ireland labour market with a vast array of skills and a competitive advantage on the economic landscape.

Under the inspirational leadership of Minister Arlene Foster — I am sorry; I cannot read her writing here — the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has been a fundamental driver to economic development. I am confident that, under her watch, the utilisation of DEL and DETI will be maximised.

Mr McElduff: Will the Member give way?

Mr Douglas: Go ahead, Mr McElduff.

Mr McElduff: Is the handwriting Arlene Foster's or your own?

Mr Douglas: It is hard to work out because it is in Irish. That gives me an extra minute. I thank the Member for that timely intervention.

I will address some concerns that were highlighted by DEL staff. If I was in their position, I, too, would be concerned. There certainly was a feeling among staff that the delay in the decision-making process on the future of DEL has been damaging to morale. That must be addressed urgently, because it is simply not acceptable that staff tell us that they are demotivated because there was little or no consultation. Concerns were also raised about potential job losses, and people are worried about an uncertain future as a result of DEL's dissolution. There were also fears that further reductions in the number of Departments would mean more changes down the line. Staff are asking whether they have to go through all these changes now only for it to happen again in the future.

Many staff also felt that there was little or no consultation with them until we, the Committee

for Employment and Learning, asked for their views and, I think, did a good job in trying to elicit those. Several branches stated that they felt that there was a clear alignment between at least some of their functions and DSD, yet DSD was not mentioned at all during the discussions. One recurring concern was the potential loss of momentum between current DEL staff and providers. Many stakeholders and staff voiced concerns about the loss of relationships built up over the years between various projects and staff. They also worried about a loss of momentum, particularly on initiatives aimed at tackling youth unemployment. Pat Ramsey mentioned NEETs, and the people involved in that area worry that it will be lost in the transition.

Finally, there was criticism from some Members, who claimed that the dissolution of DEL was a manoeuvre of political expediency. When I stood for the DUP last May on a manifesto of making Stormont work better and streamlining it to deliver more for the people of Northern Ireland, the electorate endorsed those policies.

I call on OFMDFM to take note of staff concerns and stakeholders' views. It is my view that DETI must play a major role in the reshaping of DEL, either through the transfer of power or, as someone mentioned earlier, the amalgamation of the two into a Department of the economy. I support the motion.

Mr Kinahan: I am very pleased to have a chance to speak today on the transfer of functions from the Department for Employment and Learning. I speak as a member of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and as a member of the Education Committee. However, I feel that I must start by declaring an interest, as I have two children just entering the university world. I wonder whether one or two other Members ought also to have declared an interest.

I noted, when reading the call for evidence, that the test was maintaining effectiveness, and we must all keep that in mind regardless of whether the functions are kept together or moved. However, we should also keep in mind that there were six Departments under direct rule, and we now have 12. For a considerable time, the Ulster Unionist Party's policy has been that there should be eight. However, today's motion is on the future of DEL and whether to split it or move it as one. If further and higher education were to go to the Department of Education and all skills

moved to DETI, it would seem sensible that all of education remained under one Department — if only that were the case. The lecturers want it that way, and it would keep together all elements of education from the cradle to the point of getting a degree or starting a career. However, it does not seem healthy for one party to have total control of education from beginning to end, and I emphasise the word “control”. I aim that comment at Sinn Féin, should its Minister remain there.

There is too much emphasis on control, and it is not just a problem of dogma. It seems that it is more important that Sinn Féin controls every decision and makes those decisions itself. There also seems to be a total lack of consensus and discussion. In my few weeks in the Education Committee, going around parents, teachers and boards, that is what I am hearing from all of them. No one is discussing anything with them or communicating well with them. Taking that on board, we can then look at the mess we have with transfer tests. We got rid of transfer tests, brought in two or three tests and then we had last Friday’s bickering. We cannot afford to have that happening with our children’s education. We need consensus and discussion, and we need to find an agreed way forward. It comes down to politics, particularly when politics is damaging. We also saw it last week with the debate on nursery places. We called for a review of the July and August birthday criteria and the need to help the working poor, and we were basically told no. We need discussion and a consensus to come forward.

The alternative is to put it all into DETI, and as you heard from my party leader, that is the way that we think it should go forward. The Assembly must concentrate on creating jobs and skills and on ensuring that all our students and apprentices find jobs. That is the most important priority, and it should be our top priority. The Ulster Unionist Party feels that we should have a Department of the economy. Let us take up that point and make it an opportunity.

Something else that I think is very important is that when you look at education and government, where are the links with trade, business and commerce? Councils, which are responsible for so many of the people in Northern Ireland, have little links with trade and business, and there is little help for training. The councils are there to look after everybody and yet, somehow, we are

missing out on commerce. As another Member said, in our schools, you do not really meet it until you get to the careers evenings. The governors do not necessarily have a business link, nor do the teachers. We have to look at what we are doing and find a way forward to ensure that we are looking for the skills that will get everyone jobs in the future. At the other end of the spectrum, what research is going on to ensure that the jobs and skills that we prepare people for in the future are the right ones and the ones we are educating people for? Therefore, a Department of the economy seems to be the right way forward.

We support STEM subjects, and it seems right that we should be training everyone more in technologies and engineering. However, look at world markets and world skills and try to find Northern Ireland’s place there. A study by R E Smalley, a Nobel Prize-winning scientist at Rice University, found that, in the future, 90% of all physical scientists and engineers in the world will be in Asia. In 2001, 5% of American 24-year-olds had engineering degrees, compared to 39% of the Chinese and 19% of South Koreans. We have to find our niche in world markets. Therefore, I ask again: who is looking at the research as to where we go in the future?

Look at the top businesses and top industrialists. How many of them are actually run by people who have the skills of those bodies? Often you will find a linguist or a lawyer at the top. We really must prepare people for the future and equip them with a wide range of skills. At the same time, we must move away from the tick-box world that has come in with interviews, where the threat of legal action against somebody stops them actually assessing the best leadership qualities that we need to take our businesses forward.

The Ulster Unionist Party believes that there should be a Department of employment, but it also believes that there should be parental choice and a light touch. Apologies for the clichés, but we should let teachers teach, learners learn and parents parent. When it comes to the Department, we should depart and not have too many hands on.

5.00 pm

Mr Ross: Other Members started by thanking the Committee staff. I had better do the same; otherwise, I may get into trouble. A lot of work has been done by the Committee staff and, as

Mr Douglas said, by our Chair and Deputy Chair. He referred to them as Basil and Tom. I have heard then referred to by other names in the past, but it is important that we put on record our appreciation for what was quite a volume of work to get through.

It is also useful to thank the Business Committee for allowing a little extra time for the debate. That has allowed Members who are on other Committees or who have not been part of the process until now to give their views. Members of the OFMDFM Committee and the Education Committee have been able to comment, and that is useful, because Committee motions that are brought to the House often result in the Committee involved talking to itself. I am glad that that has not been the case today.

As Members said, how DEL's functions are split up will ultimately be a political decision. It is important to note that the Committee's approach was not one of all its members starting with a political point of view towards which we made sure the report was biased. Rather, our approach was to ask the experts — stakeholders in industry and the economy, in the colleges and universities and in our businesses — what they thought and how they thought the functions of DEL should be distributed. We collected their views in written and oral evidence, and that was important, because the experts are the drivers of the economy. They are the very people of whom we were thinking when we put the economy at the centre of our Programme for Government, and it is important that they be able to argue from their position of expertise.

The argument comes down to whether you believe that we should have a Department for lifelong learning, as Mr McElduff talked about, or that we should move towards having a Department for the economy. In that regard, a casual reading of the evidence that we have collected over the past months will show a clear consensus. The majority of stakeholders believe that we should move towards having a Department for the economy, with the majority of DEL's functions moving to DETI, whether it is rebranded or not. I have also heard it argued that having a single Department to drive forward the economy would be a strong indication from the Executive and the Assembly that we are taking the economy seriously.

During the exercise, others have argued that perhaps a new Department for the economy

would be better considered in an overall restructuring of the Executive. In line with my colleague Mr McIlveen, I would have no difficulty with that. Indeed, our party has consistently argued against the structures that were set up in 1998. They were not set up for efficiency or effectiveness but for overtly political reasons. We have always maintained that we want to have a smaller Executive and Assembly. Hopefully, that will happen in the future. That debate is probably for another time and place, but it is worth putting those points on record.

As other Members said, a look at the list of consultees who argued that the majority of DEL's functions should move to DETI shows it to include the Confederation of British Industry, the Institute of Directors, Invest Northern Ireland, a number of charities, Colleges NI, Queen's University and the University of Ulster. It is significant that they all argued the same point. As has been said, the unions were not of a single view — some argued one way and some the other. Predictably enough, I suppose, the teaching unions agreed with the view of Stranmillis and St Mary's that they would be better suited in the Department of Education. Most Committee members thought that that would be the case when the exercise was begun.

However, it is interesting that other unions, including NIPSA, argued that they should move towards DETI. When we looked at the evidence from jobcentre staff, it was interesting to learn that they unanimously believe that their role of getting people into work is more closely aligned with the work of DETI than with that of the Department for Social Development. Many members began the process thinking that some of the functions would go to DETI, some to the Department of Education (DE) and perhaps even some to DSD. Therefore, it is interesting that that was raised in evidence.

Nevertheless, the thrust of the evidence that we have taken is that the function of the Department of Education should be to concentrate on the building blocks of education. It should be about ensuring that school leavers, whether at 16 or 18, have the numeracy and literacy skills required to move on in life. Many said that they believe that the Department of Education is already too big to be taking on more functions of higher or further education or skills training. Other Members said that they are fearful that further education in particular will become the Cinderella service. They remember that that was

the case previously, and, indeed, a number of charities said that they did not wish to go to the Department of Education because it is too big already and they would be forgotten about.

The further education and higher education views that came out in the report said that those sectors are there to equip people for the world of work. It is about joining up with industry for the skills that it needs and the graduate courses that are provided at university. I should declare an interest as an Assembly Private Secretary in DETI, but I think that that gives me an insight into the needs of business. I disagree with Mr McElduff, who talked about the need to have lifelong learning in the Department of Education. I have listened to employers and business voice concerns about people not leaving school and college with the needs that industry requires, and that leads me to the conclusion that we need a joined-up approach in a Department of the economy. Indeed, only this morning, the Ulster Unionist Member Mrs Overend and I met one of Northern Ireland's leading companies. That company talked about how concerned it is that young people do not have the skills that it needs. That highlights that our focus should be on that area. If we can deliver that by having a single Department for the economy, that is important.

Other Members spoke on the comments of Bill McGinnis, who is the adviser on employment and skills. He spoke about the importance of supporting the economy and said that his preferred option is for DEL, DETI and the work of Invest to operate together. Nigel Smyth of the CBI echoed that belief. He talked about the links between the functions of DEL and economic development. Again, that highlights the direction in which we should be travelling. The universities very much see their role as one that supports economic development and that can deliver the Programme for Government. The voluntary sector also wishes to go in that direction.

In conclusion, of course people will automatically look for bits of the report that back their views.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up.

Mr Ross: However, if you do not come to the report with a predisposed position but read it and look at the stakeholders' views, you will see that it is going in the one direction that they want, which is towards a Department for the

economy with the majority of functions moving towards DETI.

Mr Lunn: I rise not as a member of the Committee for Employment and Learning but as an interested observer to all this. I welcome the opportunity to speak to the Committee for Employment and Learning's motion. It is not a normal thing for me to do, but I congratulate Basil McCrea, along with his Committee and the Committee staff, for their speed and efficiency and for the attention that they have given to the matter. That is very important.

In making any decision about the future of the Department or its functions, it is essential that the First Minister and deputy First Minister do what is best for Northern Ireland and our economy rather than make any short-term political move. So far, it is being viewed in that way, and I see no reason to change my view on that. As some Members said, including some from the DUP, it is a pity that OFMDFM is not represented here today. I was going to welcome Mr Bell, but he has disappeared again. He managed about 15 minutes.

Mr Allister: He must be at the golf course.

Mr Lunn: Mr Allister wants to steal my joke about golf courses, so I will not pursue that.

The Alliance Party is supportive of the streamlining of government. In our most recent manifesto, we advocated a system that went down to eight Departments and to about probably 80 MLAs. This really needs to be part of a full review of how all Departments operate and how government in Northern Ireland can be made more effective and efficient. Decisions that are made regarding a rationalisation of Departments should not be taken in isolation of a wider review. I heard Mr McIlveen and Mr Ross say that there was no reason not to go ahead with this at the present time. If it is the right thing to do, why wait? I will watch and listen with interest to see what the next Department to be targeted will be, because there is no reason to wait for that either. Perhaps that will be a Department that is not held by an Alliance Party Minister, but it is nearly bound to be. Perhaps it will be a Department that is held by a DUP Minister or a Sinn Féin Minister, but I doubt it very much. As I say, we will wait and see.

As a small region, we need to have a flexible and responsive workforce, but we need to lay the foundations now for the skills that we

will need in the future, particularly given the possibility of corporation tax reduction on the horizon. DEL, as demonstrated by its recently published skills strategy, has set out the vision for the skills that our economy is likely to need to maximise our growth possibilities. A labour market that is strong in the STEM subjects — science, technology, engineering and mathematics — will form the basis of a successful and advanced economy. DEL has been actively working to achieve strength in those skills alongside other Northern Ireland specific priority skills and the essential skills of literacy, numeracy and IT.

DEL is a coherent Department based around the skill needs of our population. In fact, compared to a number of other Departments, its functions have a much more natural fit. So, I agree principally with the DUP that the functions should not be split. There is no coherent reason that I can see for the functions being split. However, I will watch what happens with interest, because there is a clear difference of opinion across the House about whether some of its major functions should go to the Department of Education and some to DETI or a new Department of the economy. We will wait and see how the big parties sort that out.

The focus of DEL at the moment is on training those who require the skills to enter the labour market for the first time, be that through further or higher education; those who are already in the workplace but require new skills to progress or change their careers; and those who are unemployed and need help to enter or re-enter the world of work.

Both the Programme for Government and the economic strategy recognise the importance of investing in skills and have set ambitious targets to ensure that the skills of our population meet the needs of business, both now and in the future. Skills are critical to growing our local business base as well as to meeting the requirements of potential foreign investors. Given the focus that the Executive are placing on the economy, we can ill afford to play political football with one of the key Departments to ensuring economic growth. In fact, it is one of the largest Departments in the Northern Ireland Executive.

As I said, we will watch with interest, as the losers in this debate, to see the outcome. The most important thing is that the functions of

DEL, the morale and spirit of DEL staff and DEL's ability to do the job it was set up to do are not too badly damaged by all this. There must be a morale problem at the moment. That is plain to see. That is really all I have to say about it.

Mr Allister: We are gathered here today to mark the impending passing of the Department for Employment and Learning. I admit that I have attended better wakes, and I am sure that you, Mr Deputy Speaker, have too.

Here we are, dutifully debating a serious issue. A serious issue in particular for the staff of a government Department, who, through political machinations, have been left in a position of total limbo. Their morale probably knows neither whether it is coming nor going, for they do not know whether they are coming or going. This whole process has treated the staff particularly badly.

Here we are debating this, but to what end? Who is listening to what we have to say in this House? Maybe we should be grateful, because we had the great honour of one of the junior Ministers from OFMDFM gracing us with his presence for all of 15 minutes. The truth is that they are not listening, because what we say will not in the least affect what they do. That is the harsh political reality. The reality is that the outcome of this will be dictated by political expediency, just as its origin is political expediency. The decision to abolish DEL was not taken on the basis that it was the Department that most deserved to go or that there was some rationale or determination that identified it as the obvious candidate to be put out of its misery. If you were doing that, you might have thought that the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL), the Ministry of fun, would have been the most obvious Department to choose. If the decision were dictated by reality, you certainly would not be disbanding DEL, but then who needs a Department for Employment when the number of people unemployed is as low as 60,000? Who needs a Department of skilling when 25% of young people are without skills and are unemployed?

5.15 pm

Oh yes, we need DCAL and DSD, but it seems that we certainly do not need DEL. Anyone who believes that will believe anything and will believe the propaganda that will come out when the functions of DEL are distributed — as if it will be done on any rational or sensible basis. If rationality — that which is sensible and that

which is necessary — were the touchstone, DEL would certainly not be the Department being dispatched.

However, we all know that it was political expediency that decided that DEL had to go, because even the unembarrassable OFMDFM had no answer when asked about the scandal that a party with 16 seats had one Ministry and a party with eight seats had two Ministries. So, as part of the patch-up in relation to justice, it was decided that the Alliance Party's Department, whatever it might be, had to go. That is what has brought us here today, and it is that same spirit of political expediency that will determine where DEL's functions will ultimately go.

Indeed, OFMDFM is not even putting a face on it, hence the absence of any Minister. Its Ministers are showing their unbridled contempt for this House and this Committee and for the future of DEL's functions. Not even a junior Minister is here for the debate — apart from the 15 minutes when Mr Bell was here. One might have thought that it would be more beneficial for them to have a listening role in this House rather than a speaking role, if yesterday is anything to go by. Maybe Mr Bell would have been better spending his time in this House yesterday than doing what he was doing. Maybe even today he has other requirements. I do not know what section of our community he is off insulting today; yesterday it was the golf clubs, maybe today the garden centres —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Mr Allister, I have given you a lot of flexibility. You are well away from the motion, and I ask you to return to it.

Mr Allister: I am seeking to express my exasperation that OFMDFM Ministers are not here. I am giving them some advice. If they were here to hear it, it might keep them from putting their foot in it in other places, but we will see.

Even if OFMDFM Ministers are not here for me to cast my pearls of wisdom before them, I will give the House the benefit of my opinion as to where I think the functions of DEL should go. To me, it really is very straightforward. If you have an employment and skilling Department — when you distil it down, that is, in essence, what DEL is all about — it seems self-evident that you attach it to either a new Department of the economy or the present DETI. That pretty much seems to be a no-brainer. However, that is not how it will be. It will be a political carve-up between the DUP and Sinn Féin. “Them and

us” politics will still be very much alive when it comes to the distribution of DEL functions. This bit for them, this bit for us — that will be the determination of how the functions will be distributed. So, I am sorry, we are largely wasting our time, but, then, what is new about that in this House?

Mr Deputy Speaker: After all those pearls of wisdom, I ask Mr Basil McCrea to conclude and make a winding-up speech on the debate on the motion.

Mr B McCrea (The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning): I am not sure whether I can add any pearls of wisdom to those offered by my esteemed colleagues. There is much to appreciate in tonight's debate. I want to take the opportunity to speak a little bit on behalf of the Committee and make some observations. If time permits, I will offer a few observations of my own.

I do not want in any way to embarrass any of my colleagues by what I am about to say. Some of them have been quite outspoken on the matter, and I am grateful for that. I think that it is a mistake that no Minister from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister is present to hear what had to be said. I do not want to cause embarrassment, but I think that a lot of really important information has come across. We had a really interesting debate this evening. The media sometimes castigate this place for not staying late, not talking about important issues and not dealing with issues that really affect the people of Northern Ireland. However, this is not one of those occasions. This was a measured, constructive debate that was conducted by people who have different opinions and points of view, but which were put across quite properly and appropriately. I do not think that it would have been too much to ask for some people who are in the Executive, whoever in the Executive, to listen to what we have to say. When I was waiting for the debate to start, I heard Minister Alex Attwood responding to an interim report from his Committee. He said that he would respond and take things further forward.

Having made that point, I want to thank the Business Committee. We asked several times for a little bit more time for the debate, as others might have wanted to speak. As it turns out, we probably will not need all the time. However, as the Chair, I was keen for every

Committee member and others who chose to speak — I thank them for their time — to be able to give their opinion on this matter.

One issue, amongst others, that was raised was about the views of the staff in the Department. Sammy Douglas appropriately raised it. Something that was really quite novel in the exercise that we took forward was the inclusion of a very detailed response, almost line by line, from many people in the Department. That is the correct way to have a consultation — people should be asked what they think. The staff have been quite outspoken, and I do not think that they should be castigated for saying what is on their mind. They are worried about their jobs, morale, budgets and a lot of things. We should take note of those worries and deal with them. If a private company was acting in this way, we would all be at the steps of its head office saying that that is not the right way to go forward and that the staff should be involved. Many of us were quite alarmed by the debates around Stranmillis and St Mary's. We asked at that time why the views of the staff at Stranmillis were not being taken on board. The same argument applies here.

There were positive issues that came across, and I want to offer a sincere and genuine note of thanks to my vice Chairman, Tom Buchanan, who more than ably led the debate. He absolutely put out the points of view that need to be discussed. I hope that Tom will agree with me when I say that we have shared the responsibility of trying to manage the Committee on a number of issues. Tom shared the workload and has been most diligent and helpful, and he put his point of view across in his own inimitable style.

I am also happy to report to the Deputy Speaker that chairing the Committee has been an interesting experience. Some personalities have been involved. I am grateful that the smiling Jim Allister is here to make his contribution. He certainly made a very valuable contribution in Committee. I notice that Mr McElduff was worried about my timekeeping in some of the Committee meetings that I chaired. That was mostly because I had to try to keep Mr McElduff in some form of order, which was not an easy task, as you can imagine.

Other Members have spoken, including Mr Ross, Mr McIlveen, and Mr Douglas, who I have referred to already. All of them made contributions that made the Committee as a whole greater than the sum of its parts. Mr Ramsey was forever drawing to our attention our obligation to

NEETs, and I thank him for that. We addressed other issues, such as the North West Regional College. Ms Gildernew brought quite an interesting perspective on things, including getting me on a zip wire near Omagh — I thought my last days had come.

When you take all of that together, I think that we actually worked very diligently and very well as a Committee. There were times when we had differences of opinion, sometimes hotly expressed, but they were always in the interests of making Northern Ireland a better place. For people, particularly in the media, who criticise politics or politicians, let me tell you that there is no greater amount of work and no proper diligence that has not been carried out by this Committee. If they have any decency in them, they will take note of the way in which this debate has been carried out and the points that have been made. I challenge them, here and now, if they are listening to this — because we are now past 3.30 pm, which is the point at which they stop watching — to see that this is real politics; this is real debate, and these are issues of import. They are not simple sound bites. These issues need proper, considered debate and deliberation, and it would serve us well if we were able to get that message across to the electorate in this part of the world.

I want to move on and mention some of the issues. What is in front of us is more than just a sterile debate about whether DEL should go into DE or DETI, or whether universities should go to one place or another. There is much more that the Department for Employment and Learning and its Committee have looked to than just that. Earlier, Mr Lyttle mentioned the opening of adult learners' week. That was a most inspirational event. The Belfast Trust, among others, talked about care workers who said that 80% of the people in their care left school with no qualifications. A significant number of them have numeracy and literacy issues. They point out that these are governance issues for them, because if there is a problem with reading and writing, there may well be problems later on with health. They talked about inspiration and the way that people come forward, with a bit of training, and how they go on to other things. This is what DEL is about.

We also talked about education maintenance allowance (EMA). Include Youth told us how they feel so annoyed that EMA is not paid to them but it is to others. Who will forget the person from Opportunity Youth with the great Mohican haircut — I hope he will not mind, but I thought

he made a marvellous contribution — who told us how he turned his life around. That is also DEL. That is education.

Of course, the issue of youth unemployment was raised. We have to look at Steps to Work and ask whether it is a good programme. Maybe it is good that 25% of people on Steps to Work got a job. Perhaps that is a tick. However, maybe we might think that there should be more. There are issues that the Committee will, rightly, look at: tuition fees and whether the maximum student number (MaSN) cap is still relevant. Mr Ramsey repeatedly raised the issue about what Derry would like to see as far as a third campus is concerned.

Mr Wells: Londonderry.

Mr B McCrea: I am quite happy to see that Mr Wells has come to join the debate, because I am happy to deal with this in a calm and equal manner, whether it is Derry or Londonderry. I have made the point, and the issue in front of us is about our people — all of our people.

I talk also about autonomy. What comes out in many issues in the report is that Queen's, the University of Ulster and the further education colleges value their autonomy. They all like having the freedom to go and do what they think is right. We have seen some great examples of them operating on their own, which, as politicians, we sometimes try to muscle in on. The Confucius Institute initiative was the University of Ulster's, which we happened to attend.

The investment in the Belfast campus was put together by them. The head teachers' initiative by Queen's University and the leverage are issues in which they had some independence.

5.30 pm

I come now to the skills gap. Mr Ross raised the point about most of our fastest growing companies being absolutely beside themselves because we do not have the skills necessary to fill the job opportunities. That point was repeated by other Members, including Mrs Overend. We have to ask ourselves about careers. When our young people are at school, or later on, are we giving them the right advice as to where the jobs are going to be? Are they doing the right degrees? We talk about teacher training, and we had a debate about St Mary's and Stranmillis. People said that it does not matter whether you make too many teachers, because all of them will get jobs anyway. Think

of the waste. That is not the right way for a small, niche economy to be carrying out its business.

We must find some way to deal with adult apprenticeships. Most of our companies are telling us that they want highly skilled technical people of graduate calibre, which, for those who are listening, is different from graduates. It is about having people with technical skills to look after such areas as aerospace, coding and software. We need somebody to look at that.

I have to mention other issues. Ms Gildernew brought up the work that the Committee has done with the disabled and those who need a little bit of support when they look for education. I do not think I would be alone in saying that one of the greatest triumphs for the Committee was when it had dinner presented to it by NOW, which is a project for people in north and west Belfast. You can look at the other contributions. I do not know what other members thought about Orchardville and how its representatives explained where they want to go with sheltered education.

I want to read one final bit of contribution from our report. It is really worth listening to, if the First Minister or the deputy Minister are listening. Mr Tom Mervyn of the Employment Services Board said:

"Before we get into the issue of the potential dissolution of the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL), I will give you a brief overview of the Employment Services Board and the area that we represent. West Belfast and the greater Shankill area has around 50% of Belfast's unemployed, its worklessness and its income support and incapacity benefits claimants."

He also said that it has worklessness rates of as much as 65% in some individual wards. He makes the point that because of the size of Belfast, and you can talk about other cities in our area, it is not something confined to them. This is something that affects us all. It affects the productivity of this area. We need to make sure that we concentrate resources into those areas. I am interested to see what form of structure comes forward to make sure that we deal with all those issues. It is not about only universities —

Mr Douglas: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: Certainly, Sammy.

Mr Douglas: This is not to give you an extra minute or anything. Does the Member agree that a lot of the good work that has been carried out by the Committee should be part of a legacy that

will be handed on or transferred to whatever Department takes on the functions of DEL?

Mr B McCrea: As ever, I am very grateful for Mr Douglas's intervention. On a personal note, I must say that I have been very impressed by the contribution that he has made throughout the Committee's work. His perspective is about trying to get things done. I hope that we will be able to deal with these issues.

Let me finish by saying a few things in my capacity as a Member, because I have been speaking on the Committee's behalf. I want to put out some truisms that I do not think are true. I know that some people will disagree with this, but this is real debate. Some people think that we should be engaging in blue-sky thinking and that we should simply let our teachers get on with it or let our researchers sit in a lab somewhere and think up something. We do not have the resources to do that. We are not the United States of America. We cannot research everything. We cannot do everything. We need to be focused in what we do. It is not for me to say what we do. However, I know that we need focus and that most learning takes place when it is in context and when people say, "I want to learn that skill for a particular reason." It is about getting relevant, and we need to focus our activity on ways that maintain our employment, our standard of living and our competitiveness down the road.

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

Mr B McCrea: Sorry, Mr Deputy Speaker. I do not have my glasses on, so I did not see that we were getting so close. I will finish with this point. This is not about politics; this is about the future of Northern Ireland. I hope that we will have another debate in which all are engaged, including our Ministers. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister, when considering the transfer of the functions currently exercised by the Department for Employment and Learning to other Departments, to take note of the views expressed by key stakeholders consulted by the Committee for Employment and Learning.

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

Knockmore Primary School, Lisburn: Special Needs Units

Mr Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the topic for debate will have 15 minutes in which to speak. The Minister will have 10 minutes to respond. All other Members wishing to speak will have approximately five minutes.

Mr Craig: It is with some regret that I come back to this House only a matter of months since the issue of Knockmore Primary School was debated. Last October, the debate was around the proposed closure of Knockmore Primary School. At that time, there was a huge debate around the issue, and, on that occasion, the school was saved from closure. I take this opportunity to thank the Minister and his Department for whatever role they played with regard to that. However, today, it is regrettable that despite winning that previous battle to save the school, we are now in a similar position in relation to the proposal to relocate the special units from Knockmore to other areas outside Lisburn.

In this academic year, the school enrolment is 143. Some 62 of those children enrolled in Knockmore are specifically designated to a special unit in the school. I believe that there will be good news with regard to this year's enrolment, which I am led to believe is well up from last year.

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

The school has a total of seven units, which cover each year group from year one up to year seven. The units cater for children who require specialist speech and language teaching and social communication tuition. Of the 62 pupils who attend the school for its specialist provision, 44 children use the speech and language units, and 18 are enrolled in the social communications unit. If you have not already guessed, a lot of those children suffer from autism. That is where the social communication skills come into it.

The proposed removal of each of those key special units will have a detrimental impact on the children, especially those with autism, because one of the key issues with autism is keeping a set routine. The removal of the units will most definitely lead to a change in that routine, which will have a horrendous impact not only on the children, but on the families of those involved.

The relocation of the special units to the other locations will pose a significant problem relating to transport of the children to other locations in the South Eastern Education and Library Board area. It is disappointing that in the same academic year as we secured the retention of Knockmore Primary School, we are faced with further bad news from the board, and the commissioners know the many reasons for the widespread opposition to closure in October. What has changed since that debate around the school closure? This is a school with an outstanding inspection report — that was the comment that was placed there by the inspection regime. The same staff are there, although many remain on temporary contracts despite the fact that a decision has been made to keep the school. I would like the Minister to look into that because I find it alarming. We have a Sinn Féin Minister and his party saying that they are all for protecting the rights of workers, so why, when the decision has been made to keep Knockmore Primary School open, are its acting principal, acting vice principal and three mainstream teaching staff on temporary contracts? There is an issue there, and I would like the Minister to look into it. That should not be the case but, unfortunately, it has been for many years.

What has changed? What brought about the idea to relocate the speech and language units? We are told that it is all about the children affected having a choice of where to go. According to the South Eastern Education and Library Board, it will relocate one of Knockmore's speech and language units to St Luke's, Dunmurry and one to Ballynahinch Primary School. The good news in all of that, apparently, will be the creation of a new learning support unit at Carryduff and also, for some reason that I do not know, the renaming of mild learning disability units in St Malachy's, Castlewellan.

The distance between Knockmore and Ballynahinch is 12 miles. The journey takes 30 minutes to an hour, depending on the time of day that you hit traffic. The distance from Knockmore to

Carryduff is almost another 10 miles, which is another half-hour journey. Dunmurry is, indeed, closer. However, the real question is this: why are units being moved away from a school when one of the strong arguments put together by those who, ultimately, brought about its saving was that it was a single unit? It was not just a primary school; the additional special needs unit made it unique. Time and time again, parents testified that many pupils passed from the special needs unit back into the primary school and, at times, back into the special needs unit. The continual joined-up approach at the school led to a far better educational environment for those children, so why remove the units from Knockmore?

Were the South Eastern Education and Library Board giving additional units to the areas mentioned, I would be the first to congratulate it and would have no issue. Indeed, with today's announcement of a further £6 million for special educational needs, the Minister indicated that there was increasing need in that area. I welcomed that statement from the Minister this morning, but why can we not have additional units instead of the removal and break-up of what is, quite clearly, a very good, functional unit at Knockmore Primary School?

I strongly urge the Minister and his Department to reconsider the proposal that has been placed on the table. We have spoken many a time in the Chamber about underachievement. I have seen a report that clearly indicates the levels of underachievement in the Knockmore area. Here we have a primary school that, as clearly indicated in its latest educational report, is overachieving. A combined special needs unit and school are working well together in an area of huge underachievement, and the results from Knockmore Primary School are excellent, not only for mainstream children but for those with special educational needs. That is an example of what works. It is not an example of a failing education system. What I am really saying to you, Minister, is this: the special needs units at Knockmore ain't broke and do not need fixed. So, why are we tampering with them?

5.45 pm

Mr B McCrea: Having just finished a long debate about how we need to deliver for our people rather than play politics, I feel that it is incumbent on me to support and congratulate Mr Craig for bringing this matter to the House's attention. I know the school and the set-up

there. What I took from the proposer's speech was this: if it ain't broke, why fix it? We have an excellent school that is really well supported by very diligent parents and is integrated fully in the community, with people of all abilities working together. It just seems a real shame that we have to go and disrupt that.

When it was announced that we were successful the last time and the matter had been put to bed, we were relieved, because it seemed as though the argument had been won and that certain people had been won over. However, the spectre of apparently doing something by the back door has been raised again.

I am hoping to hear the Minister — I am grateful that he is here — say that he will take on board the fact that there is genuine concern and angst. Given his earlier statement, I know that he is very concerned about the issue. I would really like to engage with him to find out what the thinking is. Why do we have to go down this route? Is there not some way of keeping everybody happy rather than constantly reinventing the wheel? I conclude on that note, because I am sure that others wish to add to the debate.

Mr Lunn: It seems no time since we were involved in the previous debate about the fate of the school, not just the special needs units. It is hard to comprehend from what we know now that on 2 December last year, which was only four days after the commissioners decided not to pursue a development proposal to close Knockmore, the commissioners were asked to review the location of speech and language units in the primary sector, obviously with Knockmore in their sights. That just seems a bit disingenuous now. It was pretty bad timing and, as it turns out, pretty bad PR.

The last time we debated the fate of the school, the Minister was fairly critical of the fact that the debate had been brought to the House at all. I must confess that I had some sympathy with that view, because we were asking him to comment on something that had not yet come before him and that he would perhaps have to adjudicate on. So, that was fair enough; I could understand that. We may get a similar reaction this time. However, at least it gives us, largely local representatives, the opportunity to vent our views about what is happening. I do not want to repeat everything that Jonathan said, because I agree with every word.

The special needs units at Knockmore are widely acknowledged as a centre of excellence in that field. Some of the reasons that I think will probably be put forward for distributing some of the units to other parts of the board area are travel time, convenience and that sort of stuff. However, I have heard no complaints from any parent with a child at the special needs units about having to travel from Carryduff or Ballynahinch to Knockmore. In fact, in the previous debate, Margaret Ritchie commented on the fact that it was not a problem and that the special needs units at Knockmore were valued by those in the northern end of her constituency just as much as by those in Lisburn. So, I really hope that good sense will prevail.

The consultation that has started will have to run its course. I hope that the right conclusion is arrived at. Some 50% of pupils who attend those units go into mainstream education, which is a terrific achievement. The pupils come from some distance away.

Jonathan referred to children with autism and the effect of upheaval and disruption to their daily lives and lifestyle, particularly to their education. That point has been reinforced. The Education Committee recently went to Middletown, where we heard the same story — that what those children need, and what is highly desirable for them, is stability. Stability will not be the outcome if some of the units are shifted. There is a demand, and the Minister recognised that in his statement today when he referred to the extra £6 million, which is totally to be welcomed. That is a sign of the increased demand that there is for those types of units. That demand is no less in the Lisburn and Lagan Valley area than it is anywhere else.

Mr Craig also said that if we need extra units, let us provide extra units, but somebody would need to make the case, so that I might understand it, for the redistribution of three out of seven of those particular units in a highly successful school, which has just recovered from the shock of almost being proposed for closure. It was thought that it was safe. Enrolments are going up now that the threat of closure has passed. What will happen if those three units are taken away? Down will go enrolment numbers again, and the next thing that we will have is another development proposal as part of the area planning process.

I do not make the case for Lisburn not having enough primary schools. There are probably too many primary schools on that side of Lisburn, but Knockmore is a special case. The synergy between the special needs units and the school itself is far too important to lose. I will conclude with that. I really hope that good sense will prevail in the long term.

Mr Givan: I thank my colleague Mr Craig for bringing this Adjournment topic to the House. I do not intend to repeat everything that Mr Craig, Mr McCrea and Mr Lunn have said. I would like to be able to add to it. Obviously, the issue has been debated in the Chamber before, so the Minister is very much aware of the campaign that has existed around Knockmore, a campaign that successfully retained the school.

It is important that we put out a message that Knockmore Primary School has been saved and, in the immediate future, will continue to operate as a local primary school, delivering education for young people. It is important that we emphasise that. What we are talking about here is a specific number of units. The school has been saved. It will go into the area planning process, along with every other urban school in Lisburn. It is important that we make it very clear that Knockmore Primary School was saved and will continue to operate in the immediate future, pending the outcome of the area planning process.

When the statement was released, the sting in the tail for a lot of people was the reference to the special units. Many people felt that the way in which the South Eastern Education and Library Board handled the initial talk about the mainstream school closing and then added in the special units was an underhand tactic. It annoyed a lot of people. It divided a school that had been united, and I emphasise again that the way in which the education board has conducted itself has left a lot to be desired.

Issues have been raised. We had a meeting that the parents were able to attend, at which quite a number of questions were asked. It is fair to say that some of the questions were answered, but a lot of them were not. The way in which one of the officials from the board conducted themselves left a lot to be desired. Many felt that contempt was being displayed for what were very genuine questions being raised by the parents present.

One of the concerns is that we have specialist provision at Knockmore that caters for a lot of children, and the fear is that if we start to split that up by relocating those units, specialist provision elsewhere will be diminished by spreading it too thinly. A discussion needs to take place with the health trust on how it will be able to provide the service if relocation of the units takes place.

Another issue that was raised concerned transport. Parents from Downpatrick and parts of Belfast have said that they want to continue to send their children to Knockmore. The official gave an assurance that if that was the parents' choice, it would be facilitated. The fear is that, having been told that there is alternative provision near your home, which you decide to go past to continue at Knockmore, you may then have to meet your own travel costs. People raised that fear, and I would be keen for the Minister to touch on that and to provide some reassurance to parents that that will not be the case.

In response to a letter that I wrote to the Minister, he indicated that the preferred travel time for children who are in this type of situation is 30 minutes. At the meeting, parents said that they were not happy with the type of transport that they get. They were happy for most of the children to travel for longer than 30 minutes, but the type of transport that is used is inappropriate. If there were a better way to provide the transport in a more suitable vehicle and with better timings, parents would prefer that to the relocation of units.

I agree with everything else that my colleagues from Lagan Valley said on this; I just added to their remarks. I commend the school. In the face of all the difficulty and uncertainty that has been created, the teaching staff have continued to provide an excellent service and quality education in very difficult circumstances. Testimony to the school is the fact that its enrolment has gone up. Usually, when the threat of closure comes, people abandon a school. In this case, enrolment at Knockmore Primary School has increased, and I think that that is testimony to the good work that has been done there. I particularly thank the principal for her leadership of the staff and those parents who have been involved actively in raising these issues and campaigning.

I look forward to the Minister's response.

Mr Rogers: I thank Mr Craig for bringing this issue to the House, and I also welcome the Minister here.

As a representative of South Down, I must say that the people there value Knockmore Primary School. Although we have a responsibility to provide quality education to all children, we must make a special effort for those with special educational needs. The Minister acknowledged that in his statement this morning.

Whether children are in preschool, the traditional school setting, a learning support unit, a special unit or a special school, we have major responsibilities. Knockmore attracts pupils from far and wide to its specialist speech and language and autism units. The school ticks all the boxes of the sustainable schools criteria. This has already been mentioned, but you might ask why there has been an increase in its enrolment since 2008. I suggest that the reason for that is that it is simply a good school and that it is very good at meeting its pupils' needs. It is commendable that the majority of its children transfer into mainstream education and need no additional or specialist support.

We do not need a High Court ruling to tell us about the advantages of early intervention. The Department's own figures for numeracy and literacy tell us that early intervention has an 80% success rate for children aged six or seven but only a 20% success rate when they are 10. By the time that they reach secondary school, the odds are stacked against them if they do not get that specialist help.

So, having previously attempted to close the school in the autumn, plans to relocate the speech and language and social communication units were brought forward just before Christmas. The most important people in this debate are the children and their parents. Has anyone stopped to think of how the disruption of moving to another unit would impact on the children? Those children need stability and will achieve their potential only if they are in a friendly, caring, supportive and familiar environment. Such children find it difficult to adapt to new surroundings, and the increasing stress that is created can have a negative effect on their learning. How can the parent of a six-year-old autistic boy tell him that he will not be going back to Knockmore in September but somewhere else, perhaps somewhere much further away? We have a moral and ethical duty

to protect the most vulnerable in our society and give them a first-class education in a school that has a proven record.

6.00 pm

I fully support Mr Craig in bringing this to the House. There is a need for greater consultation with the school, its governors and, most importantly, the families who would be adversely affected if the closure became a reality.

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to respond to today's Adjournment debate on the consultation on the removal of special educational needs services from Knockmore Primary School. You will recall that the Adjournment debate on 25 October last year focused on the possible closure of Knockmore Primary School and Dunmurry Primary School. In respect of Mr Lunn's comments, it is the right of Members to bring forward such topics for debate. My concerns around the last debate were that we had linked Knockmore and Dunmurry together, which I thought was not the best way forward. Certainly, however, Members are perfectly entitled to bring forward debates on such subjects and raise their concerns about them.

There are seven special classes or units at Knockmore; four speech and language classes and three learning support classes, which cater for 62 pupils. Children attend those types of classes for an intensive period to address their difficulties. The classes are attached to mainstream schools. The South Eastern Board has indicated that some of the pupils who attend Knockmore travel considerable distances to get to the school. Last October, the board carried out a pre-publication consultation on whether a development proposal for the closure of Knockmore Primary School should be published. The board subsequently decided not to publish the development proposal for the closure of Knockmore, but instead indicated at the time that it wished to consider relocating some of the special services at Knockmore to other schools that were closer to the pupils' homes. I believe that the rationale was that some of the children were considered to be travelling excessive distances every day.

I understand that the South Eastern Board is now considering publishing four development proposals for the relocation and redesignation of its special services, which would affect Knockmore Primary School. Those are: relocating

speech and language services from Knockmore to St Luke's Primary School, Twinbrook; relocating a speech and languages class from Knockmore to Ballynahinch Primary School; changing the status of the moderate learning services that are currently at St Malachy's Primary School, Castlewellan to learning support services; and establishing a learning support class at Carryduff Primary School. However, I emphasise that my Department has not received any definitive proposal for any change at Knockmore Primary School or the special units that are located there. If the board chooses to publish such a proposal, it will have to follow a statutory process that will involve extensive consultation with elected representatives and the community. If it is published, I will ensure that I meet representatives from the House and representative bodies from around the constituency. I know that Members will bring those to my attention.

As you are aware, the first stage of the process will be the pre-publication, which is under way. Following that, the board will decide whether the development proposal will be published. If the decision is to publish the development proposal, there will be a statutory two-month period during which interested parties can make their views known to my Department. At the end of that period, I will decide on the proposal, taking into account all relevant information, including, undoubtedly, comments that will be received from elected representatives at that time.

As I have a responsibility to make the decision on development proposals, I cannot comment on specific proposals in advance of that process. However, I assure the House that I will give full consideration to the proposals that are brought forward. Mr Givan said that he had concerns around how the board is conducting the process. The Member should bring those to the attention of the board. If he remains dissatisfied and wishes to bring them to my attention, I am more than happy to look at them. It is incumbent on us all to assure members of the public and parents of children with special educational needs who may be facing change that their concerns will be addressed in an open, frank and compassionate way, and that parents will receive all the information that is available to them. Any concerns around travel or the process should be explained carefully to parents. If you need to explain it again, explain it again to ensure that parents and pupils know exactly what the process may involve.

I assure Members that if a development proposal is published, I will meet Members and representative bodies and will discuss all the concerns that they have. I emphasise that, at this stage, I have no development proposal in my Department for Knockmore Primary School. When I have one, I will be in the rather difficult position of not being able to make detailed comments on my views on that proposal. It is a statutory process. I have to make a legal decision at the end of it, and I am bound by process. Once again, I reassure Members, members of the public, parents and representatives of the school that I will take on board their views during that process.

Adjourned at 6.05 pm.



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