

Official Report (Hansard)

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Contents

Assembly Business	
Suspension of Standing Orders	111
Ministerial Statements	
North/South Ministerial Council: Special European Union Programmes	111
Business Rates and Update on the Implementation of the Rates (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2012	118
European Priorities 2012-13	128
Assembly Business	138
Oral Answers to Questions	
Culture, Arts and Leisure	139
Regional Development	145
Executive Committee Business	
Finance Bill: Legislative Consent Motion	151
Committee Business	
Fuel Poverty	162
Private Members' Business	
Autism: "You Need to Know" Campaign.....	177

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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 28 May 2012

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Extension of Sitting

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

Mr Dickson: I beg to move

That in accordance with Standing Order 10(3A) the sitting on Monday 28 May 2012 be extended to no later than 7.30 pm.

Ministerial Statements

North/South Ministerial Council: Special European Union Programmes

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): You would think that, on a day like this, we could move proceedings outside, like I used to do in school on a nice day. We could sit out and enjoy the sun, as well as doing the business.

The North/South Ministerial Council met in special EU programmes sectoral format in Armagh on 4 May 2012. Council last met in SEUPB sectoral format in November 2011. I represented the Northern Ireland Executive, accompanied by Junior Minister Martina Anderson. The Government of the Republic of Ireland were represented by Brendan Howlin TD, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, who chaired the meeting.

The meeting began with a presentation from the rural enabler programme, a £2.7 million initiative aimed at the Rural Community Network and funded under the Peace III programme. The programme aims to build positive relationships between all communities in rural areas of Northern Ireland and in the border counties of the Republic. The presentation was a welcome opportunity for the Council to learn directly of the benefits of EU Peace funding and its delivery. I commend the project leaders for their achievements to date and for the very interesting and engaging presentation they gave to the Council.

Mr Pat Colgan, the chief executive of the Special EU Programmes Body, updated the Council on progress since the November 2011 meeting. The Council noted and welcomed the ongoing work being undertaken to close the Peace II and INTERREG IIIa programmes. It is anticipated that

the closure process for the two programmes will be complete before the end of the year.

The Council also noted SEUPB's progress in implementing the current Peace III programme. As at the end of March 2012, Peace III had approved 158 projects worth £284 million; that is, 98% of the available budget. To date, the programme has spent £108 million, and that exceeds its EU spending target for 2011. It will need to spend £11 million in 2012 in order to achieve this year's EU target, and SEUPB is confident that that can be achieved.

With regard to the INTERREG IVa cross-border co-operation programme, the Council noted that, at the end of March 2012, 71 projects worth £170 million had been approved. As a result, just over three quarters of the programme's budget has been allocated to projects. The programme has to date spent £60 million, enough to pass the EU spending target for 2011. However, it will need to spend £32 million in 2012 if it is to meet this year's target. Again, SEUPB is confident that that can be achieved.

The Council had been previously advised by SEUPB that INTERREG faced a potential risk in achieving one or more future EU spending targets, possibly in 2013 or 2014. The risk was due primarily to the fact that the programme budget was not yet fully allocated to projects. SEUPB advised that, if the programme budget was not fully allocated to appropriate projects by the start of 2013, EU spending targets could be missed, either in 2013 or 2014 or in both. When a programme misses its EU spending target, any shortfall between the actual and the target expenditure is deducted from the programme budget. SEUPB had advised the Council that up to £35 million might be at risk on account of missed spending targets, if the risk were not addressed.

I am pleased to report that, since then, there have been some positive and welcome developments with the INTERREG programme. In January this year, the SEUPB held a call for projects. That attracted 91 applications, seeking nearly £190 million, which is around five times the remaining INTERREG budget. The top-scoring applications have been shortlisted and are currently being assessed in detail. SEUPB aims to have all the top-scoring projects fully assessed and the funding issued by the end of the year. There are also a number of applications from previous calls that are still

under assessment. Again, SEUPB aims to have those assessed in full before the end of the year. If all the assessments are completed on schedule and the funding allocated, the programme should be back on track. It will have allocated its full budget, and any potential risk will have been greatly reduced. My officials are, therefore, working closely with SEUPB to ensure that that end-of-year target can be achieved.

The Council was also updated on the progress that has been made by the five local authority-based groups under the INTERREG IVa programme. The groups now have 34 projects approved, worth £37 million. In addition, they have a further £25 million worth of projects under assessment, including the North West Regional Science Park. On the basis of projects approved and projects under assessment, it appears likely that they will secure at least £55 million. That is their notional share of the programme funding. It is good to see that the programme's local dimension has made a strong showing, because there were concerns that that would not happen. The INTERREG programme was developed to have both a regional and a local focus, and it is vital that there are good local projects to balance the more regionally focused initiatives that have been funded.

With regard to future funding, the Council noted that we are still at an early stage in the process. The EU budget will not be agreed until the end of this year or perhaps early 2013. Until that happens, there will be no decision on how much individual member states and regions will receive. However, the Council was satisfied that there is likely to be a further INTERREG cross-border programme, and the prospects for a fourth round of Peace funding remain good. In view of that, the Council noted that, in line with its statutory responsibilities, the SEUPB will shortly initiate work on the development of future Peace IV and INTERREG V programmes.

The Council noted that the work will be consultative and evidence based. It will take account of the performance of previous programmes and will be led by a steering group, chaired by the SEUPB. The group will be made up of programme stakeholders from across the eligible regions. The Council noted the key priorities for the SEUPB, as set out in its business plan and budget, and noted that the SEUPB's annual report and accounts had been prepared in draft for certification.

Finally, the Council noted the November 2011 plenary meeting's recommendation concerning the establishment of a board for the SEUPB. The Council agreed that the cost of a board would be difficult to justify. Given the existence of the current EU programme monitoring arrangements, a board would, effectively, deal with only the SEUPB's administrative budget, which is just 3% of the total SEUPB budget. However, it was agreed that the two sponsor Departments would examine the governance arrangements that are in place for the SEUPB and report back to the Council at the next meeting in sectoral format, which is scheduled for October 2012. The decision will be referred for endorsement to the next NSMC plenary meeting, which will be held in June 2012.

Suspension of Standing Orders

Mr Speaker: Before I call the Chair of the Finance Committee, Conor Murphy, I will take you back to the business motion and get the agreement of the House, because that must be done by cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That, in accordance with Standing Order 10(3A), the sitting on Monday 28 May 2012 be extended to no later than 7.30 pm.

North/South Ministerial Council: Special European Union Programmes

Mr Murphy (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire fosta. I thank the Minister for his statement and welcome the more positive indication that was given on INTERREG spend. I know that he shares the concerns of many representatives in the House about the level of spend and some of the issues with getting INTERREG money spent.

It has been suggested to the Finance Committee that implementing more simplified decision-making arrangements for the next INTERREG programme that are similar to those in the other European jurisdictions could avoid the bottleneck and delays that have occurred in the current programme. What is the Minister's view on that? How confident is he that all the necessary arrangements will be completed on time to ensure that the existing programme gets back on track and avoids any budget deductions?

Mr Wilson: I thank the Chairperson for the question. He is quite right: we cannot continue with the current assessment method for programmes. I would like to think that the changes will occur not for the next set of programmes, but that we will actually see material changes. In fact, we have to see material changes in the assessment method. I cannot understand why programmes and projects can be assessed and letters of offer can be out within 26 to 28 weeks in other jurisdictions, while assessment takes 56 to 58 weeks in our system.

To meet the targets for the current programme, the SEUPB has said that it will cut that assessment down to 40 weeks for the current applications that have gone in through INTERREG. That has been done in a number of ways. First, there has been an early assessment of projects, so we are now down to a shortlist of 13. Secondly, a more detailed economic assessment will then be carried out. At the same time, there should also be work with Departments and a parallel arrangement to ensure that there is input from economists in the accountable Departments. Since, at the end of the day, the accountable Departments carry the can on this, there must be input from them. Can we marry some of the views in there, so that we get questions at an earlier stage?

If it can be done in other jurisdictions for the same kind of programmes, there is no reason why it cannot be done with SEUPB. The other thing is that, perhaps in the longer run, we will need to go back and look at devolving this down again to local partnerships rather than it being centralised to SEUPB level. I hope that that will come through in the consultation when we look at further programmes.

12.15 pm

Mr Girvan: I thank the Minister for his statement. Unlike other Members, I am somewhat apprehensive about the way in which SEUPB delivers some of the funding. I am pleased to see, between INTERREG IVa and the cross-border project, that there are a number of applications, amounting to £190 million. What measures are being taken to ensure that that funding is dispensed on an equality basis? I ask because we understand that certain Members make a big issue about that. I want to be sure that the community that I represent gets a fair crack of the whip. I do not believe that —

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member —

Mr Girvan: That is the question.

Mr Wilson: First of all, programme money is not allocated on a community basis. The individual projects that come forward are assessed on the basis of how they meet the objectives of the particular themes and programmes. I am pleased to say that there appears to be a wider range of projects coming in. There is a very strong one for the north-west science park, which I know that you will be interested in, Mr Speaker, and which should benefit the whole community. Certainly, if it has the same impact that the science park in Belfast is having, it will be valuable to the north-west. In my area, I am pleased that one tourist project, the Gobbins path, has already received money, and the refurbishment of Magheramorne quarry, which is not too far away, will have massive tourist potential in east Antrim. It really is up to areas and people in those areas, whether that is local authorities or businesses, to bring forward quality projects so that they can be assessed.

Mr Cree: Like other Members, I have a concern about the operation of SEUPB. We were told by SEUPB some time ago that it was having difficulty meeting targets. Suddenly, it takes the step, which is to my mind a normal governance issue, of issuing a new call, and it has now got

a lot more. I notice that the Minister put a note of caution in his statement:

“If all of the assessments are completed on schedule and the funding allocated”.

Is he happy that that will actually happen, or is it going to be another tactic of SEUPB — stop, go, stop, go, panic, save it, panic, save it?

Mr Wilson: First of all, I do not think that I have ever been anything other than honest with the House about the difficulties that SEUPB has experienced and will always experience. I have made it clear that I will not defend the indefensible. Where I believe that there is something to be highlighted, I will highlight it so that Members have full transparency. Even if that leads to uneasy questions for me, I am quite happy about that.

All I can say is that, first of all, there was a call for projects, and that call has brought in some very good projects. Indeed, the worrying thing is that, had some of those projects been submitted at an earlier stage, they would probably have got through the scoring process because they are very good projects. It is not that we are simply throwing money out and saying, “It does not matter what the project looks like, let us just get the money spent”. The 13 that are shortlisted are all good, high-quality projects. I mentioned the Magheramorne quarry regeneration project in my area and the north-west science park, both of which are good economic drivers and will be important.

In all the discussions with SEUPB, we have looked at what was wrong in the past, why it was taking so long and what we can do to advance the assessment. I have been given an assurance by SEUPB, as has the Minister in the Republic, that these will be assessed within the 40-week period. Consultation groups have already been set up to assess the projects, and they are starting their work now. I think that there should be a report from the consultants by September, and then allocations can be made. Letters of offer must go out by the end of this year; I put that on the record in the House so that Members can make their own judgement. If that leads to questions coming back at the end of this year, I am quite happy for that to happen. Of course, it is then up to the groups to spend the money; that is the next stage. Sometimes, that is slow, with spending starting around 18 months after letters of offer have been issued. So, again, that is the next big challenge: to

make sure that the money is spent once it has been allocated.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. I thank the Minister for his statement. What progress has been made on recouping moneys from groups that were found to be in breach of the terms of their letter of offer?

Mr Wilson: First, there is a requirement that, where moneys have been allocated and the terms of letters of offer have not been met, the money should be recouped. A number of things have to be taken into consideration, the first of which is the circumstances that led to the breach of the letter of offer. In some cases where genuine mistakes have been made and the fault does not lie totally with the group concerned, the funding body has to accept some culpability. Secondly, there has to be a proper investigation. Given that individual groups are seriously affected when money is recouped, it is only fair that they should have the opportunity for comeback. Thirdly, of course, a judgement then has to be made on what percentage of funding needs to be recouped. In the past, the levels have varied from very small percentages to — I think that there are examples of this — up to 100%. All those things have to be borne in mind.

Let us just remember that many of the groups that undertake work in their community have a grave responsibility, and some of them need their hand held more than others. I do not think that we want to run in willy-nilly and penalise people who, despite acting in the best interests of their community, very often find themselves falling foul of the very bureaucratic system of European funding and find that their personal assets have been put in jeopardy. We have to bring a bit of humanity to this as well.

Mr McCarthy: I am grateful to the Minister for reporting back to the Assembly this afternoon and, particularly, for his last comments. I pay tribute to all those on the ground who work hard to bring a lot of benefits to all our communities. I have sat through many laborious and lengthy meetings with partnerships, which you mentioned. My question has already been asked, so I will ask one about the board. The last paragraph mentions the recommendation that a board be set up. That has been set aside, I think wisely, because of costs. What was the board going to do?

Mr Wilson: The board's role was to oversee the expenditure of SEUPB. As I pointed out in the statement, only about 3% of its expenditure is for administrative purposes. The board's only role would be to look after that expenditure, which is such a small amount. I do not support building more quangos on a cross-border basis or on a Northern Ireland-only basis. The Minister from the Irish Republic took the same view. He and I are like-minded on this: we are not quango builders. We want to knock down as many quangos as possible. It was, therefore, decided that the board probably was not necessary. However, a process has to be gone through, and we will go through it. I have the same view as the Member: why set up another unnecessary body?

Mr McQuillan: I also thank the Minister for his statement. Has there been any work done on the future Peace IV and INTERREG V programmes?

Mr Wilson: The work on future programmes will be undertaken and chaired by SEUPB. There is probably about an 18-month lead-in period for that. The work will mostly be consultation and written submissions. We will look at and evaluate past programmes to see the good things and the bad things, the things you want to repeat and the things you do not want to repeat. We will look at what themes people who have an interest in the issue would like to see taken forward for the future, and then a report will go to the Executive on what we see as our priorities for Northern Ireland. There will be extensive consultation, and I expect that any report on that will go to the Executive, probably towards the end of 2013.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answers. Will he give some clarification on the overall cost of consultants engaged in the economic appraisal of funding applications? My concern is that a lot of the basic structure of applications is similar, and it is paid for over and over again. It could cut down both the cost and the time to complete the applications, so perhaps the Minister can comment.

Mr Wilson: I do not have the figure off the top of my head, but I think, in answer to questions on another occasion in the House, I indicated that I was concerned about the level of consultancy spend through many of the European programmes. Of course, some of it is imposed on us by the EU rules. There is a requirement that projects

are properly assessed and there is an economic case for them. That is a necessary step. If that step was not undertaken, it could be declared that the project itself is not valid.

I will come back to the Member, but the consultancy spend has come down. I have raised this with SEUPB on a number of occasions. On one occasion, when I raised the question of consultation and the cost of consultees and refused to approve it, it came back to me within a week at a 40% reduction. I sometimes think that maybe we need to push some of the consultants, to indicate to them that this is not some easy ride where they just put their hand out and grab a lot of public money.

Mr Hilditch: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Minister, what is your opinion of the recent INTERREG IVa call?

Mr Wilson: The Member, since he represents East Antrim, will be pleased, as I am, that, in the recent INTERREG IVa programme, a major project in his constituency — probably worth about £6 million or £7 million — has been shortlisted. That project at Magheramore quarry will be of immense benefit to East Antrim, so, from that point of view, I am very pleased with the recent call and the outcome of the shortlisting. I would like to claim credit for it, but this is a totally objective assessment of the projects. At some later date, after it has gone through, I may have something more to say about it.

The recent call has attracted £191 million of applications, which is about five times more than the money that is available, so many will be disappointed. Yet, had some of those come forward at an earlier stage, when money was more readily available, they would have easily got the score to get them through to a final selection. That shows that there are very good projects out there and that, although some cynics might say that we are panicking now and just want to spend the money and throw it at anything, that has not been the case. It has been a very competitive process, and I believe that the projects that have been selected will be very worthwhile and great economic drivers in the area when they finally get on the ground.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Minister for his statement. Does he agree with me that, when SEUPB has indicated that there are future risks for INTERREG funding, primarily from the lateness of the Budget, that is not a good way to spend public money?

Lessons should be learned from our Budget; it is much better to have more forward planning so that money can be better spent.

12.30 pm

Mr Wilson: There are a number of reasons for that. I have given reasons; I have not tried to hide what the problems have been. At an early stage, some of the projects coming through were not well thought out and required a considerable degree of sifting. Secondly, SEUPB has not covered itself in glory when it has come to the assessment of projects. It takes twice as long for projects to be assessed by SEUPB than it takes in other countries. That needs to be improved.

However, I would be more worried had some of the shortlisted projects looked fairly iffy; then, I think the Member's criticism might have been more justified. Perhaps it is because of the current economic situation, but projects that would normally never have come near INTERREG are now coming. I am fairly sure that we are not throwing good money after bad with the projects that are being shortlisted. We have good, quality projects. However, I suppose it would have been better had those projects come through at an earlier stage so that work could have progressed on them much quicker.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. One issue that has cropped up, particularly with some of the rural development projects, has been the problem that some groups are having in acquiring matched funding, especially from finance organisations. Will the Minister advise whether that has been an issue and whether any representations have been made through his Department to financial or lending institutions to try to ease the situation and help projects develop?

Mr Wilson: There have been a couple of issues around matched funding. In some cases, letters of offer or projects have been held up because matched funding, especially from Departments in the Republic, has not been forthcoming. I discussed that issue with the Minister in Armagh. I have been given an assurance that although the money has been held up because of budgetary considerations, it will be made available and letters of offer will go out.

I have not been made aware of the problem that the Member raised about financial institutions not being prepared to make matched funding

available for projects. I would have thought that any group going to a bank with a guarantee that it was getting EU money for a project and knowing that the amount of money coming from the bank would probably be a fairly small proportion of the total funding package would have been offering the bank good collateral. However, I meet banks on a regular basis, and if the Member is aware that this is a widespread problem, I would love him to give me the details and I will take it up.

Mr Humphrey: Since the Minister has made it clear that all politics is local, I commend the SEUPB for its funding for the Shankill Women's Centre in north Belfast recently. Credit must also be given to our Ministers and MEPs who have been lobbying for a Peace IV; I hope that happens in the near future.

Evidence was given by the chief executive of the SEUPB to the Committee, and members raised a number of concerns in relation to funding, applications being made and the length of time it took for the letters of offer to be sent. In administration, financial governance and management, as well as practice and structure —

Mr Speaker: The Member should come to his question.

Mr Humphrey: The Minister should be aware that lots of groups have struggled to get letters of offer. That affects their output, outcomes and delivery to the community and impedes them in their work. That means that when they come to review, the work has not been maximised because of that system. Will the Minister give an assurance that the process will be shortened?

Mr Wilson: I want to look at all the issues, and I have asked the SEUPB to look at all the issues that lead to the delay. If one reason is the stringency of the governance arrangements that are required to be put in place, that needs to be addressed. However, I point out to the Member that, since we are dealing with public money and since there very often will be matched funding from other public bodies in Northern Ireland, we cannot simply hand money out willy-nilly to groups whose credentials have not been established.

There has to be a balance; there has to be proper governance and accountability to make sure that money does not go astray because, as sure as you relax the rules, things go wrong, and as sure as things go wrong, there will, quite rightly, be

a barrage of questions around this room about what was being done with public money.

Mr Allister: Is the Minister satisfied with how SEUPB conducts itself in regard to its investigation of funding spend by groups? I refer in particular to how it has treated the victims' group Families Acting for Innocent Relatives (FAIR). The investigation denied FAIR the basic rules of natural justice by denying it the opportunity to comment on the report before it was concluded and as issues emerged. Does the Minister think that that indicates that SEUPB handles matters in a fair and even-handed manner?

Mr Wilson: I made it quite clear in an earlier answer to another Member that, since the outcomes of many of the investigations can be fairly draconian for the people who are involved in the groups, it is absolutely right that every opportunity is given to groups to explain why they breached the rules if they did so. There should also be a proper investigation into the severity and the intention because if something has been done unintentionally, the penalty should be much less than where somebody simply says, "Those are the rules, but we don't think that the rules are very good", and throws them over their shoulder and decides to go their own way.

I have met the Member privately about FAIR. I have made my views known to SEUPB, and I am quite happy to state publicly that, a report having been done and it being clear that the police did not believe that there was anything worthy of prosecution, the group should at least have had an opportunity to bring forward some points and state how it saw the investigation as being inadequate, because that may well have changed the view of what sanctions should be imposed. I expect SEUPB to give the group that opportunity.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for the detail. Although I appreciate the answer that he gave to Mr Humphrey about being certain of certain projects, is there any possibility of a speedier resolution from SEUPB on some of the economic projects that come through the cross-border bodies like the Irish Central Border Area Network (ICBAN)? There are serious delays, which jeopardise the investment of private investors.

Mr Wilson: It seems to have been the theme of this statement that people are unhappy about the speed. Of course, as the Member has quite rightly pointed out, that can have severe economic consequences for an area in which

there is perhaps a good project. Sometimes, the timing of the projects is quite important because you are aiming for certain events or times or whatever. All that I can do is to continue to emphasise to and plague SEUPB to make sure that the shorter time commitment that it has now given is met. It should not be complacent about that, and it has to look at ways of bringing that down since it is quite clear in other jurisdictions that 40 weeks or 58 weeks is not the norm; half of that is the norm. That is what we should aim for.

Business Rates and Update on the Implementation of the Rates (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2012

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I have a number of statements here, Mr Speaker, so I want to make sure that I have the right one. I would hate to start off on the wrong foot and for you to call me to order.

I wish to make a statement to the House on the implementation of the Rates (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2012. There has, quite rightly, been quite a lot of discussion recently in the newspapers about the economic problems that are being experienced by town centres and small businesses in those town centres. I felt that it was worthwhile to put on record what the Assembly has done to date and also to explain some of the limitations on what can be done by the Assembly.

My statement today will update Members about the initial success of the implementation of the Rates (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2012, which we passed in February, and respond to calls for positive action to be taken to alleviate the impact on the local business community during these difficult and changing times.

Every week — I am sure that Members will have experienced it in their constituencies — we hear of shop closures and the impact that the downturn is having on local traders in our towns and cities. I see it for myself in my constituency and as I visit other towns and cities in my capacity as Finance Minister, and I hear about it in the media and, of course, in the House from Members during Question Time, and so on. Only last week, research by one retail organisation revealed that one in five shops in Northern Ireland is empty. That is the highest vacancy rate in the United Kingdom.

It is not simply the economic downturn that is causing the problem. Online shopping and bigger stores are taking an increasing share of consumer spending, and the recession is leading to, at least for this period, consumers having less money to spend. The retail industry has been undergoing a revolution, and that is having a sudden impact on local traders because, overall, retail spending is down. Times are changing for local retailers, and it is clear that there are simply too many shops in some areas, and no amount of public money will be

enough to sustain them all. However, I want to give those with a future an opportunity or a fighting chance to help maintain the commercial and social core of our towns and cities.

Furthermore, we must recognise the wider context. Other sectors of business need help, as consumer spending comes from those in employment. It is not simply a matter of helping the retail sector alone. Allow me, therefore, an opportunity to outline the measures that I, as Finance Minister, have taken to create the right conditions for businesses to survive and flourish.

It is well known that people in Northern Ireland enjoy the lowest household taxes in the United Kingdom. We ought to remember that. Every day on the radio, we hear people talking about the level of rates in Northern Ireland. We have the lowest household taxes of anywhere in the United Kingdom, and that is a result of policies that have been actively pursued by the Executive in deciding, in the previous Budget period, to freeze rates in real terms and to do the same in this Budget period up to 2015 to enable people to keep as much of their money as possible in their own pockets. That is better than us simply taking the easy way out and looking for the kind of increases that occurred under direct rule or, indeed, that are being undertaken, even in these recessionary times, in other parts of the United Kingdom.

It is not always fully appreciated how competitive our business rates are compared to those in England, Scotland and Wales. For a start, as I have said, the regional rate is being held constant in real terms. That is part of the four-year Budget that the Executive have agreed, and businesses can bank on that. It will not change; it is set in stone until 2014-15. That gives certainty and stability. That means an increase of 2.2% in the regional rate for business ratepayers over the 2012-13 rating year. That builds on the regional rate freeze over the past four years, keeping rate increases as low as possible and meaning that, unlike anywhere else in the United Kingdom, business rates will have been frozen in real terms in Northern Ireland for seven straight years.

We have also adopted the lowest inflationary index, the GDP deflator. Business rates in other parts of the UK are geared to the retail price index and, this year, went up by 5.6%, which is more than double what was experienced locally. In addition, the Executive have agreed to hold

manufacturing rates at 30%. That helps 4,300 manufacturing businesses with £60 million in rate relief alone. That is an economic support that is unique to Northern Ireland. We have also retained the empty property relief at 50%. It has been removed in England and Wales and is being removed in Scotland. This is the right policy, given the growing number of empty shops.

12.45 pm

In addition, of course, freezing domestic rates and deferring water charges have bolstered spending power. Do not forget the 19% increase in the domestic regional rate in the year before devolution, the absence of a cap on domestic rate bills and the water bills that were ready for posting before the Assembly was set up. We saved most households hundreds, if not thousands, of pounds in the process, at a cost to public expenditure. There is an opportunity that will be foregone here if we do not collect this money because it will not be available for other public services. It has been of real benefit to the retail sector by reducing its costs but also by giving people more disposable income to spend in the shops.

Together, all these actions complement the commercial rating measures that this Assembly approved through the Rates (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2009. We passed that legislation, despite significant pressure from some quarters not to, precisely because we understood that small businesses needed help now.

I will briefly address some of the criticisms of the large retail levy and what has happened in reality. Some said that the 15% increase in rates for large stores would see the attractiveness of Northern Ireland as a place for large retailers to invest diminished, yet the Environment Minister's desk is strewn with planning applications for large retail premises in virtually every part of the Province.

I will turn now to the measures enacted in the Rates (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2009. The expanded small business rate relief scheme provided around 8,200 extra business ratepayers with a 20% discount for the next three years, bringing the total number of business ratepayers who benefit from that relief up to 23,000 businesses. The percentage of Northern Ireland properties now covered by the small business rate relief scheme is 33%; a third of all

businesses and commercial properties, representing a total rate relief of £12million.

The extension to the scheme was achieved by charging the very largest retailers a levy rather than imposing an additional burden on local business ratepayers, which is the way in which similar schemes are paid for in other parts of the UK. I will consider extending the scope of the scheme next year, again at no cost to other ratepayers. What I am able to do will depend on the outcome of my Department's evaluation of the scheme, which will be carried out later this year. That evaluation will include consideration of how best to recycle the savings that have been achieved through the exclusion of ratepayers with multiple premises.

However, it is already apparent that the extended small business rate relief scheme is making a significant difference. It was dismissed by some as being too small to be of any benefit, but I have been approached by retailers who are keen to thank me, this Executive and this Assembly for the reduction in their rate bills in these challenging times. This reduction sits, on average, at around £1,500 over a three-year period. For those who availed themselves of the enhancements introduced in April, the average amount awarded over the three-year period will be around £2,000.

Other measures have been introduced this year to help regenerate town centres, including a concession that allows new occupiers of long-term empty retail premises to receive a 50% rebate on their rates for 12 months. The rates holiday has already received a positive response from businesses; close to 50 enquiries are being dealt with by Land and Property Services (LPS). Although this might not seem a lot, when it is multiplied up over the remainder of this year, it will mean lots more shops being occupied in our towns and city centres and a lot more people being employed. I encourage all MLAs to actively promote this innovative scheme in their own areas in whatever way they can. Unlike small business rate relief, which goes to businesses automatically, businesses have to apply for this because it is not an automatic scheme.

In addition, the use of any empty shop window displays for non-commercial purposes will now be disregarded for rating purposes, allowing unoccupied properties to be given some life and stop them from bringing down the appearance

of other premises around them. I have got to say that, as I have walked around town centres, I have seen some marvellous examples of that. Shop displays have made it look as though there is activity going on in shops, rather than the shutters being pulled down, which, of course, creates an air of dereliction on the street.

The measures are unique to Northern Ireland and, along with the large stores levy and the recent announcement of a business rates revaluation, they deliver the majority of the recommendations of the 'Fair Rates for Small Traders' campaign document. That was produced by a coalition of more than 31 business organisations and trader groups, which published a five-point plan last autumn.

The Northern Ireland Executive have offered the retail and small business sector a suite of measures that are, in my view, unprecedented in the United Kingdom. Understandably, and especially in the midst of a recession, we have been lobbied for even more interventions. I am sympathetic to the plight of our business community and, instinctively, I want to see them hold on to more of their profits and invest further in their firms. I hear the calls for more targeting of rate relief, in particular for certain town centres or enterprise zones within them. However, such measures present major difficulties in choosing exactly where to designate and the likely impact that they will have, such as the unfair competitive disadvantage they may create for those outside the chosen areas and the likelihood of causing displacement. Furthermore, even if I wanted to intervene in that way, the risk of someone successfully challenging such a policy is unacceptably high. I would rather direct scarce resources to the business community than waste them on defending well-meaning schemes that are vulnerable to challenge in the courts. I would rather give money to the businesses that I want to help than to barristers and solicitors. For those reasons, I prefer the broader approach I have outlined.

The Executive have also agreed to LPS starting work immediately on a general revaluation of 72,000 non-domestic properties in Northern Ireland. That will redistribute the rating burden from April 2015, based on more up-to-date assessments. Unfortunately, that cannot be rushed through or brought forward, nor should it be regarded as a panacea for all businesses. It will mean that sectors and trading locations that

have not fared as well since the last revaluation in 2003 will pay less and those that have fared better will pay more, even if rental values overall have gone down. Just because a property has halved in value over recent years, it does not mean that rates bills will halve. When rental prices doubled in some instances, it did not result in a doubling of rates and nor does it work in the reverse. Although it is far too early to judge, many of our smaller local businesses may not benefit much or at all. I have heard some individuals call for the revaluation to be brought forward by two years. Not only is such a suggestion impractical but it could result in some businesses paying more in their rates two years early. In the meantime, the rebalancing measures that we have agreed — the extension to small business rate relief and the large shops levy — will help many local businesses without adversely affecting our public expenditure position.

I also need to recognise that there are limits to the concessions we can make and still raise enough money to help pay for essential services. I say that because, every month, someone with a worthy cause comes along and asks for more rate relief or further exemptions. This month, it is the equine industry; last month, it was town centres; the month before, it was sports clubs; and so it goes on. I would perhaps be more sympathetic to using the rating system as a means of relief if the politicians who are often responsible for calling for those benefits were not the same ones who call for more money to be spent on this or that. I am looking in a particular direction, but I could probably look around the whole place and apply that statement. It is a local taxation system, not a benefits system. If sectors need to be supported, we should look to other ways of doing that, rather than immediately jumping to the conclusions that the rating system is the best vehicle for delivering help and that it is somehow not real money.

Any revenue forgone is less money for public expenditure, and we still have to raise similar amounts of money. Every pound raised in business rates is a pound that supplements our Barnett share. It goes to hospitals, schools, roads and council services. It does not disappear into a black hole somewhere. We need to strike the right balance. Rebalancing the economy during the continuing downturn and through to recovery means keeping as much money in the control of local businesses as possible.

I have made the promise before and I make it again that we will not dip into those pockets any more than is necessary, until we have made all the savings that are to be made in delivering efficient and effective regional government services. If there is a better way, I am keen to hear what it is, but it is not viable to re-engineer the rating system and change the way that rates are measured to somehow distribute the rating burden based on individual business performance. There are other taxes that do that, and even if we were to find a simple way — no regional or local government in the world has managed that — it would take years to implement.

Let us take a collective or cross-departmental approach to tackling the underlying issues and not simply look at rates bills. My colleague the Minister for Social Development, Nelson McCausland, is due to bring forward legislation on business improvement districts, and that is a good example of this. The rating system has a role to play in developing a policy that suits businesses, suits government and suits Northern Ireland. Let us not forget the direct investment that the Department for Social Development (DSD) is making in our towns and cities. We have already spent over £20 million in a three-year period on town centre public realm schemes, and another £40 million of planned spend is in the pipeline. Then there are the restore and revitalisation projects, funded since last year with £1.5 million plus another £1.5 million on town master plans. Towns in my constituency have benefited from that.

If anyone doubts that this is a worthwhile investment, they should look at the Newcastle experience, where footfall is up threefold. That is something that can make a real and lasting difference to the fortunes of our business community. For my part, and with your support, I will be focusing on getting the right balance back into the business rates system to help pay for investment and to fund efficient public services, recognising that the system must act for business, not against it. I hope that Members will appreciate that we have taken the right approach, which is one of adopting Northern Ireland policies that are tailored and responsive to Northern Ireland needs. Devolution has allowed us to do that and to do things differently in Northern Ireland in a way that has benefited local businesses.

Mr Murphy (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. I thank the Minister for his statement, and I share his view in his closing remarks that we should be looking to have the economic levers available to us to adopt our own solutions that are tailored and targeted to our economic situation. The Committee for Finance and Personnel is keenly interested in the process of non-domestic revaluation, which is due to take effect from April 2015. What methodology will be used to ensure that robustness and objectivity are achieved in assessments? Can the Minister outline what the appeals procedure might be for non-domestic properties? He has been keen to allay any sense that this is likely to lead to a windfall or a substantial reduction in rates bills for properties. Can he suggest what he considers the overall impact of revaluation of non-domestic properties will be?

Mr Wilson: The Chairman is quite right to say that that must be done on an objective basis. One of the reasons why it cannot be rushed is that we have to be able to stand up and justify each individual rates bill, because there will be an appeals mechanism, which will be as it is at present. Where business owners do not believe that their properties have been properly assessed, they will be able to challenge that right up to court level. The first thing that we have to do is an analysis of the market, and we are starting that now. That information will come from a number of sources. Forms will be sent out to businesses this year, and they will be sending us back information about rental values and other information on that. We will use all the information that comes back, including from professional bodies and chartered surveyors who are carrying out work for us. We will then design valuation models for different sectors and for different trading locations and start applying that to individual properties. That requires considerable work on the ground because, of course, you can sometimes get things wrong when using a computer model. There will be quite a lot of footwork as we go around looking at how the results of the model tally with what we find on the ground.

So, there will be that to consider.

In 2013-14 we will probably apply that model to the entire stock and look through the figures to see whether we have got our estimations right,

etc. By 2014, we will have to have established a rate for each of the properties. We need that to be done by at least September 2014 because councils will need to know what is happening to their rate base so that they can make judgements about the rates for the following year.

That is the kind of deadline and process that are involved. So, we have to go through quite an extensive process to have a model that we believe we can stand over.

1.00 pm

Mr Girvan: I thank the Minister for his statement, which contains a number of very good elements. We know that we have a certain amount of money to raise from rates, but it depends how we break that up. There is a misconception out there. We are asked why the revaluation was cancelled for the non-domestic rate in the first place, but a lot of people are ignorant of the amount of money that we have to raise. So, why was the revaluation cancelled in the first place?

Mr Wilson: In answer to the Committee Chairperson, I probably said why it was not possible to carry through such an analysis in 2010. We cannot simply say, "I think that it is a bit less. Fewer people are using those kinds of areas. Rental values may have gone down there and are maybe a bit higher here. Let's do an estimation and get a rates bill." As the Chairperson pointed out in his questions, those things will be rigorously tested because the rates bill that someone gets is an overhead for their business. Therefore, if it is wrong, if they think that it is wrong, or if they think that it has been created in a shoddy way or that data were not sufficient, they will make sure that they challenge it.

Do not forget that we have to collect a huge amount of data on what is happening with businesses and rental value and on what is happening to the various sectors and locations and the rental values in them. If you go back to 2010, you will see that the market was all over the place. Property values were up and down — down rather than up — and people were panicking, and traders or people who held property were trying to do anything to hold on to it.

Sometimes very low valuations or low rents were given just to get concessions into a new shopping centre. Long term, that shopping centre might have had huge potential, but given

that it was built in 2010, it had no potential. What do you do? Do you fill it up with short-term leases and give them away practically for nothing? How robust would those data have been? They would not have been robust. Therefore, any valuation that was done around that time would have been, at best, fairly shaky and, at worst, useless. For that reason, we made a conscious decision to delay the revaluation. It was in the interests of everyone to delay it because there was no point in us putting huge resources into it and finding that we were getting all kinds of legal challenges.

Mr Cree: I also thank the Minister for his statement. He will remember that when we were discussing the Rates (Amendment) Bill, many businesses pointed towards business improvement districts as the way to go. Has the Department undertaken any work on that since that date?

Mr Wilson: The business improvement districts fall under the responsibility of Department for Social Development and work will be ongoing there. Indeed, I think that the Minister for Social Development intends to bring forward legislation on that fairly soon. However, business improvement districts are not an alternative to the rating system. They allow for local businesses to come together to pay a supplementary rate of some sort that is to be spent on things in their area that they want it to be, whether that is improved security, improved environmental measures or marketing or whatever. The only question for the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) in that is whether the current rating system can be used to collect the money or whether the database that we have can be used to enable the source of the money from different businesses to be identified. There will be small amounts of money locally. It is really to allow local businesses to do their bit in saying, "Here are choices that we want to make. Central government might not make these. We believe they are priorities and will have such an impact on our area that we will put some additional money in to make them happen".

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle, Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas. I thank the Minister for his statement. On Friday last, a young businessman called to my office. He opened a coffee kiosk in one of our shopping centres. He is being faced with a bill of £27,000 in rates. He employs

six people. The burden of rates could lead to the closure of his fledgling business. Can the Minister take any further measures that will help smaller businesses, especially new businesses, regardless of their location?

Mr Wilson: I do not know whether the £27,000 was a yearly rate bill or an accumulative rate bill with arrears, so I do not know the individual circumstances. Any business has, of course, the option of appealing the level of a rate bill, and I advise him to do that. Appeals are being dealt with much more quickly now.

As I said already to the Assembly, I will be looking at a revaluation of the small business rate relief scheme this year. If we can find ways to improve or extend it next year, we will do that. I cannot give definite details on that because I do not know what extra money may be available. However, it will be at no cost to existing ratepayers because there is no point taking money off one group of ratepayers to give to another. We did that with the large business levy because we believed that there was an inequality, which has been sorted out.

As I said in the statement, only so much can be done through the rating system. The rating system cannot solve all the ills that are experienced through increased competition between businesses, changing shopping habits or because people have decided to shop in different ways, such as online. Those are things that the rating system will never sort out. We are sympathetic to the sort of issue the Member raised and we will do what we can within the limits of the financial constraints that are imposed on us.

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Minister for his statement. Has there been much uptake of the opportunity around the shop window displays to improve the appearance of areas, and how is that being controlled to ensure that the displays are in line with the scheme's intention?

Mr Wilson: If they are not in line with the scheme — if, for example, a business simply decides to extend its activities into a shop window — it will not get rate relief. Those sorts of things will be checked out.

I do not have figures for the number of businesses that have taken up the scheme. We are now two months into the financial year, and we have had enquiries. I have seen some schemes in town centres. I saw one in the

centre of Belfast the other day, so I know that it is beginning to happen. I hope that chambers of trade will work with local art colleges, charity groups, etc, to look at innovative ways to use shop windows so they can have attractive displays and at least give the appearance of activity. That was the whole purpose of the scheme. Since it was heavily supported by chambers of commerce in all the towns that I visited, and I may have been with nine or 10 chambers of commerce, hopefully they will encourage estate agents and shop owners to do that.

Mr McQuillan: I thank the Minister once again for his latest statement. Is location taken into account when valuing a property, whether town centre, out of town or rural?

Mr Wilson: Location will be taken into consideration in so far as the rental value of a location will be reflective of its footfall and popularity. That, of course, is what the rates will be based on. You would expect that rental values of very popular locations, which lots of retailers want into, would go up, and the rates would reflect that. The rental values of places that have fallen in popularity will go down as landlords try to attract people into those properties. That will also be reflected in the rates. Location will be taken into consideration, but only through the mechanism of what the market says about the rental levels in those areas.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his comprehensive statement today. I very much welcome the restatement of the various initiatives that the Executive and the Assembly have approved, on the basis that eaten bread is soon forgotten. I very much hope that the local media will reflect that, because we have been talking about very significant statistics with regard to the families that are being driven into poverty and the businesses that are being driven out of business.

I have been glad that I have been able to endorse and support what the Minister has done. However, there is the issue of the enterprise zones. I take some encouragement from the fact that, in his statement, the Minister has considered that issue and considered the problems. Perhaps there is a case to be made for localised initiatives on a pilot basis in the form of four to six enterprise zones with a defined lifetime. I think that the affordability issue and any

possible legal challenges could be addressed that way. We should try to indicate that —

Mr Speaker: Time.

Mr McLaughlin: — we are prepared to think outside the box, if necessary.

Mr Wilson: We have had a discussion on a number of occasions, in Question Time and whatnot, about enterprise zones in Northern Ireland, be they the enterprise zones that the Secretary of State believes we should be setting up and which have been set up elsewhere, or enterprise zones in town centres, as suggested by some retail organisations. I know that the Member has said that he believes that the difficulties could be overcome, but they will not be easily overcome. Can you imagine an enterprise zone stopping at the end of one street and the next bit of the street or the next street not having the same advantages, especially if the advantages are to be significant enough to help the area? You would get all forms of displacement, distortion of trade, etc. I have absolutely no doubt that there would be immense legal challenges to that.

Even if there were not legal challenges, there would be economic distortion. That is why, if we are going to look at local initiatives, it would be more beneficial in the longer term for local people to have the ability to decide to put in additional money through the bids process, define where they want the improvement district to be, give the money locally, have a say over it and make the judgement on it. That is more likely to be robust. I would prefer it if we were to look at more general applications of changes to the rates system, and I think that that is the route that we will have to continue going down.

Mr Hilditch: I thank the Minister and welcome the statement and the measures contained therein. Minister, will you provide additional help for more than three years?

Mr Speaker: That is an excellent example of a very focused question; it was straight to the point.

Lord Morrow: Let us hear the focused answer.

Mr Wilson: That is even more demanding, of course. I will give a focused answer. The current small business rate relief will stop. The legislation for it stops in 2015. However, we said that, beyond the revaluation, we would be looking for ways to help small businesses. In the consultation, we asked for suggestions

on that. Not very many came through at that stage, other than the business improvement districts. As we approach 2015, businesses and business organisations will, hopefully, start to look at ways in which we can replace small business rate relief. However, do not forget that the idea of the revaluation was to try to create the even playing field that did not exist because of the huge change that happened between 2001 and today.

1.15 pm

Mr Beggs: Current business rates for town centres reflect the 2005 rate evaluation. Does the Minister accept that the 20% discount that has been given may not be sufficient and that if we really want to value our town centres and town centre retailers in the future, a much greater reassessment may be required? Why were England and Wales able to proceed with the 2010 revaluation, which might have had an even bigger impact than the 20%, when we could not?

Mr Wilson: First, we are going to have a much greater reassessment. I do not know whether the Member has been listening. We are going to have a full rate assessment for 2015. It will be a rigorous examination of what has happened in the market. I outlined all the steps, from data collection to modelling to investigation of individual areas and premises to levying individual bills. This is a major, internationally recognised assessment that will take two-and-a-half years, which is the same length of time that it would take in any other part of the United Kingdom.

Secondly, he asked why they could have it in England but not here. All the indications and measures show that the turbulence in the property market in Northern Ireland, although not as great as that in the Irish Republic, was far more extensive than in any other part of the United Kingdom. I explained why that turbulence in the property market would not have enabled us to revalue the rates in a way that was robust, fair and that we could have stood over and that would not have made us subject to widespread appeal. That is the reason.

We are where we are. We are undertaking the revaluation, and it will be a full evaluation. In the meantime, I believe that small business rate relief has compensated for whatever differences may have resulted from the necessary delay in the revaluation in 2010.

Mr Dallat: I also welcome the Minister's statement. I note that he told us that the Environment Minister's desk is strewn with planning applications from large retailers. Does the Minister agree that that is not good news for small shops? What can the Executive do collectively to ensure that we do not get into the situation that exists in Britain, where 60% of even modest-sized villages and towns have no shops at all?

Mr Wilson: I was simply making the point that, when this was introduced, the Assembly and I were lambasted by some people for putting up a sign outside Northern Ireland that read, "Business is not welcome." Apparently, large businesses would take their cue and not invest in Northern Ireland. At the time, I said that that was nonsense and I rubbished it. I rubbished it to their faces when they came to see me, and some of them left with fairly red faces. They now look even more foolish than they did at that stage, because applications have, of course, continued to come in.

I did not say whether business was welcome or not welcome. There are some places where those planning applications will be of benefit to the location, and there are some where they will not. Of course, that is a job not for the Finance Minister but the Environment Minister. If the Member is not happy with some of the decisions that are made, he should direct his fire at Mr Attwood, not at me.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister for his statement. I welcome the initiatives that the Minister has introduced: the 50% empty premises relief scheme; the rebate scheme; the regional rate freeze; and, of course, the small business rate relief scheme, which averages £1,500. All that is very welcome for local businesses. I know that the Minister has met the Belfast Chamber of Trade and Commerce and Belfast City Centre Management to discuss the dire situation that exists in Belfast city centre. Can the Minister assure the House that he will continue to engage with chambers of commerce and businesses across Northern Ireland, as he has done in the past year?

Mr Wilson: I can. Let me say something about the engagement with the Belfast Chamber of Trade and Commerce. It brought forward the idea of dressing empty windows, and we responded to that. It brought forward the idea of a 50% discount on empty shops, and we

responded to that. Some of the big city centre stores were being affected by the large retail levy, so the Belfast Chamber of Trade and Commerce asked us to ensure that it is limited to a three-year period. We responded to that. Given the impact that it might have had on some of the large stores in Belfast city centre, it indicated that 20% was probably too high, and we responded to that.

I listened to chambers of trade and chambers of commerce during the consultation, and changes were made to the initial proposals to reflect all the aforementioned concerns. There were some things to which we could not respond, however. In addition, through the Department for Social Development, extensive work on street furniture and refurbishment has been carried out in Belfast city centre. Members have probably found that, when work is being done in their town, traders complain that it has the effect of cutting down on footfall, and so on, and although the work in Belfast was disruptive, the extensive investment has helped to brighten the city and make it a very attractive location.

Therefore, lots of work is being done across Departments, and we are listening. Despite what some people may say, we do not sit here with cloth ears. We put forward ideas. If those ideas can be improved on, I am not so proud that I will not say that somebody has a better idea than me. If somebody does, I will steal it and use it.

Mr I McCrea: I thank the Minister for his statement. I congratulate him on his work as Finance Minister to try to help lessen the burden on our local businesses, especially independent retailers across our town centres. I also congratulate him for the benefit that the rate relief scheme has brought to over 1,300 properties in my constituency —

Mr Speaker: Do I detect a question?

Mr I McCrea: — to the value of around £1.2 million. That having been said, the Minister referred to extending the programme. May I encourage him to give serious consideration to doing that?

Mr Wilson: Yes. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Campbell: I thank the Minister for his statement and for outlining the generous nature of some of the changes that he has introduced. I am sure that he is aware of some

of the surveys that have shown some parts of Northern Ireland to have higher rates of empty businesses than other parts of the UK, so heaven alone knows what the situation would be like if our rates had been roughly the average of those in the rest of the UK.

Has the Minister been able to get examples of best practice from other parts — for example, from England and Scotland — of programmes and proposals that could be implemented here to assist those empty businesses?

Mr Wilson: I expect that England, Scotland and Wales could learn from us. We have a wider range of measures than in other jurisdictions. However, as I said in answer to an earlier question, I am always open to any suggestions that come along. They will be given serious consideration. If they are affordable and workable, of course we will look at them.

Lord Morrow: I, too, welcome the Minister's statement. It was fairly comprehensive. If the Act is to be an even greater success, however, does he not accept that the banks must come on board and be more constructive? I read continually about the 0.5% lending rate. I would like to know who qualifies for that rate because it is certainly not those with a mortgage, an overdraft or a personal loan. Does he agree that we need the banks on board to make this a total success?

Mr Wilson: The Member raises an issue, but it is probably the wrong morning to ask me about it, because before I came to the Chamber, I was with someone in my constituency and then someone in the office upstairs who, if their side of the story is correct or even half correct, told me the most horrific stories about the way in which banks seem to be determined to put businesses under. This week, I will speak with the banks concerned and, at some stage, I think that I will be at the point at which I will name some of them because I am increasingly worried that some banks, or some bank managers, seem to be totally cut off from reality and do not recognise that although they have a commercial responsibility to their organisation, they have a civic responsibility to ensure that they do not stand in the way of economic progress in Northern Ireland.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Allister: I do not pretend that there are easy answers but I suspect that a lot of businesses

feeling crippled by rates will be disappointed by the statement because although it is very strong on reviewing what has been done, there is really nothing new in it that will bring immediate relief. There have been many recent warnings of what is in store. The Minister's colleague the Member of Parliament for North Antrim said recently that if something is not done urgently, we are going to hear more of the sound of shutters coming down and not going up again. The Minister's statement says that he is:

"focusing on getting the right balance back into the business rates system."

However, that may be too late for many. Can no current further relief be given to those who are in dire straits?

Mr Wilson: These are new measures that came into operation in April this year, and I spoke today about their review. It is not a historical review of something that we did three years ago and our saying how wonderful we are. Problems were drawn to our attention, and we responded quickly by introducing a relief scheme in this financial year. Let us look at the situation. This year, the manufacturing industry will save £90 million as a result of the relief that it receives. Small businesses will save £12 million in overheads as a result of the relief received. I cannot quantify what has been done for an average business by freezing rates for the past four years, or what will be done by freezing rates for the next three years. All I can say is that no other part of the United Kingdom has responded to businesses in this way. I explained to the House that revaluation cannot be done more quickly. If I could wave a magic wand and have premises revalued more quickly in a way that I could stand over, I would do it. However, for all the reasons that I outlined and despite all the work that has been done, revaluation cannot be done more quickly.

I bet the Member is sitting there thinking that I have not mentioned the last bit of his question. However, I am not going to dodge that. When constituents bombard their public representatives, and the news media also bombard us with a diet of how something has to be done and nothing is being done, it is easy for that to drip-feed into everybody's psyche, even those who are politically involved. Within resources and constraints, we have done what we could, and we have done our best. If people think that there is some value in me, as Finance

Minister, holding back on anything that could be reasonably done and watching businesses close down, I do not know what kind of world they live in. People can say that shutters are going to come down, but we have not, and will not, hold back. Let me be clear: shutters may come down but that will not be as a result of our being cloth-eared and not listening, or being indolent and not working. We will do what we can because we realise that people's livelihoods are at stake.

European Priorities 2012-13

Mr Bell (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the Executive's recent European successes, including a major engagement event in Brussels undertaken by the Barroso task force working group, and to explain how those efforts have shaped the Executive's European priorities for 2012-13, which are published today.

I am pleased to report that the past year has seen a substantial step-up in our collective engagement in European Union policies, funding programmes and networks. All Departments have been involved in the work, which has seen us raise our positive profile, commit additional dedicated resources to support our efforts and has helped us to achieve increased financial successes.

1.30 pm

I turn to the European successes of 2011 and 2012. While the euro zone's financial problems have been making all the headlines, this has been a hugely important year for us in Northern Ireland to be very actively engaged with Brussels as the first firm proposals and draft regulations for the next European funding period, which is 2014 to 2020, have emerged. Departments have been following the policy debates closely and working to ensure that the proposals, and the new funding programmes that will eventually emerge, accommodate our regional needs as fully as possible.

The Executive have strengthened their European support infrastructure to assist Departments in their efforts, funding nine additional European secondments, including four desk officers operating from the Executive's Brussels office. Those desk officers are dedicated to supporting the Barroso task force working group and its four thematic subgroups. Since taking up their posts in early March, they have made a significant impact. They have opened new doors and helped Departments to engage more, maximising the benefits for our businesses and citizens over the coming year.

A significant and tangible outcome from our collective efforts can be seen in the increased drawdown of competitive EU moneys over the last year. The Executive set themselves a target in the Programme for Government of a 20% increase in EU competitive funding by March

2015. Over the past year — year 1 of the target period — Departments drew down £15.8 million of competitive EU funds, and that is an increase of £4.9 million over the 2010-11 baseline. That is an excellent start and provides a strong springboard for delivering even greater success across the remaining three years of the target period.

I turn to the Barroso task force and the context for the event. All these efforts culminated in a highly successful Brussels engagement programme by the Barroso task force working group between 27 and 29 March under the chairmanship of junior Minister Anderson and me. We led a delegation of officials from all Departments to Brussels to engage in an extensive and comprehensive programme of meetings and discussions with the European Commission's members of the Barroso task force. The purpose of the programme was to take stock of progress made to date against the Executive's agreed priorities, to pursue current issues and to share our future strategic priorities with the European Commission.

It is an important time to make our voice heard in Brussels. For example, negotiations are currently under way on the size of the EU budget for 2014-2020. That will determine the funding available for the next generation of EU policies and programmes, such as the common agricultural policy, the structural funds and the new research and development framework — Horizon 2020 — all of which will be highly significant for us. We must, therefore, continue to exploit the unique opportunities that are presented to us by the Barroso task force and opportunities such as our Brussels programme to identify fresh funding opportunities, to influence policy and, more generally, to further our interests in Europe to help strengthen and support our economy.

President Barroso has invested personally and politically in this process. In 2007, he was the first European leader to visit us following the agreement on the restoration of devolved government. He underlined the support of the European Commission for the peace process at an important time in our political and economic development, and he established a task force to enhance our engagement in Europe, reinforcing our newly established political institutions. In December 2010, President Barroso again restated his personal commitment to us when he joined the First Minister and deputy First

Minister in opening new premises for our Executive's office in Brussels, and he reinforced and renewed the work of the task force.

In response, through the Barroso task force working group, we have built up a strong infrastructure of our own, allowing us to work with the Commission task force to engage effectively in Europe and, through mechanisms such as the Programme for Government, to mainstream Europe within the Executive and Departments. The Barroso task force working group aims to promote participation in EU policy development that will benefit the region; engagement in European networks, allowing us to benchmark our performance and learn from best practice across Europe in the delivery of services to citizens and businesses; and the drawdown of resources from competitive EU funding programmes, strengthening our economy and delivering competitive advantage to our businesses. Through the group and its various subgroups, we aim to harness European programmes and policies to help us make progress across a number of areas, including competitiveness and employment; innovation and technology; climate change and energy; and social cohesion.

Recognising the time-limited advantage that the Barroso task force offers us, we have, even in the current difficult financial environment, provided additional resources to boost the number of our Brussels-based officials to ensure that every opportunity for greater European success is being maximised.

In respect of our engagement with and the outcomes from the Brussels programme, we have strengthened significantly our engagement with the European Commission, following and building on the previous inward visit to Belfast by the Commission task force in March 2011. While there, we were able to outline to the Commission areas where we have made significant progress against our targets during 2011 and 2012.

Our most recent visit to Brussels gave us once more an opportunity to express our appreciation for the work of the Commission task force, including the work of Walter Deffaa, who is the recently appointed director general of DG Regio. In addition, it gave us unprecedented access to Commission officials. Over three days, 54 meetings took place, involving 35 Civil Service officials from all our Departments. In addition,

our Executive office in Brussels hosted a plenary session attended by over 50 officials from the European Commission and our own Departments. That focused on the current world and European economic context and the strategic thrust that will be necessary in 2012-13 to stimulate growth and help regions such as ours recover from recession. The session was chaired jointly by the lead Commission official on the Barroso task force and the head of the Executive office in Brussels and was addressed by the director general of DG Regio and the permanent secretary of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, David Sterling. The Brussels programme also provided junior Minister Anderson and me with the opportunity to raise specific issues of importance.

During the first six months of 2013, Ireland will take on the presidency of the European Council. It is expected to preside over key EU decisions such as, possibly, the agreement of the EU budget, the future of the common agricultural policy and the cohesion policy. We used the opportunity of the visit to explore with the Irish Permanent Representation to the EU areas where we could contribute to and benefit from this important Irish presidency. For example, the possibility of secondments of our civil servants to Irish Departments was raised, following agreement in principle at a previous North/South Ministerial Council. One civil servant has already been seconded to the Irish Permanent Representation in Brussels to assist in the presidency. This is a rare and important opportunity for our officials to gain first-hand experience at a time when decisions will be made that will impact on us all for many years to come.

We met our MEPs Jim Nicholson and Diane Dodds, as well as staff from Bairbre De Brún's office, and we briefed them on the recent work of the task force. Since the Lisbon treaty came into force, the European Parliament has become a co-legislator in important policy areas such as agriculture and fisheries and our cohesion policy. That reinforces the need for us to work proactively with our MEPs in promoting our regional agenda.

As Ministers, we are keen to further our contribution to the EU's efforts to increase its role in peace-building and conflict resolution throughout the world. The European Commission, in the Barroso task force report, committed to working with us to examine how

that might be done. The European External Action Service, as the European Union's foreign policy arm, is currently considering how the European Union can develop its role in that area. It is, therefore, an opportune time for us to join the discussions. This is particularly so in light of the EU's recent decision to award £12 million towards the construction of a peace-building and reconciliation centre at Maze/Long Kesh. This was of particular interest to members of the cabinet of Vice President Catherine Ashton, the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, and to officials in the European External Action Service, with whom we had very positive meetings.

We also discussed these developments with Jane Morrice, one of our members on the Economic and Social Committee. Jane was rapporteur for her Committee's formal opinion on the role of the EU in helping to resolve international conflicts. Her report lays particular emphasis on the relevance of our peace process to conflict resolution in other parts of the world. It was adopted by the Committee on 19 January this year and further underlines the potential for the centre at Maze/Long Kesh to play a major role in international conflict prevention and resolution.

We took the opportunity of our meeting with the director general of DG Regio, Walter Deffaa, to discuss the future direction of European cohesion policy, including the possibility of a further Peace programme. In his role, Mr Deffaa will have an important influence in the current structural funds negotiations. We also discussed Commissioner Hahn's proposal to host an event in Brussels to showcase projects funded by the Peace programme to a wider international audience, which is scheduled for early 2013.

With regard to departmental engagement in Brussels, just as structural funds are important to our future economic growth, so are the many competitive EU programmes that are available to us now and in the future. Those opportunities were explored in some depth through a series of meetings with the Commission and our officials in each of the Executive's policy priority groups. Those in the innovation and technology group covered topics such as the future funding programmes for 2014-2020, with particular emphasis on supporting and growing our small to medium enterprises. They explored

the COSME programme, the competitiveness programme for small to medium enterprises, which aims to provide support for entrepreneurship through better access to financial and enhanced support services, the regional smart specialisation strategies and Horizon 2020, which is the European Union's future framework programme for research and innovation. Possible funding applications under the European innovation partnership were also explored, with a focus on agricultural productivity and sustainability.

Officials in the competitiveness and employment policy group discussed opportunities to address the EU-wide issue — an issue close to many Members' hearts, including mine — of youth unemployment. They discussed also the current proposals to use uncommitted funding from existing programmes to address the problem. Their discussions also covered Erasmus for All, the new future programme for education, training, youth and sport. It will replace the existing Lifelong Learning Programme. Other issues covered included the European social fund and vocational excellence.

1.45 pm

Problems posed by an ageing population — we should celebrate having an ageing population — provided a particular focus for the social cohesion group's policy discussions. Specifically, officials were interested in exploring funding for innovative approaches to the problem. They also looked for opportunities to share examples of local best practice in this area, such as the success with the creation of a Commissioner for Older People and our combined health and social care system. Other members of the social cohesion theme focused on funding opportunities relating to young people who are disenfranchised, justice, culture and community-led regeneration. The meetings explored existing and future funding opportunities.

During meetings with the Commission, the climate and energy group members impressed with examples of how our experience could provide insight into a regional approach for the EU adaptation strategy and how our approach to low-carbon technology and renewables could drive ambitious targets. Officials highlighted the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute's successful research into agricultural carbon sequestration and held constructive meetings

on transport policy, including electric vehicles and the transnational funding of projects under the Trans-European Network programme. For Members interested in finding out more, we will provide a more detailed report on the Brussels engagement programme, which will be laid in the Assembly Library shortly.

I now turn to our European priorities for 2012-13 and our next steps. As we move forward, it is important that we maintain the significant momentum that has been built up as a result of the Brussels engagement programme. Follow-up actions are being pursued, and bilateral contacts between Departments and the Commission services have been strengthened. Early reciprocal programmes by Commission officials are expected, and one has already taken place, dealing with health and the digital agenda.

Today, we published our 'European Priorities 2011-12 Implementation Report' and our 'European Priorities 2012-13'. Both documents can be found in the Assembly Library. Hard copies are available from the Business Office, and Members will be able to download them from the OFMDFM website following this debate. Their publication represents another tangible step forward and a restatement of the Executive's commitment to this work.

Given our success to date, we will continue to focus on the four broad themes — competitiveness and employment; innovation and technology; climate change and energy; and social cohesion — that we adopted last year. Our aims and objectives have, however, been updated and aligned with European Union objectives for the current year, with the details we currently have on the 2014-2020 EU funding period and with our Programme for Government. As was the case last year, an implementation plan setting targets for each of the objectives identified under each theme is being developed. The Barroso task force working group will monitor progress quarterly and provide the Executive with a formal six-month progress report in the autumn.

Now that we have a reinforced infrastructure in place to support the drawdown of EU moneys, our intention is to build on last year's success by broadening the range of competitive EU funding streams that Departments target and by working to influence the ongoing negotiations on key funding sources, such as the Connecting Europe Facility and Horizon 2020, which will

be worth around €50 billion and €80 billion respectively. During this year, we expect to consolidate our preparations for the new EU funding period so that, by the end of 2013, each Department will have a well-developed project pipeline in place, allowing them to tap in to the new EU funding programmes as soon as they are launched.

We also believe that our performance needs to be seen in context, if our success is to be honestly and fairly measured. Our performance in year 1 has been good, but, on a relative basis, compared with other regions, the picture is still unclear. For the year ahead — year 2 — we will place greater emphasis on comparing our relative drawdown with the best performing regions in Europe. Engaging positively by extending partnerships and collaboration across all key policies and programmes will do much to make that possible and to advance our learning and knowledge. We will also work closely with our MEPs and other representatives to the EU to exert maximum influence on decisions in Brussels that are important to us.

The Barroso task force represents a significant political and resource investment by the European Commission in the region as part of its contribution to helping us maintain a momentum towards a peaceful and shared society and towards economic recovery. The Executive, in turn, recognise the need to match the Commission's continued prioritisation of the region with an appropriate level of resource and effort. In so doing, we will realise the greatest benefits from our EU membership for our businesses and our people. As junior Ministers with responsibility for this work, we will continue to encourage and support Departments in their efforts, helping them to implement their individual priorities and deliver even greater collective success, strengthening our economy and building a shared and better future for us all.

Mr Nesbitt (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): I thank the Minister for his update. Members will be aware that the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister was one of a number of Committees to respond to Ministers on the Executive's draft European priorities. An implementation plan was referenced on a number of occasions during that process and again by the Minister in the House today. Given that it is nearly June, can the Minister tell us

when we can expect to see the implementation plan for 2012-13, and will he confirm that it will contain SMART targets?

Mr Bell: I cannot give the exact date, because it is being developed by our officials. I welcome the constructive contribution that the Committee has made, and I hope that it will continue to help us to influence the budgets and the policy for the 2014-2020 period.

We are meeting the first of the SMART targets by being strategic. We are taking what President Barroso has committed and the interest that the EU is giving to assisting Northern Ireland, and we want to respond positively. As I regard it, we can either use the expertise of the European Union that President Barroso has offered us and all of that energy and talent, or, effectively, we can lose it.

In terms of the SMART target being achievable, the Executive have already responded positively. The Committee has seen where we have committed significant extra resources. They are measured against our own European priorities, and they are time framed, in that we are operating in 2011, 2012 and 2013. We are also proactively looking towards the future, which is the 2014-2020 period. That is the time frame that we will operate against, and we will build on the good contacts that we have already made. We will follow through on every policy and every programme that we think has even a modicum of success in bringing development and growth back to Northern Ireland from Brussels.

Mr Speaker: Quite a number of Members want to make a contribution to the statement, so I ask Members to please be brief in coming to their question. I call William Humphrey. That is no reflection on the Member.

Mr Humphrey: I have picked up the hint, Mr Speaker. I thank the junior Minister for his statement. I welcome his comments about tackling youth unemployment in north Belfast. It is a huge issue, and I welcome that being included in the statement. What is the junior Minister's view on the outcome of European engagement?

Mr Bell: The outcome will be, in a number of ways, what we have managed to draw down in additional funding, how that has stimulated growth and how that has affected areas with youth unemployment. I know that is of particular interest to him in north Belfast as he has

invited me to visit projects aimed at tackling it. I welcome the energy that there is in north Belfast for tackling that critical issue.

When we look down at our programme of engagement, we are looking, as an Executive, at lifting and improving our European engagement. As I outlined, the success will be in the priorities that we lay down for 2012-13. In addition to the plenary session at the Brussels office, each of our four thematic groups — I will not go over them — had its own programme of meetings. There were 54 meetings across three days with Commission officials and 14 directorates general. I think that that will draw down success in and of itself.

The reason junior Minister Anderson and I were in Brussels was to support all Departments' efforts in European engagement. The responsibility of the four thematic groups and the associated individual Departments is to ensure that the objectives identified during the programme of engagement are met. We will follow each of those programmes closely. We must not lose the momentum of the programme of engagement, and we are confident that all of our Departments will work to meet their objectives that were set out in the Executive's priorities of 2012-13. As I said, a report of the entire programme is being prepared by officials, and we will place a copy in the Library as soon as possible for you to peruse.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat. I congratulate the junior Ministers on the drive they have put into the Barroso task force. Will the junior Minister tell us what the position is on Peace IV? Last term, I was at a meeting of OFMDFM with Lord Trimble, who was saying at that time that he would not support the future programme. We all know how important Peace funding has been to this programme and this Assembly: has that had any influence on unionism and the Conservative Government in their representation to Europe? What future do we have for Peace IV?

Mr Bell: We are pressing very hard at every opportunity and in every meeting for Peace IV. I do not think anyone could point to one opportunity that we have missed to put that forward. Thank you for the warm remarks on the engagement in Europe. I know that the Member works hard, as will a future colleague of mine, Trevor Cummings, in the Committee of the Regions, and we look forward to that constant

engagement of regional support for the work that we are doing.

We would welcome a further round of EU Peace funding very much. The work of peace-building is not complete. The recession has created future and further challenges, particularly among young people such as we heard from earlier, for whom unemployment is increasing and there may be fewer opportunities for education and training. I fear that some evil groups in our society will seek to prey on those vulnerable young people. The particular content of any future Peace programme will be established through research and public consultation, and a further round of Peace funding could focus on the needs of marginalised and disaffected youth.

Junior Minister Anderson and I recently had the privilege of handing out awards to a group from the Craigavon/Lurgan area, where a specific two-year programme was put in through Co-operation Ireland to help young people who were at risk and to give them a two-year development plan. Those young people were entrusted with something like half a million pounds of communications equipment. Not only did they complete their programmes; some of them have gone on to achieve full-time jobs.

We need to potentially focus on the needs of our marginalised and disaffected young people. Through the task force and direct engagement with the Commissioner for Regional Policy, Johannes Hahn, and in our dealings with Westminster and Dublin, we have pressed at every stage for a Peace IV programme. We are encouraged by the provision to fund peace-building actions in the draft territorial co-operation regulations that are published by the European Commission and by the United Kingdom and Irish Governments' declared support for Peace IV.

In pursuing that, we will seek to ensure that Peace IV provides additional funding to the region and does not merely displace other European Union funding sources. Junior Minister Anderson and I will continue to closely monitor the negotiations and will always lobby the United Kingdom Government through the Joint Ministerial Committee in Europe.

2.00 pm

Mr Eastwood: I thank the junior Minister for his statement. I welcome the fact that he stated that he intends to learn from the good example

of the Irish Government in drawing down funding from the EU. How many officials do we have based in Brussels compared with the Irish Government?

Mr Bell: I have a responsibility in Northern Ireland but I do not have responsibility for the number of officials the Irish Government have in Brussels. I thank Mr Eastwood for his positive comments about the engagement in Europe. I have shown conclusively where the Executive have put in additional resources. Even against the backdrop of a recession, we have put in four desk officers to cover the key areas. We will ensure, and have been ensuring, that those desk officers are fully and adequately resourced for the task that they are doing. We have already seen in year 1 that we are well on our way not only to meeting an ambitious target but, potentially, to exceeding it. I will get you information on the precise number of officials that we have; I presume that you would have to ask the Irish Government to get the precise number of officials that they have. President Barroso has given us energy; we will match that with energy and commitment. We will leave no stone unturned in bringing back to Northern Ireland from Brussels the maximum amount that we can. I have put out the figures honestly and squarely; we are already exceeding the targets that we have set ourselves.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for his statement and welcome his positive endorsement of the potential benefit to our citizens and businesses as a result of engagement with Europe. I agree with the Chair of the OFMDFM Committee, however: in the absence of an action plan and targets, it is difficult to assess the full ambition of the plan. What existing and future European funding opportunities are available to assist our small and medium-sized businesses?

Mr Bell: Sometimes, strategies and action plans are important — I will get that to you as soon as I possibly can — but the reality is also important; that was the “R” in the SMART targets that were set. The reality is that, under the first year of our watch, we have drawn down more than we wanted to. We will always take more than we want at every stage, and in a situation that is very difficult — you see the situation in Greece and everything else — and constantly changing, we will seek to maximise and go beyond the 20% that we have set ourselves. We have done it in year 1 and we look to do it in future.

Mr Lyttle raised a vital question about the important issue of other European funding opportunities and securing greater EU financial support for Northern Ireland. The House will be aware that EU structural funds are allocated at national level and that we receive a fixed percentage of that amount. Scope to increase that funding is very limited, which is why we, as the Northern Ireland Executive, set a target for increasing our drawdown from competitive EU funding streams. The success in competitive European funding programmes takes time and sustained effort and requires us to network with other European Union regions to demonstrate our regional strengths and expertise and build on our experience as junior partners before we can seek credibly to lead in larger projects.

As far as small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are concerned, we are developing our future research and development strategy. You have seen the Horizon 2020 proposals. Under those, we will allocate around 17% to small and medium-sized enterprises.

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

Moving on to the work that is being undertaken, the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) has looked at matching labour market supply with demands in Estonia. That has allowed it to explore potential project ideas and possible future partnerships. Where SMEs are concerned, in February 2012, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) appointed a SMART specialisation co-ordinator to lead the SMART specialisation strategy for the region. DEL has established an EU framework support fund of £80,000 per annum to encourage our universities to apply for funding from framework programme 7 for research and innovation. In the area of SMEs, each Department has been actively targeting the current programmes in framework programme 7, including the trans-European Transport Network, known as TEN-T, the Progress programme and the European Union culture fund, and we are also preparing for the arrival of the next funding programmes. It is vital that the Northern Ireland Executive are proactive and seek, in the next round of funding programmes, including through Horizon 2020, to look at how we can maximise our drawdown from 2014.

I should also say in conclusion, Mr Lyttle, that junior Minister Anderson and I have been active

in meeting European Commission officials in Brussels to discuss how we can contribute to and benefit from the 2012 European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations. That is vital. For example, I was with the chief executive of the South Eastern Trust recently to discuss my constituency of Strangford, and I thought that we should celebrate and thank God for the fact that our elderly people are getting older. They have contributed a lot to society, and as we have been seeing in the Pensioners Parliament, they have a huge amount more to contribute. However, because of the people who are living longer, we in Strangford have to prepare for a town that is equivalent to the size of a new Ballynahinch. We want to be proactive, and we have discussed with the European External Action Service how we might contribute and share our experience in Northern Ireland through supporting an enhanced European Union role in peace building.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that Question Time starts at 2.30 pm. I want to try to get through all the questions and answers before then.

Mr G Robinson: Will the junior Minister enlarge on what impact he believes our European priorities have had in 2011-12? What potential is there for Northern Ireland to benefit from developments in health, technology and innovation?

Mr Bell: I am happy to do that, and as I am conscious of the time frame, I will briefly report. There has been considerable success over the past year in engaging policy development, strengthening networks and increasing the number of officials on secondment in Europe, as well as in a range of EU funding streams. We also hope that we have laid the groundwork for what we hope will be future success. We have nine more staff in Brussels than we did a year ago, and as I said to Mr Eastwood, the four desk officers who took up post in March are providing dedicated support to deliver on the European priorities of 2012-13. A finance subgroup was established to deliver progress against the Executive's Programme for Government target of a 20% increase in drawdown from EU competitive funding sources. It is important to note that, in comparison with the previous year, we have drawn down an additional £4.9 million in 2011-12. That is a fact. Northern Ireland applicants secured a total

of €36.4 million from framework programme 7 for research and development between the start of the programme in 2007 and the end of October 2011. We will be active in shaping and preparing for its successor programme, Horizon 2020, so that we can take it forward from 2014. I will pull back there because I know that there are a number of questions.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement and for some of the very positive things that he said in response to other people's questions, particularly on small and medium-sized businesses. Now that we have a better support mechanism over there, he will be aware that the Irish Government have taken 100 SMEs over to Europe to encourage them to build the capacity to drawdown moneys. Would the Minister be of a mind to do something similar with small and medium-sized businesses from the North?

Mr Bell: It is a very well-made point. That is obviously a priority for DETI, but we have been keen, whether from a culture, arts or business perspective, to bring our businesses to the Northern Ireland Executive office and allow them to use the facilities to showcase their products. DETI has led a programme to maximise framework programme drawdown and has produced 18 recommendations designed to increase Northern Ireland's success.

Part of that success has been in bringing over some of those local businesses as part of DETI's international trade missions, and I welcome that. I know, particularly from the work of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister in Dubai, the United Arab Emirates and India, that the feedback from Northern Ireland's businesses is that they got unprecedented access because of the opportunities that were afforded to them by the OFMDFM visits to the United Arab Emirates and India. Among its recommendations, DETI has included the appointment of a Horizon 2020 manager, hopefully in place by September 2012, and thematic leads based in our two universities.

The Member may also want to know that Commissioner Máire Geoghegan-Quinn will visit Belfast on 7 June to speak at the Collaborate to Innovate conference on FP7, the focus of which will be on encouraging greater small and medium-sized enterprise involvement in FP7 and Horizon 2020. Commissioner Geoghegan-Quinn

will also meet the Executive subcommittee on the economy and separately with the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. In addition, she will visit the Agri-food and Biosciences Institute and the Northern Ireland advanced composites and engineering centre at Bombardier.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the junior Minister for his statement. Will Northern Ireland seek to secure funding through the European innovation partnership on active and healthy ageing?

Mr Bell: We will seek to secure not only that funding, but funding through every opportunity that we have. We have built up some expertise in Northern Ireland, which is regarded at a European level as a success. I do not say that lightly; I say because I sit in Brussels and I listen to what the commissioners are telling me. The First Minister and the deputy First Minister put in place a comprehensive role for the Commissioner for Older People. In many places across Europe, that legislation has been regarded as a success.

The relevant commissioners are looking to where we in Northern Ireland have already been successful in our work on active ageing and solidarity between the generations. We hope to have a number of events and have Northern Ireland's good progress profiled. Take it from here that no stone will be left unturned in any of the funding streams. We have proven that already by the significant success that we have had in year 1.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the junior Minister for his statement. I am very impressed by the number of meetings and discussions and the amount of research, but until we get actions and timelines, we have really just got seven pages of waffle here.

I want to focus on ERASMUS and the 50 officials who met to discuss the economic context and strategy. When are we going to hear, either in actions or summaries, what sort of skills and training we need to put in place in Northern Ireland so that there are jobs for our young people, whether in Northern Ireland, Europe or even globally?

Mr Bell: I thank the Member for his positive remarks at the start, which I understand. He talked about waffle, but we have increased the amount of funding for young people in our area and increased the amount of growth opportunities for economic development in

our area. You know, Mr Kinahan, I used to sing a hymn when I was at primary school and receiving free school meals. *[Interruption.]* I promise that I will not sing it now, but it spoke of the rich man in his castle and the poor man at his gate. Until I met you, Mr Kinahan, I did not realise that people in Northern Ireland still lived in castles.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I remind all Members to make their remarks through the Chair.

Mr Bell: We have drawn down more money from Europe and increased the amount of opportunities for our young people in Europe. Both of our universities, which are collaborating on the programmes that I have already outlined, are stepping up to the plate and will be disappointed with the Member's description of their work as waffle.

Look at the Department for Employment and Learning and its work in the trans-European consortium, under the PROGRESS programme and in the New Skills for New Jobs project in July 2011. That project aims to contribute to the European Union's effort to meet its ambitious employment rate target of 75% for women and men in the 20 to 64 years age group by 2020. I have already outlined the success in terms of additional drawdown.

2.15 pm

In the area of youth unemployment, European funding has provided significant support for our Executive's efforts to tackle directly youth unemployment and the issues of young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEETs). That is addressed under the thematic group's key aim, which is basically equipping our young people with the skills and the ambition that they need to contribute to the economy. European social fund assistance has been given to 82 voluntary and community sector organisations — there is an action — to support the employability of individuals who face barriers to participation in the workforce. Mr Kinahan, if you think for one second that supporting 82 voluntary and community sector organisations to help young people get employment and face and overcome the barriers to employment is waffle, you are very much mistaken. There are also a number of projects with a value of £10 million that are aimed specifically at re-engaging young people who are NEETs. Priority one of the programme is to

support 4,500 of our young people who are not in education, employment or training between 2007 and 2013. If you think that a target of supporting 4,500 of our young people is waffle, you are very much out of date in your castle.

The European social fund programme is supporting the Apprenticeships Northern Ireland programme, which offers the opportunity — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Bell: It offers individuals the opportunity to train in their chosen occupation. For an Ulster Unionist to say that 82 voluntary and community sector groups and £10 million is waffle, you are so much out of date in your castle.

Mr Doherty: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. Minister, you said:

"The Executive have strengthened their European support infrastructure"

and:

"It is an important time to make our voice heard in Brussels."

Is it the intention of the Executive to further strengthen our infrastructure in Europe, particularly in relation to accessing the Connecting Europe facility and Horizon 2020 funding sources?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that Question Time is coming up and that we will have to come back to this after Question Time if we do not get through it all. Can we have precise answers?

Mr Bell: Yes. We will do all that we can. The Department for Regional Development (DRD) received £2.9 million —

Mr B McCrea: More waffle.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Bell: I appreciate that the Ulster Unionists want to shout down £2.9 million, but that amount was delivered during 2011-12 for the TEN-T programme. The new draft TEN-T regulations are going through the ordinary legislative procedure in Europe, and DRD is doing all that it can to influence the negotiations in Europe to ensure the best possible outcome for Northern Ireland. For example — the Ulster Unionists should listen to this instead of trying

to shout down their own Minister — DRD has been instrumental in securing amendments —

Mr B McCrea: *[Interruption.]*

Mr Bell: They are shouting down their own Minister.

Mr B McCrea: No, you are —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. If the Minister is to reply and we are to hear that reply, we have to give him the space to do so. The Minister has the Floor.

Mr Bell: DRD has been instrumental in securing amendments in the Danish presidency's general approach to the regulations, including an exemption from certain rail standards for isolated rail networks such as our own. If those amendments are adopted in the final regulations, they could save the Executive — I will finish with this — up to £1.5 billion in unnecessary expenditure. That is not to be shouted down.

Mr B McCrea: I wonder whether the Minister will deal with my question precisely or whether he will waffle. His statement referred to the world and European economic context and all sorts of financial interests. Did his colleague and he differ in their advice on the EU fiscal treaty? Will he care to tell us what the position was of the two Ministers on that important matter?

Mr Bell: I hate to enlighten the Member, but that is not something that we have ministerial responsibility for.

Mr Allister: The aspect of the Minister's Europhile statement that I wish to focus on is its trumpeting of the Provo project at the Maze. That was never troubled to be announced in the House —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Question.

Mr Allister: Of course, it was once eschewed by the Minister's party when his deputy leader said:

"However it is dressed up, whatever spin is deployed, the preservation of a section of the H-Blocks ... would become a shrine to the terrorists ... That would be obnoxious".

If wasting EU money —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member for a question.

Mr Allister: If wasting EU money on this Provo project is now a DUP success, was Nigel Dodds wrong?

Mr Bell: The only person who is wrong, Mr Allister, is you. There will be no shrine, and there will be no "Provo project". We need to be very careful. I met a number of victims yesterday when I was with the Royal Ulster Constabulary on its 90th anniversary and its 10-year celebration of the awarding of the George Cross. I know that it is politics, but we need to try to be sensitive and try not to take meaningless advantage when someone of your intelligence knows the difference. To try to play party politics with the needs of victims and survivors is very wrong indeed. There will be no shrine and no "Provo project".

What Europe is looking towards and what we are looking towards is the success story that is Northern Ireland. It is a success story about how young people are today, Mr Allister, living with the lowest levels of violence in Northern Ireland than has been the case in the lifetime of anyone in this House. Should we not celebrate that success and the fact that our people and young people have the opportunity to live at a time when we have the lowest level of violence ever?

Contrary to what you are telling us, Europe is telling us that Northern Ireland is a real success story and that Northern Ireland can contribute to the building of peace, showing not only what we have done here but what we can do internationally. Our universities are telling us that they have an academic base and an academic infrastructure that can show to the world the success of peace in Northern Ireland. It can show not only what it has achieved but what it is currently achieving.

You said that my statement is "Europhile". If bringing additional millions of euros to Northern Ireland —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: You are getting close to the end of your time.

Mr Bell: — qualifies me as Europhile, I stand guilty.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I pay tribute to the two junior Ministers, and I wish my colleague Martina all the best in Europe. I have no doubt that we will all continue to work with our MEPs.

In March, the junior Ministers led a delegation of officials to engage with officials in the Commission in Brussels. Will you outline how the recent focus on this will ensure more funding for us in the North of Ireland?

Mr Bell: There are four key areas, including competitiveness, employment and social cohesion. I will not go through them all in detail because of what Mr Principal Deputy Speaker said about time. We have ensured that we have nine extra bodies and brains working on the project to ensure that we influence the budget, not only today but for 2014-2020. It is interesting that some of those with critical voices, having made their party political statement, have run from the Chamber. They are not interested in what we will do for 2014-2020, yet President Barroso, probably the most key figure in the European Union, said that he will significantly assist Northern Ireland. He has told us to use the resources and not lose them. We will engage directly with the Commission in Brussels. We will build on every good contact that we have achieved.

We will push every policy and programme area. We are exceeding our 20% targets. That is OK; we are happy to exceed them but we will leave no stone unturned in maximising to Northern Ireland the benefits that we currently get from Europe.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: As Question Time commences at 2.30 pm, I suggest that the House takes its ease until that time. The next item of business will be Question Time. After Question Time, there will be a debate on the legislative consent motion on the Finance Bill.

2.30 pm

Assembly Business

Mr McCartney: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Point of order, Mr McCartney.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. In previous mandates, the Speaker made rulings in relation to the heat and the wearing of jackets. I wonder whether the Principal Deputy Speaker will make a ruling on that?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Yes, if anyone feels that they want to take off their coat because of the heat in the Chamber, we will allow that to happen today under the circumstances.

Oral Answers to Questions

Culture, Arts and Leisure

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Questions 2 and 10 have been withdrawn and require written answers.

Cricket: Funding

1. **Mr Wells** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how much funding has been allocated to cricket over the past five years. (AQO 2046/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): Sport NI is responsible for the distribution of funding for sport here. In the past five financial years, Sport NI has provided almost £4 million of Exchequer and lottery funding to Cricket Ireland to assist with the development of cricket. As part of that funding, Sport NI is supporting the employment of a club development manager by the governing body of cricket, Cricket Ireland. That manager is based in Belfast and is responsible for providing advice and guidance to cricket at all levels on development and funding opportunities.

Mr Wells: As the Minister is aware, several players from this part of the United Kingdom have played for the Ireland cricket team. Indeed, that team had historic wins over Test-playing nations such as Zimbabwe, England and Pakistan. Cricket is clearly a growing sport, yet would she agree with me that the amount of funding that has been allocated to this international sport is tiny in comparison with that allocated to, for instance, rugby, GAA and soccer?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I share with the Member his concerns about perhaps the feeling that cricket receives smaller amounts of funding compared with other sports. However, it is only in recent times, with the success of the cricket team, that we are all enjoying and, indeed, supporting that team. I would imagine in future comprehensive spending review (CSR) bids that perhaps the amount of money to cricket will increase.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister assure us that the opportunities for funding for all sports, including cricket, will be made known to the grass roots groupings and clubs?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I will. I do share some of the concerns that have been repeated throughout Question Time on this. Cricket, like other sports, is receiving quite a lot of interest, and it is important that people who want to get involved in sport have the opportunity to do so. We will be focusing, particularly with grass roots clubs and within communities, to try to provide support that will result in a bigger uptake in sport. It is important that I keep that under review.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Question 2 has been withdrawn.

Entertainment Venues: Closing Time

3. **Mr Agnew** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for her assessment of the impact of a 2.00 am closing time on night-time culture and musical art in Northern Ireland. (AQO 2048/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The closing time of pubs and clubs, as I am sure the Member is aware, is not a matter for the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL). I understand that the 2.00 am closing time was introduced under a voluntary arrangement between Pubs of Ulster, which represents pubs and nightclubs, the PSNI and licensees. The arrangement has resulted in a number of establishments closing at 2.00 am since April even though they hold a 3.00 am entertainments licence. My Department, through the Arts Council, supports a wide range of musical art activities. The vast majority of those activities, if not all, would be finished long before 2.00 am, and, therefore, they have not said to me that they are affected by those new arrangements.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Minister for her answer. Minister, I appreciate what you said, but if we talk about culture such as night-time music culture and things along those lines, and given how we are quite out of step with the rest of Europe, does the Minister not believe that greater liberalisation of our entertainment laws would help our night-time culture and economy?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have spoken, through my constituency office, to licensees who have expressed concern, particularly at the need for better support from the Executive for the night-time economy through pubs and clubs. At the minute, we are looking at the disparity between the entertainments and the licences, but, at the end of the day, the sector itself has been very

good at lobbying. It had an opportunity last year but, unfortunately, it did not get passed through the House. I will receive requests from that sector, if it is appropriate, but it is not within my gift to influence any changes in licensing laws or entertainment licences.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Has DCAL been involved in any discussions with Pubs of Ulster regarding the potential impact on art and culture events?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have not been involved in such discussions as a Minister. As I said to Mr Agnew, I was in discussions with regard to lobbying through my constituency, as, I am sure, were other MLAs, but the voluntary arrangement was then reached. That is the last that I have heard. DCAL has not been approached officially in relation to the matter.

Mr Copeland: Given the fact that one prominent nightclub in Belfast has already left the voluntary arrangement to close at 2.00 am, can you detail the degree of engagement, if any, that you have had with the various entertainment sectors to facilitate a future agreement that strikes an appropriate balance and is acceptable to all?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I will repeat what I said to Mickey Brady. It is not within the remit of DCAL to do that. The issues around licences are for the Department of the Environment and the Department for Social Development.

Musical Instruments for Bands Programme

4. **Mrs Hale** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether she has any plans to increase the £200,000 provision to the Arts Council for musical instruments grants, given the impact that the marching band sector has in terms of social impact, cultural promotion and tourism. (AQO 2049/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The musical instruments for bands scheme is a highly successful programme, and I am pleased that it has provided over £800,000 to bands across the North over the past five years. Marching bands are an important element of our culture and musical heritage, and I am keen to support the development of organisations that encourage young people to learn to play an instrument. However, due to budgetary constraints, I have no plans to increase the £200,000 that my

Department provides annually to the Arts Council for the scheme.

Mrs Hale: I thank the Minister for her answer. Does she agree that the current £5,000 limit placed on funding applications is excessively restrictive on pipe bands, accordion bands, brass bands and silver bands, given that the average price of bagpipes and accordions is £1,000 and £600 respectively?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I hear what the Member has to say. I met the Confederation of Bands, which raised the issue as well, and we passed that on to the Arts Council. It is one of the practical arrangements that we need to look at in the future. Given the cost of some of the musical instruments, they need to be factored into the award. You cannot apply for two sets of funding for the same thing, and the money is not available in the communities to make up the difference. It will, therefore, have an impact. We need to work out whether we can and how we can make a difference in this. I hear what the Member has to say.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. What funding is available for bands in the North?

Ms Ní Chuilín: As I said to Mrs Hale, over £800,000 has been made available. That was £200,000 a year. Grants for equipment are up to £10,000, and the equipment programme for funds for over £10,000 is available. As I said, bands can apply for that funding through the Arts Council.

Mrs McKeivitt: Following the Department's study into marching bands in the North of Ireland, several opportunities for development were identified. Given the importance of marching bands in preserving cultural and musical traditions, what has the Minister done to actively build on the areas for development?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The areas for development of some bands are financially based, and they need additional resources that I do not have, but the areas for development of others are around governance and getting the band constituted. At this stage, that is what is happening through NICVA. There is a toolkit available on the website to help bands reach the criteria they need in order to put them in a better place, if they ever decide to apply for funding in future years.

Mr Elliott: I understand that the Minister's predecessor commissioned some research into marching bands? How is the current Minister taking that forward?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am taking the research forward, and I am going back to have a look at it again to make sure that it is still relevant. I am supportive of the initiative. I have met the marching bands, and I intend to meet them again throughout this year. My officials are working very closely to look at possible recommendations and any review or revision of those recommendations to try to put this on a better footing for the next period. We are looking at this in a very positive way.

Fishing Licences

5. **Mr Doherty** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for her assessment of the potential benefits of an all-Ireland fishing licence. (AQO 2050/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Three bodies across the island of Ireland provide fishing licences for their jurisdictions. Those bodies are DCAL, the Loughs Agency and Inland Fisheries Ireland. The licensing regimes are all different, reflecting the different legislation and priorities in each jurisdiction. However, I can see the merit of rationalising licensing regimes across the island of Ireland. In particular, it would simplify the purchase of licences for tourist anglers.

The current licensing regime recognises that there are distinct types of angling, and it allows anglers to pay only for that which they practise. It will be important that any rationalisation protects that principle. I have, therefore, asked my officials to contact colleagues in the other licensing bodies and their sponsor Departments to initiate discussions on considering the case of making angling licences available across the island.

Mr Doherty: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for her answer. Does she agree that the system for issuing licences is too complex? Will she consider, along with the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, the potential for an all-Ireland fishing licence?

Ms Ní Chuilín: As I said, I have asked officials to initiate discussions. I have listened to anglers from different clubs, and they said that the system of licences being issued from different Departments is too complex and cumbersome. Our own anglers said that, so we need to accept

that it will be really confusing for tourists who come here to fish and angle. So, I will initiate discussions with DCAL and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development.

Mr Campbell: Most tourists who come for fishing breaks come for a short-stay break. Does the Minister agree that it would be a much more sensible arrangement to look at short-stay applications for two, three or four days for tourists from whatever country they come, whether it is the Irish Republic, France, Germany or anywhere else?

Ms Ní Chuilín: All the conditions of licensing, and even the different types of licences that are purchased, will be examined. There are only two types of licence in the Loughs Agency, from where you can get a junior permit, whereas DCAL issues up to 17 different types. It is about simplifying that system and making it easier for people who want to angle. We are looking at this in a very practical and pragmatic way. I think that all Members would agree that we need to simplify the system rather than further complicate it.

Mr Rogers: Have there been any discussions with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) about the promotion of angling as a tourist opportunity across Ireland?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have not had any discussions about this with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, but we will be looking at talking to DETI officials. It makes sense to make sure that all our Departments are involved in this process, that we get agreement and that we get a system and regime that simplifies the process and makes it easier for people, particularly for our towns and villages that rely on angling as part of their tourism product.

Regional Stadium Development Programme

6. **Mr Humphrey** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on the development of Windsor Park, Casement Park and Ravenhill. (AQO 2051/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: As the Member will know, the stadium programme is complex. As regards rugby, planning permission for Ravenhill was received earlier this year. The design has been developed, and they will go to tender for a

contractor in mid-June. The contractor should be on site in September.

The GAA is out to tender for a design team, which will be appointed by the end of July. It is working with the planners on Casement Park's requirements and has commenced various surveys and agreed the overall programme with my Department. In addition, it will shortly commence a consultation process with residents.

The IFA has also agreed its overall programme with my Department. It has appointed a design team and is working on the design of Windsor Park. It is working with the planners and will submit for planning by the end of the year. It will also commence a consultation process shortly.

That progress means that it is anticipated that rugby will have its stadium by September 2014, soccer will have its stadium by June 2015, and the GAA will have its stadium by September 2015.

2.45 pm

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister for her reply. Can she tell the House what work DCAL is doing with the three sporting bodies to ensure that, in the medium to long term, the stadiums will be sustainable?

Ms Ní Chuilín: As I am sure the Member is aware and can appreciate, the whole process is very detailed. However, sustainability is absolutely key for the three sporting bodies. As well as being about the sustainability of the infrastructure of the three stadia, it is about achieving sustainability in the communities. Right from the start of the project, which is the biggest capital programme in this CSR period, we want to ensure that communities are considered. They will certainly be considered right at the end, and by that I mean employment opportunities, training and apprenticeships, as well as the provision of goods and services.

Mr G Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister tell us whether there will be strong social clauses that affect the neighbourhoods around the stadia?

Ms Ní Chuilín: There absolutely will be strong social clauses. Casement Park is in West Belfast, Windsor Park is in South Belfast, and Ravenhill is beside the Cregagh estate. All three are distinct areas with distinct needs. Those constituencies need opportunities, but so do surrounding areas. Therefore, our social clauses will be as strong as they can possibly

be to make sure that everybody, where possible, has some opportunity for training, employment, retraining or an apprenticeship and, indeed, will have a presence in the three stadia well after they are built and delivered.

DCAL: Arm's-length Bodies

7. **Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on her Department's review of its arm's-length bodies. (AQO 2052/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My review of the Department's arm's-length bodies started with reviews of Sport NI and Museums NI. The reviews are being taken forward in two stages. The first stage considers the continuing need for the functions of each body. It also examines the governance and accountability arrangements in place, and the effectiveness and value for money of each body in its current form. The second stage will consider future delivery options for the functions of each body.

The stage one review for both bodies is nearing completion and has highlighted some issues. I am considering how those issues will be addressed before the review team finalises stage one and completes stage two.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle, agus tá an-áthas orm go bhfuil an tAire ag caint liom arís. I am delighted that the Minister is speaking to me again after the last day. Can she confirm that she has withdrawn her edict to arm's-length bodies to channel all announcements through her?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am not really sure what the Member is referring to. I think that he may be referring to the media communications protocol that we are trying to finalise with some arm's-length bodies. Rather than withdraw it, we are progressing with it. Most of the bodies have signed up, and we are still completing the protocol with the rest.

Mr Storey: Will the Minister confirm whether the movement of responsibility for delivery of stadia development from Sport NI to the Department has anything to do with the findings of the review of Sport NI that is being undertaken?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I can confirm that that is not the case. It was quite obvious, and I said this at the time, that the stadia programme was quite big

for a body such as Sport NI to take on on its own. There were delays, so I made a decision to make the Department responsible for it to ensure not only that we reached the targets set by the Executive but that the money was spent, that nothing was returned and that the three sporting bodies got what they needed. It has absolutely nothing to do with the review that we are undertaking of Sport NI.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for her answers. Will she detail her work with her Executive colleague the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment on reviewing the excellent work of NI Screen, given that it is funded by both Departments?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Needless to say, the work that we are to do is still not finalised. The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and I are not only involved in the work and funding of NI Screen but are responsible for creative industries and taking forward a robust music strategy. So, work in those three areas is under way. I think that the Member is trying to say that, through NI Screen, a lot of Executive resources have been spent, particularly on film and television. We want to continue to make sure that that is still value for money, and we are making those areas competitive so that we can attract other productions, which will help our economy.

Sport: Reconciliation

8. **Dr McDonnell** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for her assessment of the role that sport plays in reconciliation in Northern Ireland. (AQO 2053/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I recognise that the development of sport in the North has in the past been affected and hindered by community tensions and has, on occasion, reflected segregation. However, I also believe that well-managed sport has played and can play an important role in reconciliation here. That is recognised in my Department's 10-year strategy for sport and physical recreation, Sport Matters. Sport Matters commits the Government to the promotion of sport in the context of a shared and better future, and it encourages sport to embrace and facilitate the process of reconciliation. To achieve that, the strategy contains a number of targets and actions to help to promote community cohesion through sport, including improving participation rates among under-represented groups of people and

the provision of shared spaces for sport that promote community integration.

Dr McDonnell: I thank the Minister for her answer. Will she tell the House how far down the road we are with the 10-year strategy? Are we on target, and what is the level of achievement? In other words, is the strategy working to schedule, behind schedule or ahead of schedule?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I will take the last question first. The strategy is not only working to schedule but is working better than we had anticipated. Can we do more? Absolutely. We can always do more to provide better opportunities for reconciliation, integration and cohesion. I honestly believe that the community and voluntary groups that are involved in participation in sport are the best example for all of us. For many years, they have led by example, and Sport Matters complements that. If the Member, or anyone else for that matter, has suggestions about anything that we have not thought about or that is not included in the strategy that would promote better reconciliation and inclusion, I would be really happy to hear about it.

Mr Humphrey: I very much agree with the broad thrust of Dr McDonnell's question. I am proud to be a member of the green-and-white army, and growing up in north Belfast, my idol was Pat Jennings. Does the Minister agree that any player born in Northern Ireland, or who has represented Northern Ireland at youth level, should play for Northern Ireland and that failure to do so actually damages community relations?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I do not agree with the Member. I think that it is a choice for the players, and it is down to the sporting bodies. It would be irresponsible for someone in my position to try to corral people. I am on the record as saying that I would much prefer an all-Ireland team, as did George Best. I honestly believe that there would be great support for such a team and everything that goes with it. Regardless of what team people prefer to play for, they have my support.

Intercultural Arts Strategy

9. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline any discussions she has had with the First Minister and deputy First Minister on the recently launched intercultural arts strategy. (AQO 2054/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have not had any direct discussions with the First Minister and deputy First Minister on the Arts Council's recently launched intercultural arts strategy. However, I understand that the Arts Council consulted Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) officials during the development of the strategy and that an OFMDFM official sits on the implementation group.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for her response. Will the Minister join me in congratulating a young swimmer from my constituency who has just received a silver medal and wish her all success for the upcoming Olympic Games? We are very proud of her.

Given the vital role that the ethnic minority development fund will have for all groups availing themselves of the intercultural arts strategy, has the Minister discussed with OFMDFM the inordinate delays in the administration of that fund? If not, will she engage with the office to distribute those funds as soon as possible?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Taking the last matter first, I have not had discussions with OFMDFM about this fund or about any details surrounding it in terms of delays or anything else. As I said in my answer to a previous question, OFMDFM officials sit on this body and so will be aware of this. I will certainly pass the Member's comments on.

Along with others, I congratulate Sycerika McMahon on her achievement. I think that everyone in this House, and even outside it, is extremely proud of her, her coaches, her family and her community.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a Phriomh LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her answers to date. Does she agree that, as a medium, the arts have the potential to improve mutual respect and understanding across and within communities?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I absolutely do agree. Even this morning, in the Long Gallery, there was a Services Industrial Professional and Technical Union — SIPTU — event, and a group representing north and west Belfast called Artability. Through the promotion and facilitation of the arts, they offer facilities for people with disabilities who come from what has been known as both sides of the community, and have done so for a long time.

I have also seen the work of Draw Down the Walls in my North Belfast constituency, where people have used the arts at interfaces to talk about some of the very challenging issues that adults sometimes cannot bring themselves to discuss. I have also seen the role of the arts, through the media of drama and play at St Mary's recently around the Ulster covenant, and I have seen the power that that medium has in fostering and developing better relations. I am looking forward to supporting the work that we have done thus far in developing and supporting further work to meet those aims.

Mr Dallat: I thank the Minister for her answer. Will she outline what steps she has taken to action the different points raised in relation to the intercultural arts strategy?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am due to meet my arts branch in three weeks to look at the actions from that strategy and, indeed, other outstanding actions in relation to the arts. I think that that is important. I do not think that anyone is doing this from a mischievous point of view. If there are delays, the rationale for them needs to be explained to me. We also need to look at resolution of delays or perceived delays. I will certainly be doing that. The meeting will be in mid-June, and I am sure that this will come up again in future Question Times. I am happy to write to the Member on the issue he has raised and provide the answer that he needs.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Question 10 has been withdrawn.

Sport: Health Benefits

11. **Mr McGimpsey** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the work she is undertaking, in conjunction with other relevant Departments, to encourage participation in sport as a contributor to improving health. (AQO 2056/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department is, alongside other Departments, supporting the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in developing a new Investing for Health framework. As part of that process, DCAL has submitted a number of proposals to the Health Department, setting out where sport might contribute to the implementation of the framework. In addition, my Department's sports strategy, Sport Matters, contains targets designed to increase participation in sport

across the population. To ensure that these are delivered, DCAL led a Sport Matters monitoring group, chaired by me, and established to oversee the implementation of Sport Matters. The group comprises representatives from a number of key stakeholder Departments, including Health, Education, Social Development, Agriculture and Rural Development and Employment and Learning.

Mr McGimpsey: I ask the Minister, particularly in relation to health and the issues that are the responsibility of the Public Health Agency, bearing in mind prevention, promotion and protection, what steps she believes could usefully be taken with that agency to further the aims and objectives of her Department?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have met the Health Minister on at least two occasions. We are due to have another meeting. I have met the Agriculture Minister, and I am meeting the Education Minister. As regards the Health Minister and the Public Health Agency, we are looking to use sport and physical activity as ways of promoting better health awareness, including mental health awareness. We have also met groups that are working on the prevention of suicide and groups that are trying to reduce obesity and diabetes. I have to say that the relationship with the Health Department and the Health Minister is very proactive. It is very "can do". We are looking in our own Departments and agencies for gaps and to make sure that we do everything in a joined-up way, which I understand was not done previously.

3.00 pm

Mr I McCrea: For most Members, childhoods resulted in being outside kicking football or playing whatever type of sport and getting involved in many different sporting activities at school. Can the Minister outline what discussions she has had with the Education Minister to encourage more people to take part in sport, not only while they are at school but while they are at home?

Ms Ni Chuilín: As I have said, I have had no discussions with the Minister of Education solely on the Sport Matters strategy, but officials have been meeting and working together. I want to personally meet all the Ministers, where possible, to look at a joined-up way on this.

I agree with the Member that it is necessary to ensure that children and young people have every opportunity to participate in sport. Recently, I met women who work in the area of sport who asked me to do that, particularly for young women who do not feel comfortable participating in sport, in schools and outside, perhaps because of changing facilities. We must make it easier for women and not take our eye off the ball. It is important that, throughout school and afterwards, we provide opportunities and a better way to get children and young people involved in more physical activity.

Regional Development

Housing: Amenities

1. **Miss M McIlveen** asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps are being taken to ensure that residents purchasing homes with the benefit of surety bonds under the Private Streets (NI) Order 1980, the Water and Sewerage Services (NI) Order 2006 and preceding legislation have those services adopted within a reasonable time. (AQO 2061/11-15)

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): Roads Service and NI Water have advised that they continue to work closely with developers during the construction of roads and sewers in new housing developments. Officials inspect the work at key stages and process requests for bond reductions and preliminary certificates promptly, in order to facilitate progress towards final adoption of a development.

In normal circumstances, the pace of the process is generally driven by the developer's progress on site. However, in cases where the developer does not complete the street works or sewers as agreed or if the works are not proceeding at an appropriate pace, officials will initially seek to negotiate with the developer or other responsible party to get the necessary work completed. If that is not successful, enforcement action is initiated, and, if the developer fails to act, Roads Service and NI Water make arrangements to access the bond moneys and instruct their own contractors to carry out the necessary works. As soon as the works are complete, the road and sewers

become adopted and are then maintained as part of the public road and sewerage network.

The Member will also be aware of the inquiry into unadopted roads that is being taken forward by the Committee for Regional Development. My Department has provided written and verbal evidence to the inquiry, awaits receipt of the report with interest and will give careful consideration to its recommendations.

I should say that my Department is broadly content with the current private streets legislation. It provides a good balance, reconciling the responsibilities of the Department with those of developers and house buyers, and those arrangements work well in the majority of cases. For example, in the last five years, some 260 miles of road have been adopted. However, officials also acknowledge that it would be possible to give added protection to homebuyers through other measures, albeit that there would be practical and financial implications for developers and homebuyers that would need to be carefully considered, especially in the current economic circumstances.

Miss M McIlveen: I thank the Minister for his response. Given that, in some cases, surety bonds are outstanding for between 10 and 20 years on numerous developments in my constituency, what guarantees can the Minister give that enforcement action will be prioritised in such cases and that the value of the surety meets the value of the work that remains outstanding?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for her supplementary question. She has taken particular interest in the matter. I recall the Assembly debate that we recently had on it. I am pleased to inform the Member that substantial progress continues to be made, particularly in her area, Strangford. There are recently adopted developments and those which are to be adopted shortly in the near future. There are always contentious sites, and my Department and NI Water will continue to work at them. Clearly, those that stretch into a period of years are unacceptable, and we need to see a resolution of those matters as quickly as possible. I assure the Member that I am keen to see that as any Member of the House.

Mr Nesbitt: The Minister mentioned “an appropriate pace” of activity by developers. Is

the Minister content that “appropriate pace” can be easily defined?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. There is an issue there. We hope and expect that the works will be completed within one year of the houses being occupied. If there is ongoing work further along a development or street, it may be deemed reasonable for a developer to take more than a year to complete the final surfacing. As usual, in all these matters, there is a balance to be found. By working with developers, we seek to complete those developments as quickly as possible, so that the householders can enjoy proper access and proper water and sewerage facilities.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister increase the number of staff involved in enforcement in the southern division in order to ensure that action is speedy and efficient?

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. It is not simply a matter of employing more people. By working more smartly and more closely with developers and all the agencies involved, significant progress is possible without adding significantly to the expense of the service. It is my belief that improvements can and perhaps will be made to the service that we offer. I am hoping for ideas and looking forward to the recommendations that the Regional Development Committee will bring forward as part of its inquiry. I will listen closely to those, but I also have ideas of my own.

We also have to bear it in mind that simply increasing the costs to developers will likely lead to the costs being put back onto potential homebuyers. With the housing market in its current state, I am not sure that that would be logical or very sensible. All in all, there are a number of factors that need to be given careful consideration.

Ms Lo: I have received complaints from constituents in Brooke Hall about problems with sewage and unfinished pavements and roads. The residents have been there for five years now. Can the Minister please do something to enable the adoption process to go ahead, so that the facilities and homes can be enjoyed by the residents?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for her supplementary question. I agree that five

years is unacceptable. If she furnishes me with the details, I will be happy to investigate to see if we can make progress.

Northern Ireland Water

2. **Mr Dickson** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his preferred governance model for Northern Ireland Water. (AQO 2062/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Currently, NI Water has dual governance arrangements. Legally, it is a regulated utility, and, financially, it is treated as part of the public expenditure regime. That has arisen because NI Water did not become self-funding as anticipated when it was established. In the Programme for Government, which was published on 12 March 2012, the Executive made a continued commitment not to introduce household charges during this Budget period. Given that commitment, I will bring forward legislation later in the year to extend current temporary subsidy arrangements.

In the longer term, the preferred form of governance will depend on how the Executive decide NI Water should be funded. If the Executive continue majority public funding indefinitely, it might be consistent to make legislative changes to reflect that; if they intend that water should become more self-funding, a model along the regulated utility lines would be logical. It is my intention to put a paper to the Executive in the near future on the implications of the Programme for Government commitment.

Mr Dickson: Minister, there was a large degree of consensus at the recent Institute of Water conference that some form of mutualised model was the way forward. Do you agree with that, or do you have some other model in mind?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. All of us are aware of the Alliance Party's position on these matters — the introduction of water charges and, indeed, advocating the mutualisation of NI Water. That is plainly on the record. What is equally plainly on the record is that the current Programme for Government, agreed not only by the Executive but by the Assembly, made it clear that there will be no additional charges in this mandate. The purpose of my paper to Executive colleagues will be to explore — helpfully, I hope — how we can begin a mature debate on the best options that

are available for the future of NI Water and how it is funded and governed.

Mr Spratt: Minister, with regard to governance models, will you ensure that your officials take a serious look at the Scottish model for any changes that may happen in the future, when possible water charges might come in?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful for the Member's supplementary question. I welcome him back to the House and to his role as Chairman of the Regional Development Committee.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Kennedy: I have been actively looking and consulting already on models available in Scotland, Wales, other parts of the United Kingdom and, indeed, the Republic of Ireland. All of that has given me a very useful insight on a potential way forward for the Northern Ireland Executive. It is an important matter that the Executive should reflect on and, I hope, come to consensus on. That is what I will seek to do, and, obviously, the Regional Development Committee will have a role in that too.

Mr Dallat: I congratulate the Minister on the calming effect that he has had on NI Water. Can we be assured that, in future, whatever the governance, there will be less of the turbulence of the past and the tsunamis that robbed people of their water supply and caused so much grief to people who either worked for the company or were part of it?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his carefully phrased supplementary question; I will attempt to equally carefully phrase my answer. Stability is in everybody's interest, and there has been a high degree of stability with NI Water over recent months. The current chief executive, Trevor Haslett, has, in no small measure, contributed to that. I am very much looking to the future to see how we can put NI Water on a proper footing as it faces the challenges of the future. We enjoy record levels of quality drinking water and sewerage, and those are positives. However, there are issues of governance and funding that need to be addressed, and, with good will on all sides, we can attempt to do that.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister spoke about bringing forward a model of governance for NIW. How does he see that model being accountable to the Assembly?

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. Amongst the issues that the Executive need to decide on is how NI Water will operate. Will it be a privatised company? Will it be part-privatised and mutualised in some way? Could it be brought back into public ownership through nationalisation, which is, I think, more complex and more difficult? Those are the issues. However, ultimately, there has to be a degree of political accountability. I am conscious of those issues, and, with Executive colleagues and members of the Regional Development Committee, including Mr Lynch, I will seek to explore avenues for how best to achieve that.

3.15 pm

Railways: All-island Network

3. Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Regional Development what discussions have been held with the Dublin Government about sourcing EU funding for an all-island rail network. (AQO 2063/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I have not yet had any formal discussions with the Irish Government about a joint bid for EU funding to improve cross-border rail services. I did discuss potential service improvements to the Belfast to Dublin Enterprise service with the Irish Transport Minister in the margins of the European transport council meeting in Brussels in December. I am keen to see what can be done on the line north of Dublin to ensure that the Enterprise can arrive in Dublin before 9.00 am on weekdays.

At the North/South Ministerial Council meeting in transport sectoral format on 20 April 2012, Minister Varadkar and I noted that the reliability and punctuality of the Enterprise service had improved significantly in recent months. I welcome the new station that has been constructed at Newry and the work that has started on the redevelopment of Portadown station. I look forward to measures that will be completed this year to improve locomotive reliability on the Enterprise service and to equip the trains with Wi-Fi. As regards longer-term improvements, Minister Varadkar and I agreed that investment possibilities to upgrade the Belfast to Dublin railway line could be considered within the context of forthcoming EU decisions on the next TEN-T programme. We await the outcome of those decisions.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for a comprehensive answer. I hope that we can have a commitment from him to push ahead with a submission to the EU for funding on an all-island basis in order to improve rail services on the Belfast to Dublin line and, indeed, the Belfast to Derry line. I think that, on his recent visit to Brussels, the Minister was somewhat encouraged by the fact that there might be opportunities to follow up on that. Can he confirm that there will be improvements in the town of Lurgan in particular?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Question.

Mrs D Kelly: I am asking whether the Minister will look at the needs of Lurgan in respect of the Belfast to Dublin line.

Mr Kennedy: I am very grateful for the Member's supplementary question. We seemed to travel from Brussels to Lurgan very quickly. For factual accuracy, I was not in Brussels but Strasbourg. Nonetheless, there was useful engagement in Strasbourg with, amongst others, Commissioner Kallas and members of the European subcommittee on TEN-T issues. I understand the Member's point. I am very keen to see improvements generally to the rail network. One of the difficulties we face in Europe is that it has a sense that freight in Northern Ireland and, indeed, in the Republic of Ireland is moved by rail, which is not the case. Unfortunately, it does not appear to be immediately economically viable either. However, we are making close representations to Europe on all these issues.

On the issue of Lurgan, the Member will be aware that Translink has identified a signalling upgrade that will, when implemented, reduce crossing closure times for southbound trains stopping at Lurgan railway station. The upgrade will be installed and commissioned in this financial year. However, it will work only for trains stopping at the station before passing over the level crossing. I explained that in detail at Craigavon council at the end of March. Translink has invested around £827,000 in the upkeep and refurbishment of facilities at Lurgan rail station. However, there are no plans or available funding at this time for any major works to Lurgan railway station. The need for investment in the station will be reviewed by Translink as it updates and prioritises its plans for capital expenditure.

Mr Campbell: I do not know whether the Minister has had any assessment done of

international rail travel between Northern Ireland and the Republic and whatever hundreds of millions it would cost to develop that, but would he set that beside the need to develop internal rail links within Northern Ireland — we have seen the need for that — equating those two to ensure that we get the productivity there internally, before we talk about internationally?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member. I think he was being slightly mischievous, but I accept the point that he makes. I think that I have shown strong commitment to improving the rail infrastructure in Northern Ireland with the upgrade of the Coleraine to Londonderry line. I know that the Member and, indeed, all Members of the House will support that. Where it is possible and subject to the necessary funding being available, yes, of course, I see rail infrastructure as an important tool. There is good evidence of that, with the new trains that are continuing to be brought online and the 20 new trains purchased recently. That is improving the service and the experience of travelling by rail, and that is reflected in the record number of people who use trains to travel either for leisure or for work.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Príomh-Leas Cheann Comhairle. I wonder whether the Minister agrees with Mr Campbell's colleague junior Minister Bell, who earlier expressed the importance of the TEN-T funding for rail development on this island. I wonder, in particular, what thoughts he would have on the development, somewhere down the line, of a potential western corridor for rail on the island of Ireland.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. As I have outlined, we had very constructive meetings in Strasbourg last week on the TEN-T regulations. That will be ongoing work. The Member will know that I am due to come before the Regional Development Committee on Wednesday to update it with a report from my recent visit. These are issues that we will want to carry forward constructively together.

The potential cost of what would be, in European terms, a high-speed rail network, either North/South or, indeed, extending to other parts of the neighbouring jurisdiction, is likely to be prohibitive. Some £1 billion is talked about. We want to ensure that Northern Ireland can avail itself of any possible opportunity for

grant assistance from Europe in terms of the TEN-T regulations, and that is what I am working to achieve.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Minister for his answers so far, and, indeed, the work that is being done to improve our existing rail services. He has pointed out the increased take-up of rail, which is, no doubt, a consequence of the rising cost of petrol. What is being done to introduce new services in the short or medium term?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. What I have attempted to do by, for instance, the upgrade of the Coleraine to Londonderry line, which we spoke about earlier, is not simply to maintain services but to enhance them. These things cost money, and I am mindful of the overall financial position that Translink finds itself in. The intention is that we do not simply stand still with our rail services but continue to improve the services to the general public.

A26 Dual Carriageway: Farms

4. **Mr Storey** asked the Minister for Regional Development how he intends to minimise the disturbance to farm businesses as a result of the proposed dualling of the A26 road. (AQO 2064/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Roads Service has advised that, during construction of the A26 dualling between Glarryford and the A44 Drones Road junction, the contractor will be required to ensure that, where possible, access is maintained to all land adjacent to the works. Roads Service officials further advise that the scheme will provide an all-purpose dual carriageway, with landowners and farmers accessing it either from left in/left out junctions or from one of the adjacent full-movement, side road junctions. My officials and contracted staff will engage fully with affected landowners and their agents in relation to the provision of appropriate accommodation works, including fencing, hedging, gates and laneways. Where land is required for the scheme, landowners will be compensated in accordance with the Land Compensation (Northern Ireland) Order 1982. Compensation matters are dealt with directly by the Department of Finance and Personnel's Land and Property Services on behalf of my Department.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for his reply. However, we continue to be disappointed that,

while statutory works have been carried out to continue progress on the project, there still remains an issue that his Department has not been able to resolve to the satisfaction of one local farmer, if not two local farmers: the issue of an underpass. When the climbing lane was introduced at Dunloy some years ago, an underpass was supplied to a particular farmer on that particular section of the A26. Can the Minister tell the House why an underpass is not being made available to the farms that are particularly affected in this case? Northern Ireland has seen one of those farms on a recent UTV programme displaying, week by week, the best of our farming in Northern Ireland.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary. These are issues that the Member continues to raise on behalf of his constituents, along with other representatives of the area. The scheme has been assessed by Roads Service officials, and, at this point, it is not deemed to be cost-effective to create the underpasses at the locations he has indicated. One of the next stages of the statutory process will be to move to a public inquiry. Those arguments, strong as they will be, will be made at that stage, and the inspector will, I am sure, give full account to those views. At present, however, the view of Roads Service is that it would not be a cost-effective use of public money or serve the roads network to provide those underpasses. If evidence can be produced to the contrary and a compelling argument can be made, we will listen very closely.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Does the Minister agree that the upgrading of the A26 is needed not only for road safety but because it would benefit the local economy and tourism and decrease travel times for people from Ballymoney and Ballycastle? When, in the outworking of the scheme, does he foresee that this will be done, and where does it lie with regard to his funding priorities?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary. I am a very clear supporter and advocate of the improvement and upgrade to the A26, not least because my party colleague Robin Swann raises it with me every time he sees me. I need no convincing of its merits and the economic benefit that it would have for that region. As I indicated, the next stage of the statutory process is likely to be the referral to public inquiry sometime towards the end of this

year; we estimate that it will be November or December.

The Member will know that, as part of the overall Budget that his party and others have supported, we have invested heavily in schemes such as the A5, A8 and A2.

It remains to be seen whether the investment strategy, which has yet to be published, confirmed and adopted by the Executive and the Assembly, will yield the opportunity to carry forward a scheme such as the A26, which is competing with other schemes for bypasses or through-passes all over Northern Ireland. I, as roads Minister, simply say that I am up for doing all those roads, including upgrading the A26.

3.30 pm

Mr Allister: Will the Minister explain to my farming constituents how the Department can find hundreds of millions to pour into vanity projects like the A5 and tens of millions to pay consultants, but when it comes to farmers and facilitating their business on routes like the A26, it penny-pinches and refuses to recognise the absolute functioning necessity of an underpass? Is it not time that the Department got the balance right and provided for those whom it is affecting the most?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question, and I accept the force and passion that he put it with. The difficulty is that Roads Service and its consultants have to assess from an engineering point of view whether the underpasses represent value for money and a wise choice of carrying forward a road scheme. I indicated that individual landowners and public representatives will have the opportunity at some stage — probably at the late end of this year — to make representations at a public inquiry, and based on the strength of those, to carry those forward. If compelling and accepted arguments are made, I, as Minister, or whoever is Minister, will bring those forward. I appreciate the strength and conviction with which the Member spoke. Ultimately, however, he will know that the wise use of public money has to be a key factor in all these things, and so it is with underpasses and accommodation works that are associated with any scheme, not least the A26.

Executive Committee Business

Finance Bill: Legislative Consent Motion

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I beg to move

That this Assembly agrees that the provisions in clause 189 of and schedule 23 to the Finance Bill, as introduced in the House of Commons on 10 May 2012, dealing with the devolution of Northern Ireland long-haul rates of air passenger duty should be considered by the UK Parliament.

Before turning to the detail of the legislative consent motion, I want to touch on a number of issues; namely, the scope of the powers granted to us and the cost of expanding them. Let me be clear from the outset: I have serious concerns about the impact of air passenger duty (APD) for Northern Ireland as one of the more remote regions of the UK. I consider that, as a tax, it no longer meets the basic requirements of being fair to everyone, having a simple structure and not unduly impeding consumers and business. More generally, unlike the rest of the United Kingdom, our access to other regions is not as easy; it is heavily reliant on air transport. We have no rail or car options for wider travel within the UK.

We made our position on the duty clear in our response last June to the Government's consultation. The Government said that they will return to the rebalancing issue, which is a wider issue that has implications not only for Northern Ireland but, potentially, for Wales and Scotland. We will continue to make our views on APD known. What we are dealing with today is more limited and relates only to the devolution of rate-setting powers for direct long-haul flights.

At the end of 2010 and the beginning of 2011, we were faced with significant concerns about the viability of our direct link between Belfast International Airport and New York. That was a direct result of the difference in the rate of APD here and in the Republic. It was very clear that without urgent action, that route would have been lost to Northern Ireland. It was an urgent matter, because airline schedules were being reviewed in a ruthless way following the takeover of Continental Airlines by United, and timing was crucial. The fact that the Government launched a wider consultation of APD as a whole became

a problem for a time. That was launched in the Budget in March and responded to with the autumn statement in November. In the interim, the Government were reluctant to adapt the duty in any way.

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

The First Minister and the deputy First Minister, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and I pressed them hard, with the support of Northern Ireland Office Ministers, and I am pleased to say that the Prime Minister and Her Majesty's Treasury Ministers, particularly the Chancellor — without whose help, it would not have happened — responded positively. Our request was that the Government take whatever action necessary to avoid the loss of that important air link. Our first preference was to find a way to do that within the national air passenger duty framework. Our request indicated that if the Government could not do that, we wanted the powers devolved so that we could take the necessary action ourselves. We wanted a similar exemption to that which applies for Scotland's islands, which is on the basis of a very low population density. We cannot begin to match that but we hoped that an exemption would be made available on some other basis. If that could have been achieved, we would not have needed to devolve the powers and would not have needed the block grant reduction that comes with that.

The Government explored that fully with the European Commission, but no such solution could be found within the state aid rules. The most legally sound long-term solution was to devolve the powers in line with the EU Azores criteria. It was, I believe, the Chancellor who took the decision to reduce the air passenger duty rate for direct long-haul flights from Northern Ireland to the same as that for short-haul flights with effect from last November and to begin the process of devolving the necessary powers to us. I thank him and the Secretary of State for that.

The legislative consent motion before us today is intended to give effect to the first stage of the process prior to an Assembly Bill being brought forward. Before turning to the detail of the legislative consent motion, let me be quite clear: what was under consideration by the Government and on which our consent is being sought is provision to devolve air passenger duty rate-setting for direct long-haul flights only.

Many have argued that that provision should be made to extend devolved powers to band A short-haul flights. Indeed, that issue was raised by the Finance and Personnel Committee, and the Chairman will probably say something about that later. However, put simply, the policy framework to provide for that is simply not in place. The Executive have not agreed such an approach, and at no time have the powers been requested from the Government by the Executive. Indeed, even if we did ask for greater powers, it is not clear that they would have been agreed to. Given the timetable for the Finance Bill 2012, it would be near impossible to do that in that Bill. It is likely that Royal Assent will be granted before Parliament's summer recess.

Although agreeing the policy on short-haul APD rates may be relatively straightforward, gaining consent to the financial implications would not be. Although it could be argued that the powers could be granted to use and exercise at a later date, that would be a somewhat unusual approach from a legislative perspective. The devolution of short-haul rates of APD would be an expensive measure. For direct long-haul flights, devolution will cost in the region of £5 million a year with a zero rate.

A similar approach for short-haul flights would be considerably higher, costing in the region of £60 million per annum at present and, perhaps, rising to £90 million per annum. That is not an inconsiderable sum by any stretch of the imagination. Also, as we contemplate other block adjustments, it is a significant sum that would have to be dealt with.

Although phasing may help in the early years, it would not detract from the long-term annual cost. Even halving the rate of duty on short-haul flights would initially cost around £30 million a year. That would have considerable recurring annual consequences for the resources at the Executive's disposal at a time of already considerable budgetary constraint. Furthermore, to devolve greater powers than are contained in the current Finance Bill may also require an amendment to the Northern Ireland Act 1998, as opposed to being able to deliver the reductions solely through the Finance Bill amendment. The time needed for this would be simply too long for the action that we want to take on direct long-haul flights.

For these reasons, the legislation before Parliament at this time, rightly I believe, deals

with the devolution of air passenger duty rate-setting for direct long-haul flights from Northern Ireland. There is a need for restraint and careful consideration for calls for the devolution of wider powers where these have considerable financial consequences for Northern Ireland. That is not to say that the wider concerns have been rejected by the Government or that this is an issue that should not be further considered. Rather, it needs to be considered in the wider context of other regions in the UK and the Government's response to this more generally.

I will now turn briefly to the detail of the legislation that is going through Parliament and which would give effect to the devolution of air passenger duty rate-setting for direct long-haul flights from Northern Ireland. Members will wish to note that the Assembly has no powers in relation to APD, as this is an excepted matter. An Assembly Bill cannot be used to implement the proposal to give the Assembly powers to set the APD rate for direct long-haul flights starting in Northern Ireland. Once the relevant powers are devolved to the Assembly, an Assembly Bill will be required to set the direct long-haul air passenger duty rate for Northern Ireland.

The provisions of the Westminster Finance Bill that deal with Northern Ireland and air passenger duty contain retrospective, current and future aspects. Part 1 of schedule 23 to the Bill gives effect to the cut in air passenger duty for direct long-haul flights departing from Northern Ireland with effect from 1 November 2011. The provision gives legal effect to the rate of duty for direct long-haul flights from Northern Ireland being reduced to £12 for standard class and £24 for any other class for the period from 1 November 2011 to 31 March 2012. This means that the short-haul rate of duty is applied where a direct long-haul flight is undertaken from Northern Ireland or, if there is more than one flight involved, the first connection is made in a long-haul destination. Part 2 of the schedule provides for an increase in the rate of APD from 1 April 2012, with the short-haul rate for band A increased from £13 to £26. Provision is also made for those new rates to apply to all direct long-haul flights from Northern Ireland. The Assembly does not have to give consent to these two Parts of the schedule, as no powers are devolved in relation to this.

Part 3 of the schedule devolves the rate-setting for direct long-haul flights to Northern Ireland. This change will apply to flights that take off

from Northern Ireland on or before an appointed day. The date is likely to be in late 2012 or 1 April 2013. The date will be appointed following the Finance Bill receiving Royal Assent and the necessary primary legislation being passed in the Assembly. The Programme for Government indicates that the Executive wish to set the rate to zero for direct long-haul flights.

Part 3 of the schedule also makes administrative provision in relation to the setting-up and maintenance of a register of aircraft operators with routes from Northern Ireland.

In addition, it provides for Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC) to disclose information to the Secretary of State, the Treasury and the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) for the purpose of setting the new rates of duty, along with the restrictions on the further disclosure of that information and associated penalties. The legislative consent of the Assembly is required for Part 3 as it gives autonomy over the rates to be set for direct long-haul flights from Northern Ireland.

3.45 pm

Part 4 of the schedule provides for the extension of APD to passengers in smaller aircraft and reduces the de minimis weight limit from 10 tons to 5.7 tons. It also extends the exceptions to APD for aircraft used for certain purposes and provides for new rates for certain aircraft. A new rate will apply to those aircraft that have a take-off weight of more than 20 tons and that seat fewer than 19 passengers. Essentially, the provisions extend APD to private jets and set a new rate for luxury private jets.

Part 4 also includes changes to reflect the devolution of APD rates for direct long-haul flights from Northern Ireland. For luxury private jets, the legislation provides that the APD rate would be twice that which otherwise applies, and once powers are devolved, it will be twice the standard prevailing rate set by the Assembly. Members will wish to note that although the default rate for luxury private aircraft will be twice the standard prevailing rate, my Department has asked HMRC to provide so that the Assembly could determine different rates for that category of aircraft. If agreed by the Government, an amendment will be tabled at Report Stage, which is scheduled for early July. More generally, the changes in Part 4 will take effect from 1 April 2013.

It is anticipated that the Finance Bill will secure Royal Assent in mid-July. Following that, I will bring a Bill to the Assembly for approval, which will give effect to the second stage of the devolution process: the setting of the direct long-haul rates at zero. I hope that that Bill will be passed before the end of the year, subject to the Assembly's agreement to the use of accelerated passage.

Before we move into the debate, I want to take the opportunity to thank the Committee for its consideration of the APD rates and the publication of its report on the matter. As always, I welcome the views of the Committee and look forward to its continued assistance as the necessary Bill is brought forward to this place.

In conclusion, having got the support of the Executive Committee, I would welcome the support of Members on this motion.

Mr Murphy (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel):

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. On 5 March 2012, the Minister of Finance and Personnel wrote to seek the views of the Finance and Personnel Committee on the provisions of the proposed UK Finance Bill that would devolve direct long-haul rates of air passenger duty to the Assembly. Given that that involves the devolution of tax-setting powers, the Assembly's consent is required in the form of the legislative consent motion that is before us today.

The Committee was briefed by departmental officials on the implications of the proposed provisions in the Finance Bill on 14 March. The Committee noted that, in addition to DFP, the provisions could be of interest to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI). Therefore, a response was sought from the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, which confirmed that it supported the proposed legislative consent motion.

To inform its work, the Committee received evidence from a range of stakeholders. On 18 April and 25 April, oral evidence was taken from panels of witnesses that included representatives from Belfast International Airport, George Best Belfast City Airport, ABTA: The Travel Association, the Hotels Federation, the Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau, the Consumer Council, the Chamber of Commerce and the Federation of Small Businesses. Written submissions were also received from Ballymena Borough Council, Aer Lingus, Flybe and York

Aviation. On 2 May, Members received a briefing from the Assembly's Research and Information Service together with a final oral submission from DFP officials.

Air passenger duty has been criticised as a form of unfair and economically damaging taxation, and Britain is often cited as having the highest APD in the world. The Committee noted that a number of Governments in other European countries either have not implemented aviation duties or have reduced or withdrawn them because of the potential damage to the air transport industry. Members also noted evidence that supports the argument that the British Government should reconsider their policy position and abolish APD, given that it is also damaging to the economy in Britain.

Many of the stakeholders who provided evidence to the Committee emphasised the importance of air travel to business and tourism here. Various statistics were cited, including that the air transport sector contributed a gross value added of around £127million to the regional economy in 2009 and directly supported 704 jobs and an additional 914 jobs in the production line.

The Committee was informed that the anticipated cost of devolving APD on direct long-haul flights, an estimated £5 million per annum, is lower than the direct and indirect revenue that is generated here by the North American route on which the Executive originally campaigned for a reduction in APD and which has been worth in excess of £100 million over seven years.

The Committee recognises that APD is a regressive tax that is particularly disadvantageous to businesses, consumers and the wider economy in the North. This is due to the peripheral location of the region, which results in greater dependence on air travel, and to the proximity to airports in the South, particularly Dublin Airport, which hold a competitive advantage, given that a nominal €3 rate of APD applies. The negative consequences for the North will be exacerbated by the further increases in APD rates levied by the British Government from 1 April 2012. Members, therefore, welcome the proposed devolution of APD rates on direct long-haul flights as an important step towards redressing the disproportionate burden of APD locally.

The Committee agrees that the Executive and the Treasury are to be commended for

the responsive action that has been taken to safeguard the vital Belfast-New York connection. The Committee has recommended that the Minister of Finance and Personnel, together with the other applicable Ministers, should now develop a co-ordinated action plan in conjunction with all the key stakeholders to maximise the economic opportunities arising from the devolution of direct long-haul rates of APD. This should include the aim of establishing new direct long-haul flight connections to key business and tourism hubs.

The Finance Bill also includes provisions that extend APD to small business jets, which are currently exempt due to restrictions on weight and size. This will result in most business jet passengers being subject to the same rate of duty as commercial aircraft passengers. Furthermore, luxury private airlines will pay double the higher rate of APD. The Committee research pointed out to DFP that if the Assembly were to set the direct long-haul standard rate of APD to zero, it would create an anomaly where luxury private aircraft flying from the North would be liable for a zero rate of APD. The Department subsequently informed the Committee and the Minister confirmed in his remarks that discussions are ongoing with Revenue and Customs to determine whether the Assembly could be given the power to set the private luxury aircraft APD rate at something other than twice the standard prevailing rate, should the Assembly wish to do so at a future date. This would give the Assembly the power to set a different rate should it so wish. According to the Department, it is hoped that an amendment will be approved at Report Stage of the Westminster Bill on 2 July 2012 to give effect to this. The Committee would welcome this amendment to the Finance Bill. Indeed, as I said, the Finance Minister confirmed that that is his expectation also.

Although the Committee invited evidence specifically on the detail of the relevant provisions in the Finance Bill, it also received a substantial body of evidence on wider policy issues in respect of APD, including its impact on the regional economy and on provisions that are absent from the Finance Bill but which might have been included. In evidence collected by the Committee, there was general support for the proposal to devolve direct long-haul rates of duty, including optimism that this will open up long-haul route development opportunities for the North. However, many stakeholders argued in favour of fuller devolution of powers than

that contained in schedule 23 to the Finance Bill, in particular to cover domestic and short-haul rates, which comprise the vast majority of flights from the region. This was reflected in the comments of the chief executive of Belfast City Airport:

“The moves that have been made to date on air passenger duty have left 98% of that problem untouched.”

Although this issue is wider than the terms of the legislative consent motion before us, it is relevant to the debate in that it concerns provisions that are absent from the Finance Bill but which might have been included.

The Committee concluded that it had been presented with a strong case for reducing or abolishing APD rates on the 98.5% of flights from the North that fall into the domestic and short-haul band A as a measure to improve the region’s connectivity with Britain and other European states, with a view to boosting business and tourism and helping to rebalance the regional economy. While recognising that this will require rigorous cost-benefit analysis, the Committee also concluded that, given the Treasury’s insistence on the devolution of, rather than exemption from, APD and the determination of the British Government to retain APD as a revenue-raising measure, any future reduction in APD on band A flights from the North is likely to be achieved only through the further devolution of powers to also cover band A rates. The Department has advised the Committee that devolving APD rates for all flights from the North and setting a zero rate across all bands could cost the Executive around £60 million per annum. This is a figure that the Treasury has provided as an estimate of the duty that would be applicable from 2010-11. The Minister, however, has quoted a figure of up to £90 million, although DFP officials clarified, as did the Minister today, that that is based on estimated projections up to 2016-17.

I emphasise the Committee’s recommendation that a cost-benefit decision on the devolution of powers over band A rates should take account of the fact that the Executive will only incur a substantive cost if and when the devolved powers are used to reduce the band A rates. The estimated £60 million total cost would only apply if the Executive opted to set a zero rate across all the APD bands. Importantly, the Committee has also recommended that the

Executive take an evidence-based approach to reducing rates for particular bands, with the decisions taken on the basis of forecast return on investment.

The Committee has called on the Minister to propose that the Executive commission independent expert research into the business case for reducing or abolishing APD on band A flights departing from the North, which would inform the Executive’s consideration of whether or how wider devolved powers over APD should be exercised. That research should include an assessment of the opportunity costs of non action, rigorous economic modelling and forecasting of options and lessons from other EU states that have reduced or abolished APD, including examples where Governments have attached conditions to APD reductions to ensure resultant benefits for consumers and the wider economy. As part of that initiative, the Committee recommends that the Executive proceed with making a strategic decision on whether to press the British Government for the devolution of the wider APD powers at the earliest opportunity.

Given the time constraints that now arise, the Committee acknowledges that seeking to include the devolution of band A rates of APD in the provisions of the Finance Bill could risk losing the immediate opportunity for devolving direct long-haul rates of duty. Therefore, the Committee agreed to support the Minister in seeking the Assembly’s agreement that the provisions in clause 189 of and schedule 23 to the Finance Bill, as introduced in the House of Commons on 10 May 2012, dealing with the devolution of long-haul rates of air passenger duty, should be considered by the Westminster Parliament.

I commend the motion to the House.

Mr Girvan: I stand to speak in favour of the motion. This motion came about on the back of a crisis situation that occurred due to the potential loss of the Continental flight, which is our only north American route. Therefore, it was important that we moved quickly to get that forward. To get thus far, a lot of lobbying went on. I praise the Minister of Finance and Personnel, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the First Minister and the deputy First Minister for the efforts that they put in to ensuring that we could get the opportunity to devolve APD on our long-haul flights.

The case for how much it would cost the Northern Ireland economy has been well made. Let us be honest: if we were willing to take the hit and accept the major cost to the Northern Ireland block grant — the £60 million, £90 million or whatever figure it might be — the Exchequer would not have an issue with saying, “Go ahead. We’ll take that money off you.” We have to be sensible and make a judgement on the benefits.

The north American route is beneficial to the Northern Ireland economy. A lot of the other routes are, necessarily, outgoing and more geared towards people who are leaving Northern Ireland to go elsewhere as tourists and are, therefore, making their spend outside Northern Ireland, whereas the north American route has major business benefits to us, and it is important that we protect that.

In line with going through the process of debating the issue, the Committee has heard extensive evidence from those who are involved in the industry and those who feel that they can benefit from a reduction in APD on our long-haul routes. We can and we will achieve a great benefit by making a decision on that matter with minimal cost. The figure of £5 million has been alluded to in relation to this matter. We can far outweigh that with the benefits that can be levered in from the businesses attracted by that route. However, we can use this as another opportunity to attract additional routes into Northern Ireland and use it as a launch pad to the rest of GB. We should be attempting to attract other long-haul routes on that basis.

We are unique on the basis that other parts of the United Kingdom do not have to compete with an airport 100 miles down the road that is offering a reduced APD. On the basis of that, we have to ensure that our long-haul flights are competitive.

I congratulate the Minister on bringing this to the House. It is one of the good news stories. It is the Assembly reacting to what was a crisis situation, where we could have lost one of our major links and, therefore, put a nail into the coffin of our connection with North America. We now have the opportunity to attract additional routes for Northern Ireland to benefit from, so I support the motion.

4.00 pm

Mr Cree: I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in support of the legislative consent motion on air passenger duty. The Chairman referred to the amount of work undertaken by the Committee and evidence taken from a wide range of sources. I thank the Committee staff for their hard work.

The decision to protect our sole long-haul flight to the US was the right one, and it is right to complete this exercise by approving the motion. During the Committee’s work, however, much was learned that necessitates further discussion and action. Air passenger duty is, as several Members said, a regressive tax, which started out as an environmental tax but is now clearly a finance-raising choice for the Government in Westminster. The tax is harmful to business, consumers and the wider economy in Northern Ireland. Its application actually hinders the development of the economy, which is the Executive’s first priority. The EU emissions trading system, which was introduced in the UK last January, is a further environmental tax on airlines and is, arguably, a more practical method to tax aviation pollution costs. We do not need both.

The fact that the UK imposes higher duty than other parts of Europe is another major concern. Indeed, many countries have abolished APD-type duty. The rate of duty in the Irish Republic is €3 and may be abolished. Because we have a shared boundary with the Republic and it is a relatively short distance to Dublin Airport, that is sure to have a significant economic impact on air services in Northern Ireland. We need to address that important issue.

The Scottish Highlands and Islands are exempt from air passenger duty on flights departing from their airports. We are told that that was based on their low population density. We have the same peripherality problem, which is exacerbated by our greater density and the need for access to mainland Britain. Civil Aviation Authority statistics show that, on average, 17% of UK-departing flights are domestic services within the UK. In comparison, 75% of Northern Ireland passenger movements are on UK domestic services, demonstrating a much higher dependence on air travel.

The Consumer Council pointed out that England is to benefit from a £32.2 billion investment in a high-speed rail network that will further reduce

dependence on domestic air transport. It will also have wider economic benefits for those regions, but Northern Ireland will not share in those benefits. Indeed, it will be at a greater disadvantage because of its dependence on the air routes. That situation presents a strong case for exempting Northern Ireland from all air passenger duty on flights to and from Northern Ireland.

Tourism is an important part of our economy. The Federation of Small Businesses provided evidence that the current structures of APD are damaging to the UK's tourism industry. That was supported by several other groups. The Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau pointed out that Germany is the biggest source market in Europe for city breaks, yet we have no direct access to it. Canada is our largest VFR — I think that stands for “visiting friends and relations” — market after America, and, again, we have no direct access there. As the Member who has just spoken said, there is scope for cuts to air passenger duty on condition that airlines open up new routes.

The Committee has provided several conclusions and recommendations with the report. I am sure that the Minister will have read those. I recognise that our first objective is the devolution to Northern Ireland of air passenger duty on long-haul flights. I am pleased to support the Minister, and I ask the House to agree the motion.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the legislative consent motion on the devolution of air passenger duty that is before the House. The specific measure, which is part of the Finance Bill, will devolve to the Northern Ireland Assembly the power to set the rate of APD to be applied to direct long-haul flights that take off from Northern Ireland. I believe that those flights are designated as bands B, C and D. This was spurred by the need to ensure that the transatlantic flight from Belfast International Airport to Newark continued. That route was thought vital in maintaining the links between Northern Ireland and North America, especially in relation to the continued development of business and tourism.

As we have heard, powers over other aspects of APD will be retained by the Treasury. Under the Azores judgement, the devolution of any revenue-raising powers to the Assembly

inevitably brings with it a cost to the block grant that must be borne by the Executive. In this case, it is estimated that the cost is around £5 million, but we must set that against an estimated benefit in the region of £100 million from the United Continental service over seven years. Witnesses told the Committee that three new carriers with similar levels of passenger carriage would create £300 million to £400 million in extra revenue and generate thousands of jobs. So the measure creates potential that is well worth exploiting.

Unfortunately, we have missed the boat or, should I say, the plane in relation to the Emirates airline, which was looking at a flight from Belfast to Dubai but chose Dublin instead. No doubt, APD was a major consideration in that decision. Hopefully, it is not too late. There is a market out there, and this measure will help us to exploit that market to our fullest advantage. The further someone is from this island, the more irrelevant the point of entry becomes. If we can encourage people to fly to Belfast, the likelihood is greater that they will stay in this region and we will get the economic benefit from their stay in many ways. We need to get out there and begin the work of attracting more long-haul flights from more countries. We can look at the experiences of continental countries such as the Netherlands, Denmark and Belgium. They introduced APD schemes similar to what we have here, only to abandon them or to drastically reduce them, due to the impact that they had on inbound visitor numbers. So the lesson is clear.

The debate on the motion leads us to an examination of APD on shorter flights — the band A flights — which make up 98·5% of flights from Northern Ireland, compared with 17% in the UK. As other Members have mentioned, that clearly demonstrates our dependence on air travel. It was said earlier that the Highlands and Islands in Scotland have gained exemption from APD on the grounds of being a peripheral location with low population density. We do not qualify under the revised European rules in that respect, although Mr Cree has mentioned the fact that we still have a strong argument.

We are, of course, in direct competition with Dublin, and that has been mentioned on several occasions today. Dublin Airport is only an hour and a half down the road from both airports. The domestic APD rate here is around £13, compared with €3 in Dublin. Witnesses from the

two airports told us that a family of four from Newry, for instance, would pay £100 in taxes to fly from Belfast, compared with €12 to fly from Dublin, so it is clear where the advantage lies. If you add to that the prediction that rates will eventually double, it is clear that we may be at even greater disadvantage in the future. Although the rate at the moment may not be such as to encourage someone to drive to Dublin to fly to Birmingham, for example, that may not be the case in the future if increases happen at the proposed rate. Our main market for connections, by a huge margin, is the UK and Europe. We must remember that our main tourism and business markets are there.

As was said earlier, the cost to the block grant of removing APD on the shorter flights — the band A flights — would be much higher: around £60 million. Nonetheless, we believe that a proper cost-benefit analysis should be carried out to inform a business case on the transfer of the powers. Surely we should try to establish the financial facts rather than simply dismiss the idea out of hand. If we are to be as competitive as we can be, we need to have every implement in the economic tool chest at our disposal. It should be remembered that the transfer of powers gives us the opportunity to vary APD and that the £60 million per annum total cost would only apply if the Executive set the rate at zero across all bands.

There seems to be no definitive position on whether the transfer of the powers would need to be done through a change to the Northern Ireland Act or through a Finance Bill amendment, and we need clarity on that issue too. However, I believe that there is a legislative window towards the end of 2013 when, we hope, corporation tax powers will be transferred.

My party welcomes the measures contained in the legislative consent motion in relation to long-haul flights. We support the motion. We also believe that we should use this change to our fullest possible economic advantage, as outlined at page 21, paragraph 3 of the Committee's report. We fully support the other key conclusions and recommendations in the Committee's report. I join other Committee members and the Chair in thanking the Committee staff for the hard work that they have done in the preparation of the report and in assisting the Committee in its work on the issue. I urge Members to support the motion.

Mrs Cochrane: I, too, welcome the opportunity to speak to this legislative consent motion regarding provisions in the Finance Bill for the devolution of air passenger duty rates. I do not wish to simply restate what has already been said by the Members who spoke before me, so I will focus on a few key issues that have arisen during our Committee work.

Among the stakeholders with whom we engaged and met, there was palpable support for proposals to devolve direct long-haul rates of flight duty to Northern Ireland. There was a sustained sense of optimism that that could open up future long-haul route development opportunities in Northern Ireland.

Another issue that was raised was the fact that, due to our unique geographical position, we face stiff competition in aviation provision from our neighbours in the Republic of Ireland. Northern Ireland sits on a platform that is different from that of any other country of the United Kingdom due to its physical separation by sea from the rest of GB and its sharing a land border with another EU member state. With the rate of APD in the South already substantially lower than ours and further proposals to abolish it entirely, there is a very strong case for some form of mitigation of APD for Northern Ireland. That view is shared by the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee in Westminster.

Many representatives were keen to stress the significance of air travel to business and tourism in Northern Ireland. We have already seen an increase in tourism here this year as part of our landmark ni2012 celebrations. More than £300 million was invested in our tourism sector in anticipation of this year. If we wish to be serious about developing our long-term prospects and building on our successes, we must be proactive in adapting our air travel infrastructure to accommodate our goals. Our air travel sector has a proven track record of making sizeable contributions to our economy and employment market. The feeling on the ground is very much that a devolved decision to lower APD rates would undoubtedly attract new business and have an even greater impact on our economy.

The proposed devolution of APD rates for direct long-haul flights signifies a progressive step in addressing the uneven strain of APD currently levied on Northern Ireland. Although there remains work to be done by the Minister

of Finance and Personnel together with the Executive on developing a co-ordinated action plan to maximise the economic opportunities that may arise from such a change, in real terms, the foundation of any transformation is intrinsically reliant on our support for the measures proposed. It is on those grounds that I support the motion.

4.15 pm

Mr D McIlveen: I also support the legislative consent motion. I do so not so much in a financial capacity, but I do chair the all-party group on tourism, and I thought it worth making a contribution on that basis.

First, we commend the Finance Minister on the work that has gone into this. I know that he worked very hard with his colleagues the First Minister and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. I know that a considerable change of mindset from the Secretary of State was required and that that required a fair bit of negotiation and convincing. We have to pay tribute to the work that the Executive have done. What they have achieved and, by supporting the motion, what the Assembly will achieve is the saving of a critical air route between here and New York city in North America. A number of businesses have invested in Northern Ireland very much on the basis of that air route being in place. Therefore, it is to be greatly welcomed that the Assembly is taking clear and concise action to ensure that the route is preserved. Hopefully there will be opportunities for a widening of the network to include other long-haul destinations.

Like corporation tax, this gives us something that we can now sell to airlines. I see that Mr Bradley is no longer in the Chamber, but I would not take as pessimistic a view as he did when he said that we had lost out and there was little that we could do about it. The opportunities now are immense. It is only now that we should try to speak to airlines such as Etihad Airways and Emirates. We should make it very clear that Northern Ireland has a unique product to sell and try to encourage airlines — hopefully with the incentive of a reviewed air passenger duty rate — that this is a place that they should give very serious consideration to coming to. It would mean that we could compete much better with Dublin and the routes that it has to offer, and I certainly look forward to that challenge. I think that all Departments will step up to

the mark and ensure that we do not miss any opportunities when it comes to competing with our neighbour in the Republic of Ireland.

Another thing worth mentioning is that there is a certain uniqueness in having this in Northern Ireland. To the best of my knowledge, when passengers come into the United Kingdom from a number of destinations outside the European Union, they have to get a visa to do so. However, some indications are being given that, if flights were to come directly into Northern Ireland, a visa would not be required for inward travel in the rest of the UK. If passengers then wanted to go to the Republic of Ireland, they could do so as well. Therefore, there is a convenience issue that we can sell as a result of this matter being devolved to us.

I agree with my colleague Mr Girvan that we have to exercise a degree of caution over how far we take this. I know that the figure of £60 million to £90 million has been floated in relation to the cost if we were to extend this to short-haul routes. As an Assembly, we have to be careful about the message that we send out, because we have to accept that there are families who are struggling financially at the moment. There have been many debates on the cost of fuel and various essential household items. I do not begrudge people their flights to Ibiza, Majorca or wherever, but, if we were effectively to give a carte blanche ruling and extend the air passenger duty rate to short-haul flights, that sort of investment might send out a damaging message in the current financial climate, so I think that we have to exercise some caution.

This is a good news story, and we have to welcome it. However, we also have to treat it with a degree of caution. Our view is that air passenger duty as a whole is regressive, and, in a utopian financial world, we would like to see it completely dismissed, especially in Northern Ireland. That is because the costliness of travelling by sea, which is our alternative, particularly for getting to the United Kingdom, means that we need air routes much more.

I just wanted to add those few thoughts. I commend the motion to the House, and I hope that every party will unite around it as they did with corporation tax.

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

Trade and Investment considered papers from the Finance and Personnel Committee on the motion and is convinced that there is an overwhelming case for the transfer of the duty to Stormont.

The Committee was also impressed by the various arguments that have been rehearsed here today, including the argument that we have the highest rate in Europe and that there is heavy reliance on air links to access Britain and other markets for business and tourism travellers and so on. However, the Committee focused on the need to stimulate foreign direct investment, and the link between here and Newark is, of course, very important. That North American linkage is vital in having a direct long-haul route to attract investors from North America to Northern Ireland. So, on that basis, the Committee was supportive of this move.

The Committee also heard evidence from Almac Ltd informing it that the company had expanded its business to the United States, resulting in company representatives travelling back and forth on a weekly basis. That highlights the need to retain a strong link both for foreign direct investment companies maintaining a direct linkage with their home base and for indigenous companies expanding their business links to particular export markets in the United States and further afield in North America. That, together with the recent visit by the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to Asia, underpins the need to be able to attract flights from the growing markets in Asia if FDI is to be drawn from those regions. They are important areas for potential future investment. I deeply regret that we missed out on Emirates. That is and should be a sore point for all of us. I think that the duty was a significant factor in the decision to go to Dublin.

I would like to conclude on that note. I congratulate the Minister for his application to the issue and for successfully winning the Treasury's support. It is a very difficult thing to do, and I do not know how he worked it. Perhaps the extreme situation that we were in worked wonders with the Treasury.

Mr Wilson: I am pleased that we had an informed debate and that we had such unanimity around the Chamber on this matter. We did not have the dissenting voice of the

Green Party, which was obviously outside enjoying the benefits of global warming.

I was just thinking during the debate what would have been said had we had a discussion on air passenger duty four or five years ago, when I was in another post and was being criticised for holding certain views. This duty — Mr Cree mentioned this in his speech; he was the only one to do so — started as an environmental tax, designed to deal with an urgent environmental issue and to stop people travelling in aeroplanes because of the emissions. It was welcomed, not just on the fringes by the Green Party but even within mainstream parties. Indeed, I remember that, at times in the Assembly, Members spoke about the need to change economic behaviour and the way we behaved and how we had to have those burdens imposed on us.

All these things have serious economic consequences. Air passenger duty — Members from all parties have recognised this today — was designed and specifically mentioned as a way of cutting down on air miles and the number of air journeys being taken. Ministers at one time boasted that cheap holidays to Spain, France and elsewhere in the world would have to stop if we were going to save the world and that this was a way of doing it. All Members have acknowledged today that it has had a detrimental impact on our economy. Indeed, the United Kingdom is losing out because of the decision not to increase capacity at the hub airport, Heathrow, which is an equally important issue for people from Northern Ireland and one that makes air transport more expensive.

A number of Members have congratulated the Executive on the action that was taken. We grasped at a very early stage the impact that the duty would have, especially on the direct-haul flight to North America. That direct long-haul flight had important business consequences, and, indeed, a number of Members mentioned the importance of direct-haul flights. The Chairman of the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee spelt out the detailed work that the Committee has done. There is absolutely no doubt that direct long-haul flights open up markets, and, wherever flights are opened up, trade with that region increases dramatically, both in and out, and opens up immense opportunities.

It was identified at an early stage that the duty would have severe impacts on the work that Arlene Foster was doing. She was looking to North America for investment and seeking to grow the current batch of firms operating in Northern Ireland that appreciated the fact that their managing directors and technicians and whatnot could fly in directly to Northern Ireland. This duty was going to have a severely limiting impact on the investment strategy. No one Minister can take credit for this; let me say that. The First and deputy First Minister, the Enterprise Minister and I all pressed the issue, and there was tireless work by officials in my Department and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

I have got to say that, when it came close to the time when panic buttons were being pressed all over the place, work was being done by Hugo Swire. I was just reflecting on it before I came to the Chamber. It was a day like this, this time last year. We met Hugo Swire in the middle of the holidays, down at Stormont House. We sat out on the patio and had a nice cup of tea, and we emphasised to him that we needed this message to get through. We told him that we could not emphasise enough the message that had to go to the Treasury. The First Minister has referred to this on a number of occasions. Despite opposition from Treasury officials, who still seemed to think that there was plenty of time on this, the Chancellor himself intervened and took this decision. That was after numerous calls to him emphasising the importance of the issue.

It shows that, sometimes, in these matters you need to have built up a political rapport so that you can get decisions made. People say that the Westminster Government are not responsive to the needs of the regions. I have to say that, at times, it is frustrating, but I can think of a number of occasions when there have been positive responses at Treasury level, and those responses have been for the good of Northern Ireland. This is one such occasion. No individual Minister or Department can take credit for this. A concerted effort was made, and it is a good example of the energy of Ministers in this local Assembly and of officials in Departments and the contacts that they have made actually paying off.

4.30 pm

Mr Bradley made the point that, unfortunately, it came too late for the Emirates decision.

However, I do not think that is the end of that story. Airlines will always look for opportunities, and Arlene Foster will tirelessly search those out. The north American connection is important, as are connections to other parts of the world, especially where there are growing economies. We probably have to look beyond Europe to the growing economies that are further away and try to get direct long-haul flights to those places so that we can build up a base in areas where there is greater economic potential. Therefore, I am not totally downhearted, but it would have been very beneficial if we had had that power available or if we had had the decision to reduce the rate before that decision was made by Emirates.

Other Members, including the Committee Chairman, made the point about the wider devolution of air passenger duty, and I know the Committee's view on the matter. Mr Girvan and Mr McIlveen outlined very well some of the dangers in simply saying that we should devolve air passenger duty totally to Northern Ireland and cut the rate for all flights to zero. First, it is costly; secondly, it cannot be done quickly, and we needed a quick decision on the issue. However, even if we said now that we should build on the current devolution and look for wider devolution, we would have to bear in mind that although it would benefit the pockets of individual families, many flights that we would cut air passenger duty on would not have any direct benefit to the Northern Ireland economy. It would benefit individuals by making it cheaper for them to go on holiday or to fly out to their apartments in other parts of Europe at Easter, summer and Christmas time. However, we would be taking money from public services in Northern Ireland to reduce air passenger duty for economically non-productive flights, and I am not sure that that would be a good use of the resources that are available to us.

As I said, the Executive have taken the position that air passenger duty is a bad tax, but it would be wrong for us to ask for that power to be devolved to us so that we could ameliorate the impact of a bad tax. It is an issue that the United Kingdom Government should be dealing with in the longer run. Having listened to debates on this issue in the House of Commons, I can tell you that there is a growing awareness that this level of taxation for a spurious environmental reason is not finding acceptance with an increasing number of Members in the House of Commons.

In conclusion, as far as the process is concerned now, we will await Royal Assent of the Finance Bill. Then, I will present a Bill to the Assembly to bring the air passenger duty rate down to zero. That should become effective by the end of the year or the beginning of the next financial year. Hopefully, on that basis, we will have yet another weapon in our armoury when it comes to seeking investment into Northern Ireland and increasing flights to Northern Ireland.

I welcome the fact that there has been unanimous support. I thank the members on the two Committees — Enterprise, Trade and Investment and Finance and Personnel — for their work. I look forward to the next stage when the Bill will be brought forward in September, as that will enable us to give effect to the changes that are contained in the Finance Bill at Westminster.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly agrees that the provisions in clause 189 of and schedule 23 to the Finance Bill, as introduced in the House of Commons on 10 May 2012, dealing with the devolution of Northern Ireland long-haul rates of air passenger duty should be considered by the UK Parliament.

Committee Business

Fuel Poverty

Mr 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 shall have five minutes.

Mr A Maskey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development): I beg to move

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee for Social Development on fuel poverty; and calls on the Minister for Social Development to implement its recommendations to ensure a strategic, cross-departmental and cross-sectoral approach is adopted to reduce and prevent fuel poverty.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Today's motion fits, coincidentally, with a Fuel Poverty Coalition event that is under way in the Long Gallery. Therefore, I propose to introduce and speak to the motion and then Mickey Brady, the Deputy Chair, will make the winding-up speech on behalf of the Committee. I thank him for doing that.

I thank all the Committee members for the work that they engaged in to arrive at this report. I have a very special word of gratitude for the officials, Kevin Pelan and others, who worked very hard to have the report prepared; the Department; the Minister; the other Departments; the stakeholders and all those who contributed to the work involved, particularly the fuel poverty event that we held in the Long Gallery some time ago, which enabled us to produce this comprehensive report. Those Members who have had a chance to look at it, or will do so after the debate, will understand that it is an accurate reflection of the discussions that were held between the Department and the stakeholders. We are trying to move it forward to the next stage, which will, obviously, be action-driven and -orientated.

Simply put, the definition of fuel poverty is any household that spends more than 10% of its income on fuel to maintain an adequate level of warmth in the home. In 2011, the Department for Social Development (DSD) brought out the report, 'Defining Fuel Poverty in Northern Ireland', which produced a different method

for considering fuel poverty rates based on households spending roughly twice the median — in other words, 20% of their household income — on fuel as opposed to 10%. However, the report also concluded that the 10% threshold would continue to be used and that the 20% threshold could be used to identify those in severe fuel poverty. Therefore, for the purposes of this report and the work of the Committee, we will retain the use of the original definition of fuel poverty at the rate of 10% of a household's income.

Members will be aware that the Committee's report is based on a fuel poverty event hosted by the Social Development Committee and supported, I am glad to say, by the Chairs of all the other relevant Committees. Eight Committees in the Assembly have some scrutiny role in respect of their governing Departments. All the Departments represented on the then interdepartmental group on fuel poverty also attended, as did over 30 stakeholders from the public and private sectors. We all recognised that it was a truly collaborative event, with a focus on identifying solutions to fuel poverty.

I hope that Members and the Minister will recognise that that spirit of collaboration is maintained in the report and the recommendations therein. Indeed, with the support of the Committee, I met the permanent secretary of the Department several months ago to discuss some of the key recommendations of the report and to consider a positive and co-operative way forward.

The report is not about confronting the Department for Social Development or any other Department about the shortcomings, perceived or real, in the approach to fuel poverty; the issue is too big to attempt any point scoring. Rather, it is about making recommendations to complement the Department's approach. I will deal with some of the detail of that in due course.

I think that it would be worthwhile to set the problem in context. The Department of Energy and Climate Change's (DECC) 'Annual report on Fuel Poverty Statistics 2011' states that in the year of estimate, which was 2009, England, Wales, Scotland and the North had fuel poverty rates of 18%, 26%, 33% and 44% respectively. Although a different methodology is used to calculate the rate in the rest of Ireland, the figure there is around 19%. Thirteen per cent of households in the North are also in severe

fuel poverty. That equates to some 75,000 households that are spending at least 20% of their income on energy bills. So, regrettably, we are at the top of the fuel poverty league on these islands. That is not something we can tolerate or be proud of.

We asked why the problem is so bad here. As the Committee report notes, fuel poverty is caused by the interaction of high fuel prices, low income and poor energy efficiency in homes. The Office of Fair Trading (OFT) report 'Off-Grid Energy', which was published some time ago, noted that the markets in England, Scotland and Wales are very similar, with between 12% and 25% of households off-grid — in other words, not connected to the mains gas grid — and with heating oil and electricity being the main fuels used. However, here in the North, 80% of people are off-grid and around 80% of them are using home heating oil. Over the past number of years, all of us have seen the price of gas, oil and electricity increase quite dramatically. Indeed, around 90% of the variation in the price of heating oil over time is explained by movements in the price of crude oil. At the same time, we all know that there has been no comparable increase in wages or benefits. So, it is inevitable that fuel costs will increasingly put a considerable strain on household budgets.

The cost of heating a home accounts for a far bigger proportion of total income for those on benefits or low wages. In an era of wage cuts or freezes, and with benefits likely to come under pressure as a result of welfare reform, together with increasing fuel prices, it is self-evident that affordability will increasingly become a greater issue for those affected. As we have often heard before, that can often leave people having to decide between eating and heating. The Department's plans for tackling poverty, in association with other Departments, are extremely important in that regard. Ultimately, providing opportunities for employment is key to lifting people out of poverty as a whole.

The final element is poor energy efficiency in homes. That is largely due to an older housing stock in the North. I recognise the work that the Housing Executive and the Department are doing to address that through the warm homes scheme, the insulation of 9,000 homes a year for the next three years and the target of providing double glazing for all Housing Executive homes, all of which is very welcome. The recently announced £12 million allocation

to the boiler replacement scheme to improve energy efficiency in 16,000 homes is also very welcome. Although the causes of fuel poverty are, at one level, simple to understand, I think we all realise that there are no simple or quick-fix solutions. Technical solutions are, of course, one — but only one — part of the answer. That is also at the heart of the Committee's report: recognition that the interaction of those three key causes results in a complex problem requiring a strategic, cross-sectoral and cross-departmental approach.

The nature of the report may come as a bit of a surprise to some people because it does not demand that the Minister set any specific targets to reduce fuel poverty. The reliance on oil, coupled with the vagaries of global oil prices, may make such targets meaningless or at least difficult to achieve. Nor does the report call on the Minister to implement specific actions in order to implement the solutions that were proposed by stakeholders at the event we held and that are listed in our report. In many respects, it would have been easy for the Committee to produce a report that did precisely that: a populist report that is warmly welcomed — no pun intended — easily understood and, of course, just as easily forgotten. The Committee agrees that because of the nature of the problem, that type of report would add little to the argument and certainly would not provide many solutions.

Furthermore, there was a considerable debate at the event over the solutions that needed to be implemented and how they should be implemented. Calling on the Minister to implement certain proposed solutions was, to our thinking, not necessarily an appropriate next step.

4.45 pm

We feel that there was much more work to be done to analyse what was a priority, what was achievable and what would eventually be value for money. The Committee focused on the mechanisms by which stakeholders could further engage formally with the relevant Departments to objectively consider which of the solutions that have been identified are practicable, cost-effective and, indeed, a priority. In many ways, the report, therefore, lays down as big a challenge to stakeholders as to the Departments. It does not let anyone off the hook on the issue.

The main purpose of the report is to do two things. First, it is to continue to highlight the need for radical action to tackle fuel poverty as it affects those who we represent, but it also provides a mechanism for doing that, and I want to deal with that in a moment or two. Although the report is not prescriptive about what it wants the Department to do, we are very conscious in the first instance that the Department and the Minister for Social Development have a lead responsibility within the Executive.

The mandate from 2007 states:

“DSD has the lead responsibility for tackling fuel poverty, a role which involves the coordination of information, engagement with departments and other organisations that influence the factors which contribute to fuel poverty and more directly, through the provision of funding for and oversight of the Warm Homes Scheme.”

That has recently been updated with the fuel poverty strategy:

“other departments also have a significant role to play in the eradication of fuel poverty. There are clear links to other government strategies including the Northern Ireland Strategic Energy Framework, the Green New Deal, the Sustainable Energy Initiative, and the forthcoming new Child Poverty Strategy. Closer working, not only between government departments, but between government and the private and voluntary sectors is vital. There is a strong body of evidence that partnership working is the best way to tackle fuel poverty. We will work with other government departments, the voluntary sector, the energy sector and others who are committed to alleviating fuel poverty.”

That is the mandate that our Department works under, and our role as a Committee is to ensure that we are holding the Department to account for that, but also working collaboratively with the Department to develop those policies within the Department's bailiwick, but also, crucially, with all the other relevant Departments. As I said earlier, eight Departments here have some contributory role to play in tackling fuel poverty. What we are trying to do is to work with the Department for Social Development and the Minister, building on their commitment and their responsibilities in the Programme for Government, but also, crucially, to work with all the other Departments to make sure that we get it right in a timely fashion.

A central idea in our report is the establishment of what we call thematic action groups, or TAGS, as they have been referred to. Those groups

would be based on the themes identified as a result of the discussion at the fuel poverty event and would be convened under the umbrella of the relevant Departments. Those groups would discuss or tease out specific proposed solutions, as outlined in the report. They would determine which solutions are achievable based on evidence and make recommendations to the recently established cross-sectoral fuel poverty partnership on initiatives that they recommend for implementation. The work of those thematic groups would be time-bound and would not exceed six months.

I acknowledge that the cross-sectoral fuel poverty partnership has only recently been established and has met on only a few occasions. In recognition of that, the report recommends that the Department revisit the partnership to bring senior decision-makers into its membership, to include the chairs of the proposed thematic action groups, and perhaps to be chaired by the Minister for Social Development himself.

A number of the stakeholders favoured the establishment of a ministerial task force, as they had concerns that the then interdepartmental group on fuel poverty, despite the best intentions, had perhaps been ineffective. That is what was said by others who were involved in that work previously. There are lingering concerns among stakeholders that the current partnership is perhaps a rebranding of that previous group. To address that, the Committee's proposals add to that mechanism by being more inclusive, favouring the bottom-up approach that puts the onus on stakeholders and officials to work together, and which challenges their own views on the way forward. Importantly, the work of the thematic action groups is also time-bound.

I would also like to allay any fears that the work of the thematic groups or the cross-sectoral fuel poverty partnership will be a duplication of some sort. Rather, the Committee sees the work of the partnership as co-ordinating a strategic approach to the implementation of initiatives arising from the work of the thematic groups and monitoring progress on that implementation. As I said earlier, the work of those groups also lays a challenge to the potential production of a wish list.

We cannot waste any more time talking. We need to take strong action to determine

practical solutions to the problems that we all face as a result of fuel poverty. I say that not to criticise the wide range of solutions that were proposed to the Committee but to acknowledge that it is clear that further scrutiny is required on the basis of evidence to distil these proposals into what can be achieved. That will also challenge preconceived ideas and even prejudices, but, ultimately, I believe that it will help to bring clarity and objectivity to the way forward and will underpin the work of those whose aim is to end fuel poverty.

I would like to say a few words about the importance of a cross-sectoral, cross-departmental approach. Numerous times in this Chamber and, I am sure, in each of the Statutory Committees, we have heard calls for more joined-up government. We have also heard questions asking why there is not more cross-departmental working and whether the left hand knows what the right hand is doing. We have made those sorts of comments ourselves, and, to a large extent, they are justified. However, we in the Statutory Committees run the risk of being the pot that calls the kettle black.

The Committee's fuel poverty event in some ways highlighted that Committees can work more directly together. Eight Statutory Committees were represented on the evening, and the Chairs of all those Committees took an active part by hosting a table of stakeholders and by chairing discussions. That sent out a very important message about building political momentum to address fuel poverty across all parties and Departments. It also sent a more general message about being open to new ways of cross-Committee working to harness that political weight to address other issues of concern.

In other words, the Assembly has to take its responsibility firmly. It is not enough for us to say that Departments need to work together; the Assembly also has that responsibility. Each scrutiny Committee has the very important role of scrutinising its Department, but Committees also have a responsibility to work together co-operatively. I think that that will prove beneficial to all of us in the end. It is easy to say that given that DSD takes the lead, fuel poverty is its problem. I am sure that the Minister will agree that pressure must be put on each of the other relevant Departments via our respective Committees to ensure that strategic and co-ordinated action is taken on fuel poverty.

The Committee's report is not an end point —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will you bring your remarks to a close, please?

Mr A Maskey: I will, a LeasCheann Comhairle. This report is not an end point in the debate on fuel poverty; quite the opposite. It marks the beginning of a different approach in the Assembly, one that I believe will ultimately converge with the Department's.

Ms P Bradley: I also praise all those who are responsible for producing the report. Fuel poverty is not just a case of people being a little bit cold in the depths of winter. Certainly, the recent warm weather means that it can be difficult to think just how the many people in Northern Ireland who live in fuel poverty might feel, but fuel poverty is a reality in this country.

Fuel poverty means that some of the most vulnerable members of our community, such as those on a fixed or low income, the very old and the very young, are living in cold, damp environments. We know that those are the conditions that encourage certain bacteria to grow and multiply. The Surgeon General has already indicated the scale of the problem by highlighting that, in the past decade, over 1,000 deaths have occurred as a direct consequence of people living in fuel poverty. For me, one death caused by fuel poverty is one too many. Therefore, not addressing this issue, as highlighted in the report, is not an option. It is important to identify why cross-departmental working is vital in the development of an effective strategy for addressing fuel poverty.

At a basic level, we cannot afford to have people living in conditions that can have many outcomes. At a higher level, we know that fuel poverty impacts on many areas of people's lives, from health to education to the ability to work. For example, living in such conditions is known to cause illness, which in turn means that financial resources in our National Health Service are utilised to treat such conditions in the community and in our hospitals. If we tackled fuel poverty effectively, that money could be diverted to other areas of the NHS.

We ask people daily to take responsibility for their health. Therefore, we have a duty to ensure that we are maximising every opportunity that we have to reduce the impact of fuel poverty on the most vulnerable. Fuel poverty can also impact on educational outcomes. At a basic

level, children may be unable to attend school because of ill health caused by living in cold, damp conditions. It may be difficult to wash and dry uniforms. The money that a family needs to spend on heat, light and fuel will impact on the money that is available for a child to access a good diet, as well as extra-curricular activities. Finally, fuel poverty has most impact in the dark, cold winter months, when there might not be money in households to have light and heat. That could, of course, lead to low educational attainment.

As the Chair said, no one Department can address the many complex issues that contribute to 44% of our households experiencing some form of fuel poverty. Indeed, some issues may be outside the scope and remit of any Department. I welcome the work that the Minister has already done in ensuring maximum benefit uptake through the use of publicity in local media and the availability of services, such as the benefit checker, which people can access and which can go some way to addressing fuel poverty in Northern Ireland.

Working together, we can, hopefully, ensure that no person should have to choose between heat and food and that we protect the most vulnerable in our society. I support the motion.

Mr Copeland: I, too, support the motion. Looking at the weather outside and thinking back to the cold of last winter, it is almost impossible to conceive that we are living in the same climate. It is not easy, in the glow of summer, to remember those who are, in many cases, less fortunate and for whom the winter brings a complex and different set of difficulties.

I believe, and am justified in believing, that the Social Development Committee displayed a good deal of courage in seeking opinions from those who know about this particular difficulty in the format in which it did in the Great Hall. Bringing people with an agenda, which many of them had, to a room and asking them what they think and how their thoughts can be applied to the solution of a problem sometimes does not lead to anything that could be described as a good outcome. I was present at the event; I have been present at, I think, all the Social Development Committee meetings at which this has been discussed. It has been a worthwhile exercise. The result of that exercise has been what can only be described as a well-researched, well-conducted report. I join

the Chair of the Committee in paying tribute to, initially, the members of the Committee and, in particular, the Assembly staff who service the Committee. This represents something that I am personally very keen on: an outcome. Outcomes are something that processes do not always result in, but this particular process has.

We are all in agreement about the effects of fuel poverty. We all concur that they can be devastating, and disproportionately devastating to those on low incomes, particularly the old. Last Wednesday, with junior Minister Bell and Mickey Brady — I got it right on this occasion — I attended the Pensioners Parliament. I have been in some bear pits and some cockpits in my life, but let me tell you this: the pensioners of this Province are not to be trifled with. They have opinions; their opinions are well founded and based on life experiences. Woe betide anybody who thinks they are going to bluff them. One of their repeated concerns was the inordinately high cost and very serious difficulties of matching, on a fixed income, energy prices that are accelerating at the speed at which they are. A study from Age UK revealed that two million elderly people in the United Kingdom are so desperately cold in the depths of winter that they are going to bed when they are not tired. I can only assume that Northern Ireland will have a disproportionately large share of those two million people. A similar number, another two million people, have moved into one room in an attempt to keep their energy bills down.

It is clear to the Committee that to deal with this complex issue, a gap must be bridged between the solution and the formulation and implementation of a long-term strategy.

Mr Flanagan: I will just take the Member back to the point he raised about the Pensioners Parliament. I note with some interest that, in comments he made following that, he said that what we need is more regulation of the home heating oil industry. Will the Member clarify whether his party position has changed once again and he now supports some regulation of the home heating oil industry?

5.00 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Copeland: Thank you very much, sir. I rather suspect that, on this occasion, I will not need the extra minute, but we will see.

Elements of the home heating oil industry require a degree of examination. I have run out of oil on a number of occasions and I have gone to my local garage and purchased the blue barrels, which seem to be inordinately expensive. Trying to regulate an industry that has so many distributors is tantamount to impossible. I have never been one for taking on the impossible; the difficult I do practically every day, but the impossible takes a little bit longer. I imagine that we would have difficulty in doing it, but I take the Member's point and thank him for the 26 seconds that I gained through the venture.

I struggle sometimes with what we say in here and what happens outside. It could be the fact that I was not here for four years. On occasions, we dedicate ourselves to a debate or topic and we speak on it and think that we do a good job. Then you go back to your constituency, and somebody who really knows something pokes you in the chest and says, "Aye, that's all right, but what are you going to do about it?" There are so many times when we can do nothing. Northern Ireland cannot control the world price of oil. We cannot reduce overnight the number of households that are dependent on fuel oil as a method of heating. We cannot tackle the cartels that control the price of energy, because they are bigger than most Governments. On this occasion, we have at least taken a step in conjunction with one another. I believe —

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

Mr Copeland: I was wrong about the minute, then. I support the motion. Thank you for your time and attention.

Mr Durkan: I, too, support the motion. I welcome the publication of the report on fuel poverty and thank the officials who have worked diligently on its compilation. A lot of the detail in the report would already be known to many of us as public representatives. Fuel poverty is one of the single biggest issues affecting our constituents. However, it is positive that the information has been compiled and crystallised in the report that we see today. It provides us with a good springboard from which to move forward and try to bring about real, tangible benefits to the people of Northern Ireland.

The strength of the document lies in its cross-departmental and cross-cutting nature. I have said before in the Chamber that the depressingly high rate of fuel poverty here —

44% of households was the figure that the Chair used earlier — is compounded by the fact that our approach to tackling it has, to date, been quite fragmented. Steps are being taken to address that, and that is to be commended. I am quite heartened by the fact that there are targets set around the timelines for the establishment of the thematic action groups and their work. The key word in that regard is “action”. We will be judged on our actions, so it is imperative that the guidelines are adhered to and that various Departments are held to their commitments in the report.

I fear that, with continued cuts to benefits and limited employment opportunities, fuel poverty will affect more people this year than ever before. Last week, we debated underoccupancy, which will lead to social housing tenants losing, on average, £690 a year. The impact of that is certain to be felt come the winter. We need to look at fuel poverty in the context of welfare reform, and I speculate that we should provide for bigger numbers as a result.

I acknowledge that maximising benefit uptake is an issue for consideration by the thematic action groups. That should be encouraged and supported. Another area for consideration is whether winter fuel payments could be credited to household bills rather than paid in cash. We would certainly be supportive of such an initiative. We should also support oil saving-stamps and innovative credit union initiatives as well as encouraging energy brokerage schemes.

Those are simple measures that are well within our gift to implement and we can get quick wins here, to the benefit of our citizens. Improving the energy efficiency of our homes is the most sustainable means of reducing and tackling fuel poverty, and we want the social investment fund to be targeted towards that.

I support the motion and look forward to the outworking of the report.

Mrs Cochrane: I, too, welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion today. As a member of the Social Development Committee, I am pleased that our report on fuel poverty has now been published, and I believe that the recommendations should be implemented.

Northern Ireland has the highest rate of fuel poverty in northern Europe. Therefore, DSD really needs to take the lead and work in collaboration with other Departments to tackle

fuel poverty here once and for all. Fuel poverty has been on the increase in Northern Ireland since 2006, with 61% of older people and 83% of lone older people living in fuel poverty here. The sub-zero temperatures in 2010 brought the issue to the forefront, when we saw how the health of our most vulnerable was at risk when many had to choose between heating and eating. With welfare reform on the way, we must seriously consider the likely changes to household incomes that could push more people into fuel poverty.

Members have already mentioned many of the recommendations in the report, and I will highlight some in particular. Recommendation 35 states that a discussion needs to take place as to whether the winter fuel payment should be paid as a credit to a household’s electricity, gas or oil supplier as opposed to being paid as a cash sum. Like my colleague Mr Durkan, I recommend that that be considered, as pressure can often be felt, particularly by older people, around Christmas time when they may instead use the payment for gifts when, really, they need to take care of themselves and keep their house warm.

The report also recognises that the eradication of fuel poverty is unlikely to be achieved without the adoption of a long-term strategy. Given the likelihood that fuel prices will continue to rise, we must seek to protect those with the lowest incomes by promoting benefit checks, encouraging energy efficiency in the home and helping people to budget for their fuel payments. Recommendation 36 relates to those issues and states that the advice sector has a significant role to play, not only to educate and encourage people to make their homes more energy efficient or to have their boiler serviced regularly but to work with the various energy suppliers to ensure that the advice given to consumers is accurate and consistent and is not just marketing for a particular supplier.

Of the half a million homes using oil, around 400,000 have old, inefficient boilers, and while I am glad that money has been awarded to the Housing Executive to improve energy efficiency through the boiler replacement scheme, I am disappointed that it appears that that money has been taken from funds that were earmarked for the green new deal. That decision locks us into a reliance on fossil fuels, and that needs to be addressed. With global energy prices continuing to rise, we need to enable people

to use less energy through energy efficiency measures as well as moving to sustainable energy sources such as those proposed in the green new deal.

How can we help people to pay for their fuel? It is clear that many households using oil have no option but to buy it in small amounts, resulting in them paying substantially more per litre than those who can afford to fill their tank in one go. I recently went to see Carillion's pilot pay-as-you-go oil scheme in action, and I encourage the Minister to establish a procurement process for a contract to deliver a similar pay-as-you-go oil scheme to assist those who simply cannot afford to pay large lump sums for oil in one go.

In conclusion, although I believe that DSD has the main role, all other Departments have a supportive role, as demonstrated in the departmental responses in the report. I support the establishment of the thematic action groups, which can take forward the various themes and focus on how other Departments can take practical steps to reduce and remove fuel poverty. I support the motion and look forward to the implementation of the fuel poverty report's recommendations.

Mr Easton: Fuel poverty is an issue that has long been known about in our society. It occurs when a household needs to spend more than 10% of its disposable income to gain adequate warmth. That warmth is not just important for the inhabitants but to ensure that other conditions, such as damp, are not allowed to take hold.

It is noted that 44% of households are experiencing fuel poverty, which is almost half of households in Northern Ireland. A core group of about 13% of households are in extreme fuel poverty, and that is approximately 75,000 households.

Fuel poverty is not just a matter of heating. Not having enough heat can impact negatively on health outcomes, especially for already vulnerable groups of people who have underlying health problems. The Surgeon General's report indicates that 1,890 winter deaths over the past decade are directly attributed to people living in damp and cold conditions. In particular, our older generations are at risk. They often have static income sources with low interest rates that do not give them high enough returns on their savings, which means that as fuel prices rise, they have to spend more of their

disposable income on it. It is important to remember as well that we are not just talking about heating a home but about fuel for cooking. This can restrict diets, which, again, can have negative impacts on health outcomes. The importance of diet has long been known in relation to positive educational outcomes for younger generations.

Tackling fuel poverty is an extremely complex issue that cannot be addressed by sticking plasters or quick fixes. Those who are directly involved in working to reduce fuel poverty long lamented the lack of a joined-up approach. There are three broad areas that can be seen to be at the root of fuel poverty, the first being the cost of fuel to the household. We are extremely constrained in what we can do about this issue, as prices are set on global markets. However, we have the potential to explore ways in which we can help people to manage their resources and budget for the cost of heating.

Secondly, low income contributes to fuel poverty. This has the potential to become a more influencing factor as the welfare reforms come into place. I welcome the measures that the Minister has already introduced to ensure that everyone is getting the correct benefits at the correct rate and the availability of a simple-to-use online benefit checker that everyone can access and use to ensure that they get their full entitlement.

Finally, energy efficiency is vital. We should encourage households to ensure that their heat remains in their homes. The benefits of house insulation programmes are best seen through the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's (DARD) rural antipoverty and social inclusion programme, which, over a three-year period, provided insulation or the installation of central heating systems in rural communities. Indeed, the Minister for Social Development recently announced the boiler replacement scheme, which is to be welcomed.

We have to be conscious that certain groups of people are more at risk of fuel poverty, and we must strive, through the strategy, to use innovative ways to reach these people. Rural dwellers, for example, have their own unique vulnerabilities when it comes to the rising cost of fuel, and they are often extremely limited in their choice of fuel and do not have access to cheaper alternatives. They also tend to be very reliant on their vehicles, in which they may

put fuel rather than heat their home. DARD's programme has gone some way to address this, but we need a cross-departmental and cross-sectoral approach so that we can effectively address issues around fuel poverty and help to prevent households from entering the fuel poverty trap.

In conclusion, I thank the Clerk of the Committee for Social Development and his staff for their hard work on the report. Hopefully, it will go a long way towards helping the most vulnerable in society to get away from the fuel poverty trap.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I pay tribute to the members of the Committee for Social Development for the work that they have done to bring the report forward. I am not a member of the Committee, but as my party's energy spokesperson, I take a keen interest in it.

The long-term solution to fuel poverty, and one that fulfils the aims of reducing carbon emissions, is to increase significantly the energy efficiency of fuel-poor households. We need to take a three-pronged approach to this issue. First, we need to improve the energy performance of domestic properties. Secondly, we need to encourage behavioural change that requires education on issues of consumption patterns and transparent building formats. Thirdly, we need to provide the most vulnerable households with energy-related benefits.

Fuel poverty in the North of Ireland is at record levels, disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable people in our society. Any energy policy that we introduce must seek to make provision and place protections for consumers in such a situation. It is clear that the Department for Social Development needs to play a key role in the fight against fuel poverty. However, with energy policy currently sitting with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, which also has a role in growing the economy and in supporting our business community, it is hard to merely accept that fuel poverty is given the urgent priority that it requires if we are to eliminate it from our society.

Fuel-poor households must be given the resources to reduce their energy demand through increased energy efficiency measures. Home heating must be achievable at an affordable cost. It is, therefore, very difficult to understand how the scrapping of the green

new deal scheme and moving ahead with a boiler replacement scheme fits in with that aim. Although the boiler replacement scheme will improve the efficiency of many boilers and can be used as a method of moving people from oil to gas, the potential success of the green new deal has been set aside, primarily because it appeared to be too radical for the Minister and some of his civil servants.

5.15 pm

The eradication of fuel poverty can be achieved if the key stakeholders involved engage effectively together. This is not an either/or situation, and it is within the ability of the energy regulator, government, consumer advocacy groups and the energy companies to deliver on that aim together.

Delivering affordable warmth through investment in heating and insulation programmes meets environmental and social objectives. As energy prices continue to rise, fuel poverty can only be tackled by increasing our focus on the energy efficiency and the energy costs of those in fuel poverty, especially low-income, vulnerable householders. The long-term solution to fuel poverty and one that supports the objective of reducing carbon emissions is to increase dramatically the energy efficiency of fuel-poor households.

Although the current sustainable energy interdepartmental working group is a good start, progress to date has been slow. What we need is closer working between the Department of the Environment, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Department for Regional Development to deliver the needed energy infrastructure that will protect domestic and commercial consumers. Furthermore, departmental working needs to be evident in the delivery of zero-carbon public housing and government buildings. The Department of Finance and Personnel, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Department for Social Development need to work together to deliver that. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is heavily affected by the decisions taken on energy policy, so it is critical that its voice is heard. The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister is responsible for tackling poverty, and the link between energy prices and levels of poverty is easily made.

The current arrangements are not working. Inefficient and delayed decision-making has resulted in higher prices for consumers and businesses and higher operating costs. It has also led to increased proportions of people living in fuel poverty.

Dealing with our energy challenge cannot be done with different Departments acting in isolation. All Departments need to work together with the ultimate objective of one Department taking responsibility for all energy-related matters. *Tacaím leis an rún.* I support the motion.

Ms Brown: I will speak on the report as a member of the Social Development Committee. First and foremost, I very much welcome the report and want to put on record my thanks to the Committee Clerk and staff, who assisted the Committee in its drafting and completion of the report.

Fuel poverty is even more pressing today than it was five years ago. The price of energy, such as oil, gas, coal and electricity, is the highest it has been for some time. Therefore, that means that more and more people are at risk of falling into fuel poverty, where they cut back and suffer in the cold because they just cannot afford to heat their homes and keep warm. Although fuel poverty is more likely to affect older people, it is affecting far too many families across Northern Ireland.

The fuel poverty strategy, which was launched in March 2011, identified that 44% of people in Northern Ireland live in fuel poverty. That figure is truly stark and most concerning. To date, the Department for Social Development has taken a lead role in tackling fuel poverty. However, as identified in the report, there is a need for a more collaborative, cross-departmental and cross-sectoral approach to address fuel poverty.

Despite fuel poverty having been talked about for some time, the situation is not being resolved, and more and more people are being affected by it. Any solution will not eradicate fuel poverty in a short time, and eradication is the ultimate objective. Therefore, the report calls for a long-term strategic policy approach.

It was for those reasons that the Committee proposed the establishment of thematic action groups, based on themes identified in the evidence-gathering exercise undertaken for the report. Each thematic action group will have a particular theme attached to its brief and

will seek to find realistic rather than idealistic solutions to reduce and prevent fuel poverty. Each group will be responsible for developing a work plan, which will contain various actions. That will avoid any danger of the groups turning into talking shops. Those plans should also be published regularly. Each thematic action group will report to the Social Development Committee on its progress and an overarching cross-departmental group will be established to monitor progress of the implementation of the agreed initiatives. That overarching group has already been established, which demonstrates the commitment of the Committee, the Minister and the Department to see fuel poverty tackled and prevented. The group, which is called the cross-sectoral fuel poverty partnership, will be made up of the chairs of each thematic action group and permanent secretaries of each relevant Department, with the Minister for Social Development acting as chair.

The report's proposals provide a joined-up way forward to tackle and prevent fuel poverty. I know of many people in my constituency of South Antrim who are struggling. Lone parents, pensioners, the sick and even working families are all faced with soaring heating costs on top of the other pressures of life. Heating your home and keeping your family warm is surely a basic human need. Heat is not a luxury but a requirement and not having it has major implications for one's health and leads to avoidable healthcare demands and the costs associated with that. Therefore, we need to do more for those who are in need, and the report's proposals offer a means of making things better. I support the motion.

Mr Agnew: I welcome the Committee report and the focus that it gives to fuel poverty. Many before me outlined the severity of the issue. I welcome the overall recommendation to ensure a strategic cross-departmental and cross-sectoral approach to reducing and preventing fuel poverty. If I am honest, I would have welcomed more specific recommendations from the Committee on the three key areas that have been highlighted: low incomes; rising energy costs; and tackling the energy inefficiency of our housing stock. However, I appreciate the outcomes that have been mentioned around the working groups that are to be established, hopefully, as a result of the report.

On low incomes, we need to ensure that we speak with one voice from the Chamber. Often,

when debating the rebalancing of the Northern Ireland economy, we bemoan the high public sector wages and benefits that, apparently, are strangling our private sector. However, I do note and agree with the Finance Minister's recent comments on regional pay, when he stated that we should not seek to drive down pay in the public sector but should seek to drive up pay in the private sector. We should remember this debate when we talk about the economy.

Government can do very little about the spiralling price rises in oil and gas. As fossil fuels diminish, demand for them increases and, inevitably, costs go up. What we can do is drive towards renewables and to alternatives to fossil fuels. Indeed, as the report mentions, in the shorter term, brokering initiatives can be developed. As chair of the all-party group on co-operatives and mutuals, I welcome the fact that, on the back of a meeting that we held on energy, we could see Northern Ireland's first energy co-operative. That could help to tackle some of our immediate energy issues.

Energy efficiency is, perhaps, the area where the Assembly can do most. There are more deaths from winter-related illnesses in Northern Ireland than in Finland, which is a much colder country. We have to ask why that is and what it is that we are getting wrong. I have no doubt that the inefficiency of the housing stock is a big factor. In Finland, the figures show that levels of cavity wall insulation, roof insulation, floor insulation and double glazing are at 100% in every case. I do not have the figures for Northern Ireland, but, in the UK, cavity wall insulation is at 25% and floor insulation is at 4%. It is clear to see why we, as part of the UK, are falling down substantially in how we tackle fuel poverty.

We need an area-based approach to improving the energy efficiency of our housing stock, such as that which is proposed by the green new deal group. The motion talks about a cross-sectoral approach. That is a cross-body group in that it contains groups such as Friends of the Earth, the Ulster Farmers' Union, the Confederation of British Industry and the Institute of Directors, amongst others. Such an approach has also been recommended by Lord Whitty in his recent report for the Consumer Council, 'Energising Northern Ireland'. Indeed, numerous groups that provided submissions to inform the Committee's report, such as the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, the Northern Ireland Council for

Voluntary Action, the Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations and Save the Children, have called for an area-based approach. So, there have been many calls, not just from the Green Party but from various sectors and various stakeholders with an interest in fuel poverty.

The green new deal group's proposals offered the Minister the opportunity to move to a co-ordinated and coherent approach to fuel poverty; an approach that would have created genuine efficiencies, that is, the opportunity to provide more effective help to more households with the same amount of money. That differs from the usual government definition of efficiency, which usually just translates as cuts. The green new deal proposals provided the opportunity to unlock up to £80 million worth of efficiencies from a £12 million government spend.

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

Mr Agnew: Lord Whitty categorised our current approach. He stated:

"There are a range of schemes, therefore, all of which have relatively small resources and little overall coherence. The range of schemes and the different methods of delivery cause both sub optimal efficiency and confusion."

The green new deal could have tackled that. The Minister's decision on that issue was a disgrace.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call on the Minister for Social Development, Mr Nelson McCausland, to respond to the debate.

Mr Kennedy: Time. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): I thank Mr Kennedy for his helpful advice. *[Laughter.]*

I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to the debate and thank the Members who have contributed to it. I also welcome the Social Development Committee's report on fuel poverty. I have listened carefully to the comments expressed by Members. If my response fails to address any specific points, I will, of course, write to Members separately.

The motion calls on me to implement the Committee's recommendations to ensure that a strategic, cross-departmental and cross-sectoral approach is adopted to reduce and prevent fuel poverty. I welcome this opportunity

to update Members on the range of activities my Department is undertaking to tackle fuel poverty, in particular the amalgamation of the interdepartmental group on fuel poverty and the fuel poverty advisory group into the new cross-sectoral fuel poverty partnership.

The report from the Social Development Committee was the product of an event held in November last year, at which representatives from Statutory Committees, Departments, the private sector and non-governmental organisations discussed practical solutions to fuel poverty. I have spoken many times of my commitment to tackling fuel poverty, and it continues to be one of my top priorities. However, we are all too aware of the extent of the problem in Northern Ireland and of the fact that just talking about it will not resolve it.

The definition of fuel poverty has been explored in depth by Professor Christine Liddell from the University of Ulster and John Hills in Great Britain. That work is very welcome and emphasises that fuel poverty is a real problem in Northern Ireland. The time has come to concentrate on practical solutions that will make a real difference to the thousands of householders in Northern Ireland who are struggling to pay their energy bills. I want to take a few minutes to remind Members of what we are doing to tackle fuel poverty.

My Department's fuel poverty strategy document, 'Warmer Healthier Homes', was published in April 2011 and set out our vision for the future as:

"a society in which people live in a warm, comfortable home and need not worry about the effect of the cold on their health."

I remain committed to that vision, and I want to back it up with practical measures that help people in fuel poverty. In addition to continuing to deliver mainstream schemes such as the Warm Homes Scheme, the Housing Executive's heating replacement scheme, a benefits uptake campaign and winter fuel and cold weather payments, my Department is working on a number of new and exciting pilots.

The recent boiler replacement scheme entitled eligible householders to a grant of £1,500 towards the cost of installing a new boiler. That pilot was hugely successful, and almost 1,700 inefficient boilers have been replaced, helping many low-income households that had

not previously been eligible for government assistance. In addition, over 640 local installers got work from the scheme, providing a much-needed boost to the local construction industry. Last week, I announced a new boiler replacement scheme, which will build on the success of the pilot.

An amount of £12 million has been set aside for the scheme over the next three years. In the period between the pilot ending and the announcement being made last week, many letters came into the Department calling for the scheme to be continued. It is an immensely popular scheme and has been extremely successful. In the coming weeks, I hope to announce additional funding for the scheme, which will be part-financed by the European regional development fund under the European Sustainable Competitiveness Programme for Northern Ireland. That could see an additional 16,000 people benefit from the grant available. In regard to the boiler replacement scheme, I visited the home of senior citizens who were saving on an entire oil fill in the year by the installation of the new boiler. That is very significant. The installation of the boiler enabled them to reduce the cost of heating oil over the course of the year by one third. That is significant, important and a good example of real delivery.

5.30 pm

In addition, my colleague Minister Foster last week announced the renewable heat incentive, offering grants to householders to install renewable technology to improve their energy efficiency. This represents a significant investment in the improvement of domestic energy efficiency and is an important step in preventing fuel poverty. It will also sustain jobs, create investment and improve health. I will announce further details of the boiler replacement scheme in the coming days.

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

Members will be aware of the pay-as-you-go oil pilot, which my officials have been working on with representatives from Kingspan Renewables and Carillion Energy Services to deliver. This innovative approach is aimed at discouraging people from purchasing emergency oil drums. The pilot was to run for three months and will come to an end in the next few weeks. It will be subject to a full evaluation to see whether this is something we can bring into future domestic

energy efficiency improvement schemes. Early feedback is that the pilot has worked really well, so I look forward to that evaluation. An example brought to my attention was of a low-income family with a disabled child who are now able to use their oil heating system to heat their home properly. They were not able to do that previously. Those are the sorts of difference that the schemes that we are introducing really make — differences to the family with the disabled child and to the senior citizens.

In addition, officials from my Department are working with the University of Ulster and district councils to pilot an area-based approach to tackling fuel poverty. Working in partnership with the University of Ulster, Departments such as OFMDFM and DARD and local councils, we will target areas most affected by fuel poverty and provide appropriate solutions to improve the energy efficiency of homes in the area. The pilot will start later this year, and the outcome will inform our approach to tackling fuel poverty.

The fuel poverty strategy places significant emphasis on the partnership approach required to tackle fuel poverty and the cross-departmental nature of the whole area of fuel poverty. This is very relevant to the motion, which calls for:

“a strategic, cross-departmental and cross-sectoral approach ... to reduce and prevent fuel poverty.”

That is what we are delivering. The report by the Social Development Committee recommends the establishment of thematic action groups whose key role will be to identify and prioritise agreed, workable and realistic solutions to fuel poverty and not simply develop wish lists. I am a firm believer in collaborative working to provide realistic solutions to difficult issues, so I welcome the report in that respect.

We said in our fuel poverty strategy that we would review the support structures for the strategy, namely the interdepartmental group on fuel poverty and the fuel poverty advisory group. This review resulted in the amalgamation of those groups to form the cross-sectoral fuel poverty partnership. The key recommendations from the report are, therefore, very much in line with the thematic approach that my Department is developing.

The cross-sectoral fuel poverty partnership has agreed terms of reference:

“to identify measures to reduce fuel poverty and propose implementation mechanisms within the wider strategic policy context”.

I chaired the first meeting of the partnership. At that meeting, it was agreed that the members would nominate themselves on to thematic subgroups. Those thematic subgroups are as follows: achieving affordable warmth; prevention, targeting and opportunities; synergies; and risks. Members can sit on one or a number of groups. I will chair the next meeting of the cross-sectoral fuel poverty partnership on 7 June. At that meeting, Professor Christine Liddell from the University of Ulster will present her findings, which are about informing my Department's area-based approach pilot. I am pleased that that arrangement reflects the Committee's recommendations, and I expect that the thematic subgroups will examine in detail all the recommendations in the report.

I will touch on some of the issues that we heard about from Members. Mr Durkan, who is not with us now, said that something needed to be done on energy brokering schemes. In fact, I have recently approved an energy brokering scheme, which the Housing Executive is now working on to implement for its tenants. So, we are moving ahead on that already.

I noticed a number of comments from Mr Flanagan, who has also moved on to other things. He said that the green new deal was the key to all this. Indeed, Mr Agnew took up that point. The green new deal was subject to a full economic appraisal. The proposal was fundamentally flawed. A significant slice of the available funding for the green new deal proposal went on administration costs. Administration does not heat a home. I want as much of the available money as possible to go directly to the people who are in need. The Department of Finance and Personnel raised significant concerns about the proposals, including a concern about the lack of private funding security. It is all very well to talk about how much money you will bring in from other sources, but, if there is no security with that, it is very dangerous ground on which to move forward. I suggest that Members reflect on those points when they espouse the cause of the green new deal as much as they do.

We are putting the £12 million into a scheme that is tried, tested and proven to deliver, and that is the boiler replacement scheme. That was

the right decision to take, and, in spite of Mr Agnew's comments, it is one that will stand the test of time. Mr Agnew also said that thematic action groups would "hopefully" be formed. I have already said that people were asked to nominate to them at our meeting in January, so that work is under way.

I will turn now to another couple of things that Mr Flanagan said. He said that progress has been slow, that there was inefficiency and delayed decision-making across Departments and that Departments were working in isolation. From this and from the approach that we have adopted, it is clear that we have all the relevant Departments working on this together. All the key stakeholders are there as well. In other words, we agree entirely with what is in the report in that regard. It is absolutely right, and that is the way that we are moving forward.

I have to disagree with what he said about delayed decision-making. The pilot scheme and the other measures that we brought forward, on which we are working at the moment, have not been delayed. This issue has been around for many years. In the past year, since I have been in the Department, we have moved forward very quickly on the issues. That is why we have the pilot for the pay-as-you-go scheme and the vast improvement in the energy efficiency of homes. That has been achieved through not only the boiler replacement scheme but the focus on double glazing in Housing Executive properties. When I arrived in the Department, we were told that that would take a decade; now, we are delivering it in the term of this Executive. We are keen to move forward with improving the energy efficiency of homes.

We also have our ongoing work, through our benefit uptake campaigns and so forth, on raising the amount of money that people have to spend on heating their home and on fuel.

I thank Members for their contributions today, and I reaffirm my total commitment to finding practical solutions to fuel poverty. When I came to the Department, I believed that the time had come to move away from talking about tackling fuel poverty to implementing practical solutions that would make a real difference to householders across Northern Ireland. I thank the Committee for its work, and I look forward to working with it as we take this forward.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I, too, thank all those who

participated in today's debate, all the members of the Committee and, indeed, the Committee staff, who have put so much work into the preparation of the report.

It is clear from the debate that there is consensus on the need to work together to effectively address fuel poverty. Political commitment and momentum is key to driving the agenda forward. That, in essence, is the key message of the report. It has a focus on cross-sectoral and cross-departmental collaboration, and almost all the Members who spoke referred to the need for that. The report suggests an approach that, in my opinion, could underpin the Department's current approach.

I will deal now with the comments of Members who contributed to the debate. Paula Bradley talked about the most vulnerable members of society being affected by fuel poverty. She said that it was important to identify cross-departmental working and stressed its importance. She also talked about the health implications that put pressure on other services and said that no one Department is responsible for solving the problem.

Michael Copeland talked about the Committee having shown courage in holding the event that produced the report. He talked about all of us being in agreement on the effects of fuel poverty, particularly on the old. He talked about pensioners having real concerns about fuel prices and taking drastic actions to keep warm. He said that some elements of the oil industry needed to be considered for regulation, but he was not specific on that.

Mark Durkan talked about the report providing a good springboard to move forward. He said that the approach to date had been fragmented but acknowledged that some work had been done to redress that. He is concerned about the impact of welfare reform on fuel poverty rates, as we all are. He said that innovative approaches needed to be implemented and current ones expanded. He mentioned oil saving stamps. The Minister also mentioned some of the issues that Mark Durkan alluded to.

Judith Cochrane highlighted the impact on the most vulnerable in society and said that we must seek to protect them. She referred to the key role of the advice sector, one example being the maximising of benefit uptake and energy efficiency. She feared the role of pay-as-you-go oil schemes.

Alex Easton referred to the impact on health and the number of deaths connected to fuel poverty. He also talked about the impact on educational opportunities. He highlighted the causes of fuel poverty, including low income, energy efficiency and high fuel costs. He acknowledged that departmental initiatives are helping to address fuel poverty and noted the impact on rural fuel poverty in particular.

Phil Flanagan focused on energy-efficient programmes and action to maximise benefits. He is concerned about scrapping the green new deal proposal in favour of boiler replacement. Environmental and social objectives can be met by increasing the efficiency of fuel-poor households. He said that zero-carbon public buildings must be part of the solution and that current arrangements are not working.

Pam Brown said that fuel poverty is likely to get worse and that the report calls for a long-term strategic approach. Thematic action groups will be time-bound to avoid them becoming talking shops; the proposals represent a joined-up approach that is strategic. There is a need to do more for those in need, and the report can help to achieve that.

Steven Agnew welcomed the report but would like to have seen more specific recommendations. He recognised, however, that the TAGs would make those recommendations. He said that there is little that government can do about fossil fuel prices but there should be greater focus on renewables. He talked about energy efficiency being an area in which we can do most. He noted that we have more fuel poverty-related deaths than Finland, which is a colder country. He said that an area-based approach is required, such as the green new deal.

The Minister welcomed the report and provided an update on the action that he and his Department have taken. He talked about fuel poverty being one of the top priorities and a real problem here in the North. He talked about the fuel poverty strategy being published in 2011 and is committed to that strategy. He referred to new and exciting initiatives to address fuel poverty, such as the new boiler replacement scheme, and said that the European regional development fund may provide an additional source of funding to support boiler replacement. He talked about how renewable heat incentives can help with domestic fuel efficiency and said that the oil pay-as-you-go pilot was coming to an

end in the next few weeks. He said that a full evaluation would follow in due course and the indications were that it has proved successful.

5.45 pm

The Minister also talked about how the Department is now working on an area-based approach to fuel poverty. He stated that he is a firm believer in collaboration. He talked about key recommendations of the thematic action groups being similar to the Department's approach and was happy that their approach converges with that of the Department. He said that the proposed green new deal is fundamentally flawed. Had it been a different colour, such as blue, orange or pink, I wonder whether he might have had a different view of it, but that is merely a personal observation. On that note, I will move on.

Some Members referred to the fact that fuel poverty is about poverty in general and that the requirement to increase incomes is easier said than done in the best of times but is even more difficult in the current economic climate. Providing employment opportunities will not be easy, but Departments must work together to ensure that they maximise what opportunities they can.

As I said when commenting on some of the contributions, Members spoke of the need to maximise benefit uptake. To that end, I am sure that the Minister will give close consideration to the recent Public Accounts Committee report on the uptake of benefits by pensioners, as well as to the forthcoming report from Bryson Energy on its approach to providing benefit checks to maximise benefit uptake.

The Committee's report is not an end point on fuel poverty; in fact, it is quite the opposite. It marks the beginning of a different approach but one that I believe ultimately converges with the Department's. A Fuel Poverty Coalition event is currently taking place in the Long Gallery. Events focusing on solutions and collaborative ways forward can contribute to positively impacts on fuel poverty. The Committee does not want to contribute to a talking-shop approach to fuel poverty. We know that we run the risk of having those accusations levelled at us, but the approach outlined in the report is practical, pragmatic and has inbuilt flexibility. The Committee also acknowledges that the report is not the final article. The expertise to address the detail lies with stakeholders

and departmental officials, and the report will require further discussion. The report challenges all stakeholders, including the relevant Departments, to produce outcomes within a set time frame. It is necessary to talk further, but there must be an end point at which strategic action must be taken. I commend the report to the House and ask Members to support the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee for Social Development on fuel poverty; and calls on the Minister for Social Development to implement its recommendations to ensure a strategic, cross-departmental and cross-sectoral approach is adopted to reduce and prevent fuel poverty.

Private Members' Business

Autism: "You Need to Know" Campaign

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

Mr D Bradley: I beg to move

That this Assembly views with concern the findings of the Northern Ireland-based research carried out by the National Autistic Society into the mental health of children with autism for the "You Need to Know" campaign; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to take on board the main findings of the research as his Department prepares to implement the Autism Act (NI) 2011.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Éirím leis an rún a mholadh. I propose the motion on behalf on the Assembly all-party group on autism. I thank the Business Committee for affording us the time to debate this important report, 'You Need to Know', published by the National Autistic Society.

It is important to make it absolutely clear at the outset that autism is not a mental health problem. The Autism Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, which amends the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, clarifies that autism is a social communication disability and not a mental health condition or learning disability. It is perfectly possible for someone with autism to have good mental health, just as it is for any other child. Unfortunately, far too many children go on to develop mental health problems.

The 2011 Act, when enacted, will address the acknowledged gap in knowledge and expertise across the public sector. The Act includes the requirement for an autism awareness campaign and the development of a regularly monitored and reviewed Northern Ireland Government autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) strategy that crosses all life stages and a number of Departments. As the 'You Need to Know' report points out, there is limited data collection in Northern Ireland regarding ASD and, therefore, there is no Northern Ireland-specific research into the prevalence of mental health problems in children with autism here. The need for the

correlation of ASD data across Departments is addressed specifically in the 2011 Act and consequently in the planning of the Northern Ireland Government ASD strategy, which includes a subgroup to progress this particular issue.

Children with autism can be more susceptible to mental health problems because they can be socially isolated. They can struggle to make friends and can be bullied in school. They will often find it difficult to communicate their feelings when they have problems or feel low. This can escalate into mental health problems. However, with the right support at the right time, children with autism can have the same emotional well-being as any other children and live a happy and fulfilled life. When the right support is not provided at the right time, the impact on children with autism and their families can be devastating.

The 'You Need to Know' report, which, as I said, was commissioned and written by the National Autistic Society, provides a snapshot of mental health problems that children with autism in Northern Ireland experience and seeks to make their voices heard. The parents surveyed reported that their children's mental health problems developed at a very early age. Almost nine out of 10 parents stated that their children first experienced these issues before the age of 10, and over half before the age of five. When parents were asked about what things negatively affected their children's mental health, the most common answers related to not getting the right support for the child's autism — 58% — the lack of social support — 55% — and non-mental health professionals, including GPs, social workers and schools, not having adequate understanding of autism, which was at 48%, as was a lack of appropriate educational provision. Nine out of 10 parents said that the mental health problems that their children faced had a negative impact on the whole family. The report also revealed that there can be a financial impact, with a significant portion of parents having to reduce their working hours to deal with these issues.

Unfortunately, when children with autism and their families have to access specialist child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS), they encounter many problems. Of the parents surveyed, over half — around 57% — found it difficult to get a first referral to CAMHS for their child, and around 55% waited three months for a first appointment following referral.

Some waited up to a year. Two thirds said that there had been times of crisis with their child's mental health when they needed support, but half of those parents were unable to access that support. In respect of these issues, the National Autistic Society's report 'You Need to Know' recommends that health and social care trusts develop specific pathways for mental health support for children with autism.

As you know, Mr Deputy Speaker, autism is a complex disability. When mental health problems arise in children with autism, they are more difficult to recognise, harder to evaluate and even harder to treat. Professionals need a good working knowledge of autism in order to do these things, or the interventions they provide can fail to help and, in some cases, can even be harmful. Communicating with a child with autism requires flexibility, patience and skill. Children with autism are more likely to take longer than others to trust a professional and to communicate openly. Of the parents surveyed by the NAS, over half of them felt that the CAMHS staff had a good understanding of autism, but fewer than half thought that CAMHS staff knew how to communicate with their child. On that issue, the NAS report recommends that all staff working within CAMHS at tiers 2, 3 and 4 must have basic training in autism and access to a specialist's report. All CAMHS staff need to have a broad understanding of autism to ensure that children receive appropriate support.

Providing mental health support to children with autism is indeed a very specialist skill. Without that specialist knowledge, it can be difficult to treat these children. It is, therefore, vital to have autism specialists in CAMHS who can help other professionals develop their skills. The report recommends that the key autism specialists are identified in each CAMHS service, play a lead role in developing staff training and act as a source of specialist advice. As outlined, there is limited research into the prevalence of mental health problems in children with autism in Northern Ireland, but, as I stated, I believe that that will be addressed through the Minister's work on the Autism Act.

In conclusion, I thank all the members of the all-party group on autism and the other Members of the House who have stayed behind on this hot day to participate in the debate. I welcome the Minister and look forward to hearing his response to the recommendations and hearing

how, through the autism strategy, many of those issues will be dealt with.

Mr Dunne: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the important issue of autism. Unfortunately, autism is an ever-increasing problem across Northern Ireland, and it affects a growing number of children and young people in our communities. I welcome the progress made to date in dealing with autism, and I pay tribute to the National Autistic Society Northern Ireland, Autism Northern Ireland and other important groups and organisations for their ongoing work on autism. I also commend the Health Minister for taking a hands-on, proactive approach to improving and developing autism services in Northern Ireland.

I feel that the public do not know enough about autism. It is a lifelong developmental disability that affects the way in which a person communicates with and relates to other people. As autism is a spectrum disorder that can affect people in different ways, we need to have a different system in place that can deal with specific, individual needs. Increasing public awareness of autism could be a valuable tool in promoting the needs of those with autism and helping to encourage understanding.

As with many areas of healthcare, early intervention and detection is vital to be able to support, minimise and treat autism. Despite the good work done to date, there is still room for improvement. That was re-emphasised to me recently when I was contacted by parents of children with autism from across my constituency who still have concerns about the current system and feel that much has yet to be done to make adequate support available.

Given that 17,000 people are affected by autism in Northern Ireland and 200 people are diagnosed with the condition each year, it is important that we continue to do all that we can to develop autism support. If the right infrastructure and support is in place for young autistic children, it helps reduce long-term mental health problems.

6.00 pm

I welcome the work to date on the autism strategy. The project board has been established, and the voluntary sector is involved. I welcome the Minister's assurance that he will continue to work with the voluntary sector in bringing forward the strategy. The voluntary sector is

often at the front line and has a significant role to play in the development of an autism strategy. The strategy must provide a clear pathway to set about addressing the needs of people with an autistic spectrum disorder as well as the needs of parents and carers and to identify what steps can be taken to promote awareness of autism.

Education has a vital role to play in helping to tackle autism. Many parents who contacted me recently expressed specific concern about the lack of a support infrastructure in schools. Parents feel that there is no adequate support mechanism in place to support autistic children. More should be done to promote specific training for teachers and classroom assistants in schools. An ethos of understanding would help to reassure children who suffer from autism while helping those who have to look after, teach and support children and young people with autism.

This is a cross-departmental issue. All Departments and key stakeholders must be fully involved in the way forward. The voices of those with autism must be heard as we try to tackle the ever-growing problem of autism among our young people. I support the motion.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion and welcome the opportunity to speak on it. At the launch of the "You Need to Know" campaign, Mark Lever, who is the CEO of the National Autistic Society, said:

"Too many children with autism are developing preventable mental health problems and find themselves up against a broken system that doesn't understand them or their needs. All too often they receive inappropriate, ineffectual and sometimes harmful treatments."

That was in 2010. The 'You Need to Know' report, which examined the issues of children with autism and mental health problems, also highlights that those young people are let down by the very services that are supposed to be in place to help them.

As Dominic Bradley highlighted, autism is a lifelong developmental disability. Over 70% of children with autism also develop mental health problems, such as anxiety and obsessive compulsive disorders. Coupled with autism, those disorders are harder to recognise and diagnose. Often those mental health problems

are dismissed as a side effect of autism. The 'You Need to Know' report states that more needs to be done to stop those problems from occurring, and there needs to be better support when they do occur.

Over the weekend, I met a friend who has a son with autism. Only last week, she had to take three days off work to care for him, as he had developed acute anxiety after spending the first period of his life away from his parents. Talking to that parent brought it to my attention that when the right support is not available, the impact on children with autism and their families can be devastating.

As part of the 'You Need to Know' report, parents reported that their children were developing mental health problems, as Dominic Bradley has already said. Some 90% develop problems before the age of 10, and 50% develop problems before the age of four. When parents were asked what things negatively affected their child's mental health, their answers were revealing. Some 60% were not getting the right support, as my friend confirmed; almost 50% of professionals lack understanding of autism; and 50% of parents stated that there was a lack of appropriate educational provision.

I understand that the last point is not the responsibility of the Minister in the House, but he and the Minister of Education should have a much more joined-up approach on the issue. In January, John O'Dowd said that his Department had a long way to go and he gave strong indications of the major changes that he had in mind. It is my hope that his plans of reform are nearing conclusion. However, the motion calls on the Health Minister, who is with us today, to take on board the main findings of the research as his Department prepares to implement the Autism Act.

The Minister cannot ignore those findings. The Health and Social Care Trust needs to develop integrated care strategies for mental health support for children with autism. All CAMHS staff need to have an understanding of autism to ensure that children receive early intervention and appropriate support. That demands the development of staff training, so that they can help other professionals to develop their skills.

As my friend said, her son can achieve his full potential by reducing the impact of mental health and emotional problems through the

improved provision of care services. Those children deserve an equal and fair opportunity in life, along with all children in our society.

Mr Hussey: My first knowledge of autism was gained by my membership of the Western Health and Social Services Council, to which I was appointed on my election to Omagh District Council in 2005. I had absolutely no knowledge of autism, and it was a presentation to the health council by a group of parents that pricked my conscience and made me want to know a little bit more. For that reason, I sat on the health council's autism group, and it is for that reason that I sit on the all-party Assembly group on autism.

While preparing for today, I mentioned on Facebook that I would speak during the debate. I also learned that my cousin, who works in a special school, is a specialist in working with children with autism. She said that she had read about the "You Need to Know" campaign and that it is very worthy of support, as society needs to be aware of the needs of people with autism and how to deal with those needs. She said that the findings are typical nationwide, and that, of course, change needs to come from the top down. Government need to recognise those needs and the financial and practical implications that arise with the development of relevant resources. That, in turn, will highlight the needs in Departments and organisations, which will, in turn, implement the legislation that can only benefit the families involved. She said that, as she has been out of teaching, she has missed out on recent developments, but the topic is still close to her heart.

Other comments indicate that the public fully supports the delivery of a service that recognises those with special needs and takes every step it can to support parents, grandparents, teachers and, most importantly, the children who are affected on a daily basis with autism.

I have a report sitting on my desk in Omagh that was given to me by a grandparent in relation to his granddaughter. I have met the child on several occasions. In fact, before I was elected to the House, they were visiting the Building when I was with a group lobbying for support, and the wee girl shouted out, "Granda, there's your friend". She is a lovely child who is much loved by her parents, grandparents and siblings, but she suffers from autism. Her parents and

grandparents have fought hard to ensure that she receives all the support that she should from the state.

I received a comment from a friend called Shane, who said:

"It's often up to parents of ASD kids to push education boards, schools, and youth organisations to identify the needs and resource the management so that kids can develop fully."

However, what if the parents themselves are ASD? Adults are often not aware that they may have the syndrome. In this, the early and initial stages of changing the way that we all treat and manage ASD, I feel that it is very important that schools take a special interest to ensure that the kids identified get every advantage. Why should it only be the kids with the pushy parents?

The motion is quite specific and calls on the Assembly to note:

"with concern the findings of the Northern Ireland-based research carried out by the National Autism Society into the mental health of children with autism for the 'You Need to Know' campaign".

The conclusions in the report are damning to say the least. The report clearly states that child and adolescent mental health services are underfunded and overstretched. Anyone who has attempted to support a parent who is having a child assessed for autism will certainly support the comment that CAMHS is overstretched. The sad reality is that, without the push from parents in many cases, the assessment would take a lot longer. The factual comment that children with autism and their families and carers struggle to access the right support, often when it is most needed, should make us all hang our heads in shame. The fact that thousands of children with autism will needlessly face a future of mental health problems must bring us all to a sense of shock and horror. We can change the lives of those children if we work with the National Autistic Society to provide a health and social care service that knows how to provide the relevant support. We can also improve the lives of the many parents and siblings out there who are at their wits' end trying to cope on their own.

Some people do not like reading books to the end to get the solution to a problem or to find out whodunnit. In this instance, you do not have to read the entire report; you have

only to go to the conclusions, which are pretty straightforward.

I have already mentioned the need for improved child and adolescent mental health services. In previous questions to the Health Minister, I have sought a closer relationship between the Department of Education and the Health Department in that area. The necessity for protocols has, I feel, already been accepted by all Members, and there is no doubt that actions will speak louder than words. Access to specialist advice for staff working in CAMHS seems to be a reasonable expectation, and the need for an individual to play a lead role in training is clearly a logical step. Teachers, particularly primary-school teachers, are facing demands on their time, day and daily. However, as autism becomes more apparent —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mr Hussey: — and understood, we need to develop an in-depth training course that allows teachers and classroom assistants to create an ethos of understanding that will benefit children with autism. I support the motion.

Mr McCarthy: On behalf of the Alliance Party, I welcome the opportunity to support the proposal and ask the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to implement the changes and improvements contained in the 'You Need to Know' report so as to make life better, in mental health terms, for children and young people in Northern Ireland with autism.

I pay tribute to everyone involved in the National Autistic Society Northern Ireland for the work they have done on behalf of everyone with autism, and also their parents, carers, teachers and the many other people who have contributed to the research and findings contained in the 'You Need to Know' report. The motion advises the Minister and his Department to take on board all available information as they progress to implement the Autism Act (NI) 2011, which came into being last year. I also thank the officers, staff, parents, carers and many more people who supported Autism NI as it steered that vital piece of legislation through the Assembly over two years.

I must say that I am extremely proud to have been a member of the all-party group on autism, under the excellent chairmanship of colleague Dominic Bradley, when despite some opposition

from within the Health Department itself, the 2011 Act was passed and got Royal Assent one year ago in May 2011. It is now our opportunity to see dramatic improvements made in this field for the benefit of everyone with autism. The Assembly has spoken. The Minister is fully aware of what has to be done now. The Department must not delay or drag its heels. Action is required. We as ordinary Assembly Members will not tolerate any further blockages to the Act's fullest implementation.

The 'You Need to Know' report was launched last June, and the research carried out clearly said that mental health problems such as anxiety, obsessive compulsive disorder and depression can be avoided if the proper service is provided to children with autism at an early stage. So, with the right support at the right time, autistic youngsters can have the same well-being as other children and a happy and contented childhood. It is up to us, the Minister and the Department to deliver.

It is fair to say that the Department of Education also has a vital role to play in ensuring that proper provision is made in schools. The report states that 48% of the parents surveyed felt that the lack of appropriate educational opportunities had a bad effect on their child's mental health. My experience as an MLA — and, indeed, I listened to other MLAs say this this afternoon — is that parents of children on the autistic spectrum are totally exhausted and exasperated when they seek help or even advice from the statutory authorities. They do not know who to go to to seek professional help, and when they do go, the time they have to wait for help is horrendous, thus building up anger, frustration and almost a sense of hopelessness. The 2011 Act, I hope, is a mechanism that will prevent such anxiety. Why should people who have enough problems have to suffer the indignity of not knowing where to go or where to seek help? They deserve help and, hopefully, they will get whatever is required at the time.

6.15 pm

The Department must listen, learn and act when it is dealing with autism. It is the least it can do to assist the children and their parents. The Department has complete access to the contents of the 'You Need to Know' report. It can see the fantastic work carried out by a voluntary organisation and supported throughout

the community. The Department will also have knowledge of the contents of the Bamford report and its recommendation to support those with learning disabilities and mental health issues. One is tempted to ask why there is such a delay in its full implementation.

In conclusion, the 'You Need to Know' report has to be the building block for the Department to reach out and ensure that the mental health problems of those children with autism —

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

Mr McCarthy: — are tackled at a very early stage, and so prevented before they even start. I support the motion.

Ms Brown: I welcome and support the motion. I want to begin by praising the all-party group on autism for the work that it has done to date, especially in securing the passing of the Autism Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, which amended the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 in order to include provision for those on the autistic spectrum.

Autism is characterised by impaired social interaction and communication, coupled with restricted and repetitive behaviour. Every person with autism will have different, but not dissimilar, symptoms. I also welcome the "You Need to Know" campaign, launched by the National Autistic Society, and its findings, as set out in the comprehensive report detailing the experiences of users.

Mental illness is prevalent in Northern Ireland, and as the campaign highlights, it affects 71% of those with autism. For those with autism and their carers, that is yet another set of circumstances to manage and deal with, coupled with those symptoms associated with autism. Autism is not a mental illness in itself, but sufferers can also suffer from anxiety disorder, depression or obsessive compulsive disorder, for example. That can, therefore, have an overall negative impact on their health and limit progress in other areas of their condition. The campaign seeks to highlight the message that children with autism can have good mental health and the name of the campaign, "You Need to Know", obviously aims it at many stakeholders, including government.

Autism has only recently secured the attention it requires, and many sufferers live here in

Northern Ireland. For every sufferer, there is at least one carer, likely to be a parent or close family member. The campaign places a focus on services and inspires government to make changes and improvements to services, such as the child and adolescent mental health services, to provide support for autistic children who also suffer from mental illness.

The Autism Act not only amends the Disability Discrimination Act but ensures that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety produces an autism strategy that includes how the needs of those with autism are to be addressed, as well as raising awareness of autism in society, including the workplace. The Bamford review, published a number of years ago, set out a strategic direction for children's mental health services to ensure that they met the standards required in order to tackle mental health issues faced by children. The review puts a focus on those with special needs, including those with autism or a learning disability. The review and recommendations are obviously linked to the issues pointed out by the "You Need to Know" campaign, and tie in with the change advocated by the National Autistic Society.

In a review completed in February 2011, the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority reported that although progress has been made in the area, more needs to be done. I hope that further improvements will be forthcoming in the delivery of services so that the full scope of the Autism Act might be realised and that those most in need will truly benefit.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I, too, support the motion, and I would also like to thank the all-party group on autism for the work that it did on bringing the Autism Act to fruition. I was a member of the Health Committee in the previous mandate, and I am very aware of the hard work that that Committee did in bringing the Act through. I quote Paula Bradley because, at this stage, the debate is all the same and everything else has been said. I just want to make some comments.

The three reports by the National Autistic Society were mentioned. Individuals with autism have difficulty with social interaction and communication, including using and understanding verbal and non-verbal language. They have difficulty with social imagination, the ability to understand and predict other people's

intentions or behaviours and the ability to imagine situations outside their own routine.

The motion deals with children, but one concern across the board is about what is happening with welfare reform. Adults with autism are being migrated from incapacity benefit to employment and support allowance, and there are concerns about how those people are going to cope with the interviews and tick-box exercise carried out as part of the much-maligned and discredited work capability assessment. The problems that people have carry on into adulthood; I think that is a point worth making.

As has been stated, autism is not a mental health problem, but too many children go on to develop such problems. Again, it has been stated that there is no specific research into the prevalence of mental health problems for children here in the North, but research in England shows that seven in 10 children with autism have a co-occurring mental health problem such as an anxiety disorder, an obsessive compulsive disorder or depression. A lot more needs to be done to stop these problems occurring, and better support needs to be available when they occur.

Children with autism are often socially isolated because of the condition and are thus more susceptible to mental health problems, but if the right support is available, their emotional well-being can be just as good as that of other children.

Mrs McKeivitt: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that the Health Minister should consider developing ways to make child and adolescent mental health services more accessible to children with autism, given the recommendation of the "You Need to Know" campaign that staff in tiers 2, 3 and 4 should be given the basic training in autism, and that there should be key individuals within CAMHS who are autism specialists? Does he agree that such a change would have a hugely positive impact on the lives of children with autism and their families?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Brady: I thank the Member for her intervention and absolutely agree with what she said. The people who deal with the children in this situation need to be trained to a level of understanding and need to be able to cope with the complex

problems. The complexity of autism was mentioned. People who are going to provide a support mechanism need to be trained to the highest degree.

The 'You Need to Know' report outlines some of the mental health problems that children here experience. Parents who were surveyed reported that children's mental health problems were developing at a very early age in some cases. When parents were asked what things negatively affected their children's mental health, examples given included not getting the right support for the child's autism; lack of social support; non-mental-health professionals, including GPs, social workers, schools, etc, not having enough understanding of autism; and a lack of appropriate educational provision.

It is accepted that education plays a vital role in the mental health of children with autism. My colleague Seán Lynch mentioned the need for the Education and Health Departments to be collaborative in their approach to dealing with this particular problem. A supportive education setting working in partnership with mental health services can be crucial in maintaining emotional well-being and preventing mental health problems.

The Autistic Society recommends more training for education professionals such as teachers and classroom assistants. Health and social care trusts need to develop specific pathways, as has been mentioned, for mental health support for children with autism, and all staff working within care and mental health services need to have basic training in autism — again, that was mentioned — and have access to specialist support. Also, key autism specialists should be identified in each care and mental health service and act as a source of specialist advice.

Commissioners in each trust area need to know how many children with autism live in each of those areas and know what their mental health needs are. It is essential that the trusts acquire data on the mental health needs of children with autism in their area and that a work stream is identified for the provision of mental health services for children with autism and their families. Unless all that is incorporated into the implementation of the Autism Act, it simply will not be effective, and the hard work done by the all-party group will not be recognised.

Ms P Bradley: I welcome the opportunity to speak on such an important topic. Today, in our society, mental health still has a number of negative associations and a lot of stigma attached to it. In general, people are still reluctant to seek help for mental ill health. Every one of us has mental health, the well-being of which can fluctuate at any time for a number of factors. For many on the autistic spectrum, the ability to seek help and support may be additionally hindered by lack of communication skills or their experiences within the health service.

NAS research makes clear that people on the spectrum have a high incidence of mental health issues. Estimates and research place it at about 70% of people on the spectrum having some mental health problems. As has already been stated, those can include anxiety, ADHD and OCD. For too many people, those conditions are dismissed merely as an unfortunate side effect of autism. Autism itself is not a mental health problem, but it can, in cases, go together with the aforementioned conditions. Forty percent of people on the spectrum will have two or more mental health issues. When we consider the unique situation of Northern Ireland, with a higher level of mental health problems in the general population due to the legacy of the conflict and the effects of living in social deprivation, it is clear that mental health in ASD individuals needs to be addressed effectively, ensuring that they get the right support when they need it.

In passing the Autism Act, the Assembly did go some way to helping families and individuals living with ASD to get access to help and support. There is no doubt that defining ASD as a disability has meant that awareness of the condition has risen somewhat. However, much more is still to be done. Sixty-five percent of families living with ASD felt that lack of support had negatively impacted on their child's mental health. Families also reported that this lack of support and understanding has impacted on the family's mental health.

People with ASD can be of average or above average IQ. This group in particular will have a heightened risk of mental health problems, especially anxiety or depression. Treating people with complex needs such as ASD needs an understanding of what the condition is and how different agencies can work. There needs to be more understanding in our schools, especially the mainstream sector, where a lot of ASD

children are educated. Lack of understanding in the general population can make these mental health problems worse, as was the sad case in Suffolk, when an individual with ASD committed suicide after being bullied. Recently, we had the case of a child with Asperger's syndrome being attacked in a school in Carrickfergus. We must ensure that those stories are the exception and not the norm. Sadly, however, research has shown that children with ASD are more likely to be bullied, which can, in turn, affect their mental health and self-image. The work of CAMHS has endeavoured to address mental health in all our vulnerable young people. It is clear that there needs to be more guidance on what each of the different stages is and how people can access those services.

It is for those reasons that I support the motion that mental health in ASD individuals needs to be considered when implementing the Autism Act (NI) 2011.

Mrs Dobson: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the important issue of autism, the first time I have had the opportunity to do so since being elected last year. I pay tribute to the National Autistic Society Northern Ireland, which produced the 'You Need to Know' report as well as the more recent 'A* for Autism'. Having that research carried out and those reports published adds greatly to the debate on recognising the needs of people with autism, their families and their carers.

Through relatives and constituents whose families have been directly affected by autism, I know that some people struggling with this disability can find the world a very puzzling and frightening place. Support at an early age can make such a positive difference. When a child receives dedicated help and guidance, so begins the process of lifelong care and assistance, which helps people to communicate better and to relate to people around them, thus improving their everyday social interaction.

That is why the important issue of young people with autism or Asperger's syndrome and mental health has been an area of much debate. However, that debate has frequently been based on little or no information or evidence. Now, however, it has been proven that young people with autism are particularly vulnerable to mental health problems. The 'You Need to Know' report has clearly demonstrated that.

6.30 pm

The effects of autism, which is a lifelong developmental disability, are well known, including the fact that it affects everyone in slightly different ways. Difficulties with social interaction, communication and empathy can all have a fundamental impact on a child's early years and, inevitably, will affect how that child sees the world as they grow up. The link between autism and the challenges of mental health are clear. Although my party had well-known concerns about aspects of the Autism Bill, it supported its passage at the end of the previous mandate. We firmly believe that the Assembly should become an advocate and promoter of better services for autism in Northern Ireland.

Unfortunately, for too long, statutory provision was not at the level that it should have been. Despite the clear benefits of early support, more than half of children with autism in Northern Ireland still wait in excess of a year for appropriate educational support. I was shocked by the publication of research from the National Autistic Society Northern Ireland that revealed that almost one in three parents of autistic children felt that their child's level of education was not adequate. In addition, the 'You Need to Know' report revealed that 48% of parents felt that a lack of appropriate educational provision had an impact on their child's mental health. That is wholly unacceptable, and the Department of Education must identify the shortcomings immediately and work constructively with parents to deliver improved services and to restore the confidence that is so badly needed and so clearly demonstrated in the research.

Bringing service provision for people on the autism spectrum up to standard will be no easy task. It will take immense foresight and dedication, first, from Ministers and officials across several Departments; secondly, from the parents, who want to see the best education from their child; and, thirdly, from teachers, who know the problems and now want to be involved in developing solutions. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is taking the lead in the development and implementation of an all-encompassing strategy to improve services for those on the autism spectrum. However, the Ulster Unionist Party still believes that, to tackle issues such as the difficulties of mental health, a cross-departmental approach by the Health

Department and the Department of Education is necessary to identify principles and standards of educational provision for children with autism. Again, it is about Departments and Ministers breaking out of their silo mentality.

At a time when we are debating reforms to the special educational needs system, we must consider issues such as we are discussing today. Realising the challenges that people with autism face should be a priority for every Member. The Autism Bill was passed last year, but, unless there is a genuine change in approach, the problems may never be truly tackled.

Mr I McCrea: I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. I commend the Members whose names are on the Order Paper for presenting the motion to the House. Sadly, we are once again speaking on this issue. Nonetheless, it is a very important matter. I think that the House has given it and will continue to give it its utmost attention and the importance that it deserves. I welcome the Ulster Unionist Party's conversion to supporting the Autism Bill. It was a different mandate then, and we learn from our mistakes.

Mr Hussey: I was not here.

Mr I McCrea: I am not blaming either of you two, I have to say. The previous Minister was certainly not that supportive of the Autism Bill. Indeed, he did not turn up to respond to some of the debates. As I said, that was in a previous mandate, and we can move on from that. We can truly say, on this occasion, that we have full all-party support for the motion.

I want to take the opportunity to commend the Minister on the work that he has done on this since taking up office, and some colleagues and I have met him on a number of occasions to push the issue. He has been very willing to work with the all-party group to try to ensure that autism gets the support and attention that it deserves. As others have mentioned, this is not just a health issue, and the Health Minister cannot deal with it alone. He needs the support of the other Ministers, and the fact that the Bill is now in place forces all Departments to work together to deliver something that is better for everyone involved in autism.

I try my best to keep abreast of most of the documentation that comes in on autism, and, when reading one of the reports, 'A* for Autism',

I noticed that one of the headings was about the consequences of getting the diagnosis wrong. That is an important part of the debate. It can sometimes, sadly, be well into adulthood for many people before it is realised that they have autism, and it is important that we do what we can to ensure that anyone who comes forward is properly diagnosed, whether it is a young person or an old person.

As others have said, autism is not a mental health problem, but not getting it early enough can have a detrimental impact on the education process and, as it says in the document, social and communication skills and behaviour as well as mental and physical well-being if the diagnosis is wrong. There is an onus on society to educate itself to understand autism and to understand how people react. I have spoken to many parents whose children have autism, and they have been in difficult circumstances. For example, they could be out at a restaurant and a child does something that they normally do and people find it offensive. That is understandable, but, nonetheless, as a society, we need to make ourselves better equipped to understand the issues.

I welcome the debate and look forward to the Minister's response. I encourage him to continue to work with the National Autistic Society and the all-party working group to ensure that —

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

Mr I McCrea: — everything that can be done is done to ensure that people who suffer from autism are dealt with in the appropriate manner.

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I am grateful to members for bringing the motion to the Assembly and for providing me with an opportunity to outline the work that is already being done on autism in health and social care and the plans in place to develop a cross-departmental autism strategy.

I understand the difficulties in identifying and perhaps for the public in understanding the difference between the traits that relate to autism and those that relate to mental ill health. It is important to recognise that people who are on the autistic spectrum may have neither a learning disability nor a mental illness, for autism is neither of those things. Conversely, people with autism may also have a coexisting

learning disability or mental health problem; the one does not preclude the other.

A proper and clear understanding among professionals in the health and social care and education sectors is vital in the early identification and treatment of mental ill health. Indeed, it is vital that, in wider society, autism is better understood and that, in areas such as employment and further education, those with autism can make a positive contribution. The report by NAS, entitled 'You Need to Know', very clearly identifies these issues and makes robust recommendations for health and social care and for education. I met NAS in October last year to hear their views and to get a better appreciation of their report and recommendations. At the time I agreed that the recommendations had considerable merit and that we would look at how best we could deliver them through the regional ASD network and the new autism strategy.

Members will be aware that significant improvements in autism services, particularly for children, have been made over the past three years, since the ASD action plan was published in 2009. For example, waiting times for assessment and diagnosis for children have dropped dramatically, down from more than 12 months to 13 weeks across all health and social care trusts. The number of front line specialist ASD practitioners has doubled from around 40 in 2008-09 to 80 in 2011. Furthermore, we now have ASD co-ordinators in place in all five HSC trusts and a regional co-ordinator, who together are taking forward a programme to improve ASD services in each trust.

Assessment and diagnosis are only the start of the journey for those with autism. More significant will be the identification and provision of interventions and services to meet their needs throughout their life. Awareness and treatment of other conditions is also a vital element, and that was the reason behind the development of 'Six Steps of Autism Care', which was published in October 2011. The guiding principle of 'Six Steps of Autism Care' is the promotion of a care pathway where the child or young person and their family are central to the process. The document provides an overview of the journey from the diagnosis of ASD through to ongoing assessment and on to interventions and services. It is an invaluable tool for primary care practitioners, health and education professionals, parents, carers and specialists alike. Importantly, it will bring consistency across Northern Ireland.

You can expect the same access to assessment, diagnosis and interventions no matter where you live.

Step 2 sets out the requirement to deal with autism assessments through multidisciplinary teams, including child and adolescent mental health services. In fact, 'Six Steps of Autism Care' includes a specific regional protocol that sets out the arrangements for joint working between ASD services and specialist CAMHS when a child or a young person has a co-occurring mental health need or where these concerns exist. I fully acknowledge that we still have some way to go until this protocol is fully implemented across all trusts. In some trusts there are resource issues and there is a need to reconfigure teams. However, all the trusts have indicated that they are committed to full implementation of the protocol, and parents and families should begin to see the benefits over the coming months.

Members will know that the Autism Act, which came into force in August 2011, requires my Department to lead on the development of a cross-departmental strategy that sets out how the needs of those with autism and their families will be met throughout their life. The strategy is to be published in May 2013 after full public consultation and the appropriate approvals by the Executive. Significant work has already been completed in the development of the strategy.

A project board has been established, with representation from all Departments, some key voluntary sector organisations including NAS, the Health and Social Care Board and trusts and those affected by autism. The project board has completed an initial consultation exercise through a series of engagement events across Northern Ireland to take views and identify priorities to be taken forward in the strategy. The engagement events were facilitated by the voluntary sector with active participation from the relevant Departments and agencies. Officials advise that this has been a very worthwhile exercise, providing us with a wealth of material to inform the strategy.

In addition, recognising that not all of those in the autism community can participate in this type of engagement event, my Department made available an online questionnaire and has received a significant and positive response. Officials are now in the process of evaluating

the feedback received during pre-consultation. We anticipate that a draft document for consultation will be developed by the end of the summer, and I will bring it to the Executive for approval before it is launched for public consultation. Although the Act does not require it, our intention is to also issue an action plan setting out in the short, medium and long term the specific actions that Departments and agencies will take to address disadvantages being felt by those with autism. Of course, that means that the strategy and the action plan must acknowledge the most recent research and information available, and reports such as 'You Need to Know' are key components of that evidence base. It is not only important to take account of research in developing the strategy; we must continually examine best practice in how we develop and deliver our services.

6.45 pm

The Autism Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 also requires my Department to provide data on the prevalence of autism in order to publish and update the strategy and to enable the Northern Ireland Departments to implement it effectively. A prevalence of autism subgroup has been established to take that work forward, and it is in the process of establishing a base rate for children with autism in the HSC trusts. Also, as part of the planned process to modernise the child health system, improvements to enable better recording and monitoring of ASD in each HSC trust are under way. That will also have the capacity to identify co-occurring conditions, including mental health conditions. Parallel to establishing that group, I have appointed a voluntary sector organisation to chair a research subcommittee of the autism project board. It will be a key role of that subcommittee to bring the most up-to-date research and evidence to the attention of service providers across all Departments and agencies, with the potential to report on whether such evidence is being implemented effectively.

I trust that that gives Members a good idea of the range of actions we are already taking or plan to take to improve services for those with autism. A number of Members raised specific points. Some of those have been covered, but I will go through them briefly.

Mr Bradley raised the issue of limited data on ADHD. I will suggest to the prevalence subgroup that it looks at that area to see what additional

data might be gathered. Mr Brady referred to data on co-occurring conditions. That issue is being addressed through the prevalence subgroup of the project board, and the review of the child health system will address that specific need.

Gordon Dunne raised the issue of educational support structures in schools and training for teachers. The education sector is playing a key role in the development of the autism strategy and the action plan. My officials will work with Department of Education officials to ensure that a joined-up approach is advanced.

Seán Lynch questioned the support for families. The integrated care pathways that support families and children to get the right help at the right time are key elements of the protocol for co-operation between ASD services and specialist CAMHS.

Ross Hussey pointed out that CAMHS is overstretched and that parents with autistic children feel that they are not getting full support. The aim of the regional protocol, as identified in 'Six Steps of Autism Care', is to improve that situation by placing the child and their family at the centre of the process, where ASD services and specialist CAMHS work together to assist the family through the care pathway. Mr McCarthy raised the issue of waiting lists, and, as I indicated, waiting lists have been reduced from one year to 13 weeks. It is our intention that that would also apply to CAMHS.

Pam Brown brought up the Bamford recommendations. The regional ASD action plan and the Bamford report 'Comprehensive CAMHS' emphasised the need for ASD specialist CAMHS to be family- and child-centred. I am pleased at the progress that has been made in that direction through the regional protocol. There is still much to do, and we hope that that will be highlighted in the autism strategy and the action plan.

Paula Bradley raised the issues of adults' reluctance to seek help and the bullying of ASD sufferers. The awareness aspect of the strategy should highlight those issues and others, with the aim of reducing stigma and encouraging people to seek help. Of course, early intervention in the development of mental illness is crucial to avoid a worsening of the condition. Awareness among the public at large should also help with the identification and reduction of bullying.

I once again thank the House for bringing these matters to our attention. I hope that you have received some assurance that improvements have been made and that we will continue to make improvements that are based on the most up-to-date research and evidence available to us.

Mr Craig: I support the motion tabled by the all-party group on autism. It is important that we as an Assembly recognise that many children in Northern Ireland have autism. It is defined as a lifelong development disability, and many people across the Province are either directly or indirectly affected by it. It is a spectrum condition, which means that, while all people with autism share three main areas of difficulty — social interaction, social communication and social imagination — the condition will affect each person in a different way.

I found myself fully agreeing with many Members around the House today. It can lead to mental issues, but autism itself is not a mental condition. All of us have learnt that over the past four to five years, with the whole issue of the 2011 Act. Indeed, recent research carried out by the National Autistic Society Northern Ireland through the "You Need to Know" campaign has been well documented and sends out a clear message from parents and health professionals on how best we as legislators can effect positive change for children with autism in Northern Ireland.

The implementation of the Autism Act is a means to address many of the concerning findings through this research to better implement a positive way forward for those with autism. Many recommendations are made throughout the research document, and many important points can be noted from the qualitative and quantitative analysis of parents, which can be considered in the implementation of the legislation. Autism, while not existing as an individual mental health problem, must be addressed. As many colleagues pointed out in the debate, the research in England suggests that seven out of 10 children with autism also have a co-existing mental health problem.

Child and adolescent mental health services in Northern Ireland have recognised the need for a stepped approach that places the main focus on the person, according to their specific needs. Through the 2006 Bamford review, a clear case was presented for collaborative work to be conducted across Departments to treat the

broad issue of mental health among children in all-inclusive way to support those with other mental health problems such as anxiety disorder and obsessive compulsive disorder. Isolation from social context can encourage such disorders among children with autism, and that is a problem that should be addressed more collectively.

A joined-up approach with collaboration between the Health Department, health trusts, the Department of Education and schools can provide adequate support for children with autism and help them to live a happy and rewarding life where they can have the same well-being as any other child. The role that education plays in the acknowledgement of the needs and professional help that can be administered to those on the autistic spectrum cannot be underestimated. The report draws attention to the fact that 48% of parents surveyed believe that their child was adversely affected by the lack of appropriate educational provision. This outcome is not acceptable, and it is important that the issue be dealt with to increase confidence in the education service provided to those with autistic needs.

School experiences and settings are important mechanisms in meeting the needs of children with autism. The report says that giving teachers and schools greater training will result in an easier and more worthwhile experience for an autistic child.

Expertise should be provided to families. They should be well informed of the services provided by CAMHS. That is important for relatives who must come to terms with having a child who has autism. It may be necessary to introduce a range of measures to support families who have a child on the autistic spectrum. Living with someone with autism can require a complete lifestyle change. Indeed, that is something that I witnessed, as it was my childminder who got me involved in the whole autism issue. I can vouch for the fact that, when you have a child with autism, your life is turned upside down. It is not like a normal child when it grows up. In many respects, you can allow a young teenager to get on with his own life, but autistic children will never be in a position where they are fully independent. Parents and relatives have a huge role to play in continuing to provide support for them throughout their life.

In Northern Ireland, we have limited records of children with autism in each trust area who suffer from mental health problems. Again, the report suggests that data should be collected from across the health and social care trusts to better facilitate adequate care. A greater awareness of the specific numbers of children with the condition will inevitably aid the process of administering support services for them. On reflection, that is key to the overall knowledge of where there is particular need.

A significant amount of effort needs to be put into all those areas, but it would be wrong of me to stand here tonight and not commend the changes that have taken place, especially since the last mandate. First of all, I commend the Minister of Education. I was on the Education Committee in the previous mandate, and the one thing that appalled me was the special educational needs review that was brought to the Committee. That was universally disliked, but, in fairness to the new Minister, he has turned that on its head, brought new proposals to the Committee and is consulting the Committee to get those changes right. His approach to it all has been a welcome change.

The one thing that impressed me tonight was the contribution from our two Ulster Unionist colleagues. In the previous mandate, there was no such input from that party; in fact, if anything, it was obstructive. I commend the constructive points put forward by those two Members and look forward to them working with the all-party group to improve the situation.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety goes may be a party colleague, but I will say this: when it comes to autism, there is a basic understanding of the issue. As a colleague, he worked with the charity that I chose when I was mayor, and he got a better understanding of what it is to be autistic. He has been very, very helpful in his approach to it. We have had several meetings with autism charities on issues that they have raised. We are seeing the whole issue move forward with the review group that he has put in place. I believe we will see a genuine strategy put in place by the lead Department to tackle a lot of the issues. Will we get it right? Probably not, but the one thing I know about this Minister is that the effort will be put into trying to get it right. All in the Chamber owe our thanks to the Minister for at least putting the effort into making changes for the better for all those with autism.

I commend the motion to the House and hope you all support it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly views with concern the findings of the Northern Ireland-based research carried out by the National Autistic Society into the mental health of children with autism for the "You Need to Know" campaign; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to take on board the main findings of the research as his Department prepares to implement the Autism Act (NI) 2011.

Adjourned at 6.59 pm.



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