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Contents

Ministerial Statements

Suicide Prevention: Protect Life Strategy	85
North/South Ministerial Council: Education	92
Public Expenditure 2012-13: June Monitoring	96

Executive Committee Business

Budget (No. 2) Bill: Consideration Stage	106
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Oral Answers to Questions

Social Development.....	107
Agriculture and Rural Development	112

Committee Business

Public Accounts Committee Reports and Memoranda of Reply.....	120
Northern Ireland Assembly: Membership.....	139
Penalty Charges (Prescribed Amounts) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012: Prayer of Annulment.....	150

Adjournment

Primary Schools: East Belfast	171
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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 26 June 2012

The Assembly met at 10.30 am (Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Molloy] in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Ministerial Statements

Suicide Prevention: Protect Life Strategy

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): With your permission, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I wish to make a statement on the publication of the refreshed Protect Life suicide prevention strategy and the importance of cross-departmental involvement and ministerial leadership in its delivery.

On 31 May 2012, the Executive endorsed and approved the publication of the refreshed Protect Life strategy. The original strategy was published in October 2006 and was initially due to run until 2011. At the request of the suicide strategy implementation body, it was subsequently agreed to refresh and extend the strategy to the end of the 2013-14 financial year, the aim being to maintain the momentum in addressing suicide prevention and develop further actions based on our learning from implementing Protect Life to date. Independent overall evaluation of Protect Life is being taken forward during 2012. The findings from that evaluation will help to inform the development of the next phase of suicide prevention policy from 2014 onwards.

When discussing suicide statistics, we must never forget that every death leaves a heartbroken family and many unanswered questions. Having personally experienced the sense of devastation felt by families and communities bereaved by suicide, I have made suicide prevention one of my top priorities. It is, therefore, important from the outset that I record my appreciation of the central role that bereaved families and local communities have played in the development and ongoing implementation of Protect Life. Their courage

in the face of such personal tragedy is truly inspirational.

A lot has happened since Protect Life was published in October 2006, not least the increase in funding to support the implementation of the strategy, which now stands at almost £7 million per annum. Progress has included the establishment of the Lifeline crisis response service, local research on suicide, suicide prevention training and joint departmental working, such as the collaboration between my Department and the Department of Education on the development of a pupils' emotional health and well-being programme. Despite these programmes and a very high level of commitment across statutory and community sectors, the Northern Ireland suicide rate remains stubbornly high at around 15 to 16 deaths per 100,000 of our population. This has been the case since 2006, following an unprecedented rise in suicide rates over 2005 and 2006, when recorded suicide rates almost doubled those in the earlier part of the decade. I believe that the introduction of more robust recording processes following the restructuring of the coroner's office in 2004 partially explains this and that the current figures are a true reflection of the actual suicide rate in Northern Ireland. In essence, there was probably under-reporting prior to 2005 and, although our high rate of suicide is unwelcome, it is better to have an accurate picture of what is happening than to work with artificially low figures.

The bottom line is that almost 300 people a year are dying by suicide, which is almost six times the number of deaths due to road traffic accidents. Tragically, some families have lost more than one close relation to suicide, and the burden of suicide impacts more on certain areas and certain groups. The suicide rate is twice as high in deprived areas, and males are three times more likely than females to die by suicide. Young males in deprived areas are particularly

vulnerable, as are marginalised groups such as those who are unemployed or people with mental illness and addiction problems.

The refresh of Protect Life has drawn on learning from a wide range of sources, including a review of international evidence-based best practice; local research; evaluation of component parts of the strategy; and engagement with community groups. Recurring themes from these sources include the need for training for front line service providers; an enhanced focus on addressing deliberate self-harm; the use of IT communications to reach younger people; a greater focus on males from deprived areas; and proactive outreach in mental health services. These issues are picked up in the refreshed strategy. For example, while maintaining the original strategy's long-term goal of reducing suicide rates in Northern Ireland, the refreshed Protect Life sets a new aim of reducing:

“the differential in the suicide rate between deprived and non-deprived areas”.

With a marked differential in suicide rates between deprived and non-deprived areas, particularly for males in the 15 to 45 age group, I believe that reducing this differential has the best potential to save lives.

It is widely accepted that suicide is a societal issue and that no Department can tackle the issue on its own. Enhanced cross-departmental working is vital. I have met other Ministers regularly over the past year to explore how other Departments can play a greater role in suicide prevention, and I have been struck by my colleagues' willingness to be involved. There is definitely now a greater impetus for a cross-government and cross-agency approach to suicide prevention.

An enhanced cross-departmental approach is reflected in the revised strategy, which contains new actions falling to Departments other than the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. These include involving sporting organisations in delivering positive mental health and well-being messages, identifying specific arts interventions that improve mental health and providing community-based health checks in rural areas. The ministerial co-ordination group has an important role in ensuring that suicide prevention is a priority for all relevant Departments. I aim to ensure that regular meetings of the ministerial co-ordination group are held to drive forward

cross-departmental working on the prevention of suicide and self-harm.

A reduction in suicide will continue to be a major challenge, particularly against a backdrop of increasing economic hardship and high levels of deprivation. The refreshed Protect Life strategy provides the strategic direction for our combined efforts over the next two years.

Ms S Ramsey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement. It would be childish of me not to welcome the fact that we have got to the point of getting it.

The Minister has highlighted the number of people who die by suicide every year and the impact that that has not only on families but on communities. It should not be underestimated. I commend the work that takes place daily in our areas. Without it, the reality is that we would be looking at higher figures. In his statement, the Minister mentioned the commitment of ministerial colleagues. I welcome that. I have seen that commitment. Over the past number of weeks, I have met a number of Ministers, including Ministers from OFMDFM. I met them because, despite all the rhetoric about suicide and self-harm and it being a target and a focus, the ministerial subgroup has not met in 18 months. I do not want to sound too negative: I welcome the statement today, and I welcome the commitment of not only the Health Minister but other Ministers. However, the fact that the subgroup has not met in 18 months does not send out the clear message that this is a priority for the Executive.

Although the refreshed strategy is to be welcomed, will you, Minister, give us an idea of what the agenda will be for the ministerial meeting this week? How often will the group meet? Can we have regular updates? The funding for the Protect Life strategy is being extended. Does that mean that new groups that might be formed in the wake of an incident in local areas or new fresh ideas that we gather through research cannot access the current funding?

Mr Poots: There are a number of issues. When I came into office last year, I met quite a number of groups that were involved in suicide. We hosted a conference to bring together all the groups. One of the things that I observed

at quite an early point was that an awful lot of people wanted to assist in preventing suicide and self-harm and an awful lot of people had suffered themselves and did not want others to suffer. So many people wanted to help and to get involved, but sometimes it did not have the focus that it should have had, so we brought together all the groups to see whether we could get a better working relationship and a better understanding of what needed to be done.

I have met all the Ministers in bilateral meetings to discuss suicide and what more we can do to meet the issues. As you rightly indicated, the joint ministerial working group will meet this week. At that meeting, we will discuss things such as how we deal with this in the media. Is it something that we wish to highlight through a fairly strong and vociferous advertising campaign? We have been working very closely with the Scottish, who went down that route. Although it could not be described as empirical, the evidence that the Scots have gathered thus far indicates that that has been a positive campaign. We will look at all those things and seek to address them, and we will consider how we, as Departments, can work together. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development will be involved in the group from here on in, which I welcome.

We have identified around £7 million for Protect Life. That funding is, per head of population, well ahead of any other part of the UK. We remain committed to that. I want to ensure that funding is well spent and that we do not give out funding for the sake of appeasing a group here or there. The Member represents the Colin area. Very good work has gone on in that area. As we all know, that was a cluster of suicide; we heard about it all the time. Thankfully, in the past year, we are aware of only two incidents of suicide. That is two too many, but, thankfully, that is a massive reduction in what went on heretofore. That is a demonstration of where things are working well. We need to look at where people are making the best impacts, learn from that and invest in that.

10.45 am

Mr Wells: I would be interested to hear the Minister's assessment of the role of the internet in the very worrying trend of suicides and whether he believes that the strategy will deal with that issue.

Mr Poots: The internet is a powerful tool. It can be a really good thing, but sometimes it can be a really bad thing. For example, it is useful for promoting support, awareness-raising and signposting. Groups such as the National Union of Students and the Union of Students in Ireland use it to reach out to students, which is good. Lifeline operates a website, and the Public Health Agency maintains the Minding Your Head website. However, social networking sites have the potential for negative outcomes. Vulnerable people are often bullied on the internet, and some sites promote self-harm and suicide. There is also the potential for those sites to be used for memorials when someone takes their own life. That is a concern, as they often attract inappropriate tributes that diminish the finality of suicide and almost create a temporary cult status around the deceased that may encourage others to engage in copycat behaviour. We all know that the copycat effect of suicide among young people is very significant. The Member represented Ballynahinch for many years, when it was part of South Down. Over that period, a number of copycat suicides took place in that small town, which caused huge consternation, shock and devastation in that community.

We need to make best use of the internet and seek to clamp down on those inappropriate uses. The UK Council for Child Internet Safety was established to help to protect children from exposure to potentially harmful content on the internet and in video games, which is useful given that there are those who promote suicide. Much is being done in respect of the internet. We need to ensure that we continue to make best use of it and, where possible, clamp down on episodes of it being used inappropriately.

Mr McCallister: Like colleagues, I welcome the statement and the changes to and refresh of the strategy. Does the Minister agree with me that it is important that we continue with a robust evaluation of this at all times and that we should never be afraid to change something that is proven to be an ineffective intervention and to change direction? This is simply too important not to get it right.

Mr Poots: I fully agree with the Member. Evaluation needs to be robust in the first place. On occasions, we need to say to people that, while they are well meaning, absolutely genuine and have been working very hard, what they have been doing does not actually work and is not a good use of their time or our money.

That is what evaluation is about. It is about identifying what is best and what does not work well and investing in what works well in respect of both our staff's time and our own finances.

The initial findings of the evaluation were that community engagement in the delivery of the strategy has been very strong. It is obvious that there is huge community support for reducing the incidence of suicide. Work under Protect Life has helped to reduce the stigma attached to suicide and raise awareness of suicide. The evaluation found that there is a need for greater clarity of roles and responsibilities. Evidence on the impact of Lifeline is needed. We need more robust evaluation of Lifeline and its work. There is a need to balance innovation and evidence. It was found that there were too many actions, so those need to be reclassified and streamlined somewhat. There remains a perception that suicide is a health issue. Suicide needs to be contained within a wider range of departmental strategies. It is important that other Ministers are able to identify their role in suicide prevention within their strategies.

Mr McDevitt: I am sure that the House will join me in expressing our shock, sorrow and condolences to the family of 37-year-old Christopher Stokes, who was found hanged in Maghaberry prison yesterday and, unfortunately, despite the best efforts of staff, did not survive. What steps are being taken in the prison population to ensure that young men and women who are at risk of suicide are given better support? How will the Protect Life strategy work for that group?

Mr Poots: The prison population is a reflection of failures in society, and when young people end up in prison it is because things have failed dramatically for many years. When I chaired the Committee of the Centre way back in 2000, we did work on young people who ended up in prison and young people in general, and we discovered that something in the region of 85% to 90% of prisoners' children ended up in prison and about 90% of them gave birth to children before the age of 20. A cycle of children was being born destined to fail. We need to address the issues at the very earliest point in a child's life, from prenatal right through to early years. There is a wide group of people who do not have parenting skills and are bringing children into the world. It may shock the Assembly, but a child who suffers three or four adverse incidents in the first three years of its life is

10 times more likely to contemplate suicide or self-harm as a young adult. So one can see that many of the problems that have been identified even in the prison population go right back to childhood and are about how a child is raised from the start. Work needs to be done by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, particularly in conjunction with the education sector, because those children are not school-ready, they are not nurtured properly and they are not given the proper love and care when they are being raised. When they become young adults, they do not know how to form relationships, are ill educated and are far more likely to end up in the justice system.

The South Eastern Trust has now taken over responsibility for the care of prisoners. Unfortunately, massive numbers of prisoners are on prescription drugs, and there is a drug culture in prisons that goes beyond prescription drugs. There are huge problems with a legal and illegal drug culture that we need to tackle and address. It will be difficult to do that because we are dealing with people whose lives are already very fractured and vulnerable and people who have ended up in jail because, very often, they have been raised in the worst possible circumstances. Work needs to be done there. We have good people working in prisons. Their work may often not be rewarding, but they are doing their solid best to support people in prison and to give them appropriate care. Sadly, incidents such as yesterday's continue to happen, and we want them to be eliminated.

Mr McCarthy: I welcome, as others have, the statement this morning, which is progressive and, indeed, has the potential to get on top of this important issue. In his statement, the Minister mentioned community groups, and I welcome the involvement of other Departments. He commended community groups, as I do, for trying to do what they can to get on top of the problem. He mentioned £7 million per annum, which sounds fine. However, the groups are always, as far as I am aware, complaining about delays in getting funding to carry out their work. Now there is a new organisation, FASA. Well, it is new to the Ards peninsula; I attended the opening. It has been going for some time and does tremendous work in prevention. The Minister mentioned prevention. I want to ensure that funding will go to organisations like that, not at the last minute but so that they can plan their work ahead to prevent these things in the first place.

Mr Poots: I tend to agree with the Member. Often, funding for organisations tends to involve long-drawn-out application processes and all of those things, whatever Department it happens to be. Co-ordinators and people who carry out good work often spend far too much time chasing funding. That is a waste of that resource and the individual's time. I indicated that I thought it very important that funding is very focused and very targeted on where we are actually delivering and can see real benefits from it. We can take a little comfort that the suicide rate dropped last year. After having gone up year on year on year to 313, it dropped by 26 persons last year. That is significant, but it still falls well short of where we would like to be. There is a huge amount more work to be done. I am sure that the Member will be glad to know that we fund and support FASA, and the work that it does has credibility to ensure that it is funded.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. It is timely because in Newry, in my constituency, three young men have, very tragically, taken their own life in the past two weeks. Minister, in your statement you talked about setting a new aim to reduce the differential in suicide rates between deprived and non-deprived areas, and you talked about interdepartmental co-operation. Is DSD taking a proactive role in the ministerial subcommittee? Will the Minister ensure that resources are put into deprived areas to lessen the impact of benefit cuts, such as those that are coming through welfare reform in the very near future?

Mr Poots: DSD is one of the Departments that we have had bilateral meetings with, and there is a significant degree of willingness on the part of DSD to work with our Department on issues around suicide.

One of the contributors to suicide is alcohol abuse, and a high percentage of people who have taken their own life are found with alcohol in their system. One area that we have been looking at is the minimum pricing of alcohol, which is strongly supported by the psychiatrists who deal with suicide daily. The 'Belfast Telegraph' or whoever can come out with a survey that shows one thing, but all of the empirical evidence that is coming to me says the absolute opposite. We have people who use drink to try to raise their spirits and their morale, and it actually works as a depressant.

Far too many young people are getting alone or into very small groups largely based around bottles of cider and cheap alcohol. They become involved in antisocial activity and are not going out and mixing with large groups of young people. They are not having the same engagement and are becoming isolated and depressed. All these things have very negative impacts. DSD has particular roles to play, and we will work very closely with DSD on these issues. It will participate in the group.

Mr Durkan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement, and I commend him on his continued commitment to suicide prevention. I also commend all the groups that are doing sterling work in this regard, including Foyle Search and Rescue in my constituency. Can the Minister outline what support and services are available to families and communities bereaved by suicide?

11.00 am

Mr Poots: We have a number of bereavement organisations in Northern Ireland. Cruse is one of the better known, but there are many organisations that support people through bereavement. As I was coming in this morning, I heard a very interesting discussion on the programme, 'Mornings with Frank Mitchell'. It was not about suicide; it was about the tragic case of the little boy who was run over by his grandmother in a completely freak accident and the support that counselling had been to that family at that time. It is important that we continue to support counselling services.

In respect of mental health services, we have crisis home team treatments; a psychological therapies implementation plan; and 'Beating the Blues', which is a computerised programme. Those things can be helpful to some extent. We also have counselling and bereavement support in local communities, and there is a family voices forum, which we are funding. We provide funding to quite a lot of groups that offer counselling support and counselling services. I have absolutely no doubt that some people will want to do it their own way and will not want to get counselling. However, many others will. Some people may think that they do not need counselling, but, ultimately, they will end up receiving counselling because they cannot do it on their own. Therefore, it is important to have counselling services available to people.

Sadly, we are acutely aware that, very often when one member of a family takes their own life, it can lead to other members of the family taking their own life. In my constituency, I know of two families where three members of each family took their own life. That is shockingly sad for the remaining family members.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement and commend him and his Executive colleagues for the progress that they have made in taking this important issue forward. I want to ask the Minister about the vulnerability of farmers and those in the rural community who are very much at risk of death by suicide, at times even more so than our young people who are the stereotypical people you first think about. What work is his Department doing with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, the Ulster Farmers' Union, NIAPA and other such organisations?

Mr Poots: Thankfully, it appears that the number of farmers taking their own life is not as high as it was. As I said, suicide is linked to the economy, and when the unemployment rates rises, the suicide rate rises as well. Farming is a little more profitable than it was a number of years ago. I recall so well that, in 1996, many people I knew took their own life after the BSE crisis. All of a sudden, people who had been operating relatively successfully had huge business debts that they could not contend with. Profitability was absolutely out the window.

It can be very easy for farmers to take their own life because, very often, they have accessibility to firearms, the rope in the barn or poisons. All those things are available to farmers. Greater work is going on. The Public Health Agency goes out to sale yards and places where there are large gatherings of farmers and talks to them about health issues across the board. The agency is happy to talk to farmers, whether it is about cholesterol levels or mental health issues, and if concerns are identified, it will ensure that there is the appropriate follow-up. Farmers can become very isolated. Farming is a much more isolated line of work than would have been the case 20 or 30 years ago. Farmers who are very isolated have that opportunity to tell people that they have concerns and anxieties and, maybe, ideation of self-harm. They can have someone to talk to in the system and someone to help them in that time of need.

Ms Lo: I welcome the Minister's statement. From my previous experience as a social worker and community worker, I have seen the devastation for families when a member of the family takes their own life. Obviously, that has very tragic consequences. What action, particularly cross-departmental measures, will the refreshed strategy be taking to reduce suicide rates in the Traveller community? Suicide rates are six times higher in that community than in the general population, with 11% of Traveller deaths being due to suicide.

Mr Poots: That is actually quite difficult to identify. Work was done on an all-Ireland Traveller health strategy, which found that Traveller males were 6.6 times more likely to take their own life than the general population. That equates to around four persons in Northern Ireland. However, as it is a small community, it is harder to assess whether that is a continuum or a one-off. In 2010, the Public Health Agency established a Traveller health and well-being forum. As a consequence, a number of initiatives have been targeted at the Traveller community. Those include a health improvement programme, emotional health and well-being training, and parent and child support programmes, which goes back to what I said about good parenting. A wider review of service uptake by Travellers is to commence in September this year. Those initiatives are partly funded under the Protect Life strategy, which contains actions to ensure that support services are available for marginalised and disadvantaged groups, such as Travellers.

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement and the way in which he has answered the questions put to him. Like the Minister, I heard that very harrowing interview on the radio this morning. What struck me is that we in rural areas do not have the same access to counselling as those in urban areas do. I want to follow on from Phil Flanagan's question about rural isolation and farmers. Rural Support, an organisation funded by the Agriculture Department, can signpost people in distress to organisations. However, the difficulty is that, unless you are still at school, people in rural areas do not have access to ongoing counselling support. Will the Minister take steps to address that anomaly and ensure that there is equality and equity across our communities, to ensure that everybody has access to

counselling support when they are feeling depressed and suicidal?

Mr Poots: The Member will, of course, know a little about this, having been employed previously in the role of Chair of the Health Committee and as Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development. The interests of the rural community are represented on the regional suicide implementation board by the Rural Support network, which also engages HSC structures. Rural-specific initiatives, supported to date by the Rural Support helpline and Rural Connect, include mental health and suicide prevention awareness sessions held in farmers' markets and the health-promoting farmers' programme, as I indicated. Community grant programmes have funded rural programmes delivering counselling services, bereavement support and mentoring projects for people at risk of suicide.

Where do we go from here? Obviously, we have brought the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development in to the ministerial group on suicide. I see that as a positive thing. She can bring to it her take on what is required in rural communities. We are looking at one-stop shops, which have been piloted and which could be rolled out, and we will look at any other potential vehicles that could be used to make a difference in remote geographical areas. So there is a course of things that we can look at and address, but, again, it is about spending the money that we have wisely and making best use of our money. Therefore, we need to be very targeted and focused in ensuring that the money is directed where we can see real tangible benefits. I think that that is something that we can achieve.

Mr Anderson: I welcome the statement and thank the Minister for bringing it to the Assembly. The Minister will be aware of the number of people, especially our young people, who engage in self-harm. What consideration has been given to the link between self-harm and suicide?

Mr Poots: Self-harm, particularly when it is repeated, is a high risk factor for completed suicide. Very often, it is just a cry for help. Two main actions on deliberate self-harm are the DSH registry and the mentoring self-harm interagency network (SHINE) in the north-west. The latter is a tie-in with Altnagelvin A&E, whereby patients presenting with injuries

due to repeated self-harm are offered referral to community-based groups specialising in mentoring and counselling for people who self-harm. It has had a good rate of success. Over 95% of the participants have shown a reduction in their repeat self-harm behaviour. So that is something that we can look on positively and, perhaps, we can look at how it can be replicated elsewhere.

The lifestyle and coping survey of 3,600 16-year-olds in secondary schools in Northern Ireland found a 10% incidence of deliberate self-harm. That is very significant. The main causes were bullying, relationship difficulties, struggles with sexual orientation and, for others, exam pressures. NICE-issued guidance on long-term management of self-harm in 2011 recommended a risk management plan as part of the care plan, with an aim to reduce the psychological, pharmacological, social and relational risk factors, and offering psychological interventions.

Earlier NICE guidance on the shorter-term management — the first 48 hours — covered assessment, discharge and follow-up. That recommends supportive environments, such as quiet rooms, at A&E to minimise stress. However, we will be looking at something different. The Belfast Trust is looking to identify quiet rooms away from A&E, because, potentially, the A&E environment is not a good environment for people who are suffering from fairly significant mental health issues and contemplating suicide. In all of that, and regarding all acts of deliberate self-harm, including in people over 65, there is evidence of suicidal intent, and we should regard that as being the case until we can prove otherwise.

Mr McClarty: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. Is it not the convention that Members who are not present for part or all of a ministerial statement are not called to ask a question?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Anyone who is not present for the start of the statement or present for only part of it will be called at the end; anyone who comes in close to the end is called at the very end. That is what we did today.

Mr McClarty: Further to that point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I have just witnessed an individual who came in after the Minister finished his statement be called to ask a question.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: We check the timings on a regular basis, but it is about trying to accommodate those who come in at the very end or close to the end and hear part of the statement. We feel that we followed that procedure today, but we will check it.

North/South Ministerial Council: Education

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education):

Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, with your permission I wish to make a statement, in compliance with section 52 of the NI Act 1998, regarding a meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in education sectoral format. The meeting was held at Farmleigh in Dublin on 15 June 2012. I represented the Executive as Minister for Education, along with the Minister for Social Development, Nelson McCausland MLA. The Irish Government were represented by Ruairí Quinn TD, Minister for Education and Skills. This statement has been agreed with Minister McCausland and is made on behalf of us both. I will summarise the main points from the meeting, ranging across all the agreed areas of education co-operation.

11.15 am

With regard to the education survey in border regions, we noted progress made towards the development of a questionnaire and mechanisms for a joint attitudinal survey to inform cross-border pupil movement and school planning. We agreed the planned next steps for the conduct of the survey and agreed that a final report on the results and proposals on the way forward will be available for consideration no later than the first NSMC education meeting of 2013.

In regard to educational underachievement, we noted that the educational underachievement working group met in March 2012 to review and advance its work programme. The working group has reviewed progress on the production of a joint report by the two inspectorates on best practice in literacy and numeracy in post-primary settings and the potential for a similar publication on good practice in supporting those with special educational needs. The Council welcomed the working group's planned consultation with Children's Books Ireland on the potential for a proposal to encourage young teenagers' involvement in reading. The Council noted that both Departments are giving consideration to supporting maths week in 2012, and discussions are taking place between officials on the sharing of best practice on attendance and retention.

In regard to teacher qualifications, we welcomed the ongoing liaison between the two teaching councils on issues relating to professional recognition and registration in both jurisdictions. We noted that a meeting between both councils was held on 14 June 2012. That focused on mobility, accreditation and recognition of qualifications of teachers in a cross-border context. The Council noted that their objective is to facilitate full mobility of teachers across both jurisdictions. While recognising that both teaching councils were working closely to resolve outstanding issues, I expressed my disappointment that progress in that area was taking longer than I had anticipated.

We noted the ongoing consideration being given by Marino College of Further Education in Dublin to the University of Ulster's proposal to deliver a preparatory course to enable students to undertake assessments administered by Marino College leading to the Scrúdú Cáilíochta sa Ghaeilge, which is the Irish language qualification. We also noted the continuing interest shown by St Mary's University College, Belfast in delivering the course.

On Irish-medium education, we noted the ongoing work of a jointly funded collaborative programme for the 2011-12 academic year to support 12 Gaeltacht schools and Irish-medium schools. Their participation in the programme will be evaluated with a view to identifying teaching and learning impacts and best practice examples for wider dissemination. Analysis of feedback from participating schools has taken place, and plans to develop an action plan for 2012-13 have been initiated.

We welcomed the active participation of Irish-medium teachers from both systems in educational conferences. Twelve Irish-medium teachers from the South took part in the Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta conference in Coláiste Feirste in Belfast in March. Six Irish-medium teachers from the North took part at the Gaelscoileanna conference in Tullamore in November 2011. The Council welcomed ongoing exchanges between the two inspectorates, including their sharing of good practice in school evaluation and their plans for further paired exchanges during the 2012-13 academic year.

In regard to school, youth and teacher exchanges, we welcomed the proposed 10th SCoTENS annual conference in Cavan in October 2012 entitled 'Creative Teachers for

Creative Learners: Implications for Teacher Education'. The Council welcomed the North/South student exchanges that took place in March 2012 and ongoing work to implement the recommendations outlined in the joint inspectorate evaluation report of the dissolving boundaries project. We welcomed the continuing joint support for the Causeway programme and the North/South Education and Training Standards Committee for Youth Work in Ireland.

In regard to special educational needs, we agreed to a limited expansion of services delivered by the Middletown Centre for Autism, with a focus on ensuring a sustainable future for the centre and supported joint efforts to ensure the agreed expansion is delivered as soon as possible. The Council noted the continued progress made by the centre in delivering its training and advisory service and research and information service to children, professionals and parents.

Ministers agreed that the North/South Ministerial Council in education format should meet again on 17 October 2012.

Miss M McIlveen: The Minister will be aware that the Education Committee visited the Middletown centre and was very impressed by the commitment of those involved. However, the original remit of the centre was to help those suffering from severe autism who could not be assisted through special schools. Can the Minister tell the House when he hopes the centre will achieve its full objectives and outline the expanded services to which he referred?

Mr O'Dowd: The centre was created over 10 years ago. The delivery of autism services has evolved in both jurisdictions over that time. The North/South Ministerial Council has taken the opportunity to have a full evaluation of where Middletown now sits for both jurisdictions. As the Member rightly states, the Education Committee recently visited the centre, and I believe that its remarks about the ongoing work there were quite positive. At the meeting, we agreed to a limited development of the centre.

What we in the North will be looking for from the centre — Minister Quinn will be looking for something different for his jurisdiction — is an increase in outreach support to children, from the current level of approximately 10 children a year to 40 children in year 1 and to 60 children from year 2 onwards; expansion of the research and information services to

enable increased focus on the research being carried out from working with the children who are supported by the centre; and an evaluation of staffing requirements to ensure renewed focus on the delivery of front line services and the achievement of best value for money and outcomes for young people. That is the planned way forward to meet our requirements for the Middletown centre.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. First, I would like to welcome the progress on the education survey in border regions. I think that that is a very important initiative that people in border communities will welcome. The Minister touched on the progress made to date in the recognition of teaching qualifications but mentioned that he is somewhat disappointed that that has taken longer than was anticipated. Can he provide a further update on the progress made to date and say how he expects to see that taken forward?

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Member for the question. Although there has been regular engagement between the teaching councils, I have expressed my disappointment that we have not reached a conclusion following those discussions. I hope that, at the next meeting, the General Teaching Council (GTC) and the Teaching Council of Ireland (TCI) reach agreement on recognition in the southern jurisdiction of qualifications of teachers from the northern jurisdiction. Our teacher qualifications are of an internationally recognised standard, and I see no reason why they cannot be recognised in the southern jurisdiction. I hope that the matter will be resolved at the next meeting of the councils. I think that, if it is not resolved, there will be further discussion about it at the next meeting in education sectoral format in October.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for his statement. I want to touch on the issue of educational underachievement. When the Department came to the Committee, we looked at the number of GCSEs and the increase in the number of grades A* to C. That is the wrong end of the spectrum; literacy and numeracy are at the other end of the spectrum. At these meetings of the NSMC, are we going to look at ideas for getting a better measurement of added value at the other end?

Mr O'Dowd: The work of the North/South Ministerial Council is about learning from each other's experiences and looking at best practice in both jurisdictions. I think that the goal of all students achieving five good GCSEs, including English and maths, is still the right goal. That is a target in our Programme for Government. However, I do not believe that education will be able to achieve that on its own. Many reports point out that we will not improve education if we simply concentrate on the classroom. That is also the case with health. We have to improve people's lives in totality and ensure that social deprivation is tackled. We also have to ensure that young people and their families have a stake in their community and in life in order to improve those things.

As regards measuring added value, that is something that I wish to return to, although I am not sure about a unitary measure for those things. Clearly, education cannot simply be measured against exam result league tables. Educationalists add value to our young people through encouragement and by giving them a sense of ownership over their lives and the community around them. So, that is much more difficult to measure, but I have no doubt that it is taking place in our education system.

Mr Rogers: I thank the Minister for his statement. Learning from each other, tackling underachievement and raising standards are great opportunities for us to deliver real, tangible cross-border benefits not only for research into autism but for the level of support for families dealing with autism. How active are the Dublin Government in supporting the Middletown Centre for Autism?

Mr O'Dowd: As I said in my report, we have now agreed a way forward for the Middletown centre. There has been some doubt around the future of the centre. We now have an agreed programme of work for that centre. The Dublin Government have been proactive in providing funding; the centre is jointly funded. We have now agreed that there are different needs in each jurisdiction. The Dublin Government's needs are different to those I have in this jurisdiction. The needs of this jurisdiction will be focused on research and outcomes for children, in the sense of accessing the centre, etc. I am confident that the Dublin Government see the Middletown centre as part of their ongoing work to improve outcomes for families and young

people with autism. There is no doubt in my mind about that.

Mr Craig: I noted the Minister's concerns about the lack of progress towards the full mobility of teachers in the answer he gave earlier. Will the Minister give the House assurances that the issues of requiring teachers to be able to speak Irish and to possess the Catholic certificate will be dealt with in the Republic of Ireland? Both issues are seen as discriminatory by those who are non-Irish speakers and non-Catholics. I suggest that there may also be an issue of adherence to EU rules allowing freedom of opportunity in the workplace.

Mr O'Dowd: Both of those matters are matters for the Dublin Government and relate to their legislation and employment requirements. Today, I have set out methodologies for people to obtain the recognised qualification in the Irish language. I am not aware of the detail with regard to the religious certificate for teaching in the Twenty-six Counties. Removal of those requirements are both matters for that jurisdiction.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. Will he tell us how many people are likely to be consulted as part of the cross-border education survey on pupil movement and school planning?

Mr O'Dowd: The final details of the numbers involved are not yet available to me, but we are talking about several thousand people being surveyed on each side of the border. Families will be contacted and questioned on their attitudes to cross-border educational delivery. We are talking about several thousands with regard to the survey.

Mrs Hale: I thank the Minister for his statement and answers so far. Let me pick up on the point my colleague made on teacher qualifications. At a time when the teaching profession is at saturation point, will the Minister assure local teachers that facilitating mobility between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland will not lead to further difficulties for newly qualified teachers in getting posts? There is serious concern that this will affect the ability of young teachers, trained in Northern Ireland at the taxpayer's expense, to secure meaningful employment in Northern Ireland.

Mr O'Dowd: I do not believe that teachers qualified here will be placed at a disadvantage. It is worth noting that the Dublin Government are building 20 new schools — not replacement schools, like those that I announced yesterday, but new schools — because of the rise in the population of young people. There is an opportunity for employment in that jurisdiction for young teachers from here. We already recognise teaching qualifications obtained in the Twenty-six Counties, but our teaching qualifications are not given equal recognition in the Twenty-six Counties. I want to reach a point where our teachers have an opportunity of employment in the Twenty-six Counties, in the same way that teachers from the Twenty-six Counties have an opportunity for employment here.

Mrs Dobson: I also thank the Minister for his statement. I note that he said he was disappointed with the slow progress on teacher qualifications on a cross-border basis. Jonathan Craig, my colleague on the Education Committee, has touched on that. On a related teacher training point, given that the Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 makes discrimination on grounds of religious belief and/or political opinion unlawful in employment, does the Minister accept that schools should reflect the diversity of Northern Ireland? Will he work with the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to seek a change in the order to remove the teacher exception?

11.30 am

Mr O'Dowd: The Member has made the point at the end of her question. All equality legislation and employment legislation is a matter for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to deal with. That is where the matter rests at this time.

Mr Allister: Staying with the issue of teacher qualification, it is clear from the statement that the Minister is much exercised about matters touching on the Irish-medium sector, but, as is evident from his answers this morning, he is much less concerned about a matter already raised; namely, the discrimination practised within Northern Ireland and cross border against Protestants on the issue of the Catholic certificate of education. Surely, that is an issue that the Minister, if he has any interest in opposing discrimination, must have discussed with his Southern counterparts, or is he, like his

colleague Conor Murphy, quite happy to peddle discrimination?

Mr O'Dowd: If the Member wishes to broaden the terms of North/South co-operation in educational format, I am happy to do so.

Public Expenditure 2012-13: June Monitoring

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I welcome the opportunity to inform the Assembly of the outcome of the 2012-13 June monitoring round. It is, of course, the first monitoring round of this financial year and, therefore, the first opportunity that the Executive have to reallocate funding amongst the Departments. Normally, I would have an opportunity to brief the Chairman of the Committee before making the statement. Just in case it is misinterpreted, I apologise for the fact that it was not possible; business moved on quicker than we had expected. He and I were due to meet about now but it has not been possible.

The presentation of the June monitoring position is focused on the non-ring-fenced resource and capital investment figures, since that is the funding that the Executive can use to deliver public services. That is consistent with the approach adopted during the 2011-12 monitoring rounds. However, the ring-fenced position, which relates to non-cash costs such as depreciation, is also included as a separate table to the statement. Furthermore, the Executive continue to monitor departmental administrative cost expenditure, and the latest position is also attached.

I will start by setting out the amount of resources that the Executive had available to allocate in this round. The 2011-15 Budget included a £30 million per annum overcommitment for both non-ring-fenced resource and capital expenditure. That set the initial starting position for this June monitoring round. However, a number of issues materially changed that position, and I will highlight those next.

First, we received additional departmental expenditure limit Barnett allocations for the 2012-13 financial year resulting from the 2011 UK Budget, the 2011 autumn statement and the 2012 UK Budget. Those Barnett additions amounted to £33 million of non-ring-fenced resource and £15.1 million capital investment. Secondly, Members will recall that the provisional out-turn outcome, which I announced on 29 May, resulted in planned resources of £46.3 million non-ring-fenced resource and £5.8 million capital investment being carried forward into 2012-13. Although the final amount to be carried forward will not be agreed with

Her Majesty's Treasury until the final out-turn in the autumn, I do not expect those figures to change materially. Therefore, the Executive have included those amounts in their in-year financial planning, and they have been made available in this monitoring round.

Thirdly, the amount of interest to be paid on our reinvestment and reform initiative borrowing this year is now expected to be £3 million lower than planned at the time of the Budget; hence, that released £3 million of resource expenditure at the centre for reallocation.

Finally, the Executive have also made a number of decisions that had an impact on the June monitoring capital investment starting position. These included, among others, the £10 million allocation to the Department for Social Development (DSD) for co-ownership agreed as part of the 2011-12 October monitoring round; the financial implications in 2012-13 of the A5-A8 decisions; and the impact of the asset management unit's capital receipts target being adjusted. These issues resulted in an additional £16.5 million of capital investment resources being available to the Executive in this round.

In total, all of these issues resulted in a starting position of £52.4 million in non-ring-fenced resource and £7.4 million of capital investment, respectively, available to the Executive for allocation. Importantly, that is before the departmental reduced requirements, internal reallocations and reclassifications have been taken into account. I will turn to those issues next.

Departments declared reduced requirements of £12.2 million in non-ring-fenced resource expenditure and £29.1 million of capital investment in this monitoring round. The most significant reduced requirement was the £2.5 million of capital investment surrendered by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) in respect of the regional stadium programme. I am disappointed with this slippage in the stadium programme, not only because these are important projects for our major sports, but because it will create a capital pressure in future years.

The public expenditure control framework provides each Department with considerable scope to address emerging pressures in their existing allocations on a unilateral basis. However, any proposals to move resources across spending areas in excess of the de minimis threshold of £1 million are subject

to Executive approval. There may also be departmental allocations that are incorrectly classified for technical reasons. Departments may also seek to reclassify part of their budget as part of a proactive management action. All such reclassifications require Executive approval. Details of all the proactive movements and reclassifications agreed by the Executive have been included in the tables accompanying this statement.

The level of resources available to the Executive for allocation in this monitoring round was influenced by all of the issues I have highlighted so far. The net impact, including the June monitoring position, the reduced requirements and the reclassifications, is that the Executive had £76.6 million in non-ring-fenced resource expenditure and £32.2 million of capital investment. Against that significant level of available resources, Departments have bid for additional resources of £108.2 million in non-ring-fenced resource and £88.2 million of capital investment. The individual bids by Departments, again, are detailed in the tables that accompany the statement.

Before I go on to the allocations made by the Executive in this round, there are two issues that I would like to highlight: the Executive's decision to agree an invest-to-save scheme and the latest development in the green new deal.

I am sure Members will be fully aware that the Budget position will become increasingly difficult over the coming years, and I have highlighted this on a number of occasions in the Assembly. The latest projections from the Office of Budget Responsibility (OBR) suggest that this is unlikely to change beyond the 2014-15 financial year. The ongoing uncertainty over the future of the euro zone and the lack of economic recovery in the region, including within the UK, also indicates that the next UK spending review is likely to be difficult. In that context, and given the amount of resources available for allocation during this round, the Executive agreed that it would be prudent to prioritise £30 million of funding towards an invest-to-save scheme, the aim of which is to remove ongoing costs that would likely become unaffordable in later years. The Executive agreed that departmental proposals under this scheme would be signed off by the First Minister and deputy First Minister, based on my recommendations, as quickly as possible to ensure delivery within this financial year. I intend to inform the Assembly of

the outcome of this exercise when we come to the October monitoring round.

Budget 2011-15 included a provision of £4 million of resource in each of the years 2012-13, 2013-14 and 2014-15 to take forward green new deal proposals. The funding was held at the centre until detailed proposals were developed. I can now inform the House that, after considering a range of options, the cross-departmental group tasked with developing green new deal proposals has recommended that the funding be channelled towards a boiler replacement scheme to be operated by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. The £4 million of funding set aside at the centre will, therefore, be transferred to the Department for Social Development.

As £30 million of funding for the invest-to-save scheme was held at the centre, the amount of non-ring-fenced resources available to meet departmental bids was reduced to £46.6 million.

In total, the Executive agreed allocations of £53.1 million of non-ring-fenced resource and £49.9 million of capital investment. Allocations were made to a number of Departments, and each allocation is detailed in the tables attached to the statement. However, I want to highlight some of the main allocations.

The Executive agreed to allocate £37.5 million to the Department for Regional Development (DRD). That allocation will provide a significant funding boost of £27.8 million towards roads maintenance and will speed up the Coleraine to Londonderry track relay project. Those allocations will not only help to maintain our road and rail network but, importantly, will provide a significant boost for the local construction industry. The additional funding will also allow the purchase of new buses to address the ageing bus fleet and help the Department for Regional Development to maintain the concessionary fares scheme. I am sure that that will be of interest to you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, as it will be to a number of other Members. The allocation towards the purchase of new buses also provides the potential opportunity to access a further £5.8 million of EU funding, which would double that investment.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) was allocated £24.2 million. Some £14.2 million of that funding will go towards essential health and safety works

and maintenance throughout the health estate, which will be another boost for the construction industry. The remaining £10 million will help the Department to address waiting time backlogs in key elective care areas.

The Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) was allocated £13.8 million. The allocation will provide significant funding for the Department's unemployment programmes. It includes the first tranche of £5.8 million of funding towards a new policy, agreed by the Executive, which will assist young unemployed people and those who are not in education, employment or training. The allocation will ensure that DEL is funded to provide the necessary help and support to those who have fallen victim of the economic downturn. It will also allow it to address the specific problem of rising youth unemployment.

The Department of Education was allocated £9 million. That will maintain the integrity of the schools EYF system and provide funding towards the essential maintenance of the education estate.

The Executive also agreed to allocate £8 million to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. Most of the funding will go towards preparations for the UK City of Culture events, but £1.5 million was also allocated towards the completion of the 50-metre pool in Bangor. I am sure that that will please my party's Chief Whip.

The Environment Minister tabled a bid for costs associated with local government reform. The Executive agreed not to meet the bid at this stage but asked the Environment Minister to table a more detailed paper on the issue as part of the October monitoring round. The paper would have to justify why central government should finance reform in the local government sector.

In conclusion, today I have announced allocations of £128 million, including the invest-to-save scheme. The allocations include significant additional capital investment, particularly in our roads and hospitals, which will provide a much-needed boost for our construction sector.

11.45 am

The Executive have also committed additional funding to help the unemployed back into work. The new scheme aimed at young people shows that the Executive understand the importance

of ensuring that no young person is left behind in what are very challenging economic times. I believe that this demonstrates that the Executive will not be found wanting where there is a real need for us to intervene. Our young people are the future of this country, and I strongly believe that this latest policy initiative shows our commitment to investing in our future.

The result of these allocations means that the Executive now exit the monitoring round with a comfortable overcommitment of £6.5 million in respect of non-ring-fenced resource expenditure and £12.7 million in capital expenditure. I believe that this is a reasonable position at this stage of the financial year, although the scope to make further allocations later in the year will depend heavily on the amount of reduced requirements that are surrendered during the next monitoring rounds. That said, I firmly believe that it is important to allocate funding early in the financial year, since doing so ensures that money is spent in a more planned and efficient manner. I, therefore, commend the June monitoring outcome to the Assembly.

Mr Murphy (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel): Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. I thank the Minister for his statement and acknowledge that circumstances meant that we were not able to meet this morning. In possibly my last opportunity as Chair of the Finance Committee, I thank the Minister for his co-operation throughout the year. We have not always agreed on everything; nonetheless, it has always been interesting, and I place on record my appreciation for the work that I have done with him.

There was, obviously, a more significant level of reduced requirements in the monitoring round statement: almost twice as much as last year in resource; and, last year, capital was only £0.3 million, whereas, this year, there is almost £30 million of reduced capital requirements. Does the Minister believe that what he set out today indicates that the Departments have fully declared their reduced requirements at this time, and how confident is he that Departments will not declare significant levels of reduced requirements at the January monitoring round, which would leave much less time to properly reallocate those funds?

Mr Wilson: I thank the Chairman for his comments and wish him all the best as he leaves this place.

Mr Hamilton: I do not know where he is going.

Mr Wilson: That is quite true; certainly not to Westminster. He is going to have a life of leisure.

He highlighted the issue of reduced requirements. Of course, we want Departments to identify and declare reduced requirements — although it is not always possible — as soon as possible. That is because, as can be seen from my statement, that means that we can plan ahead; we can look at which schemes are the Assembly's greatest priority and spend money on the most pressing needs, rather than have, as he highlighted, the unseemly scramble at the end of the year, where money comes in late and we are looking for things to spend it on in the short term so that it does not go back. I suppose that we have at least got the message over to Departments to declare reduced requirements early.

He asked me to look into the crystal ball and say whether or not there are likely to be significant reduced requirements later in the year. I do not know the answer to that. It is up to Departments to keep on monitoring their expenditure. There will be an opportunity in October for them to look at the figures again. However, he identified the important point that Ministers must not hold on to money until the last moment. They must scrutinise their Department's expenditure regularly and, where there is any doubt, make sure that money is returned. We do not want a situation such as last year's to arise, where huge amounts of money were returned in the February monitoring round. At that stage, had it not been for the fact that we were able to pump a lot of money into roads maintenance, we would probably have been left in an embarrassing position.

Mr Weir: I thank the Minister for his statement. North Down Borough Council officials and I met him several weeks ago to highlight concerns about the funding to finish the Olympic legacy pool in Bangor. I am sure that people in north Down will join me in welcoming the commitment of £1.5 million to complete the pool. Does the Minister welcome the fact that a high percentage of the work on that project has gone to local firms via procurement, and does he believe that that construction work will help to stimulate the economy?

Mr Wilson: I acknowledge the Member's point. The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure raised that early last year and returned the money. Ministers are sometimes reluctant to return money because they think that they will not get it the next year, so, even though it cannot be carried forward, they tend to hold on to it for as long as possible.

That money was returned, and, although we can never give any cast-iron guarantees that it will be made available next year, the allocation today indicates that we will always seek to be able to make the money available in the next year. That is the case where the money has been returned in good faith because it could not be spent and for situations where there is an ongoing project. I visited the pool in Bangor, and I was very pleased to see that the mapping that had been done meant that over 85% — I think that that was the figure — of the spend on the project went to firms operating within a 60-mile radius of Bangor. That meant that a high percentage of that sum went into the small and medium-sized enterprise sector in Northern Ireland.

Despite what has been said about public procurement and the way in which we are tied by European rules and so on, that project highlights that we try to ensure that, when money is pumped into the economy through such projects, the procurement will try to make sure that as many local firms and people as possible benefit. That is not always possible, but it has a huge multiplier impact on the local economy. Once the pool is finished, the people of Bangor, and, in fact, the people of Northern Ireland, will have a fantastic facility.

Mr Cree: I am glad to hear that I will also have a pool on my doorstep. The pool, which will be the first 50-metre pool in Northern Ireland, has been a long time coming. So, it is good news.

I thank the Minister for the report. It mentions the invest-to-save scheme, which I was intrigued by. I cannot see that £30 million mentioned anywhere in the schedule, so will the Minister tell me whether it is in the centre, that infamous place where money seems to rest? What else is in the centre? How is the invest-to-save scheme likely to work? Will there be bids, for example? How will it actually be carried out?

Mr Wilson: The invest-to-save money is held at the centre. It has not been allocated to any Department yet, because, as the Member said, it is up to Departments to bid for the money.

We will look in those bids for, first, the long-term savings that can be made from them; secondly, the money that the Department in question has already, the spending that it has done to try to save the money and the resources that it will bring; and thirdly, the way in which the invest-to-save proposals fit with the Executive's priorities. The important point is that the scheme seeks to relieve, in future years, the pressure on budgets that we have identified. We will judge the proposal on the amount of pressure that it relieves. I am particularly interested in schemes that show that there will be an improvement in the way in which services are delivered. If we are going to make improvements, we cannot keep on delivering services in the traditional way. We know what costs are based on that method, but, if there are proposals for new ways to deliver services that require some new investment, we will look at them. Hopefully, the bids will come in sooner rather than later, because the quicker this money can be spent, the quicker we can get down the road of making the savings. That is why we are not waiting until the next monitoring round and why we will allocate the money between now and then and simply inform the Assembly of that.

Mr McDevitt: I listened carefully to the Minister say that he wanted clear indications of invest-to-save bids. I remind him that, on 13 December, he said that he was open-minded about a £70 million bid to deliver Transforming Your Care, or the Compton review. Yet, despite a significant bid from the Department of Health, there is no allocation for that in this monitoring round. How so?

Mr Wilson: If one looks at the statement, one will see that money has been allocated to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for elective care and for maintenance. The invest-to-save fund has only been set up. That is the first thing to say.

Secondly, bids will have to be received from Departments. The Member nods — yes, the bid has already been received. However, the Executive had to set up the fund. We agreed to its setting up, and it is being presented to the Assembly in this monitoring round. I have absolutely no doubt that DHSSPS will be one of the Departments that will make an application for funding.

I wish to make this point very clear: we will be looking to see how Departments, from within

their own resources in the first instance, can contribute to any invest-to-save proposals. I think that it is right that we do that. This should be neither a penalty kick for Departments nor a way of enabling them to avoid scrutinising their own budgets. Departments will therefore have to show what they can do from within their own resources. They will then have to show what savings they believe will be released and how quickly, because, depending on their scheme, some Departments may be able to release savings much more quickly than others. Thirdly, funding will depend on the number of bids received and how they fit into the priorities that we have set. The Health Minister has already looked at a number of proposals for changing the whole care regime, so I would hope that DHSSPS will be in a position to make a bid fairly quickly, as I am sure will other Departments.

Mr Hilditch: I thank the Minister for his statement. Can he explain why administration expenditure in some Departments has fallen substantially, while in others it has increased?

Mr Wilson: The Member probably refers particularly to the increases in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM). In some cases, administration costs have gone up because of a transfer of responsibilities into a Department. In other cases, they have risen because of a reclassification, whereby some costs had not been regarded as administration costs before. That is the case with the Office of the Attorney General, which has put up administration costs in OFMDFM. Therefore, there can be a number of reasons for increases and decreases. Some departmental administration costs have been removed as a result of transfers of responsibilities out of Departments. Some costs have increased because of transfers of responsibilities into Departments or because of reclassifications.

That said, I think that some Departments have been much more diligent than others in reducing their administrative costs. As I said yesterday during the debate on the Second Stage of the Budget (No. 2) Bill, I am pleased that, last year, administrative costs went down by 5.3% on average across all Departments in Northern Ireland. However, that should not be the end of the story. We should still be looking for ways in which to reduce those administrative costs so that front line services are not affected where there are pressures on budgets.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: I thank the Minister for his statement. It is a mixed bag, but, all in all, there are some interesting nuggets in it.

Administration costs have just been referred to. The Minister gave me a very detailed answer yesterday, but I see that those costs in the Department of Education went up by £7.8 million, an increase that was accepted, yet a bid for £2.3 million for the reform of public administration and local councils was declined. Would that bid for funding not have been considered an invest-to-save measure that should have been supported? I have to express my disappointment that it was not.

Mr Wilson: First, the application for some of the costs towards the reform of public administration and local councils could not, on the basis of an Executive decision, be accepted.

The Executive had made a decision that, since the savings from the RPA would be fully held by local government, the cost of any changes and any work should fall on local government. That was an Executive decision in October last year. Therefore, the bid would have been contrary to the expressed wish of the Executive. That is one of the reasons why we said to the Minister to come back in the next monitoring round and, between now and then, bring a paper to the Executive if there is an exception. If he can make an exception, the Executive will consider it, although it is still my preference that, since the RPA is designed to release hundreds of millions of pounds of savings to local councils, they should pay the costs, as they will benefit. The other danger of simply saying that all RPA costs will be met by the Executive is that there will be no incentive for local councils to consider how savings might be made as a result of the RPA by looking at joint services, slimming down their administrative structures and so on. A balance must be struck. If substantial savings can be achieved, the costs should be looked at.

I appreciate — I am sure that the Member is referring to this — that there may well be upfront costs. I will look to the Minister of the Environment to indicate the likely upfront costs and suggest how they can be addressed so that they are spread over a longer time. There are probably ways of doing that.

12.00 noon

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister for his statement and his answers so far. He will be

aware of the problems with the PSNI equal pay issue. Will he confirm to the House that the £26 million that has been ring-fenced and is sitting in the Department of Justice will be there in the next financial year, if it is not spent by the end of this financial year?

Mr Wilson: As the Member is aware, the PSNI equal pay issue goes to court some time in September — 7 September, I think — and, therefore, I probably cannot answer anything on the specific claim. However, the £26 million was ring-fenced until the end of the last financial year. The issue had not been settled by that stage, so we intervened with the Treasury, and the ring-fencing was extended for another year. If the case is not settled by the end of this financial year, of course we will go back to the Treasury. I cannot give any guarantee because at this stage we have not discussed the issue with the Treasury, but, given the way in which the Treasury has accepted arguments to date, it can be extrapolated that money can be carried over for a further year.

I do not want this to be long, protracted and drawn-out affair. I would prefer to get the issue to court — it should have been in court in May, but, for whatever reason, it was not listed until September — and get a decision made as to whether there is a valid pay claim. If there is a valid pay claim, the money should be paid out. That is my desire and the desire of everybody in the Department. Money cannot be paid out if there is not a valid pay claim, which is why the court adjudication will be important.

Mr Rogers: I thank the Minister. It is disappointing that the Department of the Environment's bid for support for RPA transition costs for councils was not met in the monitoring round, but I welcome the fact that the door is not closed. I also take on board what the Minister said about the Executive not being expected to absorb all the costs. However, does he recognise the desirability of giving councils some direct support to assist with this difficult process, which will generate mountains of work, to build confidence and reduce the pressure on business and domestic ratepayers?

Mr Wilson: As I said in answer to a previous question, the expectation has always been that, since the benefits would fall to local councils — there will be hundreds of millions of pounds' worth of benefits, if it is done properly — they would find the money from their own resources.

The bid, as I understand it, was for the setting-up of transition committees and for the payment of officials, some of whom, I imagine, will be seconded from the councils anyway. It is really just a transfer of money there. Some of it will be for the payment of allowances etc to people who have to attend meetings. Again, that is a decision that local councils can make.

If there are inescapable, unavoidable and insurmountable costs to councils that cannot be met immediately, that is the kind of information that I want to receive from the Environment Minister. I would have thought that £2.4 million spread across 26 councils at present would not have broken the bank for the councils and, therefore, could probably have been absorbed by them. There may be costs at a later stage that are up front and would put considerable strain on council finances in one particular year. That is the kind of issue that I want to hear from the Environment Minister about.

Mr Ross: The Minister talked earlier about a penalty kick for Departments. I hope that they do not select Ashley Cole to take them.

In his statement, the Minister referred to the £13.8 million for DEL. Youth unemployment is a major issue in all our constituencies. He specifically mentioned the £5.8 million to fund a new policy agreed by the Executive that is targeted at assisting young unemployed people. He said that this was the first tranche of money from the Executive. What future funding will be required for this initiative?

Mr Wilson: Whilst the Executive take the issue of youth unemployment in Northern Ireland very seriously, a look at our record will show that, as a result of proactive measures, we are already probably better placed than other parts of the United Kingdom. Our youth unemployment is considerably lower than that in the Irish Republic, lower than the UK average and lower than about six other regions in the United Kingdom. It has not been rising here, when other regions have had a rise. Considerable work has been done already, but the Minister for Employment and Learning was encouraged to bring forward a programme especially for those who were hard to reach — the NEETs, who are not in education, employment or training. There is no point in these things being one-year, one-off programmes because, very often, the problem lasts much longer than that. Therefore, he has made a three-year spending bid for that

programme. I should know the exact number off the top of my head, but it is in the region of over £30 million. This is the first tranche. Obviously, it will ramp up over the years, and there is a commitment by the Executive to find funding in the third year and the fourth year of the Budget so that his application is fully funded.

Mrs McKeivitt: I thank the Minister for his statement. When he read it out, he lost £10 million. When he was reading out the reduced requirements sent back by DCAL, he read out £2.5 million instead of £12.5 million. Anyway, that is not my question.

I am sure that the Minister will agree that the slippage on the stadium spending in the DCAL budget is regrettable. Which stadium will be affected by the slippage, and will it mean that the project is slipping beyond the comprehensive spending review (CSR) period and that some of the funding for that is now at risk?

Mr Wilson: I congratulate the Member on passing the test. I used to do this in school all the time to see who was listening. *[Laughter.]* Could they pick up the deliberate mistake? I congratulate the Member on identifying it; it shows that she was paying rapt attention. I have to say that, while I was reading the statement, some of my party colleagues were not paying the same attention. They did not pick it up at all. So, congratulations on that.

There have been planning and technical issues with the stadiums. Someone has been appointed to oversee the delivery of the stadium projects. In response to the Chairman, I made the point that I did not want Departments to hide any underspend that there might be but to bring it forward as quickly as possible. The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, to be fair, identified that, after the projects were looked at, there were technical issues and issues that the director believed would affect delivery within the timetable that we had expected, and she declared that at an early stage. We are aware that that money will be available in future years, so we will have to plan accordingly.

The stadium projects are important for the Assembly. We cannot give any guarantees, and the Member would not expect guarantees to be given so far ahead for capital expenditure. Nevertheless, once the projects are started, we would have to see them through anyway. It will be a case of looking at what capital moneys are available. There is always a health warning

put on any bid or indication that resources might be required because of slippage in future years. The health warning is always that we can recognise that the project is important, but, until we see what resources are available, we cannot give a guarantee about whether the resources can be allocated. Although it is disappointing that there has been that slippage, it is better to know about it now than be told about it at the last moment and then have to find ways of accommodating the additional money that has been made available.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for his statement. Would he like to address the issue of flexibility for Invest Northern Ireland? I raise the issue because, last year, Invest Northern Ireland surrendered £37 million and, this year, it is already in a position of surrendering £11.8 million. That is because of very difficult economic circumstances, and I am not criticising Invest Northern Ireland. Should it not be allowed greater flexibility to retain those moneys so that it can reinvest them more flexibly in other areas in which they could be usefully used to create jobs and further investment?

Mr Wilson: I understand why the Member asked the question. At least he has not joined in the siren calls condemning Invest Northern Ireland. A lot of it is demand-led: if the demand is not there, the money cannot be spent. In that regard, his response was measured. However, I am a wee bit surprised. He will know as well as I do — I have explained this time and again in the Assembly — that there is no ability to hold on to money and carry it forward from one year to the next other than through the Budget exchange system that we have designed with the Treasury, which allows us to carry over a certain percentage of our DEL and capital from one year to the next. If the money was left with Invest Northern Ireland unspent and was outside the amount that we keep under the carry-over provision, it would be lost. It would just go back to the Treasury. There is no mechanism for simply saying, “Look, you hold on to that money. You are a government body, so hold on to that money and carry it forward to next year”. If it does not fall within the amount that we hold at the centre as a result of unspent moneys each year, it goes back to the Treasury. So, there would not be any benefit in that.

I will say this, however: given the importance of growing the economy to the Programme

for Government, it has happened in the past that Invest NI has come in at the last minute and said, "Look, we have an important project here". The Bombardier one is a good case in point. That decision came after the Budget was agreed. It was a fair amount of money; I think that it was over £30 million at the time on a year-to-year basis. I have been to see the project, and it is a fantastic opportunity for Northern Ireland to get its foot in what will be a fairly lucrative market. When it came to the need for that money, we went as far as top-slicing Departments' budgets to make sure that the bid was met. If the Member looks at it in that way, he will see that, given our priority, should there be an upturn and should Invest Northern Ireland say, "We now desperately need the money that we gave back for projects", we will go to extremes to find the money rather than lose the opportunities.

12.15 pm

Mr Allister: I notice that the Department of Education will get an extra £9 million of resources through this recycling. Is that Department doing all that it should to recoup the money that it ought to be recouping for the education of children from the Republic of Ireland? It appears that in excess of 400 children who come from the Irish Republic are enjoying education in Northern Ireland, and it appears, from the equivocal answers of the Minister, that not one penny is being recouped and that the Northern Ireland taxpayer is subsidising that. Is that correct? How long has that been the situation? What steps will now be taken to recover that money? How much is involved?

Mr Wilson: The detail of that question is more the responsibility of the Minister of Education, but the Member is quite right that there is a net inflow of pupils from the Irish Republic into Northern Ireland. I think that over 400 come into Northern Ireland to be educated and about 200 from Northern Ireland go to the Irish Republic to be educated. It is my understanding from the little investigation that I have done on the issue so far that no moneys have been transferred, which means that there will be a net cost of, I think, over £1 million to the education budget in Northern Ireland.

As I have said time and time again, there are occasions when it is a better use of our resources to co-operate and sell services to the

Republic and vice versa, but it must be done on the basis that it is not a gift, especially when budgets are under pressure. I hope that the Education Committee and Members will take that issue up with the Department of Education. My investigations to date show that no money has changed hands. If that is wrong — I do not think that it is — a correction will, of course, be given. However, on the basis that there is a net transfer of young people to schools in Northern Ireland and no money is being paid — there is an average cost of £2,000 per pupil — there is, of course, a net cost to a budget that, as the Member pointed out, is hard-pressed at the moment. Any Minister should seek to ensure that all the money that can be earned by his or her Department is earned.

Mrs Cochrane: I welcome the monitoring round statement, particularly the investments in youth employment measures and Steps to Work. I want to touch on the invest-to-save fund. Does the Minister recognise that investment in shared facilities and services provides an important opportunity to unlock savings by removing segregation?

Mr Wilson: I have said to the Member on a number of occasions — certainly to members of her party — that there are a range of ways in which savings to the public purse can be made. If, by having shared services or breaking down the costs of segregation, we can, as she said, make savings to the public purse, of course Departments ought to bring those forward and show how the savings can be made. As I said in earlier answers, they should also show what they are doing within their resources in the first place to try to release those savings. Schemes of that nature will be judged in the same way as any other invest-to-save scheme that is brought forward for the £30 million that the Executive have set aside.

Mr Beggs: I welcome the additional £24.2 million to help to address pressures in the health system. I noticed that the Transforming Your Care bid of £18 million has been turned down. Can the Minister explain precisely why such a bid was turned down? Enabling GPs to treat more patients away from hospitals, for example, involves a degree of investing to save by our primary healthcare system.

Mr Wilson: It was turned down for a number of reasons. First, I was not convinced that the money for the Transforming Your Care proposals

could not be found in the health budget. Indeed, all the studies that have been carried out — the Department brought in the Nuffield Foundation to look at Transforming Your Care — identified that the programme could be funded from the Department's resources because it would release savings. I interrogated the Health Minister on whether that was possible and whether he could show what moneys could be made available from his budget for this. Secondly, with any proposal, the actual savings have to be identified, and, at this stage, it was not clear what the savings were. Thirdly, since we knew that we were setting up the invest-to-save fund, that was probably the more appropriate mechanism through which any bid of this nature could be made.

The Health Minister is a proactive Minister, so I expect that he will look at the points that I made to him and investigate how he can satisfy those queries and make a bid. The Transforming Your Care initiative is important in the long run to enabling the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to live within its budget. If additional investment is required to deliver those savings, he will not be turned away. As with any other bid, he will have to answer the kind of questions that have been posed to him and I have indicated to the Member.

Lord Morrow: I will raise two issues on the Minister's statement. One relates to the £6.5 million for the UK City of Culture. I take it that that is additional funding. What is the total budget for that?

Furthermore, the Minister of the Environment submitted a bid for financial assistance to deal with RPA. I am disappointed that there will be no funding for that, and I suspect that the Minister who is charge of that will use it to go at his usual snail's pace in the delivery of RPA. It is obvious that there are issues that need to be addressed. The Minister himself has mentioned the lack of joint services, and that is a big missing gap here. Is there anything that he can do to ensure that joint services are looked at to provide RPA by 2014? I think that that is getting very doubtful.

Mr Wilson: On DCAL's bid for the UK City of Culture, a lot of money has been poured in for infrastructure and support for programmes. I cannot give the Member the figure off the top of my head, but DCAL, DSD and the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister have all

put money into the City of Culture bid. I know that some people are sceptical of these events and everything else, but I visited Londonderry recently, and there is a great buzz and great enthusiasm about the place. Businesses are looking at how they can capitalise on that and ensure that there will be a legacy after it is all over. It is good that the success in being named UK City of Culture has added to the enthusiasm and brought some confidence to the area. Only yesterday, Mr Humphrey mentioned the impact that spending money on events had had on Belfast and the fact that occupancy of hotel bed spaces was up to around 85%. He said that 15,000 people were involved in the hospitality industry. Money spent on this is not wasted if it produces that kind of outcome and, more importantly, leaves a legacy. However, I cannot give the Member the exact figure that has been spent already.

I have explained the RPA issue. The Executive's decision is that councils should fund it themselves. The Minister has been invited to bring a paper to allow the Executive to decide whether they want to revise that opinion in total or in part and, if they were to revise it, how they would decide how funding might be made available. However, it is still my contention that, given the savings that exist in this and given the impact that it will have on the job that local councillors do — RPA will present councillors with fantastic opportunities to influence things in their area — an investment of less than £100,000 for each council, at this stage, is not a huge investment to expect councils to make.

Mr Copeland: I, too, thank the Minister for his statement. As he knows, I was not here during the previous mandate, but, even as a relative outsider, I was aware of the anticipation in many quarters for the arrival of the green new deal. Although I welcome the recent introduction of the boiler replacement scheme, even though some people considered that it was a bit late, does the Minister accept that the original green new deal, even in its later forms, when it concentrated on retrofitting, was about much more than just replacing inefficient boilers? Will he confirm that its wider aspirations remain on the table, perhaps for future consideration and progress? If that be the case, when might we anticipate such progress?

Mr Wilson: I am sure that the Member would not expect us to spend money on things where there was not value for money, a good return

and a business case that showed that the money was being well spent. The truth of the matter is that, when the details of the green new deal were run through a business case and we looked at the benefits and the costs involved and whether it presented value for money, it did not stack up. Therefore, we decided that that was not how the money would be spent. We believe, however, that the boiler scrappage scheme will deal with a range of issues, including fuel poverty and the efficient use of fuel at a time when fuel costs are spiralling. It would also enable many households that find themselves under pressure at present to benefit from a more up-to-date heating system. Therefore, it was decided to put the money into something that was tried and tested rather than into a scheme that did not stack up in money terms.

I am sure that there will be a return to this, but if, in the future, some additional measures can be brought forward that make economic sense, of course we will not turn those away. The green new deal was a nice catchphrase, and nobody really looked at the economic details in the way that they should have done. It caught on for a while, but hard economic reality requires us to look at these schemes and ensure that we get value for money.

Executive Committee Business

Budget (No. 2) Bill: Consideration Stage

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to move the Consideration Stage of the Budget (No. 2) Bill.

Moved. — [Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel).]

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: No amendments have been tabled to the Bill. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to group the eight clauses of the Bill for the Question on stand part, followed by the four schedules and the long title.

Clauses 1 to 8 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedules 1 to 4 agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes the Consideration Stage of the Budget (No. 2 Bill). The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately upon the lunchtime suspension. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. When we return, the first item of business will be Question Time.

The sitting was suspended at 12.29 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Social Development

Homelessness Strategy

1. **Mr G Kelly** asked the Minister for Social Development to outline his Department's plans for a new homelessness strategy. (AQO 2254/11-15)

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): My Department introduced the Housing (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2010, which placed a duty on the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to formulate and publish a homelessness strategy. The strategy was launched on 1 May 2012 at an event at the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA), which I attended and spoke at. The strategy covers from 2012 to 2017 and has the guiding principle to end rough sleeping in Northern Ireland. It has four key objectives on homelessness prevention and services. Allied to those objectives are 38 recommendations, which will be delivered in the implementation plan that has been developed to accompany the strategy over the next five years. The four strategic objectives are to place homelessness prevention at the forefront of service delivery; to reduce the length of time households and individuals experience homelessness by improving access to affordable housing; to remove the need to rough sleep; and to improve services to vulnerable homeless households and individuals. The aim of the homelessness strategy is that long-term homelessness and rough sleeping is eliminated across Northern Ireland by 2020. The strategy aims to ensure that the risk of a person becoming homeless will be minimised through effective preventative measures and enhanced interagency co-operation and services to the most vulnerable homeless households.

The promoting social inclusion homelessness partnership, which is a cross-departmental and cross-sectoral group, chaired at deputy secretary level in my Department, not only helped to

shape the final make-up of the strategy but will play a crucial role in delivering many of the key action points. The Housing Executive and the housing division in the Department for Social Development (DSD) have appeared together before the Committee for Social Development, twice in the past 12 months, to explain the rationale behind the strategy and the means by which it will be delivered. They are keen to continue to keep the Committee fully informed.

Mr G Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his answer. I welcome the input of the voluntary housing sector. Will the Housing Executive be able to track the thousands of young people who present themselves as homeless and yet seem to be turned away? Will he reiterate the fact that housing allocation is on the basis of objective need?

Mr McCausland: I will take the second point first. Of course housing allocation will be on the basis of need. There is no doubt about that.

The first question was about tracking and information. The current Housing Executive mechanisms make it difficult to track and follow through to get the hard information that we need to keep us better informed so that the development of strategies and policies are based on evidence. I have been working with the Housing Executive to ensure that we get more robust information in the future.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that it is one question per Member.

Mr Eastwood: What role, if any, does the Minister envisage the community and voluntary sector playing in the strategy?

Mr McCausland: The community and voluntary sector clearly plays a key role in a number of areas. I visited some organisations, including at least one in the Member's constituency and some in my constituency, that provide services to people who are homeless, including rough sleepers. Those organisations do immensely valuable work, which we fully support through the Department. Housing associations fall into that general category, and they are at the forefront of house building. There is certainly a key role for the sector in providing support and services to people who are homeless and in ensuring that we move forward with a good house-building programme.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. I welcome the strategy. Will the Minister explain in more detail how the strategy is to be implemented?

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive's homelessness strategy has 38 action points that are to be fulfilled by 2017, at the latest. Depending on their relative urgency and complexity, each has been allocated a specific year by which it should be fulfilled, and that progress will be carefully monitored.

Housing: North Down

2. **Mr Dunne** asked the Minister for Social Development how the newbuild social housing targets and the affordable housing targets will be met in 2012-13, particularly in the north Down area. (AQO 2255/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Programme for Government contained a commitment to deliver 8,000 new social and affordable homes over the four-year period, 2011-12 to 2014-15. Work is well under way to deliver those targets. During that four-year period, over £564 million will be made available, of which £461 million will be for social housing and £103.25 million for affordable housing. That will not only deliver more new homes, it will play an important role in sustaining work in the construction industry.

In north Down, 380 units are programmed to start in the next three years, with 131 due to start in this financial year. In the previous financial year, 50 new homes were started and 25 completed, and a total of 97 new homes were on site at 31 March 2012.

Affordable homes are demand-led and cannot be identified as the Member requests. However, in the past financial year, the Northern Ireland Co-Ownership Housing Association has received £28.25 million of funding from my Department, which, in conjunction with private finance resources, supported the purchase of 643 affordable homes, which is 30% more than in the previous year. Early indications are that demand remains buoyant in this financial year, and I will continue to keep the situation under review to ensure all efforts are made to meet that demand where the budget permits.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for his answer. Can the Minister enlighten us as to what alternatives he is looking at in relation to providing affordable housing?

Mr McCausland: The new housing strategy, which I hope to issue shortly, will outline future priorities for investment in housing, including how we may expand the delivery of affordable homes. However, my officials have already commenced work with the housing associations to bring forward new affordable housing opportunities to complement the work of the Co-Ownership Housing Association.

A number of urban and rural project proposals, such as the surplus land projects, are under early consideration. If approved, they will offer a real opportunity to boost the construction industry and make more affordable homes available.

Mr Cree: The Programme for Government proposes that 4,600 new social homes will be constructed between 2012-13 and 2014-15, but the net stock model indicated the need for 1,900 new homes to be built each year, in addition to another 600 to bridge previous years' shortfalls. Does the Minister now dispute the net stock model?

Mr McCausland: That is a point that has been raised on a number of occasions. I think that it is important to stress that housing need will not be met simply through the provision of social housing. We need to look at the private market as well. That is why we need to make sure that the private sector is a much more appealing prospect going forward. It is also why the registration of landlords, and all the things that will flow from that, are particularly important. It should not be seen as a second-best option. We need to look at how we can provide the maximum amount of social housing; how we can ensure that the private sector contributes to the housing demand; and how we can assist more people to get them into the position of being able to purchase an affordable home.

Mr F McCann: How many apartments were bought in the past financial year to make up the social housing development programme? Does the Minister agree that the purchase of those units, some of which have lain for years, does nothing for the construction industry, which has shed thousands of jobs over the same period?

Mr McCausland: I do not have that figure to hand, but I will supply that number to the Member. It is one way in which you can remove property from the empty situation and get it occupied. Such properties, whether they are homes that have been lying empty for a long period over years or whether they are newbuilds

but unoccupied, can help to meet housing need. There is no doubt about that, and it is providing people with a home. I am sure the Member will agree that that is a good thing.

As regards the construction industry, if, as a result of this, a developer is in a better financial position, that may enable him to move forward to other developments, as opposed to being stuck, unable to do any development work at all. Therefore, it is not as simple as the Member suggests. We are certainly keen, and that is why we are pushing affordable homes. That is a direct kick-start for the construction sector, and that is necessary at this time.

Housing Executive: Maintenance Contracts

3. **Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the audit that he commissioned into the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's management of maintenance contracts. (AQO 2256/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Last year, I became increasingly concerned that the issues that led to the termination of the Red Sky contract by the Housing Executive in July 2011 may be present in other contracts that had not been the subject of any full investigation. I asked for a forensic investigation to be carried out of a sample of Housing Executive maintenance contracts, including those of the contractors to whom the Red Sky contract was reassigned on its termination on 14 July 2011. That is to provide me with assurances in relation to ensuring that the issues that led to the termination of the Red Sky contract are not present in other response maintenance contracts; the provision of the best possible value-for-money services to Housing Executive tenants; and the appropriate use of public funds.

The investigation has been carried out, and it considered, amongst other things, the quality of the workmanship undertaken; whether the invoices submitted by the contractors and paid by the Housing Executive were appropriate within the context of the work requested and the work actually carried out; whether the inspection regime in place in the Housing Executive operated as expected; whether the key controls in place to manage contracts — to ensure that the quality of works undertaken is monitored and price variations are identified, valued and approved — are adequate and operate effectively; a classification of any

financial anomalies identified during round 1, which involved contractors assigned to the Red Sky contract, and round 2 inspections, which involved other contractors; and an extrapolation of any findings from round 1 and round 2 to determine the possible level of any overcharging or errors. That investigation work has now been completed, and I am due to meet the Housing Executive later this afternoon. The final report will be due on 29 June 2012, which is this Friday, and I am sure that it is eagerly awaited.

Mr Hamilton: Given the importance of maintenance contracts to Housing Executive tenants, I am sure that the Minister will agree that their proper management is absolutely critical. He has outlined some improvements that are required, which will require fundamental change in the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. Does the Minister have confidence in the Housing Executive's ability to develop a culture change in that organisation to make those improvements?

Mr McCausland: The Member raises a fundamental issue. I already have concerns in relation to the effective and timely implementation by the Housing Executive of the recommendations made in the 2010 governance review. My permanent secretary has met the chief executive and the chairman of the Housing Executive to discuss his concerns about contract management and what the Housing Executive is doing to ensure the effective and timely implementation of those recommendations. I intend to raise those issues with the chairman at a forthcoming performance review meeting. Almost 12 months ago, I met the chairman and the acting chief executive of the Housing Executive in the context of Red Sky. I asked for assurances, and I was given assurances, about other contractors. The evidence that is now emerging raises very serious questions about the assurances that I was given by the chairman and the acting chief executive. I take that very seriously because they both sat in my office and gave me those assurances personally. The investigation that has been carried out has been thorough.

2.15 pm

The Housing Executive will have to be afforded an opportunity to consider the findings in order to formulate a response. Contractors will also have to have an opportunity to consider the findings and comments in due course. The information being uncovered is, I think, quite alarming.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Does the Minister agree that organisations such as Red Sky sometimes seem to be like the tail wagging the dog? They seem to have something over senior members of staff in the Housing Executive. When officers in the Housing Executive were trying to put a halt to some bad practice, they were moved out of their district office. Does he agree that that was wrong and should never happen again?

Mr McCausland: I thank the Member for his question. It raises a fundamental issue that I touched on: it is becoming increasingly clear — it was actually clear last year to some extent, but the scale is now much clearer — that the issues that arose in regard to Red Sky are present in quite a number of contractors. There are shortcomings not only in the service provided to tenants but in the monitoring, management and inspection of work. In the past, somebody signed off work that did not even happen in a place that did not even exist. I do not know how they ever managed to sign it off.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as na freagraí sin. I thank the Minister for his replies. This question is based on personal experience in my constituency. I listened very carefully as the Minister talked about the quality of the workmanship and the monitoring of improvements to homes inhabited by tenants. What is the role and function of his Department specifically in regard to housing associations and the quality of the work they deliver on the ground for tenants?

Mr McCausland: My Department is responsible for overseeing and monitoring housing associations. Of course, the Member will be aware that, in more recent times, there has been a much more hands-on approach to the oversight of housing associations after quite a number of them had their development status removed because of shortcomings in a whole range of areas. Work is now being done with housing associations in a range of ways. We are also talking directly to the Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations about ensuring, as far as possible, that there is really good practice in housing associations. So, there is a key issue with housing associations.

The question was actually about the Housing Executive. When you bear in mind that these major contracts are extremely expensive and that large amounts of public money are being

spent on them, you can see that we need to be absolutely sure that there is value for money and that charges are not made for work that was never carried out or was carried out improperly, inadequately or whatever. I am determined to ensure that there is a value for money. That is why we will be engaging very thoroughly and fully with the Housing Executive over the next number of weeks and months and why, I think, others share my concerns.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Has the investigation looked into or found out whether there are efficient and effective ways of putting in double glazing so that there is less disturbance to families in future?

Mr McCausland: I have seen examples of double glazing installed by a number of contractors. In one case, it was so well done that you could put your hand around the frame and see your fingers on the other side of the window — that is how well it was done. In some cases, I have seen windows that were practically butchered during installation. So, there are real questions about the quality of the workmanship. The nature of the installation of windows is a separate piece of work that is being carried forward at the moment. I think that there is a way of doing it that will save us millions of pounds and enable us to do far more maintenance work in areas where there is a great need for it. There is no point in unnecessarily chipping out plaster and replacing it.

Social Disadvantage

4. **Ms Ruane** asked the Minister for Social Development to outline his Department's plans to tackle disadvantage in communities. (AQO 2257/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The 2012-13 business plan sets out what the Department plans to achieve over the next 12 months. Housing, welfare reform, strengthened communities and vibrant urban areas are the Department's priorities. The objectives in the plans are, first, to provide access to decent, affordable, sustainable homes and housing support services; secondly, to meet the needs of the most vulnerable by tackling disadvantage through a transformed social welfare system, the provision of focused support to the most disadvantaged areas and encouraging social responsibility; and, thirdly, to bring divided communities together by creating urban centres that are sustainable, welcoming and accessible for living, working and relaxing in peace.

The Department has measures in place that focus on tackling disadvantage in communities. Neighbourhood renewal assists the most disadvantaged communities by seeking to reduce the social and economic inequalities that characterise those areas. Neighbourhood renewal partnerships are fundamental to the delivery of the programme. I will, therefore, launch a code of practice in the coming weeks that seeks to build on best practice and to assist partnerships generally in building their capacity to deliver neighbourhood renewal in their area. That is based upon extensive contact engagement with neighbourhood renewal partnerships across the Province and some excellent examples of really good practice that we want to learn from, and we want to ensure that other areas learn and benefit from them as well.

My Department also provides a wide range of support to individuals, families and households through the provision of decent and affordable housing; action to address fuel poverty; the delivery of child maintenance arrangements; comprehensive social security provisions, including the delivery of a major welfare reform agenda; and supporting the voluntary and community sector.

The Department is taking forward measures aimed at addressing long-standing issues with the existing welfare system, the most significant of which is universal credit. Universal credit is intended to ensure that work always pays, addressing poverty through tackling worklessness and benefit dependency. It will also contribute to wider and longer-term economic and societal benefits.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a chuid freagraí go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for his answers to date. However, with rising unemployment, proposed cuts to housing benefit and thousands losing incapacity benefit, will the Minister assure the House that objective need is to the fore in allocating resources?

Mr McCausland: I believe entirely that the allocation of resources has to be evidence-based, and based on meeting the needs of the most disadvantaged communities. The Member speaks of a whole range of measures that are coming down the line towards us. The important thing is that we do what we can to make sure that we get the best outcome for the people of Northern Ireland, and that is a challenge that

will face us over the autumn and winter period as we move forward with welfare reform.

Mr Campbell: On the issue of welfare reform, will the Minister outline the measures taken to ensure that those who are legitimately entitled to benefits get them?

Mr McCausland: The Member makes a valid and valuable point. Improving the uptake of benefits remains a key priority for the Department. Almost £40 million in additional benefits and arrears has been generated for people across Northern Ireland since 2005. This year, another 25,000 customers will be contacted directly with an invitation to receive a full and confidential benefit assessment. A wide-ranging, multi-channel promotional campaign will accompany the direct targeting approach. The Social Security Agency will continue to work with community and other partners to encourage uptake and will focus on customer groups that, current research shows, are most vulnerable and at risk of poverty. A long-term benefit uptake strategy will be launched for consultation later this year.

Ms Lo: I am very pleased to hear the Minister praise the work of neighbourhood renewal partnerships. Why is the social investment fund not given to some of those partnerships rather than reinventing the wheel and setting up steering groups to implement the fund?

Mr McCausland: The Member is aware that the social investment fund is an initiative that came through the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. We are now under way. It is important that, rather than looking back, we look forward and see what we can do to maximise the results and outcomes and also to ensure that there is complementarity between what is undertaken in neighbourhood renewal and what is undertaken in commitments by the social investment fund. Neighbourhood renewal should not simply be related to the social investment fund. Neighbourhood renewal should be related to all Departments, whether Education, Health or whatever, so that we have a holistic, comprehensive approach to addressing disadvantage.

Welfare Reform

5. **Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister for Social Development what action his Department has taken to promote awareness of the proposed

changes to the welfare system for individuals with complex needs and disabilities. (AQO 2258/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I previously highlighted the importance that I attach to my Department being seen to communicate proactively with the people of Northern Ireland on the proposed changes to the welfare system and what they mean for individuals. I am also conscious that we have a higher proportion of our population in receipt of disability living allowance (DLA) and a different profile, particularly in relation to mental health. I am committed to raising awareness and understanding of the proposed reforms with all audience groups.

Across all the different reforms, there are plans to co-ordinate and manage communications and stakeholder engagement as the Welfare Reform Bill makes its journey through the Assembly. Officials continually engage with customer representative groups to explain the changes proposed by the Welfare Reform Bill through a series of conferences, workshops and meetings. I have participated in a number of those and taken the opportunity to engage with individual customers and customer representatives.

The personal independence payment (PIP) project has established a specific forum for disability groups and members of the voluntary and community sector to provide information on that payment. The forum consists of a network of over 60 different organisations, and seven successful meetings have been held to date, which ensures that the particular circumstances of individual groups are represented and factored into the design of the new benefit. The forum recently held a meeting to discuss the proposed forms and letters that will be used in the PIP process. Feedback obtained from that meeting was shared with colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions.

Individual disability organisations have also been offered the opportunity to avail themselves of one-to-one meetings to address a wider cross section of individuals in the organisation concerned. Many organisations have availed themselves of that. There have been staff awareness sessions on the introduction of PIP, the purpose of which is to ensure that front line staff have a full understanding of the issues when dealing with customers with a disability or complex needs.

In April 2012, my Department published on its website a consultation document, 'DLA

Reform and Personal Independence Payment: Completing the Detailed Design'. Individuals and organisations have been asked to consider the proposals and to respond.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your time is up, Minister.

Mr P Ramsey: I welcome the Minister's lengthy and unfinished response to my question. Does the Minister acknowledge that, across the range of all-party groups on health and disability matters, the main issue is the fear, worry and concern of disabled people and their families about welfare reform? Will he assure the House that there will be intensive consultation with individuals and those representing disabled people with complex needs to make sure that there is a clear understanding of their concerns and worries?

Mr McCausland: I thank the Member for the question. I assure him that, to date, the organisations that have taken up the opportunity — I ran out of time for this bit — include Mencap; the Northern Ireland Association for Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus; Disability Action; the National Autistic Society; the Northern Ireland ME Association; the Southern Health and Social Care Trust sensory disability team; the East Belfast Independent Advice Centre; and the Multiple Sclerosis Society. So there has been wide consultation, which we need to continue as the process moves ahead.

I will pick up on the Member's point about fear. There are legitimate and understandable worries, because people, particularly those who have a disability or complex needs, become concerned about change. It does not help the situation at all that people make unfounded or alarmist suggestions that are not based on fact, of which there have been a number of examples in the past. That distorts and diverts the conversation that needs to take place and creates unnecessary fears among people who are already very vulnerable.

Agriculture and Rural Development

Rural Development Programme: Axis 3

1. **Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of the GROW South Antrim programme. (AQO 2269/11-15)

13. **Mr Sheehan** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on axis 3 of the rural development programme. (AQO 2281/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 1 and 13 together. Generating Rural Opportunities Within (GROW) South Antrim is one of seven competitively selected local action groups (LAGs) delivering axis 3 of the rural development programme across the rural North, using the LEADER methodology, which empowers local people to address local problems with local solutions.

At present, axis 3, with a budget of £100 million, has achieved an investment of £27.7 million. Within that, GROW, with an allocation of £8.9 million, has received 351 applications and has issued 101 letters of offer with a total grant value of £2.8 million. Forty-three of those projects have been completed, and a grant totalling £721,000 has been paid. A further 11 applications seeking grant assistance of over £1.1 million have been approved by the JCCs for the issue of letters of offer, and the GROW LAG is processing a further 16 applications seeking grant assistance of almost £1 million.

I will be visiting my colleague Pat Sheehan's constituency to view for myself some of the successful projects that have been completed and are under way in rural west Belfast. It is important that such areas, which were previously excluded from the rural development programme, use the funds available to improve the quality of life of the rural dwellers who live and work there.

2.30 pm

Mr Hilditch: I thank the Minister for her answer thus far. Although we welcome the very successful uptake of the village renewal grants, I am concerned that the business creation element has struggled to reach its full potential and has created an underspend. What actions, Minister, have you taken or do you intend to take, considering that most of the problem lies with banks not lending to new businesses in relation to match funding?

Mrs O'Neill: The Member makes a valid point. Some measures are obviously spending out better than others, so, as part of the way forward in ensuring that we maximise spend, the one area we are looking at is strategic projects.

That is just one element of what we are trying to do, but the local groups also have the opportunity to move money to the better spending measures, and they are actively doing that.

We recently agreed the implementation plans for 2012-13, which include some of the measures that you are talking about, particularly around basic services and village renewal, as they are high-spending measures. We want to ensure that we maximise spend.

I have also met all the main banks to talk about issues around match funding, so they are aware of the issue. They have given us contact points so that we can talk to them if people encounter particular issues when they are trying to achieve match funding.

Mr Copeland: What is the Minister's assessment of the grant funding available for stand-alone renewable energy projects? Is she concerned that, given that such projects cannot be used to reduce farm running costs, some farmers may be discouraged from applying?

Mrs O'Neill: I do not have the figures for the stand-alone energy projects with me, but I am happy to provide that information to the Member in writing. We are doing all that we can to promote renewable energy. The Executive have a Programme for Government commitment to increase renewable energy by, I think, 20% for people's own use. Those are challenging targets, but farmers are a key target group who could use renewable energy for beneficial purposes. I am happy to forward the figures on stand-alone energy projects and their uptake to the Member.

Single Farm Payments

2. **Mr Rogers** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what lessons have been learnt from the delivery of the 2011 single farm payment scheme to ensure that applications and payments to farmers are processed more quickly this year. (AQO 2270/11-15)

3. **Mrs Hale** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether remote sensing satellite imagery can be used to fast-track the inspection process for single farm payments. (AQO 2271/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I will answer questions 2 and 3 together.

I am aware that the 2011 inspection cases took longer to complete and finalise for payment than in previous years. Although I am pleased that the Department has met its targets on making single farm payments, I am conscious that later payment can add to difficult financial situations that some people find themselves in. As far as the remaining cases are concerned, I understand that interest has been paid in the past where single farm payments remained unpaid at 1 July. I have asked my officials to arrange to make such interest payments where appropriate.

I have taken forward a number of initiatives to improve the speed at which payments are made in future years. For example, land eligibility inspections relating to the 2012 application year started four weeks earlier this year than they did last year. This significantly earlier start was made possible by the intensive development of IT and business systems as well as increasing the number of inspection staff who were trained and equipped prior to the start of the inspection process. Those inspectors have been deployed at this early stage to take advantage of the generally better weather that we see at this time of the year. Although it is perhaps not that way at the moment, the weather and the field conditions are generally better at this time of year. Importantly, it provides a longer window of opportunity for the completion of inspections in order to make payments to more inspected businesses earlier in the payment cycle.

Earlier this month, I announced my intention to introduce the use of satellite imagery for approximately 250 land eligibility inspections in the 2012 campaign. Not only will that be a less disruptive method of inspections but the use of that remote sensing should improve the prospects of early completion of inspections in future years. I am aware that there has been an increased use of remote sensing among other member states over the past number of years. I am also aware of a recent 'Irish News' article that expressed concerns about remote satellite imagery being used to spy on farmers. I assure the House that that is not the case. It is an alternative way to carry out inspections, and it is designed to speed up the whole inspection process.

Looking ahead, I plan to issue a new LPIS map to claimants in time for the 2013 claim year. Those maps, which will also be made available online, should be very helpful to farmers and

will enable them to submit accurate single farm payment applications. Farmers can also help themselves by using the Department's single application online service.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up, Minister.

Mrs O'Neill: I want to point out that there was an increase in that for next year.

Mr Rogers: I thank the Minister for her answer. Given the existence of satellite-based aerial imaging, why is it necessary to spend more money on technology-based inspection systems in Northern Ireland?

Mrs O'Neill: One of the reasons for the delay this year was the inspection process and the length of time that it took to gather information. Remote sensing will obviously speed that up and mean that the information is more easily obtained by the inspectors and can be applied. It will also mean fewer on-site visits. Anything that speeds up the process is to be welcomed. If you are a farmer who is sitting waiting for a single farm payment because inspection findings are yet to be applied, you will welcome the fact that we intend to increase our use of remote sensing.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Chris Hazzard for a supplementary.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Can the Minister outline how remote sensing actually works?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Sorry, I have to call Mrs Brenda Hale first.

Mrs Hale: Will this inspection process using satellite imagery, if implemented, rule out infraction fines or make us more open to them?

Mrs O'Neill: As I said, there has been increased use of satellite imagery across Europe, and it has become a lot more popular. There were some problems at the start, particularly around weather and climates and whether or not, when taking your image, you would be able to identify scrub and other features. A lot of work has been done with the Commission to bring it on board with the imagery that we will use. That is positive, and I would not suggest that we will face infraction because of the use of satellite imagery.

We are going through the whole LPIS remapping process. That is a massive piece of work, remapping 750,000 fields. Remote imaging will

add to the value of having up-to date, accurate maps, which is what the Commission had problems with in the past.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I can now call you, Chris.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith míle agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister outline how remote sensing will work?

Mrs O'Neill: It is a way of carrying out on-the-spot checks. Basically, a photograph is taken by satellite, and we are able, back in the office, to analyse the information on the fields that has been gathered by the satellite.

As I said in a previous answer, the methodology has been developed by the European Commission's Joint Research Centre, which proves that the Commission is on board with the use of that type of technology. The technology is tried and tested, and it is a very positive development. We hope to use it in 250 inspection cases next year, but the long-term aim is to roll it out across the board. That will obviously lead to a speeded-up inspection process.

Youth Unemployment: Rural Areas

4. **Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on what her Department is doing to address youth unemployment in rural areas.
(AQO 2272/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Through the tackling poverty and social isolation framework, my Department supports two rural youth initiatives aimed at increasing employability and promoting entrepreneurship among the young unemployed in rural areas. Through the youth employability programme — marketed as Boost — unemployed rural young people will have the opportunity to develop skills, to increase their employability and to improve their chances of securing a job. The programme includes face-to-face workshops, an interactive support package, access to a network of employment mentors and the provision of industry-endorsed certification from the Federation of Small Businesses on completion. Boost will target almost 1,500 unemployed young people by working with partner agencies such as the jobcentre networks, libraries, the Rural Development Council, the rural support networks, local action groups, local councils, the enterprise agencies, rural colleges and sports centres.

I am also supporting the rural youth entrepreneurship (RYE) programme, which aims to develop business potential among vulnerable young people in rural areas. These areas will be identified using multiple deprivation criteria and will recruit 600 vulnerable young people onto the programme by undertaking outreach events and workshops in the areas identified. The RYE programme will create the foundations for the development of future rural businesses through upskilling, networking, mentoring and the sharing of ideas to stimulate business creation.

I am confident that these innovative initiatives will help to address the problem of youth unemployment in rural areas and, in doing so, help to reduce rural youth migration and increase the sustainability of rural communities.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her answer. Such work is important if we are to arrest the problems around emigration that affect many rural communities, particularly the families steeped in the construction sector tradition. What areas will be targeted through these programmes and how will they be targeted?

Mrs O'Neill: The Member is absolutely right: a lot of our rural communities are being emptied out, with young people travelling to different countries just to get work. Barry McElduff would support me in that. We know of many rural communities in Tyrone that would have problems even fielding a GAA club team. Those are the issues that we need to address. The rural youth employability programme, Boost, will target 1,500 unemployed young people in rural areas right across the North. That programme will include a marketing and promotion campaign in rural areas, through which Advantage will engage with over 350 partner agencies, such as those outlined in my initial answer.

It is important that we work in partnership with all the groups that have an interest in maintaining rural communities. Everybody has a role to play, particularly local councils, enterprise agencies, rural cottage industries etc. They will also really help us to target young people who are in their agencies and coming to their services. Through those agencies, we have the opportunity to disseminate all the information throughout the rural network and make sure that it is readily available.

The rural youth entrepreneurship programme will target young people living in deprived rural areas

across the North. Those areas were identified by the Rural Development Council using the multiple deprivation criteria. The RDC proposed to recruit 600 vulnerable young people to the programme by undertaking outreach events in workshops in the areas identified.

Lord Morrow: What is the Minister's rationale in deciding to support an eating disorders clinic at Tullyallen Road, Dungannon, and to throw the weight of her Department behind this controversial planning application?

Mrs O'Neill: I fail to see what the supplementary question has to do with the main question.

Lord Morrow: It is to do with the rural economy.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson.

Mrs Dobson: Given the unique difficulties that those living in rural communities already have to overcome, such as reduced public transport connections and the distance to many basic services, will the Minister give her assessment of the importance of adequate primary school provision to the sustainability of the local community? Is she concerned about the Education Minister's feared plan to close many rural schools, regardless of individual circumstances, under the cover of the much-disputed viability audit?

Mrs O'Neill: The rural White Paper action plan is a key document in addressing the varied needs of a rural community. It is an Executive initiative, led by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, that looks at all the issues, particularly rural transport, rural unemployment, education and all other services. This week, I will officially launch the rural White Paper action plan, which shows key Executive commitments from all the other Ministers, because looking after rural communities is the remit not just of this Department but of all Departments.

The Member raises the issue of the future of rural primary schools. The Education Minister is committed to making sure that he looks after young people who live in rural communities. He is very committed to making sure that he looks at rural communities' needs, which is why he argued very strongly that the criteria should not be a numbers game and that all the other factors should be taken into account, particularly the links with the local community. Often, in a rural community, a school can be the community centre and everything else. I am not

fearful for the future of rural primary schools, and I think that the criteria are there to make sure that they are looked after.

2.45 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that questions must be relevant and should not be read out. I now call Mr Pat Ramsey, who, no doubt, will speak from the heart.

Mr P Ramsey: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank the Minister for her replies so far. Given the high number of young people across Northern Ireland who are NEET, is your Department doing anything to target them by increasing the number of on-farm job opportunities for young people who are interested in farming?

Mrs O'Neill: We have a particular strategy, and you will be aware that our agriculture and food colleges are oversubscribed with young people who want to work in the industry. That is key to the success of the industry. The Agri-food Strategy Board, which has now been established, is looking at the key challenges for the entire industry and each of its sectors. The board will also look at young people's skills and employability needs. So, although we have a programme of work, there is still lots to be done. We now have an economic strategy, and I will do my bit to tackle rural unemployment, particularly by working with young people. I think that the Executive can collectively make a difference.

Rural Development Programme: Strategic Projects

5. **Mr I McCrea** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline her Department's definition of "eligible strategic project", following her decision that clusters should make open calls for strategic projects to underpin and realise strategic spend. (AQO 2273/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: In December, I announced a refocus for axis 3 that was driven in part by low project spend and high administrative spend. All areas have now examined their progress and have agreed to refocus by reallocating funds both to higher investment measures and larger strategic projects. Indeed, all areas are now open for calls for strategic projects.

Local authorities, NGOs and the community sector, including social economy enterprises, will

be eligible to apply for the strategic projects. For a project to be eligible, it must be ready to go — in other words, there must be no impediments to starting before the end of April 2013 — and the project must be completed by 2014. There are other elements to the full criteria, which all areas published when they went to the press to open their calls. I am happy to get the Member a copy of those criteria if he so wishes.

The local action groups will make the decisions under the LEADER methodology, and it is up to them, not DARD officials, to determine what fits the strategic criteria.

Mr I McCrea: Now that the criteria have been set, I hope that they will be kept. It is maybe not the first time that the goalposts for some projects have been moved. How will the Department support clusters that have limited unapproved funding available so that letters of offer for approved strategic projects are issued and viable projects can be moved to implementation quickly?

Mrs O'Neill: The principle behind all this is that we do not send money back to Europe, so I am committed to making sure that the money that we have is spent to the best value in support of our rural communities. You talked about a number of initiatives, and I think that strategic projects are very important. Once the criteria are published, the goalposts cannot be changed, so I hope that that reassures you somewhat.

We are doing a number of things. As I said, strategic projects are very important. We have just agreed the implementation plans for clusters for the year ahead, and part of that will look at the measures for which spending is better than for others and at shifting some money around so that it is put into the better-spending measures. I am confident that a lot of hard work is being done. As you know, the JCCs work hard to get their spend out. There is sometimes a concern that calls are closed and things like that, but that is not the case. If that is ever the case, it is only because there may be a backlog of applications that need to be dealt with. You want to get the letters of offer out, get the work started and get the money for the projects spent for the best value for the rural communities. So, we have a lot of work to do over the year ahead, but I think that the JCCs and the Department are up for it. I also think that, collectively, we can make sure that we get

all the money spent for the best value for the rural community.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle, agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire fosta as ucht a freagra. I thank the Minister for her answer. What examples of eligible projects is her Department considering? By that, I mean projects that might be termed strategic for clusters.

Mrs O'Neill: As I said in my initial answer, when the local areas published their call for strategic projects, they also published criteria, and it is up to each to set its own criteria.

The most important thing to me is that the strategic projects that come forward are projects that can be delivered within the time frame. Therefore, a lot of them are probably projects that people had already been thinking about or had started to work up. I suppose that the beauty of the strategic call is that, given the nature of the LEADER approach, the strategic projects for the area will be designed to meet the strategic needs identified for it. The other beauty of it is that the funding has increased. Normally it is £250,000, but that has risen to £1 million. That allows projects to come forward that may not have been able to under the normal situation. We are working jointly with the JCCs. I think that, for five of the cluster groups, the closing date for applications is Friday, so we will be in a better position next week to know the types of project that will be coming forward.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Is it true that the Department has stopped clusters opening new calls?

Mrs O'Neill: As I said, it is not a case of closing people down or stopping any spend. The only reason that I would ever get involved is that I have a role as the managing authority. The Department is the managing authority, but the LEADER approach dictates that the local areas will set their own strategic vision for what they want to achieve, and rightly so. They will set the criteria and assess the applications.

The only reason that I would ever get involved and say that it is not a good idea to open more calls would be that there is a pile so high on a table that needs to be assessed. It is very important to me that we get the letters of offer out to groups as quickly as possible so that they can start work and we can get the money spent in good time. That is the only time that we would

get involved with the JCCs. The implementation plans that have now been agreed for 2012-13 clearly show that there is no issue with any cluster not being able to open calls.

Business: Rural Areas

6. Mr P Maskey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline what her Department is doing to assist the small and medium-sized enterprise sector and the microbusiness sector in rural areas. (AQO 2274/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department offers a wide range of assistance to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and microbusiness sectors in rural areas. Under the processing and marketing grant (PMG) scheme, aid is available to SMEs involved in the processing of agrifood products. That financial support goes towards investments in capital infrastructure and the purchase of plant and equipment. The College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) at its Loughry campus provides food technology services, including training programmes, to all food-processing companies in the North. They include company-specific support, such as new product development; technical problem solving; quality systems; and factory design. The Food Business Incubation Centre has eight rental units and provides start-up food manufacturing to support new and existing food-processing businesses. All units are currently full.

The supply chain development programme, through the rural development programme, is delivered on the ground by the Countryside Agri-Rural Partnership. It supports growers and supply chain partners to work together to improve their supply chains. Rural enterprise advisers facilitate farm families to establish new businesses or to expand existing diversified businesses on their farm. The range of support includes diversification awareness events; recruiting and mentoring for CAFRE diversification challenge programmes; and an invitation to business cluster networking events. Rural enterprise advisers will also support farm families with initial meetings to discuss their diversification ideas and provide assistance in the pursuit of project funding. That can provide the link to the axis 3 funding available to farm diversification and microbusiness development projects. Applicants can apply for up to £50,000, which they match pound for pound.

Along with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, I have recently established the Agri-Food Strategy Board. It will be led by the industry, but it is the board's job to develop a longer-term strategic vision for the sector and to make recommendations on how agrifood businesses can be supported to realise their full potential. I am sure that you can see that the Department offers a great deal of support to those sectors.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The agrifood sector is one of the good news stories of recent times. I was wondering, given the pressures that are on the sector, what measures the Department and the Minister can put in place to make sure that it remains sustainable and continues to grow.

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for that question. Agrifood is doing really well, and it is important that we support the industry so that it continues to grow. Over the past number of years, through the economic decline, agrifood has continued to grow and continued to be very successful. The Agri-Food Strategy Board that I talked about will be the key strategy developer. That project is being taken forward by myself and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

In the Department, CAFRE management are reviewing and prioritising the existing programmes to make sure that they are in line with the industry needs. We are currently recruiting specialist food technologists to meet the increasing demands that we have.

I also remind Members that I have offered the strategic project opportunity in the context of weak economic growth. We talked earlier about the strategic projects that are coming forward, and it is important that we recognise that this is another opportunity for rural communities and for these businesses.

Mr Frew: What communication has the Minister had with her counterpart the Minister of the Environment on the serious issue of planning so that rural businesses are allowed to expand? That is a big issue in the rural communities.

Mrs O'Neill: I can confirm to the Member that I have had a meeting with the Environment Minister on that issue. The issue was raised at length in a debate in the Chamber, and other Members have raised it before. I have picked it up as an issue for the Environment Minister to consider and not just for rural businesses.

There is range of issues, such as signage, that we need to address if we are going to allow our rural communities to flourish and be sustainable in the future.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for her previous answers. In relation to job creation in rural areas, has the Minister conducted any conversations with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment on the development of anaerobic digesters in rural areas, which could create jobs and provide income for farmers in rural areas?

Mrs O'Neill: I will correct myself if I am wrong, but through the research challenge fund we have recently funded anaerobic digesters. One has been passed and is operational, and there are three more to come, which is positive. There are quite a few others in the planning system. I absolutely agree with you about the benefit, particularly to the farming community. It is another avenue of income for farmers to explore.

On job creation, I cannot remember the figure, but NIFDA published a report, and there are plans to create 25,000 jobs in the wider agrifood sector. That is very positive, and the strategy that we are developing is about looking at all the challenges to the agrifood sector and at how industry and government can work together so that we lead forward in the most strategic fashion and make sure that we maximise the potential benefit.

EU Floods Directive

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Ceist uimhir a seacht le do thoil.

7. **Mr Mitchel McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline what action she is taking to implement the EU floods directive on a North/South basis. (AQO 2275/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department is the competent authority for the implementation of the European floods directive, and, through the work of Rivers Agency, the preliminary flood risk assessment was completed in December 2011.

The agency is producing flood risk and flood hazard maps for significant risk areas that are on target for the December 2013 legislative deadline, and it is starting the drafting of flood risk management plans, which are required to be completed by 2015.

The role of competent authority for the implementation of the floods directive in the South is undertaken by the Office of Public Works. While carrying out the preliminary flood risk assessment, there was full co-operation and sharing of information between officials across the island. Although it has been identified that there are no significant flood risk areas, there are three river basin catchments that need to be managed on an all-island basis: the Shannon, the Foyle and the Erne and the Neagh/Bann systems.

Given that the vast majority of the Shannon catchment is in the South, the Office of Public Works is leading on the development of that flood risk management plan. For the other two catchments, co-operation is required to draft the flood risk management plans, and I met Minister Hayes TD on 15 June to discuss that specific issue. I am pleased to announce that we have agreed a joined-up approach that will ensure that the flood risk is managed on a whole-catchment basis and demonstrate close working across this island to the European Commission.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: I thank —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind the Member that he did not translate his question.

3.00 pm

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: The Minister understood that it was question 7, but for those who did not, it was question 7.

I thank the Minister for her comprehensive reply. Will the Minister confirm to the Assembly that substantive savings will accrue from this joined-up approach? The cost of implementation is an issue that constantly interests the Assembly.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask you to be very brief, Minister.

Mrs O'Neill: OK. The approach that Minister Hayes and I have agreed will deliver cost savings to the Executive and right across the island. When it comes to procurement there are more areas that all Departments need to explore, and this is one small example. The actual amount that will be saved either by my Department or by the Office of Public Works will probably be modest, but there is so much more potential there, and we need to explore it.

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

Committee Business

Public Accounts Committee Reports and Memoranda of Reply

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

Mr P Maskey (The Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee): I beg to move

That this Assembly takes note of the following Public Accounts Committee reports: Report on Campsie Office Accommodation and Synergy e-Business Incubator (01/10/11R); The Management of Substitution Cover for Teachers: Follow-up Report (20/10/11R); The Administration and Management of the Disability Living Allowance Reconsideration and Appeals Process (25/10/11R); Report on Arrangements for Ensuring the Quality of Care in Homes for Older People (39/10/11R); Measuring the Performance of NI Water (37/10/11R); Procurement and Governance in NI Water (40/10/11R); Improving Adult Literacy and Numeracy (60/10/11R); Report on Managing Criminal Legal Aid (NIA 20/11-15); Report on Reducing Water Pollution from Agricultural Sources – The Farm Nutrient Management Scheme (NIA 21/11-15); Report on Creating Effective Partnerships between Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector (NIA 24/11-15); Report on the Use of Locum Doctors by Northern Ireland Hospitals (NIA 37/11-15); and the following Department of Finance and Personnel memoranda of reply: Report on Campsie Office Accommodation and Synergy e-Business Incubator; The Management of Substitution Cover for Teachers: Follow-up Report; The Administration and Management of the Disability Living Allowance Reconsideration and Appeals Process; Measuring the Performance of NI Water; Procurement and Governance in NI Water; Report on Arrangements for Ensuring the Quality of Care in Homes for Older People; Improving Adult Literacy and Numeracy; Report on Managing Criminal Legal Aid; Report on Reducing Water Pollution from Agricultural Sources – The Farm Nutrient Management Scheme; Report on Creating Effective Partnerships between Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector; Report on the Use of Locum Doctors by Northern Ireland Hospitals.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. On behalf of the Public Accounts Committee (PAC), I thank the Business Committee for allowing this take-note debate.

It is fitting to bring this body of work to the Assembly, as the Committee has been extremely busy since the previous such debate in 2010. I am proud to have held the post of Chairperson for the past four years and I am proud of the Committee's work during that time, so I am glad of the opportunity to speak for the Committee today for the last time.

I am grateful for the support of the members of the Committee, past and present, who have worked so hard together and made our work meaningful and my job as Chairperson easier. The Committee staff have been second to none and have done a fabulous job, for which I thank them all.

If you will permit me to put a more personal slant on things, a LeasCheann Comhairle, I am proud to say that I was elected by the people of West Belfast. I do not need to stress to the Chamber the high level of socio-economic need in that area and the amount of work that has been done in the community to generate opportunities, jobs and investment, to develop skills and direction in the community, and to address trauma and poverty.

This has given me a particular sense of purpose as Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee. The Minister of Finance and Personnel sometimes says that I preach about our work, but I have been sent here by our people, who have experience of not having a great deal of money or the luxury of deciding how to spend it. That has given me a very human perspective on how taxpayers' money should be spent responsibly. I have to speak the truth to enable their views to be heard and to deliver for them.

As you can see from the motion, the Committee has completed a wide variety of inquiries and reports in the past two years, ranging from the quality of care in homes for the elderly to the use of capital funds to prevent environmental impacts in agriculture. The members of the Committee and, I hope, other interested MLAs will focus on a selection of those reports.

Of course, we spent a considerable amount of time on performance, procurement and governance in NI Water, which I will come to

shortly. In light of my earlier remarks, however, I will start with the inquiry into the effectiveness of partnerships between government and the community and voluntary sectors. In that inquiry, the Committee went out to the premises of NICVA in north Belfast, which is another area of social need and deprivation, to hear how government was using the community and voluntary sectors. I worked for many years in the community sector prior to my life in the Assembly, and I was concerned at what I heard from people in the sector about the impact of cuts on their organisations. It was already difficult to get sustainable core funding for the sector, and now, as I said at the evidence session, there is such uncertainty around funding that the sector is haemorrhaging good staff.

During the inquiry, we heard of instances where organisations have had to put staff on notice simply because public bodies were so slow in processing funding applications and releasing funds. In other cases, some staff worked without pay for a number of months while waiting on letters of offer to be signed and money to be released. It was evident to the Committee that there is an urgent need for a joined-up approach by public bodies and agencies, particularly in relation to funding. That will require new ways of thinking.

The Committee has recommended that all public sector bodies should move towards the adoption of long-term funding arrangements, stipulating that, where funding is dependent on the outcome of an evaluation, this must be planned for, completed and decisions communicated to the organisations three months before existing funding contracts run out. The Committee also commented that payments to sector organisations must be made in a timely manner, whether they are for the provision of contracted services or in respect of grant or grant aid. We understand that prompt payment arrangements are currently different for grant than for commercial goods and services contracts with government, but we have asked for those to be brought, as far as possible, in line with one another.

The Committee welcomes the proposed arrangement to report annually on the working of the concordat, and sees that as an opportunity to drive forward change and improve accountability. It has earmarked the report as high priority for follow-up, and will return to it in a year from the memorandum of reply (MOR)

to see how progress is being made on the Committee's recommendations.

The Committee's investigation of procurement and governance in NI Water resulted in a landmark report that exposed serious failings in procurement, inappropriate and ineffective governance arrangements, and a failure to observe the high standards that are expected of senior public servants. We found that, at all levels in NI Water, there was a deeply embedded culture of thought that it was acceptable to bypass proper procurement rules. Between 2005 and 2010, procurement failures totalled £46 million. Abuse of single-tender awards was widespread, a large number of contract extensions went unapproved, and official controls were circumvented. The rules are there to ensure that contracts are awarded fairly and that they provide value for money and minimise the potential risk of fraud and corruption. Failure to follow the basic procurement rules is inexcusable.

We also found that the governance arrangements that were established by the Department for Regional Development (DRD) for NI Water represented the worst of all possible worlds. The governance model was devised for a self-financing commercial company; it was inadequate for a body whose income derived mainly from public funds. Departmental oversight of NI Water was also deficient. For example, for a significant period, DRD had no right to access key audit information about NI Water. DRD approved the appointment of the NI Water chair as interim chief executive, in direct contravention of the fundamental principle requiring the separation of roles and responsibilities at the top of any organisation. Proper oversight by the Department is essential for a public body that delivers a service of fundamental importance to the people here.

In January 2010, DRD's permanent secretary and NI Water's chief executive commissioned an independent review team to investigate governance arrangements at NI Water in light of procurement problems that were identified in a number of audit reports. Following the review, four of the five NI Water non-executive directors were dismissed. At our evidence session in July 2010, some members raised their concerns about the actions of the permanent secretary and the chief executive and the independence of the review team. The Committee then received correspondence from a member of the review team that criticised what they said was

the Committee's disgraceful line of questioning. It later emerged that the permanent secretary, Paul Priestly, had a role in drafting that letter. The conduct of Mr Priestly, in seeking to undermine the Committee, was utterly disgraceful. Mr Priestly was suspended from his position by the head of the Civil Service, and, following a disciplinary process, he was demoted and is currently on secondment to the private sector.

The actions of a number of senior officials in that case undoubtedly undermined confidence in the integrity of the public sector. In fact, it impacted on the relationship between the Committee and its witnesses; a relationship that I have always sought to develop through constructive engagement when problems arise. It is crucial that the Committee can count on having good faith and completeness from accounting officers, and it was of great concern that that standard had been compromised and breached. The Committee worked with the Finance Committee to ensure that systematic change could result from the case and improve the accountability arrangements between the Senior Civil Service and the Assembly. The Committee was not happy with the secrecy around the arrangements made for the official and sent a strong message that confidentiality agreements should not be made where the use of public money is concerned.

Transparency since the Freedom of Information Act is a reality that renders much of the old way obsolete, and that is good for public administration. I believe that we have brought issues of transparency and accountability into the light of day and made serious points about the expectations that the Committee must be able to rely on. The Committee has discussed with the head of the Civil Service his programme of accountability training for the Civil Service, and that is being rolled out. That is very welcome. I know that a strong public service ethic drives most people in the Civil Service, and I hope that cases that come to PAC are rare failures in a professional service. However, the pressure is on those at the top to lead by example and apply the highest standards in public life, and I hope that these tough conversations will give a solid basis for good work by government together with the PAC in the difficult economic times ahead. I look forward to the rest of the debate.

Mr Girvan: You would probably need a lot more than seven minutes to go over the issues that we have had to discuss. Some of the reports that we have received are on sensitive issues, such as the one on locum doctors. How that has been managed and dealt with has created a problem. The appointment of internal locums is one point, but external locums are also brought in by private contract. The report alluded to that and identified that the locum approach did not necessarily give patients the best cover and care. It also identified that the costs associated with doing it far exceeded its benefits.

We felt that the locums who were appointed had no buy-in to keep continuity between the care that the patients were receiving. They could be in one hospital today and in another tomorrow. Therefore, some continuity was lost, and the care that patients received could be compromised because of that. The report also identified that some doctors who were working in a hospital could be brought back to act as a locum during another time when somebody else was off. Therefore, they could be creating a problem for themselves because they worked to what is called a European working time directive, which was to ensure that they did not exceed their hours of work. However, there was no mechanism to measure that, and it was up to the doctors to police it. Some — we are not saying all of them — probably far exceeded their working time directive, and they could have been working in one hospital on a shift and then moving to another hospital to do locum work. We identified a number of problems because of that.

The spend for the four years up to March 2011 was £74 million for the external and £35 million for the internal. It was extremely difficult to get a breakdown of that because trusts did not necessarily have the full information on where those costs came from, and it was not easy to extract some of that information. That was a way forward.

One of the recommendations was the introduction of a regional management and medical locum service. That has been taken on board, although there is a bit of a delay in its delivery. We believe that that should have been working internally, as trusts built up their own pool of locum doctors who could work and be called upon.

3.15 pm

Registration was another key issue that caused major concern. We have all heard the horror

stories about doctors coming in to work as locums who have been struck off or who have had malpractice cases go against them. That has created problems, not necessarily in Northern Ireland but in other areas. There were risks to patient safety from improper registration and details being held, and that had to be tightened up.

The PAC dealt with so many reports on which we could go into detail. We did a report on the farm nutrient management scheme, which seemed to be a way of driving public money. Under that scheme, someone estimated the value of a piece of land at £200 million and built a business case on why the slurry storage systems could be built to that value to spend that money. It was identified that that valuation was, more or less, done on the back of an envelope.

Comments were made to the Committee that showed that people were playing fast and loose with public money, and it is very dangerous that that happened. A number of reports are still to be totally signed off. The report on creating effective partnerships between government and the voluntary and community sector identified many good areas that are delivering for communities but which do not necessarily link up with the funding. All of the reports were very welcome. Some other reports will probably come forward, and it is necessary to have a further debate on a number of these issues or table a take-note debate. There is the Excess Vote, benefits take-up by pensioners, and one that was really was very interesting on the use of consultants. We did a report on reducing criminal legal aid, and all I will say is that some of the legal aid claims that went in were criminal. It seemed horrendous that you could decide whether a case was big and whether or not it would be a serious case to determine the level of legal aid required.

All in all, the reports that were conducted in the PAC produced a good body of work. I congratulate the staff on their work, and the evidence sessions definitely brought out some very glaring irregularities and areas that need to be closed up. The Committee made recommendations, not all of which were taken on board by the groups and the bodies that we were working with. The majority of the recommendations were accepted and will have some merit in the future.

Mr Copeland: The price of a bottle of bleach is, give or take, £1. I will come back to the

significance of that statement later. At some stage, everyone in this Chamber will have had some experience of handling other people's money, whether as the treasurer of a Masonic, Orange or Hibernian lodge, a church group or a community group. You know the situation as you approach the annual general meeting. You have had your accounts audited, and you stand up and present them. You think that you are getting away with it when someone at the back puts their hand up, leading to an interminable discussion, generally around a very small amount of money.

Imagine my surprise, coming from a business background into this new world, where some money is real and other money is not. In a community group or a small organisation, money, generally small amounts, that is owed or unaccounted for properly is pursued to the utmost of the law. At the other end, tens of millions of pounds seems to be spent irregularly and in questionable circumstances.

I learned phrases that I had never heard before. "Flipping" appears to be where you buy something with money that you have not got on behalf of someone else and sell it on on the same day — a wonderful procedure. There was the lawful procurement, if that is the right word, of a system of computers for £971,000, which, subsequently, totalled £10.5 million. Then there is the daddy, forgive me, of them all, which was an evidence session regarding a scheme that has been alluded to. It began, strangely enough, with the description of a clerical error — a clerical error that was subsequently held not to have been committed by a clerk, which was strange; it involved a four, a five and seven zeros and a plus sign instead of a minus and gave rise, I believe, to a variance in the budget of £90 million. The explanation for that did not take that long and, to be honest, I was not very much wiser after I heard it than I was before it started.

If I remember correctly, and I do not want to be unfair to anyone, we then went on to a description of a scheme that solved a problem that nobody was really sure existed, and expended somewhere between £100 million and £200 million of money that was not available before they realised that they had not got it. That gave rise to a necessity to acquire money. As Mr Girvan said, a valuation was acquired on the basis of a telephone call, I understand, from a Department to Land and Property Services asking the value of building land in the centre

of Belfast. The answer was £2.5 million with planning approval. Based on that, a valuation was placed on a piece of land of around 86 acres in the amount of £200 million, which was, subsequently and mysteriously, inculcated into the budget and the transaction took place. Shortly afterwards, it was discovered that it was not, unfortunately, £200 million; it was closer to £2 million — a substantial difference.

There is a requirement incumbent on all of us on this Committee, and I pay tribute to the Committee Chair, who has had a lot to put up with, to be quite frank, and has discharged the duties in a fair, just and appropriate way. He has remained attentive and, on occasions, interested and kept us on the straight and narrow.

The issue that I have is that, in certain quarters, there appears to be a reluctance to be straight with us as we attempt to be straight with those who we bring before us. They appear almost to resent the questions that we put to them, and skilfully give us answers that do not answer the questions that we are asking. That tends to lead to a degree of inquisitiveness on behalf of the members, which I fully understand, endorse and support.

The reason why I quoted the price of a bottle of bleach was that I have knowledge of a small community group that, following the flooding some years ago, purchased an amount of bleach. That amount of bleach was more than the community group would normally have been expected to use, and there was an investigation into the amount of bleach.

It strikes me that there are two different types of pound — well, there are three. There is the pound that may be misspent or incorrectly accounted for by a small community group or a private citizen who, perhaps, has an overpayment of housing benefit; there is the pound that exists in this place; and there is the pound that is used here but does not really seem to exist. The importance of each of those is treated differently. The responsibility that we have here, and which we exercise through the Public Accounts Committee, is quite simple: it is to ensure that the public money we handle is properly, lawfully and justly apportioned. It is the public who pay for this by their taxes and contributions, many of them struggling and being told that they must take their share of the pain in solving a problem that they did not create.

Last night, I saw the chief executive of a nationally owned bank explain that there was really nothing to worry about, that his bank had very broad shoulders and could stand any loss. I am not surprised: he just comes to the Government to get money when he needs it.

There are some in the higher echelons of non-elected government who look somewhat fondly at the days of direct rule when they were, to coin a phrase, kings. I think that they are possessed of the notion that, in discharging its duty towards the Assembly, the Public Accounts Committee sticks its nose where it does not belong. However, I have to tell them that direct rule has gone, and those who subscribe to its continuance or linger for its pleasant memories will, like that system of government, be consigned to history. I learned two things in business about the first principles: follow and control the money, and control the stock. Exactly the same thing applies in here. If Departments are guilty of spending money inappropriately, they must be treated in exactly the same way, no matter the vastness of the amount. That is not done in an attempt to harass, annoy or find people out, but quite simply to ensure that we discharge our duty in handling the money that we hold on behalf of the people who send us here. We should not and will not be distracted from that —

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

Mr Copeland: — in any way.

Mr Dallat: At the outset, I pay tribute to the Committee Chairperson, Mr Paul Priestly, who is leaving us — [*Laughter.*] Paul Maskey certainly deserves a total and absolute apology for that mistake. Paul, I am so sorry.

Before Paul, we had Mr Billy Bell — I got his name right. Both Chairpersons have been outstanding. [*Interruption.*] Both have been —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Dallat: — very much above party politics. That is the strength of the Public Accounts Committee.

I want to mention two reports briefly. The first is the inquiry into NI Water, which has already been referred to twice. The second is the inquiry into literacy and numeracy. Although the person whom I have just mentioned, Mr Priestly, drafted the letter, it was sent by Mr

Peter Dixon, the chairperson of the independent review team and one of the highest-earning people today, who suffered no penalty as a result of that disgraceful act. There can be no doubt that a number of senior officials have undermined the confidence and integrity of the public sector. That said, it is equally important to emphasise that the majority of officials, at all levels in public bodies, are good and honourable people. The Public Accounts Committee, despite criticism, has sought to give credit where credit is due. I hope that that is noted by all.

As a result of the Public Accounts Committee inquiry, we know that the board of NI Water was badly let down by senior executives. Managed information was poor, and the internal audit of procurement was and continues to be deficient. The PAC report clearly laid down the ground rules for ensuring that the mistakes, inefficiencies and downright irresponsibility of the past should never be repeated. The report could not, however, clear up many of the outstanding issues. That is another avenue that I hope is pursued to its very end, because four non-executive directors were shamefully dismissed on the back of a so-called independent review headed up by Mr Dixon.

Several years ago, one of the first investigations with which I was involved while serving on the Public Accounts Committee was into literacy and numeracy. The issue affected 24% of the population. I will put that in human terms: 250,000 adults. It is not fully appreciated that a further 30% — 313,000 people — were considered able to deal only with the most simple material. Between 2001 and 2011, the Department for Employment and Learning spent some £70 million on essential skills qualifications. I am happy to acknowledge that that reduces the overall level of illiteracy and innumeracy. Some 51,000 people gained an essential skills qualification. However, it should be noted that those with particularly poor skills have not yet been engaged. We have not been able to get in touch with them. Clearly, a great deal of work is still to be done if there is to be a material overall improvement in the foreseeable future.

The Committee considers that there is a fundamental need for a major cultural change in Northern Ireland, whereby education becomes much more highly valued throughout the population. The Committee believes that tackling the adult literacy and numeracy problem

is not only about improving education but about tackling much wider social issues that impact on our economic, health and justice systems.

3.30 pm

I believe that many of the problems that have beset this part of the world over the past 40 years could have been prevented if we had acknowledged that our education system is not the best in the world and that it fails so many young people. Many of them leave school without the ability to read, write or understand the basic instructions that would allow them to be employed. If many of those young people had been caught in the safety net, they would not have ended up in the grip of criminal groups. Such involvement resulted in many of them spending the best part of their life in jail, where the current literacy and numeracy problems affect up to 80% of the prison population. Surely, that is a damning indictment on all of us.

I acknowledge the work of all my colleagues on the Public Accounts Committee and the staff who have, at all times, put their work on the Committee before party political considerations. It is important that the PAC continues to get the full support of the Assembly. Anyone who intentionally or unintentionally undermines it is doing themselves no favours and is certainly not acting in the best interests of the public, who, as a result of the PAC, have more accountability and a better standard of service. Surely, in these times of austerity, there have to be particularly important rules, because we all accept that our public services are under increasing strain and that any waste is not acceptable.

Finally, I pay tribute to the Audit Office, and I want to defend it. Any attacks on the Audit Office are not doing anybody any favours whatsoever. My experience, as I said, as the longest-serving member of the Committee, is that the Audit Office is entirely independent. The Members who have served on the Public Accounts Committee, many of whom I have served with, have always been above party politics. The Audit Office is independent, and I sincerely hope that there is no attempt to take away the independence of that institution, which has done Northern Ireland proud in the worst of times and will, hopefully, in the future, in the best of times.

Mr Easton: The Public Accounts Committee has done a wide and varied range of reports. Two that

have stood out for me are the reports on the farm nutrient management scheme and on the safeguarding of Northern Ireland's listed buildings.

The agriculture industry in Northern Ireland is a significant industry, and it provides many people with employment. It has long been noted that agriculture can have a negative impact on the environment, if not managed properly. In fact, it has been seen that the agriculture industry has been a principal contributor to a number of serious water quality problems. In 1991, the nitrates directive was introduced by the European Commission. In order to comply, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) implemented the farm nutrient management scheme (FNMS). The scheme provided grant support for farmers to build additional storage that would be required under the directive, and when, in 2007, the budget was increased to £144 million, it became one of the largest grant schemes run by DARD.

The scheme has had a number of shortfalls, which are highlighted in the report. In my view, the most serious was the gross overvaluation of the Crossnacreevy site. The initial valuation of £200 million was the basis for securing an additional £89 million of capital funding from the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP). In fact, a subsequent survey set the value at between £2.28 million and £5.87 million, with additional costs associated with the sale. The financial benefits of selling the site were nowhere near the original estimate. It seems that the estimate was written on the back of some toilet paper and every time the individual went to the toilet, the costs were flushed down. The handling of the proposed sale was flawed from beginning to end, with little cross-departmental interaction sought from the relevant personnel in DARD.

The second major concern highlighted by the report was that such a large amount of money had been spent — the total given in the report was £121 million — without any evidence of the extent to which it had contributed to improving water quality in Northern Ireland. Worryingly, there is also a high potential that a substantial proportion of farms could be found to be in breach of the nitrates action programme. Obviously, that casts a great deal of doubt over the entire scheme's effectiveness. In 2010, the breach levels were detected at 21%, which is one in five of the farms that were inspected. Sixty-eight of those breaches were discovered

on farms that had received grants under the FNMS. That highlights a real need to be more proactive in tackling non-compliance.

The report highlights a catalogue of failings by DARD, not only in the implementation of the scheme, which was funded by the taxpayer, but in the openness and transparency of some officials called to the Committee to give evidence. The reluctance by some has meant that evaluating and assessing the scheme has taken longer than necessary, again costing the taxpayer more money than necessary. The lack of SMART — specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timebound — targets and outcome measures has meant that it has been unable to give an accurate picture of the capacity of slurry storage in Northern Ireland before the scheme, the increase as a result of the scheme and the potential for under-capacity. The report highlights a number of important lessons that should be learned by all involved in the scheme.

On the second report, it is important to ensure that we have the wisdom to acknowledge that the gifts we have from our past can strengthen our future. In 'Safeguarding Northern Ireland's Listed Buildings', it has been acknowledged that although there was an effort in 2007 to undertake the complex task of completing a survey to identify buildings that would be suitable for listing by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA), and although there were a number of difficulties in identifying the practical aspect of conducting such a survey, there were still a number of failings identified around the methods initially used, which meant that the project was not identified as being one that gives value for money.

One of the main findings, which identified a waste of scarce resources, was that approximately 60% of buildings surveyed in 2010 were identified as being unsuitable for listing. Although it was anticipated that a number of buildings would fall into that category for a plethora of reasons, the high rate of buildings being consigned to that category was wasteful to a cost of approximately £1.1 million. It is also a concern that NIEA did not act quickly enough to address that issue.

Grant schemes should have performance indicators built into them to ensure that they are delivering on their objectives. There was no objective measuring tool included in the development of the historic buildings grant

scheme, which makes it difficult to assess how effective the scheme actually was. Although the pattern shows that the expenditure over the past five years has been directed to the most important and rare buildings, that has happened more by accident than real design. It had the potential therefore to go the other way, and it does not appear that there was any control in place to prevent that from happening.

A targeting mechanism was drawn up in 2009, but the report identified that that was not used, as applications to the grant scheme were not oversubscribed. Added to that, there is a target for the removal of 200 properties from the built heritage at-risk register by 2016, and there is still not a prioritised list of what NIEA wants removed, nor is there any mechanism identified to direct grant aid to the most urgent or important cases.

Those are just a small number of the criticisms that were contained in the report, and as Members can see, there are a lot of areas of concern around ensuring that money is not wasted and that we maintain these historic buildings in a way that future generations can continue to enjoy them.

Some of the main recommendations that were contained in the report include improved arrangements built into the current contract for targeting survey work; a formal weighting and scoring mechanism for assessing grant applications; and that NIEA undertakes a review to clearly establish the full range of management and costing information. If the NIEA accepts and implements those and the other recommendations contained in the report, we can be sure that many generations in the future will be able to continue to enjoy our valuable heritage. It will also mean that the government bodies will be held accountable for their responsibilities to the buildings that they own and operate from. Through this more collaborative working, we will ensure that our historic buildings will continue to survive into the future.

To conclude, I thank the Public Accounts Committee staff, who have been invaluable in helping us with not just these two reports, but many others. I do not know how they are able to do it all but they have done a fantastic job. I also praise the Chair.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. It has to be

recognised that retrospectively going over spending programmes and poring over Audit Office reports, particularly where they flag up problems, invites a certain dynamic, which can be quite negative and defensive at times. I have to say that that has been very much the exception during my time on the PAC. Very often, even very critical reports were accepted for what they were: a rigorous and forensic examination of the information to try to establish the circumstances in which anomalies or mistakes were made and, in the interests of ensuring full accountability and achieving best value for public money, to make recommendations that would address and resolve the issues. Time after time, we found that Ministers, Departments and accounting officers in fact recognised the positive value of that interaction.

Over the past number of years and, indeed, across the mandates since the re-establishment of the Assembly, the Committee has had to deal with a significant backlog of work. The reports listed in the motion follow on from a similar debate that we had in the previous session, and they show the volume of work across all Departments and spending areas. I think that the reports very often demonstrate the human quality of government in respect of the prevailing mood. At times, the delivery of projects — although they may have had a certain political or economic imperative — resulted in safeguards that were carefully developed over a period being set aside. Although that is inexcusable, I think that it is necessary to recognise that there are different prevailing pressures on officers to deliver, which can result in people taking shortcuts.

We heard other Committee members give examples, some of which had much more serious implications than others. We as a society are in transition, as is the system and the permanent Government. For some, it has been a difficult process. Government should be publicly accountable, but I believe that the direct rule system very often invited bad practice, because we were dealing with Ministers who were here, perhaps, for 48 hours in any given working week, covering two or three portfolios. Quite clearly, there was a huge reliance on the Senior Civil Service cohort and the middle management structure. In some instances, we have found that that has been less than what people might necessarily and ordinarily expect. It is quite remarkable that they survived that experience, and I think that most of them have developed good working relationships during the transition.

We could be excused in some circumstances for being cynical about the type of answers and responses we get. However, I think that the Public Accounts Committee, in its membership and leadership from the Chair — I, too, pay tribute to Paul, who is the second Chair of the Public Accounts Committee whom I have had the privilege of working with — gets on these issues, and party political interests are set aside to come up with the best resolution or response to the circumstances that are very often based on Audit Office reports in which the factual content is not in dispute; it has been accepted. It is then a question of drilling down to find out the how and why, and to come up with responses that will help to avoid mistakes in the future. It is that kind of productive dynamic that I draw on. It is on that basis that I can say that, of all the Committees on which I have sat from 1998, the Public Accounts Committee is the best. The exercise of auditing efficiencies, money and wastage, and of addressing all those issues actually amounts to quite a remarkable contribution to the better management of public money.

3.45 pm

The specific report that I would like to address is that on teacher substitution, and I declare an interest in education. The Westminster Public Accounts Committee drew attention to this issue some considerable time ago, in 2002. In 2010, there was a follow-up report, based on an Audit Office report that investigated the issues of managing teachers' sickness leave, the substitute cover in those circumstances and prematurely retiring teachers who were sometimes brought back into service fairly quickly. That did not give the best outcome in value for money, or give newly trained teachers opportunities for acquiring the necessary experience and expertise on coming out of teacher training. In many circumstances, a revolving door was created, and the system was feeding on itself. The problem had worsened between the publication dates of the two reports. We were obliged to draw attention to that and do something about it. The fact that the report focused on it resulted in a short-term efficiency that reduced the cost of teacher substitution, but the problem is a long way from being solved, and we must return to that subject yet again.

Mr Anderson: It is some time since we had a debate on a motion such as this. If I am correct,

the last such debate was in November 2010, under the previous mandate. I am, therefore, glad that we have an opportunity to consider the wide range of reports on a wide range of subjects, as outlined in the motion, all of which reflect the hard work of the Committee.

All the Assembly Committees have important scrutiny roles, but the Public Accounts Committee has a particularly important one. Its remit is wide and can touch upon almost any area of government and administration. It is our task to do all we can to ensure that limited resources are deployed in the most efficient and cost-effective manner possible. The motion is a reminder that, under devolution, levels of scrutiny are very much higher than those under direct rule, and that can only be good.

I also wish to record my thanks to the Comptroller and Auditor General and his staff, who have an excellent working relationship with the PAC, and thanks to the Committee Clerk and her staff for all their good work. As a member of the PAC, I have taken an interest in all the reports and the discussions around them. However, I want to focus my remarks on the 'Report on Managing Criminal Legal Aid', which was completed on 26 October 2011. I have also been involved in that particular area as a member of the Justice Committee, and it is an issue that I feel strongly about. It is also worth pointing out that it was the first time that the Public Accounts Committee looked into the justice issue since the devolution of policing and justice powers to the Assembly in April 2010.

At the outset, let me say that legal aid plays a crucial part in making sure that everyone has fair, equal and open access to justice. It is only right and proper that such an arrangement exists, but, for one reason or another, the cost of legal aid in Northern Ireland has been allowed to go through the roof to such an extent that the whole thing has become scandalous. Over the past decade or so, spending on criminal legal aid has been spiralling out of control, costing the taxpayer over £400 million since 2001, with no comparable increase in the number of cases. It is one of the most expensive systems in the world, and that is certainly not a record that we should be proud of. It is important just to remind ourselves that legal aid is public money. Vast sums of taxpayers' money were thrown at the private sector, to barristers and others in the legal profession who were, to put it mildly, doing very well indeed.

In May last year, it became clear that a group of 200 barrister and solicitors' firms received — I did not say “earned” — almost £70 million in legal aid in the financial year 2010-11. The identity of some of those very rich people was made public a few months ago. In one case that I raised in Committee, a barrister had claimed £832,255, and when that was assessed by the taxing master, it was reduced by over half to £411,250. I accept that that may have been an extreme case, but it illustrates the point. When we probed officials on the matter in some depth, we got some helpful answers, but we did not always get absolute clarity as to precisely why costs had soared in the way that they had.

As the Committee gathered evidence, we were very taken aback by some of what we learned. We were shocked to hear of some of the practices over the past 10 years. For example, almost £23 million had been spent on complex cases, known as very high cost cases, which never actually went to trial or lasted more than 25 days in court. An extra £10.5 million was paid to lawyers who appealed their fees for Crown Court cases. It is significant that defendants in Northern Ireland are represented by two barristers in over half of cases, whereas in England and Wales, it is just 5%. That obviously has financial implications. We recommended that new procedures be introduced and that all cases be subject to much stricter scrutiny than in the past. As a result, I am glad to say that tangible savings have now been achieved.

The Committee also heard that the Northern Ireland Legal Services Commission has overspent its budget every year since it was set up in 2003, requiring almost £150 million in additional funding. Such poor financial management cannot be allowed to continue. The Committee expects the Department to work with the commission to improve forecasting and bring spending within budget. That is a priority. Perhaps most disconcerting was the fact that the commission was unable to prove that legal aid has not been claimed fraudulently, either by applicants or practitioners. As a direct result, its accounts have been qualified every year since its establishment. To make matters worse, it had no cohesive counter-fraud strategy in place. The Committee has told the commission to identify the risks of fraud in legal aid and to establish proactive counter-fraud arrangements to manage them. That work has begun, and the Committee will continue to monitor its progress.

The Committee received an assurance that the criminal legal aid reforms, which were due to be completed by 2007 — five years ago — will now be implemented fully by June next year. Members will certainly agree with me that further delays are simply not acceptable, and I can assure the House that the Committee will be keeping a close eye on that progress.

There are other key areas of concern, and the Committee has reached a number of important conclusions that I will now share with the House. What is clear above all is that no one emerged with any credit from the review. The Department and its direct rule predecessors created an inherently flawed and complex system that was not fit for purpose. The Court Service introduced a series of defective remuneration schemes. The commission did not administer the system successfully, and the legal aid profession exploited loopholes in the system and, by the accounting officer's admission, and as has been referred to by my colleague, played “fast and loose” with public money.

Overall, our message is simply this: public confidence in the system must be restored. Significant improvements have to be made to the arrangements for delivering criminal legal aid, and spending must be brought under control. Although access to justice is paramount in a fair society, the Committee made it clear that that cannot come at any cost.

Finally, I should mention that the Committee for Justice has also been progressing the issue since we cross-referred our report for further scrutiny. That is to be welcomed, and it is an example of how two Assembly Committees can work in a joined-up manner for the greater good of the taxpayer.

Mr Hussey: I am also pleased to contribute to the debate on the work of the Public Accounts Committee. I begin by paying tribute to the staff who work with the Committee and to our Chairman, Mr Paul Maskey, who will be leaving the blue Benches of this House, possibly for the green Benches of somewhere else, in the not-too-distant future.

I will focus on an issue that sits closely with my role as a member of an Assembly Committee and as a member of the Policing Board: the criminal legal aid system, to which Mr Anderson referred. Following the publication of the Comptroller and Auditor General's report on 29 June 2011, the Committee, in its first inquiry

since the devolution of policing and justice powers, took evidence from officials from the Department of Justice, the Legal Services Commission and the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service.

Criminal legal aid plays a vital role in ensuring that there is fair and equal access to justice. It pays for legal advice and representation for those who could not otherwise afford a solicitor or barrister. However, providing criminal legal aid in Northern Ireland comes at a significant price. Mr Anderson referred to the fact that it cost the taxpayer over £400 million. Unlike most other public services, criminal legal aid is a demand-led service, and the budget is not cash limited. It is delivered exclusively by the private sector, making it all the more important that it is managed and controlled properly. Until recently, expenditure was rising every year, with costs trebling over the past decade, with no comparable increase in the number of cases.

The Northern Ireland Legal Services Commission was set up in 2003 to control expenditure and implement a programme of reform by the autumn of 2007 that would lead to tangible cost savings. However, it has delivered neither of those objectives. The reform programme remains significantly behind schedule and those reforms that relate specifically to criminal legal aid will not be implemented fully until 2013 at the earliest, as Mr Anderson pointed out.

The current system for providing criminal legal aid in Northern Ireland is one of the most expensive in the world. That is something that we should be ashamed rather than proud of. The Department accepts that the current system is complex and not fit for purpose. Although the judiciary decides who receives criminal legal aid and the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service determines policy, the commission has been left to pick up the bill. As a result, no one is wholly accountable for the large sums of public money spent on criminal legal aid. The Department has acknowledged that the current system is fundamentally flawed and not fit for purpose.

The Committee is highly critical of the very high cost case regime that existed between 2005 and April 2011. Fees for these cases were paid at a significantly higher rate than for standard cases, and were decided only when the case was concluded. However, the rate of payment was not the only cause of concern with very high

cost cases. In Northern Ireland, the qualifying threshold was a trial that lasted 25 days, but in England and Wales, it was 40 days. The Department conceded that 25 days was too low a threshold as it resulted in three times more very high cost cases coming through the system than expected. Also, even if a very high cost case did not eventually go to a trial that lasted for more than 25 days, legal practitioners were still paid at the higher rates.

Another important inquiry that the Committee completed looked at the use of locum doctors in Northern Ireland's hospitals. Mr Girvan raised this issue, but I feel it must be commented on again. As a Member who represents the people of West Tyrone, this inquiry was particularly relevant since the area is serviced by the Western Health and Social Care Trust, which has a significant reliance on the use of locum doctors.

As well as the potential negative impact on patient care and satisfaction, there is a significant cost to the public purse. The demand for locum doctors has risen in recent years due to workforce issues such as increased difficulty in filling vacancies and the impact of European legislation governing working hours. In the four-year period to March 2011, almost 8% of trusts' overall medical staffing expenditure related to locums. Payments to external recruitment agencies for locums totalled £74 million, while payments to substantive staff working over and above their contracted hours totalled over £35 million.

The Committee considers that trusts need to get better at managing the potential risks to patient safety of using locum doctors. They need to be more consistent in how they screen and induct locums and in the way that they manage their performance. In the Committee's view, one failure to rigorously follow procedures is one too many. In particular, the Committee was very concerned that compliance with the controls for sharing information about poorly performing doctors between trusts has not been sufficient to allow a hospital intending to engage a locum to make an informed decision as to whether it is appropriate to employ that doctor. For a planned, flexible workforce strategy to be successful, trusts need to improve their understanding of the use of locum doctors through greater use of data and better demand forecasting.

I look forward to the introduction of the regionally managed medical locum service, which should provide a more co-ordinated and consistent

approach to the management of the locum appointment process.

Mr McQuillan: I am pleased to contribute to this debate on the work of the Public Accounts Committee. I wish to refer to the Committee's examination of the reconsideration and appeals process for disability living allowance. Many members will be familiar with the difficulties and complexities of that benefit. The application process itself is a challenge, with an application form some 38 pages long, especially for those who are already vulnerable and suffering from disability. These difficulties are exacerbated further by the appeals process that applicants must go through if their claim process has been unsuccessful. That process can be gruelling for anyone, never mind the most vulnerable in our society.

Having heard from DSD and the appeals service, the Committee decided to hold an additional evidence session during that inquiry to take evidence from the president of the appeals tribunal. This seemed crucial and, indeed, essential for the Committee to properly assess the accountability of the process as it also involves a judicial element. The Committee's examination of the DLA reconsideration and appeals process highlighted that it was taking an excessively long time for appeals to be heard and concluded. No target was set for the end-to-end process so, of course, one of the Committee's key recommendations was that such targets should be put in place.

4.00 pm

We were encouraged to note that, following the Northern Ireland Audit Office report, the average time taken from an appeal being received in the Social Security Agency (SSA) to the issue of the tribunal's decision had fallen from 31 weeks to 22 weeks. Although that is a definite improvement, there is still room for further progress with that time frame.

It was clear from our investigation that the Social Security Agency, the appeals service and appeal tribunals needed to co-operate much more effectively, by adopting a more constructive and efficient approach and working more closely in partnership. Co-operation with the customer is a vital and fundamental issue that also needs to be addressed.

Although the Committee agreed that the independence and integrity of the appeal

process should be maintained, it also found that improvements in administration and communication between the bodies was required to ensure that the service is as efficient and effective as possible and that appellants are not subjected to any more stress than is necessary. As Members will know, this is a customer-facing service, and yet our experience demonstrates that, quite often, consideration for the customer seemed to be severely lacking in the whole process. Issues such as holding appeals in appropriate places that are not intimidating or daunting to the customer: courthouses have been used as venues for appeal hearings, which, in my opinion, are not suitable venues. Their use only adds undue stress to the customer. They are appealing and should be made to feel comfortable in their surroundings. Indeed, I have had constituents wanting to withdraw their appeals because they felt overwhelmed by the thought of their appeal being heard in a courthouse. This is a service in which the welfare of the customer is paramount, and yet their consideration and needs have not always been at the forefront.

The Committee's recommendations covered a number of important issues, including improvements to the disability living allowance application process, the timely production of the president of appeal tribunals' annual report and agreement on the attendance of agency staff at tribunals. The Committee also recommended that the process should be improved by obtaining feedback from appellants on the appeals process, ensuring consistency of decision-making on appeals and reviewing the reasons for the postponement and adjournment of hearings.

The investigation concluded that contentious issues such as the attendance of SSA staff at tribunals, the notification of appeals and the setting of an end-to-end target for the appeals process had to be resolved. For too long, those issues have deflected the bodies concerned from focusing on the needs of appellants and the delivery of an efficient and effective appeal service. Those are important themes that the Committee will continue to pursue in its future work. I will also continue to gather feedback from my constituents in order to monitor the process.

For me as a constituency representative, the inquiry was incredibly significant. I spend much of my time engaged with the service on behalf

of my constituents, whether to speak on their behalf, to facilitate their appointments or to help them arrange the supporting evidence and records they need to provide. As a result of the inquiry, I feel that I and the Committee have achieved real improvements that will have a positive bearing on the lives of local people, as well as achieving greater efficiency in the provision of an important public service.

This is, of course, only one aspect of the important work that the Committee has been occupied with over the past year. However, I wanted to focus on the issue today as I frequently deal with it in my constituency, as I am sure many other Members do also.

I want to express my thanks to the Chairman for the way in which he has chaired the meetings. I want to especially thank the Clerk and her staff for their help and support to me, and their dedication to the Committee as a whole over the working year. I also add my thanks to the Northern Ireland Audit Office for its help in the Committee process during the year.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Lord Morrow. Sorry, I call Jim Allister.

Mr Allister: I do not know whether I can fill those shoes. I doubt it very much, but I will make my contribution nonetheless.

I greatly welcome the debate. My only regret is that, within the short space of the debate, we have to debate so many reports. I say to the Committee that, in the main, these are excellent reports, and it would, to me not as a member of that Committee, have been far more beneficial if each one of them, or two or three of them, were brought to the House for debate so that they could get the examination they deserve, rather than bringing an omnibus collection of them for a debate such as this. Indeed, when I look back over the past year and think of some of the issues that we debated, many of them were a lot less deserving that many of the matters that lie at the heart of the reports. Therefore, in future, it would be much better if we had fewer Committee reports brought for debate more often.

Given the time that I have to speak, I have to choose which report I will speak to. I was probably most intrigued by the report that dealt with the farm nutrient management scheme. That is not least because, as an MEP, I was close to and familiar with the issue. I well remember and was involved in all the arguments about what was

causing the eutrophication in Northern Ireland's waters. It was always clear to me that the issue was not one of nitrates but of phosphates. Yet we went head over heels into extravagant requirements under the nitrates directive, putting huge burdens on the farming community.

I was not all surprised to read in the report — having experienced from many constituents how the farm nutrient scheme was handled — that the Committee reached the view:

“that, in a number of key aspects, the ... Scheme was poorly planned and badly managed.”

It also had a “piecemeal approach”, and:

“The quality of the Department's Economic Appraisal ... was far below the standard required”.

That certainly equates with any experience that I ever had of the report.

I suppose, though, that the most intriguing part of the report is when it deals with the magical mathematics by which funding for the scheme was obtained, under the guise of the Crossnacreevy lands in Castlereagh. We had this wheeze whereby, to draw down another £85 million, we had on paper a fictional notion that there was a £200 million valuation on the Crossnacreevy lands.

I find many things about that interesting, one of which is that the Minister of Finance at the time, who — with the then Agriculture Minister — took that proposition to the Executive, was not someone ignorant of the value of land in Castlereagh. He was not somebody who represented Strabane or Fermanagh who might not have been tuned into the nuance of value in Castlereagh. He was Mr Castlereagh himself: Mr Peter Robinson, who knew the value, if I may say so, of every blade of grass in Castlereagh; so much so that he knew that a blade of grass at one end of the constituency could be worth £5. Indeed, he purchased land for £5. The fact that that assisted him to sell his back garden for £460,000 is, we are told, neither here nor there.

This Minister knew, with great precision, the value of land in Castlereagh. Yet, remarkably, while land in one part of the constituency was worth a fiver, land in another part was worth £200 million. With a straight face, the Minister carried that proposition to the Executive table — a Minister who knew all about the value of land in Castlereagh; knew that Crossnacreevy was greenbelt land; had followed the debates,

interrogations and investigations of the Belfast metropolitan area plan and the efforts to get land at Crossnacreevy into development. He also knew the interest of certain developers in that regard. Yet that Minister allowed this wheeze of land allegedly worth £200 million, which it patently was not, to go to the Executive. It was worth £2 million because, in this context, it was never coming into development and required £6 million to relocate, so the land was of negative not positive value.

Therefore, this is not just a matter of civil servants valuing land inefficiently and inadequately. We heard from the Member for East Belfast how it was done, but this was civil servants picking a figure for the generic value of development land in the development limit and multiplying that by 80 for land that was not in a development limit. That is quite an astonishing way to proceed. However, this was a situation where a Minister who knew so much about the value of land in Castlereagh was in charge yet apparently lent himself to this wheeze. I think that the PAC maybe did not fully explore that, and maybe it is something that the Minister would like —

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

Mr Allister: Maybe today's Minister would like to explain how it could be that a Minister of Finance and Personnel could take a proposition based on such a fallacy to the Executive table.

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and can I say that, once again, it is a great joy for me to respond to this fourth debate on the Public Accounts Committee reports — at least my officials have told me that. At the very start, I should say to the Chairman, whatever his name, that I wish him all the best. I do not know where he is going — Sinn Féin has maybe imposed a confidentiality clause on his eventual location, but I wish him all the best anyway. Maybe I will see him at Westminster sometime, but then, maybe cows will fly. Who knows — after tomorrow, anything is possible.

This debate is about how we ensure that we get value for money when spending government finances. We have to remember that the main aim of government, which takes money from the public and then uses it for various items of expenditure, is to ensure that, when that money is taken, it is used as efficiently and effectively

as possible. Of course, we have our roles to play in that. The Executive have their part to play, because they have to give the leadership, establish the structures and set the vision and the targets for the direction in which we want to go. Of course, that is set out in the Programme for Government. Departments and public bodies are under the direction of Ministers, and they have to be responsible for implementing that programme. They have to do so within a defined governance and accountability framework, and they have to ensure that they operate within the appropriate guidelines. I think that Mr McLaughlin made the point that, although we have to have guidelines, we also need the flexibility to ensure that we use money effectively, efficiently and in an innovative way. Mr McLaughlin put that point more gently than I have in the past, but I think that we have to be very careful that, when we are looking at accountability and examining the ways in which money is spent, we do not finish up creating a straitjacket that means that we lose the flexibility that we want in the delivery of public services.

Indeed, the foreword to 'Managing Public Money Northern Ireland' states that:

"Public sector organisations can and should innovate in carrying out their responsibilities, using new technology and taking advantage of best practice in business efficiency."

Given that that means going into new territory, it sometimes involves taking risks. The one thing that we have to ensure in all this is that we avoid laying down a framework that stops officials being prepared to take that risk. Indeed, PAC evidence sessions highlighted those various issues, and its report on creating effective partnerships between government and the voluntary and community sector focused to a large extent on the need for fresh thinking and implementation of those new and innovative practices, as well as on the importance of avoiding the kind of bureaucracy that some Members mentioned, where we get so stifled by accountability and red tape that we allow community groups almost to wither on the vine while they wait for decisions to be made about the way in which money is to be spent. If people have had a bad experience with one group or a bad report from the Public Accounts Committee or the Northern Ireland Audit Office, they perhaps become afraid to take some risks to keep groups alive. We have to bear all that in mind and get the focus right.

4.15 pm

It has been said in the past that we need to ensure that there is value for public money and that officials themselves act innovatively. I am very pleased to advise the Committee that a recent training initiative will see senior civil servants receive training in their role of ensuring public accountability and good governance. The head of the Civil Service has agreed that the training will be mandatory. The initiative will include training in personal accountability and responsibilities; on the practical application of managing public money; and on the role of the Public Accounts Committee. I am sure that the Committee Chairman will be pleased to hear that. It is not that we are always wanting to fight with the Committee; rather, we want to know its role. The training will also include examples of the key lessons learned from recent PAC hearings and reports. Moreover, it will be designed to instil ethical values and high standards of corporate governance and accountability in our Departments and key public bodies.

Before addressing the specific issues raised by contributors, I will say a word or two about two issues. I am sure that the Chairman and the Assembly would be disappointed if I did not raise them. I may have already mentioned the first one, but I want to caution against what can easily become an unhealthy preoccupation with the processes and procedures, almost turning governance into an industry or an objective in its own right. We must not lose sight of the real objective, which, in all the reports, should be how we achieve the best delivery of services across the public sector.

I could cite examples from a number of reports, but I have to say that the recommendations that come from them are sometimes more concerned with processes. An example might be picked from one particular case, after which the Public Accounts Committee automatically thinks that it can be applied across the whole public sector. That is not always the case. I make that point in the round but also with regard to the Executive memorandum of reply. I fully understand why the Committee is sometimes frustrated when we note recommendations rather than accept them. I would rather accept recommendations and move forward positively, but sometimes it is important that we simply note when we do not believe that the recommendation can be applied, and applied effectively, across the

service. The recommendation may be too vague or too wide-ranging, or it may not consider the wide varieties and variations that there can be across the whole system. That has detrimental knock-on effects.

Secondly, I wish to speak about memorandums of reply. I do not know whether the Committee understands their use. There has been a consistent pattern in recent years of the PAC seeking to challenge the responses provided in MORs. There has been ongoing correspondence between the Committee and the Treasury Officer of Accounts on the matter, and I know that it has been discussed with the Treasury Officer of Accounts regularly. I wish to make something clear: the MOR is the Executive response to the Assembly, not to the PAC. If the PAC is unhappy with the response, it is up to it to raise questions in the Assembly. Recently, the Committee decided to write to a number of accounting officers in relation to MORs that it disagrees with. That disregards the position that I have stated, which has been communicated and clarified to the Committee. It is not acceptable that that action has placed accounting officers in the difficult position where they are in conflict with the stated view of me as Minister and the demands of the Public Accounts Committee.

I can advise the Committee that the accounting officers will not be responding. I reiterate that, if a member of the Committee wants to raise a matter of concern about an MOR, they should do so with the appropriate Minister in this Chamber. That is the proper place to do it.

The other issue I want to raise concerns the Audit Office. Mr Dallat has already raised this: that if I criticise the Audit Office, somehow or other it is tantamount to interference with its independence or public accountability. Let me make it clear: it is not. I simply want the Audit Office to abide by the same standards of transparency and accountability that there should be across the rest of the public sector. Members will be aware that there have been significant changes to audit services in England and that changes are under consideration in Wales. I hope that the Assembly will consider having the same review.

I turn to some of the comments on the reports. Mr Maskey raised the issue of the partnership with the voluntary and community sector. The Committee's report rightly states that the

Government's relationship with the sector is complex. If it is not properly managed, we can have approaches that are bureaucratic and risk-averse and fail to focus on what should be delivered. Those are not just words; they have practical implications for groups. It is important that there has been a positive response to the report from DSD: it is now working towards a programme of work that is geared toward building efficient partnerships with the key elements across the sector. The Department's project is to identify improvements that will reduce the bureaucracy and to have a new concordat between the Government and the sector, which will help with transparency and accountability.

There is also the issue that Mr Maskey and Mr Dallat raised about the governance of Northern Ireland Water and DRD. Again, it is clear from the Committee's report that DRD and Northern Ireland Water needed to take some urgent action. I have been informed that the process of looking for the weaknesses, identifying them and dealing with them is under way and that, specifically, there is a new management statement and financial memorandum put in place between DRD and Northern Ireland Water, which will provide greater clarity in respect of the governance arrangements. They are also undertaking a project to regularise the identified irregular contracts, which is to be completed by December. There will also be a procurement committee established by Northern Ireland Water, which will be able to make recommendations on the award of contracts that exceed £1 million for operational costs and £2 million for capital costs.

Mr Girvan and Mr Hussey raised the issue of locum doctors in Northern Ireland, and I have been advised that DHSSPS is working to agree the optimal split between the permanent staff and the locums for each trust. Hopefully, that will help to reduce the need for locums and, more importantly, offer potential savings. There is also to be a new, regionally managed medical locum service implemented by September of this year, which will consider the weakness in management information.

As far as the compliance with the European working directive is concerned, DHSSPS has advised that the cost of introducing a system for monitoring the hours worked by doctors would be prohibitive, particularly in the current

financial climate. However, it is to look at the options that might be available.

On the issue of adult literacy and numeracy, DEL has informed me that it continues to address the absence of the necessary numeracy and literacy skills by mainstreaming essential skills provision in all its programmes, including initiatives such as learner access and engagement, the union learning fund, Steps to Work and the wider support for work-based provision. In the academic year 2010-11, 57,492 people went through essential skills, which was a 12% increase on the previous year. Of course, it is not just the number of people who go through the programmes; it is, as a number of Members have pointed out, the quality of what happens, and that is what we will have to judge it on at the end.

Mr Allister, Mr Easton and Mr Girvan raised the issue of the farm nutrient management scheme. DARD has accepted that aspects of that scheme should have been handled differently. I understand that DARD has re-examined and revised many of its procedures and internal processes, so it should be able to implement another major scheme and will be placed to ensure that it will operate more efficiently and effectively.

I will not have time to go through all the rest of the issues. I am sorry; I do have time. I thought that I had only 15 minutes, but I have 20 minutes.

Members also raised the issue of Crossnacreevy. Mr Allister gave us the benefit of his knowledge of land prices in Crossnacreevy and Castlereagh, and the knowledge that the First Minister, then the Minister of Finance and Personnel, would have had about that. I would have much preferred to hear about Mr Allister's experience and knowledge of the legal advice and support services involved, the cost of those and the way in which barristers have been able to use them very efficiently to line their pockets. I know that we would have had a more interesting debate had he stuck to his area of expertise on that particular issue.

All I can say about Crossnacreevy is that —

Mr Allister: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Wilson: I will, since I mentioned the Member.

Mr Allister: The Minister could also, of course, share his experience of the use of the legal system.

Mr Wilson: I probably could. I am trying to think what experience I have of the use of the legal system. I am sure that I have had some use of it on occasions. The one thing that I know is that any time I have used it, it has cost me an arm and a leg and it has not been on legal aid either. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Allister: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Wilson: I have given way once already. The valuation of the Crossnacreevy scheme was done on the basis that there was land that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development intended to sell, with planning permission, and, had it been sold with planning permission, it reflected the value of land with development potential at that particular time. The fact that it was not sold and could not be sold at that price makes no difference to the operation of the Department any more than the depressed value of land and assets at present makes to the efficient running of government in Northern Ireland in the current recession.

Mr McLaughlin raised the issue of the management of substitute cover for teachers and the Committee's follow-up report. The Department of Education has informed me that the introduction of the new streamlined framework for reporting teachers' sickness absence is providing employing authorities and schools with reports on absence rates and substitution costs.

The good thing about this system is that it has had two effects. First, teacher absence days have gone down considerably from 9.5 days to 7.2 days. That is still too high, but, nevertheless, that monitoring has led to that. Secondly, the introduction of the flat rate of pay for substitution cover and the undertaking of other initiatives has meant that the number of days worked by permanently retired teachers has fallen by 63% between 2008-09 and 2011-12, and it now accounts for only 6% of the total number of substitute days worked. That offers new opportunities for young teachers who are just coming out of college. Nevertheless, Mr McLaughlin said that there is still much to be done. Given the fact that the teacher substitute bill still runs to £57 million, there is work to be done there to save money in the education budget.

I will now turn to the management of the criminal legal aid scheme. The Department of Justice has informed me that many important

changes have taken place to control criminal legal aid. The first thing is that subjective assessment has been removed from Magistrate's Court and Crown Court cases. They are now paid in accordance with standard fees that are set out in legislation.

There is also an increasing use of standard fees, and many of the very high cost cases have been removed, which has helped to improve the accuracy of forecasting. A new accounting system will be introduced, which will further improve the commission's ability to manage expenditure more effectively. The implementation plan for legal aid reform should all be completed and delivered by 2013, which is the target.

4.30 pm

I think that I have addressed most of the issues that Members raised. As I said, it is important that we have proper accountability when we spend public money. We may differ on occasions on how that is best achieved. It is right that we should debate how that is done, but I am sure that, at the end of the day, all of us who have contributed to the debate and contribute to the discussion on making sure that there is effective and efficient use of public resources have the same aim in view. We will have our disagreements and discussions about how it is best done, but I think that we all aim for the same objective.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank all the Members for taking part in today's debate. I think that the previous one was in 2010, and a number of reports have been done since. I commend all the Committee members for taking the time to go through them and having the patience to do so, and I commend them for all their hard work and dedication. I also commend the Committee secretariat, which has been invaluable to me and the rest of the Committee members. In addition, I commend the Audit Office, which, through its joint work with the Public Accounts Committee, has saved government tens of millions of pounds that can then go into front line services. In some cases in the past, as you see when you look at the other reports, that might have been squandered or badly spent; it certainly was not value for money. The collaboration between the Public Accounts Committee and the Audit Office, along with the staff in the secretariat, has meant that tens of

millions of pounds have been saved over the past number of years. That should be welcomed and recognised instead of being criticised on some occasions. That is where we are. I hope that the Public Accounts Committee will continue in that regard in the future.

I will probably touch on all the points that were raised, but I do not intend to spend a lot of time going into them. The fact is that one senior civil servant said that they were playing fast and loose with public money. That is one of the worst comments that I have ever heard from a civil servant. The fact that they were playing fast and loose tells you that they did not care about the money; it was not theirs. The point that I raised at the start of my opening comments —

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr P Maskey: Yes.

Mr Wells: The phrase “fast and loose” was used in the report on the legal aid budget. The overspend was £150 million, which is the equivalent of six new schools. Nobody was disciplined or sacked. In fact, nobody was even spoken to about that overspend. Does the Member agree that that is a disgraceful situation?

Mr P Maskey: The fact is that there was no fraud at that stage; we could not find fraud. However, Mr Wells’s sentiment is 100% right. That is the difficulty. I will refrain from speaking about somebody being sacked or not; that is not the role or remit of the Public Accounts Committee, which is there to ensure that money is spent well. That role is for Ministers and the head of the Civil Service with regard to their civil servants; it is not a role for the Public Accounts Committee. We should not get lost in that. Once the Public Accounts Committee goes down that road, it leaves itself open to being criticised and is not doing its job as it should be. However, it is a big issue.

This is the important part of the debate. The Minister — I am Paul Maskey, by the way; maybe John does not realise that — touched on MORs in his contribution. That has a serious consequence. You said that MORs are the response to the Assembly. The PAC is doing the work of the Assembly. That is where those responses should be made, and they should be made very clearly. If that is the role of the Public Accounts Committee, that certainly should be the role of the Department of Finance and

Personnel, and the others Ministers should also go down that road.

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

Mr Jim Allister, in fairness to him, said that a lot of good work and good reports are being done. However, he said that we are here today to speak about a lot of different reports, and some of them should be brought forward sooner. I do not think that some of your Executive colleagues, Minister, would want every report produced by the Public Accounts Committee to be brought to the Assembly when they are published, because it would give them more work to do. We concentrate on senior civil servants, and the whole beauty of the Public Accounts Committee is that we do not mention Ministers. That allows us to leave our political baggage at the door and not bring it into the room. Looking at the Ministers is up to the Assembly and the ministerial colleagues in the Executive. So, I think that you should think that over, Minister, and talk to some of your Executive colleagues, because they may not agree on that approach. It is entirely up to the new Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee, who will come in very shortly, and the rest of the Committee to decide that. I wish them luck with that.

I will go back to some of the comments that were made. Paul Girvan spoke after me about the recommendations on locum doctors. Mr Girvan raised major concerns that some doctors in other places could have been struck off but could get a job as a locum doctor because that accountability mechanism is not place. That is a very worrying concern that came out of that report. People on the outside are looking in and expecting a first-class service from our health service. They are not looking at locum doctors, but they need and want to see a doctor.

Michael Copeland started off by talking about the bottle of bleach and the community group. I was tempted to ask whether that bottle of bleach was to make sure that all the civil servants are squeaky clean, but I will not go down that road. Mr Copeland said that he heard the word “flipping” in the Committee, and that is about buying a piece of land and flipping it on again on the same day. I have heard worse terms for it, but I will not go into that. Some pieces of land were being valued originally at

£200 million and being let off and then sold for just over £2 million. That is absolutely crazy.

John Dallat, the longest-serving member of the Committee, quite wrongly announced me as Paul Priestly. He had the good wisdom to come up and apologise and say that that is worst thing that he could ever say to anybody. I appreciate that. John majored on NI Water, but he homed in on the skilling up of our young people in the basic skills of literacy and numeracy. All members of the Committee very much agreed with that.

There may be something about toilets. Alex Easton mentioned toilet paper, and I am not sure if that goes hand in hand with the bleach that Michael Copeland was using. Mr Easton made that point when talking about the costings. The reality of it is that, in some cases, it looks like, when people are marking up costings for different projects, it has been done on a piece of toilet roll or a cigarette box because no other way could explain it. If it had been done properly, those mistakes would not have been made.

Mitchel McLaughlin looked back on a number of reports and touched on the work that Ministers have done. He mentioned the direct rule Ministers and said that some pressures on civil servants can lead to shortcuts. That is why the PAC is needed now and will always be needed. When shortcuts are taken, mistakes can be made. However, the point of it all, which we raised on many occasions, is that we are not opposed to risk and are not risk-averse. We encourage risk as long as it is well calculated and well managed, but we hope that some of those mistakes are never made again. They are too costly.

Sydney Anderson touched on legal aid. Ross Hussey spoke about me leaving the blue Benches of Stormont and probably going to the green Benches somewhere else. I hope that the green benches that you were talking about are in the Falls park. Those are the only green benches that I will be sitting on. *[Laughter.]* He also said that 8% of the overall budgets in some trusts was spent on locum doctors. That is a crazy amount of money, given all the checks and balances, and that goes back to Mr Girvan's point.

Adrian McQuillan spoke about the fact that the appeals process for DLA takes too long. I totally agree. We all deal with DLA in our constituency offices, and it sometimes takes 20-odd weeks

for an appeal to be heard. You have to ask who is making money out of all this. Some appeals are postponed for a long time. I remember a Committee member saying that some appeals were held in courthouses in which murder trials were also being conducted. People who were ill and had their appeal turned down perhaps had to face the trauma of making another appeal in a courthouse.

Jim Allister was the last Member to speak before the Minister. I am glad that he welcomed the fact that the Committee produced some excellent reports. I know how hard everyone who was involved in the reports worked. The issue is about ensuring that we receive value for money, that there is good governance and that government works to deliver for all people in our society, including those living in some of the worst and most deprived areas. In some areas that are represented by me and by Sue Ramsey, who is sitting beside me, people are crying out for good governance and value for money. They sometimes do not see the benefits of government when it is not working, and they are the people whom it hurts most. I urge all Members to continue to support the Public Accounts Committee reports, and I thank you all.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly takes note of the following Public Accounts Committee reports: Report on Campsie Office Accommodation and Synergy e-Business Incubator (01/10/11R); The Management of Substitution Cover for Teachers: Follow-up Report (20/10/11R); The Administration and Management of the Disability Living Allowance Reconsideration and Appeals Process (25/10/11R); Report on Arrangements for Ensuring the Quality of Care in Homes for Older People (39/10/11R); Measuring the Performance of NI Water (37/10/11R); Procurement and Governance in NI Water (40/10/11R); Improving Adult Literacy and Numeracy (60/10/11R); Report on Managing Criminal Legal Aid (NIA 20/11-15); Report on Reducing Water Pollution from Agricultural Sources – The Farm Nutrient Management Scheme (NIA 21/11-15); Report on Creating Effective Partnerships between Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector (NIA 24/11-15); Report on the Use of Locum Doctors by Northern Ireland Hospitals (NIA 37/11-15); and the following Department of Finance and Personnel memoranda of reply: Report on Campsie Office Accommodation and Synergy e-Business Incubator; The Management of Substitution Cover for Teachers:

Follow-up Report; The Administration and Management of the Disability Living Allowance Reconsideration and Appeals Process; Measuring the Performance of NI Water; Procurement and Governance in NI Water; Report on Arrangements for Ensuring the Quality of Care in Homes for Older People; Improving Adult Literacy and Numeracy; Report on Managing Criminal Legal Aid; Report on Reducing Water Pollution from Agricultural Sources – The Farm Nutrient Management Scheme; Report on Creating Effective Partnerships between Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector; Report on the Use of Locum Doctors by Northern Ireland Hospitals.

Northern Ireland Assembly: Membership

Mr Principal 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 15 minutes to propose and 15 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Moutray (The Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee): I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the report of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee on the review of the number of Members of the Northern Ireland Legislative Assembly and on the reduction in the number of Northern Ireland Departments: Part 1 - Number of Members of the Northern Ireland Legislative Assembly.

Members will be aware that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland intends to introduce a Northern Ireland Bill in the third session of Parliament. The Bill will provide an opportunity to make changes to the Northern Ireland institutions where there is broad support among the Assembly parties and where Westminster primary legislation would be required, such as future amendments to the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The Assembly and Executive Review Committee therefore asked the political parties and the independent Members of the Assembly for their priorities for the Committee's immediate review of Parts III and IV of the Northern Ireland Act within the available timescale set out by the Secretary of State for his proposed Northern Ireland Bill. Following consideration of the responses, the Committee agreed that its immediate review would cover the size of the Assembly and the number of Northern Ireland Departments. The Committee then agreed in the review's terms of reference that it would, first, report on the size of the Assembly by mid-June 2012 and then report on the number of Northern Ireland Departments in late October 2012. Therefore, the report today focuses solely on the number of MLAs.

To obtain wider views on the size of the Assembly, the Committee agreed to write to some 80 stakeholders requesting their specific views on five key issues set out in a Committee call for evidence paper. The five key issues were the main focus for the Committee's considerations and discussions during the review. For the purposes of this first report,

the Committee concentrated on the first four issues: the statutory link between Westminster constituencies and the Northern Ireland Assembly constituencies, commonly known as coupling; the implications of the forthcoming change to the number of MLAs arising out of the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011; the number of MLAs required to ensure that the effectiveness of the Assembly is maintained; and finally, the proposals to mitigate the impact of reducing the number of MLAs on the effectiveness of the Assembly in delivering its key functions, in particular proposals to ensure a robust and effective Committee system.

4.45 pm

The Committee's key stakeholders for the review were the Assembly's political parties and independent Members; the First Minister and the deputy First Minister and the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister; Clerks of relevant Assemblies and Parliaments in the UK and the Republic of Ireland; academics whose field of study involved devolved legislatures; NILGA and the 26 local councils; and, finally, all other political parties registered in Northern Ireland. In addition to requesting written evidence directly from those key stakeholders, the Committee used a signposting advertisement in the three daily papers to attract a wider public sector and public response to its call for evidence paper. In all, the Committee received and considered 25 stakeholder responses to the review. The Committee also received oral evidence from Professor Rick Wilford of Queen's University Belfast, the Northern Ireland Local Government Association and the Director General of the Northern Ireland Assembly, Mr Trevor Reaney. That evidence was extremely useful, and I thank all the witnesses for their contribution.

It was apparent from early on in the Committee's consideration of the review that, although we examined responses to the five key issues set out in the stakeholder call for evidence paper separately, members considered that the issues were very much interlinked and that a holistic approach to reaching a view on the size of the Assembly with regard to the number of MLAs should be taken. That having been said, the Committee could not reach consensus on the size of the Assembly. However, the report usefully sets out in some detail the position of the political parties

represented on the Committee on the four key issues under the first part of the review. In the Committee consideration section, the report includes the views of other key stakeholders who responded to those issues, including the other political parties in the Assembly and one independent Member.

The report also sets out in summary options that the Committee considers may prove a useful tool in establishing a final position for the size of the Northern Ireland Assembly. The options set out in the conclusions section of the report list several scenarios for retaining or removing the statutory link between Westminster and the Northern Ireland constituencies; variations in the number of Northern Ireland constituencies and the number of MLAs elected per constituency; potential practicalities for the implementation of each option; and, finally, envisaged timing implications of each option. The options arose from the Committee's deliberations on the written and oral evidence that was received and considered by the Committee during the review.

As to the way forward, that is now for the Assembly's political parties, through the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. Finally, on behalf of the Committee, I acknowledge and thank the Committee staff for their valuable work and support during the review. I include in that the work of the Assembly research staff, legal advisers and Hansard staff. The Assembly and Executive Review Committee requests that the Assembly note the Committee's report.

Mr McCarthy: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom fáilte a chur roimh an tuairisc. Ba mhaith liom fosta mo chuid buíochais a ghabháil le foireann an Choiste le haghaidh na hoibre atá déanta acu. I welcome the report. I offer the appreciation of the Sinn Féin members on the Committee to the Chairperson, Stephen Moutray, for taking us through the discussion stage of the report. I also thank the staff. I know that the Chair has already outlined the people involved in compiling the report.

We looked at the size and the number of representatives in the Assembly. Throughout our discussions and in whatever discussions will take place in future, we will be guided by the principles of inclusiveness and representativeness because, for us, those are the key issues. Indeed, we spoke about many

things and, I suppose, the pending decision about the Westminster constituencies, in many ways, is an imposition of the number of constituencies in the North. It was agreed to a degree that the uncertainty of the constituencies outlined by Westminster does, in many ways, pose a challenge to us. The number can go up and down; we are not in control of the numbers. In our discussion, we said that this could be brought into line with the pending review of public administration. It opens up the avenue to have a look at the constituencies. Coming out of that, it is fair to say that the need for a Boundary Commission is perhaps something that the Assembly could consider in the future. There is absolutely no reason why we should not have the ability to decide the number of constituencies that we feel are needed to provide good representation, to set those boundaries in the context of the political and day-to-day realities of life and not have that dictated by numbers elsewhere.

When you read the report, you will see that a number of parties have put forward what they believe to be a suitable number of representatives in the Assembly. We went at this with an open mind. We remain to be convinced about what size the Assembly should be. If we are ever going to change the numbers, we will have to be convinced that safeguards and mechanisms will be in place.

What guided and, in my opinion, underpinned the Good Friday Agreement was inclusiveness. Too often, in the past, constituencies have been left not properly representative or with people representing them in a sectional way. That we have taken good steps and provided good examples, particularly in the Assembly, to ensure that inclusiveness was one of our guiding principles is a plus. There is no doubt that the model in the Good Friday Agreement was designed to ensure representation of the smaller parties and independents. In many ways, that may have been eroded to some degree, but the guiding principle and the fundamentals remain as true today as they were then. That is important. Whatever discussion we have about size, that is how we will be guided.

As the Chair outlined in his presentation, we have opened up the discussion. In the previous mandate, the AER Committee had a role in the transfer of policing and justice powers. Again, many decisions that had to be made were, ultimately, made in a wider context. In

my opinion, the work of the AER Committee was part of teasing out and making people comfortable with the issues that had to be dealt with and tackled. I have absolutely no doubt that, in times ahead, as we go at this discussion about not just the number of Assembly representatives but the number of Departments, how they mix together and the review of public administration, it will all come together.

From a Sinn Féin perspective, whatever decisions we make, we will be guided by the principle that there has to be inclusivity, equality and representativeness at the heart of it.

Mr Beggs: I welcome the publication of the first report of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee. Go back through it again and you will suddenly realise that we have been working on this issue since last September. It has taken some time to progress, and we are only at part one. Progress has been relatively slow. At times, meetings were delayed or put off because of information not coming back to the Committee. Nevertheless, we all recognise that we have made progress.

It is right to acknowledge the work of the Committee staff and the assistance that the Committee received from the Assembly's research and library services. A lot of very detailed information was brought together for us, which helped make us better informed about how change is happening elsewhere and the various aspects involved in making any changes to the Northern Ireland legislation.

As others have said, the Committee received a considerable amount of written correspondence and oral evidence. We have hopefully made an informed decision in putting that together for the public to see. Ultimately, I think others will be discussing it in detail and taking everything in the round.

One of the overriding factors that is taking place at present and we are in the middle of is the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011, which will result in the Northern Ireland Westminster constituencies being reduced from 18 to 16. I understand that the boundaries are expected to be finalised this autumn. Section 33 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 indicates that there should be six Members for each of those constituencies. With the new Westminster legislation, there will, therefore, be an automatic reduction of 12 Northern Ireland Assembly

Members, when the Boundary Commission recommendations are finalised.

One Member said that we should deviate from the Westminster boundaries and invent our own. What difference would it make if there were plus six or minus six Members in the current Assembly, never mind in a future Assembly? In all probability, we will hover at about six. I understand that the predictions are that we might go up to 17 constituencies and, at some point, go down to 15. We will stay at around 16, and I do not think that it would be a huge issue if we went up six Members or down six.

We believe that the Belfast Agreement was about creating inclusive democratic government in Northern Ireland. That is an important concept. Recently, we agreed the new structure of local government boundaries, which will, ultimately, reduce considerably the number of local councillors. Since the Ulster Unionists believe in inclusive democracy, we argue that those changes should be allowed to bed in before we go further and take the next step.

The Committee has had discussions about how we could identify the best method for new constituencies. My Ulster Unionist colleagues and I believe that the Westminster boundaries are the easiest system. New Westminster boundaries are soon to be finalised. All of the consultation has happened, and all the costs involved have already occurred. The guidance is there to ensure fairness and equality so that each of those constituencies will be of an equal size and there will be equal representation. Not only that, the law in place will require that to happen automatically on a regular basis, so it will ensure equality in the long term.

Some have advocated following the Scottish example. They have introduced their own revised boundaries, but they had a different problem. They wanted to keep the number of MSPs and not reduce them; they wanted to maintain the status quo. That is not the case here. There are advantages in avoiding costs and in avoiding confusion with the electorate. Having Westminster boundaries, Assembly boundaries and council boundaries would be unhelpful and confusing for the electorate.

Dr McDonnell: Like others, I welcome the debate and the openness that it begins to create around the issue. I thank the Chair, the Committee and the staff for the work they have done and for the time they have devoted to the issue.

These institutions are public property; they are in public ownership. Therefore, any decision on review or change must be conducted in fully open, transparent and accountable circumstances. The process should not be rushed for populist reasons or for any other reason, without a thorough and robust analysis of all the implications, ramifications and complications that might arise. While other meetings and fora have some benefits in providing space to tease out party political differences, authority for the Assembly and Executive review should and must remain within the broad membership of the Assembly and, therefore, be conducted through the appropriate channels of the statutory Assembly and Executive Review Committee, regardless of how long some might think that will take.

5.00 pm

Our view on the number of MLAs is a matter of public record and has been disclosed numerous times by my colleague Conall McDevitt, and he will go into this issue in some detail at a later stage. I do not want to take up undue time, but, in summary, we will accept a reduction in the number of MLAs from 108 to 96 upon implementation of the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011. We are open to be persuaded in any future negotiations about any future reduction in the size of the Assembly, if people feel that it is necessary, but we would want to make sure that it is in the best interests of the public.

We have concerns about the impact of the link between Westminster and Assembly constituencies and the impact that regular and repeated changes in boundaries à la Westminster will have on the Assembly boundaries and the damage that that can do to political stability. Continuous change may also damage the important relationship between voters and their representatives.

It is important that this debate does not become, and is not defined as, a simple, narrow numbers game. It is our firm view that representation, legislation and scrutiny of the Executive must be designed around public need and best function. To my mind, the public requires more than just stability from these institutions. Those who elect us require and deserve a set of institutions that deliver for them and keep delivering for them and their families. They expect a set of structures across

this island that will move the peace process and the political process that we have been involved in for a number of years on to a peace with prosperity process that will improve lives and livelihoods. That is the job of this Assembly, and that should be the fundamental root of any discussion around the number of Departments and number of Assembly Members.

I am glad that progress has been made and can be made on the issue of the number of MLAs in this Assembly, but it is rather disappointing that progress in respect of the North/South review is hindered by some of the same Members of this House, who should know better.

We have made slow and steady progress on strand one, which is internal to Northern Ireland, but we need to push forward on strand two, which relates to North/South issues, and strand three, which relates to east-west issues.

I welcome the report. I would welcome it going faster and further, but it is very good in so far as it goes.

Mr Lyttle: I welcome the report on behalf of the Alliance Party. The party is on record as supporting a reduction in the number of MLAs and Departments. The proposed reduction in the number of parliamentary constituencies represents a good opportunity to start the process in earnest. We are supportive of reducing the number of MLAs per constituency from six to five, with the aim of having an Assembly with closer to 80 Members. That would be in keeping with the size of Northern Ireland and would cater for the need for efficient government. The Alliance Party cautions against going below five Members per constituency, as proportionality may be affected, and proportionality is critical in a divided society seeking to build a more united community.

A reduction in the number of MLAs to approximately 80 would also result in significant savings, with additional indirect savings being made through a reduction in other running costs. The Alliance Party is content that there is little evidence to suggest that this type of reduction would be insufficient to ensure the effectiveness of the Assembly, particularly if a streamlining of the Executive happened concurrently. It is, therefore, important that a reduction in MLA numbers is accompanied by a rationalisation of Departments in order to allow sufficient government scrutiny. A reduction in Departments would lead to a reduction in

Statutory Committees and, therefore, fewer MLAs would be needed to cover the number of places available. There is no reason why that should produce a negative impact on the level of governance. The Alliance Party believes that the fact that the Scottish Parliament has similar powers to the Northern Ireland Assembly and has fewer MSPs per head of population indicates that around 80 MLAs is a sufficient number to produce a proportionate and effective legislature.

It is also important to note that the public have a voice and support such a position. That was clearly displayed in a recent opinion poll that found that seven in 10 voters want the number of MLAs cut. We as an Assembly have undoubtedly come a long way since 1998, but devolution must continue to evolve. The opinion poll also showed that there is a significant amount of dissatisfaction among the public with the institutions in their current form. We must take that on board and show the public that we are willing not only to listen to their concerns but to act on them.

A reduction in the number of MLAs is not a panacea, but it can be a good starting point in the process to develop an Assembly that delivers more effective and efficient government for all our citizens.

Mr Campbell: I support the take-note debate on the report. Like others, I pay tribute at the outset to the staff and all those who assisted in any way in the report's production throughout some lengthy as well as some rather shorter meetings. It is a process that took considerable time.

As Mr Lyttle just outlined, the issue in the public's mind is not the same as those of us who are deeply enmeshed in the political world assess it to be. The public are more concerned about getting a system in place in the Assembly that is lean, effective and does not cost as much as the current Assembly. That is what people want. They look at the Assembly and at the burgeoning cost, year on year, of the existing structure. That is one of the reasons why we proposed to reduce the number of MLAs to around 80.

We will have to come back to the issue of decoupling the constituencies. Although we had an initial preference for the Westminster model, the uncertainties that it throws up leave for a more undesirable outcome. If someone were to suggest that we go down the route of an 11-council model in future, would we have

11 constituencies? Could we then agree at that stage to have — six times 11 — 66 MLAs? That would be a saving of almost 40% on the current 108. One thing is for sure: the public do not want excessively expensive MLAs continually, week on week, month on month and year on year, labouring here to get legislation passed. They believe that that can be done much more effectively and efficiently.

The issue of dual mandates has come up in this context on numerous occasions, and I am sure that it will come up again. I make no apology whatsoever for saving the public purse not tens of thousands of pounds but hundreds of thousands of pounds. *[Laughter.]* I notice that the 'Belfast Telegraph' mentioned the Sinn Féin decision to take some four MPs out of the Assembly. Its headline was that that was going to save Sinn Féin £700,000 rather than saying that it was going to cost the taxpayer £700,000, which is what it will do. Either we get the dual mandate issue right by reducing the numbers or we will cost the public purse even more. People have to make up their minds about what they want. I think that we will proceed much more effectively and have much more support from the public if we move successively along the line of saying that we want single mandates and fewer MLAs and MPs. Who will argue with that? The electorate will decide. Whatever boundaries we agree through the Boundary Commission, people can put their names forward and the voters will decide. I think that we have at least the basis for some movement. People want to say to us: get on with it, get it trimmed down, get it slimmed down, get it effective, get it efficient and get it working.

Mr Hamilton: I have sat on the Assembly and Executive Review Committee for five years, and one thing I have learned in that time is that the work is frustrating. I concur with what Dr McDonnell said earlier. All of us who were involved in the Committee would rather that some of its conclusions were a bit more definitive than what is before us today. I echo what he said: we wish its work was faster and went further. That said, the work that is before us is a useful body of material. In the past five or six years, the Committee has been good at scoping out the broad range of issues surrounding touchstone matters such as the reduction in the number of Assembly Members. This is a very long-standing issue. Over the past five years that I have been in this place, I do not think there is a single subject on which I have

done more radio or TV interviews than reducing the size of Stormont.

Mr McDevitt: The media is obsessed with it.

Mr Hamilton: Absolutely, to the point where I lamented last week the sad passing of the BBC's 'Hearts and Minds' and the time I was depicted by Ian Knox in a cartoon as a turkey leading fellow MLAs to vote for Christmas after I got unanimous support for a motion calling for a reduction in the size of Stormont. The issue has been ever present during the time that I have been here, and it goes back further to previous mandates.

The DUP's position of supporting over that entire time a reduced number of Assembly Members is well stated and does not need a lot of repetition. We put forward our desire to see a reduced number, a range of between 72 and 80 Members, during evidence. Over the past number of years, we have seen a downward pressure, which Mr Campbell mentioned. That is borne out by a number of factors, including Budgets and the public financial situation. It would be a brave man — I can look around here and say that — who would go out and argue that he would rather have large institutions than investment in public services. Only a very brave man would say that.

The Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011 has already established the default position. If we do nothing at all, we will have fewer Members in this place after the next election than we do today. The argument that many of us have put forward, in this and other parties, has been won. In that respect, I agree with Roy Beggs when he says that progress has been made. Public opinion is very clearly in favour of a reduced number of Assembly Members. Even if we went to the lowest number of the DUP range, which is 72, there would still be people saying that there are too many MLAs. The argument has been won.

Look at the responses of political parties to this and what has already been said during the debate. The likes of the Ulster Unionist Party and the SDLP, who are largely the architects of the institutions that we have, have said that they are open to a reduction. Dr McDonnell said that he was open to persuasion for fewer than 96 Members, which is his party's stated position. Sinn Féin has repeated its mantra, as it always does, of inclusiveness and equality, but it has never said that it rejects a

smaller number of Members. In talking about inclusiveness and equality — and I am not a Sinn Féin Kremlinologist by any means — I presume that means the type of voting system that we have and the number of Members that there would be for each constituency, but, again, there is an openness to a reduction. The Alliance Party's position is clearly stated: it is for 80 Members. It is significant that, in the debate, and in the evidence that we received during our deliberations in the Committee, not a single person has put up a defence for the maintenance of 108 Assembly Members. That is consistent with public opinion and the overall downward pressure.

As for mitigating any reduction, which we are obviously heading towards anyway, the Committee had some interesting discussions about Committee structure and what you would do with it, and what you would do with the balance between sitting days, Committee days and constituency days. However, how you would mitigate the effects of having a reduced number of Members, and the additional pressures that that might put on people, is an issue that is inextricably linked with the number of Departments. If we had fewer Departments, we would not have to worry about taking a huge cohort out of the membership of this place to populate the Executive, and we do not have to have as many Committees in the first instance anyway.

5.15 pm

I do not have the time to go into the issue of decoupling as much I would have liked, other than to say that, as a unionist, you instinctively wish to maintain that link with Westminster perhaps every bit as much as republicans want to diminish it. However, it is not that simple a matter. For the sake of ease, if nothing else, it is advisable to keep the constituencies as they are, rather than to confuse people.

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

Mr Hamilton: With many things left unsaid — I am sure that others will say them — I welcome the report. It is a useful body of work that will allow us to take the issue forward.

Mr McDevitt: I join in thanking colleagues, particularly the Chair and Deputy Chair, for the work that they put in. I also express the SDLP's thanks to officials for their ongoing support for that work.

I was very entertained by Mr Campbell's remarks. I am tempted to wonder whether we can explore some time what sounds to me like a charter for the reduction — indeed, possibly the disappearance — of Westminster on the basis of the principle tests he applies about when legislatures become relevant and how much they cost. I would suggest that it is considerably more expensive and a considerably less relevant place to the people of Northern Ireland than here.

On a more germane point, going back to the report in front of us today, it is important that we continue to respect and uphold the status of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee, which has, of course, a statutory basis, and which has a specific role set out in law to be not just the critical friend of the Executive and the Assembly but the forum through which stakeholders, civic society and the ordinary people of this region can participate in important debates such as this about the future structures of government or the size of this legislature.

I agree with many Members who have said that there is a series of basic principles that should always underline these debates. There should be a given principle of equality and a further given principle of fair representation. I welcome the fact that no one is in any way suggesting that we should depart from those. The fact that the Committee exists and was able to take evidence means that a voice was given to people from a scholarly perspective, and others, who had the opportunity to reflect more deeply on questions of accountable governance, proper representation and the role of this legislature. Those were people like Rick Wilford, and I commend his evidence in the report to colleagues in the House.

The question of the number of MLAs is, as Alasdair McDonnell has said, a consequential one. It arises because legislation elsewhere will almost certainly give rise to fewer MLAs in the future than we have today. However, if we are honest about it, that is probably not the way to come at this debate. The way to come at this debate is probably in a more bottom-up manner: to think about how we wish to be represented in the future, how many constituencies we wish to elect people from, how many MLAs we wish to elect in each of those constituencies, and whether those constituencies are best coterminous with a parliamentary Westminster boundary or whether they would be better coterminous as a series of

constituencies within a local government boundary, for example. What is unfortunate about how we have had to come at the debate is that we have not had the opportunity to do that because of events elsewhere.

It is worth saying for the record that the reason we went with coterminosity in 1998 was simply because of expediency. If we had not gone with coterminosity in April 1998, we would not have been able to have elections in June 1998, for there would not have been time to have a boundary commission of our own and to do all the necessary things that we might have wanted to do in order to get the Assembly off the ground. That is a matter of fact. However, that question of expediency should not become a binding principle on which we would seek to make future policy.

A final point is about the role of this legislature, irrespective of its size. The thing that the public question sometimes is not the size of this place but its performance and its ability to do its job. They question its value in a value-for-money sense, rather than in a simple cost sense. It is important, therefore, that, in the AERC's deliberations, we reflect very carefully on how this Assembly can better do its work; how it can better hold the Executive to account; how it can better scrutinise legislation; and, as Mr Hamilton referred, how it can better organise its business so that it is more visibly able to provide a clear role and purpose to the people of this region.

I would love for us in the AERC to be able to consider questions of North/South development as well. I share Alasdair McDonnell's concerns in that regard.

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

Mr McDevitt: I think that, to be complete, we should be open-minded about that in the future, too.

Mr Givan: I, too, thank the staff for the work that they carried out, and also the Assembly Research staff. Some very interesting papers were brought forward detailing how other jurisdictions operate. Those will be beneficial to us in the future.

Colleagues touched on a lot of points, and I do not plan to repeat too many of them. Ultimately, the public expect to have the

most effective system of government that is available, providing the most efficient value to the taxpayer. Nobody here will argue that having 108 Members is delivering that. The report and research papers touch on the fact that there are pressures on Assembly Members. There is more and more pressure from the public on representatives to be doing constituency work on the ground, yet we are elected to legislate, so there is a conflicting tension building. If you are not seen on the ground as being actively involved in those bread-and-butter issues that councillors would typically be involved in, it will have an impact on you as an MLA. Ultimately, we are not seen here solely as legislators, albeit we are primarily elected to legislate. However, to the public eye, we are much more than just legislators, and that puts increasing demands on our time. That public reality must be borne in mind when we consider the numbers that would be required in this place to make it work.

Ultimately, Westminster has forced this issue, so, for our particular party agenda to reduce the numbers, that link in being coupled with Westminster is delivering an outcome for us, albeit not to the extent that we would wish. However, it has forced the reduction in the number of Members in this place from 108 to 96. That is a good thing and we would like to go further, but there are valid points. Let us look at this in more detail.

Mr Beggs pretty much said that their view is that we should be linked to Westminster boundaries, whatever the position. He asked whether people would really mind if our number goes down or up by six. I suggest that, having been reduced in number to 96, if we managed to get our electoral registration numbers to go up and it was decided that Northern Ireland was entitled to another Westminster seat, there would be a public outcry if this place went back up to 102 MLAs. We need to bear that in mind.

If you tease out Sinn Féin's stated position around inclusivity, some could say that we need more than 108 MLAs in order for this place to be inclusive of every strand of political opinion that exists. Mr McCartney rightly made the point that the objective of the agreement to have as many voices represented in this place has already been diluted in some senses because the Women's Coalition is no longer here, the UK Unionist Party is no longer here and the Progressive Unionist Party is no longer here. Clearly, the larger parties have been able to

make sure that the electoral system works to their advantage and squeezed out those smaller voices. If you really want to have an inclusive place that would include the Monster Raving Loony Party, you would need to have a lot more than 108 MLAs.

Mr Hamilton: We have that — it is the TUV.
[Laughter.]

Mr Givan: Hansard has maybe picked up those comments. Far be it from me to step into the gutter like that.

We need to be careful about what we mean by “inclusivity” and where that would take us as to how many Members this place would need to have to be an inclusive Assembly encompassing all political opinions. I support the motion.

Mr Ross: I did not have the benefit of sitting on the Committee to go over the report. However, after hearing some of the comments about it, I am not sure whether that would have been of benefit. Nevertheless, I think that it is a good report, and it is useful that we can debate it today.

My colleague Mr Givan mentioned that we got to the position of having 108 Assembly Members because the architects of the Belfast Agreement wanted to create an Assembly that could include as many minority opinions as possible. Mr Raymond McCartney talked about the need for inclusivity but acknowledged that some of the parties that it was created for, such as the Women’s Coalition and the DUP, have since lost their seats. I would agree with the comments of my colleague Mr Givan, who said that if we wanted to include those parties again, we would have to make the Assembly even bigger. I do not think that anyone would make that argument. You could also make the same point about the number of Departments we created. The architects of the Belfast Agreement wanted to ensure that Sinn Féin was at the Executive table, and that is why we have so many Departments. However, if we were starting again now, no one would argue that we want as many Departments.

As other Members said, there is a general consensus among the public, and a growing consensus among political parties, that this place is too big and that it needs to be reformed and made smaller. As my colleague Mr Hamilton said, the Democratic Unionist Party has been consistent on this issue. Even when we were not the largest party in Northern Ireland, back when

the Belfast Agreement was being negotiated, we held the position that we did not need 108 Members. That has been a consistent approach from our party, irrespective of our size.

As others said, we are now in a position in which, because of changes to Westminster boundaries, we will have an automatic reduction in the number of Members. Therefore, even if we did not want to go any further, the number of Members will automatically reduce to 96, as we will lose two Westminster constituencies. However, it is an ideal time for us to go further. Even with 96 Members, I think that it could be argued that we have far too many Members. It has been discussed whether we should drop from six Members per constituency to five. If we were to do that under 16 constituencies, we would have 80 MLAs, and I think that most people would feel that that would be reasonable enough.

It is also useful to compare the size of this legislature with other devolved legislatures in the United Kingdom. For example, the Scottish Parliament has 129 MSPs for a population of around five million people. If we were to use the same politicians:population ratio for this place, we would end up with only 43 MLAs, and if we were to use the same ratio as the Welsh Assembly, we would end up with only 35 MLAs. It is important that we look at that. If I was to be a little bit mischievous, I might suggest that we should look at other legislatures, albeit those that operate under a different system. In the United States, the state legislature of California manages with 120 legislators in its two houses, and the state legislature of Texas manages with 181. Those states have populations of over 25 million and have budgets and GDPs that are much bigger than ours. It is worth bearing that in mind when we look at other places around the world.

I may even be convinced that we could reduce the number of MLAs to below 80. If we had four MLAs across the 16 constituencies we would end up with 64 MLAs, and I am quite sure that the Assembly could function perfectly well with that number of Members. However, there are two perfectly logical reasons why our party has said that a number between 72 and 80 Members would be the optimum. First, we know that we need to get agreement across the House to make the place smaller, and now that parties have acknowledged that we should, perhaps, shrink the size of the Assembly, it is much more achievable to have a smaller rather

than a greater reduction. Therefore, a figure of between 72 and 80 MLAs — more likely 80 — is a number that we could find agreement on. The second reason is that, in the absence of reducing the size of the Executive, we need to ensure that we have enough Members to fully scrutinise each Department. That also has to be taken into consideration, and, having read the report, I know that that point was made in Committee.

On the issue of decoupling, it has been said that our preference —

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

Mr Ross: — would be to stay as is. However, Members on this Bench would be open to discussion on that.

The fundamental issue is that we need a smaller Assembly. The public want that, and I think that that would make the Assembly more efficient. Hopefully, that is what all the parties will now move to do.

5.30 pm

Mr Allister: On the basis of one reading of the recent ‘Belfast Telegraph’ poll, the right number of MLAs is zero, because there seems to be a popular perception that Stephen Nolan is more valuable than this Assembly. I doubt if even Stephen Nolan is more expensive than the Assembly. *[Laughter.]*

It is quite clear from today’s debate that nothing is happening on this issue, courtesy of the Assembly. Yes, the number will be reduced by virtue of the reduction to 16 constituencies, but not thanks to anything said or done in the Assembly. This report is really just a little more whitewash in our pretending to deal with the issue.

I well recall a meeting that the Committee Chairman reminded me of when he spoke, because I think that he was there. Grandly labelled “a consultation meeting” by the DUP, it was held in Lurgan Town Hall back when the DUP was deciding whether to accept and move forward, as it saw it, with the St Andrews Agreement deal. At that meeting, enthusiasts for the project assured everyone that, yes, there would be some bitter pills to swallow but for only a short time. They said that mandatory coalition would evaporate in 2015 because they had won a review. What, of course, the meeting was not told, and what some did not like when I

pointed it out, was that that review was subject to the veto of Sinn Féin and, therefore, the promised result would never be produced.

Today, we are seeing that veto being exercised by Sinn Féin on the much lesser issue of the sheer number of MLAs. It is saying that it is not persuaded; therefore, we stay as we are. Just as it is on the number of MLAs, so it will be on the number of Departments. By the way, where has that Bill to remove DEL gone? It seems to have been lost somewhere; and so it will be with the reduction in the number of MLAs and with the ending of mandatory coalition. None of it will happen, because a veto was surrendered to Sinn Féin. We will talk incessantly about our “aspirational desires” to see the number of MLAs reduced; to see the number of Departments reduced; and to move to voluntary coalition. However, those who talk in those terms know full well that it is not going to happen, because they made sure it would not by surrendering the veto on it to Sinn Féin. That is why, today, we are wasting our time talking about this issue, but then wasting our time in this House is nothing new.

Some pretend an attachment to the coupling with Westminster. Where is the coupling with Westminster when it comes to procedures, to the right to have an opposition and to the right to have a voluntary coalition? Let us not demean ourselves by pretending that there is some great mirror image of Westminster in this House. There is not. There is not because the Belfast Agreement form of devolution could not be more light years removed from the Westminster style of government. So it may be right that the constituencies should be coterminous with district councils. Maybe it should be 11 with two constituencies in Belfast six times over — 72 — or five or four. In truth, we do not need 108, 96 or 80, and many people would tell you that we do not need any.

Mr Agnew: The Green Party stated in its manifesto its position on the number of Assembly Members, and we stated it again when we replied to the consultation that led to this report. However, I will restate it again for the record: the Green Party wants a reduction in the number of MLAs, and we favour a reduction to 80. We believe, as others have stated, that, to ensure that 80 MLAs can perform the job of scrutinising government effectively, that would need to be coupled with a reduction in the number of Departments.

Some Members mentioned the need for inclusiveness, which we also believe in. However, we add to that the need for proportionality to ensure that the electorate's wishes are represented fairly in the parties that it wishes to see represented in the Assembly. That is why we proposed that, as well as any reform of the number of Assembly Members and Departments, there should be a review of the electoral system. We believe that a top-up system such as that in Scotland and elsewhere would ensure the election of regional MLAs on the proportional basis of party strength. We think that the benefits of that would be twofold: not just, as I mentioned, ensuring proportionality of representation, but ensuring adequate reflection of the electorate's wishes. It would also mean that we would have 16 MLAs who were representatives of Northern Ireland. They would, therefore, be more inclined to look strategically at issues. Look at yesterday: the Minister of Education announced funding for new schools, and every one of us, including me, stood up and mentioned schools that are in our constituencies. Under the current system, we are obliged to do that, but if we had regional MLAs, we could have Members who are mandated to look strategically at how the schools estate, for example, across Northern Ireland should be best planned. So, we believe that there would be numerous benefits to that.

We think that the power to decouple from Westminster should be in the Assembly's hands. We share concerns that departing from coterminosity with Westminster could lead to voter confusion. However, let us have that power and that debate and make the decision with that as a consideration.

The real issue for me is not so much what is in the report, because it is a copy and paste and a restatement of party manifestos. In my former role as a research officer for an Assembly Member, I attended meetings of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee (AERC), and I have a colleague who shadows it. We are not represented on it. Nothing much beyond a restating of party positions takes place at its meetings. In its response to the issue of decoupling from Westminster, the Alliance Party gave the game away to some extent by saying:

"Given the debate around this issue we feel it would be best dealt with at the leaders meeting."

That is the reality. These issues are not dealt with by the AERC. The AERC should be where they are dealt with, in a transparent manner through the mechanisms that the Good Friday Agreement provided to review the Assembly with full public scrutiny and in the full glare of that public. In reality, however, we know that any decisions about changes that are made to the way in which this Assembly operates will be taken in leaders' meetings and in those that take place behind closed doors. That means that the public will not be able to see the whys, hows and whens of those decisions. If we want to talk about saving money, let us get rid of the charade of this Committee, and, if we are going to have a reduction in Members, let us save their time. Let us also save the Committee Clerk's time, because it is no fault of theirs or of the officials who produced the report that it is little more than a restatement of the party positions, as that is all that the parties have given. We could save a lot of money if we got rid of this Committee. Even better, let us actually start making decisions in the Committee and use it for what it is for. Let us give full transparency to decision-making in this Assembly —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to bring his remarks to a close.

Mr Agnew: — and give the public what was promised to them when they voted for the Good Friday Agreement: transparency and accountability.

Mr Sheehan (The Deputy Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee): Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. The report represents part-fulfilment of the matters referred to the Assembly and Executive Review Committee by Standing Order 59, which provides for the Committee to make a report to the Secretary of State, the Assembly and the Executive Committee, by no later than 1 May 2015, on the operation of Parts III and IV of the NI Act 1998.

Members will be aware that section 33 in Part IV of the 1998 Act specifies that Members of the Assembly shall be returned for the parliamentary constituencies in the North and that each constituency shall return six Members.

As the Chairperson said earlier, no consensus could be reached by the Committee over the size of the Assembly. However, the report usefully sets out in some detail the particular position of the political parties represented on

the Committee and includes a set of options that may well aid the final determination on the size of the Assembly.

I do not propose to go through Members' contributions, except to say that we have had a mature and constructive debate in Committee, and what we have agreed is that there is a need to take the debate forward. Simon Hamilton made the point that we now have a useful body of work on which to base those future discussions.

I thank Members for their contributions. I also thank the Committee staff and other Assembly staff and researchers who assisted the Committee in its review and the production of the report. On the way forward, as the Chairperson of the Committee said earlier, that is now for the Assembly's political parties, through the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, to decide. Finally, I ask that the Assembly notes the Committee's report.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the report of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee on the review of the number of Members of the Northern Ireland Legislative Assembly and on the reduction in the number of Northern Ireland Departments: Part 1 - Number of Members of the Northern Ireland Legislative Assembly.

Penalty Charges (Prescribed Amounts) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012: Prayer of Annulment

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: As is normal for debates on legislation, there is no time limit.

Mr Spratt (The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development): With your indulgence, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, as this is my first opportunity to do so in the House, I wish to take a minute to thank all Members who sent me cards and messages of support over the difficult days during my illness. That support came from all sections of the House, and I am very grateful for it. I especially acknowledge the messages of prayer support, which meant so much to me and my family. I look forward to that support continuing in the difficult days that may lie ahead.

I beg to move

That the Penalty Charges (Prescribed Amounts) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 (S.R. 2012/203) be annulled.

I find myself in somewhat of a catch-22 situation today. I have moved the motion as Chair of the Committee yet will oppose it as a Member of the House. Therefore, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I hope that I do not confuse you or Members along the way.

I will present the facts of the matter in my capacity as Chair. They are as follows: on 19 April 2012, the Minister for Regional Development, Mr Danny Kennedy, appeared before the Committee to brief it on the proposed legislation relating to car park and on-street parking tariffs and increases to the penalty charge notices. During the briefing, the Minister advised the Committee that he intended to raise the penalty charge for illegal parking from £60 to £90, with a 50% remission of the charge should it be paid within 14 days. Members were advised that that increase, along with the increases in car-parking charges, was contained in the Northern Ireland Budget and had been approved by the Minister and his Executive colleagues and subsequently by the House. The Minister stated that a total of £7.5 million would be required over the remaining three years of the Budget period and that the money raised would be returned to Roads Service to cover operational costs. Members did not agree the policy merits of the proposed charges, as they believed that there were further efficiencies to be realised in the collection processes. That

was formally relayed to the Department by letter on 18 April 2012.

5.45 pm

The Committee received correspondence from the Department dated 3 May 2012, which was considered at the meeting of 9 May. The correspondence advised that, as the Department's budget and spending plans had included the increases, and given that the Budget had been approved at a plenary sitting of the Assembly in March 2011, the Minister had instructed officials to introduce the legislation. Members responded by stating their concerns about the inappropriate time that was being given to consider and scrutinise the regulations

The next time the Committee had sight of the regulations was on 6 June when the statutory rule was presented to the Committee for agreement. The Committee had also received a presentation from the Northern Ireland Independent Retail Trade Association (NIIRTA) at that meeting. The association said that it was opposed to an increase in the rates as it would drive shoppers out of town centres and into shopping centres, and so on, where parking is free. At the appropriate time, the Deputy Chairperson put the Question on the matter, which was defeated by four votes to one, with the majority agreeing that the Committee should seek to annul the rule.

On the following Monday, 11 June, I attended a meeting with the Minister and was accompanied by the Deputy Chairperson and the Committee Clerk. There was a frank conversation in which the Minister detailed the consequences of the prayer being carried in the House. Those consequences essentially would mean the Minister and his officials having to identify alternative efficiencies in the Department that would potentially, as the Minister put it, impact on front line services and on health and safety matters, such as reducing the cutting of grass on verges alongside roads.

On 13 June, I submitted written notice of my intention to bring a motion to Committee to rescind its decision of 6 June. The notice was discussed in the Committee meeting of 13 June and was forwarded as a prior notification to all Committee members by post and e-mail and was included in the Committee packs for that meeting, indicating that a motion would be considered at the meeting of 20 June.

The Minister accepted an invitation from the Committee to attend the meeting and again outlined his reasons for introducing the proposed charges and the consequences of their not being brought in. During the debate, alternative options to the current charging regime and ways of enhancing and communicating the discretionary powers of wardens were also discussed.

I am pleased that the Minister has agreed to look at the merits of a dual-layer approach to charging, where low-impact offences, such as being a few minutes over the time, will attract a lesser penalty than those for people who park in blue badge bays, in bus lanes and next to bus shelters.

In addition, the Minister said that he would look at protocols for enforcement officers based on those that are used in local government in England and Wales. Those define the offences and outline the steps that enforcement officers will take before issuing a ticket. Importantly, those protocols are published and are available so that an individual receiving a penalty charge also knows the enforcement powers, limitations and procedures.

As I said, there was a full and frank debate on the matter, which was followed by the Question on the motion to rescind the decision to lay a prayer of annulment. I advise the House that this was defeated by a majority of seven votes to four.

That is how we find ourselves here today, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I wish, with your permission, to speak now as a Member for South Belfast. I am not opposed to the introduction of increased penalty charges, because, to put it bluntly, if you break the law you have to pay for it.

As elected representatives, we are, perhaps, all aware of tickets being handed out to elderly people whose doctors' appointments have overrun by a short period or the individual who has the misfortune to run over time in a pay-and-display car park. However, I ask Members not to confuse the need for increased penalty charges as a contribution towards departmental savings plans and as a deterrent to illegal parking with the overzealous behaviour of traffic wardens.

Since the new arrangements for traffic management were first introduced in 2006, some 700,038 penalty charge notices have

been issued in towns and cities in Northern Ireland. That is one for every two men, women and children who live in Northern Ireland, which I find astonishing. I do not agree that the majority of these have been issued in error either, as the figures show that an average of approximately 123,000 tickets are issued each year. Thirteen per cent of these tickets are appealed, and, of those, 59% are successfully upheld — that is over 9,000 appeals.

The figures that I have outlined are indicative of the problem that the Department is facing in relation to illegal parking in our towns and cities. The parking charges have been set at £60 since 2006, but the problem still exists, and, apparently, occurrences are increasing at a time when the Department is investing heavily in rapid transit systems in Belfast and quality bus corridors in Londonderry, and when it is providing park-and-ride facilities to offer motorists alternatives to driving into our towns and cities. It is entirely appropriate that a real deterrent to illegal parking is offered and implemented.

During the Committee debate on the matter last week, my Committee colleagues provided a range of reasons why these increases should not be applied. Without stealing their thunder — I know that they will speak for themselves shortly — I want to address some of those reasons. First, there is an idea that this is not an attempt to achieve efficiencies in the Department, but rather a revenue-generating scheme to plug a budgetary defect. Yes, these increases are detailed in the Budget — a Budget that was consulted on, debated in the Committees and eventually endorsed by the Assembly. I am not aware of any objections being raised at any of these stages in relation to the Budget. These increases were also identified in the savings delivery plans, which, again, were approved by the House and have been before the Committee on a number of occasions. Again, there were no objections.

It is normal government accounting practice to use revenues to offset operational costs. Student fees offset the cost of education; sales of timber offset the Forest Service's budget. These parking charges offset the cost of providing an enforcement regime. The taxpayer is currently subsidising this whole process to the tune of £7 million a year. This is an opportunity to lessen the burden by some £2.5 million a year by making those who break

the law pay for blocking our laneways, taking up spaces reserved for blue-badge holders and preventing other legitimate parking from taking place. It is an appropriate charge, and one which makes the offender pay.

There is also the argument that this is a stupid form of budgeting because, if the increased charges are a successful deterrent and the number of parking offences declines, you will not be able to raise the revenue that has been identified. It is a utopian dream to believe that any level of charge will remove the problem of illegal parking. If the number of offences declines, the cost of enforcement will also decline. Therefore, efficiencies in the contract will be possible. Either way, the taxpayer will be better off.

A further suggestion is that enforcement wardens have targets for the number of tickets that they must issue. Many believe that that is the cause of the overzealousness that is displayed by traffic wardens, which supports the attitude that the red coats are out to get everyone. I have a copy of the key performance indicators (KPIs) in the contract. I assure the House that there are no targets that specify the number of tickets that should be issued. Remember that this is the legal definition and the legal document by which both parties are bound. Any breach, such as unofficial targets, would leave both parties open to judicial process.

The Minister has identified a number of areas that might have to take a hit if the statutory rule were annulled, including the possibility of further increases in car parking charges. I accept that there is a degree of sabre-rattling by the Minister, but I agree with his conclusion that, if that were the case, people who park legally will be forced to pay to support the cost of enforcing legislation against those who park illegally. In this instance, I believe that that is a greater incentive than the threat of increased fines for people to move from town centres to suburban centres. I would find it hard to condemn anyone who did so; those who obey parking laws should not have to pay for those who breach them.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, before concluding my comments, I ask again for your indulgence for a few seconds. As many will already be aware, this debate will be the last occasion on which the Deputy Chair of the Committee for Regional Development will speak in the House. It is hugely ironic that we find ourselves at the opposite end of the spectrum on this occasion,

because we have enjoyed — and I mean this — a very good working relationship in Committee. I am very appreciative of the Deputy Chair's help and support to me on a personal basis, particularly over the past few months, which I mentioned at the beginning of my remarks. I wish him well in his new ventures, which all seem to be centred on Westminster. He tells me that he will be in that place on Thursday of this week. He is wasting no time; he will be on the plane and off to London some time after the debate today. Seriously, Pat, on behalf of all members of the Committee and personally, I thank you for your hard work and dedication to the Committee and wish you well in your work outside this House.

The problems that Members will identify today are not associated with the increased charges; they are problems that are associated with the enforcing regime. Let us address that problem separately and in consultation with the Minister, his officials, and, where necessary, other areas of best practice. We should not penalise law-abiding citizens. Those who break the law should be made to pay for their transgressions.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas le Cathaoirleach an Choiste. I thank the Chair of the Committee for Regional Development for outlining the Committee's position on the prayer of annulment. I support that annulment. I do so not because I am opposed to the increase in parking fines per se but because this is not the right time.

I say that because, particularly in the provincial towns and villages, shops and businesses are increasingly coming under pressure. At local government level, we have tried as hard as we could to keep rates as low as possible, and speaking from experience in my borough of Limavady —

6.00 pm

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ó hOisín: Yes, certainly.

Mr Beggs: Does the Member realise that the purpose of the parking ticket is to ensure good parking and good road safety so that people do not abandon their cars inappropriately at entrances to roads, car parks and on footpaths? In saying that you are opposing this for a

commercial reason for retailers, are you totally ignoring the road safety implications?

Mr Ó hOisín: Absolutely not. The purpose of the issuing of some PCNs goes further in that they restrict the time that people might use in some town centres, and that restricts the business that they can get done. In some cases, that is as little as an hour, and if you want to do anything in the town, you will not get the chance to do it in that time.

We have been lobbied by the chambers of trade and commerce in the smaller provincial towns and villages and by the NI Independent Retail Trade Association, which has outlined its objections to the proposals. Ideally, people should come into towns on public transport, but in the rural settings, that is not possible and there is a continuing diminution in the supply of transport in rural towns and areas. I appreciate that the situation is rather different in our two major cities and our larger towns.

I do not believe that we would have been in this position had we put in place the on-street parking charges that the previous Minister proposed, because that would have raised sufficient revenue to cover the shortcomings that we have been talking about. Any proposal to increase the —

Mr Swann: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ó hOisín: Yes. Go ahead.

Mr Swann: For clarification, are you now saying that on-street car parking would help town centres rather than penalise them?

Mr Ó hOisín: I am saying that I support a decent on-street car parking system whereby people could pull up and pay for the amount of time that they want to stay, be that one hour, two hours or three hours. Ideally, it should be more than one hour, but in some areas, it is just one hour, and that is certainly not enough to do your business. People are caught out when they go to the hairdresser or a dentist, or whatever, because an hour is not enough, and people come to us with appeals to challenge a ticket. Those appeals are upheld in only about 7% of those cases, and we are talking about pensioners who could end up paying £30, £60 and now potentially £90 or half thereof.

Business users who are doing deliveries are also struck by the issue. I know of one butcher who has to park his van some 500 yards from

the front door of his premises because of restrictions there. Those people are sat on by the redcoats. I am not saying that that is the case everywhere.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ó hOisín: Yes.

Mr Beggs: The Member is objecting to parking restrictions outside a butcher's shop. You do, of course, realise that if you think that there should be no parking restrictions there, there are methods to go through to get yellow lines or double yellow lines removed. If that is the objection, why not deal with the issue in that fashion rather than simply say that you want to reduce the penalties for those who breach the rules and the law?

Mr Ó hOisín: The Member knows very well that it is a very cumbersome process to get any parking restrictions removed, particularly from town centres. That is an issue right across the board.

I contend that parking fines are a deterrent to trade. It also leaves a bad taste with our visitors who come here and happen to end up with a ticket. In one area, a council car park outside the council building is controlled or monitored by the redcoats, and, in the past, guests, tourists, and everybody, have been booked there. That has left a bad taste in people's mouths.

There is another issue with the issuing of PCNs. In some towns, the numbers are minimal. My town, which is one of the most congested anywhere in the North or maybe on the island, as the Minister well knows, has had two tickets issued in the six years from 2006 to 2012. On many occasions, I have seen traffic attendants in that town. There are only five disabled parking bays, and I assume that that is what they are monitoring. I rarely see anyone parking in those, so I wonder whether that is the best use of money. The Chair proposed that we might look at some sort of staged or staggered system, and that might be well worth looking at. We might also look at a differential between city and country delivery. I urge the Minister to revisit this and to come back to the Committee with new and updated proposals. I support the annulment.

Mr Hussey: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the prayer in the name of the Regional Development Committee, of which I

am a Member. On this occasion, I completely disagree with the course of action on which the Committee has decided by bringing this proposal to the House. From the outset, I make it clear that I was as concerned as anyone else when I heard that parking tickets were increasing from £60 to £90, but when I thought about it, I realised that those who are complaining loudest about the increase are probably those who have been at the receiving end of the greater share of tickets.

I also have to admit that I, too, have been the recipient of a parking ticket. I confess that I deserved that, as I arrived early, prior to the charges being implemented, intending to use my car, as a friend and I were going to Belfast. However, he turned up and picked me up from the front of my office, and off I went, completely forgetting that I had no ticket on my car. When I came back, a ticket of a different kind was attached to the windscreen. Therefore, even the most innocently intentioned people can be issued with a parking ticket. It can happen to any of us, and no one likes the sight of one taped to our windscreens.

Sometimes, people are caught out for relatively minor offences, because their tickets have overrun by a few minutes or because they have foolishly run the chance of not paying for a ticket at all. People, such as me, who did not pay have absolutely no excuse, but people who missed by a few minutes should be given every sympathy. We have discussed that in Committee, with the Minister agreeing to look at the options open to him by perhaps extending the time between when the ticket has expired and the time that a penalty ticket can be issued. Of course, we do not then expect people to automatically assume that that means that they have one hour plus the added minutes and a few more for luck.

I must say that I have little sympathy for people who repeatedly park on double yellow lines, which was the most common reason for being given a ticket last year. Possibly even worse are people who park in disabled bays when they are not entitled to. In fact, I am sure you are all aware of the number of blue badges that have been illegally and immorally obtained by some people. At the Committee, I even suggested that an automatic £100 fine should be introduced for this infringement.

We have looked at other schemes, and there is an option to have a scale of fines for different

offences. As someone who has a disability, I find that people who feel that any empty car parking space is fair game or who feel that the disabled space might prevent them from getting their hair wet when it is raining on a standard Northern Ireland summer's day deserve to be penalised heavily for this infringement.

There seems to be a misunderstanding in some quarters about exactly why car parking tickets are issued. No one should be in any doubt about the real purpose of parking tickets. They are not simply a way of generating cash for the Department, and I will make some comments on that shortly. They are a crucial component in effective parking enforcement. People should not only be dissuaded from parking illegally but should be reprimanded if they decide to do so. Illegal parking not only compounds congestion on our roads but badly parked vehicles can present a risk to other road users as well as potentially limiting response times for emergency vehicles. There are housing estates in my home town of Omagh where elderly people live where certain individuals believe that they can park where they want. The fact that they are restricting access in and out is neither here nor there to them. The bin lorry cannot get turned, so the bins are left for another day. Ambulances have had to park in the middle of the road and attempt to bring patients out whatever way they can.

Of course, parking in Northern Ireland has, for many years, been a bone of contention. Since enforcement was privatised in 2006, the issue seems to have exploded. I never thought that we would ever hear people moaning that they miss the local traffic warden. Again in my home town of Omagh, the late Howard Hegan was a well-known character. Howard would patrol the streets day and night, and if you were getting to the point that a ticket might have to be issued, Howard would attempt to seek you out and give you the 10-minute warning. There is no doubt that if you got a ticket from Howard, you deserved it. Generally, it is fair to say that people were used to a different approach to enforcement. However, a very small minority of traffic attendants in a number of areas grew overzealous and gave the majority of absolutely fair attendants a difficult time.

On the issue of the disparity of parking tickets, I will use my home town of Omagh, with the population of 20,000, as an example. Last year, 5,097 tickets were issued. Compare that to a town such as Portadown, with 22,000

residents but only 2,506 tickets. That may be down to better parking facilities in some towns compared to others but, as the excellent The Detail website found, there are major inconsistencies across Northern Ireland.

Nevertheless, getting back to the debate in hand, if today's proposal to annul is successful, it sends out an entirely wrong message. Not only would it be seen as the Assembly backing down on tougher parking enforcement, it would totally disregard the financial consequences of such an action. Most people are already aware that enforcing an effective parking regime costs far in excess of what the Department manages to raise through fines. That is on top of a declining rate of tickets. The number of tickets issued has been falling significantly over recent years. In 2006, over 160,000 were handed out. Last year, however, only 125,800 were issued. Even then, the downward trend was somewhat bucked, as in 2010, there were only 118,000.

Even though enforcement costs far more than is raised, the Ulster Unionist Party strongly believes that the benefits of reduced congestion on the roads, improved access to our towns and villages and improved road safety are worth paying the extra for. Most people in Northern Ireland will not be affected by the increase from £60 to £90 or, more realistically, the increase from £30 to £45, as most people do not get parking tickets regularly. We all make mistakes, and sometimes we can feel hard done by. However, rules are rules, and we would complain as quickly as anyone if an illegally parked vehicle was causing any of us any difficulties.

I should also add that I have appealed quite a few tickets on behalf of constituents and won. If you can provide a reasoned argument, and provided that it is your first and only appeal, you will generally win. It must be borne in mind that the majority of people do not appeal and must, therefore, accept that they were worthy recipients of a parking ticket.

I am sure that you will be pleased to note that I am coming to the end of my remarks. However, there are those sitting on the Benches opposite who might want the Minister to bring in town centre charges for parking, as was the policy intention of the previous Sinn Féin Minister, Conor Murphy. If that were to happen, how long would we allow people to park their car in a town centre? One hour, two hours or three hours? Why not give them the full day?

You would then have congestion in towns because you would have people driving round continuously looking for a parking space that they cannot obtain.

The best policy is the one-hour free parking that we have in most towns. If people want to go to a town to shop, they will go to the car parks and pay the appropriate charge. If they are going to use on-street parking, one hour should be sufficient to go into the bank or whatever. I am sure that most ladies, who were referred to earlier, who go to the hairdresser are aware of how long it takes to get their hair set. I do not have that problem. I am sure that those who go to the dentist have a rough idea of how long it is going to take. Generally, you want to get in and out of there as quickly as possible. I am sure that when most people go to the bank — unless it is the Ulster Bank — they go in and come out in a fairly reasonable time [*Laughter.*]. I am sure that if you get a ticket for parking outside the Ulster Bank, it will come along and pay that fine.

The image of the Minister rattling his sabre appeals to me. I was thinking that I could just see him with his sabre rattling it about here today. However, this is not sabre-rattling; this is common sense. We have seen the need for parking charges. We know why people get tickets. You do not get a ticket for the fun of it, and it is not the sort of ticket that most people look for. You cannot win a prize but you can certainly get a fine, and if you pay it on time, you will not get the larger fine.

However, we know from experience that people are inclined to chance their hand. The double yellow line? Well, I will give it five minutes. The disabled bay? Sure I am only going in and out. If you are a disabled person and you cannot get parked in a disabled bay because somebody has parked in that bay to go into the bank or the hairdressers or whatever, you are not a very happy person. People will always try their hand. People parking on corners; people parking on double yellow lines; people parking in disabled bays or loading bays. They will continually do it. They have to be told that they cannot do it. If they do not do it, they will not get a ticket. That is the message: do not break the law; do not get the ticket; no major problems.

I do not support the prayer.

6.15 pm

Mr Dallat: Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I put my hands up immediately and say that I have just joined this Committee. I am very impressed by the Chairman and the Deputy Chairman; I am sorry he is leaving. I was also impressed by the openness of the Minister in how he treats the Committee. Indeed, I will be eternally grateful for all the money he found for the Derry to Coleraine stretch of railway.

That aside, this is an issue that does touch me. Before Roy Beggs gets to his feet to tell me that I am irresponsible and all that, let me say that, for the best part of my adult life, I taught road safety studies. I was very proud of my pupils when they competed in the Northern Ireland road safety competition that was held annually in Stranmillis college. And they won. So, I am not here to defend the people who defraud the blue badge scheme or the people who obstruct emergency ambulances that trying to get to somebody in need. It is not about that.

Like my colleague Mr Ó hOisín, I am influenced. In Limavady, there are two very busy car parks. For a long time, my constituency council looked out on one of those — until the commission decided that the rent was too dear, but that is a different issue. I saw, day and daily, who was getting nabbed. Ross, it was not the people you talked about. Very largely, it was people who were retired. They came in, paid the money that they could afford, went in to the town centre to the optician or the dentist or whatever and came back a few minutes late. They had to pay £30 or £60. A lot of those people were on a pension of £147 a week. That is a big blow. The other people often caught were young mothers with children, who would be going in to the town centre to get shoes fitted or whatever. The situation is not as simple as has been described. You do get queues in the banks. You do get busy times in shops. You do get children who become excited when in the town centre and maybe keep you longer than you intended. It is not about that. The Minister, when he talked to the Committee, was entirely honest about this. Let us keep the debate honest. The measure is about finding £7.5 million to fill a hole in the Minister's budget. That is not his fault. He is dictated to by the Executive.

Somebody compared fines and fees. This is not the pantomime season. To suggest that fines and fees are somehow similar is not quite right.

Fees are something that you pay when you are getting something in return. A fine, in this case, will be something you pay to make up Danny's budget. That is totally wrong.

I am influenced by these times of austerity. In Limavady, something like 3,000 jobs have disappeared over the past five years. A lot of people will not be paying the parking fines because they have already emigrated. Those who are left behind, particularly those who come in to the town during the day, are caught. We are all human.

We know, of course, that people will get nabbed by the redcoats. I am not painting the redcoats as some kind of vicious animal going around looking for people. However, like people in this Assembly and everywhere else, there are different personalities. I know one redcoat who enthusiastically goes out to get the scalps. Of course he does. He boasts about it afterwards. I know others, and their heart bleeds to even issue a ticket. Human beings are different, no matter what they are doing.

I would not dare to attempt to speak for the Minister, but I know that his heart is not in this. *[Laughter.]* It is not. He is a kind person — *[Laughter.]* — who would not impose such a vicious fine on poor elderly people or young mothers if he could get away with it. He told the Committee that he is up against it in that cruel Executive that want to extract a new form of taxation from the oppressed people of Northern Ireland. That is what it is about; there is not much more to say about it.

I suppose I can be eternally grateful that I have got free parking up here. I do not have the problem that we are talking about. However, given the sorts of debates we have been having recently, I think I would be qualifying for parking charges regularly. Long may these fairly late debates take place; at least Members are having an opportunity to discuss the issue. I hope that Mr Spratt, the Chairman, accepts what I am saying because he knows what fines are about from his previous life. They should always be pitched at a level at which they cause pain but not distress. This increase in fine will, unfortunately, cause a lot more than pain. It will cost hardship, particularly to those who may not be so bright at interpreting the rules in the car parks, those who are not so conscious of the time on their watch, or those who, perhaps, make appointments for which the time required

is difficult to predict, as is, therefore, the time they will return to their car. Those are the main reasons why I am supporting the prayer of annulment.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The clock at the bottom end of the Chamber is either slow or stopped, so it is later than Members might realise.

Mr Dickson: I apologise to the House for being late in returning to the Building this afternoon. I was at another engagement in Enniskillen. *[Interruption.]* There were no parking problems there today.

The Minister has to tell us straight: is this about revenue raising or, as he has told the Committee, about improving parking etiquette in Northern Ireland? If it is about revenue raising, then, Minister, go ahead with your draconian increase to £90. However, if it is about improving parking etiquette and, at the same time, dealing with those rogue elements who are persistent offenders, as you have suggested to us on numerous occasions, I suggest to you, Minister, that there are alternative ways of dealing with that and, perhaps, as a consequence, raising additional revenue. We all have concerns about the problems regarding the Department's budget.

Due to public demand, all, not just some, London local authorities have introduced a two-tier system of fines: lower and higher levels. There is a £60 fine, as we have in Northern Ireland, for low-level offences, and a £120 fine for high-level offences. The high-level fine is for people who block bus lanes or cause blockages outside schools or who park on pedestrian crossings, on yellow lines, in safety zones, in disabled bays or in loading bays. Minister, if you are genuine about improving parking etiquette and about bringing about a sea change in driving and parking habits in Northern Ireland, and if, as I hope, the House supports the prayer of annulment and you are required to come back with alternatives, can I encourage you to give serious consideration to the introduction of a two-tier system? Such a system would, on the one hand, deal with the persistent offenders, the people who you say you want to get at, while, on the other hand, it would deal with those people whom other Members have referred to — those who spend an extra few minutes in the dentist's surgery because an appointment has overrun, or those who have to go into the bank, for example — and for whom

the overzealous traffic warden is waiting in a car park or in a parking bay on the street. Those are the people whom we do not wish to see penalised any more than they are currently. I think that £60, with the discount, is perceived to be a reasonable amount to deal with that.

There are persistent offenders and, perhaps, we could extend the two-tier process to those who receive fines on a regular basis. Offenders who had received three fines in a period for minor offences, for example, would receive a higher penalty. All those things are open and available to you. I encourage you and your departmental officials to come back to the House with constructive proposals, not draconian proposals, in respect of parking fines. Minister, that is why I oppose your proposal and support the prayer of annulment.

Mr I McCrea: At the outset, I will state that when the Minister was with the Committee, I expressed some sympathy with him on this matter because there are people who consistently break the law in respect of illegal parking. In that vein, I understand the need for the Minister to do something about it.

I came to the Chamber today hoping for something different in the arguments being presented by those who support the prayer of annulment but, unfortunately, I have not heard anything different. It is easy to say that we need to vote for the prayer of annulment, but it is not as easy to say what you would do in its place. I heard the Member for East Antrim suggest some alternatives, but I am not sure that there was much there, other than a charge for the rich and a charge for the poor. Nonetheless, I accept that the Minister needs to consider some alternatives to how we move this matter forward.

On a constituency basis, I have always been an advocate of trying to tackle the problem of illegal parking in our town centres. On many occasions, I have supported the need for the redcoats or traffic attendants or whatever we wish to call them. I have no doubt that there are other names that people will choose to call them, but we will call them what they are supposed to be called today. They have a difficult job. There is no doubt that support to deal with this problem needs to be given.

I listened to what other Members said in respect of the increase. Maybe it is my ignorance, or maybe I just did not hear what they had to say, but it was more an issue about

the fact that there were penalty fines, not the fact that there was an increase. We have to remember that penalty fines of £60 are already in place, and the issue is the increase. I have not heard that much of an argument against it. I have not heard much of a reason why people who consistently break the law by parking illegally should not be dealt with.

There is a wider issue in respect of how we deal with this.

Mr Clarke: Will the Member give way?

Mr I McCrea: Yes.

Mr Clarke: The Member will appreciate that some of us listen to the radio in the mornings, and there is one particular presenter who, when he is not talking about his weight, consistently talks about the price of fines and the number of times that he has been fined. Obviously, that presenter has not been put off by the amount that he has been fined. In fact, he will probably be on the radio tomorrow morning welcoming an increase in the fines.

Mr I McCrea: I try my best not to listen to him as much as the Member, but I believe that, recently, he was trying his best to pay his fine via the internet or the telephone. To be fair, the Minister is trying to address that issue to ensure that people can do that. On-street parking is a different matter from the fines. Nonetheless, the fine has the same end result.

Mr Dallat said that there are always one or two bad traffic attendants who bring down people's opinion of them all. I could name more than one, but I will not today.

Nonetheless, the lack of a consistent approach is a problem, and that has been raised with the Minister. There is a need for a more consistent and human approach. People should not try to see how many tickets they can give out on any given day as if it were a bonus scheme, which the Minister has assured us it is not. That needs to be addressed.

To some extent, I have sympathy with people who feel that the charge is too severe. Nonetheless, we cannot sit on our laurels and do nothing. We have to show people that we intend to tackle the matter. If that means that we have to increase —

Mr Dickson: Will the Member give way?

Mr I McCrea: Yes.

Mr Dickson: Does the Member agree with me that the prayer of annulment is not a “do nothing” proposal but actually asks the Minister to do something, which is to come back with improved suggestions and more creative thinking on the matter?

6.30 pm

Mr I McCrea: The prayer of annulment is what it is; it is speaking out against what the Minister has proposed. Obviously, the Minister will have to take on board what is discussed if the prayer of annulment is agreed to today.

I believe that the Minister, who was praised by Mr Dallat earlier, has a heart. I also believe that he has a listening ear, and I respect him for listening to the issues that I bring to his table. I think that he will listen to the debate regardless of the outcome and will hopefully bring forward alternatives to address the problem while ensuring that people are not ticketed just because they are, through no fault of their own, a few minutes late. Some Members talked about hairdressers; I am not one of those who would get caught out by a long waiting time at the hairdresser. I suppose that I should declare an interest because my wife is one. Nonetheless, there are people who get caught out when they have an appointment and are, through no fault of their own, late getting back to their car to ensure that their ticket is up to date. Those are issues that the Minister has, no doubt, to take on board. However, I again urge Members not to vote in favour of the motion.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. As a member of the Committee, I support the prayer of annulment. There has been considerable debate about the issue in Committee. I thank the Minister for coming to the Committee and for putting forward his reasons and rationale. I am not convinced that it is not a revenue raising project. The Minister says that raising the level from £60 to £90 will act as a greater deterrent to those who choose not to park properly. He said:

“The increase in the PCN will go towards the self-funding of car parking services which currently runs at a deficit of £7million per year. Reducing this deficit will free up other parts of my budget for maintaining front-line services such as fixing potholes and maintaining street lights.”

If the Minister is successful in doing the first, he will certainly have no money.

We do not encourage or condone illegal parking by any stretch of the imagination. The Minister told the Committee that he wanted to deter the small number of rogue drivers who incur penalties by parking in illegal places etc. However, in my experience, the vast majority of those who incur penalties are ordinary citizens going into town for specific reasons such as appointments etc, as all the other Members said. I think that Ross Hussey quoted the figure for Omagh — 29,000, nearly 30,000. Outside of Derry and Belfast, Enniskillen tops the league with almost 43,000. Is the Minister saying to me that there are almost 43,000 rogue drivers in and around Enniskillen? I live in Enniskillen and have a constituency office beside the car park. We have people coming from the car park who are angry, having received a ticket for having been 10 or 15 minutes late. People who come to shop from the border counties are being deterred. From a personal point of view, I am not saying that I incurred all 43,000 tickets, but I incurred a number of them. Possibly some were due to my own carelessness, but quite a few of them were for being 10 or 15 minutes late. A LeasCheann Comhairle, I want to tell Members that I have paid them all.

Many of the people are van drivers making deliveries. They have to park somewhere. There is an overzealous attendant or whatever you call him in Enniskillen. I know that the Minister says there are no bonuses, but I would love to know what this man is on. If you have not the change in your pocket for the machine and you have to go up the town for it, there could be a ticket on your car. You need to tell someone to stand beside your car until you come back. I know people from the outlying towns in County Fermanagh who will not go to Enniskillen to shop, unless they are going to the large out-of-town shops. They say that you will end up with a parking ticket. That is why I asked the Member down there who was in Enniskillen today whether he got a parking ticket, but I think that today was one of those days when there might not have been any handed out.

The proposed increase is far too great, particularly in this economic climate. The Minister needs, as others say, to look at other measures, reconfigure his figures in some way or look within the Department. He needs to put in place a more transparent and exact system.

The one that gives out 42,000 fines in a small town is not good enough. If the penalty fines are increased, it will encourage more and more people to leave our town centres for the free car parking spaces at the large shops. I agree with the Minister when he said that he wanted drivers to park legally and consider other road users. I believe that the current penalty charges are sufficient for that. I ask all Members of the House to support the prayer of annulment.

Mr Nesbitt: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lynch: Too late.

Mr Beggs: I think we are having a useful debate. It is interesting to hear some of the arguments and some of the illogical arguments. No one likes paying a car parking fine. Let us be clear: it has a deterrent value, a very important value. It has affected me. I am sure that it has an effect on all other Members, but perhaps not on some, like Stephen Nolan, who seem to be able to flout the law, continue to pick up fines and then whinge about it. In reality, the fines are there. Yes, there is a fine for illegal and dangerous car parking, and there is also a fine for those who have overstayed their dues. It is important that those who abandon their car in a dangerous place face appropriate penalties, and it is clear that there is a deterrent effect with those fines.

Mr Ó hOisín: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: Yes.

Mr Ó hOisín: Does the Member agree, and I think that he has outlined it, that there is a difference between those who park illegally and those who have unfortunately been caught short or whatever?

Mr Beggs: That is something which, it is clear, has come forth in the discussion. In the discussion between the Minister and the Chair and the Deputy Chair of the Committee, it is something which — it was made clear— will be pursued further and, I hope, instigated. There is the issue of adopting protocol with those who are given the job of enforcing the law so that they do it with regard and some degree of good service to the customers, in dealing perhaps with someone who is just a few minutes late. That would go a long way towards improving the situation and would show that, for those who may have overstayed their welcome by a very short period, some degree of leniency would be allowed.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: I gave way earlier. I would like to pursue my own argument, if I may. We have heard that the fee has sat at £80 — or £30, because most people pay within the deemed period — since 2006. Whether you like it or not, there have been considerable increases in offences during that time. We were given clear evidence on that. That means that the deterrent is not working and is not sufficient. As a result, some of those who continue to flout the law, as I have highlighted, will be increasing road safety issues. They will be parking inappropriately, without receiving the appropriate penalty to act as a deterrent. That danger remains. It is clear from the increased number of tickets that it is not doing the job as we wish it to do.

I got one ticket a number of years ago. My trailer was not parked perfectly, even though I had a ticket on the car. It was at the very far end of the car park. I thought it was well away from everybody. I had to pay my ticket. I reckoned that it was not parked correctly, and I paid my ticket. I learned my lesson. I have since ensured that I have parked meticulously. I check when I have to and always endeavour to be back at the car within the appropriate period.

This is a very emotive issue. People can go on a crusade against car parking attendants or redcoats, but picture your local town without car parking attendants. The Member for East Londonderry suggested that you should be able to stay much longer outside the butcher's shop.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: I certainly will.

Mr Storey: The difficulty I have is that, in Ballymena or Ballymoney, the car parking attendants are absolutely useless when it comes to traffic jams. They have no power to intervene to keep traffic flowing. They have no power to intervene to manage traffic in the towns. All that they are out to do is to make sure that they get some poor individual who has been in the town for four minutes over time, spending money, and chase them out of the town. That is the only benefit they are.

Mr Beggs: Anyone who has any knowledge of the subject will agree with me that the sooner responsibility for car parking attendants is passed to councils, the better, so that they are accountable to local people and have to

respond accordingly. That is my view. If there are issues like that, that would certainly deal with them. The local council would deal with them.

I go back to the issue. If, as the Member opposite suggested, we should not have waiting restrictions outside the butcher's shop or the butcher should be able to pay to park for three or four hours, what customers will get in there? Surely, the butcher will park there or perhaps the office worker upstairs. The purpose of some of the restrictions is to enable customers to get there. We all need to look at it carefully before changing such policies. On occasions, it is right to change, but, I have to admit, I was shocked when the argument against fines was that, instead of the fines, we should introduce on-street car parking charges. I really find that ridiculous. It almost seems as if Sinn Féin is miffed that its policy of introducing additional on-street car parking charges was avoided by passing some of the costs for the traffic management issue to those who are causing offences and not obeying the regulations. That is a rather childish approach, if that is what it is, simply because that party's original policy of wanting to charge people for parking in town centres was altered.

I go back to the issue of road safety, which is very important. I declare an interest as a member of the Carrickfergus road safety committee. Some people think that they can just abandon a car anywhere. We have to make sure that that is not allowed. Surely, after six years with a steady price and the knowledge that the fine is not working, because the number of offences is increasing, there has to be an increase.

6.45 pm

There are choices. I welcome the discussion that has occurred between the Chair, Deputy Chair and the Minister. I hope that we can hear more and that the ideas of dual charging and protocols can be progressed further so that there is clarity and transparency for everyone. There are choices in everything we do. A Budget has been set that the Executive have passed. I have been a member of different Committees, and many policies to increase costs have come forward. I would have preferred many of those costs to stay at zero, just as most people would, but you have to act responsibly. Unless you can propose an alternative cost that will fill that void, you are acting irresponsibly. The

only suggestion that I have heard here today to fill the void of this traffic management issue has been the introduction of on-street parking charges in town centres. I think that would have an adverse effect on our town centres and should not be introduced. I do not accept that as an argument.

Mr Dickson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: Yes, I certainly will.

Mr Dickson: Does the Member agree that it is not reasonable to suggest that that is the only proposal that has been made in the Chamber today? The proposal that I made and, I think, others would agree with is that we should introduce a two-tier fine system. That would add to the Minister's coffers, and, at the same time, it would not penalise those who can least afford it and those who commit the most minor of offences. We need some intelligent thinking about this, not just one big slap of an increase of a fine.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Member for his suggestion again, but, if he were on Carrick council discussing some issue, he would know that the budget is today. The budget is not in six months' time, after you have gone through some new consultation procedures and introduced new legislation. The budget is today.

I am a former member of the Regional Development Committee. Officials came to that Committee just before I moved on, and I asked, or someone asked, what the choices were. They indicated, at that point, that the choices that they had included the reduction of grass cutting on the verges. Again, from a road safety point of view, I would not want that to be reduced because of the danger to pedestrians. It is not that long since we heard of tragic accidents where pedestrians were struck by vehicles, and, if there is long grass or bad visibility at junctions, you will increase the risk of road traffic accidents. Therefore, I reject the suggestion of reducing the cutting of grass verges.

Another suggestion — I had to take a second look at it, but I discovered that it is a very real suggestion — was to turn street lights out at night. People may be surprised and not take that seriously, but that is what many councils in England have done; they have turned the lights out in the wee hours of the night. Again, I do not wish to go down that route. There would be potential hazards for those who might still be

working or going home from night shifts and possible dangers for the local community as well. Many people become attached to their street lights, and, rather than turn them off, I would much prefer that we live with what the choice is now — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. I ask that Members return to the debate.

Mr Beggs: I ask that we respect the fact that increased fines for road traffic offences, such as parking offences, would have a dual purpose. They would be a major deterrent. Those prices have sat there for some six years without any increase. They would also fill the void. I wish to hear more from the Minister at the end, but I understand that the alternatives would result in some potentially drastic instances. Realistic alternatives have not been presented. Therefore, regrettably, I have to support this measure. I do not want higher fines for myself or my constituents, but there are reasons why this is the best option — road traffic reasons and to fill the real budget gap. I support the retention of the costs and will vote against the prayer of annulment.

Mr McCallister: It has been interesting to hear the different ideas and thoughts in the debate. I certainly take issue with the Sinn Féin perspective. I find the very suggestion that somehow paying on-street parking charges will alleviate all the problems quite illogical. Before the last election, I was very much part of the campaign to avoid on-street parking charges in towns in my constituency, such as Kilkeel, Warrenpoint, Downpatrick, Newcastle and others. I congratulate the Minister on a very speedy decision to scrap the proposals for on-street parking charges. It was the right decision to make then, and it is right to support it now. I think that there is actually great support around the House for the Minister's action back then. Sinn Féin Members have talked about the economic conditions not being right to increase fines.

Mr Anderson: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCallister: Just let me finish this point, Mr Anderson. On-street parking charges could have been a disaster for our struggling market towns and town centres across Northern Ireland. We were right to oppose them, and we will continue to oppose them.

Mr Anderson: I thank the Member for giving way. He says that he did not want additional on-street

parking fees, but is he in support of additional car parking fees that were not previously charged? They are now being introduced by the Minister. That is happening in my own town in my constituency. Both are additional charges, so what is the difference between on-street parking charges and car parking charges?

Mr McCallister: I am surprised that Mr Anderson has now become an advocate of on-street car parking charges. There are tough choices to be made *[Interruption.]* I support the actions that the Minister has taken on car parking, thus avoiding on-street parking charges. It was the right decision.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. Make your remarks through the Chair.

Mr McCallister: I am surprised that the Member has suddenly moved away from that position.

My point about the Sinn Féin position is that it is totally illogical. Its argument that you should pay on-street parking charges is illogical. How will you enforce that if you do not want any type of fine? You would get into the same issues with on-street parking that we have now with people who come back to a car park a few minutes late. Either you have a fine system to enforce that or you do not. If you do not have a fine system in place, nobody will pay any of the charges anyway, because there will be no penalty. The very arguments that Sinn Féin makes are totally illogical. It simply will not work.

Parking is one of the most difficult issues to deal with in our towns. Getting the balance right in even our small market towns is difficult. Who parks in the towns? There are all-day parkers who go elsewhere in the country to work and do not bring any new business into the town. How do you manage that? There are many towns in which we have restricted parking to help to bring in business to regenerate them, and it is right and proper that we do that. We are in the process of doing that in my local town, Rathfriland, because we have had a problem with all-day parkers and cars taking up space. Those people are not bringing commercial activity into the town, and we do not want that. We need to manage town traffic and parking to increase business and throughput in all our towns. Many of our smaller towns are struggling in these difficult economic conditions. That is why parking is an important issue that we must get right.

Mr Dickson talked about other options. My understanding of the prayer of annulment is that either the motion is passed or it is not. Therefore, it is not presenting us with options. He may well have brought other options to the Committee that may be useful to explore. However, tonight, we have to make a decision on how we will fund the future of parking.

Mr Dickson: The Member is right: the prayer of annulment is the only way of dealing with the matter. As the Member's colleague Mr Beggs said, when departmental officials came to the Committee we saw the paucity of their proposals: stop grass cutting and turn off street lights. Those are not alternatives; they are ridiculous suggestions. The alternative is to introduce a proper, two-tier system of fines, and the only way that that can be achieved is by annulling the proposal tonight and genuinely allowing the Minister to come back with better proposals.

Mr McCallister: Has the Committee worked through how much that system would raise? At what level would the second tier of fines have to be set to raise some of the money? Would those who have been or claim to have been unlucky enough to have been caught several times in one year complain about the level of fine? The Minister may also want to respond to questions about the bureaucracy required to deal with such a system. We already have a gap between what it costs to administer the system and the revenue raised by parking fines. People have got the message about parking, and we should encourage the levels of illegal parking to keep coming down. However, Mr Dickson's proposals seem to be a few ideas that he has just thought of; he has not worked through the cost and workability of such a scheme.

Like my colleague Mr Beggs, I am concerned about a reduction of grass cutting. I am also concerned about turning off lights in our towns and villages and the major impact that that could have on safety and crime. We have to take that into account.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCallister: Certainly.

Mr B McCrea: Does the Member agree with me that some Members are simply not taking the issue seriously? What we are seeing is cheap political knockabout. We have Members who have no intention of letting this through but

see an opportunity for making a cheap political point. Surely it is time for Members to show that they are responsible politicians, rather than making cheap jibes from the Benches. We know how the DUP will vote and how Sinn Féin will vote. This is pure political pantomime — *[Interruption.]* It is not a serious point. I am sure that my colleague will want to elaborate on that.

Mr McCallister: I thank my honourable friend for that valuable contribution. It has certainly added a great deal of clarity to the debate, and, perhaps before I finish, he may wish to contribute some more of his knowledge. *[Interruption.]*

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

There are important issues. Members have argued that the increase is so great that people will be unable to afford it. For most who pay within the 14-day limit, the fine will increase from £30 to £45. That is about half a tank of diesel in most cars and probably less than 10% of an average annual car insurance premium. I find it incredible that someone would be thrown into hardship if they were asked to pay £45 for a parking offence. We should bear it in mind that, if you commit an offence and are caught, you should be fined. Are we going to argue that point for speeding offences and for every other offence?

Mr I McCrea: I thank the Member for giving way. The Member spoke about the increase in the fine. Surely the issue is really about encouraging people not to park illegally. If they do that, they will not have to pay the additional amount, as they will not have a fine to pay.

Mr McCallister: The point is well made. The evidence suggests that, if the number of illegal parkers is coming down, at least part of the message is getting through. I applaud that and encourage us all to do that. I am sure that there are few Members who have not been caught out with a parking fine at some point —

Mr Spratt: Speak for yourself, John.

Mr McCallister: When I was caught, I was entirely innocent. *[Laughter.]*

7.00 pm

Mr Flanagan: I thank the Member for giving way. He talked about Members being caught for parking offences. I, too, confess to having been caught out, but it was not putting £60 or £90 into the Department for Regional Development

or paying it to red coats; it was paid to a private clumper in south Belfast, which was far worse because getting clamped cost me £85. However, a dirty rumour is circulating around the House that I ask UUP Members to clarify. Some in the House say that the Minister received a ticket in Enniskillen today. Can you clarify that? *[Laughter.]*

Mr McCallister: I will let the Minister clarify that when he speaks. If he received a ticket, I am quite sure that, on an occasion such as today, he will be happy to pay it before the increase goes through. *[Laughter.]* At least the Member did not claim that he was innocent when he was parked in south Belfast and got clamped.

The House has a duty to act responsibly, to set an example and, when we change things, look at how we fund those changes. That is incumbent on us all.

Mr B McCrea: I have to say that the Member on the Benches opposite raised an interesting point. I want to get to the bottom of whether ignorance is any defence. If you have got some sort of charge against you, should you not stand up and pay it like a man, or a woman, if that is the case? Should you not go and do that? Is that not what this House is all about: that you should meet your obligations fairly and squarely?

Mr McCallister: Absolute fairness and responsibility; yes. I look forward to hearing from other Members, but this is an important issue for the House to tackle and there is a responsibility on us all to vote for something that we can say is fair and responsible for the Executive and Assembly.

Mr Speaker: I call David McNarry. Mr McNarry may bring some order to the debate.

Mr McCallister: I would not have thought it.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McNarry: I am sure that the House will say well done to Mr John McCallister and Basil McCrea for demonstrating how to thank the only party that is likely to support them. I am sure that that party, namely the DUP, will recognise just how trivially they treat you. You have heard it, and you decide.

I thank the Committee Chairman for the degree of decorum and seriousness that he brought to the debate. On behalf of the Committee, I thank him for his report and, personally, I admire him for being here and doing that. Thank you very

much. I also concur with his comments to the outgoing Deputy Chair. At that time, anyhow, they set the tone for the debate that we embarked on.

The law currently operates fines of £60. In my opinion, that sum is adequate and fair. People pay for breaking that law. The argument that increasing the fine to £90 will prove a major deterrent has not been backed up by evidence to the Committee. However there is, has been, and I think that there will continue to be strong representation from local traders and businesses in all our constituencies who advise us that the increase will drive customers away from town centres and towards shopping complexes.

In their efforts to stay afloat, those traders have every right to expect support from their elected representatives rather than have things made more difficult, as we could with this vote, so that they can survive and continue in business. There are no compromises here. It is not a matter of a £5 or £10 increase. It is a straight £30 uplift or nothing. However, we are told that this £30 increase is nothing to do with revenue. That is what was said to the Committee. The Committee was told that it was only about a deterrent and that that is all that it was about. So, why have we had the high-handed threats over introducing increased car parking charges and neglecting cutting grass verges? On the other hand, we were told that £7 million is required to plug a budget shortfall. If this is not revenue based, what is it? Is it revenue raising to compensate for budget savings? Or could it be that the NSL commercial contract is due for renewal this October? I add that to the mix, because, as you all know, £4.5 million is raised annually from the collection of the £60 fine. However, it costs £9.3 million to administer and collect the fines. There is no profit in that; there is not even a break-even figure on the balance sheet. So, if the deterrent aspect is to be believed, with the suggestion that fewer people are offending and that fewer fines are collected, how can it be that the £7 million extra can be collected at net value to the Department when there is a shortfall of £4.8 million?

I offer this idea. For the year for which the latest figures are available, 2008-09, the net deficit to the Department to operate overall car parking services was around £9 million. It is on the upward spiral. Do Members not agree that that is a lamentable situation and that it shows an Oliver Twist mentality of asking for more? If

you decide to defeat this prayer of annulment tonight, that would seem to be acceptable, and it would seem to be acceptable that commercial people can ask for more and more and that we give and give.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr McNarry: Is the issue not really about a departmental inability to manage its current budget? It has a problem, which the Committee respects and recognises. However, the Department cannot have it both ways. It cannot say that a greater deterrent will reduce the fines that are collected but then add that the increase in fines will reduce a deficit of £7 million annually. As somebody else said, if the deterrent works, the revenue to reduce the deficit will not be collected.

Surely the other question has to be this: why is the £60 fine not sufficient today? Why is it not working? Is the answer not to be found somewhere? It is sufficient. It happens to be that the cost of collecting it is provoking the loss-making inefficiency that is being discussed.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr McNarry: So, if the House wishes to tell the public that it supports — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member should not persist. Allow the Member to continue.

Mr McNarry: If the House wishes to tell the public that, as a consequence of backing a £90 fine, it supports an inevitable downturn in town centre vibrancy, it should do so. If the House wants to drive people out of town centres and to be accused of doing that, it should do so. However, if we, as a House that is accountable to the electorate, genuinely want to endorse the current £60 fine and if we want to send out and reiterate the signal that the law, as it stands, should be respected and will be rigorously enforced, we should do so by supporting the Committee's motion. It is a straight choice. You can take that choice back to your electorate, constituencies, business owners, shopkeepers and the people who use those facilities. You can take that choice back tonight after you have voted, and you can tell them how you voted. It is a simple choice, but the £60 fine surely is worth preserving and worth sticking with. We are not talking about a £5 or £10 uplift, which is something that we might have been able to live with; this is £30 or bust. I put it to you to

support the motion and bust any proposal to bring the £90 fee in.

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): I am grateful to all of the Members for their contributions. Through the course of my remarks, I will address many of the questions that they have raised and the issues about which they have asked.

Our aim in managing car parking is to reduce congestion, to improve safety and accessibility and to generate a turnover in car parking spaces. Parking enforcement is essential to ensure that parking restrictions on our roads and car parks are adhered to by motorists. Those restrictions are there to improve road safety, reduce congestion and make our town centres more accessible for shoppers. Regrettably, not everyone complies with the restrictions, and so a deterrent in the form of a parking ticket is required. My main reason — not the sole reason, but the main reason — for increasing this penalty is to provide a deterrent in order to get drivers to park properly. If that is successful, parking tickets will not be issued, and that is what I really want.

Since the Department became responsible for parking enforcement in 2006, the number of penalties issued has been reducing year on year, from approximately 160,000 to approximately 118,000. However, last year saw a reversal of that trend, with an increase to approximately 125,000. That upward trend contributed to my decision to tackle the problem at source and to try to encourage drivers to park properly in the first instance. However, if a minority of drivers continue to ignore the rules and park irresponsibly, it is right that they should pay.

Although my proposal is to increase the cost of a parking ticket from £60 to £90, it should be noted that, since the beginning of decriminalised parking enforcement, the vast majority of drivers have paid their parking ticket within two weeks, at the discounted rate. In practice, that means an increase of £15 in the discounted rate from £30 to £45.

An effective parking enforcement service costs money, and it is not right that law-abiding drivers who take the time to park properly and show courtesy to others should pay for a service that is there to control the actions of a few. So, the people who flout the law should pay more for the cost of providing the enforcement service.

It has been highlighted in the debate that my Department's parking services operate at a deficit of some £7 million per year. In accordance with the principles of 'Managing Public Money Northern Ireland' and the efficient running of my Department, I have a responsibility to reduce that deficit and make parking services self-funding. The obvious way to do that, following the logic of some contributors to this debate, is to increase charges wholesale and widespread. I am not prepared to do that. However, if I cannot proceed with the increase in the charge for a parking ticket, it is estimated that my budget will have a shortfall of approximately £2.5 million per year over the next three years, which is a total of £7.5 million. That will have significant consequences and will require me to review other parking charges to recoup the deficit; a move that I believe would not be welcome to town centre traders. It would, of course, also have the resulting penalty for motorists who park properly, as opposed to those who flout the rules.

Other options that I would have to consider if the prayer of annulment succeeds include a reduction in the frequency and extent of grass cutting, longer response times for the repair of street lights and a reduction in the frequency of inspection and repair of potholes on rural roads. Those are services that are already under pressure. These activities are already funded at a minimal level, and I am reluctant to reduce the level of service further.

7.15 pm

We should all remember that this is a penalty that can be avoided. All that drivers have to do is obey the rules of parking in keeping with the vast majority of drivers in Northern Ireland. I am aware of comments to the effect that people are not fully aware of the parking system. I have, therefore, asked my officials to rerun an awareness campaign to remind drivers of the issues that are associated with parking restrictions and enforcement in the lead-up to the start of the new contract in October.

It has also been suggested that my Department should produce a protocol on parking. My Department already has clear procedures on how it deals with different circumstances. These procedures form part of the training for traffic attendants and processing officers. Again, as a listening Minister, and to ensure that there are no misunderstandings, my Department

will publish a protocol that will help drivers to understand the rules and avoid getting a parking ticket. The Department will take this forward as part of an awareness campaign that I have asked officials to undertake in the lead-up to the introduction of the new contract in October. I hope that this will contribute positively to the whole debate around parking and the need for parking management.

I also hope that it will highlight the issue of discretion in the system and that there is a fair, equitable and easily accessible process for those drivers who wish to appeal. The appeals process itself includes an independent body of adjudicators who are appointed by the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service in the Department of Justice. The four independent adjudicators in the traffic penalty tribunal are from a legal background. They are either barristers or solicitors, and they hear appeal cases brought by drivers.

I have listened closely to the comments about traffic attendants. I do not believe that the number of tickets that are being issued — one every two hours on average — is indicative of an over-zealous approach. However, again, as a listening Minister, and in an attempt to deal with public disquiet on this matter, I have instructed officials to reiterate to the company that is responsible for the attendants the need for improved customer engagement as they seek to perform their often difficult duties.

Mr Flanagan: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Kennedy: I have to make progress.

I, too, am often asked about grace periods for parking restrictions. There are procedures laid down for traffic attendants that include a built-in grace period for some of the more minor offences. For example, if you pay-and-display, a 10-minute grace period is given after the expiry of your paid time. For more serious offences, there are no grace periods. For example, tickets are issued immediately to vehicles on a zigzag line, at a bus stop or on a clearway.

I am promoting and actively bringing forward the introduction of electronic parking payment across the whole of Northern Ireland, which will greatly benefit drivers. This facility means that drivers do not have to predict how long they need to park and how much they need to pay up front, because they can start and stop their parking when they need to and pay only for the

time that is used. This will mean that parking penalties will not be issued for overstaying the pay-and-display time as long as time restrictions are adhered to. This facility currently exists in Belfast and Londonderry as well as Lisburn, Newry and Omagh, and I hope to extend the scheme to other towns across Northern Ireland over the coming months.

I recognise that some parking contraventions are more serious than others and that in London and in other parts of England, about which we have heard in this debate, a system of differential penalties applies. I am willing to consider the introduction of a similar system here, but it cannot and will not be done overnight. Therefore, I say to the House that the prayer of annulment is an issue of the day that has to be dealt with today.

I have engaged, as the Chairperson and the deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development outlined, on this issue. I attended meetings with the Committee in April this year and as recently as last week. The Department briefed the previous Committee on its plans to raise additional revenue from increased parking charges and penalties as part of its savings delivery plans associated with Budget 2011-15. Specifically, in January 2011, the Department provided written and oral evidence that indicated that it intended to raise an additional £37.5 million through a combination of an average yearly increase of 15% to existing car parking income for each of the Budget years and an increase in the penalty for parking illegally. That and on-street parking charges are what we are debating this evening.

I subsequently decided not to proceed with the on-street charges. That was the right decision. It was a popular and well-received decision in town and city centres all over Northern Ireland. Following that decision, my Department wrote to the Committee in November 2011 to set out the financial consequences of that decision and to provide an updated savings delivery plan. Let me be clear: I want the number of car parking tickets to reduce further by deterring illegal and improper parking. Increasing the penalty for a parking ticket is a measure that can help to achieve that, and, therefore, it will make parking easier for everyone.

I am conscious of time, so I will very briefly —

Mr Allister: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Kennedy: No, I am going to make progress.

I want to refer to comments that were made by Members during the debate. It has, in large part, been a good and reasonably measured debate. I express my thanks to the Chairman of the Committee for Regional Development, Mr Spratt. He found himself in a difficult position: he had to present the Committee's view on the issue while not agreeing with it. That is never an easy position to be in, but he made a very balanced contribution. I am grateful to him for his support on the overall issue. That is not what I have to say to Mr Ó hOisín, who, frankly, astonished me. He almost immediately indicated that he was not opposed to the principle of an increase in parking fines, but he also said that he supported the reintroduction of on-street car parking charges. That is a huge tax on town centres, small businesses and people who are struggling to survive at this time. I wonder whether we will see a new Sinn Féin strapline on the issue: will it be "Our bay will come"? *[Laughter.]*

I was very impressed by the weighty contribution that was made by my party colleague Ross Hussey and the arguments that he advanced. He made the point that the ticketing system is a crucial tool in ensuring that there is proper parking and that the parking laws are obeyed.

Mr Dallat had sympathy for me; he said that he did not blame me personally. He talked about the impact on the local economy. I have made a huge contribution by not introducing on-street car parking to town centres. That is widely recognised by town and city centres and traders all over Northern Ireland. I am not cruel or mean or whatever, but I have to deal with the financial realities that are before me in the operation of the Department. All of us have to act properly and with sufficient control when we come to important or difficult decisions. I find myself having to make a difficult call, but it is done for the right reason.

I have addressed Mr Dickson's issue about the two-tier system, and I am prepared to look at that. However, it cannot, as I have said, be introduced overnight, and, therefore, I cannot wish away or vanish away the gaping hole in my budget. I am grateful to Ian McCrea for his contribution, particularly his acceptance of the very difficult job carried out by attendants and the need for a consistent approach.

Seán Lynch rather fell into the on-street car parking issue again. I was in Enniskillen today

at one of the most tremendous services that I have ever attended. It was a truly inspiring, memorable and very emotional occasion, but it was wonderful to see Her Majesty The Queen in Enniskillen today enjoying the rapturous acclaim of her people — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Kennedy: A wide range of the entire community was there, and all enjoyed the service. I did not receive a parking ticket, and, maybe if I had, I would have sought the royal prerogative of mercy.

Mr Beggs and Mr McCallister rallied strongly to my defence, and nearly lost me votes as a consequence. They expressed the fundamental views that, in essence, it should be the polluter who pays. That is the basis of this, and perhaps it is wrong or unfortunate that, since 2006, there has not been a graduated increase here. Sometimes, it is popular in politics to not introduce charges, but I think people can deal with increases as long as they are given to understand them and as long as they are applied fairly and with an even approach. Waiting six years to do this has served up some of the problems with it. I cannot be faulted for that, because I was not in office for all those six years.

While Mr McNarry was a member of the Ulster Unionist Party, he stood on a manifesto that supported the non-introduction of on-street car parking charges. It was a pledge that, rightly, we honoured when we took ministerial and departmental office, and, as I said earlier, it was the right decision. As a consequence of that decision, we were faced with a hole in the budget because of the previous Sinn Féin budget delivery savings plans. I had to deal with that, and that is one reason why I am bringing forward the proposals. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Kennedy: We are in the real world and in real politics, and we are running a Department that ultimately has to wash its face.

Finally, I say to all Members of this House, particularly those who are inclined to support the prayer of annulment — I say this respectfully — to be careful what you pray for, because there are severe consequences of not introducing the charges. A prayer against the increase could mean further increases to existing car parking charges, which, in effect, penalises motorists

who obey the rules as opposed to those who flout them. It may mean a reduction in front line maintenance activities; for example, less frequent grass cutting, longer response times for the repair of street lights and a reduction in the frequency of the inspection and repair of potholes on rural roads.

I do not want to be in that situation, and I do not want to be forced to look at those possible consequences. I want to bring forward and continue to look at the issue in a mature, responsible way, and I want to continue to work with the Chairman and the members of the Committee. The Deputy Chairman is about to make his valedictory speech to this Assembly, and he is going to oppose me on this issue. I join with others in recognising the contribution that he has made to the Committee and wish him well for a successful engagement at Westminster, taking his seat and rejoining the Commonwealth, and all the great benefits that Westminster will bring. *[Laughter.]*

On a serious note, it is flawed logic to promote and support this prayer of annulment, and I ask the House to reject it.

7.30 pm

Mr Doherty (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. This is indeed my last contribution to the House as a Member, and it is an honour to do so in my capacity as Deputy Chair of the Committee for Regional Development. It is also an honour to have served under such a fine Chairman as Jimmy Spratt, and I say that with all sincerity. At the outset, I thank the Chair and my Committee colleagues for their humour and hard work and their dedication to the Committee. I also thank the Committee Clerk and his staff. I added that bit in myself, Paul. I echo the Chair's comments that it is unusual to see the Committee divide as members are genuinely united in their opinions on how we get the best for the North in transport, roads, rail and water. This was most evident in our recent visit to Brussels in respect of the TEN-T negotiations.

I will try to curtail my comments as much as possible, because I am aware that other business has to be heard in the House. As a member of the Committee for Regional Development, I voted for this prayer to be brought to the Floor of the House. As Deputy Chair, I hope that I will reflect the opinions

of all members of the Committee, but, at the same time, I will indicate that the Committee position is as delivered by a majority of its members. I will refer to the Chair of the Committee's introductory factual remarks about how we arrived at this position. This was not an easy speech for the Chair, particularly given his personal views on the charges. As would be expected of our Chair, those introductory remarks were honest and accurate. As has been heard, the majority of Committee members respectfully beg to differ with his comments as a Member of this House.

The Committee remains unconvinced of the motives for introducing these increased charges, and it called for a strategic review of car parking. The Minister has not explained why, after an initial significant reduction in penalties when the scheme was introduced in 2006-07, there has been a steady increase in the number of tickets since. Why is this the case? What research has been undertaken to explain that? If the research has been undertaken, why has it not been presented to the Committee or the House?

The Committee sees these increases as purely and simply to raise revenue. Although we acknowledged that no specific targets are defined in the contract, it must be acknowledged that, often, the policy is made up of what is not said, rather than what is in writing. In this instance, the enforcement organisation is placidly being instructed to raise an additional £2.5 million a year in ticket revenue. That is between 27,000 and 55,000 additional tickets each year. Surely, this will erode whatever little bit of discretion the wardens or redcoats have. I wholly agree with the Chair's suggestion for a dual tariff and published protocol, and this has been echoed by a number of Members in the debate. Such an action would bring a level of reassurance to the public, and I fully endorse calls for the Minister to review those areas urgently.

I do not intend to respond to all of the contributions in the debate, but I will make reference to some of them. Cathal Ó hÓisín, quite correctly, talked about the pressure on small businesses and the effects on villages and small towns. Ross Hussey admitted to illegal parking, but said that the fines were a critical component of enforcement. He liked the idea of the Minister rattling his sabre, and I wondered where "beyond use" went to when he was talking about sabres.

John Dallat expressed appreciation for the openness of the Minister. He said that it was ordinary people who were being targeted and pointed out the difference between fines and fees. He also cited the conduct of one red coat and blamed a cruel Executive that was pushing a kind Minister. Stewart Dickson said that it was about revenue raising as opposed to improving parking etiquette. He suggested a two-tier system and said that £60, plus discount, was reasonable, but not £90. He asked the Minister to reconsider the two-tier system. Ian McCrea said that this was a difficult issue, but supported the Minister. However, he had sympathy with some people who were fined, particularly those going to the hairdresser. *[Laughter.]*

Seán Lynch said that it was a revenue raising issue and that it was coming down heavily on ordinary citizens. He said that he gets heavy representation on the issue, perhaps because his constituency office is beside a car park. He, too, admitted to illegal parking, but said that he paid his fines. Roy Beggs said that no one liked to be fined, but that some of the arguments being put were illogical. He noted that fines had not been increased since 2006. He said that if there were no car parking attendants, towns would be jammed up. He highlighted the need for road safety and asked what the alternative was. He said that it would not affect the Minister's budget. He also said that he was very much attached to street lighting. *[Laughter.]*

John McCallister took some issue with Sinn Féin. He did not want on-street parking charges and said that Sinn Féin's position was illogical. He supported increases in the charges and dismissed other options as not being worked through. There was then quite an interruption from Basil, which caused a bit of an uproar. I thought that he was slightly disrespectful to the Committee that had tabled the motion. John then returned to his point and quite forcefully made the point that £45 was not that big a charge. It is to some people.

David McNarry made a very measured contribution and thanked the Chair for the way in which the report was delivered to the House. He said that, if the charge was increased by £30, it would have a big negative impact on ordinary people and traders. He said that the Department cannot have it both ways and asked why the £60 option was not working. He said that, if it was not prayed against, the measure would

drive people out of town centres. He also said that it was, essentially, a fundraising measure.

Minister Danny Kennedy thanked Members for their contributions. He restated the Department's position and said that there was a need for a deterrent to get drivers to park legally. He said that people who flouted the law should pay more. He said that if the statutory rule were prayed against, it would cost the Department £7.5 million over three years and that that money would have to be found by other means, which he outlined. He said that the penalty could be avoided by drivers parking legally. He said that there was training and that protocols were in place, and highlighted the fact that there will be discretion in how the charges are applied. He spoke correctly and very honestly about his dialogue with the Chair, the Deputy Chair and the Committee. I appreciate that and thank him for it. He attempted to bring forward a new Sinn Féin slogan — very badly, I must say. *[Laughter.]* Nevertheless, it was a genuine attempt. He said that the polluters should pay. He also said that we must live in the real world and that, if we do not accept this and pray against it, there could be further charges down the line.

I hope that I have accurately reflected Members' views and the thoughts of the Committee. The Committee for Regional Development supports the motion.

I would like to divert for a short while, because this is my last speech in the Assembly. I want to thank you, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank all the Speakers and Deputy Speakers — Cinn Chomhairle, LeasChinn Chomhairle and Príomh-LeasCheann Comhairle — from the time I have been here since 1998. I thank them for their courtesies and efficiencies in the way that they conducted business. I also thank all the MLAs and Ministers with whom I have worked, in my own party and others. Finally, I say to my unionist colleagues across the Floor: I am going to west Tyrone not Westminster. *[Laughter.]*

Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 36; Noes 49.

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Dallat, Mr Dickson, Mr Doherty, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Mr Flanagan, Ms Lo, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle,

Mr F McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mr McGlone, Mr McKay, Mrs McKeivitt, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr McNarry, Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Flanagan and Mr Rogers.

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Beggs, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Ms Brown, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mr Copeland, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mr Frew, Mr Gardiner, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Hussey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr McCallister, Mr McCausland, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr McGimpsey, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr G Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Hussey and Mr Kinahan.

Question accordingly negatived.

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

Primary Schools: East Belfast

Mr Speaker: The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes in which to speak. The Minister will have 10 minutes to respond. All other Members who wish to speak will have approximately seven minutes. *[Interruption.]* Order, order.

Mr Lyttle: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank the Minister for his attendance here this evening at this late hour of business. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I ask Members to leave the Chamber in an orderly fashion.

Mr Lyttle: Thank you, Mr Speaker. As we draw towards the end of the school term and the Assembly term, which is clear from the unruly behaviour we have here, I welcome the opportunity to speak on the issue of primary education provision in East Belfast. I welcome the positive news with regard to capital investment yesterday, but, unfortunately, it has been another academic year of uncertainty for many of our local schools.

Six years ago, the Bain report on the future of education provision in Northern Ireland recommended that area-based planning be implemented in order to provide a strong and sustainable schools estate. In 2009, the then Education Minister Caitríona Ruane commissioned a capital review exercise, which identified schools as being either compliant, non-compliant or partially compliant for capital investment. It soon became apparent that failure to achieve compliant status would effectively exclude schools from being considered for capital projects for some time.

The capital review exercise has now become obsolete, and, in the three-year period between 2009 and 2012, some schools in East Belfast have been left in limbo. They have been left wondering if and how much-needed capital work will be carried out at their school. During this time, the stresses on schools in East Belfast requiring capital investment have increased, pupil numbers have increased, space inside schools has become more cramped and outside

space for play has decreased, with more of our children being educated in mobile classrooms.

The Minister of Education has recently advised that the focus is no longer on individual schemes or on the outcome of the capital review exercise but is based on educational need identified by the area-based planning process. The area planning process has a number of high-level objectives, including developing a network of sustainable schools; raising standards; reducing surplus places; reducing duplication; and identifying opportunities for shared learning, sharing facilities and the co-location of mainstream and special schools.

Education and library boards conducted viability audits of all schools to highlight those under stress with respect to low enrolment trends, poor educational attainment and poor financial standing. There are concerns, however, that the viability audits have been based more on limited facts and figures than on the important qualitative data from schools or parents. I would be grateful to the Minister if he could confirm how area planning will include the input of schools, parents and elected representatives in that important strategic process at the earliest possible stage.

The Bain report envisaged area-based planning working best under a single education and skills authority, with a wide-ranging, bird's eye view of education provision across the entire region. However, due to the continued delays in the implementation of the Education and Skills Authority (ESA), originally scheduled for 2009, education and library boards and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) have been authorised to develop area plans. As a result of that arguably more fragmented approach, concern has been expressed to me that separate plans are being drawn up for the controlled and maintained sectors in fairly arbitrarily chosen sub-areas, with seemingly little regard for possible shared and integrated solutions. If the ESA were in place, it may have provided a more joined-up framework in which to make those considerations. There is serious public concern that options for increased shared education and the shared use of facilities are being overlooked by the current process.

The Department has committed to increasing shared education in the Programme for Government, and increasing integrated

education is a clear commitment in the Good Friday Agreement. Therefore, surely area-based planning and area learning communities present a generational opportunity to deliver that type of fundamental change. Given those concerns, there is an urgent need for the Minister to clarify what he understands as shared education and how that will be advanced by the current area-based planning process.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way and for his comments thus far. Is he clear in his own mind about the distinction between integrated education and shared education? Many of the problems that he highlighted in his constituency of East Belfast have been exacerbated by integrated education and schools that were created as a result of the creation of another sector. There are many such schools in my constituency, and at the end of the day, they have taken pupils away from the controlled sector in particular because the maintained sector has not yet caught up on the issue of integration or shared education.

Mr Lyttle: I am not sure that I agree with the premise, but I agree that, for shared education, there should be cross-sectoral options as much as solely an integrated sector. The Integrated Education Fund, for example, has presented a range of measures that could move towards shared education. I think that the concern is that we are seeing very few of those types of options being explored.

Despite the identification of area-based planning as the process by which capital investment in schools will be determined, the Minister announced an interim process for newbuild schools this week, and that, of course, has to be welcomed as a positive investment. I am particularly delighted to see the £5 million investment for the new Victoria Park Primary School in Sydenham, east Belfast, being included on the list. The school has been operating in extremely cramped conditions for a number of years, and I would like to pay tribute to the board of governors, the principal, the staff and everyone involved for all their hard work in getting the school to that point. However, many other schools in need of capital investment remain somewhat confused about which process they should engage with going forward to achieve those legitimate aims for capital investment. For example, my former primary school, Strandtown Primary School, was not included on the list of capital announcements even though it is

currently delivering exceptional outcomes in extremely difficult and unsuitable conditions.

8.00 pm

My colleague Judith Cochrane, who is a past pupil of the school, will discuss those issues in more depth. There is a need for the Minister to explain further how exactly the school enhancement programme, announced and aimed at refurbishing and extending existing schools, will be delivered via this process. I hope that schools in East Belfast in serious need of capital funds will be able to avail themselves of those opportunities.

I urge the Department and the boards to commence more interactive consultation and conversation with schools, parents and the community to enhance the process without delay. Their views would undoubtedly assist the development of robust area plans. It is important that their views are taken into account, even at this early stage. There are frameworks in place for this type of engagement. The East Belfast Partnership board, for example, has undertaken extensive strategic planning on education in our constituency over the past number of years. It has analysed trends and identified key areas where provision can be enhanced, particularly in inner East Belfast. Many schools and stakeholders have creative ideas and are working in innovative ways. They should be included throughout the area-based planning process to produce the best plan possible for education in East Belfast. I recall a conference organised by the Integrated Education Fund on education in East Belfast at which there were some very rich conversations. It would be useful to capture that type of input in the area-based planning process, even at this stage.

Primary schools in East Belfast cover the Belfast Education and Library Board and the South Eastern Education and Library Board, and when issues of sustainability arise, I sincerely hope that neighbouring boards will work together to find positive solutions.

Area-based planning should be seen as an opportunity to shape how we want education to be delivered in East Belfast for generations to come. Planning should not only focus on the schools that are there at present but look beyond that and start to plan how and where we want provision to be located in the future.

There are many difficult issues to tackle in education in East Belfast. Although we have many pupils achieving outstanding results, a large number are struggling. With literacy and numeracy skills, Northern Ireland has one of the biggest gaps in performance of young people, and East Belfast has one of the highest levels of internal inequality in Northern Ireland. We must work to close that gap. Attainment must be improved and aspirations set as high as possible among our children and young people.

Area plans should not be seen as static. They need to be flexible and responsive to changing needs in East Belfast, and recent high birth rates in the constituency will have an impact on primary provision in years to come. It is important that the board and the Department foresee those challenges and are equipped to deal with them.

Area-based planning provides a significant opportunity to enhance, improve and explore new forms of education provision in East Belfast. Both cross-sectoral and cross-age options need to be fully explored to make the most of facilities and increase sharing. It is vital that schools are kept fully informed and included in the area-based planning process. These are the people on the front line. Their expertise and insight must be valued, and I urge the Minister and his Department to engage closely with schools, parents and the community over the coming months and year to ensure that we deliver the best possible educational outcomes for children in East Belfast.

Mr Newton: I am grateful to the Member for securing the debate. It is a timely debate and one which, I am very pleased to say, I was able to secure in December 2008, when we debated very similar issues.

Before I make my remarks, I want to thank the principals of East Belfast primary schools for their commitment, leadership and skills. I also want to thank the dedicated teaching staff who bring so much to education in the east of the city, often in very difficult circumstances. Their dedication and enthusiasm for education deserves our support. Whatever we say about primary education during this debate and in the future, they deserve our thanks, gratitude and support.

This subject concerns not only political representatives but organisations like the East Belfast Partnership, which, in a document it

recently produced, confirmed the beliefs of school principals that education is a partnership, that a partnership between schools and the home is absolutely essential and that, in order to allow our children to have the best possible chance in life, that partnership between those component parts has to be nurtured. That is particularly so in disadvantaged areas where there are high levels of deprivation and poverty and where, in many cases, there are parents who have difficulty in supporting their children at school. That is not the case throughout East Belfast, but it is certainly the case in some areas. Parents who have those difficulties can become distanced from the schools, and that increases the challenge for the principals and teachers to get parental involvement and, therefore, provide the opportunities for the pupils.

There is robust evidence that parental attitudes and home circumstances play a most influential role in the formation of the skills that children receive in their early years. Their aspirations are raised and their ability to learn is enhanced in those early years. Parents act as role models and build children's self-esteem and confidence that they can succeed at whatever they want to succeed in. In the most disadvantaged areas in East Belfast, we need to see investment in preschool projects. We need to see places for children in preschool education, because those are the building blocks and the foundations on which every other aspect of education will be built, rather than parents scrambling around looking for places or, indeed, being offered places away outside East Belfast. They are even offered places across the city, which are totally impractical.

My three areas of concern about education involve the funding, the parental involvement and the education. Indeed, as has been mentioned, the strategy for preschool education, leading into primary education and the area-based approach, is needed. Pre-primary and primary school education are the most important periods in a child's learning time. I have already said that they are the building blocks on which later education is supported and on which it flourishes or, indeed, where the light actually diminishes and goes out in many cases. There are strong feelings that many children are being failed by the system that is supposed to offer them opportunities. I believe that, if we do not have the holistic approach that I have outlined, that will continue. As the previous Minister recognised, and I am sure that this Minister recognises, there are

many young children, particularly young Protestant boys, who are just failing at school. Overall, children spend a relatively small period of time at school. It is the family background, the cultural aspects and, indeed, even the material needs of the family that have a significant impact on educational outcomes.

I want to pay tribute to the fact that the Minister has announced the funding for Victoria Park Primary School, but I want to remind him of what was said back on 1 December 2008 by his predecessor. In a debate on primary-school education, she said that:

“Several major capital projects are being planned for schools in the East Belfast constituency. Those include the amalgamation of Strand Primary School with Sydenham Primary School in a new school on the existing Sydenham site, which will be known as Victoria Park School”.

Good so far. She went on to say:

“and a new school for Strandtown Primary School on its existing site.”

So, no funding is announced for Strandtown, yet in 2008, the Minister of Education committed herself and her Department to Strandtown Primary School being funded for a new school site.

Finally, pastoral care is an important part of education. If a child is finding life difficult at home, then primary schools in East Belfast need to have the support of the Minister to provide that pastoral care in order to enhance the opportunities of our children. That requires support and funding from the Minister.

Mr Copeland: I declare an interest as a member of the board of governors of Braniel Primary School. I thank the Minister in this open debate for the very great help that his private office has been to me recently, particularly Claire and Willie, I think it is, who respond to me very promptly on all occasions.

My first school in East Belfast was in Castlereagh, really. Therein is part of the problem, because what is considered to be east Belfast geographically encompasses two education and library boards; the South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB) and the Belfast Education and Library Board. However, my first primary school was a converted German prisoner-of-war hut that had been brought from the location of Grosvenor Grammar School and located at the edge of the Clonduff estate. It

leaked in the winter, you got fried in the summer and there was a coke stove that nearly poisoned all of us. I had a one-and-a-half-mile walk through open fields across a very narrow road that is now the Knock dual carriageway.

I enjoyed every minute of primary school. It was challenging. I met people that I had never known before. In the summer, the kids from Moneyreagh made a concession and turned the tops of their water boots down, because they were mostly from farming communities. I moved from there, which was two huts encompassing four classes — three primary classes and a composite class — to a brand new red-brick primary school with a pupil number somewhere in the region of 1,000. P1 and P2 were in the huts; P3, P4 and P5 were in the big school; and P6 and P7 were in Glenburn Methodist Church hall, such was the size of that school.

Having failed the 11-plus significantly, it was a very short walk from there across the road to Lisnasharragh Secondary School. I felt in no way done down, intimidated, belittled or deprived having gone to a secondary school. There was progression within the school; there were forms, including a lower and upper sixth, allowing people to go from a secondary modern school to university. We knew we were not going to be brain surgeons or rocket scientists. Most of us ended up in commerce and did pretty well; two ended up on the West End stage; and one, I believe, is the second or third most senior person in NASA. That is not bad by any stretch of the imagination.

However, when the time came for my children to move schools, something had happened. My wife, a police officer, was in a Land Rover going into Springfield Road police station when it was hit with a machine gun. A bullet went through the constable beside her before striking her, injuring her in the throat and in the knee. She has never forgotten that. She determined that her children, if she was lucky enough to have them, would never be brought up as we had been — not knowing people of another faith or viewpoint until they were 15, 16 or maybe older. It was determined that Sarah, our eldest daughter, would attend Lagan College. That was somewhat controversial for someone with the unionist background that my wife and I had.

Sarah benefited from the integrated education to a degree. Our son, Matthew, however, was quite different. We were told when he was nine

that he would never be able to read and write. Consequently, the recommendation of the primary school headmaster was that he should not sit the transfer procedure test. I think it was probably driven by two motives: one, that it would be unfair on the child; and, two, that it might depress the statistical results of the school. I remember Matthew coming home, knowing that something was wrong, cuddling up on his mother's knee and saying, "I am way ahead of everybody else". It was not true, and it was heartbreaking.

8.15 pm

My wife was recovering from breast cancer at that stage, which she had when Matthew was born. Therefore, his early schooling years were disrupted by almost daily visits for radiotherapy, chemotherapy, reconstruction, reconstruction that failed, deconstruction of reconstruction and, eventually, a TRAM flap that settled the matter. My wife brought home all Matthew's books and took him through them. He did not do the 11-plus. He went to Lagan College and went into form 1F, which was pretty far down the food chain. However, his abiding desire was to become a doctor, and he eventually went to university and got a 2:1 in psychology. He went back and did the three science subjects that he had been deprived of when he did his A levels, and he has been accepted for medicine in Queen's University this summer. I respectfully suggest that, if I had sent him to the school that I went to, he would not have achieved that. It would simply not have been possible. The school that I went to was no longer the school that I went to.

I do not believe, and I speak personally and honestly, that we, with a population of 1.92 million people, can afford four or possibly five different types of education. I believe that the only thing that matters is the education of the child; the product. I do not laud Lagan College particularly because it is mixed religiously, but I do laud it because it is mixed educationally. It is possible, within the body of one school building, to move from non-academia to academia and to be academic in the subjects you wish to pursue or have some talent for. It is also possible to forever remove the stigma of having failed or not passed an examination, which I found distressing when I was confronted with my alleged failure at the age of 11. I know that many in my party will disagree with me. I do not care what a school is called, as long as it produces well-rounded and

balanced citizens who are capable of taking a place in the world and having a relationship with those around them.

At one stage, East Belfast was an industrial constituency. In fact, I know that figures exist that show that Belfast was responsible for 7% of the gross domestic national product of the United Kingdom in the latter years of the century before last. While we busied ourselves killing each other, for want of a better term, over an ancient argument, the industries that the children who went to the schools in inner East Belfast would have transitionally gone into disappeared. We maintained the integrity of our argument while the shipyard and the rope works went and Shorts reduced in size. No one ever thought, "What are we going to do with these children?" It is a damnation and a damnable comment on us all that we are producing children who are not capable of functioning as human beings in this world. The responsibility lies with us, and you sir, to do something about it.

Mr Speaker: Your time is almost gone.

Mr Copeland: The first three years are the most important. Primary education is the most important. Minister, I will support whatever notions you have to make things better.

Mr Douglas: I welcome the opportunity to speak on such a vital issue. I thank Chris Lytle for securing the Adjournment debate and the Minister for his attendance. I am not sure whether it is in order, but I also want to thank you, Mr Speaker, and your staff for staying here at this late hour. We all have a big day ahead of us tomorrow.

I want to join my colleagues in thanking — I sound like Barney Eastwood — and paying tribute to all the primary school teachers, principals and staff who do an extraordinary job in East Belfast, in the face of the most difficult of circumstances at times, as my colleague Robin Newton said.

The importance of adequate primary school provision must not be underestimated. I am sure that we would all agree that primary education is the most vital part of the educational journey that our young people embark on. The foundations of primary education allow our young people to grow and develop, and without the correct and adequate provisions in place, later educational development will suffer greatly.

A major issue that I want to focus on is funding. If our primary education system is to meet the demands required of it, we need to ensure that adequate funding is in place. Yet, for too long, that cornerstone of our education system has lacked adequate core funding. We must not underestimate the task that our primary education system has in East Belfast. It is not simply a classroom role, although that is vital. Schools in East Belfast have a wider importance, and that was spoken about earlier. Primary schools provide a focal point for our communities. They act as a centre for everyday life, fulfilling not only an educational role but a wider social and economic role. The importance of these factors must be understood and taken into account when any decisions around a primary school are taken. Any viability audit needs to ensure that the role that our local primary schools play in East Belfast is taken seriously and that all relevant stakeholders' concerns are taken on board when decisions are made.

In most cases, local communities in East Belfast drive and shape the positive direction of our schools. As other Members have done, I pay tribute to the East Belfast Partnership, under the inspired leadership of our friend Maggie Andrews, for leading the way in the support and development of an education system that we can all strive for.

Funding is a major concern for primary schools based in areas of deprivation. We all know too well the economic hardships and challenges faced by many in our communities, with four wards in East Belfast being among the top 10% of areas of deprivation. Those stark factors not only create the need for an adequate provision of primary education, they also increase the requirements place on already stretched resources in our local schools. Teachers and staff are, in many cases, not simply educators; they are the symbol of continuity and strength, the friendly face each day, the willing listener to young people's concerns and a helping hand in difficult situations. I call on the Minister to ensure that greater action is taken in areas of economic deprivation and for his Department to note the excellent work that teaching staff, principals and others carry out in these schools.

As I highlighted, East Belfast contains four of the 14 wards that have been identified by the Department of learning as the greatest underachieving wards; they are ranked sixth, seventh, thirteenth and fourteenth on the list

of educational underachievement. Primary education provision can and must play a major role in tackling that major issue in East Belfast. Our young people have suffered for far too long from a lack of the necessary resources, and the focus should be on creating an atmosphere conducive to and suitable for developing education in the area.

We must also tackle the range of inequality in educational achievement in East Belfast. Our community contains the wards placed fourth and 561st in the list of educational attainment. The disparity can no longer continue, and provision must be made to ensure that all young people are given the education that they deserve, regardless of whether they live in the leafy avenues of Stormont or in Stormont Street, Ballymacarrett, which is one of Northern Ireland's most deprived areas. I have heard people say that, in East Belfast, we have the best and the worst in education. I think that that is a bit extreme, but there are major problems, particularly in some inner East Belfast areas.

I welcome news of the Minister's investment in Victoria Park, although I think that it has been agreed that it was long overdue. Since being elected, one of my guiding principles has been to fight for the improvement of education provision in East Belfast. With my colleagues in the East Belfast Partnership, much work has been done to tackle this issue, yet more must be done. Education is not a luxury. A proper, well-resourced educational system is a requirement for all our young people, and yet we have failed to deliver that in some areas. More work, more focus and more action must be taken to ensure that East Belfast is not left behind.

I look forward to hearing not only the Minister's response this evening but his answer to questions that I submitted about expansion plans for oversubscribed schools in East Belfast. To conclude, I again voice my appreciation and admiration to all those involved in the primary-education system in East Belfast who have provided excellent role models for our young people. However, I ask the Minister to take on board the concerns expressed not only in the House but in the cries from the streets of East Belfast to ensure that our community is given a well-resourced education service for all.

Mrs Cochrane: I am glad that, along with my colleague Chris Lyttle, I have been able to bring

this issue to the House. I thank the Minister for attending the Chamber.

The importance of primary education cannot be overestimated, which is why we need to get the provision right. Schooling should reflect pupils' needs in the most effective and efficient way possible. My colleague Chris spoke about how area-based planning could address that requirement, so I will take this opportunity to elaborate a little further on the needs for East Belfast, particularly where Strandtown Primary School is concerned.

At this stage, I will declare an interest, because, like Chris, I attended Strandtown Primary School — I will let you guess which one of us was there most recently — and my children are enrolled in one of the feeder schools. As you know, Strandtown Primary School is one of Northern Ireland's largest primary schools, with an enrolment number of some 900 pupils across primary 4 to primary 7. It is also famous for being an award-winning listed building that Wilshire designed in the 1930s. It was built at a time when children sat at their desks all day to learn. Nowadays, however, given the enriched curriculum, children are encouraged to move around the classroom and to participate in active learning. Current classrooms are no longer fit for purpose, and, indeed, as Mr Newton mentioned, the school was assessed as needing a newbuild.

Strandtown Primary School is also unique in Belfast in that it follows the infant/junior model, meaning that children attend feeder schools from primary 1 to primary 3 and move on to the primary school to complete their primary years. The capital review exercise was raised. That exercise caused much confusion to the principals and boards of governors, as well as to the parents of children who were enrolled in the feeder schools and Strandtown Primary School itself, as the infant/junior model was listed as non- or partially compliant with the Department's requirements, meaning that it would not be considered for a capital build project.

I understand that the focus is no longer on the outcome of the capital review exercise and that future capital decisions will be based on educational need in the context of the area-planning process. To fit in with the sustainable schools policy, schools will be assessed against six criteria, and viability audits have been carried out on the schools against those criteria. I can

see no reference in the published results to any issue with the infant/junior model, and I would be grateful if the Minister could clarify whether that remains an issue for the Department. If so, I would welcome a future debate on the Strandtown infant/junior experience to explore all the pros and cons. That debate could include the educational attainment from the infant schools and the confidence building that results from four- and five-year-olds mixing only with children two years ahead of them at the start of their school life. It could also include the strong links that exist between the principals of the feeder schools and Strandtown Primary School, the wider catchment area and the opportunities that that presents and so forth. You could perhaps also judge Chris and me as examples of people who survived the system and assess whether it affected us as individuals. For now, however, I will stick to the six criteria and ask the Minister whether he can confirm that he intends to add criteria to the list.

I agree that we should focus on raising standards. When measuring educational attainment in primary schools, the targets are linked to the number of pupils who are in receipt of free school meals. However, the disadvantages of using that measure have been discussed widely in the academic literature and centre around the fact that not everyone who is eligible for free school meals may actually claim them. The board of governors and senior management team at Strandtown Primary School recognised that and showed leadership by commissioning their own research into the social deprivation indices for each child at the school. The results have shown that, although approximately 12% of the pupils are in receipt of free school meals, 24% of the school's pupils come from the two most deprived areas of East Belfast, in comparison with 55% from the most affluent areas. As part of that research —

Mr Newton: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Cochrane: Yes.

Mr Newton: Does the Member agree that preschool education is the building block for providing the necessary start in life for children and that, regardless of a child's circumstances and whether it received free school meals, they deserve the opportunity to have preschool education?

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Member for his intervention, and I agree with that point. I am

sure that he is aware of the amount of work that I have been doing on that issue, as I agree with that sentiment entirely.

As part of the research that I referred to at Strandtown, it was established that there has been an improvement in educational attainment by children from every background in the school, not only those from the most deprived backgrounds. Surely that is an example of a quality educational experience. Perhaps the Minister will be able to schedule a visit to the school in the coming months to make his own assessment.

8.30 pm

As for accessibility, Strandtown attracts pupils from a wide catchment area and is known for its diversity and inclusive nature. My party wants to see all children, regardless of class, religion, nationality or colour, learning together because it is clear that the opportunity for children to mix with those from other backgrounds, including different socio-economic backgrounds, can raise the aspirations of those from disadvantaged areas and increase the understanding of parents who have had more privileged experiences.

If you wanted to, you could probably hazard a guess at the background of a child who attends Strandtown by the gate they get picked up from. However, you will also see the children all leaving through the same gate as they go off to attend one another's birthday parties. The friendships forged between children and between their parents at school activities last for many years and are so important when progressing a shared future.

Enrolment trends show a clear demand for places in Strandtown, which is evidenced by the intake of the three feeder schools. For the 2012 intake, Belmont, Dundela and Greenwood received 412 applications for 258 places. Those feeder schools are operating at full capacity. That has an immediate knock-on effect for Strandtown, which will no longer be able to accommodate those numbers with eight classes per year group. Some classrooms are already squeezing in 31 pupils. The Strandtown site is large enough to accommodate the pupils, the demand is there from the parents and the educational attainment is excellent, but the building is lacking. I ask the Minister to be flexible and creative in addressing the space and capacity issues there. For example, has the Department explored the option of downgrading

the listed status so that perhaps only the frontage would need to be retained and the wings could be replaced? That, surely, would be a more cost-effective option for the Department.

When considering the links to the community, we need to think outside the box. Alongside schools being fit for purpose, there should be a broader remit to examine area facilities and see schools as the hubs of the community.

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

Mrs Cochrane: Perhaps after-school care and parent training courses should also be accommodated.

Mr Speaker: I call Sean Rogers.

Mr Rogers: I am glad you did not forget about the outsider, Mr Speaker. I thank Chris for bringing this topic to the House for debate. I am here because, as an educationalist, I am passionate about giving children the best chance in life, whether it is in East Belfast or South Down. Primary schools in Northern Ireland, particularly in East Belfast, do extraordinary work in very challenging circumstances. Michael Copeland got it right when he said that our schools now leak in the summer as well as in the winter. For years, our schools have not received the funding that they need to do the job asked of them.

Primary education is key to the long-term achievement and well-being of children, and we expect primary schools to deliver a multitude of services: a solid core of education for life; strong numeracy and literacy skills; social skills; pastoral care; needs-based attention for children with learning difficulties and special needs; a modern, welcoming and stimulating learning environment; IT facilities; physical education; and nutritional meals. Primary schools are the heart of our communities and they play a vital role in influencing children's attitudes at a young age. Those demands are tremendous by any measure. We have created high expectations for primary schools but, critically, we are not giving them sufficient funds to deliver the services. Teachers and principals are regularly forced to make cuts and compromises that do not make anyone happy.

Primary schools in East Belfast face particular challenges that other Members have spoken about. East Belfast was once a great centre of

manufacturing and industry. Young people could leave school at 16 —

Mr Newton: I thank the Member for giving way. He made reference to some difficulties in East Belfast. Particularly where there are children who require support and have special educational needs, we need to see an integrated approach between the health services, social services and educational services and support for parents. A failure to ensure an integrated support approach to a child with special needs will generally result in failure to address their overall needs.

Mr Rogers: I thank the Member for his intervention. It is an issue I feel passionate about and have raised quite often at the Committee for Education.

As I was saying, young people could leave school at 16 and walk straight into a job. Indeed, there is a direct parallel in my constituency of South Down. In the past, there were plenty of jobs in farming, fishing and construction, and many families did not see the value of education beyond 16. Jobs have waned in recent decades, but, unfortunately, this has not been replaced by an increasing focus on education.

The loss of jobs and lower levels of educational achievement in deprived areas have meant that parents often have to deal with pressing problems at home, and some parents are unable to fully support their children at school or are unclear about the best way to do it. We cannot expect children to reach high levels of educational attainment if other serious problems are affecting their life. Such challenges place additional demands and stresses on primary schools, which are on the front line in identifying and assisting children and families in need. My party colleagues and I have spoken to primary school principals in East Belfast, and, admirably, they do not begrudge their pastoral care responsibilities. They recognise that they are often the liaison point between families, children, social services and even the courts. They accept that responsibility and want to maintain a high professional standard. However, they are not able to do this, given the current level of primary school funding.

Primary schools in Northern Ireland receive proportionately less money than secondary schools, compared with England, Scotland and Wales. That dramatic disparity in funding means that primary school educators in Northern Ireland

work in stressful conditions. They are not able to deliver the support that they would like, particularly to the children who need it most. Teachers and principals in East Belfast do not receive the release time that they need to prepare for and address the demands made of them.

Recently, the Minister of Education delivered some startling figures on underachievement in education among children and young people in deprived areas. Difficulties cannot be identified and addressed at an early stage; instead, they fester and grow into problems and crises that result in the failure levels that are being experienced in secondary education. By not assisting our children fully at a young age, we leave them to deal with serious difficulties in the long term.

The need for assistance and support at the preschool stage is apparent in many neighbourhoods in East Belfast. Primary education puts in place the building blocks that shape children's learning experiences for the rest of their life, but the early years provision from nought to four provides the foundation on which that is built.

There are many examples of great practice in East Belfast, from Tullycarnet Primary School to St Joseph's Primary School in Ballyhackamore, but the secret there is parental participation. I encourage the Minister to make urgently the necessary changes to enable primary schools and preschool services to meet the demands that are made of them. Funding for primary schools in East Belfast must be increased to a level that matches people's expectations.

I welcome the upcoming review of formula funding, and I trust that the aspect of social disadvantage will be addressed. Whatever formula the Department uses to arrive at the per pupil figure, the standard aims must be to provide quality education for young children in a safe and stimulating welcoming environment and to provide teachers and principals with the resources that they need to carry out this important work.

A dramatic increase in funding for primary schools must be found without touching the funding for post-primary schools, which face their own challenges. It is a question of addressing a shortfall in one specific area of education and increasing its funding to a level that it should have received a long time ago. We cannot rob Peter to pay Paul.

The additional funding for primary schools must be channelled through core funding and not tied up in new initiatives. As one initiative after another is introduced, requiring schools to respond constantly to the new demands of short-term funding, primary schools have become laboratories for policy experiments.

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

Mr Rogers: There needs to be engagement with other Departments so that there are sufficient professionals to ensure that adequate early years strategies are employed. I think particularly of speech and occupational therapy and educational psychology. It is a backward step to expect teachers to train up to perform the role of the educational psychology service.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Rogers: Teachers are employed to teach.

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ar dtús, fáiltím roimh an díospóireacht. I welcome the opportunity to respond to the debate. I hope to get through Members' comments as I work my way through.

Mr Lyttle, the sponsor of the debate, spoke about area planning and its history. Yes, it has had a difficult history; it has been a battle to get it to the stage that it is at. I believe that it is now generally accepted that area planning is the way forward. Indeed, early in July, I intend to publish area plans for consultation. I accept that that consultation process will run over the summer, but government cannot close down for the summer. Those consultations will continue until the end of October. I answered two of your questions in that sense: area planning is continuing, and communities, elected representatives, schools and pupils will have an opportunity to have their say on area plans. We want to make the process as involving as possible, and we will do that.

Area planning is the way forward. We can no longer plan our schools estate based on the needs of individual schools or sectors. We have to produce area plans that provide an education service. There will not be a plan for the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools and a plan for the controlled sector or the boards. One plan will be published that will deal with various sectors. Part of our programme of work has been to challenge sectors and ask where and

how we can share education going into the future. To advance that, I will announce in the next number of weeks the membership of the ministerial advisory group on shared education. I said in the House yesterday that I wanted that panel to challenge society, stakeholders, sectors and politicians, including the Minister, on the way forward on shared education. Most people accept that it is the right way forward. Bringing it to fruition may be another difficult matter.

It is the worst-kept secret in politics that the Education and Skills Authority (ESA) is in trouble. I brought an ESA Bill to the Executive on 7 March. The very fact that that Bill has not been before the Executive shows that ESA is in trouble. The Executive will have to make up their mind in the very short period ahead: either ESA is the way forward or it is not. If it is not the way forward, regrettably, we will have to go back to the board system with a multimillion-pound package to rehire and re-employ staff of a capable standard who can provide the services that the boards did a number of years ago. That is the stark reality that faces the Executive. It is make-your-mind-up time about ESA. We can no longer continue in this limbo.

Educational standards in East Belfast and elsewhere — particularly in East Belfast — present a challenge for us all. My predecessor and I have been adamant in bringing forward policies. We have stuck to those policies down through the years because they are the right thing to do to improve educational attainment. Area planning is not about saving money; it is about providing a modern education estate so that young people have the best facilities in which to learn and so that they achieve everything that they can. If there are savings to be made, they can be redirected into education to ensure that those young people are given the best chance in life.

Members crossed over on a number of points, so I move on to Mr Newton. Education in disadvantaged areas is key. If we are to allow young people in disadvantaged areas to break the cycle of disadvantage, education is the way forward. There have been changed circumstances in East Belfast over a generation. That was mentioned by a number of Members. We have come out of the heavy industries and the guaranteed jobs. There is a role there for the Minister of Education and the Department of Education. There is also a role for community leaders to challenge the Minister, the Department,

the community and the education system in their area. Members are right to praise the principals and schools in East Belfast: they provide education in very difficult circumstances. However, we should never lose the challenge function that goes along with leadership and being an elected representative.

I am glad that there is now agreement that we do not have a world-class education system. We have world-class educationalists, we have world-class education facilities in many areas, but, in general, we do not have a world-class education system. For years, we believed in that myth and walked about with it. When you believed that, there was no need to challenge anyone because everything was right. Everything is not right, and we have to make it right. Now that we are in that space, change will come much more quickly.

8.45 pm

There is specific targeting of social disadvantage, and we should look at the early years Sure Start system and at our early years programme. Members may remember that, a few months ago, I was heavily criticised for having positive discrimination in early years and targeting early years provision at those in the most socially disadvantaged communities. Why did I stand by that policy? I did so because early years is vital, especially for those in socially disadvantaged areas. The Programme for Government has set us a target to ensure that all young people have access to early years, and I intend that to be the case. Indeed, this year, we improved that, moving forward measurably, and we will continue to do so.

Mr Newton: Will the Minister give way?

Mr O'Dowd: I have very limited time, Robin, and I have a number of answers to give.

Mr Copeland gave a personal and dramatic history of education, which is reflected in many families. I congratulate your son and daughter on their achievements. Well done to both of them, and I wish them every success in the future. The old cliché that we should not label anyone a failure is true. There is no such thing as a stupid child. There is no such thing as a failure with children. A principal once said to me that, when a child walks into their school, they ask a simple question: "How are you clever?" not "Are you clever?". That is important as we move forward.

I have introduced the review of the common funding formula, of which a key element is targeting social need. There is already an element of targeting social need in the way in which we fund schools, but I want to ensure that that is right, that money is directed where it is needed and that young people, especially in socially deprived areas, are given that added advantage. It will be an advantage to our entire society. If we ensure that young people are educated properly, they will become beneficial to their community, will not end up in the criminal justice system and their health will be better. As I said, they will be valuable members of the community who contribute to society.

I am aware of the issues around Strandtown Primary School. At no time has the issue of the infant/junior experience been raised with me as a negative. I am more than happy to discuss the matter further with Mrs Cochrane. I am glad that she mentioned the listed building and how we could perhaps downgrade that. That is a significant cost factor in providing a new school. I am familiar with most of the schools that people mention to me in relation to newbuilds because they have been around for a long time. However, I want to ensure that I invest in communities such as East Belfast, and I want to bring projects such as Strandtown forward. We have to overcome a number of obstacles, one of which is the cost factor. A discussion with the board of governors and local representatives about that will be beneficial to us all.

I am not planning to add any new criteria to the six criteria for sustainable schools. That policy has been consulted on and brought before the Executive and the Assembly and is now departmental policy. I have no plans to change it. Area-based planning will decide what the landscape of education will be in the future in East Belfast. I also put it to Members that there is a challenge in area planning for all of us. Some difficult conversations will be needed in East Belfast and elsewhere about the future of schools. It is no longer about quantity but quality, and I hope that MLAs are in a position to give leadership on those matters. I am not asking them to agree with the Minister, but I ask them to interrogate the proposals and, when necessary, have difficult conversations with their communities and boards of governors on the way forward for education in the community.

I also alert Members to the fact that I am bringing forward a public campaign on education

that is specifically targeted at communities that have become divorced from education for a variety of reasons. It will be based on the experiences of the Public Health Agency. Unfortunately, I do not have the same budget as the Public Health Agency to do this, but I will launch a public campaign with messages targeted at communities, parents and families in socially deprived areas and communities that have turned away from education, selling the message of what they can do to help their young people to improve their education, why we need to be involved in education and to explain that education is of benefit to the individual as well as to the broader economy.

Adjourned at 8.50 pm.



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