



Northern Ireland
Assembly

OFFICIAL REPORT

(Hansard)

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ASSEMBLY MEMBERS

Adams, Gerry (West Belfast)	McCarthy, Kieran (Strangford)
Anderson, Ms Martina (Foyle)	McCartney, Raymond (Foyle)
Armstrong, Billy (Mid Ulster)	McCausland, Nelson (North Belfast)
Attwood, Alex (West Belfast)	McClarty, David (East Londonderry)
Beggs, Roy (East Antrim)	McCrea, Basil (Lagan Valley)
Boylan, Cathal (Newry and Armagh)	McCrea, Ian (Mid Ulster)
Bradley, Dominic (Newry and Armagh)	McCrea, Dr William (South Antrim)
Bradley, Mrs Mary (Foyle)	McDonnell, Dr Alasdair (South Belfast)
Bradley, P J (South Down)	McElduff, Barry (West Tyrone)
Brady, Mickey (Newry and Armagh)	McFarland, Alan (North Down)
Bresland, Allan (West Tyrone)	McGill, Mrs Claire (West Tyrone)
Brolly, Francie (East Londonderry)	McGimpsey, Michael (South Belfast)
Browne, The Lord (East Belfast)	McGlone, Patsy (Mid Ulster)
Buchanan, Thomas (West Tyrone)	McGuinness, Martin (Mid Ulster)
Burns, Thomas (South Antrim)	McHugh, Gerry (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Burnside, David (South Antrim)	McIlveen, Miss Michelle (Strangford)
Butler, Paul (Lagan Valley)	McKay, Daithí (North Antrim)
Campbell, Gregory (East Londonderry)	McLaughlin, Mitchel (South Antrim)
Clarke, Trevor (South Antrim)	McNarry, David (Strangford)
Clarke, Willie (South Down)	McQuillan, Adrian (East Londonderry)
Cobain, Fred (North Belfast)	Maginness, Alban (North Belfast)
Coulter, Rev Dr Robert (North Antrim)	Maskey, Alex (South Belfast)
Craig, Jonathan (Lagan Valley)	Maskey, Paul (West Belfast)
Cree, Leslie (North Down)	Molloy, Francie (Mid Ulster)
Dallat, John (East Londonderry)	Morrow, The Lord (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Deeny, Dr Kieran (West Tyrone)	Moutray, Stephen (Upper Bann)
Dodds, Nigel (North Belfast)	Murphy, Conor (Newry and Armagh)
Doherty, Pat (West Tyrone)	Neeson, Sean (East Antrim)
Donaldson, Jeffrey (Lagan Valley)	Newton, Robin (East Belfast)
Durkan, Mark (Foyle)	Ní Chuilín, Ms Carál (North Belfast)
Easton, Alex (North Down)	O'Dowd, John (Upper Bann)
Elliott, Tom (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)	O'Loan, Declan (North Antrim)
Empey, Sir Reg (East Belfast)	O'Neill, Mrs Michelle (Mid Ulster)
Farry, Dr Stephen (North Down)	Paisley, Rev Dr Ian (North Antrim)
Ford, David (South Antrim)	Paisley Jnr, Ian (North Antrim)
Foster, Mrs Arlene (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)	Poots, Edwin (Lagan Valley)
Gallagher, Tommy (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)	Purvis, Ms Dawn (East Belfast)
Gardiner, Samuel (Upper Bann)	Ramsey, Pat (Foyle)
Gildernew, Ms Michelle (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)	Ramsey, Ms Sue (West Belfast)
Hamilton, Simon (Strangford)	Ritchie, Ms Margaret (South Down)
Hanna, Mrs Carmel (South Belfast)	Robinson, George (East Londonderry)
Hay, William (Speaker)	Robinson, Mrs Iris (Strangford)
Hilditch, David (East Antrim)	Robinson, Ken (East Antrim)
Irwin, William (Newry and Armagh)	Robinson, Peter (East Belfast)
Kelly, Mrs Dolores (Upper Bann)	Ross, Alastair (East Antrim) (<i>From 14 May 2007</i>)
Kelly, Gerry (North Belfast)	Ruane, Ms Caitriona (South Down)
Kennedy, Danny (Newry and Armagh)	Savage, George (Upper Bann)
Lo, Ms Anna (South Belfast)	Shannon, Jim (Strangford)
Long, Mrs Naomi (East Belfast)	Simpson, David (Upper Bann)
Lunn, Trevor (Lagan Valley)	Spratt, Jimmy (South Belfast)
McCallister, John (South Down)	Storey, Mervyn (North Antrim)
McCann, Fra (West Belfast)	Weir, Peter (North Down)
McCann, Ms Jennifer (West Belfast)	Wells, Jim (South Down)
	Wilson, Brian (North Down)
	Wilson, Sammy (East Antrim)

PRINCIPAL OFFICERS AND OFFICIALS OF THE ASSEMBLY

<i>Speaker</i>	Mr William Hay MLA
<i>Deputy Speakers</i>	Mr John Dallat MLA Mr David McClarty MLA Mr Francie Molloy MLA
<i>Office of the Speaker</i>	
<i>Adviser to the Speaker</i>	Mr Richard Good
<i>Private Secretary</i>	Vacant
<i>Clerk to the Assembly</i>	Mr Arthur Moir
<i>Deputy Clerk to the Assembly</i>	Mr Joe Reynolds
<i>Deputy Chief Executive</i>	Mr Tom Evans
<i>Director of Legal Services</i>	Ms Clare McGivern
<i>Examiner of Statutory Rules</i>	Mr Gordon Nabney
<i>Editor of Debates</i>	Mr Simon Burrowes
<i>Clerk Assistant</i>	Ms Nuala Dunwoody
<i>Director of Research and Information (Acting)</i>	Mr Michael Rickard
<i>Keeper of the House (Acting)</i>	Mrs Sheila McClelland
<i>Principal Clerks</i>	Mr Alan Patterson Mrs Debbie Pritchard Mr John Torney Mr Martin Wilson
<i>Clerk to the Assembly Commission</i>	Mr Tony Logue

MINISTERIAL OFFICES

The Executive Committee

<i>First Minister</i>	Rev Dr Ian Paisley
<i>Deputy First Minister</i>	Mr Martin McGuinness
<i>Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development</i>	Ms Michelle Gildernew
<i>Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure</i>	Mr Edwin Poots
<i>Minister of Education</i>	Ms Caitríona Ruane
<i>Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment</i>	Mr Nigel Dodds
<i>Minister of the Environment</i>	Mrs Arlene Foster
<i>Minister of Finance and Personnel</i>	Mr Peter Robinson
<i>Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety</i>	Mr Michael McGimpsey
<i>Minister for Employment and Learning</i>	Sir Reg Empey
<i>Minister for Regional Development</i>	Mr Conor Murphy
<i>Minister for Social Development</i>	Ms Margaret Rictchie

Junior Ministers

<i>Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister</i>	Mr Gerry Kelly
	Mr Ian Paisley Jnr

THE NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 8 May 2007

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

THE LATE MR GEORGE DAWSON MLA

Madam Speaker: It is my sad duty to inform the House of the death of Mr George Dawson, a Member for the East Antrim constituency. In accordance with convention, as a mark of respect for Mr Dawson, the sitting will now be suspended until 11.00 am.

The sitting was suspended at 10.33 am.

On resuming (Madam Speaker in the Chair) —

11.00 am

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Restoration Order

Madam Speaker: In a letter dated 7 May 2007, the Secretary of State has notified me that he has made a restoration order under section 2(2) of the Northern Ireland (St Andrews Agreement) Act 2006. The restoration order lifts the suspension of the Northern Ireland Assembly and effects the restoration of devolved Government in Northern Ireland today.

SPEAKER'S BUSINESS

Madam Speaker: I am mindful of the importance of today's proceedings, the level of interest in our business today, and the widespread goodwill being expressed towards our restored Assembly, both within and beyond our community. That goodwill is evidenced by the large presence in the Gallery of members of the public and guests, including some who have travelled from London, Dublin and the United States of America. On behalf of the Assembly, I welcome all our guests today and thank them for their interest and support, past and present.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Roll of Membership

Madam Speaker: Since we last met, the Secretary of State has amended the Standing Orders for the Transitional Assembly that relate to signing the Roll of Membership. Mr Trevor Lunn has since signed the Roll of Membership in my presence and that of the Clerk to the Assembly. I am satisfied that he has taken his seat in accordance with the amended Standing Orders. I have deemed Mr Lunn's designation to be "Other".

In accordance with the legislation, all Members have now taken their seats in the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Standing Orders

Madam Speaker: Members will be aware that the Secretary of State prepared draft Standing Orders. In accordance with the legislation, those have today become the Standing Orders of the Northern Ireland Assembly. Each Member has been provided with a personal copy.

ELECTION OF SPEAKER

Madam Speaker: Under the legislation, I became Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly this morning. However, I do believe it is important that the Assembly should have an early opportunity to elect a Speaker from among its Members.

I remind Members that the election of the Speaker will be conducted using the procedures set out in Standing Order 4, as follows.

I will begin by asking for nominations. Any Member may rise to propose that another Member be elected as Speaker. I will then ask for the proposal to be seconded by another Member, as required by Standing Order 14. If that occurs, I will then verify that the Member so nominated is willing to accept the nomination. There will not be an opportunity for speeches at that stage.

I shall then ask for further proposals and follow the same procedure for each. When it appears that there are no further proposals, I will make it clear that the time for proposals has passed. A debate relevant to the election may then take place, in which no Member shall speak more than once.

At the conclusion of the debate, or at the conclusion of the nominations if there are no requests to speak, I shall put the Question that the Member first proposed shall be Speaker of this Assembly. Such a vote can be carried only on a cross-community basis. If the proposal is not carried, I shall put the Question in relation to the next nominee, and so on, until all nominations are exhausted. Once a Speaker is elected, all other nominations will automatically fall.

If that is clear, we shall proceed.

Do I have any proposals for the office of Speaker of this Assembly?

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Madam Speaker, we appreciate all that you have done in presiding over our Assemblies. As you look down at these Benches, you will have some peculiar thoughts. Perhaps some day we will be privileged to read what you thought of the people that you looked upon so carefully and affectionately. You had a difficult time, and it was a difficult time for the Assembly. Nevertheless, you kept a grip on business, with the necessary leniency; yet you kept aright the standards of debate. We are grateful to you for that. You can look ahead with no doubt that you did well, because you never had to order any Member out of the House.

Mr Adams: Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a thabhairt duit. You did a wonderful job, and I join Dr Paisley in thanking you for being very fair in conducting business here.

Tá mé an-sásta go bhfuil tú anseo ag tús an ré nua. Furthermore, I am very pleased that you are here to see a new start. I wish you, your husband and your family well.

Ba mhaith liom a rá fosta go bhfuil mé an-bhrónach faoi bhás George Dawson, agus déanaim comhbhrón lena theaghlach agus lena pháirtí. I am sorry to hear of the untimely death of George Dawson, and Sinn Féin extends to his wife and family, his party and party leader its condolences.

Sir Reg Empey: Madam Speaker, on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, I join with other Members in thanking you for your courtesy and the manner in which you have conducted our business over some very difficult times. At every occasion you extended every courtesy to us, and, as other Members have said, I know how difficult we can be at times. At all times you kept a sense of humour and occasion, and we are grateful to you for carrying on well beyond the point at which you could easily have relieved yourself of the burden of office.

Like the previous Member, I place on record the UUP's deep regret at the very sad news of the death of one of our Members, George Dawson, which overshadows today's proceedings. To his family, and colleagues in the Democratic Unionist Party, we extend our deepest sympathies.

Mr Durkan: Madam Speaker, on behalf of the SDLP, I join with the leaders of other parties in thanking you for your contribution in the office of Speaker. You have displayed courtesy, good character and not a little charm during something of a political twilight zone in which we operated during the past few months. Prior to that, you made a very distinctive contribution in the Assembly. You leave with our thanks — not only for your role as Speaker but for your contribution as a fellow Member of the Assembly.

I, too, extend sympathy to the Dawson family, George's friends and his party colleagues on his untimely death. George had a very distinctive economic insight, and the new Assembly, on this important day, will be the poorer for his absence.

Mr Ford: I echo the comments made about the passing of George Dawson. On behalf of my party and all my colleagues, I express sympathy to Mrs Dawson, his party colleagues and the wider family circle. As Mark Durkan has just said, during last summer he made an enormous contribution in the Preparation for Government Committee in preparing the ground for the economic work to be done. We will at least have his legacy in that respect.

I echo the sentiments of other Members in expressing thanks to Madam Speaker Bell. I may have worked rather longer with Eileen Bell than have others, but on this occasion I, and my colleagues, want to thank you

for what you did. It was a thankless task to preside over the Transitional Assembly.

It was not only Members in this Chamber who gave you problems at times; you were presented with problems from a wide range of circumstances. However, you dealt with them all with good humour and your customary courtesy and charm. You ensured that everything that could be done to defend the integrity of this Assembly was done. Madam Speaker, on behalf of my group, I thank you, and the staff who worked with you, for all that you have achieved, and I wish you and Derek well in the years ahead.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I assure the Members and the leaders of the various parties who have expressed their sympathy to the Dawson family that I will convey those sentiments to Mr Dawson's wife and his two daughters. I am grateful to the party leaders and all our colleagues here for their kindness and understanding at this time.

Ms Purvis: On behalf of the Progressive Unionist Party, I wish to express our condolences on the death of George Dawson and extend our sympathies to his family.

Madam Speaker, there were times when it has been difficult for you over the last couple of years, but you embraced your role with your usual enthusiasm and courage. On behalf of my party, I thank you, and I wish you well in your retirement. I know that you will indulge all your many passions, including fashion, golf, and so on. I wish you well for your retirement.

Madam Speaker: Thank you.

Do I have any proposals for the office of Speaker of this Assembly?

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I would like to propose Mr William Hay. It gives me very great pleasure to nominate Mr Hay from the Foyle constituency to be the first elected Speaker of the Assembly.

It is fitting to say some brief words about him. I have known the Hay family for far too long to want to remember how long ago I met him — he was a young boy in short pants at that time. *[Laughter.]* He came to prominence through his mother, Anna Margaret Hay, who was the first ever DUP elected representative in County Londonderry. This is a proud day for the Hay family, and it honours the memory of their mother.

At the last election, William performed the remarkable feat of topping the poll in an overwhelmingly nationalist constituency — with all due respect to my Friend, the leader of the SDLP. *[Laughter.]* It is not often that that happens. William is well regarded by unionists and non-unionists, and I welcome the opportunity to put him forward. I acknowledge that at the next Assembly election, we will support a candidate drawn from the other side of the House. Of course, that will rest with the people because we will go back to

the people for new mandates. However, all things considered, if we do well we will support someone from the other side of the House in the next Parliament. Thank you, Madam Speaker, for your leniency.

Madam Speaker: Thank you. I was lenient, given the day that is in it.

May I have a seconder for the nomination?

Mr Donaldson: Madam Speaker, it gives me great pleasure to second the nomination of William Hay, a Member of the Legislative Assembly for the Foyle constituency. The city of Londonderry has had many stout defenders in the past, and I have no doubt that William will continue to be one. *[Laughter.]* I hope that he will not find himself under siege in that Chair; our best wishes go to him.

Madam Speaker: Mr Hay, do you accept the nomination to be Speaker?

Mr Hay: I accept the nomination.

Madam Speaker: Are there any further proposals?

The time for proposals has expired.

Question, That Mr William Hay be Speaker of this Assembly, put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Mr William Hay be Speaker of this Assembly.

Madam Speaker: I formally declare that Mr William Hay has been elected as Speaker.

11.15 am

With the Assembly's indulgence, before I vacate the Chair for the last time, I would like to make a few personal remarks.

When I first took up the position of Speaker, I confessed to Members that I considered it a rather daunting task. Facing one's peers in such a formal and unique role brings many challenges, and I was anxious to ensure that I conducted myself in a manner that reflected the importance of the office.

Looking back over the past year, I want to place on record my sincere thanks to Members for the co-operation and goodwill that they extended to me from the outset, and which has continued to this day. That goodwill has enabled us all to overcome each and every challenge. My thanks also go to my two Deputy Speakers for the support that they have given to me and to the Assembly as a whole.

I also wish to express my thanks to, and admiration for, all the staff of the Assembly secretariat. The position of Speaker offers an opportunity to observe in much greater detail the lengths to which our secretariat officials go to serve the Assembly, and, throughout my time in office, their commitment and loyalty to me personally has made my task a great deal easier.

Members will know that my desire has always been to see a stable, devolved Assembly in Northern Ireland, working for the best interests of everyone. As I leave office, my hope is that today heralds the beginning of such an Assembly, and it has been my privilege to play some small part in achieving that.

Although, as I said, I considered the role of Speaker to be a daunting task, on taking up the office, I chose as my personal motto a paraphrase of that of the Special Olympics: I hope to succeed, but if I do not, I will be brave in the attempt. I hope that I have lived up to that standard.

To the Assembly, to each of its Members, and, in particular, to my successor, I offer my very best wishes as you set about the task for which you have been elected.

I now invite the Speaker to take the Chair, and I will hand over the Assembly's gavel as a symbol of the office of Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

[Applause.]

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

SPEAKER'S BUSINESS

Mr Speaker: Before I call the next item of business, I take this opportunity to thank Members for electing me to the position of Speaker. As I take the Chair, I am conscious of the role played by past Speakers of the Northern Ireland Assembly. I express my own regard for the manner in which the outgoing Speaker conducted herself in what was, for all Members, an often challenging and unusual situation.

I find myself in the position of being the first Speaker to have been elected directly by the Northern Ireland Assembly. That is, indeed, a privilege, but one that carries with it a considerable burden. In electing me, Members have placed their trust in me and in my ability to maintain the authority and impartiality so essential to the office of Speaker. I will strive to uphold those values, and I will seek to act at all times as a servant of the Assembly as a whole.

The authority of, and respect for, the office of Speaker is drawn from the Members themselves and the co-operation that they offer to the office. I trust that that respect and co-operation will be forthcoming, as it has been in the past, and that together we will fulfil the responsibilities placed on all of us, with mutual respect. To that end, we shall now proceed.

ELECTION OF DEPUTY SPEAKERS

Mr Speaker: Standing Orders require the election of three Deputy Speakers. The procedure for electing Deputy Speakers will be the same as that adopted for the election of Speaker. I will ask for nominations, which must be seconded. I will then verify that the nominee accepts the nomination and will continue in that way until there are no further nominations. I remind Members that a debate may take place after I announce that the time for proposals has passed.

Are there any proposals for the office of Deputy Speaker of the Assembly?

Mr Adams: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Déanaim comhghairdeas leat, a Cheann Comhairle. Molaim Francie Molloy do phost an LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom cúpla focal a rá faoi Francie.

Mr Speaker, I congratulate you on your elevation to the post of Speaker.

I nominate Francie Molloy for the post of Deputy Speaker. Like you, Mr Speaker, he is stout. *[Laughter.]* He is an Armagh man who represents Tyrone. It is a source of great pleasure to me that he has been involved in our struggle since the early days of the civil rights movement; and it is with pleasure that I nominate Francie Molloy for the post of Deputy Speaker.

I pray your indulgence also to extend condolences to the Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone Gerry McHugh, who is this morning attending his father's funeral and cannot be with us today. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Speaker: Is there a seconder for the nomination of Mr Molloy?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Cuidim leis an mholadh.

I second that proposal.

Mr Speaker: Mr Molloy, do you accept the nomination for the post of Deputy Speaker?

Mr Molloy: Tá mé toilteanach glacadh le hoifig an LeasCheann Comhairle.

I accept the nomination.

Sir Reg Empey: I beg indulgence, Mr Speaker, on behalf of my colleagues, to congratulate you. Mr Donaldson described you as a stout defender. However, we shall describe you as a robust defender, as we hope you will be, of the interests of the Members of the Assembly.

I propose that Mr David McClarty, a Member for East Londonderry, be elected to the office of Deputy Speaker. Mr McClarty has extensive experience of the Assembly Business Committee, and I believe that he is eminently suited to the office of Deputy Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Is there a seconder for the nomination of Mr McClarty?

Mr Kennedy: It is with pleasure that I endorse the nomination of Mr McClarty.

Mr Speaker: Mr McClarty, do you accept the nomination for the post of Deputy Speaker?

Mr McClarty: I accept the nomination, and maintain the theme of stoutness. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Durkan: Mr Speaker, I join with other party leaders in congratulating you, the first directly elected Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly. We have worked well as constituency colleagues, but I know that that will stand me no favour from the Chair when I am out of line. I know that you have been a solid representative of the Foyle constituency, and have served Derry City Council well as its chairperson.

I wish to nominate John Dallat, another Assembly Member for East Derry —

A Member: Another stout Member. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Durkan: Shares in Weight Watchers will be going up at a fast rate after this morning's proceedings. *[Laughter.]*

I nominate John Dallat, another MLA for East Derry, to serve as Deputy Speaker. He served with distinction in the previous Assembly; he has a solid record of service in local government and has given very proud service to the entire community.

Mr Speaker: Do we have a seconder for the nomination of Mr Dallat?

Mr A Maginness: It gives me great pleasure to second the nomination of John Dallat.

Mr Ford: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. It will doubtless come as a great relief to the House that I do not propose to make any nomination for the post of Deputy Speaker at this time. However, feeling svelte and enthusiastic after my exercise around the streets of Belfast yesterday, I wish you well in your role as Speaker in robustly defending the interests of this Assembly against all-comers, and we look forward to working with you.

Mr Speaker: Mr Dallat, do you accept the nomination to be Deputy Speaker?

Mr Dallat: Without any further elaboration on previous remarks, I humbly accept the nomination.

Mr Speaker: Are there any further proposals?

I hear no further proposals. The time for proposals has expired.

Question, That Mr Francie Molloy be Deputy Speaker of this Assembly, put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Mr Francie Molloy be Deputy Speaker of this Assembly.

Question, That Mr David McClarty be Deputy Speaker of this Assembly, put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Mr David McClarty be Deputy Speaker of this Assembly.

Question, That Mr John Dallat be Deputy Speaker of this Assembly, put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Mr John Dallat be Deputy Speaker of this Assembly.

AFFIRMATION OF THE TERMS OF THE PLEDGE OF OFFICE — FIRST MINISTER (DESIGNATE) AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER (DESIGNATE)

Mr Speaker: The next item of business is the affirmation of the terms of the Pledge of Office for the First Minister (Designate) and the Deputy First Minister (Designate). In a letter dated 3 May 2007, the Secretary of State advised the former Speaker that he had received official confirmation from Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness that they had accepted their parties' nominations to be First Minister and Deputy First Minister respectively.

Members will be aware that the legislation provides that the persons nominated shall not take up office until each of them has affirmed the terms of the Pledge of Office contained in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Before we proceed, Members may find it helpful if the Pledge of Office is read into the record so that it does not have to be read in full by the First Minister (Designate), the Deputy First Minister (Designate) or other Ministers as they take up office.

11.30 am

The Pledge of Office is as follows:

“To pledge:

- (a) to discharge in good faith all the duties of office;
- (b) commitment to non-violence and exclusively peaceful and democratic means;
- (c) to serve all the people of Northern Ireland equally, and to act in accordance with the general obligations on government to promote equality and prevent discrimination;
- (ca) to promote the interests of the whole community represented in the Northern Ireland Assembly towards the goal of a shared future;
- (cb) to participate fully in the Executive Committee, the North-South Ministerial Council and the British-Irish Council;
- (cc) to observe the joint nature of the offices of First Minister and deputy First Minister;
- (cd) to uphold the rule of law based as it is on the fundamental principles of fairness, impartiality and democratic accountability, including support for policing and the courts as set out in paragraph 6 of the St Andrews Agreement;
- (d) to participate with colleagues in the preparation of a programme for government;
- (e) to operate within the framework of that programme when agreed within the Executive Committee and endorsed by the Assembly;
- (f) to support, and act in accordance with, all decisions of the Executive Committee and Assembly;
- (g) to comply with the Ministerial Code of Conduct.

Paragraph 6 of the St Andrews Agreement says:

‘We believe that the essential elements of support for law and order include endorsing fully the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the criminal justice system, actively encouraging everyone in the community to co-operate fully with the PSNI in tackling crime in all areas and actively supporting all the policing and criminal justice institutions, including the Policing Board.’”

Members, the Pledge of Office has now been read into the record of proceedings. I will shortly ask the Rt Hon Dr Ian Paisley and Mr Martin McGuinness to affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office.

The First Minister (Designate) (Rev Dr Ian Paisley): I affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Mr Speaker: I now ask Mr Martin McGuinness, as Deputy First Minister (Designate), to make the affirmation in the form prescribed.

The Deputy First Minister (Designate) (Mr M McGuinness): Glacaim leis an Ghealltanais Oifige.

I affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Mr Speaker: I now confirm that the Rt Hon Dr Ian Paisley and Mr Martin McGuinness, having affirmed the terms of the Pledge of Office, have taken up office as First Minister and Deputy First Minister in accordance with the Northern Ireland (St Andrews Agreement) Act 2006.

APPOINTMENT OF MINISTERS

Mr Speaker: As we go through the processes, I am sure that all Members will co-operate. I wish to say to people in the Public Gallery that, with the day that is in it and with the death of a Member of the Assembly, applause would not be appropriate.

The next item of business is the appointment of Ministers. I will conduct the process for filling those offices in accordance with the procedure set out in section 18 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. I wish to remind Members of the requirements set out in the Act.

I shall ask the nominating officer of each political party, in the order required by the formula contained in section 18(5), to select an available ministerial office and nominate a person to hold it who is a member of his party and a Member of the Assembly.

I therefore call on the Rt Hon Dr Ian Paisley, as nominating officer of the political party for which the formula laid down in section 18 gives the highest figure, to select a ministerial office and nominate a person to hold it who is a member of his party and a Member of the Assembly.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I select the Finance and Personnel portfolio and nominate Mr Peter Robinson to hold it.

Mr Speaker: Will Mr Peter Robinson confirm that he is willing to take up office and affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office?

Mr P Robinson: Yes, Mr Speaker, I am willing to take up the office of Minister of Finance and Personnel, and I affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Mr Peter Robinson appointed Minister of Finance and Personnel.

Mr Speaker: I now call on Mr Gerry Adams to select a ministerial office and nominate a person to hold it.

Mr Adams: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Molaim Caitríona Ruane, ar bean as Maigh Eo í, mar Aire Oideachais.

I nominate Caitríona Ruane as Minister of Education.

Mr Speaker: Will Ms Caitríona Ruane confirm that she is willing to take up office and affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office?

Ms Ruane: Tá mé toilteanach glacadh le hoifig an Aire Oideachais agus dearbhaím téarmaí an Ghealltanais Oifige mar atá siad leagtha amach i sceideal 4 den Acht Thuaisceart Éireann 1998.

Yes, I am willing to take up the office of Minister of Education, and I affirm the terms of the Pledge of

Office as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Ms Caitríona Ruane appointed Minister of Education.

Mr Speaker: I now call on the Rt Hon Dr Ian Paisley to select a ministerial office and nominate a person to hold it.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I select the Enterprise, Trade and Investment portfolio and nominate Mr Nigel Dodds to hold it.

Mr Speaker: Will Mr Nigel Dodds confirm that he is willing to take up office and affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office?

Mr Dodds: Yes, I am willing to take up the office of Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and I affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Mr Nigel Dodds appointed Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

Mr Speaker: I now call on Sir Reg Empey to select a ministerial office and nominate a person to hold it.

Sir Reg Empey: I select the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and I nominate Michael McGimpsey to hold the office of Minister.

Mr Speaker: Will Mr Michael McGimpsey confirm that he is willing to take up office and affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office?

Mr McGimpsey: I confirm that I am willing to take up the office of Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and I affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Mr Michael McGimpsey appointed Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

Mr Speaker: I now call on Mr Mark Durkan to select a ministerial office and nominate a person to hold it.

Mr Durkan: I select the Department for Social Development, and it gives me great pleasure to nominate Margaret Ritchie as Minister.

Mr Speaker: Will Ms Margaret Ritchie confirm that she is willing to take up office and affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office?

Ms Ritchie: Yes, I am willing to take up the office of Minister for Social Development, and I affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Ms Margaret Ritchie appointed Minister for Social Development.

Mr Speaker: I now call on Mr Gerry Adams to select a ministerial office and nominate a person to hold it.

Mr Adams: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Molaim Conor Murphy, ar fear as Ard Mhacha é, mar Aire Forbartha Réigiúnaí.

I nominate Conor Murphy as Minister for Regional Development.

Mr Speaker: Will Mr Conor Murphy confirm that he is willing to take up office and affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office?

Mr Murphy: Tá mé toilteanach glacadh leis an oifig seo.

I am willing to take up the office of Minister for Regional Development, and I affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Mr Conor Murphy appointed Minister for Regional Development.

Mr Speaker: I now call on the Rt Hon Dr Ian Paisley to select a ministerial office and nominate a person to hold it.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I select the Environment portfolio and nominate Mrs Arlene Foster to hold it.

Mr Speaker: Will Mrs Arlene Foster confirm that she is willing to take up office and affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office?

Mrs Foster: Yes, I am willing to take up the office of Minister of the Environment, and I affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Mrs Arlene Foster appointed Minister of the Environment.

Mr Speaker: I call on Mr Gerry Adams to select a ministerial office and to nominate a person to hold it.

Mr Adams: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Molaim Michelle Gildernew, ar bean as Tír Eoghain í — agus níl sí ina haonar — mar Aire Talmhaíochta agus Forbartha Tuaithe.

Thank you, Mr Speaker. I nominate Ms Michelle Gildernew, a Tyrone woman — and she is not on her own in that respect — to hold the Agriculture and Rural Development portfolio.

Mr Speaker: Will Ms Michelle Gildernew confirm that she is willing to take up office and affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office?

Ms Gildernew: Tá mé toilteanach glacadh leis an oifig seo.

Yes, I am willing to take up the office of Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, and I affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Ms Michelle Gildernew appointed Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development.

Mr Speaker: I call on the Rt Hon Dr Ian Paisley to select a ministerial office and to nominate a person to hold it.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I select the Culture, Arts and Leisure portfolio and nominate Mr Edwin Poots to hold it.

Mr Speaker: Will Mr Edwin Poots confirm that he is willing to take up office and affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office?

Mr Poots: I am willing to take up the office of Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, and I affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Mr Edwin Poots appointed Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure.

Mr Speaker: I call on Sir Reg Empey to select a ministerial office and to nominate a person to hold it.

Sir Reg Empey: I select the Employment and Learning portfolio, and I nominate Reg Empey to hold it. I am prepared to accept the office, and I affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Sir Reg Empey appointed Minister for Employment and Learning.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. That concludes the process for the appointment of Ministers to each of the Departments.

APPOINTMENT OF JUNIOR MINISTERS

Mr Speaker: I have received correspondence from the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister in relation to the appointment of junior Ministers. I will read the letter:

“Pursuant to the procedure for the appointment of Junior Ministers specified in paragraph 3(1) of the former First Minister and deputy First Ministers’ determination of 8 December 1999, as approved by the Assembly on 14 December 1999, the First Minister and deputy First Minister have appointed Mr Ian Paisley Junior MLA and Mr Gerry Kelly MLA to the post of Junior Minister. A copy of the letters of appointment are attached.”

Will Mr Ian Paisley Jnr affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office?

Mr Paisley Jnr: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I congratulate you on your appointment. I willingly affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Mr Ian Paisley Jnr appointed a junior Minister.

Mr Speaker: Will Mr Gerry Kelly affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office?

Mr G Kelly: Tá mé toilteanach glacadh le hoifig an Aire shóisearaigh agus dearbhaím téarmaí an Ghealltanais Oifige mar atá siad leagtha amach i sceideal 4 den Acht Thuaisceart Éireann 1998.

I affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Mr Gerry Kelly appointed a junior Minister.

Mr Speaker: I offer my congratulations to all those appointed to ministerial office.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Business Committee Membership

Resolved:

That the Business Committee shall consist of:

The Speaker (Ex officio)

Mr Billy Armstrong

Mr P J Bradley

Mr Paul Maskey

Mr Kieran McCarthy

Dr Alasdair McDonnell

Mr David McNarry

The Lord Morrow

Ms Carál Ní Chuilín

Mr Peter Weir — *[The Speaker.]*

Mr Speaker: Before we move to the Adjournment, I wish to advise the House that the Business Committee is scheduled to meet at 3.30 pm to consider further business. The Order Paper for the next meeting will be issued as soon as possible. Members should note that the Whips have provisionally agreed that, subject to ratification by the Business Committee, business will begin at 10.30 am tomorrow.

Adjourned at 11.45 am.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Wednesday 9 May 2007

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Dallat: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You will be aware that shortly after the events in the House yesterday, an announcement was made to the effect that 500 workers are to lose their jobs in the Water Service. Is it in order to ask that the new Minister for Regional Development address the House at an early opportunity to reassure Water Service workers that there will be no compulsory redundancies?

Mr Speaker: I am sure that the Minister for Regional Development will have heard the statement and will act accordingly.

Mr Burnside: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. As we move to the motion on the appointment of Statutory Committees, will Members have any opportunity to debate what was generally considered to be the weakness of those Committees in scrutinising and controlling executive decisions of Ministers in the previous Executive? Given that weakness, there should be widespread support in the House for strengthening them.

Mr Speaker: Today's motions are business motions for which there is no opportunity for debate. However, I am sure that the Business Committee will consider any motion that the Member wishes to table in the Business Office.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Establishment of Statutory Committees

Resolved:

That this Assembly, in accordance with Standing Order 46(1)(a), establishes the following Statutory Committees:

- the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development
- the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure
- the Committee for Education
- the Committee for Employment and Learning
- the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment
- the Committee for the Environment
- the Committee for Finance and Personnel
- the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety
- the Committee for Regional Development
- the Committee for Social Development
- the Committee of the Centre.

The composition and quorum of the Statutory Committees shall be as prescribed in Standing Orders 46 and 47. — *[Lord Morrow.]*

Establishment of Audit Committee

Resolved:

That this Assembly, in accordance with Standing Order 53, establishes a Standing Committee of the Assembly, to be known as the Audit Committee, to exercise the functions mentioned in section 66(1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. — *[Ms Ni Chuilín.]*

Assembly Commission Membership

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That, in accordance with Standing Order 74, the following shall be members of the Assembly Commission:

The Speaker (Ex officio)

Mr P Butler

Rev Dr R Coulter

Mr A Maginness

Mr S Moutray

Mr S Neeson — *[Mr Armstrong.]*

APPOINTMENT OF CHAIRPERSONS AND DEPUTY CHAIRPERSONS OF STATUTORY COMMITTEES

Mr Speaker: I am required to supervise the appointment of a Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson to each Statutory Committee, in accordance with the procedure set out in Standing Order 46.

I shall ask the nominating officer of each political party, in the order required by the formula contained in Standing Order 46, to select an available Statutory Committee and nominate a person who is a member of his party and a Member of the Assembly to be Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson of it.

For the information of Members, I have received notification from the SDLP that Mr John Dallat will act as the party's nominating officer for the purposes of today's business. I have also had notification from Sinn Féin that Mr John O'Dowd will act as nominating officer for his party.

I have been given advance notice by a number of Members that they are unable to attend proceedings today. Standing Orders provide that Members may accept nominations in their absence, and I will refer to each Member's correspondence at the appropriate time.

I shall now call on the Rt Hon Dr Ian Paisley, as nominating officer of the political party for which the formula laid down in Standing Orders gives the highest figure, to select an available Statutory Committee and nominate a person who is a member of his party and a Member of the Assembly to be Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson of it.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I nominate Mrs Iris Robinson to be Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member who has been nominated willing to take up the office for which she has been nominated?

Mrs I Robinson: I accept the position of Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

Mrs Iris Robinson appointed Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

Mr Speaker: I now call on Mr John O'Dowd to select an available Statutory Committee and nominate a person who is a member of his party and a Member of the Assembly to be Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson of it.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Molaim Mitchel McLaughlin mar Chathaoirleach.

I propose that Mitchel McLaughlin be Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member who has been nominated willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

Mr McLaughlin: Glacaim leis an oifig, a Cheann Comhairle. Go raibh maith agat.

I accept the nomination to be Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin appointed Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel.

Mr Speaker: I call again on the Rt Hon Dr Ian Paisley to select an available Statutory Committee and nominate a person who is a member of his party and a Member of the Assembly to be Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson of it.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I propose that Mr Sammy Wilson be Chairperson of the Committee for Education.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member who has been nominated willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

Mr S Wilson: I accept the position of Chairman of the Committee for Education.

Mr Sammy Wilson appointed Chairperson of the Committee for Education.

Mr Speaker: I now call on Sir Reg Empey to select an available Statutory Committee and nominate a person who is a member of his party and a Member of the Assembly to be Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson of it.

Sir Reg Empey: I nominate Mr Danny Kennedy to be Chairperson of the Committee of the Centre.

Mr Speaker: I have received a letter from Mr Kennedy — *[Interruption.]*

Order. I received a letter from Mr Kennedy, but I have been told that he is now in the Chamber. I suppose that he was trying to ensure that he would be able to accept his nomination.

Is Mr Kennedy willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

Mr Kennedy: Yes, Mr Speaker. I apologise to you for any inconvenience that I have caused. There was an early indication that I might not be present, but I am happy to be present and to accept the chairmanship of the Committee that scrutinises the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. Thank you very much.

Mr Danny Kennedy appointed Chairperson of the Committee of the Centre.

Mr Speaker: I now call on John Dallat to select an available Statutory Committee and to nominate a person who is a member of his party and a Member of the Assembly to be Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson of it.

Mr Dallat: I nominate Mr Mark Durkan to be Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

Mr Speaker: I have certainly received a letter from Mr Mark Durkan, and I do not see him in the Chamber. His letter expresses his regret that he is unable to attend today's proceedings. Mr Durkan makes it clear in his letter that, in the event of his being nominated, he is willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated.

Mr Mark Durkan appointed Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

Mr Speaker: I now call on Mr John O'Dowd of Sinn Féin to select and nominate.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Molaim Barry McElduff mar Chathaoirleach.

I propose that Mr Barry McElduff be Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member who has been nominated willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Glacaim leis an oifig agus tá mé sásta bheith i mo Chathaoirleach ar an Choiste Cultúir, Ealaíon agus Fóillíochta.

I am happy to accept — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McElduff: I am happy to accept the nomination, a Cheann Comhairle. Keep her lit. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Barry McElduff appointed Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure.

10.45 am

Mr Speaker: I call again on Dr Paisley of the Democratic Unionist Party to select a nominee.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I put forward my colleague Rev William McCrea to be Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development. He is unable to be here because of parliamentary business in another place; I present this letter, which confirms his acceptance.

Mr Speaker: On inspection, the letter is clear.

Dr William McCrea appointed Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development.

Mr Speaker: I call on Mr John O'Dowd of Sinn Féin to select a nominee.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Molaim Sue Ramsey mar Chathaoirleach.

I propose Sue Ramsey to be Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member who has been nominated willing to take up the office for which she has been nominated?

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Glacaim leis an oifig.

I accept the nomination as Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning.

Ms Sue Ramsey appointed Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning.

Mr Speaker: I call again on the Rt Hon Dr Ian Paisley of the Democratic Unionist Party to select a nominee.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I nominate Gregory Campbell to be Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member who has been nominated willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

Mr Campbell: I gladly accept the nomination for Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development.

Mr Gregory Campbell appointed Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development.

Mr Speaker: I call again on Sir Reg Empey of the Ulster Unionist Party to select a nominee.

Sir Reg Empey: I nominate Fred Cobain to be Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member who has been nominated willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

Mr Cobain: Yes, I am happy to be Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development.

Mr Fred Cobain appointed Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development.

Mr Speaker: I call again on Mr John Dallat of the SDLP to select and nominate.

Mr Dallat: I nominate Mr Patsy McGlone to be Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member who has been nominated willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

Mr McGlone: A Cheann Comhairle, tá mé an-sásta glacadh leis an cheapachán mar Chathaoirleach ar an Choiste Comhshaoil.

I am happy to accept the nomination from my colleague for Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment.

Mr Patsy McGlone appointed Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment.

[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I call again on the Rt Hon Dr Ian Paisley of the Democratic Unionist Party to select and nominate.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I nominate Mr Jim Wells to be Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member who has been nominated willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

Mr Wells: I am happy to accept that nomination.

Mr Jim Wells appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development.

Mr Speaker: I call again on Mr John O'Dowd of Sinn Féin to select and nominate.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Molaim Paul Maskey mar LeasChathaoirleach.

I nominate Mr Paul Maskey to be Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member who has been nominated willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Glacaim leis an oifig.

I accept the nomination for Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

Mr Paul Maskey appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

Mr Speaker: I call on Mr David Ford of the Alliance Party to select and nominate.

Mr Ford: As nominating officer for the Alliance Party, and with the support of the United Community group, I have great pleasure in nominating Naomi Long as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee of the Centre.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member who has been nominated willing to take up the office for which she has been nominated?

Mrs Long: I am willing to take up the office for which I have been nominated.

Mrs Naomi Long appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee of the Centre.

Mr Speaker: I call again on the Rt Hon Dr Ian Paisley of the Democratic Unionist Party to select and nominate.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I nominate Jimmy Spratt to be Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member who has been nominated willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

Mr Spratt: I am willing to take up the position of Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning.

Mr Jimmy Spratt appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning.

Mr Speaker: I call again upon Sir Reg Empey of the Ulster Unionist Party to select and nominate.

Sir Reg Empey: I nominate Mr Tom Elliott to be Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member who has been nominated willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

Mr Elliott: I am willing and accept the nomination for the position of Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development.

Mr Tom Elliott appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development.

Mr Speaker: I call again on Mr John O'Dowd of Sinn Féin to select and nominate.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Molaim Michelle O'Neill mar LeasChathaoirleach den Choiste Sláinte.

I propose Michelle O'Neill to be Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member who has been nominated willing to take up the office for which she has been nominated?

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Glacaim leis an oifig.

I accept the nomination.

Mrs Michelle O'Neill appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

Mr Speaker: I call again on Mr John Dallat of the Social Democratic and Labour Party to select and nominate.

Mr Dallat: I nominate Mr Dominic Bradley to be Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Education.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member who has been nominated willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

Mr D Bradley: Gabhaim mo bhuíochas leat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tá mé toilteanach glacadh leis an ainmniúchán mar LeasChathaoirleach den Choiste Oideachais.

I am prepared and willing to accept my nomination as the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Education.

Mr Dominic Bradley appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Education.

Mr Speaker: I call again on the Rt Hon Dr Ian Paisley of the Democratic Unionist Party to select and nominate.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I nominate David Hilditch to be Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member who has been nominated willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

Mr Hilditch: I accept the nomination.

Mr David Hilditch appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development.

Mr Speaker: I call again on Mr John O'Dowd of Sinn Féin to select and nominate.

Mr O'Dowd: Molaim Cathal Boylan mar LeasChathaoirleach den Choiste.

I propose Cathal Boylan to be Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member who has been nominated willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

Mr Boylan: Glacaim leis an oifig, a Cheann Comhairle.

I accept the position of Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment.

Mr Cathal Boylan appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment.

Mr Speaker: I call again on the Rt Hon Dr Ian Paisley of the Democratic Unionist Party to select and nominate.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I nominate Mervyn Storey to be Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member who has been nominated willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

Mr Storey: I am willing to accept the nomination.

Mr Mervyn Storey appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel.

Mr Speaker: I call on Sir Reg Empey of the Ulster Unionist Party to select and nominate.

Sir Reg Empey: I nominate David McNarry to be Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure.

Mr Speaker: I have received a letter from Mr David McNarry expressing his regret that he is unable to attend today's proceedings. However, Mr McNarry's letter makes

it clear that, in the event of being nominated, he is willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated.

Mr David McNarry appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the appointment of Chairpersons and Deputy Chairpersons of Statutory Committees.

I am also required by Standing Orders to ensure that all Members who do not hold ministerial, or junior ministerial, offices are offered at least one place on a Statutory Committee. The allocation of seats will be determined by the Business Committee and shall be approved by resolution of the Assembly. We shall return to that matter later.

APPOINTMENT OF CHAIRPERSONS AND DEPUTY CHAIRPERSONS OF STANDING COMMITTEES

Mr Speaker: The next item of business on the Order Paper is the appointment of Chairpersons and Deputy Chairpersons of Standing Committees. I am required to supervise the appointment of Chairpersons and Deputy Chairpersons to each Standing Committee, with the exception of the Business Committee, in accordance with Standing Order 48(3) and the procedures set out in Standing Order 46. In accordance with Standing Orders, that process is separate and distinct from the process of filling the posts of Chairpersons and Deputy Chairpersons of Statutory Committees.

I shall ask the nominating officer of each political party, in the order required by the formula contained in Standing Order 46, to select an available Standing Committee and to nominate a person who is a member of his party and a Member of the Assembly to be Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson of that Committee.

I call on the Rt Hon Dr Ian Paisley, as nominating officer of the political party for which the formula laid down in Standing Orders gives the highest figure, to select an available Standing Committee and to nominate a person who is a member of his party and a Member of the Assembly to be Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson of that Committee.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I nominate Jeffrey Donaldson to be the Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee.

He is not in the House, but I have a letter from him stating that, in the event of his being nominated, he will accept the nomination.

Mr Speaker: The letter is clear.

Mr Jeffrey Donaldson appointed Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee.

Mr Speaker: I call on John O'Dowd to select an available Standing Committee and nominate a person who is a member of his party and a Member of the Assembly to be Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson of that Committee.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Molaim mé féin mar Chathaoirleach.

I nominate myself as Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee, and I accept the nomination.
[Laughter.]

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr John O'Dowd appointed Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee.

Mr Speaker: I call the Rt Hon Dr Ian Paisley to select an available Standing Committee and nominate

a person who is a member of his party and a Member of the Assembly to be Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson of that Committee.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I nominate Lord Morrow to be the Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member who has been nominated willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

Lord Morrow: Very willing.

Lord Morrow appointed Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures.

11.00 am

Mr Speaker: I now call on Sir Reg Empey to select an available Standing Committee and nominate a person who is a member of his party and a Member of the Assembly to be Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson of it.

Sir Reg Empey: I nominate Mr Roy Beggs to be Deputy Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member who has been nominated willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

Mr Beggs: I confirm that I am willing to accept the position of Deputy Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee.

Mr Roy Beggs appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee.

Mr Speaker: I now call on Mr John Dallat to select an available Standing Committee and nominate a person who is a member of his party and a Member of the Assembly to be Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson of it.

Mr Dallat: I nominate Mrs Carmel Hanna to be Chairperson of the Committee on Standards and Privileges.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member who has been nominated willing to take up the office for which she has been nominated?

Mrs Hanna: I am willing to accept the nomination.

Mrs Carmel Hanna appointed Chairperson of the Committee on Standards and Privileges.

Mr Speaker: I now call on Mr John O'Dowd of Sinn Féin to select and nominate.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Molaim Raymond McCartney mar LeasChathaoirleach of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member who has been nominated willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tá mé sásta agus toilteanach glacadh leis an phost seo.

I am willing to accept the nomination.

Mr Raymond McCartney appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee.

Mr Speaker: I now call the Rt Hon Dr Ian Paisley of the Democratic Unionist Party to select and nominate.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I nominate Mr Robin Newton to be Chairperson of the Audit Committee.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member who has been nominated willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

Mr Newton: I confirm my acceptance of the position of Chairperson of the Audit Committee.

Mr Robin Newton appointed Chairperson of the Audit Committee.

Mr Speaker: I now call on Mr John O'Dowd of Sinn Féin to select and nominate.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Molaim Gerry McHugh mar LeasChathaoirleach.

I nominate Mr Gerry McHugh to be Deputy Chairperson of the Committee on Standards and Privileges.

Mr Speaker: I have received a letter from Mr Gerry McHugh as I understand there has been a death in his family. The letter makes it clear that he is prepared to accept the nomination.

Mr Gerry McHugh appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee on Standards and Privileges.

Mr Speaker: I call on the Rt Hon Dr Ian Paisley of the Democratic Unionist Party to select and nominate.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I nominate Mr Mervyn Storey to be Deputy Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member who has been nominated willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

Mr Storey: I am willing to accept the nomination.

Mr Mervyn Storey appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures.

Mr Speaker: I now call Sir Reg Empey of the Ulster Unionist Party to select and nominate.

Sir Reg Empey: I nominate Mr Samuel Gardiner to be Deputy Chairperson of the Audit Committee.

Mr Speaker: Is the Member who has been nominated willing to take up the office for which he has been nominated?

Mr Gardiner: I have much pleasure in accepting that offer.

Mr Samuel Gardiner appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Audit Committee.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the appointments of Chairpersons and Deputy Chairpersons of Standing Committees.

I propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm to allow the Business Committee to finalise the allocation of seats in the Statutory and Standing Committees. I ask members of the Business Committee to convene in Room 106 at 11.30 am. The outcome of the Business Committee's deliberations will be published as soon as practicable before the sitting resumes and will be subject to the approval of the House.

The sitting was suspended at 11.05 am.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —
2.00 pm

MEMBERSHIP OF STATUTORY AND STANDING COMMITTEES

Mr Speaker: Members should have received the documents that relate to the motions.

Membership of Statutory Committees

Resolved:

That this Assembly adopts the membership of the Statutory Committees as detailed in NIA 1/06-07. — [Mr McCarthy.]

The Membership of the Statutory Committees as detailed in NIA 1/06-07 is as follows:

Committee for Agriculture and Rural

Development: Dr William McCrea (Chairperson); Mr Tom Elliott (Deputy Chairperson); Mr P J Bradley; Mr Thomas Burns; Mr Allan Bresland; Mr Trevor Clarke; Mr Willie Clarke; Mr William Irwin; Mr Gerry McHugh; Mr Francie Molloy; Mr George Savage.

Committee of the Centre: Mr Danny Kennedy (Chairperson); Mrs Naomi Long (Deputy Chairperson); Ms Martina Anderson; Mr Tom Elliott; Mr Barry McElduff; Mr Francie Molloy; Mr Stephen Moutray; Mrs Dolores Kelly; Mr Jim Shannon; Mr Jimmy Spratt; Mr Jim Wells.

Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure: Mr Barry McElduff (Chairperson); Mr David McNarry (Deputy Chairperson); Mr Dominic Bradley; Mr Francie Brolly; Lord Browne; Mr David Burnside; Mr Paul Maskey; Mr Kieran McCarthy; Mr Nelson McCausland; Mr Pat Ramsey; Mr Jim Shannon.

Committee for Education: Mr Sammy Wilson (Chairperson); Mr Dominic Bradley (Deputy Chairperson); Mrs Mary Bradley; Mr Paul Butler; Mr Jeffrey Donaldson; Mr Trevor Lunn; Mr Basil McCrea; Miss Michelle McIlveen; Ms Michelle O'Neill; Mr Ken Robinson; Mr Mervyn Storey.

Committee for Employment and Learning: Ms Sue Ramsey (Chairperson); Mr Jimmy Spratt (Deputy Chairperson); Mr Alex Attwood; Mr Paul Butler; Ms Anna Lo; Mr Nelson McCausland; Mr David McClarty; Mr Basil McCrea; Mrs Claire McGill; Mr Robin Newton; Mr Jim Wells.

Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Mr Mark Durkan (Chairperson); Mr Paul Maskey (Deputy Chairperson); Mr Leslie Cree; Mr Simon Hamilton; Ms Jennifer McCann; Dr Alasdair McDonnell; Mr Alan McFarland; Mr Mitchel McLaughlin; Mr Sean Neeson; Mr Robin Newton; Mr David Simpson.

Committee for the Environment: Mr Patsy McGlone (Chairperson); Mr Cathal Boylan (Deputy Chairperson); Mr Billy Armstrong; Mr Trevor Clarke; Mr David Ford; Mr Tommy Gallagher; Mr Samuel Gardiner; Mr Alex Maskey; Mr Ian McCrea; Mr Daithí McKay; Mr Peter Weir.

Committee for Finance and Personnel: Mr Mitchel McLaughlin (Chairperson); Mr Mervyn Storey (Deputy Chairperson); Mr Roy Beggs; Dr Stephen Farry; Mr Simon Hamilton; Mr Fra McCann; Ms Jennifer McCann; Mr Adrian McQuillan; Mr Declan O'Loan; Ms Dawn Purvis; Mr Peter Weir.

Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Mrs Iris Robinson (Chairperson); Ms Michelle O'Neill (Deputy Chairperson); Mr Thomas Buchanan; Rev Dr Robert Coulter; Dr Kieran Deeny; Mr Alex Easton; Mr Tommy Gallagher; Mrs Carmel Hanna; Mr John McCallister; Ms Carál Ni Chuilín; Ms Sue Ramsey.

Committee for Regional Development: Mr Fred Cobain (Chairperson); Mr Jim Wells (Deputy Chairperson); Mr Cathal Boylan; Mr Willie Clarke; Mr John Dallat; Mr William Irwin; Mr John McCallister; Mr Raymond McCartney; Mr Stephen Moutray; Mr George Robinson; Mr Brian Wilson.

Committee for Social Development: Mr Gregory Campbell (Chairperson); Mr David Hilditch (Deputy Chairperson); Mr Mickey Brady; Mr Thomas Burns; Mr Fred Cobain; Mr Jonathan Craig; Ms Anna Lo; Mr Alban Maginness; Mr Fra McCann; Mrs Claire McGill; Miss Michelle McIlveen.

Membership of Standing Committees

Motion made:

That this Assembly adopts the membership of the Standing Committees as detailed in NIA 2/06-07. — [Mr P J Bradley.]

Mr Ford: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Standing Order 48(4) requires that the principle of proportionality that applies to Statutory Committees should also apply to Standing Committees. It is my belief, and that of the United Community group, that the failure to include any Member from my group on the Assembly and Executive Review Committee means that the requirement set out in Standing Order 48(4) has not been met.

It also seems illogical that a Committee that is to review the total operation of the Assembly does not contain a single Member from a party outside the Executive. It appears that those who talked so much about inclusivity in the past are less anxious about inclusivity now. I understand that discussions are ongoing about the issue that I have raised; however, for the reason that I have outlined, the United Community group will not be supporting the motion.

Furthermore, in respect of Standing Order 51, it appears the ultimate contradiction that a party's nominating officer — even if he is only that party's acting nominating officer — can nominate himself to be Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee. That Committee must be seen to be independent. Such a proposal would not be allowed in Westminster, the Oireachtas, Holyrood or Cardiff Bay. It is most damaging for the Assembly's prospects that that nomination is going through. My group, through its representation on the Business Committee, recognises fully what is happening, but let no one say that our failure to divide the House implies that we accept the terms of the motion.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the Member for his point of order. However, I am satisfied that the Business Committee dealt with the matter properly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly adopts the membership of the Standing Committees as detailed in NIA 2/06-07.

The Membership of the Standing Committees as detailed in NIA 2/06-07 is as follows:

Assembly and Executive Review Committee: Mr Jeffrey Donaldson (Chairperson); Mr Raymond McCartney (Deputy Chairperson); Mr Alex Attwood; Mrs Carmel Hanna; Mr Danny Kennedy; Mr Nelson McCausland; Mr Ian McCrea; Mr Alan McFarland; Ms Carál Ní Chuilín; Mr John O'Dowd; Mr George Robinson.

Audit Committee: Mr Robin Newton (Chairperson); Mr Samuel Gardiner (Deputy Chairperson); Dr Stephen Farry; Mr John O'Dowd; Mr Pat Ramsey.

Procedures Committee: Lord Morrow (Chairperson); Mr Mervyn Storey (Deputy Chairperson); Mr Francie Brolly; Lord Browne; Mr Willie Clarke; Mr Raymond McCartney; Mr David McClarty; Mr Adrian McQuillan; Mr Sean Neeson; Mr Declan O'Loan; Mr Ken Robinson.

Public Accounts Committee: Mr John O'Dowd (Chairperson); Mr Roy Beggs (Deputy Chairperson); Mr Willie Clarke; Mr Jonathan Craig; Mr John Dallat; Mr Simon Hamilton; Mr David Hilditch; Mr Trevor Lunn; Mr Patsy McGlone; Mr Mitchel McLaughlin; Ms Dawn Purvis.

Standards and Privileges Committee: Mrs Carmel Hanna (Chairperson); Mr Gerry McHugh (Deputy Chairperson); Mr Allan Bresland; Mr Francie Brolly; Mr Willie Clarke; Rev Dr Robert Coulter; Mr Alex Easton; Mr David Hilditch; Mr Adrian McQuillan; Mr George Savage; Mr Brian Wilson.

Mr Speaker: I remind members of the Business Committee that we are due to reconvene in 30 minutes.

Adjourned at 2.05 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 14 May 2007

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Speaker: It would be useful if mobile phones could be switched off, or even left outside the Chamber.

Ms Lo: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it in order for me to thank the First and Deputy First Ministers for the civic reception that they held in Stormont last Wednesday for ethnic minority communities? I congratulate both Ministers on a very successful event that sent out a strong message that the Assembly values the contributions of ethnic minority communities and will not tolerate any form of racism against them.

Mr Speaker: That is not a point of order, but I have been very liberal in taking it. I am sure that the First and Deputy First Ministers have heard the Member's statement.

SPEAKER'S BUSINESS

Mr Speaker: I must inform Members that I will not be available for plenary business tomorrow because I will be representing the Assembly at a function in Westminster.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Commonwealth Parliamentary Association

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow one hour for this debate. The proposer of the motion will have a maximum of 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to wind up. All other Members will have five minutes.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I beg to move

That this Assembly agrees to re-apply for admission to membership of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, such membership to be effective immediately on approval of the application by the General Assembly of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, and to abide by the provisions of the constitution of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association; that the required membership fee be paid to the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association; and that this motion be communicated to the secretariat of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association immediately following agreement.

Mr Speaker, this is my first opportunity to address the House since your election to the distinguished office of Speaker. Therefore, I congratulate you on your election and wish you well in the post. As I have known you well for many years, and we have been friends for a long time, I know that you will be a worthy holder of the post. I can already see that you are bringing a dignity and presence to the position and I believe that you will serve the House with great distinction.

The motion is an important milestone for the Assembly. In rejoining the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA), the Northern Ireland Assembly will re-enter the largest association of free and democratic Parliaments across the world. It is an important statement for the Assembly to make. It says that Northern Ireland is back on a sound democratic track and, once again, is a distinct part of that great democratic worldwide community.

This is a good time to reflect on the objectives of the CPA, so that Members can appreciate the importance of the shared democratic values that it represents and why it is important that the Northern Ireland Assembly belongs to it.

The CPA exists primarily to promote knowledge and understanding of parliamentary democracy and respect for the rule of law and the individual rights and freedoms that it represents. Active CPA branches exist in 169 national, state, provincial and territorial Parliaments across the Commonwealth, with a total membership of approximately 16,000 parliamentarians. Those figures must make it one of the greatest democratic forums on earth.

The CPA was founded almost 96 years ago, on 18 July 1911, when a group of parliamentarians from the United Kingdom and the five then self-governing

dominions of Australia, Canada, Newfoundland, New Zealand and South Africa agreed to form an association. That meeting constituted the first formal conference of the British empire's parliamentarians. One month earlier, those members had gathered in London for the coronation of King George V.

Although it was originally known as the Empire Parliamentary Association, in 1920, membership was extended to all of the former colonies of the British empire and to states within the then dominions. With the end of the British empire, the association reconstituted itself in 1949 as the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, and all the newly independent states of the Commonwealth joined as they achieved independence.

The CPA comprises the national, provincial, state and territorial Parliaments and legislatures of the countries of the Commonwealth. It is a lively and developing body and is constantly renewing itself. The CPA discusses relevant and important topics and, by bringing together countries across the Commonwealth, it enables parliamentarians to develop new and original perspectives on many problems of the day.

It is interesting to note that the CPA's fifty-third plenary conference is discussing delivering democracy and sustainable development; financial scrutiny across the Commonwealth; global environmental protection; gender equality; and the financing and administration of Parliaments.

Those issues are real and relevant. Membership of the CPA would ensure that parliamentarians in the Northern Ireland Assembly were well informed and aware of best practice on all those issues across the globe. Indeed, this month, the CPA is holding a joint conference with the World Bank in British Columbia. There are also ongoing study tours and attachments, Government and Opposition workshops, post-election seminars, study groups and staff development activities, all of which enhance the effectiveness of parliamentarians.

In 2004, for example, a joint venture by the CPA and the World Bank Institute explored the setting of benchmarks across a broad range of parliamentary activities and, in so doing, assessed the effectiveness of all the Parliaments in the CPA. Technical assistance programmes have helped local legislatures to address issues that increase parliamentary operational effectiveness, such as modernising Standing Orders.

Other workshops have tackled issues such as the relationships between Speakers, Clerks and other parliamentary staff, financial controls, service delivery, the provision of information, security and human resource management. Those issues are all relevant to this Assembly. Issues such as electronic governance and the relationships between central and local

government are also explored within the association. It all adds up to better legislatures and, by extension, to a better and more enduring quality of democracy.

Membership of the CPA also provides the opportunity for participation in plenary and regional conferences, seminars, visits and delegate exchanges. Special seminars are often arranged at the request of local Parliaments, especially those that have been elected following significant constitutional changes. That is an excellent description of our own situation, and such a conference could afford the Northern Ireland Assembly the opportunity to network with other legislatures across the world.

The UK branch of the CPA is hosting the annual conference of the British islands and Mediterranean region in the Stormont Hotel in Belfast from 13 to 17 May. Delegations from all the branches in the region — Alderney, Cyprus, the Falkland Islands, Gibraltar, Guernsey, the Isle of Man, Jersey, Malta, St Helena, Scotland, the UK and Wales — will be present.

In essence, membership of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association will bring real and tangible benefits to the Members of this Assembly. It will put them in the mainstream of a worldwide association and embed this Assembly where it rightly belongs — alongside other democratic legislatures. Our sister legislatures in Scotland and Wales already belong to the CPA, and the Northern Ireland Assembly first joined the organisation in 2001.

The time has now come for our Assembly to take its place once again among our parliamentary friends and among the great community of nations and free peoples that make up this truly international body, spanning all continents and income levels and bound by a common heritage of democracy, liberty, justice and freedom under the law.

The First Minister (Rev Dr Ian Paisley): It gives me the greatest possible pleasure to support the motion. It is nice to know that our Queen is the head of the Commonwealth; through this motion, we salute Her Majesty. We look forward to the continuance of her good health, because one needs that blessing when one is over 80 years of age.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

The First Minister: The motion emphasises that the Ulster that we love is part of the Commonwealth and part of the United Kingdom.

I do not need to emphasise that matter because the world knows exactly where we stand.

12.15 pm

The Commonwealth teaches us that unity is possible amidst diversity. Everyone knows that there is diversity in the House; it remains to be seen whether

there can be unity, and the testing days of the future will decide the strength of that unity. I cannot think of a better job at such a time than to address the CPA conference tomorrow, and I look forward to it.

I congratulate the hon Lady who made herself heard in such wonderful circumstances and who put one over on the Speaker. From time to time, I may take a leaf out of her book.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

Mr Speaker, I want to add Sinn Féin's congratulations on your appointment last week. The party shares the confidence of other Members that you will bring the qualities of dignity, integrity and fair play to the office.

Sinn Féin Members will listen with great interest to the debate; the party recognises that the work of this body is of particular significance to many Members. Sinn Féin acknowledges that this legitimate motion should have been tabled. Inevitably, our history will mean that, from time to time, we will deal with matters that do not sit comfortably with all Members. However, we are living in a time of change and, in the context of current politics and, in particular, in the light of last week's remarkable developments, it behoves us all to recognise the fact that our community is shared. There is diversity, which is quite legitimate and has significant and sizeable support in the community. If Members are to make politics work, they must strike a balance between all those clashing and competing issues. If we acknowledge that diversity is legitimate, it is within the combined creative talent and genius in the Chamber to chart our way through the issue.

Sinn Féin will not vote against the motion. As Members will understand, although the issue is not a matter of primary interest to Sinn Féin, it will not set up any obstacles or cause difficulties for Members who feel that the motion reflects their cultural, political and social affinities.

Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr A Maginness: Congratulations, Mr Speaker, on your appointment. It is good to see a Donegal man in the Chair. I also share some Donegal blood; my mother comes from Rathmullan, so we have that bond in common.

The SDLP supports the motion that has been tabled by Rev Robert Coulter. It is important to establish international links with other democracies throughout the world, and the motion is a step in that direction.

The previous Assembly, of course, was associated with the CPA. Indeed, some Members of that Assembly were involved in various exercises and conferences that the CPA promoted.

However, a central point to remember is that membership of the CPA should not be an exercise in junketing. It should be taken seriously, and our membership should have a serious purpose: the promotion of parliamentary democracy throughout the world. Our contributions to whatever CPA forums we attend should be fearless in their support for parliamentary democracy and human rights. We should not remain mute when those who violate human rights and undermine democratic principles appear at those conferences. We should fearlessly say to them that they are wrong; that they are undermining democracy; that they are attacking human rights; and that they have no place in the civilised world of parliamentarians.

Therefore, we should take our role in the body very seriously. We have spent many years building democracy here, and it seems that we have at last agreed to share the democratic institutions and the Executive and to build a new society based on shared values. It is important for us to present those values to the rest of the world. It would be wrong for us to remain as isolationists and say that although the outside world is interesting, we will not participate in it because we have enough work to do here. We do have enough work to do here, but we should make our contribution nonetheless and share with the rest of the world our experiences in building peace and democracy. If we take that approach, we will make a solid contribution to the deliberations of the CPA.

Some see the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association as some sort of old imperialist organisation. It is not: it is a multinational organisation comprising parliamentarians from all parts of the world. It is important that parliamentarians mix together and learn from one another. We should remember that.

Mr Donaldson: In the light of what the Member for North Belfast has said, would he and his party welcome an application from the Republic of Ireland to join the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association?

Mr A Maginness: I would welcome the deepening of Members' relationships — and not just the nationalist Members, but the unionists as well — with the Members of Dáil Éireann and Seanad Éireann, who share this island as parliamentarians.

Mr Speaker: Your time is up.

Mr A Maginness: Mr Speaker, I thought that we had a bond; obviously, we do not.

Mr Neeson: Like those Members who have already spoken, I congratulate you on your elevation, Mr Speaker. I am delighted that, for once, we have our full quota on the Floor.

I support the motion. The Assembly was previously a member of the CPA, and it was a successful

experience. It is useful to work with democracies throughout the world.

Many issues are now dealt with on a global basis, and it is important to remember that not only Members but the Assembly's staff would benefit from membership of the CPA. I welcome the fact that the CPA is meeting in Belfast this week, and I will certainly attend that conference.

Mr Donaldson rather pre-empted what I was going to suggest. In the present political climate in Northern Ireland and the British Isles, and with improved Anglo-Irish relations, it is time for the Government of the Republic of Ireland to consider joining the CPA in order that they can interact with the other major nations throughout the world.

I support the motion.

Mr Wells: I had the privilege, along with Dr Coulter and Mr Maginness, of being a member of the CPA during the Northern Ireland Assembly's first mandate. The Northern Ireland branch of the CPA was extremely active.

I am sure that all Members are proud of our Commonwealth background. I am sure that they are all proud that Northern Ireland was once part of the empire. We are all bound by our links to Her Majesty The Queen and the English language. This is not just semantics. We are dealing with being part of an organisation that represents two billion citizens.

Two billion people live in the Commonwealth, and that opens up vast economic development opportunities for Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth. Therefore, Members should not scoff at the CPA. As Dr Coulter said, the membership of the CPA includes 169 legislatures, ranging from state parliaments to small municipal authorities. The CPA is a huge organisation that could give so much to the people of Northern Ireland.

As we speak, a subgroup of the CPA — the British islands and Mediterranean region — is meeting in the Stormont Hotel. It is wonderful that we have been able to link that visit to Northern Ireland with the Assembly's application for readmission to the CPA. I must emphasise that this is an application for readmission. Between them, the Northern Ireland Parliament and the Northern Ireland Assembly have been members of the CPA on and off for decades. However, the collapse of devolution meant that the Assembly's membership lapsed. In 2001, with Rev Coulter and the then Speaker Lord Alderdice, I had the privilege of reapplying for membership. The CPA unanimously agreed that application. Therefore, it is appropriate that the Assembly reapplies once more while the CPA is having its conference in Northern Ireland.

Membership of the CPA offers a marvellous opportunity to meet with those in Governments in countries linked by their English language and heritage, ranging in size from India, with 1.1 billion people, to Montserrat, with a population of only a few thousand. Membership also offers the Assembly wonderful opportunities to learn from those Governments and legislatures, and, perhaps, for the Assembly to give advice and assistance to emerging democracies.

The CPA is linked to the Commonwealth Association. A clear rule of the Commonwealth Association is that any member Government that does not meet normal democratic standards, such as Zimbabwe recently, and Pakistan more latterly, is removed, with its membership suspended until democracy is restored. A set of standards is applied. The CPA applies similar rules. A country's membership is suspended if the country concerned does not adhere to normal democratic standards.

Northern Ireland could benefit enormously from membership of the CPA. Mr Dallat, a Member for East Londonderry, attended one of its conferences in 2002 and made an important input.

I am very enthusiastic about the CPA. The Northern Ireland Assembly should play a full part in it, and all Members should attend and support the meetings of this very important association.

Mr Donaldson: Mr Speaker, I add to the words of other Members and congratulate you on taking up the office of Speaker of the Assembly. I trust that you will enjoy your term of office.

12.30 pm

The hon Member for North Antrim the Rev Dr Robert Coulter has already mentioned that the members of the British islands and Mediterranean branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association are holding their conference this week in Northern Ireland for the first time. I bid them a very warm welcome. I know that you, Mr Speaker, will be attending the formal opening of the conference.

Members have already highlighted some of the work of the CPA; I want to mention other aspects of its role. One relates to conflicts around the world. The CPA works in partnership with the international community and with individual Parliaments and their Members to apply the expertise of Commonwealth parliamentarians to the task of managing conflicts.

On that issue, we in Northern Ireland have something to give back to the international community, from which we have received support and encouragement over the years — and sometimes interference, as the First Minister suggested in his speech at the opening ceremony here last week. Nevertheless, we have the opportunity to contribute to conflict management in the Commonwealth.

The range of the CPA's programmes reflects its commitment to human rights and the widest possible democratic participation in governance. I echo the Member for East Antrim Mr Neeson in saying that it would be good to see the Irish Republic joining the Commonwealth of Nations. There is a place for the Republic there, and I hope that in this new environment we will see it coming forward and joining the Commonwealth, bringing the Irish Parliament into the CPA so that it too can make a contribution in that forum.

In 1996, the CPA became one of the sponsor organisations of the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, collaborating closely in order to further the Commonwealth's human rights and democracy agenda.

The CPA works with the World Trade Organization, the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the European Parliament and the parliamentary network of the World Bank to raise awareness of international trade issues. Although Parliaments and parliamentarians have long been asked to support their Governments' trade policies and to enact legislation implementing the results of trade negotiations, until recently, MPs and MLAs had virtually no involvement in, or knowledge of, the international trading system that determines the future of their communities. That began to change in 2003, largely through the work of the CPA.

The CPA is also involved with the tragic impact of HIV/AIDS, particularly in Africa. The CPA works with the international community and parliamentarians, analysing the impact of HIV/AIDS to determine what Parliaments can do to alleviate its effects. Members of the CPA have regularly discussed the issue with experts at Commonwealth parliamentary conferences since 2000, and the CPA has convened a study group on the role of parliamentarians in combating the HIV/AIDS pandemic. It has also sent parliamentarians to inter-parliamentary workshops in Pakistan and South Africa to discuss ways to strengthen Parliaments' role in combating issues related to HIV/AIDS. A survey of Commonwealth Parliaments is under way to establish what parliamentary activities have been undertaken and what legislation has been passed to deal with the disease.

It is appropriate that on this day, when Northern Ireland hosts a CPA conference for the first time, we as an Assembly should reapply for membership of the CPA. It will help the Assembly to take on a role in the wider international community and allow us to give something of our collective talents towards international development and co-operation. I support the motion.

Mr Kennedy: Mr Speaker, I join with other Members and extend my warm congratulations to you on your election as Speaker. I look forward to a happy relationship with you, and I wish you all the very best.

I am heartened by the level of agreement on this motion. As the Assembly establishes, or re-establishes,

its membership of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, it is appropriate to remind Members that the association's overall aims are to:

“promote knowledge of the constitutional, legislative, economic, social and cultural aspects of parliamentary democracy, with particular reference to the countries of the Commonwealth of Nations.”

Those are laudable aims, and Members should be very happy to be associated with them.

I have taken great comfort from the level of agreement among the Members who have spoken. I pay particular tribute to my colleague, Rev Robert Coulter, who moved the motion, not only for his background knowledge of the issue, but for his ongoing and long-standing commitment to the work of the CPA. That commitment has been widely known and is now widely respected.

Currently, 169 Parliaments, Assemblies and legislatures are associated in some shape or form with the CPA, and, as Members of the Assembly, we want to play a more active part in that organisation.

I also welcome the remarks of the First Minister. As well as wishing good health to himself and Her Majesty The Queen, in what might be called the over-80s' club, I had rather hoped that he would extend wishes of good health to all Members of the Assembly. However, I am sure that that is the case.

I was interested in the contribution made by the representative from Sinn Féin, Mitchel McLaughlin, who accepted that Members of the Assembly are genuinely interested in the CPA and see benefit for all from renewing the Assembly's membership. It was a helpful contribution, as was that of Alban Maginness.

In the past, members of the SDLP have been very active in attending meetings and conferences organised by the CPA. Mr Maginness made the important point that membership of the CPA should not be an opportunity, or should not be seen to be an opportunity, for Members to indulge in junkets. That is not the intention. There is important business to be transacted, including the exchange of information and ideas among parliamentarians. Indeed, membership gives the staff of the Parliaments and Assemblies the opportunity to engage with, and learn from, one another. Under no circumstances should it be seen simply as an opportunity to get additional stamps on one's passport.

I also welcome Mr Neeson's contribution. He made the good point that politics is happening increasingly on a local basis. It will assist all of us greatly if the Assembly re-engages with the CPA.

I pay tribute to Jim Wells for his contribution to the work of the CPA during the Assembly's first mandate. He was always very enthusiastic, and one hopes that he will be given the opportunity to re-engage in the work of CPA. However, at the moment, he may be under a cloud in some quarters, and there might be

punishment involved that might not allow that to happen immediately. Jim, hopefully, it will happen soon. *[Laughter.]*

I echo the comments of Members —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Kennedy: Thank you very much for your indulgence, Mr Speaker.

Mr Moutray: Mr Speaker, I join other Members in congratulating you on your elevation to your post. I look forward to working with you in your capacity as Chairperson of the Assembly Commission.

I welcome the opportunity to debate the possibility of the Assembly's rejoining the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, the work of which is varied. Through participation in Commonwealth Parliamentary Association programmes, parliamentarians are able to champion socio-economic reforms and promote good governance, not only in their own jurisdictions but in the international community. Parliamentarians can contribute to shaping poverty-reduction strategy papers that can be implemented in poorer Commonwealth — and other — nations through the World Bank Institute and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Those parliamentarians can improve the conservation of scarce Government financial resources through advances in parliamentary scrutiny and public spending, and they can implement and reinforce effective measures to curb corruption so that valuable resources go to where they are most needed — the poorest in all societies.

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

CPA programmes link parliamentarians with poverty-reduction strategy papers through the World Bank Institute. Workshops on public spending and poverty reduction have been held in west Africa, with funding from the United Kingdom's Department for International Development. In partnership with the World Bank Institute, national workshops in Cameroon, Sierra Leone, Ghana and Nigeria were followed by a regional workshop to strengthen participating Parliaments' capacities to deal with poverty issues.

Poverty reduction is now commonly part of CPA post-election seminars. Newly elected members can learn directly from experienced parliamentarians and World Bank Institute officials about what their countries are doing to reduce poverty and about how they can participate in that process. Commonwealth members have debated poverty-related issues such as: achieving the millennium development goals of the United Nations; eradicating extreme poverty and hunger; how Parliaments and civil society can work together to achieve poverty reduction; and the link between poverty and human security.

CPA programmes have ensured that scrutiny of public spending has now been recognised as playing a crucial

and practical role in the fight against poverty. Members, Governments, international aid donors and global financial agencies now acknowledge that better parliamentary oversight leads to better policy formulation and programme delivery.

The CPA has focused parliamentary and international attention on the vital role of public accounts committees in strengthening Parliaments' scrutiny functions. In discussions with the experts in the field, members have learned more about scrutiny techniques, including the presentation of budgets and their processes through Parliaments, and the role and status of poverty-reduction policies and their impact on the budgetary process.

Various matters of importance for increasing efficiency in oversight and financial scrutiny have been highlighted. Those include adequate resourcing for oversight institutions, collaboration with departmental parliamentary committees, the relationship between public accounts committees and auditors general, and the opening of committee meetings to the public media.

The CPA and World Bank Institute are developing a programme to ensure that all parliamentary committees are equipped to deliver effective financial oversight of Executives. Allied to its work on the oversight of public spending is the CPA's programme to help parliamentarians — and, through them, their Governments — to develop effective ways to curb corruption and to ensure that civil services have a culture of providing efficient and ethical governmental services. It is for those and many other reasons that we should support the Assembly's rejoining the CPA.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: It is encouraging to hear support from all sides of the House for the motion, and I welcome the understanding that there will be no opposition to it. I thank all Members who have spoken in support of the motion. I ask that the relevant bodies expedite this matter so that the Assembly can rejoin a great and distinguished body as soon as possible.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly agrees to re-apply for admission to membership of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, such membership to be effective immediately on approval of the application by the General Assembly of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, and to abide by the provisions of the constitution of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association; that the required membership fee be paid to the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association; and that this motion be communicated to the secretariat of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association immediately following agreement.

Women in Politics

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for this debate, the Member proposing the motion having a maximum of 10 minutes to propose and a further 10 minutes for the winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

One amendment has been published on the Marshalled List. The Member proposing the amendment will have 10 minutes in which to do so and five minutes for the winding-up speech.

12.45 pm

I remind Members of the procedures and protocol regarding maiden contributions, as Ms McCann is about to make her maiden speech.

Ms J McCann: I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses serious concerns about the under-representation of women in the Assembly and calls on all parties to commit themselves to addressing the situation; and for the establishment of an all-party working group to discuss these and other issues that have a negative impact on women; and further calls on an incoming Executive to fully implement and resource a comprehensive strategy to tackle the under-representation of women in political life.

Ba mhaith liom an rún a mholadh.

I welcome the opportunity to take part in this important debate on the under-representation of women in the Assembly. In Ireland today, women are still not fully represented in either national politics or in local government decision-making structures. Men continue to dominate all our cultural, social, economic, legal and political institutions.

The following statistics graphically illustrate that inequality. In Ireland as a whole, women make up 51% of the population, yet in the North of Ireland only 16.7% of MLAs and 21.3% of local councillors are women. In the South of Ireland only 13% of TDs and only 15% of elected councillors are women. In this Chamber, only 18 out of 108 MLAs are women — all of whom have been elected because of their abilities and their contributions to political life.

The statistics show that women are seriously under-represented at all levels in the decision-making process. Such under-representation does not happen by accident but is caused by inequalities of power, which are deepened by other factors such as poverty, educational disadvantage, lack of access to housing and appropriate healthcare, violence, rural isolation, inaccessibility for people with disabilities, racism and ageism. It will take political vision and will to change that, but it can be done.

The primary benchmark in relation to women's engagement with, and representation in, politics is the United Nations' Fourth World Conference on Women,

which took place in 1995 in Beijing. That conference identified two key strategic objectives: to ensure women's equal access to, and full participation in, power structures and decision-making; and to increase women's capacity to participate in decision-making and leadership. It also proposed actions to be taken by Governments, political parties, all other concerned parties and the United Nations itself to facilitate those objectives.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that:

“Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country”.

The Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women also seeks to progress women's rights in respect of politics. However, women are still largely under-represented at all levels of government. Furthermore, they have made little progress in attaining political power in legislative bodies.

All political parties have a responsibility to ensure that more women are elected to the Assembly and other political institutions. Political parties can and should adapt strategies to increase the number of successful women candidates by using positive action in their recruitment and selection processes to ensure that we are all working towards achieving 50:50 parity. The playing field is not even at the moment, and we should not pretend that it is.

Political parties can engage with women's organisations that work at encouraging and supporting women to enable them to become more involved in political life. However, there is real need for an all-party group to examine all the issues that lead to under-representation.

All of us in this Chamber can reflect on at least one woman who has had a positive role in shaping and directing our future. Our mothers, sisters, wives, partners and daughters have at some stage contributed towards making us into the people we are, yet despite all the strategies and policies adopted by Government to promote gender equality, extensive discrimination against women in all areas of life still exists. Women bring a great contribution to the development of society. It is incumbent on all agencies to ensure that all possible mechanisms for advancing gender equality are used rigorously.

The under-representation of women in politics and public life has a negative impact on politics and on society as a whole. Women constitute a diverse group with many talents, life experiences and positive attributes to bring to the world of politics. Equality and human rights are at the core of the Good Friday Agreement, and we must ensure that equality for women is a priority. An Ireland of equals can be achieved only in the context of full equality for women.

The female MLAs in this Chamber can be positive role models for women to become involved in politics, but it is not their responsibility alone. Everyone in the Chamber has a responsibility to ensure that the barriers to women's participation in all aspects of political life are removed. Gender discrimination and equality for women are issues of concern for us all. Therefore, I call on the Assembly to support the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have received one amendment to the motion —

Ms Ní Chuilín: Le do thoil, a LeasCheann Comhairle. On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. If the gender equality strategy has indeed been adopted by the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), it will cut across all the Departments and the Executive. However, if it has not been adopted, is the amendment competent?

Mr Deputy Speaker: We do not have any advice from OFMDFM. That will be sought, but at this stage I am advised that the Speaker has accepted the amendment as being a competent amendment.

I remind Members that this is Miss McIlveen's maiden speech, and that therefore it should be heard uninterrupted.

Mr McNarry: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. In the light of what you have just said, is it your intention that, if a vote should be taken, the information that the Speaker requires as to the amendment's competence will be relevant to the vote? On this side of the House we should like to hear from Miss McIlveen, and it is a relevant amendment, but if uncertainty exists as to its competence, is it fair to put the House through the strain of hearing it? Is it not possible to give advice now as to the relevance of the amendment?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Speaker is satisfied that the amendment is competent, and we will continue with the debate.

Miss McIlveen: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after "situation" and insert "recognises the commitment of the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to implementing the Gender Equality Strategy; and believes that individuals should obtain positions on merit, otherwise the argument for greater representation from women can be diminished."

In order that the Assembly can truly represent the views of Northern Ireland's electorate, it should be reflective of the demographics of that electorate. That is a truism. Sadly, however, only 16.7% of the Members of the Assembly are women. If this were an accurate reflection of the electorate, the human race would be approaching extinction.

I welcome this debate. Like many others in the Chamber, I am concerned about the under-representation of women, not only in the Assembly but in each stratum of political life, and this is an opportunity to express

those concerns. The motion proposes the establishment of an all-party working group to discuss the under-representation of women in this Assembly, along with other issues that have a negative impact on women. That is duplication rather than additionality. Such issues are within the remit of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister through the gender equality strategy.

Indeed, four Members of this Chamber spoke at a conference in November 2006 at Hillsborough Castle, organised by the Secretary of State and the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, that specifically addressed the issues faced by women and the problems in the political system in Northern Ireland. We still await the report pertaining to that conference.

What more would the establishment of a working group hope to achieve? If it is the hope that a quota system be imposed on the parties, I find such a proposal an insult to my gender. As a female representative, I feel that the honour of being selected by my party to stand, and my subsequent election to this Assembly by the Strangford electorate, would be tarnished if that selection were the result of an enforced quota system and not on merit. I wish to be judged on my abilities and not on my gender.

Over the past two years, I have been actively involved in the Women in Local Councils initiative, which has placed the issue on the agenda, and I have been encouraged by the progress that has been made. As a woman, I am conscious of the difficulties that can be faced. That said, however, those same difficulties are faced by many of my male colleagues. We need a working environment that encourages new people to enter local government and retains them once they have been elected. It is from local government that future MLAs can be cultivated. The current working environment is too inflexible; it needs to be able to accommodate a life outside of it.

The traditional role of the woman as the sole carer for the family while the man is at work has long since gone. Those responsibilities are now shared. We do not assist the cause of converting more women to the idea of running for civic office by continually concentrating on negatives, particularly when those negatives, such as conflict with work and time away from the family, are the same for men as they are for women.

There has been much talk of the problem of getting women selected, of old-fashioned attitudes and of the need for mentoring and capacity-building. However, the primary problem is that women do not seek elected office; it is overthrowing that obstacle that is most important. Society is now willing to accept and elect female politicians, if only more could be encouraged to appear on the ballot paper. Forcing them onto the ballot paper is not the answer. Parties need to look

within to address any lingering prejudices that may persist. The DUP has a growing female representation, and we are proud of the achievements in our party. Our challenge is to highlight the talents of candidates, irrespective of gender, and promote on the basis of merit. Furthermore, parties must assist with fluidity of movement throughout their ranks by implementing the correct supportive measures. For those reasons, I ask the House to support the amendment.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Basil McCrea. I remind Members that this is Mr McCrea's maiden speech and should therefore be heard without interruption.

Mr B McCrea: I am grateful for this opportunity to address the House. I listened with some interest to Miss McIlveen's speech, and I concur with much of what she said. The real issue is one of equality of opportunity, but selection on merit. There is no doubt that this is an issue for all Members.

The Ulster Unionist Party, in common with many other parties, has sought ways of dealing with the issue. One need only look at what Mr Cameron has tried to achieve with his A-list. Apparently, he has managed to identify the key criteria that make up ideal political candidates of either gender. Perhaps something that we ought to consider for future reference is that all political representatives should go through that kind of test. Of course, even though Mr Cameron has been successful in getting women selected in 43 out of his 107 most winnable seats, it has not been without its difficulties.

The Labour Party also tried to deal with this issue. It has had all-women lists, twinning of constituencies and zipping, yet its disappointment at the Blaenau Gwent by-election result shows that the public do not take kindly to having candidates foisted upon them.

Returning to the local situation — and there was the sad demise of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition — research was carried out on this issue, and some notable statistics emerged.

1.00 pm

First of all, 70% of men and women do not care about the gender of the person who represents them. Secondly — and this point was touched on earlier — 70% of people thought that women either chose not to put themselves forward or chose to put their family before a career in politics. In other words, we are talking about female choice. We have a challenge: we have to encourage a greater number of qualified women to come into politics.

I want to pick up on a point that my colleague made earlier. It is a little strange that other parties whose members have already contributed to the debate have actually deselected sitting female MLAs and replaced them with men.

Some Members: Who?

Mr B McCrea: This issue is one for everybody, and we do not intend to duck it — and to answer the MLAs who are interrupting, Norah Beare MLA was deselected and replaced by an all-male constituency slate, and in Newry and Armagh, Pat O'Rawe was deselected and replaced by a man. If we get to a situation — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Let the Member speak. I remind Members that this speech should not be interrupted.

Mr B McCrea: We want to attract more women into politics, but we have to consider the political system that is in place. Under the system, we have seen vote management and a very impressive display in West Belfast. It does not matter who is selected, because the vote is a vote for the party. It is therefore difficult to understand why the gender of candidates is important.

The Ulster Unionist Party believes in selecting people in a less draconian way than other parties present in the Chamber. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind Members that Mr McCrea is making his maiden speech. As such, it should be uninterrupted, yet we have had several interruptions.

Mr B McCrea: We have to encourage more people to take an interest in politics. That will be a challenge, because 50% of people out there have no interest in politics, and the other 50% believe that they were conned over the past four or five weeks. People in this Chamber were elected on a manifesto that they are not now keeping to. If we want to encourage women into politics, we have to show them that politics actually works.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Your time is up, Mr McCrea.

Mrs D Kelly: It appears that the Member for Lagan Valley touched something of a raw nerve among Members on the DUP Benches.

I have been in local politics for the past 14 years, and it has not been easy. It has involved many sacrifices. I am sure that some of our male colleagues will have made sacrifices too, but the fact remains that women continue to bear the brunt of family responsibilities — caring for children and for others who depend on us for their healthcare and social care.

Mr McCrea spoke about the electorate, and the proposer of the motion pointed out that 51% of the population of the island of Ireland is female. Mr McCrea suggested that people would vote for whomever they wanted to. However, the electorate is increasingly disengaged from democracy. Why is that? Well, when people look at their political role models, they see far too many men. Positive action is required to bring women into politics, because there are not enough opportunities or support mechanisms for them. In Northern Ireland,

the Republic of Ireland and right across Europe, we have seen that positive action works.

The SDLP does not support the amendment. For several years, we have adopted a policy of affirmative action and have put forward more female candidates in previous Assembly elections than any other party. Women make up over 40% of our representation at local council level and in SDLP party structures.

What is the case for gender equality? An increase in the number of women elected to the Assembly would lead to a higher quality of decision-making, reflecting the greater diversity of experience of those making decisions. Evidence from the newly devolved institutions in Scotland and Wales highlights that a relatively high number of people have had a discernable impact on shaping their policy agendas.

We should be mindful of that point, particularly today, when it has been revealed that 100,000 children in Northern Ireland are living in poverty. That represents a huge challenge to us all. That is one good reason why more women should be engaged in local politics.

Representation plays a greatly symbolic role. It is important for decision-makers to be effective role models and to be truly representative of their electors. Women make up 51% of the electorate. There are far too few women in this Chamber, and too few parties are taking the matter seriously. The SDLP supports the motion.

Mrs Long: It is a sad state of affairs when the only maidens on the Ulster Unionist Benches are their maiden speakers. That is something that the party should consider — that we have better representation.

Mr Kennedy: Would you like to join?

Mrs Long: I shall decline that kind invitation.

[Laughter.]

Mr Kennedy: You lot have changed parties before.

Mrs Long: The Ulster Unionist Party tends to shed, rather than gain, Members during any Assembly term. If any of that party's members would like to come in our direction and join a party with better representation, we would certainly welcome them.

Democracy is best served when the elected cohort reflects wider society. I do not believe that the current cohort does that in respect of gender representation or in respect of people with disabilities, people from ethnic minority backgrounds, young people and, indeed, many other groups in society who look at this Chamber and do not see anyone who reflects their individual interests and concerns. The Member for Strangford said that if the Assembly were an accurate reflection of society, society would become extinct. Dare I suggest that there are people outside the Chamber who would say that, if that were the case, it would not be a bad thing?

I am disappointed with the motion in that it is very narrow and considers only the issue of gender, whereas representational democracy needs to look at a much broader range of subject matters. The amendment is also extremely narrow, which I will talk about later.

Most people agree that there is a need to have a more representative democracy. However, the debate will centre not on the wording of the motion — which I am quite comfortable with — but the wording of the speeches that have taken the debate a step further. We have now entered the realms of saying that, rather than needing to investigate whether barriers exist to women entering politics, we accept that those barriers do exist and that the way to get around them is so-called positive discrimination.

I do not believe that discrimination can ever be positive; if someone is promoted for the wrong reasons, it will always have a negative effect on someone else. Discrimination is therefore always negative. In that sense, the amendment is very strong on the fundamental principle of merit — that people should be promoted on the basis of ability and nothing else. However, the amendment stops short and cuts across the original motion at the wrong point by eliminating any sense of responsibility for taking forward the work to create a level playing field. It is that aspect of the amendment that makes me uncomfortable.

Many things that stop well short of engineering equality of outcome can, and should, be done to create equality of opportunity. That is where attention should be focused.

I have some issues with regard to the speeches so far. I agree with the proposer of the amendment about the language that is used and the gender stereotyping. For example, at meetings where getting women more involved in politics is discussed, much of the time is spent talking about childcare responsibilities. Although that is not an issue for me, as I am not a parent, it is for many women, and it is a huge issue for some of my male colleagues, who are parents. Therefore, in our language and in how we address such issues, we must base our examination of the barriers to people's participation in politics on the issue rather than on a presumption that is based on a gender-biased approach.

Furthermore, we should examine societal change, and I do not agree that, at the moment, parents share full responsibility for their children or for wider caring responsibilities in the family. That is where we should be heading; however, we are not there yet, so those societal issues must be addressed.

Parties should also examine such matters as succession planning. Many of the people in this Chamber have been here for a long time. Change through those parties is more difficult to see, because there is no natural turnover.

My sympathy lies with the amendment, but I cannot support it for the following reason. The last sentence says that:

“the argument for greater representation from women can be diminished.”

I do not believe that that is true. The argument for better representation of women is a democratic imperative. The credibility of female Members can be undermined as a result of discrimination, as can the democratic process. I should prefer to see a move away from politics based on patronage, financial status, class and gender bias; however, I do not believe that simply by reversing the direction of discrimination we will achieve that end.

Mr Weir: I support the amendment, and I am glad that the motion has been brought to the Assembly. Contributions to the debate have, so far, been good, although the Ulster Unionist Party was, as far as I am aware, the only party in the Chamber to reduce the number of female candidates in the last election to the Assembly. The words “kettle” and “pot” come to mind, therefore, when the hon Member for Lagan Valley from that party decides to lecture the rest of us on the issue of encouraging more female representation.

As someone who, through the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) and the Women in Local Councils initiative, has been involved in the issue for some time, I welcome this debate. It should not be pigeon-holed as “female Members of the Assembly”. It affects all of us, whether at council or Assembly level. If we do not have a system, and if we are not fully representative of the community as a whole, we do not harness the full talents of that community. Consequently, the ability and the opportunity, at Assembly or council level, to ensure that we have the best possible solutions to problems are diminished.

A joint survey by NILGA and the National Association of Councillors (NAC) was carried out in 2005 at local council level. It indicated that female representation in Northern Ireland, although lower than in England, was similar to that in Scotland and in Wales. It was said earlier that 21% of our councillors are female.

Although the figure for those returning to local government who had previously been councillors was around 17%, one encouraging statistic from that survey was that the figure for new councillors in Northern Ireland was approximately 30% to 31%. Although that does not reach equality, it does show that things are at least moving in the right direction. However, we must be on our guard to ensure that women, particularly those who were brought in at the last election, are encouraged to remain in the system.

In the brief time remaining, I wish to address two matters, one in relation to the motion and the other to the amendment. In encouraging women into either local government or the Assembly, as was indicated by

the proposer of the amendment, quota systems will be detrimental if women are not selected solely on merit. That may prove to be successful in obtaining some seats for women, but if those women are selected, and are seen to be selected, only to reach a party quota, what kind of message does that send out?

1.15 pm

Tokenism will cause more harm to the furthering of women's careers, and their selection should be purely on merit. As has been mentioned before, the Labour Party got a lot of PR out of the “Blair babes” in 1997, but, 10 years on, the number of female MPs in the Labour Party is fewer than it was in 1997. Many of those women were brought in, and were seen to be being brought in, on an unequal basis. Consequently, that diminished their opportunity for authority.

Mention has also been made of the all-party group. As someone who has been involved with women in local councils, I have seen various organisations, such as Women Into Politics and the Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network, all of which do a very good job. However, we must move away from the idea that if we need to do something about an issue, we need to form a committee. Instead, we need action and practical measures. Encouraging women into politics is more about delivering than constantly forming strategies.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Weir: Unfortunately, I will have to decline that kind offer as I have only five minutes.

The Member who spoke previously mentioned the need to look at childcare facilities, for example, but that is not the be-all and end-all. Sometimes, particularly with female representation, people tend to look at the matter as at one stereotype, as has been previously indicated. We have to cater for the fact that if we are to encourage as many women into politics as possible — indeed, encourage many people into politics — we have to have flexibility to cover everyone's personal circumstances. Therefore, for example, simply adopting family-friendly hours may create a situation in which those involved in a career opportunity — and this is particularly true at council level — find themselves excluded from joining councils. We have to ensure flexibility so that all are covered.

The priority has to be assisting entry — not legislating quota systems to make the numbers look good. We have to look beyond a candidate's gender and get to the root of the problem of how we can put in place a strategy that encourages women. We should not be distracting ourselves with quotas; rather we should be highlighting the potential needs of everyone.

I support the amendment.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Before I address the amendment to the motion I would take this opportunity to congratulate you on your elevation to the post of Deputy Speaker on this your first Assembly sitting as Deputy Speaker.

I am speaking in favour of the motion and against the amendment, because the latter does not go far enough. It negates the original proposal in that it stops a working group being formed. That is what is important about this. We can have this one-hour debate today, and we can present anecdotal evidence and studies before us. We can go away saying that we had a debate around women in politics and that we have passed a party strategy that will come through the Executive. We can say that we are not sure when it will come but that it is there. The responsibility to ensure that women can get into politics on a fair and equitable basis rests with each and every one of us. That is what the working group should be about. The working group should go away, study the issues and look at all the various opinions in this Chamber. Sinn Féin has its own views on how to move forward on the matter, as do the Alliance Party, the DUP and the Ulster Unionists, apparently. Those views should go to the working group, and we should return to the Chamber and debate reports on the way forward that emerge from that group.

If we neglect 51% of the population on the island of Ireland, in terms of political representation, we will have failed. We can go no further. We have spent many years trying to ensure that we enter a parliamentary body here that is as representative of the people as possible. We now have to ensure that it is as representative as possible of both the genders on the island of Ireland. My mother often told me after I was elected that it was she who drummed my social conscience into me — and she was right. She often reminded me that her generation did not have a chance to have a voice. She was correct in that. We have to ensure that this generation of women has a voice. People should not be standing up on their behalf, but women should be speaking in the Chamber not only about women's issues but on all the complex issues that will be raised in the Assembly in the weeks and months ahead.

Why do women not seek elected office? Is it because they do not want to be politicians, because they do not have ideas, or because they do not have thoughts and principles on the way in which society should be formed? Of course they do. However, we cannot stand over a statement that says that women do not seek elected office, and then move away from that statement; nor can we say that quota systems do not work because women do not seek elected office. Sinn Féin's view of the quota system is that every woman on the list is there through merit and not because they are women. Sinn Féin ensures that those women are then placed in winnable seats.

The SDLP makes much of the fact that it had more women candidates in the last election than any other party. The vast majority of those women stood in constituencies where there was no chance of their being elected. There must be a responsibility to ensure that women are placed in constituencies where they will be elected and eventually end up in the Chamber to make a contribution.

I am not making a case for dismissing the amendment because it does not come from Sinn Féin or because it comes from the DUP. The amendment has fundamental flaws. It would cut out a working group, and the gender equality strategy does not particularly refer to women in politics. The motion proposes that we ensure that we get women into politics. The gender equality strategy covers a much wider remit and has its own place, but it is not specific to the issue. Therefore, I support the motion and oppose the amendment.

Mr Beggs: I support the amendment. The principle of equality of opportunity must be maintained, and Members must be appointed on merit. The Ulster Unionist Party does not want quotas. I was disappointed at the number of female Assembly candidates put forward for election and the number that have been elected. The Ulster Unionist Party is already addressing that issue by carrying out a major review.

Several Members have had a go at the Ulster Unionist Party and its all-male Benches. The Ulster Unionist Party could easily have had a female Assembly Member if its MP for North Down had stood, and I have no doubt that she would have been elected. However, would that have been good for her constituents? She cannot be in Westminster and in the Assembly at the same time, and I respect her decision not to stand. I hope that people will appreciate that and stop using that fact as an opportunity to have a whack at the Ulster Unionist Party.

The Assembly must be more gender-representative of the community. I will give Members an example of an area in which males, for some reason, have not become involved, which can be easily overlooked. In my constituency, I am involved in children's and young people's issues. I am involved in a Sure Start scheme in the Carrickfergus and Larne area, and frequently I am the only male member attending committee meetings, as males overlook those issues. Females are more aware of those important issues and could bring them to the Assembly at a higher level than males. That is just one example.

What can be done? Individual parties must address the issue. Some female candidates have been reluctant to put themselves forward for election, and all parties must address that issue. Parties should provide training and support, and encourage more women to put themselves forward for election to councils, the Assembly, Westminster and the European Parliament.

I agree that quotas are not the way forward and would be demeaning to women, and many women political activists to whom I have spoken agree with that viewpoint.

I agree with other Members that the next local government election should be seen as the most likely launching pad for many new female careers. Undoubtedly, local government is the level at which new people can become involved more easily, and if, in two years' time, there are many more successful female candidates, I have no doubt that in the two years after that, the make-up of the Assembly will change. To have more female candidates at council, Assembly or whatever level should be a target for all those involved in politics.

Mr K Robinson: Does the Member agree that the Ulster Unionist group on Newtownabbey Borough Council is an example to follow? The majority of UUP members on the last council were female, including the leader and, in 2000, the mayor. On the current council there is 50:50 gender representation in that group, with the chief whip and the leader both being female. Surely that is an example for all to follow.

Mr Beggs: I agree. That is a very good example that should be replicated throughout Northern Ireland.

To return to the issue of double-jobbing, which is a big issue affecting gender balance, there are 18 Northern Ireland MPs, of which 15 are male and three are female, including one female who has decided not to stand again. What happens when an MP stands for a local council or for the Assembly? One can weigh the votes. Double- and treble-jobbing is one of the greatest issues creating gender imbalance in the Assembly and at local government level.

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: I need to continue, as I am nearly out of time.

It is important that the issue of double-jobbing be addressed so that constituents can be properly represented in the Assembly and at Westminster. It is impossible for one person to properly represent several bodies at once.

If we are serious about the problem of the under-representation of women in politics, the practical issue of double- and treble-jobbing provides one way to address the problem. I see that some Members are touchy about that issue. What happens when a male Member of Parliament stands for the Assembly with an all-male team? Often, three or four of that team will be elected. A debate on the mechanisms that allow MPs to stand for multiple bodies could improve the gender balance by leading to the creation of vacancies.

Ms Purvis: As the only female party leader in the UK, and perhaps the British Isles, I support the motion over the amendment. Members have spoken about equality of opportunity, against the issue of quotas and

in favour of the merit principle — I would like to see equality of outcomes.

In the community that I come from, women are still the main carers; they still have responsibility for looking after children or elderly relatives who may be ill, along with children or other relatives who may have severe learning disabilities. In my community, women still have the main responsibility for domestic chores — looking after the house, cleaning, washing and cooking. They still earn less than men: it was recently reported that, on average, women earn 80% of a man's weekly wage. We have not even achieved equality of opportunity, never mind outcome.

Certain Members have talked about the "presumption" that women are still the main carers. It is not a presumption but a fact that women are still the main carers right across the board. It is a fact that they still have responsibility for housekeeping, and it is a fact that they still earn less than men.

Even though women make up more than 51% of the population, we do not have 51% representation in this Assembly. In fact, I do not believe that we have 51% representation in any of the Houses across the United Kingdom.

I do not particularly agree with quotas, but they could be useful where there is reluctance to examine the barriers that are faced by women. The use of quotas could be an important measure to make people look at the structural difficulties that women face. The introduction of quotas may come about. They could always be revised once equal representation has been achieved.

I would like to see this Assembly endorsing politics as a real career choice for women, because currently it is not. In my community, women would run a mile in the opposite direction at the mention of politics as a career. That is because they face many barriers when it comes to having a career in politics.

They face emotional and practical barriers. I am a great believer in the idea that if the practical barriers are sorted out, the emotional barriers that prevent women from taking their rightful place in the politics of this country will also be removed.

1.30 pm

Lack of confidence is one emotional barrier that women face. Moreover, their role as children's main carers means that they feel guilty about leaving their children in order to go to work. That happens not only in politics but across the board. However, if we remove the practical barriers that women face daily, those emotional barriers can be overcome.

The House has gone a long way to dealing with the practical barriers that women face in becoming involved in politics. The Assembly holds its plenary sittings and Committee meetings during the day, not at night. It

provides childcare facilities and ensures that women can afford childcare that is of a proper quality. That provision helps to ease the emotional barriers that women encounter when they have to leave children or elderly dependants in order to attend meetings.

Mr Weir mentioned the “Blair babes”. He said that for the Labour Party to get so many women elected in 1997 had been a great achievement, but he went on to ask where they are now. Where are they now? They are no longer in Parliament because the structures necessary to support them did not change. It was great, then, to get women into Parliament at Westminster, but no support mechanisms were set up to ensure that they remained there. The Assembly has support mechanisms in place to ensure that women stay here. We must do more, however, and that is why I support the motion. The Assembly should support projects that encourage women to follow a career in politics, such as Women in Politics and Girls into Government (GIG). GIG works with working-class teenage girls to give them an opportunity to learn what politics is about. It exposes them to politics, and it plans to bring them up to the Assembly to see what is happening.

Mrs Foster: Although I understand the frustration that some of my female colleagues have expressed, we must recognise that devolution holds out the prospect not only of more females becoming involved in politics but of more young people becoming involved, and, as my Friend Naomi Long has said, more people from ethnic minorities and people with disabilities. That positive exists now that devolution has returned.

A low percentage of women may have been elected to the Chamber, but we must remember that the percentage of women Ministers compared to the number of MLAs is much higher. That is a tribute to the party leaders. Of the five main parties, it is notable that it is my party leader who is the only one who has been present for the entire debate. I therefore thank him for taking an interest in the debate on female participation in politics.

We have a comprehensive strategy to tackle the under-representation of women in, as has been said, all parts of life — the gender equality strategy that the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister introduced some time ago. I welcomed that strategy at the time, and, as far as I understand, the Executive have not resiled from the commitment to that strategy that parties made during suspension. I see no prospect of their resiling from that commitment — a point that was raised at the beginning of the debate. We should not use finite resources to reinvent the wheel when we have a gender equality strategy already in place.

I wish to touch briefly on some points that were raised during the debate. Basil McCrea talked about equality of opportunity and selection based on merit.

After that, his speech descended into a farce of Monty Python proportions. Dolores Kelly talked about support mechanisms to allow women to come through the system, and she also talked about comparative figures from other Administrations. Naomi Long dealt with the fact that the elected cohort here does not represent women in the way in which it should do. She also stated that women should be promoted on the basis of ability. She felt that language needed to be looked at, and, as a result, she felt unable to support the amendment.

My colleague Peter Weir reflected on his experience as president of NILGA and its Women in Local Councils programme. I commend his leadership in that area. He also mentioned the need for action instead of simply setting up committees or working groups.

John O'Dowd spoke in favour of the motion and against the amendment. He felt that because the gender equality strategy covers all issues, it is not focused enough to deal with the issue of the under-representation of women in politics.

Roy Beggs supported the amendment and tried to defend his party's lack of female MLAs by pointing to the fact that Sylvia Hermon had decided not to run for an Assembly seat. I acknowledge that, although 100% of the Ulster Unionist Party's MLAs are male, 100% of its MPs are female. *[Laughter.]*

Dawn Purvis is the only female leader in the House, and she supported the motion. She focused on equality of outcome rather than equality of opportunity. She does not agree with quotas, and she talked about some of the barriers women in politics face.

There are many reasons for women not getting involved in politics, and Dawn Purvis dealt with some of them. Some obvious reasons are the aggressive nature of politics, the misogynistic attitudes of some male politicians, the long hours involved and women's lack of self-belief. Many women feel that they do not have all of the necessary skills and therefore take a back seat. That does not seem to prevent our male colleagues — I am not looking at anyone in particular. *[Laughter.]*

All those issues can be overcome, but I genuinely do not believe that a working group will encourage more women to get involved in politics. More DUP female voices are being raised at every level. I know that colleagues in the Assembly, both male and female, will continue to encourage and sustain those women who put themselves forward. As a party, we take the issue of female participation very seriously. I genuinely believe that now that the Assembly is up and running, more women will enter political life.

However, Members must face the fact that not everybody wants to get involved in politics. Just as some mothers want to stay at home, others will go out

to work. We must facilitate choice, so that everyone has equality of opportunity to come forward. Yes, we should make it easier for women to participate in political life, but setting up working groups is not the way forward.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. This motion is about setting up a working group. Many Members have commented on gender equality and gender imbalance, and some of those comments have been relevant and interesting. However, this is not a debate about gender equality; this is a debate about establishing a working group. At this very moment, the International Development All Party Assembly Group is meeting, and, in the past, working groups have focused on children and young people, disability, autism, and so on. Thus, when Members felt strongly enough about an issue, the Assembly decided to establish a working group to examine the issue further on a cross-party basis.

I understand that some parties feel that promoting the idea of a working group — and any actions that may arise from it — might be a bridge too far. I can reveal, without fear of contradiction, that, at the last Business Committee meeting, one of my male colleagues made an underhand remark about a woman's place being in the kitchen. Therefore, I am not surprised that some Members do not support the establishment of a working group. However, Members must take seriously their role as leaders, and political parties have a responsibility to make the first move. The establishment of a working group, and the implementation of any other initiatives that may arise from the work of this Assembly, can only complement that effort. However, such initiatives must not become a substitute for work that should begin in political parties.

Unless the Assembly shows leadership, initiatives such as the Women in Local Councils and the Women into Politics programmes will be put under even more pressure.

As far as I am aware, Belfast City Council is the only institution in which female members and female officials work together to resolve the issue. The council's cross-party working group has worked well and has led by example.

Last week's events mean that many people will look to the Assembly to see what type of leadership it will provide and whether its Members will act as positive role models. I welcome the opportunity to assist the Ulster Unionist Party in encouraging more women into politics. I and other Members do not want to look constantly at Benches that are male, pale and grey. Therefore I support the motion and reject the amendment.

Mr Kennedy: That is an accurate representation!

Ms Ní Chuilín: Take a wee lie down, Danny.
[Laughter.]

Mr Deputy Speaker: Ciúnas. Order.

Question put, that the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 44; Noes 43

AYES

Billy Armstrong, Roy Beggs, Allan Bresland, Lord Browne, Thomas Buchanan, Gregory Campbell, Trevor Clarke, Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Jonathan Craig, Nigel Dodds, Jeffrey Donaldson, Alex Easton, Tom Elliott, Sir Reg Empey, Arlene Foster, Samuel Gardiner, Simon Hamilton, David Hilditch, William Irwin, Danny Kennedy, John McCallister, Basil McCrea, Ian McCrea, Dr William McCrea, Michael McGimpsey, Michelle McIlveen, David McNarry, Adrian McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Stephen Moutray, Robin Newton, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Ian Paisley Jnr, Edwin Poots, George Robinson, Ken Robinson, George Savage, Jim Shannon, David Simpson, Jimmy Spratt, Mervyn Storey, Peter Weir, Jim Wells, Sammy Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Arlene Foster and Michelle McIlveen.

NOES

Martina Anderson, Alex Attwood, Cathal Boylan, Dominic Bradley, Mary Bradley, P J Bradley, Mickey Brady, Francie Brolly, Thomas Burns, Paul Butler, Willie Clarke, John Dallat, Mark Durkan, Dr Stephen Farry, David Ford, Tommy Gallagher, Michelle Gildernew, Carmel Hanna, Dolores Kelly, Anna Lo, Naomi Long, Fra McCann, Jennifer McCann, Kieran McCarthy, Raymond McCartney, Dr Alasdair McDonnell, Barry McElduff, Claire McGill, Patsy McGlone, Daithí McKay, Mitchel McLaughlin, Alban Maginness, Alex Maskey, Conor Murphy, Sean Neeson, Carál Ní Chuilín, John O'Dowd, Declan O'Loan, Michelle O'Neill, Pat Ramsey, Sue Ramsey, Margaret Ritchie, Brian Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Paul Butler and Michelle O'Neill.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly expresses serious concerns about the under-representation of women in the Assembly and calls on all parties to commit themselves to addressing the situation; recognises the commitment of the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to implementing the Gender Equality Strategy; and believes that individuals should obtain positions on merit, otherwise the argument for greater representation from women can be diminished.

Development of the Rail Network

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one and a half hours for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to speak and 10 minutes to make the winding-up speech — [*Interruption.*]

Order. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes. Two amendments have been received and are published on the Marshalled List. If amendment No 1 is made, amendment No 2 will fall. The proposers of the amendments will each have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes to make their winding-up speeches.

Mr Dallat: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls upon the Department for Regional Development to bring forward their plans for upgrading the rail network to provide attractive inter-city services between the principal centres of population within Northern Ireland and onwards to the Republic of Ireland.

I am grateful for the opportunity to bring the motion before the House. It is some time since the previous Assembly found the money to invest in the new train sets that now serve the public in a style that was not previously possible. The public response to that investment has been encouraging, with the number of passengers using the Belfast to Derry line having doubled from half a million to one million a year. On other lines, business has increased by 30% or more, clearly indicating that when the level and reliability of rail transport improves, the public responds positively.

However, it would be a gross exaggeration to suggest that anything close to a proper intercity service that is capable of attracting a huge number of passengers away from road to rail transport has been achieved.

Since those new trains were introduced, interest in rail transport has increased to a new level in both parts of the island. Indeed, as the election campaign heats up in the Republic, it is clear that rail transport has become a major green issue — in the environmental sense, of course. Pipe dreams about extending rail facilities beyond Derry to Letterkenny and Sligo, thereby opening up the west, have become a possibility; indeed, dare I say, a reality.

That is good news for the whole island. Rail transport functions best when the network is comprehensive.

I acknowledge the co-operation of the councils served by the Belfast to Derry line, including Derry City Council and the Limavady, Coleraine, Ballymoney, Ballymena and Antrim borough councils, which encompass all the political parties.

2.00 pm

Mr K Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I think that Newtownabbey Borough Council should also be included in that grouping.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order.

Mr Dallat: I gladly acknowledge Newtownabbey Borough Council's contribution to the work.

By working together, the councils played a significant role in ensuring that plans to cut the line at Ballymena were not carried through, and some additional money was made available to carry out modest improvements — although not on the scale required to create a frequent, high-speed service. Translink is conducting an internal review, but that will not generate the kind of new money that is required to deliver what we now know will attract big numbers of commuters out of their cars, away from the roads and onto the railways.

In the future, unlike the past, the rail transport infrastructure must not be forced to compete with the day-to-day running expenses of the Assembly. The serious deficit will not be solved in the short or long term if it has to compete day and daily with, for instance, education and health. That is what happened in the past. Money for infrastructure — be it road, rail, sea or air — must come from separate ring-fenced resources, otherwise we will repeat the mistakes of the past and the deterioration will continue.

The motion is not only about the Belfast to Derry line, where, as I have said, there are huge opportunities for creating a new joined-up network in the west of Ireland that would bring about not only a positive contribution to the environment and a meaningful reduction in road fatalities but an enormous boost to our tourism industry. The rail network tangibly symbolises a new economic revival; it is a public statement of new confidence in the future. Let us use it to tell the world that we are on the move — advancing — and leaving behind the shackles of the past that prevented investment and encouraged decay.

A man once told me that there will be those who will be remembered for what they built, and there will be those who will be forgotten for what they neglected or destroyed. Let the Assembly belong to the former category.

The reopening of the mothballed Antrim to Lisburn line must be high on the agenda. We must insist that the Department for Regional Development takes phrases such as “non-core lines” and “lesser-used lines” out of its vocabulary, and we must encourage its officials to accept that the entire network is critical to the future of public transport. The same applies to Belfast's rail network, and for that reason the SDLP will have no difficulty in accepting the amendment proposed by Mr Beggs.

We have recently received renewed offers of financial help from the European Union. We must put concrete proposals for the renewing of the Belfast to Dublin Enterprise service before the European Union as a trans-European project, and in so doing emphasise that the eastern corridor is not the only route to the Republic and that the western corridor must not be ignored.

In the past, we have encouraged both Governments to work together to ensure that our relationships with the European Union are maximised to the mutual benefit of both parts of the island. We are now in a strong position to ensure that that happens.

Reviews and appraisals are a necessary part of any new venture, but this part of the Assembly's business must not be unnecessarily held up by bureaucracy and red tape.

Mr S Wilson: I take the Member's point about reviews and appraisals, but assessing the costs of a proposal is part and parcel of any decision-making process. Is the Member aware of the possible costs of his proposals, and, if not, does he believe that it will be necessary to have an appraisal of any investment project like this?

Mr Dallat: Of course I am aware of the need for appraisals. I wish that the appraisal of the refurbishment of the Belfast to Bangor line, on which there was an overspend of £20 million, had been done better. I am sure that that is of concern to the Member.

If the Assembly has confidence in its ability to make this part of the world economically viable, the £500 million investment that is needed in the north-west could be recovered within 10 years. In the past, the Assembly has encouraged both Governments to work together to ensure that relationships with the European Union are maximised to the mutual benefit of both parts of the island. The Assembly is now in a strong position to do that.

I am sorry to repeat myself, but reviews and appraisals are necessary. However, my point is that we must not get bogged down in so much red tape that nothing happens. The campaign for renewal began long ago: the arguments were made and were won. Action is now needed to demonstrate that the Assembly has the will and the determination to begin the march towards a new confidence and to acknowledge that the past failed us all and must, therefore, be addressed in a positive and practical way.

Rebuilding the infrastructure is vital. However, it must be immediate and decisive. That infrastructure will attract inward investment, international tourism and, in particular, the confidence of the people whom we serve. In the past, the need to maintain the railways was not fully understood. They were ripped up all over the island of Ireland. In Britain, the railways were systematically destroyed after the Beeching Report.

The price that is now being paid for that is choked motorways everywhere.

At present, railways in the Republic are reopening, particularly in the west, where there is an acknowledgement that the issue of public transport infrastructure is not just about the existing volume of use but the need to deliver equality and target social need in those areas that have been disadvantaged in the past. That is particularly true in the north; hence the need to end the use of discriminatory terms such as "non-core" and "lesser-used" as criteria for investment.

I hope that the debate provides the opportunity for those who take part to support the motion and send a clear message to both the British and Irish Governments, and especially to the European Union, to acknowledge the deficits of the past and to participate in building anew in everyone's common interests, offering no threat to anyone.

Finally, I would have liked to embrace both amendments. Unfortunately, the partitionist philosophy is still present. I have no doubt, however, that, in time, now that we have realised that we belong to a global village, and that people in Europe can move from one part to another without hindrance or regard for political borders, we will have the confidence to follow suit.

Lord Morrow: I beg to move amendment No 1: Leave out all after "Assembly" and insert

"notes the positive impact that a devolved Minister was able to have on rail previously, including the acquisition of new stock and the provision of free transport for senior citizens; and calls upon the Department for Regional Development to bring forward its plans for upgrading the existing rail network and further development of the network throughout Northern Ireland."

I have listened intently to Mr Dallat's speech. It was a good speech until it reached the last paragraph or two, which is regrettable. Even on issues such as that which is being debated, there are those who seem compelled to politicise everything. I can see Mr Dallat smiling because he knows that what I have just said is the perfect truth. He has been caught offside. However, that will be dealt with at another time.

It is fitting that the debate should take place in the early stages of the new Assembly. Transport is a key issue for the future well-being of Northern Ireland. I acknowledge that in the past — even under the failed Belfast Agreement — considerable progress was made in that field. The previous Minister for Regional Development Peter Robinson took strident steps to enhance the rail network throughout Northern Ireland. However, much still needs to be done. We look forward to that progress.

Northern Ireland's railway network plays a key role in transportation. New trains that were purchased during the first mandate are now in use on key routes. Senior citizens are able to travel for free, not only on

railways, but on other modes of public transport. It is important that that is acknowledged.

Members should examine the possibilities for developing the railway network, but our view should be holistic in the wider context that a huge area of Northern Ireland does not have access to the railway. The road network is the main transport system in those areas and, unfortunately, is likely to remain so. Nevertheless, I hope that, in any review, the Minister will take a wider view than simply examining the existing railway structure.

Those who come from the west must travel a considerable distance to even see a train, never mind receive the services to which they are entitled. In the part of the world that I come from, the last railway system was known as the Clogher Valley Railway — and that is long departed. It cannot be right that a large geographical area of Northern Ireland should never be considered for a railway network.

It is important that the Assembly takes those points seriously when it considers the way forward on this important matter.

Dr W McCrea: Does the hon Member agree that areas that were previously mothballed, such as the Lisburn and Antrim lines, must be put into operation again? Furthermore, it cannot be acceptable that there is no link between Belfast International Airport and the city of Belfast. That must be addressed.

Lord Morrow: I thank my colleague Dr McCrea for making that excellent point, which is poignant and significant.

It is in the nature of Mr Dallat that, when he speaks, he likes to get a sting in at the end —

Mr Campbell: He is a scorpion.

Lord Morrow: He is a wee bit like that. Mr Dallat thinks that the Members on this side of the House shrivel up every time the Irish Republic is mentioned. There may be good reason for doing that, but the DUP comprises forward-looking people. My party believes that there should be a proper and workable rail infrastructure that links Northern Ireland, for which Members are responsible, and the rest of the island. I suspect that Mr Dallat is surprised to hear me say that. The DUP has good reasons to put up a Great Wall of China, and it does not forget how the Republic of Ireland allowed its territory to be used to house and offer security to those who committed all sorts of crimes. However, Members must make an honest effort to establish a rail network that will be fit for purpose.

With the restoration of the devolved Assembly, Members are told that tourists will flock in by the planeload, trainload and any other means that will convey them. Members will all say “Hear, hear”, because that is the way that it should be. It is only with

a proper rail network and transport system that those issues can be taken forward.

I hope that the House will support the amendment that is tabled in my name, because it does not take anything away, but adds to what Members are trying to achieve in Northern Ireland — a proper, functional, fit-for-purpose railway infrastructure. I hope that Mr Dallat and his colleagues will see the wisdom of that and, when they think it through, will resoundingly support the amendment.

I hope that the same progress is made with railways and transportation under the present Minister as was seen under the previous devolved Minister for Regional Development.

2.15 pm

Rail travel should be developed and enhanced — but in conjunction with the other transport links in Northern Ireland, to provide a truly integrated system. That is the challenge for the new Minister, who I hope will soon give us plans that will benefit all travellers right across Northern Ireland. That can only create an enhancing spin-off for the whole of Northern Ireland.

Mr Beggs: I beg to move amendment No 2: Leave out all after “attractive” and insert

“commuting options and also inter-city services between the principal centres of population and the neighbouring regions.”

I thank Mr Dallat for indicating his support for this amendment. I propose it because some of the language in the motion causes me some concern. “Inter-city services” and “principal centres of population” are not clearly defined. “Inter-city” could mean narrow benefit to only the long-distance traveller; for example, someone travelling from Londonderry to Belfast or from Belfast to Dublin. It is important that commuters throughout Northern Ireland benefit from improvements to the service. I want local commuting options to be included.

Although it is important that there be good regional transport networks throughout Europe — and that means transport links from Belfast to Dublin — there are also important transport links on the Trans-European Network, and from Belfast to Larne and Stranraer, and on to other European destinations. It is also important that everyone is considered when encouraging investment in railways. The student who needs to travel to college and who values rail transport where it is available needs to be included, along with the tourist and the business traveller.

Senior citizens also value the service, but there must be accessible points where they can enter the network. That is why local railway stations are important and need to be upgraded. We must improve our park-and-ride facilities, and walking and cycling access to stations, so that as many people as possible can be included in the regional transport plan that was presented

to the previous Assembly to try to encourage a modal shift from road to rail.

There is another reason why I thought that it was important to widen the scope of the motion, and many Members will be unaware of this. Northern Ireland got 23 new train sets; everyone said "Hurrah". None of them came to East Antrim or the Larne line. We still have all the old sets.

Therefore there is an issue of rail equality in Northern Ireland. Why do the East Antrim commuters have to be second-class citizens? The new trains are much more disabled-friendly, and therefore the use of rail could be widened to a much bigger community. At present, East Antrim and Larne do not have those disabled-friendly facilities, so it is important that further rail investment should allow other parts of the rail network to experience the uplift in rail transport that results from the introduction of those new, quality services. If we really want a modal shift —

Mr S Wilson: Does the Member accept that the issue is not just about the quality of the trains, or whether they are disabled-friendly, but the fact that those trains, being so old, break down regularly? Therefore, people will not use them, because they cannot be sure of getting to work on time or getting back from work.

Mr Beggs: I agree that punctuality is one of the biggest issues, and I am thankful that punctuality has been improving on the east Antrim line. It is important that we do not scare rail commuters away, because the Member's prophecy could become self-fulfilling. We must recognise that punctuality has improved. Even the older trains that, on occasion, were cold and damp have been improving. Recent surveys of passenger numbers in the area have indicated that that is the case.

However, the number of passengers using the service could increase greatly if new trains were provided. It is unfair that one section of railway in Northern Ireland does not have these new high-quality trains; and it is that very section that is part of the Trans-European Network. Tourists coming to Northern Ireland by train, or wishing to travel onwards from Belfast to Scotland must think that we are part of a Third World economy, since we use these ancient trains that are not of a quality expected by modern travellers.

I hope that all Members are able to appreciate the wording of my amendment, which does not rule anything out, but seeks to improve the travel of local commuters, to improve opportunities and to promote improvements in regional travel throughout the United Kingdom and onwards to Dublin.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom fáilte a chur roimh an rún agus tacaíocht a thabhairt dó. Phléigh an Tionól an t-ábhar seo cheana féin, agus tá a fhios agam go bhfuil

an-suim ag an Chomhalta John Dallat sa cheist seo agus go bhfuil cuid mhór oibre déanta aige uirthi. Ba mhaith liom a aithint go bhfuil an tAire Conchúr Ó Murchú inár measc inniu. I welcome and support the motion proposed by the Member for East Derry. He has consistently raised this subject in the Assembly and elsewhere. I acknowledge the presence of Conor Murphy, the relevant Minister.

Sinn Féin remains committed to building an Ireland of equals. I emphasise the word "building", since we must build the physical transport infrastructure to deliver that Ireland towards which we strive.

The project that lies ahead is developing rail travel with all its associated benefits, putting in place a fully integrated, accessible and multi-modal transport strategy. That is the task that we have set ourselves.

Today's debate serves as a timely reminder of how much we have been deprived in the past of the ability to develop, socially and economically. It is not my intention to concentrate on the past; Sinn Féin looks forward in the coming months and years with optimism to delivering, with all the parties, what we have set out to do.

As many Members know, in travelling to carry out public responsibilities, there is an over-reliance on the car, and that that has now reached breaking point. The status and overemphasis that we place on the car is incompatible with the approach of our European neighbours. As was once said, one cannot build one's way out of congestion by building roads.

Ós rud é gurb as Doire mé, tá a fhios agam nach bhfuil an córas iarnróid sásta ag daoine atá ina gcónaí sa chathair agus sna ceantair máguaird. Bhí mé ar chruinniú i dTír Chonaill an tseachtain seo chaite — contae ina raibh dhá chéad míle iarnróid tráth ach nach bhfuil oiread agus míle amháin aici anois. As I am from Derry, I am only too familiar with the poor rail connections of our city. Last week I attended a discussion in Donegal town. At the beginning of the last century, County Donegal had some 200 miles of rail network, with four rail operators. Today, it has not a single rail track. That meeting accepted that the argument for rail in Donegal is enhanced by the retention and upgrading of the line to Derry, and that Derry should be linked to Sligo, and so on. The motion represents a real opportunity for these institutions to work with our friends and neighbours in border counties.

In recent times, Donegal County Council has commissioned a feasibility study on the development of railway systems and links to Derry and beyond. Working with the Irish Government, and exploiting the European Union platform, to establish that, should not be viewed as cross-border or all-Ireland infrastructure; however, we should be seeking the establishment of an internationally recognised rail route from Derry to Kerry,

and from Dublin to Belfast, in a loop. The amendments, as tabled, seek only to reduce the scope of the problem.

Dr Deeny: I ask the Member and the Member who moved the motion whether they refer to the counties of Tyrone and Fermanagh, mentioned by Lord Morrow? There is huge tourist potential there. In Tyrone there are the Sperrins and the Ulster Amercian Folk Park; in Fermanagh there are the lakes. In addition to that, from Omagh alone some 250 cars travel to Belfast daily, and a similar number travel from Fermanagh.

If we are talking about the north-west, my concern is that the Member is excluding County Tyrone and County Fermanagh — I hope not.

Mr McCartney: Absolutely not. My reference to the western corridor includes those border counties, as well as Cavan, Monaghan and elsewhere.

Inserting partitionism into the debate is wrong. It was said at last week's meeting in Donegal town that stopping the Derry line would undermine the need for other networks. The result of confining rail development to the six Northern Counties would be that we would have a railway only in and around Belfast. We all agree that that should not happen.

There are obvious environmental, social and economic benefits in having a proper rail network. The deaths on our roads over the weekend highlight the undoubted safety of rail travel, and that should not be lost on our policy-makers and decision-makers.

The previous Assembly brought forward several options; in particular, the viability of the Derry to Belfast line. As regards Dr Deeny's point, if the Derry to Belfast line were lost, there would be no possibility of extending the rail network to Tyrone and Fermanagh. It is important — and this is not from a parochial standpoint — that when it comes to promoting new rail networks, we ensure that the existing network is upgraded in order to protect any addition.

I, and my party, support the motion. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Mr Ford: I welcome the debate, and I thank Mr Dallat for initiating it. I also welcome the near unanimity among all Members who have spoken, and I look forward to hearing what the new Minister will say on the matter. It is time for him to establish that his Department has ceased to be the Department for roads development and that it actually does a bit of rail development as part of its functions.

However, Lord Morrow's self-congratulatory speech about his party was out of line with the near unanimity achieved. I remember some of the issues he mentioned — in particular, the day that Mr Campbell, the then Minister for Regional Development, came to Crumlin to announce that the Knockmore line was to remain in operation for a year. I also remember that he did not

show his face in south Antrim a year later when he closed the line.

If we hope to increase our rail infrastructure, we must ensure that we do so completely and in all places. Although we should celebrate the success of the Assembly, in its first guise, in maintaining any kind of railway system — without the Assembly, we probably would have been reduced to having the Enterprise line and nothing else — we should not be too self-congratulatory, as a lot needs to be done.

It has been highlighted that the Bangor to Portadown line is providing a service and attracting passengers but at a considerable cost overrun. If the Assembly is to ensure that it gets best value for money, it must ensure that that does not happen again.

Mr Beggs highlighted a particular issue, and I know that Sean Neeson would not forgive me if I did not mention the failure to provide new rolling stock on the Larne line and that the decision to order 23 train sets was inadequate for the needs of the existing rail lines. There is also a need to improve timetables because they are a major disincentive to people to use trains. They are difficult to read when compared with bus timetables, which tend to be much simpler on some key routes. In retrospect, the decision to purchase 23 new train sets represented not nearly enough investment. Another 18 to 20 sets should have been ordered.

The lack of railway infrastructure north of Ballymena was highlighted — John Dallat is keenly interested in that matter. That must be addressed if the Assembly hopes to link the main population centres.

I welcome the fact that the amendment proposed by Mr Beggs refers to some significant key areas in respect of rail use — for example, commuter services into Belfast. That is why it is so unfortunate that the DUP, in a past life, closed the Knockmore line and thereby made it more difficult to reinstate services that could have linked to Belfast International Airport, which Dr McCrea, as the local MP, spoke about enthusiastically. Perhaps, rather than addressing the rest of us, he should speak with Mr Campbell and link up the inconsistencies in the DUP's position on that point.

2.30 pm

We need to develop those commuter services to ensure that people in places such as Crumlin and Antrim — which has a growing population — Mossley and Ballyclare get a decent transport service. We must follow through on Translink's plans — which have not yet been funded by DRD — to get a rail and bus interchange beside the M2 at Templepatrick. Implementing those plans would do far more to decrease congestion at Sandyknowes than any plans to widen the motorway.

If development of the rail network is to be taken seriously, it must be at the heart of DRD policy. The

Department must establish the circumstances in which trains can begin to substitute for use of the private car. The Alliance Party is not sure that that point has been reached.

When discussing option appraisals and research, it is easy to look at the financial factors involved. However, factors such as social inclusion — mentioned in the debate in relation to who has access to private vehicles — have not yet been taken into account. Other factors include the growing environmental problem that is now recognised across the world. Only public transport will solve our problems in commuting on the current mass scale, and commuting into Belfast in particular.

The motion and amendment No 2 highlight some key issues that must be addressed. However, many problems will not be solved without a significant and serious input. There is no way that the Assembly will be able to resolve the environmental problems around Belfast if it continues to allow the private car to eat up 60% of the investment in transport. If the motion is to mean anything, Members must accept that the rail network is a key part of our transport infrastructure and not just as an option for a few extra visitors.

If I may digress into your own county, Mr Deputy Speaker, I believe that Mr McCartney and his colleagues will have to determine what the key development in the west of the Province will be. They will have to decide whether a railway line through Donegal will be better than one through west Tyrone, which I once used on my summer holidays and look forward to using again.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Thank you for including us in the debate.

Mr Wells: Mention has already been made of the successes of previous devolved Ministers in delivering free transport for the elderly and improvements to rolling stock. Of course, those previous Ministers were Mr Peter Robinson and Mr Gregory Campbell.

Mr Beggs: Does the Member accept that the previous Ministers for Regional Development made those successful changes with funding approved by the Executive, and that it was the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister that provided funding for free transport?

Mr Wells: Yes, but the two Ministers made very wise use of that money, and I am far from confident that other Ministers would have had the ability to do so.

Before any strategy is examined, Members must remember that rail travel is not accessible by everyone in Northern Ireland. People living in west Tyrone, Fermanagh and, indeed, large parts of south Down, have no access to rail transport unless they are prepared to travel considerable distances by private car. However, the Assembly should be doing all that it

can to ensure that those who do have access to a railway line are encouraged to use it.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Encouraging greater use of the rail network would reduce congestion — an increasing problem in Belfast and across many parts of the Province — and there would be environmental benefits. Financial costs must always be included in any assessment, but environmental impact is becoming more important. Northern Ireland has to meet the targets set down in the Kyoto protocol, and the draft Climate Change Bill is putting strict limits on carbon dioxide emissions. One way of reducing those emissions is to move people off private transport and onto trains and buses.

Northern Ireland's transport policy is built on the regional transportation strategy. Longer-serving Members will remember that in 2002 the strategy was passed in the Chamber unanimously. However, there is some way to go before implementation will be completed.

A start must be made on improving the rail experience of passengers in Northern Ireland. Ministers began the process by purchasing new C3K trains, but there is much room for improvement. Obviously those trains are used on the busiest lines, but Northern Ireland Railways still has a high percentage of rolling stock that could not be described as modern. As a student at Queen's University in 1980, I cleaned trains at the old station at Sydenham — 27 years ago. The sad reality is that some of the trains that I cleaned all that time ago are still being used to convey passengers.

David Cairns, the former Minister with responsibility for regional development, in a reply to my colleague Iris Robinson, who was showing a concern for public transportation through a parliamentary question, stated that a number of C3K trains were used on the main lines, and that there were nine Class 400 units that were between 19 and 21 years old, six MK2 coaches that were 33 years old and three Class 80 trains that were between 28 and 32 years old — those were some of those that I cleaned in Sydenham. Obviously, trains that are approaching 30 years old do not provide the best experience for passengers.

It is important that an attempt be made to increase the number of people making use of our railways and that passengers have the most pleasurable journey possible. The main purpose is not to drive people off the road but to entice them on to the trains, because public transport is so much better — a more enjoyable journey to and from work. Certainly some of the trains that are in service at the moment would not entice anyone to use them.

The biggest single feature of a journey is the train on which people are travelling. That is obviously backed up by making sure that services run on time

and do not break down en route, and I know that this is a big problem with the Larne line.

I hope that the Minister will bring forward plans to improve rail travel for passengers in Northern Ireland. However, there is no doubt that he will realise that if one searches the Ulsterbus and Northern Ireland Railways website for an example of travel time from Belfast to Londonderry, it is evident that it takes longer to travel by train than by bus. I hope that there are going to be further improvements in areas such as Dungiven that will make it faster to travel by bus from Londonderry to Belfast. That will also deter folk from travelling by train.

I look forward to hearing what the Minister intends to introduce to improve the situation. An integrated public transport system in Northern Ireland that offers a first-class service to the travelling public should obviously be one of his priorities. It is important that that is done in the most efficient manner possible. However, that will still leave many thousands of people in Northern Ireland without access to trains, and we must also, commensurate with that decision, improve our bus service as well.

Mr Campbell: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I join with others in congratulating you on the elevation to your new position.

I also congratulate Mr Dallat on bringing this motion before the Assembly on a matter that both he and I, and many others, have shared concern about for some considerable time. There is no doubt that this debate will ensure that there is quite a bit of expansion of contributions and, hopefully, of the rail network as well. However, it also appears to have allowed for some expansion of revisionism by Mr Ford from South Antrim who, as I recall, when I was faced with the imminent closure of the Knockmore line, courtesy of the statistics that he referred to, congratulated me on keeping the line open for a year. I notice that the congratulations have now evaporated.

Mr Ford: Will the Member give way?

Mr Campbell: No, I will not give way. I did not ask him to give way when he made his inaccurate comment, so I will not give way to him when he attempts to try to retrieve the operation. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Ford: Mr Speaker, can a Member make an inaccuracy and not accept the correction of it?

Mr Speaker: All in this House should know that it is up to the Member whether or not to accept an intervention, and quite obviously Mr Campbell does not wish to accept.

Mr Campbell: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I want to get to the substance of the matter. It is clear from the statistics, which I hope we are all in possession of, that car ownership is growing at the rate of 4% a year. This

Assembly comes into being now in 2007. In approximately 10 years, if there is not a development of the rail network, there will be approximately 50% more car usage in Northern Ireland than there currently is. Therefore, all the problems that we hear about every morning on 'Good Morning Ulster' — the congestion at Sandyknowes, on the M1 and on all the other bottlenecks — will be 50% worse in 10 years' time if action is not taken. It is blatantly obvious to everyone that provision should be made for expanding the rail network and that an attempt should be made to try to deploy whatever resources that we can in order to ensure that people see that transport by rail is economical, advantageous environmentally, affordable and comfortable.

If people are faced with such an option, they will be more likely to forsake their love affair with the private car. However, if they are not faced with such an option, they will not forsake the car. That is blatantly obvious.

Let us consider Europe, where the expansion of the Train à Grande Vitesse (TGV) network in France is an obvious consequence of governmental attempts to ensure that investment and resources are ploughed into the development of the rail network. They have seen, and continue to see, the results of those extra resources. It will be the same in Northern Ireland; if the rail network is starved of resources, passenger figures will stagnate. Mr Dallat and one or two other Members mentioned the increase in patronage on the lines where development has occurred. Mr Wells mentioned my introduction of free travel for the elderly. That measure resulted in increased rail usage — it would be difficult to see how it would not.

Those Members from north of Ballymena will be aware that, without a passing loop at Ballykelly, one is restricted to one train from Ballymena through Coleraine and onwards to Londonderry, and one train back. However, if there were a passing loop, there would immediately be the potential to double the number of people who use that line. Departmental officials have informed me through answers to parliamentary questions that I have tabled that a passing loop could cost several million pounds; they said that it would cost almost £10 million. I would like to see a business case made for that. I hesitate to say that I do not think that it would cost that much, but I do not think that it would cost that much. However, that is what they tell us. The passing loop is absolutely essential for the possibility of doubling the number of people who use the Londonderry line.

Mr Dallat referred to travel beyond Northern Ireland. I am sure that we can address that issue, but let us get this country's rail network sorted out before we take advantage of another's.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr K Robinson: I welcome the fact that this debate comes so early in the life of this Assembly. I shall resist

the temptation to ask Members when they last travelled by train. I have already written to the Minister for Regional Development to ask him to address urgently the problems currently encountered by passengers who use the Londonderry and Larne lines.

My interest in the possibilities presented by rail travel goes back to my early days as a newly elected member of Newtownabbey Borough Council, as far back as 1985. Since then, I have continued to lobby consistently for the reinstatement of the Bleach Green to Antrim line, and I am glad that we have achieved that. I also lobbied for the modernisation of the Trans-European Network route to Larne Harbour, which has been only partially achieved. We have witnessed a slow but steady realisation that rail travel represents an eco-friendly alternative form of transport for those who are fortunate enough to live along the few remaining rail corridors in Northern Ireland.

The first Northern Ireland Assembly had the foresight to set aside money for 23 new trains, a complete relaying of track on the Bangor line and an upgrade of the routes between Belfast and Whitehead, and between Belfast and Ballymena. Together with a modernised signalling system, those measures enabled sufficient improvements to persuade a loyal section of the travelling public to continue to let the train take the strain. However, as evidenced by the frequent bulletins on local radio, in some instances the reliability of the service left much to be desired. In fact, sometimes, there were shades of 'Are Ye Right There, Michael?' on the West Clare Railway.

On the Larne line, I, like many other passengers, have sat on a train, almost willing it to start up again and make it to the next station. That is no way to run a railway. I must, however, pay tribute to the engineering staff of Northern Ireland Railways, who have managed to keep those antiquated trains running over the past number of years. As Members have said, some of those trains are up to 30 years old. It is incredible that we still tolerate that situation in this day and age.

It is now a matter of urgency that the Minister for Regional Development completes the process begun by the Assembly. The Northern Ireland travelling public have proved on the line between Bangor and Portadown, and on the cross-border line to Dublin, that a modern railway system can compete with, and reduce, the carbon footprint of the motor car. I call on the Minister to enter discussions with his colleagues in the Executive and with Northern Ireland Railways officials to bring forward a scheme to purchase and introduce new rolling stock so that the long-suffering rail travellers on the Larne and Londonderry lines can experience the benefits in speed, comfort and improved frequency that the Bangor to Portadown passengers have enjoyed for some time.

I simply refer Members to the timetables, where the graphic differences between the different sections of Northern Ireland Railways' system can be seen.

2.45 pm

The House can fully appreciate the environmental benefits of expanding the park-and-ride provision along those rail corridors, thereby reducing many needless car journeys through already congested towns and cities — the Sandyknowes roundabout was referred to, just as it is unfortunately referred to in traffic bulletins every morning.

I urge the Minister to bring forward at the earliest opportunity a comprehensive package designed to increase the intercity potential between Londonderry and Belfast, maximising the benefits of the new track and signalling that will enable the rolling stock to travel at speeds of up to 90 mph over greater stretches of the track on the commuter line north of Ballymena.

I urge him to build upon the increasing passenger numbers on the Larne line by encouraging a greater willingness between various Departments to transfer land. For example, in Carrickfergus one Department holds a piece of land that would enable the creation of another 80 park-and-ride spaces, but for years there has been a difficulty in transferring that land to the relevant Department. I ask the Minister to consider such simple matters to allow the expansion of the successful park-and-ride schemes.

The possibility of 30-minute train frequency between Larne harbour and Belfast should also be explored, together with a reduction in the journey time, which currently stands at approximately one hour and seven minutes between Larne and Belfast. Likewise, the current journey time of two hours and 15 minutes between Londonderry and Belfast is not acceptable in this day and age.

Faster, frequent and passenger-friendly trains have proved successful on the Bangor to Portadown commuter corridor and on the Enterprise service between the two capital cities on this island. Those benefits must be made available to a wider section of potential rail travellers than is currently the case.

I urge the House to use its influence to ensure that our internal rail system is further developed and that commuters on the Larne and Londonderry routes share equally in the benefits of the new rolling stock and enhanced track engineering. I also support efforts to enhance the service between our two major cities and onwards to the neighbouring state.

Mr P Ramsey: Mr Speaker, I congratulate you on your appointment. It is well deserved, Willie, and I wish you good luck.

I support John Dallat in his call for the Department for Regional Development to bring forward detailed

plans for the modernisation of the rail network in Northern Ireland. In conjunction with the Irish Government, let us work together for all the people of this island to provide a public service that we can all be proud of. It can be achieved, and such an all-island network makes sense on social, economic and environmental grounds. For my constituency and the surrounding area, it would give a tremendous boost to the north-west, which has been starved of regeneration money for years.

Three years ago, there was a major campaign, which was successful to a certain degree, where the Department for Regional Development was forced to give £24 million to upgrade the track between Derry and Ballymena. However, we have not yet seen that in action. The Minister must investigate that in order to find out whether the money has been spent on that stretch of rail track.

The campaign must take on a more serious and sustainable case for a continuous welded track to be laid. In simple terms, we want, and demand, the same action as the lines between Belfast and Dublin and Belfast and Bangor received. John Dallat commented on core and non-core lines. There must be an end to such terminology; it is nonsense, and it is degrading to the sub-regions.

At present, the standards of service are poor to such a degree that few people use the service, although I agree that the new trains have led to an increase in passenger numbers. However, I ask the Minister to visit the terminal in Derry. We have a terminal in Derry, but he will not be able to get a cup of tea or to buy a newspaper in it. Indeed, at times, he will need an umbrella to protect himself from the rain — it is that bad. How can we expect people to use the railway in such substandard conditions?

When the Belfast to Dublin line was improved and the Enterprise service was introduced, passenger numbers doubled. If our railway network were modernised and a decent service were provided, particularly between Derry and Ballymena, there would be a similar or greater increase. An upgraded rail service in the north-west would increase tourists' use of trains, and a rail service that met commuters' standards would also create an economic boost. At present, businesspeople, professionals and commuters are not willing to use the trains, but say that they would be more inclined to do so if the service were fast, reliable, and relaxed — free from the risk of delays and traffic jams.

Raymond McCartney said that there had been discussions in Donegal about bringing back the Derry to Sligo railway line. If that were the case, there would be immense encouragement, if not financial help, from the Irish Government to advance that matter.

There is evidence of a link between poverty and social exclusion, and access to transport. The upgrading and modernisation of the railway network must therefore be viewed as one of many elements with which to combat poverty and social exclusion in the north-west. As roads become overcrowded and car ownership increases, the likelihood of traffic jams rises considerably. A journey by train is safer and healthier than by road and, according to the Railways Task Force, 162 more people will die on the roads by 2010 if there is no improvement on Northern Ireland Railways lines. Trains cause less air pollution than cars and other forms of transport. Fuel emissions from road vehicles seriously damage the health of those living nearby. If existing railway lines are not modernised and upgraded, the cost will be great to our health, our economy, our environment, our region, and society in general.

Mr Shannon: Ivery yeer Translink Bus an Rael tak heer an ther 75 million trevellers, they hae £100 million turniver an provide tae the Province iver 3,500 joabs.

We hae no sae lang ago haud improvements tae tha Bengier line alang wi Bilfast – Antrim Bleach Green line which is bein re-apened tae provide journeys intae oor capitol.

Thees figures speek weel o' tha system but they dinnae paint aa richt pictur o- whut we hae richt noo. Hense tha amendment an they daenae pit fort what shud be ther an whut cud be in place.

Every year, 75 million passengers use Translink services. That company has a £100 million turnover and provides the Province with 3,500 jobs. Recently, improvements were made to the Bangor line, and the Belfast to Antrim line was opened to provide quicker journeys to our capital. Those statistics speak well of the system, but they do not paint an accurate picture of the current situation, hence our amendment. Long before I came into this world, there was a very active railway line in Comber and Donaghadee. I would not say that Comber was ever the Swindon of Northern Ireland — far from it — but it formed an integral part of the railway system. Something similar is now required. Due to people's moving to Strangford, we need a system of transport to take them from their homes to the capital, where they work.

The importance of the rail network is underestimated in Northern Ireland. Try driving from Bangor to Belfast in the mornings to get to work: it will take over an hour of stopping and starting, revving and losing one's patience, as traffic lights ensure that only three cars get through any green light. On the flip side, there is a service whereby one can take a seat, read the morning paper, have a cup of coffee, and look out the window and think about the day, without the stress of travelling by car. That service is provided by Translink. It takes less than half the time and helps the environment —

there has been great talk about carbon footprints. There are regular trains to suit most schedules, but there are gaps in the system, as my colleague Lord Morrow and other Members have said.

One needs to look objectively at the two options. There seems to be no contest, yet, of the millions of commute journeys made by workers, morning and evening, only a small percentage makes use of the rail network. We must ask why that is the case. The main reason is that people recognise that in their own cars — although they are still at the mercy of other road users — they have more control. In the event of unexpected delay, they can choose to turn around or to take a different route; they cannot do that if they use the rail service. On the train, they do not have the same measure of control; rather they are at the mercy of the driver and the system. To be frank, the majority of people in Northern Ireland do not have the trust in the rail service that would allow them to use it. They hear too many horror stories and prefer to drive their own destiny, in their own cars.

Much has been made, rightly, of the £80 million investment in 23 new trains. Some Members talked about 23 train sets — I had a train set when I was five years old — but those are new trains, which were approved by the former Assembly in 2000. Those trains are built for comfort, can reach speeds up to 90 mph and can carry 200 passengers. However, they are not always full. What is the reason for that? It may have something to do with the fact that three out of the four lines do not meet the punctuality targets set by the Consumer Council. Although it would be better for the environment if they took the train and they would get more exercise by walking from the station to work, small matters such as that make people think that, if they are going to be late anyway, they would prefer the independence, and sometimes the solitude, of their own cars.

The cost of a month's travel between Portadown and Belfast is £145 and between Bangor and Belfast it is £120.50. However, it is possible to travel from London to any one of 26 European countries for £292 a month. Travel between Londonderry and Belfast costs about half that amount. Therefore, cost is an important factor, and I ask the Minister to look at that matter as well.

I ask Members to support Lord Morrow's amendment.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Declan O'Loan. This will be Mr O'Loan's maiden speech, and I remind Members that it should be heard without interruption.

Mr O'Loan: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am pleased to have the opportunity to make my first speech in the Assembly on an important matter for North Antrim. As a new Member, I would like to add to the congratulations that have been extended to you on your appointment as Speaker.

I am honoured to have been elected to represent North Antrim, particularly at this time of promise for all of us. I want to say a few words in tribute to my predecessor as the SDLP representative in North Antrim, Dr Seán Farren, who is known to many — probably all — in this House. Seán Farren gave great service to his constituents, including on the matter under discussion today, and to the Assembly, including two periods as a Minister. History will record his massive contribution, often behind the scenes, to political progress here over many years.

Turning to the motion, I wish to refer in particular to the line from Ballymena to Derry, although, as has been rightly pointed out by many Members, the system has to be examined as a whole. However, there is real concern over the threat to that section of line, which makes a very important social and economic contribution to North Antrim. Rail provision depends for success on frequency of service and journey time. The new rolling stock, as has been pointed out, is capable of reaching 90 mph. If that rolling stock were able to express its own concerns and emotions, there would be much frustration at the line on which it has to operate, which does not allow it to operate at the speed of which it is capable. Massive investment is required, and a business case must be established for that. There will be many competing interests in this Assembly. I agree with Sammy Wilson that economic appraisal is an important factor.

I want to make three points about the business case. First, the social benefits must be fully reflected, which can be difficult to do in economic appraisals. Secondly, it must be acknowledged that usage increases when services improve — a point that has been made by other Members. Thirdly, and of particular importance, we must remember that we are planning for the future. I think that all Assembly Members would agree that future plans must include a huge enhancement of our private-sector economic activity, which will involve a greater movement of goods and people. That will have significant implications for any economic appraisal.

3.00 pm

I end with a general point. Any discussion of major physical infrastructure issues can be held only on an all-island basis. I am aware of the protocol that a maiden speech should not be controversial, and perhaps there has already been a little controversy in maiden speeches today. However, if we look behind people's words — or even if we look directly at them — there is common ground on the need to consider the whole island. I welcome Lord Morrow's remarks about that, although I qualify what he said when he referred to two systems that could be linked. We need look beyond that: the entire system must be planned as one system. We have to consider all the economic activity and all the social use. We must also consider not only where

we are and where we have been but where we want to go. We can all agree on the need to take that perspective.

I congratulate John Dallat on this important motion. I support him fully.

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I congratulate you, Mr Speaker, and wish you well in your job. I noticed that some Members were trying to curry favour with you earlier. If it will be of any benefit to me, I point out that my grandfather was from Letterkenny. I look forward to suitable favours in future.

Ar dtús, ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a thabhairt do John Dallat as an rún seo a chur chun tosaigh. I thank John Dallat for tabling today's motion. I am pleased to have the opportunity to hear Members' views on this important public transport issue so early in the Assembly's restored existence. I have been encouraged by the passion with which Members intend to support any budgetary applications that my Department will make in relation to public transport. I hope that the support will extend into the Budget debates.

John Dallat has been an enthusiastic supporter of the railway network. I have listened carefully to his points and to the points that other Members added. There were so many that to answer them all would eat into my time allocation so much that I would not be able to make any general points. However, some of the points were of great interest.

John Dallat spoke about ring-fencing money for infrastructure. The idea might be very attractive, but the Minister of Finance and Personnel — notwithstanding his previous experience at the Department for Regional Development — might have something to say about it.

Mr Dallat also spoke about the terminology used to distinguish between lines; he spoke about non-core and lesser-used lines. Of course, with roads, we talk about motorways, A-class roads and B-class roads. I appreciate that terming lines as “non-core” or “lesser-used” can suggest that the lines are less valued, but it is inevitable in any system that some lines are more important than others and must take priority. However, I welcome any suggestions that Mr Dallat or others might make on how to improve the language and to arrive at an agreed terminology.

Maurice Morrow made a number of points. I agree that any review of public transport and the rail network will have to look beyond what exists and consider what is possible. All Members expressed their support for improvements and offered clear opinions on what is wrong and on what they desire. As we all know, improvements require substantial investment. As I have suggested, I look forward to Budget debates this year and in future years.

Regarding William McCrea's intervention when Maurice Morrow spoke about the rail link to Belfast International Airport at Aldergrove, it is anticipated that the airport needs a throughput of 10 million people a year for such a connection to be considered. Unfortunately, throughput at Belfast International Airport falls far short of that, but I am willing to listen to any argument concerning the matter.

Maurice Morrow, and several other Members, mentioned the need for integration in the transport system, such as park-and-ride facilities, to ensure that the networks can be linked. Translink is developing a programme to improve both the number and capacity of park-and-ride facilities attached to railway stations, so I hope that we will see some improvements in that regard.

Roy Beggs and others — and I shall return to the issue of the stock on the Larne line — referred to a major modal shift, which is the sort of terminology that we will have to consider in order to advance the debate. Other Members, including Gregory Campbell, mentioned the increase in car usage. This debate is not merely about the existing stock or improvements to timetables but about changing the way that society moves around. David Ford mentioned bringing the Lisburn to Antrim line back into use, and that is being assessed as part of the current review.

Gregory Campbell, who is not present, made a case for the passing loop on the Derry line. I am told that a large proportion of the cost involved is not the track itself, but the charges incurred as a result of changes to the signalling system.

I hope to address in writing some of the other points that Members made. I apologise for those that I miss, but I will endeavour to answer them after reading Hansard.

I shall outline the current position in relation to railways and the steps that we intend to take. During the last period of devolution, the Assembly endorsed two important strategies: the regional development strategy (RDS), and, flowing from that, the regional transportation strategy. The RDS recognised that quality, mobility and accessibility for people and goods were basic, everyday needs for successful regions in the twenty-first century. The regional transportation strategy developed that approach into a vision, which was:

“to have a modern, sustainable, safe transportation system which benefits society, the economy, and the environment and which actively contributes to social inclusion and everyone's quality of life.”

A good public transport infrastructure is therefore important for the promotion of competitiveness and sustainable development. It is critical that the workforce has access to a reliable and efficient means of public transport for the economy to function at its optimum level. A good public transport system also assists the delivery of an environmentally sustainable economy. The growth in population and employment in tandem

with the environmental imperative to reduce carbon emissions means that a major modal shift in passenger transport from private car to bus and rail is required.

In the area of public transport, railways comprise a substantial asset for the region by connecting people with jobs and providing accessibility for communities and services. In addition, the rail network represents a means of reducing harmful emissions from transport, which is of increasing importance as concerns grow about the prospect and impact of climate change, and as more people subscribe to the need for sustainability to be a key consideration in decision-making.

The regional transportation strategy set out two main targets for rail. The first was that all current trains would be replaced by new ones, with the exception of those providing the Enterprise service between Belfast and Dublin. Secondly, services were to be retained on single-track sections of the network, north of Whitehead and north-west of Ballymena, subject to successful results from the introduction of new trains and improvements to the infrastructure on the rest of the network. That review was to take place in 2007.

In 2004, the then Minister with responsibility for transport, John Spellar, held a public consultation on the extent of funding to be put into the railway network in advance of the 2007 review. Three options were put forward, with the 2004 Budget subsequently allocating funding to the option that involved maintaining services on the single-track sections and maintaining the lines at the current standard. The funding offered little scope for improvement in the quality of the infrastructure on those sections.

There have been positive developments. There has been major capital investment in improving sections of track on other lines. In addition, thanks to the funding decisions made by the Assembly and the previous Ministers, NIR has been able to procure 23 new train sets to replace 70% of its fleet.

That cost £76.7 million and allowed the oldest and least reliable trains to be withdrawn from service. All of the new trains are in service and operate successfully. They have transformed the travelling experience of passengers, providing them with more comfortable and reliable journeys, a point made by several Members. Some of the older trains have been retained and extensively upgraded at a cost of £3.5 million.

The use of new trains is not limited to the core commuter network. They are also used for services to Coleraine and Derry. Given the amount of single-track running on the line to Derry, it is important to use the most reliable trains. The older trains have only one engine. Should that fail, the line effectively closes and all other services suffer extensive delays. Each new train has three engines, so that if one fails the others

allow the train to continue its journey, albeit at a reduced speed.

Roy Beggs made the point — and I am aware that travellers are disappointed — that new trains are not in regular use on the Larne line. However, the trains are needed on the line to Derry for operational reasons. The Derry line is single track, with passing loops; therefore overall punctuality is particularly sensitive to the need for each train to keep exactly to time. The deployment of the new trains on the Bangor, Belfast and Portadown corridor permits maximum use of the 90-mph track sections and works well with the higher speed Enterprise services. Moreover, the Class 450 trains that operate on the Larne line have been refurbished to a high standard. In due course, it will be necessary to replace them. That need has been factored into current work to assess future investment needs.

Mr Kennedy: Will the Member give way?

Mr Murphy: I will give way if the Member is brief; I have only a short time left.

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Minister. I appreciate that he has outlined improvements to tracks and other measures. Will he comment on stations, particularly Newry railway station, about which he knows much? Perhaps he will advise me at some stage — even in writing, after the debate — on the current plans to upgrade that station. In addition to the network of tracks, and the trains themselves, there is the important issue of upgrading stations.

Mr Murphy: One would think, from the length of time that I have known Danny Kennedy, that I would not have let him cut into my time in a debate.

I was minded that my experience, and Mr Kennedy's, of Newry station is similar to that of Pat Ramsey, when he talked about the Derry railway station. No one can buy a cup of tea or a newspaper. There are plans to improve and upgrade Newry station, and I shall speak to officials and advise Mr Kennedy in more detail.

NIR has introduced new timetables, and the frequency on much of its network has increased. Changes to both the quality and frequency of the service have led to an impressive increase in the number of journeys made by rail. In 2005-06, the overall number of passenger journeys by rail was almost 20% higher than in 2001-02. Last year alone, patronage on the Bangor, Belfast and Portadown line rose by approximately 16%.

Since the introduction of the new trains and the refurbishment of the Class 450 trains, NIR's performance has markedly improved across the network in punctuality and reliability, as well as in general passenger satisfaction, which reached historically high levels. I appreciate, from the comments of others, that there is further work to be done in that regard.

I referred to capital investment in the railway network in recent years. Railways are costly to provide, maintain and operate, and that is the case in every country in the world. Our railway already receives substantial funding. In 2005-06, NIR had a capital allocation of £36.2 million. Moreover, it received a revenue fund of some £23.6 million, which was needed to bridge the gap between revenue collected as fares and the NIR operating costs.

I understand the wishes of Members for further investment in the railway network, including those sections of single track, which tend to be referred to as "the lesser-used lines", whether it be the line to Larne, or Coleraine or Derry. I understand the aspiration to have a top-quality, cross-border service linking Belfast and Dublin and to greater frequency of service and capacity in the commuter network around Belfast. Towards the end of 2006, the Department for Regional Development set up a steering group to begin the review envisaged for 2007. The group has examined a wide range of options for the future provision of rail services and is close to providing me with its findings. It has examined the entire rail network; that is, the commuter lines around Belfast, the line from Belfast to Dublin and the single-track sections. Importantly, it has been able to take account of recent changes in the use of our railways.

I shall examine the findings of the steering group and investigate the case for further investment in the rail network. I shall want to consider all available options, and it will be necessary to seek the resources for future funding in a priorities and budget exercise and in the investment strategy. I look forward to support at that stage.

There is a process that will allow me to put forward my case for funding and to have that case considered when the Executive begin the work of agreeing a draft Budget. My ministerial colleagues and I will have important decisions to make on how best to allocate the available resources.

3.15 pm

We are all aware of the competing claims for investment in a wide range of public services — health, education, economic regeneration, rural development and, in my own Department, roads and water. Transport services — including public transport, of which railways form a part — must show that they represent good value for money. Resources are limited, and we must use them in a way that brings the greatest benefit to our society and is in line with priorities for development. Before that process comes to a close towards the end of the calendar year, it includes a period of consultation and consideration by the Assembly. At that stage, I expect that there will be clarity on the way in which the railway network is to be shaped for the years to come, together with the levels of investment that will underpin that development. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Beggs: I wish Members to consider the original motion and the amendments. There is a need to ensure that the debate concerns more than just intercity travel. With careful listening, it is clear that the debate was much wider than that. Members have been interested in improving the modal shift to public transport by enabling as wide a range of people as possible to benefit from the rail service. I hope that, with the proposer of the motion having indicated his acceptance of my amendment, everyone will be able to accept it. The amendment respects the ability to improve local services in Northern Ireland and to improve regional network services outside Northern Ireland, with improved linkages to any region. I hope that Members will accept my amendment.

Mr S Wilson: This is the first opportunity that I have had to speak since the death of my colleague in East Antrim. George Dawson campaigned fiercely for the railway service in his constituency, and I know that he will be greatly missed in the Assembly.

I address the point that was made by the proposer of the motion — that he rejected the DUP amendment because he said it epitomised, or was a symbol of, the partitionist philosophy of the DUP. With that phrase, he tried to cast aside what was a considered amendment. The DUP's amendment is designed to, first, focus attention on what is realisable when it comes to the debate, and, secondly, focus attention on the immediate needs of improving the rail network in Northern Ireland.

The proposer of the motion talked about his hope that the motion would not be held up by appraisals, debates and reviews. We have come to expect that cavalier attitude from the SDLP when it comes to spending taxpayers' money. I went through three days of motions that had been proposed by the SDLP during the Transitional Assembly at the beginning of the year. In those three days alone, it spent the block grant — on the issues of water charges, affordable houses, the transportation strategy, victims' forums, the final closure of old people's homes, rural schools, and so it went on.

Mr Kennedy: Do you oppose all of that?

Mr S Wilson: No. However, there is a bit of sense in deciding what one's priorities are. In his speech, Mr Dallat slipped in that he thought his proposal would cost about £500 million — but he was unsure. He did not want any appraisal of it anyway. First of all, since the Assembly will have to work within finite resources, people should look at what is deliverable. That means that the Minister for Regional Development will have to carry out very severe appraisals of proposals that come forward from the Assembly.

A second reason for the DUP's amendment is that any appraisal of expenditure should be directed towards the immediate needs of people in Northern

Ireland. As Roy Beggs, Ken Robinson and others have outlined, there is a severe need for resources to be spent in East Antrim, and, of course, that applies to other rail lines in Northern Ireland.

Jim Wells talked about carriages that he cleaned 20-odd years ago. I was in one of those carriages, and there it was, written on the wall, "JW was here — 1700 or 1900 whatever it was". — *[Laughter.]*

Those carriages are still in use today. I have received emails from commuters who travel on the Larne line, and they refer to rain coming through the roofs and to there being no heating in carriages, yet we expect people to travel in those carriages.

Not only are the carriages in poor condition, but, as a result of the old engines, the service is poor. One email said that it took one and a quarter hours to go from Carrickfergus to Great Victoria Street. That distance could be walked quicker.

Mr Kennedy: What is wrong with that?

Mr S Wilson: A pushbike would have been quicker.

A lady who emailed me was on her final warning at work because she relied on the train to get her there each morning. Even though she caught a train that should have got her into Belfast at 8.00 am, cancellations, delays, broken trains, etc — all of which were beyond her control — still left her late for work at 8.30 am. Such events will put commuters off using trains.

Mr Dallat should focus his priorities on improving the rail links in Northern Ireland first of all. Then, and only then, should we consider international rail links.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle, as an deis labhartha seo a thabhairt domh. Ní comhghairdeas leat as do cheapachán mar Cheann Comhairle agus guím gach rath ort.

I support Mr Beggs's amendment. Many Members have spoken during the debate, and most referred to the folly of the destruction of the Irish rail network, which at one time interlinked every town and many villages throughout the length and breadth of Ireland. Members agreed that the short-sightedness of the past is now catching up with us, as our roads become more and more dangerous, our towns and cities more and more congested, and our atmosphere more and more polluted.

We have moved from an era when almost every possible cargo was carried by rail, to the present day, when most rail lines are devoted to passenger services only. What an advantage the previous network would be to the environment, trade, industry, commerce and tourism on this island if it still existed.

Members, in general, agreed that rather than bemoan the passing of a former age, we should do what we can with the present rail infrastructure to ensure that it is

the best that it can possibly be, and, where possible, augment it where that makes good sense.

Members proposed the extension of the rail network into counties Tyrone, Fermanagh and Donegal, with an interlink to Sligo. Members also maintained that we must ensure that the existing network is upgraded to the highest possible standards for both track and rolling stock. They also said that we must ensure that timetables are synchronised in such a way that travel by rail, where possible, is the preferred option of as many people as will make a difference to our environment, the atmosphere, the economy, and, most importantly, public safety.

Mr Dallat reminded us that investment in rail pays. He said that the number of passengers on the Belfast to Derry line has doubled since the purchase of new trains. Investment in railways encourages more and more people to leave their cars behind and travel by rail. The Belfast to Dublin line is an example of that point. After the new Enterprise service was introduced in 1997, the number of passengers on the Belfast to Dublin line doubled.

We need further investment in, and development of, the Belfast to Dublin and the Belfast to Derry services. We need cross-border commuter trains that service all major towns, as well as a fast and efficient intercity service with limited stops.

The Enterprise service is a great intercity success, but it boasts neither the time nor the timetable to suit commuters crossing the border. It simply will not get them to work on time. Every morning, one can witness the spectacle of travellers racing by car from Dundalk to get the 7.35 am commuter train from Newry to Belfast, while travellers from Newry head in the other direction to get the 7.15 am Dundalk train to Dublin. There is no good reason why the Belfast-bound commuter train cannot start from Dundalk, and the Dublin-bound train from Newry. The only reason is a lack of rolling stock.

We need at least four new trains on the Belfast to Dublin route to ensure the hourly service that is needed. North/South economic activity is booming and will continue to grow, so the infrastructure must be adjusted to take account of that reality and to make it easier for the increasing number of cross-border workers.

My colleague Pat Ramsey mentioned the primitive state of the terminal in Derry, and Danny Kennedy, my colleague from Newry and Armagh, underlined the inadequacies of the railway station in Newry. I add my voice to Mr Kennedy's concerns: Newry's station facilities are primitive to say the least. There are a mere 60 parking spaces, which has the effect of discouraging people from using the rail service to Belfast, and to Dublin. We need a modern intercity station in Newry with state-of-the-art passenger services

and a 300-space car park. The authorities have been vested with the land, and there is no reason why work on the station should not begin this year.

The fundamental message, as emphasised by Member after Member, is that where there has been investment in our railways in recent years, business has grown by 30%. That figure is true of the Portadown, Belfast and Bangor corridor, and indeed of other lines.

Mr Dallat mentioned that £500 million was needed in the north-west. Contrary to what Mr Sammy Wilson said, Mr Dallat is not opposed to an appraisal, but to the red tape that is sometimes involved in appraisals, because that can stop rather than facilitate a project. Mr Dallat also mentioned the need for EU involvement.

Lord Morrow adopted an extremely conciliatory attitude to Mr Dallat's motion, and I am sure that he will agree that the motion and Mr Beggs's proposed amendment cover all aspects of the debate. I encourage Lord Morrow and his colleagues to fall in behind the rest of us and support the motion and amendment No 2.

Mr Beggs: He is off the rails.

Mr D Bradley: Lord Morrow or me? *[Laughter.]*

Lord Morrow suggested that the Minister should take a wider view, stretching into counties Tyrone and Fermanagh, and, indeed, across the border, and that there should be an interlinkage between the Northern and Southern rail systems. Therefore, I fail to understand why he bothered to table an amendment to what was a perfectly good motion.

3.30 pm

Roy Beggs Jnr said that as many people as possible should be encouraged to travel by rail. He mentioned the importance of access at local stations for tourists, students and senior citizens. He complained about the neglect of the Larne line and its rolling stock.

Sammy Wilson interjected that breakdowns with older trains are discouraging passengers from using the rail system. Raymond McCartney quite rightly praised my colleague Mr Dallat for proposing the motion. He acknowledged the presence of the Minister for Regional Development in the Chamber and made the point, as many other Members did, that a fully integrated transport strategy is needed in Northern Ireland. He said that over-reliance on cars is causing congestion and pollution. He also bemoaned the demise of the Donegal rail network and hoped to see a link through Derry and Letterkenny to Sligo.

David Ford wanted to hear more from the Minister on his future plans. He mentioned Gregory Campbell's mysterious disappearance from south Antrim when Minister and his own difficulty with reading rail timetables. He went on to point out the need for improved commuter services into Belfast, and he

underlined the inconsistencies in the DUP's attitude on that issue. He also said that rail must be considered as a major alternative to the private car, which eats up 60% of transport investment.

Jim Wells said that access to rail travel is far from widespread in Northern Ireland and that as much as possible should be done to encourage people to use rail where it is available. He also said that his intimate knowledge of Northern Ireland's ageing rolling stock tells him that people would not be encouraged to use rail travel in some areas. Once again, he underlined —

Mr Speaker: I remind the Member that his time is up.

Mr D Bradley: He underlined the need for an integrated public transport system for Northern Ireland.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to take his seat.

Mr D Bradley: I support Mr Dallat's motion and Mr Beggs's proposed amendment.

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that if amendment No 1 is made, amendment No 2 will fall.

Question, That amendment No 1 be made, put and negatived.

Question, That amendment No 2 be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls upon the Department for Regional Development to bring forward their plans for upgrading the rail network to provide attractive commuting options and also inter-city services between the principal centres of population and the neighbouring regions.

Undocumented Irish in the USA

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow one hour and 30 minutes for this debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to wind up, with all other Members having five minutes.

May I have the attention of Members as we go through the business of the House? A number of Members are moving in and out of the Chamber.

Lord Morrow: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it not the custom in the House that when a Member is on his or her feet, other Members should be in their place?

Mr Speaker: It is very much the custom. Some Members have been Members for a number of years, and they should know that. Irrespective of who the Speaker is, now or in the future, the protocol is that Members do not move in or out of the Chamber until the next item of business is started.

I want to comment on the motion before it is read out. The motion was tabled in the Business Office shortly before the Business Committee met last Wednesday. It was selected for debate with other motions to be debated today and tomorrow. On further reflection, but after the Order Paper had been issued, I had some concerns that the final sentence of the motion raised some doubts about its competence. The Members who tabled the motion were alerted to the difficulty and have tabled an amendment, which I have accepted for this debate. If this amendment is made, it will address the competence issue of the motion. Two other amendments have also been tabled, and they appear on the Marshalled List. If neither of the first two amendments is made, I will not put the Question on the third amendment or on the original motion. On that basis, we shall proceed.

Mr P J Bradley: I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses its deep concern about the plight of the “undocumented Irish”, including many young people originally from Northern Ireland currently living, working and paying their way in the USA. Furthermore, that this Assembly agrees to make a donation towards the Irish Lobby for Immigration Reform, to support the campaign to legitimatise resident arrangements for, and create legal status for, the “undocumented”.

I also beg to move amendment No 1: Leave out all after “agrees” and insert

“to support the campaign by the Irish Lobby for Immigration Reform.”

Mr Speaker, like other Members, I congratulate you on your appointment and wish you well in your role as Speaker. I also thank you for explaining the scenario that occurred last week and for your acceptance of the amendment.

It might be worthwhile for the Executive to examine the issue that has arisen, because some day a situation might arise whereby all 108 Members wish to donate

to a crisis fund or a charity, yet because of the legislation, or the lack of legislation, would be unable to do so. That matter should be examined.

At the weekend, I checked out the situation regarding the “undocumented” in the United States. I found that there is much ongoing political activity on Capitol Hill in relation to immigration reform. So intense is the debate and so hectic the activity that it is practically impossible to tell what is happening in Washington at the minute. No draft Bill has been prepared as yet for a debate in the Senate that was supposed to take place tomorrow. Even this afternoon, discussions are taking place between the two political parties and their legislators. Some believe that the President himself will have to do something, but his approval rating in the Republican Party is so low that it makes it difficult to be optimistic. The situation is so uncertain that even the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, will not have a Bill debated in the House unless she gets a guarantee that at least 70 Republicans will vote for it so that it can be seen as bipartisan.

I also learned that those members of the Republican Party who support reform for the illegal residents of the United States believe that more time is required for the parties and administrators from President Bush’s office to continue the bipartisan negotiations. The Bill that they are working on would clamp down on illegal immigration and create a guest worker programme, while providing a way for illegal immigrants to become citizens eventually. Naturally, having President George Bush’s support is important to the entire debate, and it is the belief of some supporters of reform that if President Bush and senior Democrat Ted Kennedy can put something together, their agreement would have a reasonable chance of success.

A further scenario could possibly emerge if there is a failure to agree. An option to return to the Bill passed in the Senate in May 2006 might be pursued. Indications are that some of the pro-reform politicians would be prepared to look at a modified version of the 2006 agreement.

No one could have foreseen the time factor becoming the issue of the day, but it is, and, at the weekend, Republicans were so adamant in their claim that more time is required that they threatened to block efforts by the Democrats to start the debate.

On the other hand, the Democrats, the vast majority of whom support reform, are concerned that any delay could severely damage the chances of enacting legislation this year. They maintain that legislators in Washington will soon be concentrating their efforts on the process leading up to next year’s presidential election.

My opening remarks are full of possibilities and probabilities; it is fair to say that uncertainty reigns. Meanwhile, an estimated 35,000 to 45,000 Irish couples,

boys and girls currently living, working and paying their way in the United States are caught in a debate that is not of their making. Whatever the outcome of that debate, it will have a tremendous bearing on all of their futures.

The Irish represent a very small minority of those caught up in the debate. There is a great human tragedy involving 11 million illegal residents, all of them living in fear. It is a widespread problem, most prominent in California, New Mexico and Arizona. It involves, in the main, access from Mexico and South American countries. Most of these immigrants are unable to speak English.

I have sympathy and understanding with the two amendments that have been tabled, as they refer to the overall situation in America. However, they overlook the point that Alasdair McDonnell and I are making. We are concentrating on the work of the members of the Irish Lobby for Immigration Reform (ILIR) on behalf of the undocumented Irish. To add the plight of the 11 million others would weaken what the ILIR is about. I ask the proposers of the two amendments to consider withdrawing them, because we can best serve the undocumented Irish by supporting the group that is best aware of the specific issues and how best to deal with them. In 'The New York Times' on 16 March 2006, the chairman of the group, Niall O'Dowd, said: "the Irish Lobby will push for any special arrangement it can get" for the undocumented Irish.

In March 2006, and again in July, I was privileged to join with 3,000 undocumented Irish in Washington, where they lobbied Senators and Congressmen as part of their campaign for legal status. The events, and the huge numbers who attended, were the climax of an intensive campaign organised by the ILIR. Incidentally, it was nice to meet up again last week with the group's president, Grant Lally, and its chairman, Niall O'Dowd, who were both here for the reinstatement of our Assembly.

Since the autumn of 2005, the ILIR has organised rallies in most major Irish-American cities and called for the undocumented to come out and support the campaign to legalise the Irish. Many were, understandably, afraid to openly declare their lack of official status, but I pay tribute to the many that did. Thousands filled halls in New York, Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia and cities on the west coast, including Los Angeles and San Francisco. They followed that by making long journeys to Capitol Hill to join their Irish contemporaries from across the United States. This grass-roots mobilisation of the Irish-American community by the ILIR is to be complimented and is worthy of support from all elected representatives.

As I mixed with the undocumented in Washington and listened to their stories regarding their respective situations, I could only attempt to imagine the ordeal that many of them are living through. Two County

Fermanagh sisters told me of their sadness at being unable to travel home for the funeral of a relative. Others remain afraid to travel home for family weddings or christenings, or to visit their parents and family members back in Ireland. The fear of being caught on re-entry to the United States and facing automatic deportation leads many of them to simply avoid travelling, so they suffer that heartbreak.

In the absence of the Assembly, many of our local authorities, community organisations, sporting bodies and elected individuals made the American ambassador in London and the Belfast-based American consul aware of their concerns and of their support for the campaign to afford the undocumented Irish legal status in America. It is therefore important that the diplomats be further advised that the Assembly is also concerned at the threat to the current and future generations that work or might wish to work in the United States.

As stated in the motion, many of the illegal exiles come from our jurisdiction, and this was very much in evidence when the ILIR visited Dublin on 14 April to meet the Irish relatives of the undocumented Irish in America. Almost 2,000 people attended the Dublin event, and it was estimated that around 30% to 35% of them were from Northern Ireland.

I referred in my opening remarks to the fact that the Assembly has no authority to make financial contributions to charitable or lobbying groups. Thankfully, for the campaign organisers in America, the Government of the Republic of Ireland is not equally restricted.

At the event in Dublin in April, all political parties were present to support the undocumented and their families. During the event, the Irish Minister for Foreign Affairs, Dermot Ahern, endorsed the campaign by announcing that his Government were offering an additional \$50,000 to the ILIR to assist its campaign. The money was additional because the Irish Government had contributed \$85,000 to the campaign in 2006.

3.45 pm

Like all Members, I am pleased that the Assembly is once again up and running, because it gives us an opportunity to raise the many and varied concerns of the wider community. Concerns such as that expressed in the motion are shared in many homes across Northern Ireland. Many parents would love to see the return of a beloved son or daughter, or, in some cases, to meet their grandchildren — currently caught up in the immigration debate — for the first time.

As elected representatives, we should express our gratitude to the dedicated and energetic group of professionals that makes up the Irish Lobby for Immigration Reform. They are so fully committed to the cause of the undocumented Irish that we must demonstrate our appreciation of their work to the maximum of our ability.

Mr Speaker: I call Simon Hamilton to propose the second amendment to the motion. This shall be Mr Hamilton's maiden speech, and I remind Members of the convention relating to such contributions.

Mr Hamilton: Mr Speaker, I begin by congratulating you on your appointment to the office of Speaker, and I wish you all the best in your endeavours.

I beg to move amendment No 2: Leave out all after the first "Assembly" and insert

"recognises many young people originally from Northern Ireland currently living, working and paying their way in the USA are included amongst the millions of undocumented immigrants to that country from various parts of the world; welcomes bipartisan approaches to address this issue which emphasise strong border controls; and urges the US Government to enhance efforts to resolve this matter."

When the good people of Strangford did me the honour of electing me to serve them at Stormont —

Mr McNarry: Hear, hear.

Mr Hamilton: Thank you. When they elected me, I did not envisage that my maiden speech would address an issue that affects people living in New York rather than Newtownards. Although I am pretty sure that, of the estimated 50,000 illegal immigrants of Irish origin living in the United States at the moment, very few are from Strangford and even fewer support me or my political party, I am nonetheless interested in the subject.

Anyone who knows me well will affirm that I have a long and abiding interest in the United States, particularly in its politics. My love for that country is surpassed only by that for my own. Irrespective of the level of our interest in the US, we all know that it is a nation founded upon wave after wave of immigration spanning several centuries. People of all persuasions from our Province have played a pivotal part in shaping the history of America. All of that, however, was long before visas or green cards. As is the case everywhere in the Western World, immigration into the US today is a wildly different and much more complex issue than it was 100 or 200 years ago.

The lure of the wealth of the world's biggest economy has subjected the United States to what its Department of Homeland Security suggests is an influx of as many as 12 million illegal immigrants. Others argue that the actual figure might be as high as 20 million immigrants. However, regardless of the real number, there are undoubtedly millions of individuals who illegally cross the US border, overstay their visas or violate the terms of their legal entry, thus placing a strain on the US. Indeed, some states, such as Arizona and New Mexico, have had to declare states of emergency as a result.

My desire for a resolution of the issue is as much influenced by global economics and my aforementioned affection for the US as it is by the desire to offer assistance to people originally from Northern Ireland.

Those illegal immigrants currently residing in the United States who are, as the original motion says:

"living, working and paying their way",

generally do so in low-paid, heavy-labour jobs in the agriculture, hospitality and construction industries — jobs that many Americans do not want to do. Removal of in excess of 10 million workers from an economy such as that of the United States could bring that country to the brink of economic collapse. There is an old adage that whenever America sneezes, the rest of the world catches a cold.

I would never condone the wilful flouting of the immigration laws of another state, just as I would condemn anyone who ignores our laws, and I have little sympathy for anyone whose "plight", as the motion described it, is self-inflicted. However, I understand the problem, its consequences and the need for a resolution. To that end, at local government level, I supported a Bill that was before the United States Congress in 2005. It has already been mentioned; it went by the names of its major co-sponsors, Senator Edward Kennedy and Senator John McCain. The Bill was widely recognised as an attempt to reach compromise between the diametrically opposed positions of a total amnesty for illegal aliens and enforced deportation — something that resources would not permit.

The Bill offered undocumented workers entry to a guest-worker programme and a pathway to possible legalisation if they paid a fine and any unpaid back taxes. That was backed up by proposals for stricter and stronger border controls. I am sure that we could all see some merit in that approach.

No doubt, some will say that the Assembly should not spend its time debating such issues. When we stand back and survey the despairing legacies of direct rule, such as the chronic underfunding of education and the creaking infrastructure and chaos of the Health Service, those people may have a point. Of course, there are several other legacies of the Troubles, one of which, the onset of parochialism, came as a result of being feted by Prime Ministers and Presidents who sought to solve our problems.

I hope that last week's events allow us to take our own place in the world instead of having it defined for us. Instead of having the world watch us, we must lift our vision and view the world around us. If, from time to time, like all other democratic institutions, we debate issues that affect people beyond our shores, it will be of benefit to us all.

Mr Speaker: Mr Cathal Boylan will move amendment No 3, which is published on the Marshalled List. I remind Members that Mr Boylan is making his maiden speech.

Mr Boylan: I beg to move amendment No 3: Leave out all after "Reform" and insert

“and this Assembly, in a public expression of its support for the undocumented Irish in the USA, contact the US Administration and all US Senators, urging them to reach a compromise which would secure residency for the Irish undocumented as well as the many immigrants living in the USA deemed illegal by the present system.”

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle, and I wish you well in your new post. Given that I have family in New York and I understand the problems that they have faced in the past, I am grateful for the opportunity to move the amendment.

Sinn Féin has consistently supported and highlighted the Irish Lobby for Immigration Reform's campaign for legal status for the estimated 40,000 — and more — undocumented Irish people who live and work in the United States. The hardships faced by many of our brothers, sisters, family members and friends in America — who are known as the undocumented Irish — have had an impact on a great number of families throughout Ireland. Therefore it is an issue that must be resolved.

On a recent trip to the USA, I met ILIR activists and heard of the many problems faced by the undocumented Irish whom the present Administration have deemed illegals, and, therefore, lawbreakers. People from my own town of Keady live there, as well as people from Middletown, Ballymacnab, Granemore and throughout the Newry and Armagh constituency. Indeed, people from many parts of Ireland live there. I was made aware of a young mother who could not take her child home to its grandparents in case she would not be able to return to America — a place she has made her home. Some of the stories were from families who were unable to travel to family occasions such as weddings, or, most poignantly, the funerals of loved ones.

Many Sinn Féin elected representatives, including Gerry Adams, Martin McGuinness, and Dublin South-West TD Seán Crowe, have travelled to the US to lobby and support ILIR representatives and to stand shoulder to shoulder with their fellow countrymen and women. They have also heard at first hand the difficulties that those people face. Many of them are young people who work and contribute to the financial well-being of the USA and make a positive impact on that society.

Granting legal residential status to the undocumented Irish would not only lift the constant daily pressures that they face and ensure that they can plan for the future, it would benefit the USA as a nation and those of us who are back in Ireland. With that status, those people could travel freely to visit family and contribute to the economy through tourism and investment, now and in the future. This is a crucial time for the more than 40,000 undocumented Irish who live and work in the US. The matter must be resolved; citizenship must be granted to those people. The elected representatives in the US Administration who are involved in brokering a deal to solve the problems of immigration should

seize the moment. I appeal to them to act now. They should not scuttle what many believe is the best chance in a long time to secure comprehensive immigration reform and to finally resolve all the outstanding issues.

The time has arrived for concerted lobbying to solve the problem of the undocumented once and for all. I ask the Assembly to champion the cause. A public expression of its support for the undocumented Irish would add significant weight and, I hope, help to encourage all those involved in the decision-making process finally to resolve the matter. Therefore, I ask that the Assembly contact the US Administration and all its Senators to urge them to reach a compromise that would secure residency for the undocumented Irish and the many immigrants who live in the US and whom the present system deems illegal. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Kennedy: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Have any representations been made to you, your officials or the Deputy Speakers about either the acoustics or the heating system in the Chamber today? Both are unsatisfactory to varying degrees. I ask that you take those matters on board as quickly as possible. You could hang beef down here.

Mr Speaker: Mr Kennedy, neither issue has been raised with me, but I will address both of them as soon as possible.

Mr Elliott: Mr Speaker, I also welcome you to the Speaker's Chair. I hope that Members on this side of the Chamber will not give you too much difficulty. Best wishes to you in your new role.

The first thing that struck me when I saw the motion was that I — and I am sure that Members of the House agree — do not want to support any illegal activity in the United States of America. I am concerned that by supporting the original motion, we may do so. I also appreciate the difficulties faced by the US Administration in deciding to whom they should issue visas or grant occupational rights in their country and jurisdiction.

I am sure that many people have exploited those difficulties, and I would not like to think that the Assembly should condone what might be the exploitation of legislative powers in the United States. It is clear that the issue must be addressed in the USA. Happily, the current President recently said that one of his priorities is to address the matter and try to move it forward, perhaps not speedily but to a satisfactory resolution.

The motion also states that the Irish people concerned are “paying their way”. I wonder what that means. Does it mean that the 50,000 Irish exiles who have been mentioned pay all the taxes and levies imposed by the United States Government? If so, I would have thought that they were living in the country legally. I want some clarification on what exactly is meant by “paying their way”.

I understand that about 15,000 of the 50,000 undocumented Irish that have been mentioned are from Northern Ireland. Perhaps the Assembly should try to grasp what their particular circumstances are. Members need to get a general feel for their difficulties, how long they have been in the US and why they face such problems.

4.00 pm

The number of Irish people being deported from the USA is falling, but there remain many who live in fear. The 'Los Angeles Times' recently reported a fall in the USA's Irish-born population. In 1970, there were 251,000 Irish-born people living in America, but that has dropped progressively over the past 34 years to 127,600. Much of the decrease in Irish immigration in recent years has been attributed to the Celtic tiger economy and economic growth that has encouraged more people to stay in Ireland. There are also difficulties with the lottery-type competition that is used to grant legal residency in the USA.

I recently read a report that highlighted problems in the USA's Irish neighbourhoods that were associated with the decline in the Irish-born population. The report stated that Irish community newspapers were losing advertising and that the number of GAA teams in traditional Irish neighbourhoods was falling. However, I am pleased to inform the House that the membership of the Orange Order in America is increasing — something of which, I am sure, Members will be proud and glad to hear. Since 1998, when a new lodge was formed in California, the membership of the Orange Order in America has risen steadily. I am sure that Members will be pleased about that and, at a time when there are problems within the broader Irish dimension in America, I am glad that I have something positive to offer.

Mr Speaker: I call Dr Stephen Farry. I remind Members that this is Dr Farry's maiden speech.

Dr Farry: Mr Speaker, before I address the substance of the motion, I congratulate you on your appointment as Speaker. We share a common predecessor in Eileen Bell, and in my maiden speech I wish to pay tribute to her as my predecessor as the Alliance Party MLA for North Down. Many tributes have been paid to her for her role as Speaker, and I put on record my thanks, and those of my constituents, for her work on behalf of all the people of North Down over the past eight years.

I thank the proposers of the motion for bringing the important issue before the Assembly. Of the estimated 50,000 undocumented Irish citizens living in the United States, a considerable number of those are from Northern Ireland, so it is right that the Assembly turns its attention to their welfare. The majority of those people will have legally travelled to the United States on tourist or work visas, but, for various reasons, they will have overstayed the terms of those visas. Many of them are now well

established in their communities, where they have homes, have got married and have had children. Some are running businesses; indeed, some have enrolled in the army and are now fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq.

However, they are living in fear of being found out and deported. They experience major difficulties in accessing driving licences, social security numbers and health insurance, and they often live in fear of having a major accident or illness. They cannot risk returning to Ireland for fear of not gaining re-entry to the United States and often miss out on important family occasions.

As someone who legally spent most of the past year in the United States on a J-1 visa, I can testify to the bureaucracy involved in establishing oneself there. I can imagine what it would be like without documentation.

As a liberal, I believe in open borders for trade and labour. The USA has prospered as a nation of immigrants; essentially, it had an open-door policy until 1920. Since then, it has regulated its borders — as any country is entitled to do. However, the USA is a country in which many people aspire to work and live, and those people are often driven by lack of economic opportunities in their homeland. The Assembly must address that.

The Irish in America cannot be separated from the wider debates on immigration, and I hope that there is a good prospect of comprehensive reform being put in place for the first time since 1965.

The fact that the debate is occurring in the United States is encouraging. To put that in perspective, it is not happening in either Britain or Ireland. Outside the context of EU migration, economic migrants from other parts of the world are routinely deported from both of those jurisdictions. Although there are some elements in the USA who want to erect walls and fences, take a protectionist economic line and criminalise undocumented immigrants, there are many others who recognise the social, economic and cultural benefits that those immigrants bring to the United States. Indeed, there are many areas of the economy that could not function without them. In many big cities such as Washington, the service industry is dominated by immigrant workers.

Last year, I was present on the National Mall when over 500,000 people, most of whom were Latin American, were holding a rally in favour of immigration reform and were chanting in Spanish. The discipline and order among the crowd were remarkable. The police were required simply to direct traffic and people. It was a refreshing sight.

It is hoped that the views of progressives will eventually win out and that some form of compromise will be reached that involves tougher border security, a scheme to legalise undocumented immigrants and the introduction of a new immigration policy that has a

heavier emphasis on skills. Ultimately, however, it is for the United States to resolve the matter, not the Assembly.

I largely support the SDLP's proposed amendment to the motion, although I have concerns about the way that it has been phrased and about the tone of some speeches, which suggest that the issue of the Irish can somehow be separated from the wider issue of the 12 million undocumented immigrants from different countries. It would be wrong to highlight one nationality above others and to imply that their case is most deserving. For that reason, I have sympathy for the Sinn Féin amendment, which addresses the broader issue more comprehensively.

Although Mr Hamilton's amendment also addresses the issue, I am concerned about its overemphasis on border security. Border security must be one element of a comprehensive solution; however, it is not the only solution. I would hate for the Assembly to go down the line of endorsing higher walls and security fences, which most people in the United States do not recognise as being the main part of any solution. People in the United States want the issue to be dealt with properly. Business and labour organisations want immigrant workers to be properly documented so that they can contribute fully to the economy.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Ian McCrea. I remind Members that this is Mr McCrea's maiden speech to the Assembly and should be heard without interruption.

Mr I McCrea: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I congratulate you, as other Members have done, on your elevation to Speaker of the House.

The debate is timely for the new Assembly, as, over the weekend, negotiations took place among United States Senators to try to forge a long-elusive compromise on the immigration issue. They are working towards a deadline of Wednesday 16 May, which was set by the Senate majority leader Harry Reid — a Democrat from Nevada — for a vote to determine whether the Senate will begin to debate immigration.

With House Leaders insisting that Senators take the lead on the issue, the Senate's failure to move forward this week could derail hopes of overhauling immigration laws in 2007. President Bush has made immigration reform one of only a few major domestic issues that he has pledged to resolve before the end of his term. Two months of intense negotiations involving a bipartisan group of Senators and two Cabinet Secretaries did not yield a compromise.

There is strong consensus on continuing to improve border security. Both sides agree on the creation of a foolproof system to verify that employees are legal. They back tough punishments for companies that hire outside the legal system. Both sides have also accepted that certain goals to tighten the border and immigration practices must be realised before further reform can proceed. They agree that the estimated 12 million illegal

immigrants in the US should be given a way to earn citizenship. Although the criteria is yet to be fully ironed out, illegal immigrants who qualified for citizenship would probably have to learn English, pay taxes retrospectively, show that they have established roots in the United States and have held a job.

There has been disagreement over a temporary worker programme. Democrats want participants to be able to gain permanent resident status, which is a step towards citizenship. However, Republicans prefer a programme that is purely temporary. Republicans also want to reconfigure the basic underpinnings of US immigration, shifting it from a system that seeks to reunite families to one that gives preference to immigrants who have the education and skills that are sought by American businesses. Democrats are bitterly opposed to that.

In his weekly radio address to the nation, President Bush urged Congress to continue to press for an overhaul of the immigration system. He said that any final package must include improved border security and hold employers accountable for verifying the legal status of employees. It must also include a temporary worker programme and:

"must resolve the status of millions of illegal immigrants who are already here, without amnesty and without animosity."

News reports have suggested that a possible deal could centre on legislation aimed at securing the US border with Mexico and establishing a high-tech identification system for immigrant workers. Only then would millions of illegal immigrants be given an opportunity to gain legal status after meeting certain criteria.

Members' sympathies are with those from this part of the world who are contributing positively to United States' society, many of whom have done so for decades. However, in arriving at a settlement, cognisance must be given to future implications and how those who seek to enter the United States will be dealt with.

Unfortunately, I cannot support the SDLP amendment. The difficulty is with the Irish Lobby for Immigration Reform. One of its events was concluded to rapturous applause, with *tiocfaidh ár lá* from the Democratic Senator Charles Schumer. I cannot support a body like that. However, the DUP has tabled an amendment, which proves its desire to resolve the matter.

Mr Speaker: Mr Mickey Brady will give the winding-up speech on the third amendment. I remind Members that this is his maiden speech.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I have listened with interest to what has been said by previous Members who spoke, and I commend Mr P J Bradley and Dr McDonnell for tabling the motion.

There are varied views on the undocumented Irish, and it has been pointed out that there are approximately

12 million undocumented immigrants in the USA. I am not sure how many of them are from Strangford. However, if Members look at the figures that have been quoted, approximately 15,000 of the undocumented Irish are from the North. It is incumbent on the House to give all the undocumented Irish from the island of Ireland, regardless of which part they come from, the support that is required to make them legal.

Dr Farry stated that the Irish are well established in America and contribute to that community by marrying or joining the army, etc. That has been the long-term position. The undocumented Irish require the support of Members.

I, and others from Newry and Armagh, recently had the opportunity to meet a group of influential high-profile US Congressmen and Congresswomen, including Carolyn McCarthy, who visited the area. In that group were Richard Neal and Jim Walsh, both of whom have long-established contacts with Ireland and have had input on issues relating to the island. Congressman Neal serves as the chairperson of the Friends of Ireland (FOI).

I met the delegation along with the former mayor of Newry and Mourne District Council Councillor Pat McGinn and discussed the present situation concerning the undocumented Irish. We conveyed the deep concern of local people about the potential implications if arguments made by the anti-immigration, restrictionist lobby are accepted. Members have already mentioned many examples of the impact on the lives of undocumented people, such as not being allowed to return home for funerals and weddings. There are cases of people who have had children in America and are married to Americans who are not allowed back.

I commend the motion to the House. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Simpson: I congratulate you, Mr Speaker, on your elevation to the office of Speaker. I trust that Members will not give you too much of a hard time.

4.15 pm

I support my colleague's amendment. There are thought to be approximately 12 million illegal immigrants in the United States. Each year, between 500,000 and one million more enter the country, mostly through the 2,000-mile southern border with Mexico. Many of these people are poorly educated, unskilled workers. However, in their thousands, they fill the sorts of jobs that most native-born Americans will not take — at least not for the same wages.

For example, much of California's agriculture industry relies on migrant workers. However, some argue that those jobs could be filled without illegal immigrants. Most people agree that, at present, the US system is failing all its stakeholders: foreigners who want to enter the country; citizens who expect the US Government

to prevent illegal border crossings; and employers who need workers to fill jobs. Strength of feeling on the issue has been characterised by huge marches to protest against the discrimination of undocumented workers.

The United States was built by immigrants, many of whom were seeking a new life in a new land. Until 1882, anyone could move to the United States. Throughout most of the twentieth century, the federal Government fine-tuned their immigration policies to answer the specific concerns of their citizens. In recent years, an increasing number of Americans have come to believe that the country is being overwhelmed by immigrants, and they have asked policy-makers to create laws that discourage both legal and illegal immigration.

The debate on immigration offers a modern-day reading of the principles on which many people feel America was founded: providing newcomers with freedom from oppression and the opportunity for prosperity. Some Americans think that immigrants are a burden on the US economy, while others believe that they have benefited it. In addition, critics of immigration are concerned that the country is splintering along racial and cultural lines, because immigrants are not being assimilated properly into US society.

Historically, many went to America to escape war, poverty, famine or religious persecution. Some went seeking fortune, and others were taken against their will to work as slaves. Early immigration laws were aimed at preserving the racial, religious and ethnic composition of the United States, which was then largely European. Soon, however, Americans were complaining about European immigrants as well.

During the latter part of the twentieth century, US immigration policy addressed specific modern-day problems. In some instances, the federal Government have set limits on the number of immigrants who fall into certain classifications, such as refugee, who are allowed to reside in the country.

The United States admit close to one million legal immigrants every year, and, annually, immigration is swelling by several hundred thousand others who illegally cross its borders. Both legal and illegal immigrants contribute to dramatic changes in the racial, ethnic and cultural composition of the country.

Some US citizens think that immigrants have revitalised many American cities, but, in some communities, there has been a backlash against their growing presence. Many Americans support restrictions on immigration because they think that the illegal immigrants take low-skilled jobs away from American citizens.

The negotiations that have been mentioned, which are ongoing among the political leaders in Washington, have the potential to resolve the current difficulties.

This Assembly should play its part in encouraging agreement on the issue.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Dr McDonnell: Mr Speaker, like other Members, I congratulate you on becoming Speaker. I did so privately in the Business Committee, but this is my first opportunity to do so publicly and put on record my best wishes to you. I hope the role is a happy and successful one for you.

I wish to pick up on a couple of threads. I am delighted at the broad consensus of opinion on this subject. Members may differ in the detail, and on some of the outcomes, but I am delighted that so many from all parties have shown interest, attended and engaged in this debate. That is what P J Bradley and I had hoped for when we tabled the motion. We believe that it is an issue for us all.

I am doubly delighted that five or six maiden speeches were made. I wish to thank all those Members for their contribution to the debate.

Most of the points have been made, and I do not want to repeat them or bore people. However, there are strong ties of history and blood relationships between the people of the United States and the people of Ireland, particularly with those of Northern Ireland. It is important to me that those ties are strengthened, and a number of Members have articulated a similar interest. It is in that context that the motion was tabled.

The motion is not about broad issues of the security of the United States or its border. It was not my intention to engage in heated debate on the detail of how the Americans protect their borders — whether they build big walls or mount guns on the border, and so on. Those are issues about which we can do nothing. The 15 million, 16 million or 18 million estimated undocumented in the United States are not my concern, and I make no apology for that; rather it is the estimated 40,000 to 50,000 from the island of Ireland who are in difficulties there and not enjoying undocumented status. Of those, some 15,000 to 18,000 — almost half — are presumed to have come from Northern Ireland. There are various ways of estimating that figure.

Those people have been in the United States, making livelihoods, for as many as 15 years. They have put down roots there; some have married; and some have set up businesses. However, the motion refers to those who are “paying their way”, and that reflects the fact that the vast majority of those people, as I understand it from people who have briefed me, are earning a living, working, contributing and paying taxes. They have been doing so for a long time. Some are on the margins and not operating through the books but the majority are paying taxes, because it is not possible to be a builder or a tradesman without doing so.

I visited San Francisco last week. It is estimated that there are over 3,000 undocumented Irish in that area. A disproportionate number of them are from Northern Ireland. I am told that 2,500 of the 3,000 are northern. These figures are only guesstimates. A significant number of those — perhaps 600 — are of a unionist background. I mention that not to be divisive but to illustrate that this is not simply a problem for nationalists. There are unionists involved.

A couple of months ago, I met a young man who works in the Irish Immigration Center in Boston, who proudly told me that he is a unionist from County Down. He is equally concerned that many people seeking help from the Irish Immigration Center in Boston are from a unionist background, and that they often find it more difficult to get help because they are in many ways the forgotten people in that situation.

Mr P J Bradley and I appeal to our unionist colleagues to be aware that the motion is not exclusively nationalist or Irish. Americans do not see much difference in unionists who cross the Atlantic — they are treated as Irish. We are all Irish, when we get that far.

I do not wish to dictate immigration strategy to the United States; I want to highlight the plight of 40,000 people, particularly those from Northern Ireland, who have been driven to the United States because of circumstances, economic or otherwise, that were often beyond their control. I plead with the Assembly to assist those people in whatever way possible.

I congratulate Mr Hamilton on his maiden speech and I welcome his general support. However, we would be splitting hairs by broadening the issue. He asked about the strain on individual states. Last week, people in San Francisco told me that the economy would collapse in some states because, for example, every gardener in California is Mexican, and around 80% of them are undocumented. However, I am not concerned primarily with that issue. I am concerned about the 15,000 people from Northern Ireland. Although some constituencies are represented more than others in that figure, by and large, all constituencies and backgrounds are represented.

Mr Boylan mentioned several details of the campaign and highlighted family problems, such as the people who are not able to attend a parent's funeral or a family wedding. His point was that guest-worker status is required in order to allow people time. People do not want to be forced to leave the country in order to become documented and receive clearance. If they were allowed to register in the United States as undocumented and be given a year, 18 months, or whatever time it takes to clear their status, and were then rejected, let them come home. Let them not be in a twilight zone, where they are neither fish nor flesh,

where they are unsure for months, and where those who have businesses would have to fold them.

I assure Tom Elliott that I am neither condoning nor encouraging illegal activity. However, I would not agree to registering those people as having committed a crime. They may have bent, or broken, immigration laws by working while undocumented; however, that is a fact of life, and the Irish dimension represents a very small percentage of the 15 million people involved. I would like a fuller debate on the bigger problem. However, our intention today is to highlight one issue.

Mr Elliott made my point very well when he raised the issue of the Orange Order in California. I welcome the formation of an Orange Lodge in California because it confirms my point that there is a substantial slice of unionism caught up in the debate. Although some of those people may be very successful, some may be undocumented.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Dr McDonnell: Thank you Mr Speaker. I would have liked to address the comments made during the other maiden speeches. I support the SDLP's amendment to the motion, and I appeal to all sides of the House to do the same. Let us dissect the other points at another time.

4.30 pm

Mr Speaker: It has been a while since we started to debate this motion. I will try to recap and explain how the voting on the amendments will work. You might all be the wiser for it.

I remind Members that the first amendment is from the proposers of the motion. The second amendment is from Mr Hamilton, and the third is from Mr Boylan.

I will clarify how the amendments will operate. Whether or not the first amendment is made, I will put the Question on the second amendment. However, if the second amendment is made, then the third amendment will fall. If neither the first nor the second amendment is made, I will neither put the Question on the third amendment nor the Question on the motion as it appears on the Order Paper. After that explanation, this should be clear to most Members. *[Laughter.]*

The Question will only be put on the third amendment if the first amendment is made and the second is not made. I know you all understand that.

Question put, That amendment No 1 be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 42; Noes 43.

AYES

Martina Anderson, Cathal Boylan, Dominic Bradley, Mary Bradley, P J Bradley, Mickey Brady, Francie Brolly, Thomas Burns, Paul Butler, Willie Clarke, John

Dallat, Dr Kieran Deeny, Mark Durkan, Dr Stephen Farry, David Ford, Tommy Gallagher, Michelle Gildernew, Carmel Hanna, Dolores Kelly, Anna Lo, Naomi Long, Alban Maginness, Alex Maskey, Fra McCann, Jennifer McCann, Kieran McCarthy, Raymond McCartney, Dr Alasdair McDonnell, Barry McElduff, Martin McGuinness, Daithí McKay, Mitchel McLaughlin, Francie Molloy, Conor Murphy, Carál Ní Chuilín, John O'Dowd, Declan O'Loan, Michelle O'Neill, Pat Ramsey, Sue Ramsey, Margaret Ritchie, Brian Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Dominic Bradley and John Dallat.

NOES

Billy Armstrong, Roy Beggs, Allan Bresland, Lord Browne, Thomas Buchanan, Gregory Campbell, Trevor Clarke, Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Jonathan Craig, Leslie Cree, Nigel Dodds, Jeffrey Donaldson, Alex Easton, Tom Elliott, Samuel Gardiner, Simon Hamilton, David Hilditch, William Irwin, Danny Kennedy, John McCallister, Ian McCrea, Dr William McCrea, Alan McFarland, Michael McGimpsey, Michelle McIlveen, David McNarry, Adrian McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Robin Newton, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Ian Paisley Jnr, Edwin Poots, George Robinson, Iris Robinson, Ken Robinson, Peter Robinson, Jim Shannon, David Simpson, Jimmy Spratt, Mervyn Storey, Peter Weir, Jim Wells, Sammy Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Jim Shannon and Mervyn Storey.

Question accordingly negated.

Question put, That amendment No 2 be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 43; Noes 42.

AYES

Billy Armstrong, Roy Beggs, Allan Bresland, Lord Browne, Thomas Buchanan, Gregory Campbell, Trevor Clarke, Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Jonathan Craig, Leslie Cree, Nigel Dodds, Jeffrey Donaldson, Alex Easton, Tom Elliott, Samuel Gardiner, Simon Hamilton, David Hilditch, William Irwin, Danny Kennedy, John McCallister, Ian McCrea, Dr William McCrea, Alan McFarland, Michael McGimpsey, Michelle McIlveen, David McNarry, Adrian McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Robin Newton, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Ian Paisley Jnr, Edwin Poots, George Robinson, Iris Robinson, Ken Robinson, Peter Robinson, Jim Shannon, David Simpson, Jimmy Spratt, Mervyn Storey, Peter Weir, Jim Wells, Sammy Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Jim Shannon and Mervyn Storey.

NOES

Martina Anderson, Cathal Boylan, Dominic Bradley, Mary Bradley, P J Bradley, Mickey Brady, Francie Brolly, Thomas Burns, Paul Butler, Willie Clarke, John Dallat, Dr Kieran Deeny, Mark Durkan, Dr Stephen Farry, David Ford, Tommy Gallagher, Michelle Gildernew, Carmel Hanna, Dolores Kelly, Anna Lo, Naomi Long, Fra McCann, Jennifer McCann, Kieran McCarthy, Raymond McCartney, Dr Alasdair McDonnell, Barry McElduff, Martin McGuinness, Daithí McKay, Mitchel McLaughlin, Alban Maginness, Alex Maskey, Francie Molloy, Conor Murphy, Carál Ní Chuilín, John O'Dowd, Declan O'Loan, Michelle O'Neill, Pat Ramsey, Sue Ramsey, Margaret Ritchie, Brian Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Martina Anderson and Raymond McCartney.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises many young people originally from Northern Ireland currently living, working and paying their way in the USA are included amongst the millions of undocumented immigrants to that country from various parts of the world; welcomes bipartisan approaches to address this issue which emphasise strong border controls; and urges the US Government to enhance efforts to resolve this matter.

Adjourned at 4.58 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 15 May 2007

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Review of New Rating System

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

Two amendments have been received and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of each amendment will have 10 minutes in which to do so and five minutes for the winding-up speech.

Mr B Wilson: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the introduction of unfair changes to the rating system, and calls upon the Department of Finance and Personnel to conduct a full review of the new system, including in particular, consideration of further income-related reliefs and a full income-based system.

I congratulate you on your appointment, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Since the recent rates revaluation, I have been approached by a number of my constituents whose rates have increased dramatically, in some cases by more than £1,000. For some, their rates would have doubled had it not been for transitional rate relief. Most of those constituents live in an old family home and exist on a modest pension. The rates increase will cause extreme hardship in most cases, and in extreme cases it will result in people having to sell the family home. It is unacceptable that elderly people who have worked all their lives and have saved for their retirement are now being hammered by those excessive rate demands.

The Executive must revisit the options for funding local government services. The present system, which is based on the regional rate, increasingly puts the burden on the elderly and those on a fixed income. It also hits low-income families. That cannot be

acceptable in a civilised society. Rates are a regressive tax, and they bear little relation to a person's ability to pay. They not only create hardship for those on fixed incomes but have a disproportionate impact on the low-paid. The Department of Finance and Personnel's own figures, which are based on the 1999-2000 household survey, show that a house with a weekly income of £100 would pay 11.6% of that in rates, yet one with a weekly income of more than £400 would pay only 2.5% of that figure.

The new valuations, which are based on capital values, that were introduced in April 2007 highlight the rating system's unfairness. Any system, however, that is based on property values is inherently unfair, as it totally disregards a person's ability to pay. The problems raised by that revaluation are not new, but they are fundamental to any system that is based on property values.

For years, I have highlighted the plight of many elderly constituents who live on small pensions and who must pay more than 10% of their income on rates. The current proposals have emphasised and exacerbated their hardship. It is time for something to be done to reduce their burden.

Rates are a regressive tax, and they bear no relationship to one's ability to pay. How can one justify an old-age pensioner's having to pay the same as a family of three wage earners, simply because they live in a similar house? Moreover, payment of rates does not relate to the use of facilities. Can it be argued that a pensioner makes more use of an ice rink or squash courts, creates more rubbish, or uses more water than a family of four? Is it right that a person who lives on a pension should pay full rates while a young person who earns a substantial wage and lives in the family home should contribute nothing to the cost of local services?

Rates should be replaced by a tax that is based on ability to pay. The recent change from a rates system that is based on rental values to one that is based on capital values is merely tinkering with an unacceptable system that needs fundamental reform.

I have long argued that rates are inherently unfair because they take no account of ability to pay. In 1982, I raised that issue with the then Secretary of State, Jim Prior, when we met him to propose the abolition of the regional rate. The problem has worsened significantly in recent years as successive Finance Ministers — both Executive and direct rule — have raised the regional rate disproportionately to pay for the upgrading of our economic infrastructure. Few people would dispute that we must raise additional revenue to upgrade that infrastructure, but that should not be done through an unfair rating system that places the burden heavily on the most vulnerable sections of our community. I

therefore call on the Minister to carry out a full review of the means of funding local services.

I recognise that, in 2000, the Executive set up a review of rating policy and began an extensive consultation process. However, the terms of reference for that review were extremely restrictive and the consultation was unable to consider options other than those that were based on property values. My submission, which proposed a local income tax, was dismissed as going beyond the terms of reference.

Much has happened since then. The regional rate has almost doubled, and both the Lyons Inquiry and the Burt Review of local government, in England and Scotland respectively, have suggested changes to local government finance.

There were more than 100 responses to the consultation in Northern Ireland, but the input from some political parties was limited by the terms of reference and, in other cases, was non-existent. I was the only elected representative to oppose the principle of the charges and to call for the replacement of rates by a tax that is based on ability to pay, such as a local income tax.

Three of the political parties that were then represented in the Assembly did not submit any evidence, and the comments of the other four queried the details of the new system, rather than the principles behind it, which are fundamental to the achievement of a just system. Over the five-year consultation period, there was very little interest from most politicians until last year, when the new valuations were announced. Politicians then demanded that the proposals be withdrawn.

The motion calls for a review of all the options, particularly income-based alternatives such as a local income tax. That would clearly be fair, as it would be based on one's ability to pay; it would tax non-householders who do not pay at present, and it would not act as a disincentive to improve property. Other options include a local sales tax; a services tax; green taxes, which would help the environment as well as raising revenue, based on the principle that the polluter pays; and a land-value tax.

The Green Party in the Scottish Parliament has proposed a land-value tax, which is being considered by the Scottish Parliament and Executive. The Assembly should examine that option, because such a tax would benefit people on low income and would encourage the development of derelict land. When land is derelict, no one pays tax on it, and no income comes from it. A land-value tax would stop speculators from building up land banks on which they pay no tax, but from which they benefit from almost daily rises in land prices. Many developers, particularly in the greater

Belfast area, have land banks where affordable homes could be built.

The values of those land banks have increased dramatically in recent years. It is wrong that developers rather than the public should benefit from the appreciation in land prices. We should examine all those options, and the Assembly should seek to acquire tax-raising powers so that all increases in public expenditure are not met solely from the property tax paid by the ratepayer but from a basket of taxes.

I accept that such a review will take time; however, a great injustice could be resolved immediately. We should end the discrimination against single householders in Northern Ireland. Since 1993, single householders in the rest of the UK have benefited from a 25% rebate. That takes into account the fact that they make less use of public services than larger households. That rebate has helped millions of householders in Great Britain, the majority of whom are pensioners.

In 1992, I wrote to the then Finance Minister, Michael Mates, to ask that he introduce a similar discount in Northern Ireland. He rejected my request, pointing out that local-government finance is different in Northern Ireland. I wrote to all subsequent Finance Ministers and have a file of their replies, which were pretty awful. Those Ministers did not understand the issue — for example, Paul Murphy pointed out that the Exchequer funding for Northern Ireland is much higher than in the rest of the UK. Mark Durkan replied that the issue would be considered in the course of the review of rating policy. The matter has been put off, year after year, since 1992. Why should Mrs Jones from Bangor in north Wales get a 25% discount, while Mrs Jones from Bangor in County Down does not? Such discrimination cannot be justified, particularly as the regional-rate burden has increased significantly in recent years. In North Down alone, 5,600 single pensioners would benefit from such a rebate. We call on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to introduce the 25% rates discount for the single householder and to end this discrimination.

In conclusion, I ask the Minister to set up a review of the funding of local services and to consider moving from a property-based tax to a mainly income-based tax. That review should also examine all other options, such as a local sales tax, service tax, land-value tax and green taxes. If necessary, the legislation must be changed to give the Assembly tax-raising powers, which it should have anyway. It is essential that the burden of taxation be spread more evenly and does not continue to fall most heavily on the elderly and those on fixed incomes. In the meantime, I ask the Minister to introduce the 25% discount available in the rest of the UK, thereby reducing the hardship and concern

experienced by tens of thousands of pensioners in Northern Ireland.

Mr Beggs: I beg to move amendment No 1: Leave out all after “notes” and insert

“the widespread public concern at the changes to the rating system and calls upon the Department of Finance and Personnel to conduct a full review of the new rating system, including consideration of a generous, non-means tested, rates relief scheme for pensioner households.”

I tabled the amendment in the interests of avoiding the complex, highly expensive and bureaucratic system that would emerge. For “income-related reliefs” in the text of the motion, we should read “means-tested reliefs”. With regard to take-up of means-tested relief, a 2006 report from the Office for National Statistics indicated that benefit take-up was in the range of 62% to 68% by caseload and 65% to 71% by expenditure for 2004-05. In other words, a third of people entitled to those reliefs did not claim them, so any such scheme will miss one third of the most vulnerable.

Pensioners' groups have also examined the issue. Help the Aged found, similarly, that 37% of pensioners did not take up their benefit entitlement. We should not be surprised at that figure.

10.45 am

In a 2006 policy statement, Help the Aged indicated that means testing much of this help has created a complex and bureaucratic system, resulting in the failure of millions of the poorest pensioners to benefit from the changes. Pensioner interest groups have expressed concern; therefore, my amendment includes the words “non-means tested”. Any form of relief should be universal; everyone should be free to apply for it or to receive it automatically.

Help the Aged commented that:

“Universal benefits tend to have the best rates of take-up as they are simple to understand, usually have clear eligibility criteria, and are not associated with any kind of stigma.”

Many elderly people do not take up their entitlement because they believe that they must reveal all of their personal circumstances. It is an invasive process, and it is important that we realise that. Stigma, therefore, is a big issue to consider when determining how any new system should operate.

The motion mentioned income-based systems. That means income tax, and I am pleased that the proposer of the motion mentioned that in his speech. However, he did not mention it in the motion itself, because he wants additional income tax for Northern Ireland. Will that help the economy or detract from it? We must encourage as many people as possible to return to employment and assist them to contribute to the economy. The fear that an increase in income tax effectively means an additional tax, a poll tax, for working families contributes to the problems.

There is a choice. There can be a full income tax system for everything; for example, what was raised by property rates could be raised by income tax. However, that would remove any choice from local government. Each area would simply be handed a budget with central control over what could be done with it.

That is a complex system to administer. We must remember that, apart from income tax and the Inland Revenue, there may be issues concerning national insurance, child tax credit, pensioner tax credit and working families tax credit. How would all of those things work together in a system? There is no doubt that any effect on someone's income will impinge on other benefits. It is therefore foolish to introduce an income tax unless it is introduced in the whole of the UK. Instead of a huge administrative burden, it could be done more efficiently and should be considered only at a national level.

To follow that route in replacing the rates system would create a complex system. I surmise that the 250 staff employed by Crystal Alliance to administer water charges is only a small number compared to the number of civil servants required to administer any new income tax system that is not fully integrated into the Inland Revenue. It is likely that we would have to pay many civil servants to run yet another bureaucratic system, thereby damaging the economy and without reaching the people we want to reach.

The proposer of the motion referred to another choice involving an income tax-based system, and that is to raise the regional rate element from income tax and the remainder from property tax. Two systems would, therefore, have to be administered. Money that we want to spend on services in the community would be wasted.

Those new Members who have yet to come into contact with issues involving the complex system will, I fear, do so before long. I refer in particular to the tax credit system. Some of the poorest families tried to take advantage of benefits to which they believed they were entitled, only to discover that, following an assessment by the Inland Revenue at the year end, and owing to administrative errors and miscommunication, they had to pay back several thousands of pounds.

That exacerbates the situation. Therefore a move towards income tax would be done at our peril; it will be worthy of our consideration only when it is co-ordinated at the national, UK level.

It is important that any new rates system should be universal so that everyone who is entitled to benefit from it will take it up. In particular, vulnerable pensioners should be able to make use of it without stigma. Incentives and entitlements should remain in such a system so that everyone can save and be

prudent as they prepare for their later years. It is important not to create unreasonable administrative burdens.

The Member who moved the motion talked about other taxes that he wishes to employ. Let us be careful with our economy; we should avoid administrative burdens, complex systems and layers of tax that create difficulties for small businesses and discourage people from becoming workers or employers. We must allow the economy to grow. I am aware that the current system must be reviewed for fairness and so that it can deal with additional reliefs, but that must be done carefully. I suggest that the grief that Members get currently from constituents about property tax is minimal compared to the complaints that we would receive if we were to consider introducing further income tax burdens on the working community. Remember that for "income tax", I read "working family taxes". Let us encourage everyone back into employment and to save, and let us be cautious as we administer tax burdens on our community.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr O'Loan: I beg to move amendment No 2: Leave out all after the second "system" and insert

"which fundamentally fails the essential test of ability to pay; and further calls for this review to give particular consideration to fair and transparent income-based protections, and suitable reliefs for pensioners and all disabled persons."

The SDLP supports the need for a review of the new rates system. This amendment is necessary to emphasise that the central task that faces the Minister of Finance and Personnel is the understanding that the current system significantly generates rate demands that are not in line with ability to pay.

A property tax creates basic tensions about ability to pay. Houses do not pay the rates; occupants pay. Houses do not have incomes; occupants do. Houses do not have outgoings and varied circumstances; occupants do. Therefore the Minister faces quite a task in creating a property tax that truly reflects ability to pay. However, that should not be regarded as an argument for a local income tax; it is not that simple.

Let me be clear that the SDLP is not calling into review — and I doubt that any other party will, either — the central change in the new system, which was the replacement of a rental-based valuation of property by a capital-based one. All the evidence is that the old, rental-based approach was regressive and placed a disproportionate burden on those with lower incomes. A property tax is better based on capital, rather than rental, values.

It is proper that those who are in the political system recognise good administration, so, in passing, let me pay tribute to the staff in the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Rate Collection Agency who

administered a complex changeover. Taken as a whole, they did it well.

A capital-based system, however, brings its own problems. There may be some broad correlation between the value of a house and the ability of the occupant to pay. However, there are many exceptions and anomalies that the Minister must address.

The SDLP wants income-based protection proposals for both water charges and rates, to include a guaranteed maximum payment as a percentage of a person's income.

There are particular problems for pensioners. In some cases they have valuable homes but low incomes. That happens frequently after people have been widowed. There are places along the north coast, for example, where even modest homes have been priced astronomically for some time. Pensioners who live in such situations are carrying an unfair burden and need relief. The Government's well-established concept of a minimum income guarantee under the social security system is significant in this debate. Failure to allow proper relief for pensioners under the present rating system undermines and contradicts that guarantee.

If Draft Planning Policy Statement 14 is not removed, many people will fear the next property revaluation exercise. Small cottages on rural sites are now worth fortunes, and would be rated accordingly.

The SDLP amendment mentions "disabled persons". There is 25% rates relief for disabled people whose property has been modified; the SDLP wants that relief to be extended to every person with a disability. Why should a person with mobility difficulties who lives in a bungalow that does not need modification be treated differently from other people with disabilities?

The SDLP proposes that there should be a revenue regulator — an independent watchdog for all Government revenue proposals. The regulator would assess, comment on and have powers to regulate such proposals, including their cumulative effect. My party commends that proposal to other parties for consideration.

There must be more transparency in the rating system. Members have seen the people's anger during the argument over the water element in the regional rate. People want to know what they are paying for.

Finally, the SDLP has no objection to a local income tax being studied, but there are many problems involved. The Assembly has no tax-raising powers; the Scottish Parliament has such powers but has never used them, and there must be good reasons for that. HM Revenue and Customs would have difficulty in building in such a scheme. If it were achieved, revenue would be collected across Northern Ireland uniformly, but local council revenue demands vary enormously, so there is

no simple answer. There will be a property-based charge in Northern Ireland for the foreseeable future. The current system contains significant defects, which the Minister must rectify.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Congratulations on your appointment, Mr Deputy Speaker. I missed the opportunity to congratulate you yesterday.

I support the motion, and I have no difficulties with the amendments, which extrapolate the issues that would have to be considered during a review. Sinn Féin's preferred option is the removal of the rates and their replacement with a system of progressive direct taxation. However, that is work in progress, and a considerable amount of work needs to be done. Sinn Féin intends to pursue the matter with the Exchequer.

Sinn Féin believes that equality and ability to pay must be at the heart of any rating system, and that such a system must be transparent and fair. There should be a clear relationship between rates revenue, value for money and the quality of services provided. Mr O'Loan referred to a prime example, which is the widespread public view that people are being asked to pay twice for the same service when it comes to water charges.

Consequently, Sinn Féin believes that the rating system in the Six Counties is in urgent need of a radical overhaul, in the context of a review of the Barnett formula, and the negotiations, which we hope will be concluded successfully, on a meaningful peace dividend.

I call on the other parties in the Assembly to consider and support Sinn Féin's call for tax-varying powers for the Assembly. That would be a key element in bringing forward policies and measures that reflect local issues, expertise and accountability.

11.00 am

The current rating system, which was introduced by a direct rule Minister, does not distribute the rates burden fairly and has achieved little or no buy-in from stakeholders in our community. Every party addressed the issue in the recent election. In particular, current rating policy does not address the fact that, in many cases, house values bear no relationship to income. Therefore, many people are in the unenviable position of being asset rich but income poor and are experiencing exceptional hardship because of this unfair system.

In the absence of a progressive tax-gathering power to replace the present system, Sinn Féin argues that rates should be assessed through an income-related system, which is based on the ability to pay, and with specific exemptions for economically vulnerable groups such as older people, those with disabilities and other low-income households. Sinn Féin continues to

raise public finance issues including tax-varying powers, the Barnett formula, and the legacy costs of many years of neglect and underinvestment by successive direct rule Ministers. Sinn Féin is raising those issues to give the new team of Executive Ministers the tools and the opportunity to deliver on an agreed Programme for Government.

It is incumbent on MLAs, parties and party groupings to continue to provide support for that call and to continue to address those issues with the British and the Irish Governments. Sinn Féin supports the motion and the amendments.

Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Weir: The DUP has been consistent in its concerns about the proposed system. The party has highlighted its concerns from the start, and has raised them consistently with Ministers. Taking the capital value of houses on 1 January 2005 is not a reliable basis for determining rates. Therefore today's debate is welcomed.

People who fall just outside the benefits system and whose net income does not reflect their level of wealth will suffer most as a result of the review of rating policy.

The DUP has pressed on a number of issues and it will continue to press for a financial package to alleviate the situation. Unlike other parties in the House, the DUP has not thrown in the towel on that issue. At St Andrews, the DUP stressed that any system that left Northern Ireland ratepayers without a cap on rates was inherently unfair. It was unacceptable to have a situation in which people in Northern Ireland were, potentially, paying a lot more than the Duke of Westminster. I am glad to say that the DUP achieved a cap on rates. However, the level of the rates cap is too high, and that needs to be taken into account in any review of rating policy.

There should be a greater focus on the need for more generous relief for pensioners, and I welcome references to that matter in both amendments. Pensioners are the most vulnerable group who may be suffering because of changes to the rating system.

A fundamental mistake was made during the reinvestment and reform initiative (RRI), when rates rises were linked to council tax in England and Wales. The result was that many of us who served in local government saw a massive increase of 19% in the regional rate, which meant that no matter how prudent local councils were, ratepayers were given an unacceptable burden. The DUP believes that the link between council tax levels in Great Britain and Northern Ireland should be broken.

The DUP is content with both amendments as they focus on the key issues; rates relief, and the protection of vulnerable groups. The DUP will support the

amendments because they improve the motion. Having listened to the proposer of the motion, I have a number of concerns with the issues he has raised. His solutions seem to be twofold — first, he proposes some kind of agrarian revolution in this country in which landowners are taxed.

The landowners will not pick up the bill for that: when land is used for development it will simply become an additional tax passed on to property owners. We do not need further inflation of house prices in this country. However, the United Community group — and the Alliance Party, for whom I assume the proposer speaks also — has become the party that believes in taxation to the hilt, because that is what has been proposed.

The other imaginative solution put forward by the group is that of a local income tax. Again, the effect of that would be to tax people to the hilt. When we are given an opportunity to vary income tax, the Treasury will inevitably look at our expenditure — whatever the block grant is in Northern Ireland — and advise that if we are looking for more money we should simply increase our taxation to the maximum level possible before they can consider any additional finance.

The flawed thinking offered by Mr Wilson and others would not soak the rich, but rather drown the working man and women in a tidal wave of extra taxation.

The DUP welcomes the opportunity to debate the subject and believes that there must be a fundamental review and examination of the rating system. However, a review must focus on what will benefit people and must not be counterproductive to the people and the economy of Northern Ireland.

Mr Storey: Members would do well to ask why this debate is necessary. It is because of the failed political arrangements of the past, under both direct rule and the failed arrangements of the Belfast Agreement. However, we are in a new dispensation, and that dispensation has placed on us a responsibility to ensure that we get it right —

Mr McClarty: The Belfast Agreement mark II.

Mr Storey: — unlike the hon Members who are now reduced to a small number in the corner of the House, who cannot bring forward any proposals that command respect in the community, and whose election results were a clear indication of that.

There are few recently elected Members who have not come to realise the importance of the rating system in Northern Ireland. They will also have realised how important it is for the Assembly to take real action to ensure that the current situation imposed by direct rule administrators is reviewed and a new system implemented that does not unfairly penalise Northern Ireland

homeowners. In that I include homeowners on Rathlin Island, the most remote part of my constituency, some of whom I am delighted to welcome as guests in the visitors Gallery this morning.

The DUP laid out its position clearly on the rating issue in the run-up to the election, and it does not believe that the capital value of someone's home on 1 January 2005 is a sufficiently reliable indicator of a person's ability to pay to be used as a sole basis for determining rates. It is therefore clear that a different system must be employed. The motion calls for consideration of a "full income-based system". While I doubt strongly that an income-based system is the way forward, I welcome the call for a review to lay out all the different possibilities, so that the House —

Mr Campbell: I thank the hon Member for giving way. He is touching on an important point. The amendments, along with the motion, concentrate on exemptions, and that is right and proper for people on a low income. However, should we not also look at increasing disposable income across society so that the take is not reduced because of the exemptions that must be introduced?

Mr Storey: The hon Member for East Londonderry has made a good point. There is no doubt that we should look in detail at the level of relief given to vulnerable groups in our society. The DUP has already called for a 25% rate reduction for single pensioners living alone. Most often it is the older people, living in family homes for a long time, who find themselves in financial difficulty when faced with rate bills that continue to rise.

This issue should not be looked at in isolation, as my hon Friend and colleague has said. The ongoing negotiations with the Chancellor can make a significant impact. The reinvestment and reform initiative, a hallmark of devolution under the Belfast Agreement, shackled householders to huge rates hikes simply to allow the then Northern Ireland Executive to access borrowing. That situation cannot and should not be allowed to continue. It will be a significant step forward if we can break the link between local tax levels in England and the regional rate in Northern Ireland.

There is little point in claiming that there is going to be a simple solution to the problems of rating. However, it is an issue that this party has taken to the electorate, and we have clearly received an overwhelming mandate to take the issue seriously. That was demonstrated by our taking the Finance and Personnel portfolio as our first choice in Government. I have every confidence that the Minister who has been appointed to that position will ensure that delivery is a hallmark of the policies that we have set out. I look forward to working with the Minister and the Committee and hope that we will be able to bring to the House a

review on terms that are acceptable and able to be implemented.

Northern Ireland does not have unlimited resources. It is vital that the best efforts be made to make sure that those resources are distributed to the benefit of all in our community. I hope that a review of rating will be combined with a cutting back of much of the waste that has been a hallmark of devolution in the past.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time, please.

It has been some time since we have had full-blown debates in the Chamber, but the convention has been that Members do not refer to the Public Gallery. We have been getting back into the habit very quickly.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I commend the two Members who have brought this motion. The introduction of the new rating system was universally criticised across the North of Ireland. The issue has been to the forefront of people's concerns since the changes were announced last year against the wishes of the vast majority of the population, who see them as a way for the Government to force more money out of those who, in many cases, do not have the ability to pay.

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

We were told that the rates were being brought into line with payments in England and that we had had it easy for many years and were not paying our way. However, that does not take into consideration the facts that people here pay higher prices for fuel, both domestic and commercial, that food is more expensive in general, and that the cost of living is comparatively high here. Add in our low earnings and high unemployment and an altogether different picture is painted.

Those in power — and their advisers — chose to ignore those very relevant issues. Why did they not leave the old system in place so that an incoming Assembly could deal with it? They chose to do that with other matters, but they knew that while local politicians may not agree on every element of what would be required, once at the helm the Assembly would at least have looked at the matter sympathetically. In fact, the last Executive commissioned a review of the rating system, but were unable to complete the job before the Assembly collapsed.

Direct rule Ministers argued that the present system was fair and would benefit those most in need. Such nonsense! If it is that good, why did they not push to have it introduced in their own constituencies? Many of those responsible for its introduction here are the same people who came out strongly against the poll tax.

Sinn Féin has consistently called for a radical review of the rating system. We would prefer to scrap the rates altogether and introduce a system of progressive direct taxation. Consequently, we believe that the

rating system in the Six Counties needs a radical overhaul, in the context of a complete review of the Barnett formula. We also need a meaningful peace dividend and the granting of tax-varying powers to the Assembly and the Executive.

In the meantime, equality and ability to pay must be at the heart of any continued rating system. Also, the system must be made transparent. It must be fair, with a clear relationship between rates, income, value for money and the quality of service provided.

11.15 am

The current system does not distribute the rates burden fairly. In particular, the failure to address the correlation between house values and income means that many people will be in the unacceptable position of being asset rich but income poor, and will pay higher rates than they can afford.

Rates relief should be addressed through an income-related system, which is based on ability to pay and has specific exemptions for economically vulnerable groups such as older people, those with disabilities and other low-income householders.

Some people with disabilities are forced to adapt their homes to enable them to live with dignity — their circumstances should be taken into account in any rating system. The rating system must address disadvantaged and low-income groups in a meaningful way. The British Government's scheme, in its present form, does not address those core issues, which are essential criteria and which must be at the heart of any review.

Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Hamilton: I take the opportunity to welcome you on your first occasion in the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker.

There is no doubt that a review of rating policy is required. Many objections to the capital value system have been well aired this morning. I will dwell on the concerns about local income tax that were overlooked, perhaps understandably, by the proposer. Having listened to him, one might be forgiven for thinking that local income tax is a panacea for all of our taxation ills.

There is some popular support for an income-based system. Recently, the Lyons Inquiry, which examined local government finance in England, found that half of its respondents were in favour of some, or all, local taxation being raised through an income-based tax. However, four in ten people did not express a view, which suggests that there is a lack of knowledge about the implications of such a system.

A local income-based tax system would result in significant rebalancing — from retired householders to the working-age population — and this is where a

judgement is required. Do Members want retired householders to pay less, on average, than younger, working householders?

It is often said during discussions about local income tax — and was repeated by the proposer — that any system should be based on ability to pay. However, Members must consider which definition of the phrase “ability to pay” should be applied. There are some attractions about a scheme that is purely based on income. However, should retired householders with modest incomes, but significant savings, or equity, pay less than a young family with a slightly larger income but no assets?

Income-based tax has been a hot topic in the recent Scottish election. Professor David Bell of Stirling University has illustrated the “classic case” of a household comprising a fireman, a nurse and their young family. He found that that household would be £73 worse off under a Liberal Democrat plan for a local income-based tax system — a plan that has had some support from the Alliance Party Members.

Are there implications for a local government that is financed through local income tax? Would resources rise and fall because income yields would create uncertainty for councils in bad times, with the risk, and temptation, of over-extension in good times?

The ease with which such a scheme would be implemented should also be examined. Any new tax inevitably creates complex and often unforeseen problems. I am sure that Members agree that we want a simpler and fairer tax system. Taking that tax at source would inevitably lead to more stress for businesses, which are already burdened by bureaucracy.

David Watt of the Scottish Institute of Directors has said that a local income-based tax would be an anti-business measure that could impact on competitiveness and add to the tax collection burden for businesses. My impression is that Members want to increase competitiveness in Northern Ireland, and that no one wants to see businesses burdened by more bureaucracy and red tape.

A local income-based tax system is attractive on paper, especially because of the general view that ability to pay translates into fairness, but it is easy to overlook that such a system has serious limitations.

There would be a substantial increase in tax for the working population, potentially less stable funding for local government than current streams, and an undoubted effect on business. Any change to any tax system will result in winners and losers, and a local income tax would simply create different winners and different losers.

Mr Gardiner: Mr Deputy Speaker, I wish you well in your appointment as Deputy Speaker of this House.

I will speak today on the amendment proposed by my hon Friend Roy Beggs.

The changes introduced to the rating system by direct rule Ministers were one of the most distasteful aspects of the direct rule regime. They occasioned widespread public outcry and a deep sense of public unease at their unfairness. They became the cause of major public protest. It would be fair to say that outrage over the rates was a major factor in determining the public mood that ultimately led to the restoration of this Assembly. It was not just a matter of the substance of the rates proposals, but of the way the direct rule Ministers handled the public outcry — their attitude bordered on dismissiveness, if not actual contempt.

At the very heart of my concern about the rates issue is the disproportionate impact it will have on many senior-citizen households. The ability to pay a tax has to be a major factor in how publicly acceptable that tax is. That is why a review of the ability of many senior-citizen households to pay the tax must be undertaken and why rates bills must include a significant rebate for older people living on fixed incomes. Many elderly people live on fixed incomes and pensions and are in no position to meet massively increased rates demands. They cannot increase their incomes and cannot reasonably be expected to sell their homes, their major asset, to pay their rates bills.

Those homes are not just houses, but family homes. In many cases, older people have lived all their lives and brought up their families in those homes. There is something deeply personal about a home — especially as a person gets older. Those homes are filled with memories and have a real sense of place for their occupants.

The distress caused by this issue cannot be overstated. Older people could not have predicted the massive boom in house prices recently. Could any of us have predicted that 10 years ago? Therefore they were in no position to plan for such an eventuality throughout their lives. Thus, significant rebate must be built into the system for older ratepayers on fixed incomes and that issue must become a basic focus of any review of the rating system that Ministers set up.

The fact that older people's homes are now worth a lot more makes no material difference to them. They will never see the value of their homes unless they sell them, which is unthinkable for many. They may be asset rich, but their income stream may be incapable of absorbing new rates bills and water charges.

Societies change and older people often get left behind. There are 200,000 more people living here than there were decades ago, and large numbers of people are returning to Northern Ireland now that civil strife has ended and the political landscape has changed. Furthermore, people are living longer.

It is small wonder, therefore, that house prices have risen with the pressure of demand. It is also true that they have risen because of planning restrictions. Both factors have impacted disproportionately on first-time buyers and older people.

In the light of these arguments, I ask the House to advocate a review of the rating system that will give special consideration to generous rebates for older people living on fixed incomes.

The eyes of the people are on us, and we must not fail them.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr P Robinson): Mr Deputy Speaker, I congratulate you on your appointment as one of the Assembly's Deputy Speakers and join other Members in welcoming you to the first sitting over which you have presided.

Few issues are more important to householders in Northern Ireland than the level of local taxes that they have to pay. I congratulate the two Members from North Down on securing this debate at such an early opportunity and thank all the Members who have contributed. The return of devolution can make a real and meaningful difference on this issue. I welcome the opportunity to put my views on record and to set out how I intend to proceed.

Although it will not be for the Minister of Finance and Personnel alone to determine the future arrangements for rating in Northern Ireland, I will ensure that any proposals that are brought to the Assembly and the Executive represent a fair deal for householders.

As someone who fought for election on a manifesto commitment to review the present rating arrangements, I am glad that the motion and, indeed, the amendments are broadly consistent with that outlook. Today's debate has helped to focus on many of the failings of the present arrangements. That is the easy bit; the real challenge is to devise arrangements that can command widespread support and be seen to be fair.

Let me make it clear that I am committed to reviewing the arrangements for domestic rates in Northern Ireland. I intend, in the next few weeks, to bring a paper before the Executive setting out the steps that I propose to take. I agree with the Chairperson of the Finance and Personnel Committee that it is important that rating reform be viewed in the context of how the Executive intend to address the funding of water in Northern Ireland.

In the past five years in Northern Ireland, extensive research and consultation has been conducted on the rating issue. In Great Britain, Sir Michael Lyons has recently conducted a lengthy review of local government finance. What is needed now in Northern Ireland is not a lengthy analysis but a short-term review that can

deliver changes by next April and consider what further long-term steps should be taken.

We must not only achieve as fair a rating system as possible; we must also ensure that the system does not place too great an overall burden on householders as a whole. Recent years have seen some unprecedented increases in the level of the regional rate, with an increase of 19% in 2006-07. Such increases are neither sustainable nor acceptable.

In this financial year, the domestic regional rate is forecast to contribute £240 million to public spending in Northern Ireland. Put another way, that represents about 2.5% of planned departmental expenditure. Each 1% increase in the domestic regional rate provides a little over £2 million in additional spending power. Therefore, increases in the regional rate can have a big impact on householders but a limited impact on public spending.

Mr Weir: Will the Minister give way?

Mr P Robinson: I will give way on this occasion. However, if I am to respond to the remarks made by each Member who spoke, I cannot give way again.

Mr Weir: Will the Minister confirm that if, as a result of his review of the rating system, domestic rates are revalued, the process will be carried out on a revenue-neutral basis and will not lead to an increase in the regional rate?

Mr P Robinson: The mechanism for determining the regional rate is that the Executive determine what the Budget requires from the regional rate, which amount is then divided based on the valuation of all eligible properties. Therefore, the only distinction in a revaluation is the extent to which one person's property is out of kilter with the other valuations. The overall intake is the same, and, therefore, the process is revenue neutral.

As I was saying, a 1% increase in the domestic regional rate provides a little over £2 million in additional spending power. By comparison, the proposed efficiency targets of 3% per annum for each Department over the comprehensive spending review (CSR) period will free up £790 million of additional spending power by 2010-11. A modest increase in the current efficiency target to 3.5% a year would raise an extra £120 million.

11.30 am

As well as mapping out the long-term options for raising revenue in the Province, it is essential that short-term measures be considered in any review. As I said, I intend to carry out an early review of the domestic rating system. As part of that review, the effectiveness of the new relief packages, which are already on offer, will be examined. There are better ways of delivering relief to those who are most deserving, and we need to examine the options for doing so.

We also need to look at ways of encouraging the most vulnerable, particularly elderly people, to take up the reliefs that they are entitled to. I will be urgently seeking ways of making improvements in this area. Enhanced assistance for pensioners has recently been put in place; it provides additional relief for pensioners on lower incomes. I want to ensure that all those entitled to this relief are aware of it and take advantage of it.

The motion includes a proposal that would require new legislation, which could not be completed in time for the next rate bills, even if the proposal were considered sound and approved by the Executive and Assembly. There are issues, then, that could only form part of a long-term review. Whatever the possibilities for change in the longer term, we must be able to make changes that can be in place for next April.

There is scope for change within the existing legislation to deliver alternative or supplementary income-based reliefs. Options such as circuit-breakers, which would ensure that no household paid more than a certain percentage of its income on rates, must be examined as part of any review. Although there are many administrative difficulties with this approach, it could offer significant benefits, providing we can deliver it easily, which means within the scope of the existing legislation.

Other changes that could be made quickly and without the need for new primary legislation include the introduction of a minimum payment or a change to the level of the cap. In addition, we have the power to introduce the rating of vacant homes or to bring in a deferment scheme for pensioners. Although I am uneasy about a number of these options, it is important that any review examine all of them.

There are no easy answers. Difficult choices will have to be made. Rating is distinct from other forms of taxation because the amount of money to be raised is decided first each year as part of the Budget process of the Assembly and the district councils, and the individual bills are worked out accordingly. Therefore, providing more reliefs will either add to everyone else's bills or lead to money being foregone.

This will inevitably lead to difficult choices for the Executive to make, and, at a time when increases in public spending are at their lowest for a decade, there are significant spending pressures. People will not tolerate spiralling local taxes when they believe that there are significant inefficiencies in the public sector. That places a huge responsibility on the Executive to ensure that every pound of public expenditure is well spent.

A complete overhaul of the system is within the power and reach of the Assembly. However, more significant change, such as bringing in a purely income-based system, would take longer to achieve, if it were thought to be appropriate. As an incoming

Executive, we have an obligation to ensure that a fairer system is in place for next year's rate bills. In the coming months, I will look at the evidence carefully and bring back proposals to my ministerial colleagues, the Finance and Personnel Committee and the Assembly.

Members raised a number of points during the debate and, in the short time available, I want to respond to as many of them as possible. I have no doubt that, in the months ahead, we will return to this subject. Certainly we will do so before conclusions are reached.

The option of a local income tax has been suggested as an alternative to a property tax. Although this cannot represent a short-term solution, it should be considered, if only to be rejected, as part of any review. I agree with the Member for Strangford Mr Hamilton that this option is not a panacea to the problem, as many have suggested it is. It could only be done with the agreement of Parliament and would require an amendment to the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Evidence suggests that a local income tax system would be expensive to introduce, difficult to administer and open to fraud.

Research has demonstrated that people expect to benefit from a local income tax to a greater degree than would, in fact, be the case. It is estimated that to entirely replace the current regional rate in Northern Ireland, about 7p would have to be added to the basic rate of income tax. Despite that, I shall not rule out the option, but we must be realistic about the timescales and the likely costs, as well as other factors. All of those matters must be carefully considered. Nevertheless, without prejudice to the outcome of such an analysis, the existing system can be made more income sensitive.

The Member for North Down Mr Brian Wilson mentioned the position of single pensioners. I understand that the assistance available through the enhanced relief scheme goes further than that provided for single pensioners in Great Britain. As Members consider the amendment that was tabled by the Member for East Antrim Mr Beggs, it should be noted that enhanced assistance has been recently introduced, which provides additional relief for pensioners on lower incomes. I want to ensure that all those who are entitled take advantage of that scheme. One way of doing that is to examine the case for applying a non-means-tested relief for pensioners, which can be provided automatically.

I listened to those Members who spoke about non-means-tested reliefs; I will take their views seriously and consider them carefully as part of the early review. However, such an option would require new legislation, which could not be completed in time for the next set of rates bills, even if the proposal were approved.

Mr O'Loan mentioned the mammoth task that was carried out by the staff and officials of the Department of Finance and Personnel. I welcome Mr O'Loan's

acknowledgement of the difficulty of valuing more than 700,000 properties. If those who criticised the Department had put their complaints in the context of the task confronted by those officials and staff, they would have reached the same conclusion as Mr O'Loan, and I welcome his remarks on that matter.

The Chairman of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, Mr McLaughlin, said that the motion and all the amendments related to it were acceptable to him. Likewise, I do not have a problem with them. Although they laid a different emphasis on various aspects of any review, they all ask for a review. To that extent, the motion and the amendments are acceptable.

The Member for North Down Mr Weir mentioned the RRI and the link with tax levels in Great Britain. He knows — and gave me the opportunity to say — that we were successful in our discussions with the Chancellor of the Exchequer in breaking the link between the RRI and local taxation, which was one of the causes of the massive rate rise in 2006.

This debate has provided an early opportunity for the Assembly to consider this important matter. In the months to come, the way in which the Assembly addresses this issue will be regarded by many as a litmus test for the success of devolution. I am determined to ensure that we can make a difference in this crucial matter.

Mrs Hanna: I appreciate the openness of the Minister of Finance and Personnel's response and the various expressions of genuine concern about achieving a fairer system — albeit from different angles — during the debate on the motion and the amendments.

Given our new situation, I hope that we can be reasonably confident that the Assembly will not be subject to suspension. We are now best placed to set up a review of the current unfair and unworkable rating system, which was introduced by direct rule Minister David Hanson MP. I support the introduction of further income-related reliefs, although I was somewhat puzzled by the phrase “a full income-based system”.

All parties requested, or demanded, a rates review. A short time later, the Assembly was suspended. Now that we are back, it makes sense that we take control of the issue. It is a telling fact that the Assembly voted to replace the former system of basing rates on rental values, which was acknowledged to be outdated, unfair and discriminatory against those on lower incomes.

Since 2002, the SDLP has been entirely consistent in calling for a system based on ability to pay. We opted for the capital valuation model, with caveats, purely because we considered it to be the least unfair of the options available. However, the effects of that model would still need to be mitigated by the introduction of a comprehensive relief package to take account of householders' ability to pay: single householders; pensioners; those with disabilities; and, indeed, those

just above the benefits threshold — the new poor. The criterion of ability to pay must be the cornerstone of rating policy.

Soaring house values have had a distorting effect on house prices. The fair rates campaign must be mentioned. Whether we like it or not, the fair rates campaign maintained focus on the rating issue through the election period. The campaign's website contains many well reasoned arguments.

The fact is that Mr Hanson used Northern Ireland as a testing ground for rating policy, when the Government did not appear to have the courage to introduce the same system in Great Britain. Many people have felt that the rating issue was a north Down or south Belfast problem. However, the cold reality is that sharply increasing house prices throughout Northern Ireland, coupled with the introduction of Draft Planning Policy Statement 14, has led to rating policy becoming an issue in rural areas also.

Many people will be in for a nasty shock in coming years unless there is serious rates reform. It is a debate for another day, but the issue of more social and affordable housing and the release of public land to that end, which could help burst the bubble, will have to be addressed.

Many people who bought their houses for modest prices decades ago have seen the value of those houses go sky-high, often as a result of development and the building of apartments and town houses. Through no fault of their own, those people are now being penalised and face the threat of being forced from their homes by an inability to pay their rates bills. Those people do not want to move from their homes, but they cannot really take a few bricks out of the walls to pay their rates bills in Chichester Street.

Itemised rates bills are required, because there is no clarity at present. The issue of itemised billing has come up time and time again. People want, and need, to know exactly what they are paying for. As well as considering the many options that have been mentioned, whether it is a pre-determined percentage of income, non-means-tested reliefs or the introduction of an independent rates regulator, we must get to grips with the issue and emerge from the review with a fairer system.

I want to mention the full income-based system, which I now know to be a reference to a local Northern Ireland tax, and which is the preferred option of the Alliance Party. That is one option that is up for review but, as has been said, the fact that the Scottish Parliament has tax-raising powers —

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

Mrs Hanna: I shall finish now, Mr Deputy Speaker. I look forward to the review. Any rating system must be fair, equitable and based on ability to pay.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member's time is up. There can be no latitude.

11.45 am

Mr B McCrea: First, Mr Deputy Speaker, I offer you my congratulations. Only yesterday, when making my maiden speech, did I understand the importance of your role and the protection that you can offer Members who are making speeches. I offer my sincere congratulations on that.

It is my privilege to make the winding-up speech on the amendment tabled by my colleague from East Antrim Mr Roy Beggs. In doing so, I will try to pick up on points that have been made. I was pleased that Mr Peter Weir, a Member for North Down, has clarified that his party has not thrown in the towel. No doubt he will be making a press statement, because his comment will be news to some people. I was a little disappointed in the comments of the Member for North Antrim Mr Storey, who has suggested that people such as me do not have a contribution to make on subjects such as the rates.

Some people fundamentally misunderstand the relationship between capital and revenue, and the issue of being asset rich but cash poor lies at the heart of that. A very unfortunate situation can arise for pensioners, and it is no fault of their own. They can be living in a house with a high capital value but — as was pointed out earlier — they cannot remove bricks and take them down to the bank as payment. As an interim measure, we may have to find a way of giving such people substantial, non-means-tested support. I am grateful that the Minister of Finance and Personnel has stated that he will consider that issue.

The time when a person can realise a capital valuation is when he sells the house, and that is a perfectly valid option. However, we have to consider a disgraceful situation that can arise — when people have to sell their house to pay for their healthcare. A person might have lived all his life making extra mortgage payments, extra rates payments and so on, but might then — just when he needs it most — have to sell his big asset. We will have to consider that in a review.

It is especially important that we consider a rates cap. I can think of nothing more outrageous than the fact that some pensioners in south Belfast appear to have to pay more in rates than either David Beckham or the previous Prime Minister. It is fundamentally important that taxation should be fair, should be related to ability to pay and should offer value for money.

There is another issue that we have to consider in our discussion of my hon Friend's amendment, and it

is one on which I fundamentally disagree with the position of the Alliance Party. It has to do with the difference between rates and income tax. Rates are supposed to be tied to local consumption; they are not a tax on income, which is a fundamentally different matter. Rates are for services such as collecting waste from the bins, putting in flowerbeds and regenerating local areas. Those services should be locally based, and people should buy into them. The fundamental problem that can arise is one of fairness, transparency and ease of administration.

We talked earlier about whether we should be a low-tax or a high-tax environment. I believe that we should have a lower tax where possible and that that tax should be collected in a way that the people of this Province support. I support the first amendment to the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I now call on Dr Stephen Farry to wind up the debate on the substantive motion.

Dr Farry: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker — and I too congratulate you on your new post.

In essence, the motion is a call for a review of the new rating system that was introduced on 1 April 2007, a process that was begun by the previous devolved Executive before it was suspended. Although its result may not have been precisely what that Executive had in mind, the review was far too limited in scope. That point has been reflected in the Chamber today. Specifically, the review did not include consideration of sufficient income-based reliefs or of a full income-based system — as was pointed out by the Alliance Party at the time.

It is notable that the Lyons Review into local government finance in England and Wales, and the Burt Review in Scotland, considered that option, as Brian Wilson pointed out.

The minor tweaking of the creation of a £500,000 cap on bills is not sufficient to address the range of concerns with the current system. If anything, it introduces further unfairness. Politicians from all parties in the Assembly have pointed to dissatisfaction with the new system. That dissatisfaction needs to be followed up by supporting a full review that considers all of the options. The motion does not ask Members to endorse any particular reform, but rather to ensure that all options remain on the table.

I am grateful to the Members who contributed to the debate, particularly the Minister. I am very pleased that he is prepared to launch a full review into the system, the terms of which we await with great interest. I am also pleased that he has, at least, accepted that the issue of a local income tax can be kept on the table. Although he may not feel that such a tax is appropriate, if it is on the agenda, we are prepared to argue the case. We shall

await with interest the response from people of Northern Ireland.

The difficulty with the amendment tabled by Roy Beggs from the Ulster Unionist Party is that it focuses solely on pensioners. Mr Beggs called for a non-means-tested review, whereas Mr Gardiner suggested that it should be means tested. Addressing the needs of pensioners alone will pass more of a burden back onto families — whom Mr Beggs was so keen to protect in his initial remarks. The amendment from the Ulster Unionists essentially rules out a local system.

The SDLP has made great play of the issue of ability to pay, yet, once again, the idea of a local income tax or local income-based system was dismissed. The SDLP seems to think that we can edge towards such a system by introducing more reliefs. In effect, that would create more bureaucracy, whereas a full income-based system is much cleaner. If, in using the term “ability to pay”, the SDLP means taking into account someone’s assets, it is worth remembering that many pensioners deliberately put their savings aside to finance themselves for 20 or 30 years beyond retirement. In the absence of free personal care, paying for one’s old age is something that many people have to bear in mind.

The problems with the rates system have been well aired. A property-based system is inherently unfair; the value of property is a very blunt measure of ability to pay. The system struggles to adequately reflect personal or household circumstances, with those on fixed incomes, such as pensioners, most affected. Ultimately, those who are asset rich but income poor face the greatest problems. Many people find themselves in the situation where the family home, in which they have lived for many years, has shot up in value due to a booming housing market while their income has not kept pace.

Single people are also particularly affected in comparison to those in larger households who live in properties of similar value but inevitably place a greater strain on a range of services. Mr Basil McCrea made the point that rates are based on the services that people use. That is false: people living in the same street in similar-sized houses pay the same rates, irrespective of whether the council empties their bin or whether they use the entire range of council services, from leisure centres downwards.

The regional rate is the only means through which the Northern Ireland Administration can raise additional funds and balance the books. Previously, the purpose of the regional rate was to reflect the services charged by councils to ratepayers in Great Britain. In Northern Ireland, however, those services were provided by central Government. Since 1999, the regional rate has been used to fund general services, particularly the reinvestment and reform initiative,

which the Minister mentioned. Therefore, Northern Ireland is the only part of the UK where a property tax is used to fund central Government services.

Over the past few years, the people of Northern Ireland have suffered considerable hikes in their rates; Mr Weir and Mr Robinson mentioned a figure of 19%. If the Executive continue to use that system, such unfairness will be magnified. The move from rental values to capital values essentially only tinkered with an already unfair system. Much more fundamental change is required.

Simply capping the rates is not the solution. The Alliance Party is wary of caps, which are blunt instruments, and the impact of which tends to be regressive. It is worth noting that the Lyons Report suggests that council-tax capping be removed in England and Wales. The current £500,000 cap may help some people who are experiencing difficulties, but it provides no comfort for others. That cap also allows millionaires to escape paying their fair share of moneys. The cost of lost revenue from a cap will have to be found elsewhere in the system; that entails spreading the cost around other ratepayers. Simply lowering the cap to £300,000 will increase the system’s unfairness rather than dealing with the problems. Members have mentioned other relief schemes, which the Alliance Party is happy to consider.

The idea of an income-based rating system has caused much controversy, but it could replace either the regional rate or both the regional and district rates. Both of those options are available. That may require legislation from Westminster. However, if the Assembly agrees that that is the way forward, it can approach Westminster for that measure.

The claim that an income-based system inevitably means tax increases is a huge red herring. An income-based system would simply replace the property-based system. It would be a different, and fairer, way of redistributing the same tax burden; it is revenue neutral. The point is made that some people could be paying hundreds of additional pounds in income tax each year. It must be borne in mind that an income-based system would replace the hundreds or thousands of pounds that people currently pay in their rates bills.

The decision on how much money to raise from the system would lie in politicians’ hands, and that is the case with the rates system today. The SDLP’s proposition for the appointment of a revenue regulator is interesting. That party would appear to suggest that the Assembly cannot be trusted to take decisions on taxation and expenditure, which is what Members were elected to do. It seems to be an admission that some parties in the Assembly are incapable of taking balanced decisions about money.

In any redistribution of the tax burden, there will inevitably be winners and losers. Some people claim that families will be particularly hard hit. However, the income-tax system already takes account of family situations and whether people have children.

An income-based system would pose new administrative challenges, but I doubt that a new system would be much more complex than the management of the current rates system. The introduction of an income-based system into Northern Ireland may even carry some opportunities. All citizens share the same BT postcode, and all taxpayers' home addresses are available from Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs. For Mr Beggs's information, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs is the new name for the Inland Revenue; he was not aware of that fact in his earlier comments.

Mr Kennedy: Thank you for that.

Dr Farry: I am glad to keep Members up to date with developments. Tax codes can be modified geographically.

The Lyons Report holds open the door for the introduction of a local income-based system in England and Wales. If that can be done in England and Wales, consideration should be given to it being done in Northern Ireland. As Mr Hamilton mentioned, the report found that there was strong support for that option.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel said that the issue of how revenue is raised cannot be considered in isolation from public expenditure in Northern Ireland. I cannot stress how important those comments are. Northern Ireland depends hugely on the UK Treasury. That situation will not be allowed to be sustained in the long run, notwithstanding any financial package that the Assembly may receive in the short term.

If the Assembly is to avoid passing further unsustainable burdens on to the people of Northern Ireland, it must promote economic growth and expand the local tax base. It must also address the inefficiencies and costs in the system. The Minister referred to the 3% efficiencies in the 2007 comprehensive spending review.

The Alliance Party has also pointed to an annual cost of some £1 billion that is spent on trying to manage a divided society. That sum dwarfs the amount of money that is raised by the rates. The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister has commissioned a report from Deloitte, which will be published shortly. That report will set out the issues in detail.

The Alliance Party believes that our motion reflects the wide range of available options. Both amendments are unnecessary and, if anything, contradict each other. Our motion represents the best way forward and keeps all the options on the table. I urge the Assembly to support the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that if amendment No 1 is made, I will still put the Question on amendment No 2.

12.00 noon

Question put, That amendment No 1 be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 63; Noes 7.

AYES

Martina Anderson, Billy Armstrong, Roy Beggs, Cathal Boylan, Mickey Brady, Allan Bresland, Francie Brolly, Lord Browne, Thomas Buchanan, Paul Butler, Gregory Campbell, Trevor Clarke, Willie Clarke, Fred Cobain, Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Jonathan Craig, Leslie Cree, Nigel Dodds, Jeffrey Donaldson, Alex Easton, Sir Reg Empey, Arlene Foster, Samuel Gardiner, Simon Hamilton, David Hilditch, William Irwin, Danny Kennedy, Fra McCann, Jennifer McCann, Raymond McCartney, David McClarty, Basil McCrea, Ian McCrea, Dr William McCrea, Alan McFarland, Claire McGill, Michael McGimpsey, Gerry McHugh, Michelle McIlveen, Daithí McKay, Mitchel McLaughlin, David McNarry, Adrian McQuillan, Stephen Moutray, Robin Newton, Carál Ní Chuilín, John O'Dowd, Michelle O'Neill, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Ian Paisley Jnr, Edwin Poots, Sue Ramsey, George Robinson, Iris Robinson, Caitríona Ruane, George Savage, Jim Shannon, David Simpson, Jimmy Spratt, Mervyn Storey, Peter Weir, Jim Wells, Sammy Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Leslie Cree and George Savage.

NOES

Dr Kieran Deeny, Dr Stephen Farry, Anna Lo, Naomi Long, Kieran McCarthy, Sean Neeson, Brian Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Naomi Long and Kieran McCarthy.

Question accordingly agreed to.

12.15 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Question is that amendment No 2 standing on the Marshallled List be made. All those in favour say "Aye".

Mr McNarry: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. If the second amendment —

Mr Deputy Speaker: You must wait until the vote is over, Mr McNarry.

Mr McNarry: I will address the issue then. Thank you.

Question, That amendment No 2 be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the widespread public concern at the changes to the rating system and calls upon the Department of Finance and Personnel to conduct a full review of the new rating system, which fundamentally fails the essential test of ability to pay; and further calls for this review to give particular consideration to fair and transparent income-based protections, and suitable reliefs for pensioners and all disabled persons.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As Members know, the Business Committee has arranged to meet at lunchtime today. I propose therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 12.17 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Health Prescription Charges

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow one and a half hours for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make the winding-up speech. Other Members will have five minutes each. One amendment has been received and has been published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes to make his winding-up speech.

Mr McCarthy: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls upon the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to establish a cost and benefit review for the purpose of abolishing health prescription charges as has been carried out in Wales.

As the Alliance Party's spokesman on health, social services and public safety, I wish to see the best possible health provision for everyone living in Northern Ireland, and I am sure that all Members agree with me. To that end, I hope that the Assembly will support my call to the new Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Michael McGimpsey, who I am glad to see in the Chamber, to initiate a cost-and-benefit review for all current prescription charges.

In addition, I am happy to support the amendment.

The Alliance Party's policy on health provision continues to be that the service should be free to patients at the point of delivery; funded through general taxation; available to all on the basis of need; and universally and equally accessible by everyone.

The National Health Service was introduced throughout the United Kingdom in 1946, and it was to be free from any charges. However, in 1949 a new Act was introduced to permit charges for prescriptions, and it came into force on 1 June 1952. Prescription charges were abolished in 1965, and prescriptions remained free until June 1968 when charges were reintroduced. Those charges remain throughout the UK to this day, with the exception of Wales where all prescription charges have been abolished from 1 April 2007.

I congratulate the National Assembly for Wales on the planned and gradual way it abolished prescription charges. The Welsh Assembly's main reason for abolishing the charges was that it wanted to ensure that people would not be put off going for their medication due to cost, and that patients would get the medication they required to improve their health and, ultimately, their quality of life. The Welsh Assembly also reckoned that people who were on modest incomes and who had

chronic illnesses might not have been eligible for free prescriptions under the previous exemption system, which could be complicated.

Research has shown that costs have prevented patients availing of healing drugs, and that the long-term costs to the NHS could end up being much greater through avoidable hospital treatment having to be carried out.

UK regions have different opinions on prescription charges. Scotland has promised to reform its system and introduce more exceptions for chronic conditions, students and people on low incomes. England retains prescription charges, but its health Minister has pledged that increases will not go above the rate of inflation and that all proceeds from these charges will go straight back into front-line services. At present, we in Northern Ireland have to pay for prescriptions, although it is now estimated that some 90% of people get prescriptions free of charge for one reason or another.

Our challenge today is to ensure equality of treatment for everyone in Northern Ireland. My information is that everyone in the Republic of Ireland is entitled to either free or subsidised approved prescription drugs and medicine and certain medical and surgical aids and appliances.

In asking the Minister to instigate a cost-and-benefit review on prescription charges, there are many factors to be considered. For instance, how much does it cost the Health Service to administer the prescription system? What is the revenue from prescriptions in the context of the wider health budget? How can we reduce prescription fraud, which was estimated in 2005-06 to amount to almost £7.6 million? Should free prescriptions for Northern Ireland be introduced on a single date, or should we gradually reduce the cost of prescriptions as happened in Wales? What has to be done to ensure that patients comply and take their prescribed medication? The review must answer these and many more questions, taking into account the voices of local GPs.

There is also a fear that if all prescriptions were free, patients would simply telephone surgeries and ask for medication that can be bought over the counter, thus giving our already hard-pressed GPs extra and unnecessary work. The review must consider, in addition, the overall benefit to the National Health Service and how to make a real and visible improvement in Health Service provision.

In conclusion, we acknowledge the efforts of one of our leading newspapers, the 'Belfast Telegraph', to establish a level playing field for all patients by seeking the total abolition of these charges. Indeed, I warmly welcome the Minister's published views on this important subject and his eagerness to have a review of it. Now he has the opportunity to respond positively to my proposals today.

I ask Members to support the motion and the amendment.

Mr Buchanan: I beg to move the following amendment: After "Wales" insert

"; and to review the list of conditions that currently entitle patients to free prescriptions in order to reduce anomalies."

Prescription charges were first introduced in 1952 and, except for a three-year period between 1965 and 1968, they have been levied ever since.

A person can qualify for exemption on three grounds: age, financial status or medical condition. It is estimated that around 50% of the population qualifies for free prescriptions under the current exemption arrangements.

However, because this group includes children, the elderly and people with chronic health conditions, all of whom are high users of medicine, it is estimated that over 90% of items dispensed could be supplied to patients free of charge.

Undoubtedly there are arguments in favour of prescription charging. It places a value on the medicine that patients require, helps reduce the level of less urgent demands on GPs' time and provides a much needed source of revenue for the National Health Service.

There are indications that between a quarter and a fifth of people would be more likely to go to their doctors for prescriptions if prescriptions were free to all. Dropping prescription charges might lead to an increased demand on doctors' time and for prescriptions.

As indicated in the amendment, current exemption arrangements contain certain anomalies that need to be addressed. Any changes to the present system should be straightforward and easy for patients to understand. Secondly, the impact of any changes should not increase the administrative burden on GPs and community pharmacists. Some chronic conditions are currently exempt while others are not.

The argument is made that it is one thing for diabetics, for instance, to receive free prescriptions for their condition, but quite another that they should receive free prescriptions for conditions unrelated to diabetes.

However, it may prove difficult to determine whether one medical condition is related to another. In addition, some conditions can cause secondary problems or can affect sufferers' general health. For example, the symptoms that affect sufferers of multiple sclerosis are wide-ranging. They include fatigue, pain, spasms, depression, incontinence and other problems. Drawing a distinction between drugs that relate to multiple sclerosis may, therefore, be difficult.

Similarly, it has been recognised that treatment of the main condition may cause side effects for which a prescription is also required. Furthermore, a patient may suffer from an illness that is unrelated to the

exempt condition, but which may, nonetheless, lead to a deterioration of that condition if left untreated.

Concern has also been expressed that limiting exemption to treatment for the main condition would require significant changes to be made to current administrative systems, which would be costly. From a processing perspective, it would be difficult to have some items on a prescription form that were exempt from charges and others that were not. It has even been suggested that such changes could cost more than the complete abolition of charges for people who have a chronic condition.

Another idea is to base exemptions on a list of drugs rather than on a list of conditions. However, there are several drawbacks to that suggestion. The extra bureaucracy required to maintain the list of drugs may prove costly. There would be a potential time lag between new drugs coming on to the market and their addition to the list of exempt drugs. The feasibility of developing a list of drugs that includes all of those medicines that are required to treat even common chronic conditions is questionable. As many drugs are used to treat more than one condition, drugs-based exemption from charges might be granted not just to those who have chronic conditions, but also to those who have minor ailments or short-term acute illnesses who may be less in need of assistance with charges. For example, antibiotics can be prescribed for anyone who has a cough. For a patient who has cystic fibrosis, however, the consequences of not taking antibiotics are severe. That is not the case for other patients.

Some people have suggested that there be a reduced flat fee for prescriptions. The main argument in favour of that is that all patients would contribute something to the cost of their medicine, which would provide much-needed revenue to the NHS. There is no doubt that some of those people who are already exempt from charges could afford to pay something towards their medication.

For patients who require many prescriptions, a more affordable option is to purchase a prescription prepayment certificate (PPC). Those can be cost-effective when a patient needs several items over many months. The PPC system could be improved by allowing patients to pay in instalments, issuing PPCs retrospectively and publicising the system better. For patients who are not exempt on the grounds of income, but who require many or frequent prescriptions, the prescription prepayment certificate presents a more affordable way of paying for their medication.

However, it is recognised that the PPC system has several shortcomings; in particular, the size of the upfront fee may present difficulties for some patients, particularly those who are on lower incomes. Options include abolition of the system of upfront payment and

allowing patients to pay in instalments with the option of paying by direct debit, standing order or by a stamp-scheme system. Some people favour the retrospective issuing of PPCs to patients who incur significant but unanticipated charges during a set period.

There are many varied ideas on prescription charging. Representatives of the Royal College of General Practitioners have suggested replacing the current charging and exemption arrangements with a patient co-payment system, similar to those that exist in other countries, in which charges vary for different categories of drugs. They have also stated that it would be worth examining experiences elsewhere, such as the current French system in which patients receive a higher level of reimbursement for evidence-based treatment than for newer or more expensive medication, which is not necessarily more effective.

2.15 pm

In such a model, it is likely that the great majority of prescription medicines — perhaps 90% — would be free to the patient. That would require the categorisation of all medicines. However, as a first step toward addressing this important issue, Members should seek to review the list of exempt conditions.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mrs Michelle O'Neill. She will be making her maiden speech, and it is the convention that it be heard uninterrupted.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am pleased to have the opportunity to make my maiden speech on an issue that has an impact on the lives of so many people.

Sinn Féin is determined to create a society in which inequalities in health provision are eradicated. To that end, we launched a campaign for free prescriptions over a year ago, which we took to most councils in the North. It received universal backing.

Sinn Féin notes that the graduated abolition of prescription charges over one electoral term was in the UUP manifesto, and we will support the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in achieving that worthy goal.

Prescription charges should be redundant in the Health Service, which is supposed to be free at the point of delivery. The current cost — almost £7 per prescription — has the detrimental effect of excluding many people from receiving the correct medical treatment. People on low incomes cannot access the medications that they need. That cannot be allowed to continue, and Members must end charging now.

Sinn Féin recognises that it may take some time to implement, as it did in Wales. In the interim, we urge the Minister of Health to go the extra mile and to adopt our recommendations from last year concerning the list of chronic conditions that qualify for exemption. As

other Members have said, that list was compiled in 1968, is no longer fit for purpose and must be modernised. There have been tremendous advances in pharmacology in the 40 years since the exemption list was compiled. Sinn Féin urges the Minister to immediately widen it to include long-term conditions such as Alzheimer's disease, arthritis, cancer, multiple sclerosis, HIV and schizophrenia, to name but a few. There must be a more consistent approach for patients who require repeat prescriptions for long-term medical conditions. The disparities associated with the outdated exemption list must be addressed as soon as possible.

In its report, 'Unhealthy Charges', the National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux found that more than two thirds of those with long-term health problems had difficulty meeting prescription charges. That has an adverse impact on their health and raises costs elsewhere in the Health Service due to hospital admissions and appointments.

With that in mind, Sinn Féin calls on Members to support the motion.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: Members have heard some lucid arguments in favour of the motion. A look back in time may help Members to take a long-term view.

In 1979, the prescription charge was 20p. Figures for the retail price index, on the 1974 basis, show an increase by a factor of 6.62 between 1979 and 2007. That implies that the prescription charge could reasonably be expected to have increased from 20p to £1.32 — yet in 2007 it had reached £6.85. That is more than five times what might have been expected due to normal inflationary pressures. That simple arithmetical exercise shows how inflated prescription charges have become.

That is not the whole story. If prescription charges played a significant part in recovering the cost of medicines, such an overblown increase might be understandable — even justifiable, if all moral and ethical issues were set aside to deal just in figures and recovery costs. However, the picture painted by the facts shows that prescription charges are negligible in terms of cost recovery.

In 2004, just 4% of the cost of prescription items was recovered through prescription charges. Some 95% of prescription items — 25.73 million prescriptions — were not paid for at the point of dispensing. That figure included the 90% receiving free prescriptions and the further 5% using prescription prepayment certificates.

In 2005-06 the 501 pharmacies in Northern Ireland dispensed 27.1 million prescription items at a cost of £340 million. Four million pounds was received in prescription prepayment certificates, and only £10 million was received in prescription charges. That is £10 million out of £340 million. The general pharmaceutical service cost some £381 million in 2005-06, and that

cost was defrayed by only £14 million from prescription charges and prescription prepayment certificates.

The extent of the bureaucracy involved in administering the system simply cannot be justified in terms of the rate of recovery. A new prescription barcode system, begun in 2006 and based on a £6.8 million contract with Hewlett Packard, will enable whatever data recovery is necessary on patterns of prescribing by drug, patient and doctor. That will render much of the bureaucracy obsolete.

Quite apart from this statistical approach, there is the ethical issue of taxing health. Make no mistake — that is what prescription charges actually are. Strip away all the arguments and you come back to this point. That is why the Welsh Assembly, which has fewer devolved powers than the Northern Ireland Assembly, has abolished prescription charges from 1 April 2007.

The purpose of levying prescription charges is now unclear. The income from them is negligible in overall terms. We must get away from continuing and perpetuating activities simply because we have always done them. Levying prescription charges is one of those survivals from past practice that no longer makes sound business sense for Government.

It may be argued that we need to get back to the founding principles of the National Health Service in this matter. The National Health Service introduced in 1947 was a comprehensive health service that was free of charge at the point of need. If patients are treated free of charge at the point of need, medicines should also be free.

The motion calls for a review of prescription costs and benefits. On that basis, I support the motion.

Mrs Hanna: The existing charging scheme in Northern Ireland is outdated and inconsistent. A review of the system is clearly needed. There are many inequities and anomalies in the system. Although around four out of five prescriptions are exempt, the price of a prescription — set at £6.85 from April — sometimes hits those who cannot afford these charges.

There are many people with chronic conditions who are still not exempt. With the continued rise in prescription charges there is concern that more patients will be discouraged from visiting the doctor when they are ill. Research in the UK and Canada shows that charges result in patients not taking the treatment that they require.

Therefore, prescription charges may constitute a financial barrier to receiving treatment for a portion of the population, which would obviously have a detrimental effect on the health of those individuals. That is probably accurate. There are many other groups of patients who are on long-term, or indeed lifelong, treatment, such as those with cancer, cystic

fibrosis, Parkinson's disease and other conditions. They are certainly disadvantaged.

Unfortunately, some terminally ill patients cannot afford the cost of medicines. It would be fairer, particularly for the most vulnerable, to extend the grounds for exemption from prescription charges to include chronic illness. Cancer charities have recently called for the abolition of charges for the chronically or terminally ill to be implemented as a matter of priority. Of course, a fair legal definition of the word "chronic", on which to base the exemptions, would have to be established.

The Scottish Parliament is not convinced that an equitable charging scheme can be created by identifying exemption categories and may be in favour of abolishing prescription charges entirely. However, in Northern Ireland the abolition of charges should be costed to determine whether it could be budgeted for. It is estimated that, in Wales, free prescriptions will cost £25.5 million for the first year. I have no doubt that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety will initiate a cost-and-benefit review to measure the impact of abolishing prescription charges. Indeed, it might be more cost-effective to abolish charges; the vast majority of people already do not pay for prescriptions.

Another important question is whether abolition of prescription charges will impact positively on public health and benefit the people of Northern Ireland. There is an argument that free prescriptions will result in fewer hospital stays. Conversely, there is an argument that free prescriptions will encourage a rise in the number of prescriptions issued, which will put further pressure on the health budget and may not be good for public health.

Doctors should be encouraged to prescribe less expensive generic medicines. Pharmacists should inform patients when there is a cheaper, over-the-counter alternative to that prescribed. Pre-paid prescriptions should be availed of and made more flexible.

Society is very reliant upon medication, and that is not to detract from the benefits of powerful drugs. However, these are often seen as the only solution to health problems. Members interested in health issues will accept that we must create a Health Service that promotes good health and supports early intervention. People must be encouraged to take more responsibility for their health, so that they do not become too reliant upon medication. That is why the costing of free prescriptions is important. It will assist those who cannot afford essential medication. Should prescriptions become free, the prescribers — mainly general practitioners — will have an added responsibility and will have to be extra careful, especially with regard to repeat prescriptions. We are all aware of individuals who are dependent on medication. Last weekend, we heard about an eight-year-old boy who was selling his

parent's medication. That is becoming common. It is important to weigh the options, and remember that medicine is not a panacea.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

I support both the motion and the amendment. As the Sinn Féin spokesperson on health, I look forward to working with the Minister and acknowledge that the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety and he will have much work to do together.

The Investing for Health strategy should be at the centre of the Executive's concerns. Health, like many other policy areas, cuts across the responsibilities of several Departments. Deprivation in north and west Belfast has been well publicised, as have the links between ill health and poverty. In this debate Members have consistently made the connection between those on low wages having restricted access to prescriptions and the fact that they also suffer the long-term effects of lack of access to primary care. Those people will be much more expensive to treat when accessing secondary care, which will put more pressure on an already stretched Health Service. Furthermore, it does not take into account the cost in human terms to the individuals.

2.30 pm

At this early stage of the Assembly, it is good that Members are seeking to help those in most need — by trying to give them access to services from which they are deprived due to the financial implications. Sinn Féin supports the motion and the amendment. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr John McCallister to make his maiden speech, and I ask Members not to interrupt.

Mr McCallister: First, I congratulate the Members who tabled the motion for bringing the extremely important issue of prescription charges before the House. It is encouraging that they have read, and agree with, the Ulster Unionist Party manifesto. It is with personal satisfaction that I make my maiden speech on such a pressing matter.

If the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety establishes a cost-and-benefit review, such as the motion calls for, I hope that it would result in firm and sustainable proposals to abolish health prescription charges. I use the phrase "firm and sustainable" because there have been situations in which similar measures have been adopted and subsequently rescinded.

The National Health Service Act 1946 did not allow for health prescription charges — those were introduced in 1952. The founding fathers of the NHS wanted the service to be free at the point of need. It was my party that brought the National Health Service to Northern Ireland.

However, for many hard-working families today, the Health Service is not free at the point of need. Those people have already paid for their healthcare through their taxes; therefore, the present situation results in almost double taxation. Members must agree that it has to stop.

As Rev Coulter stated, prescription charges are a tax on health, or indeed on ill health. A recent citizens advice bureaux survey found that 37% of respondents who suffered from long-term conditions such as arthritis could not pay for all or part of their prescriptions because of cost. If those people cannot afford prescriptions, their health may deteriorate, they may be hospitalised and may cost the NHS and the taxpayer even more money.

There are serious flaws in the current exemption regulations for prescription charges. The exemption system does not necessarily include chronic conditions and terminal illnesses such as cancer, multiple sclerosis, cystic fibrosis, arthritis and asthma, which means that sufferers have to pay for what could be life-saving treatment.

The Ulster Unionist Party wants to introduce free prescriptions, and the cost would be around £14 million to the taxpayer — less than 0.5% of the current health budget. The new Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, my friend and colleague Michael McGimpsey, has reiterated his commitment to free prescriptions. The Welsh Assembly has delivered free prescriptions from 1 April 2007, and the Scottish Parliament may follow soon. Why should Northern Ireland be the only devolved region in the UK to be different?

The proposal to abolish prescription charges serves as an excellent example of how devolution can benefit all of the people of Northern Ireland. It is a prime demonstration of how the Ulster Unionist Party plans to serve the people, and how we will strive to improve the quality of life for everyone.

Mr Armstrong: I welcome the debate and support the call for the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to examine the cost and benefits of abolishing prescription charges. Ending prescription charges is a step towards restoring a key principle of the National Health Service. The Ulster Unionist Party supported free prescriptions in its manifesto, and I am delighted to see that the measure has attracted support from all parties.

Prescription charges are effectively a tax on illness. It is an unfair system that gives free medication to various groups who can often afford to pay, while charging numerous other groups who may find it difficult to pay — for instance, those who have chronic illnesses or who are on a low, modest income but who do not qualify for income support.

The current exemption system is complicated and unbalanced. There is a range of chronic and terminal illnesses that are not included in the list of conditions that are exempt from prescription charges. These conditions include arthritis, asthma, cancer and multiple sclerosis. Sufferers of those illnesses must continually pay for medication that could effectively save their lives or at least improve their quality of life.

It is grossly unfair that 230,000 people in Northern Ireland who are affected by arthritis, many of whom have to take a wide range of medications over a long period of time, should not be awarded free prescriptions on the basis of their condition. Those costs are in addition to other financial restraints such as loss or limitation of employment and the cost of aids and adaptations that are necessary to easing their everyday lives.

Arthritis is the single largest cause of physical disability and lost working days in Northern Ireland, yet many people suffering from arthritis find it difficult to pay for the necessary medications to reduce their pain. That is unacceptable.

Similarly, all those suffering from cancer would benefit from free prescriptions. Macmillan Cancer Support research has shown that one in seven cancer patients under the age of 55, who must currently pay for prescriptions and whose financial situations have worsened, are unable to afford their cancer treatment. Poverty is a particular problem for people of working age who suffer from cancer. That is deplorable.

Macmillan Cancer Support research has established that, of those people who have been diagnosed with cancer at age 55 or younger, seven out of 10 households have suffered an average loss of income of 50%. Furthermore, increasing numbers of cancer patients receive their treatment as outpatients, which means that more and more people must now pay for medication such as treatment for side effects, long-term preventative medicines and even treatments such as oral chemotherapy when they get home.

Prescribing medicines is often complicated, with some medicines complementing another, and others requiring to be taken with another drug. Two substances can sometimes be combined into one tablet, but others cannot and must therefore be paid for separately. That creates further financial problems for many people who are already suffering a lot of distress.

The National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux found that 37% of respondents with long-term conditions have failed to purchase all or part of their prescriptions because of cost. It would surely be more cost effective for the National Health Service for patients' conditions to be adequately treated as prescribed rather than paying for avoidable hospital treatments in the long term. Rather than select only parts of medication that patients are prescribed, free

prescriptions would enable them to comply fully with their prescription, bringing longer-term health benefits.

The inequalities of the current system must be eliminated. The British Medical Association calls for a: “fundamental review of the whole system of prescription charges”, describing prescription charges system as “outdated”.

The current system awards free prescriptions to 87% of the people, but many of the remaining 13% who pay regularly for prescriptions are suffering because of the outdated system. The National Health Service makes a real difference to our lives, contributing in vital ways to the quality of life of people in Northern Ireland.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up. We need to keep within the time allotted for the debate.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I thank the two proposers for tabling the motion. The motion is entirely in keeping with the Ulster Unionist Party's manifesto commitments and my already stated determination on the issue of prescription charges. Therefore, the support of Mr McCarthy and Dr Deeny is wholly welcome.

I also thank all the Members who have spoken on the subject. Many useful points have been made. It is not overstating the case to say that there is strong agreement in the Chamber. I look forward to further cross-party enthusiasm in support of my future requests for additional health funding.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr McGimpsey: It is clear that prescription charges are an issue on which Members want to make progress and that the people of Northern Ireland wish to have addressed. That is why the Ulster Unionist Party is committed to the introduction of free prescriptions for all. Therefore, I welcome the opportunity to bring the issue forward for review. Indeed, I have already told my departmental officials that such a review is a priority.

My Department will also seek to restore the key principle of the National Health Service, which is that healthcare should be free at the point of use. After all, it was a Stormont Government that brought the National Health Service to Northern Ireland. Now, this Stormont Government have the opportunity to renew their commitment to the fundamental principles of the National Health Service.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr McGimpsey: On prescription charges, it is worth considering a number of points. Currently, each prescription item costs £6.85, unless a patient is entitled to free prescriptions. Members will be aware that there are several grounds for exemption from paying for prescriptions. These include age, medical condition and

income. However, the implementation of exemptions is complex and highly bureaucratic.

Until now, the direct rule Government's view has been that if people can afford to pay for their medicines, they should do so. Annually, approximately 28 million prescriptions are dispensed here. The income from charge-paying patients is around £13 million. That must be set in relief against the £360 million that is spent on medicines prescribed by GPs. Of that £360 million, only a small proportion — around 3.5% — is recovered. Additionally, each year, hospital consultants prescribe approximately £100 million worth of drugs, all of which are free to patients. Therefore, only a small proportion of the costs is recovered as income through prescription charges.

People who are not exempt from prescription charges, and who need regular medication, can reduce their costs by using pre-payment certificates. These certificates cost £98.70 for 12 months. If a person buys a pre-payment certificate, it allows him or her access to a year's worth of medicine for £100.

Approximately 90% of NHS prescription items are dispensed free of charge: not 90% of prescriptions, but 90% of prescription items. Although that appears to be a lot, it disguises the fact that it accounts for approximately 28 million items.

One prescription with, for example, four items on it will cost about £27. Therefore, prescription costs can be an onerous financial burden on families. I know only too well of large numbers of people — people with serious, often chronic conditions — who still have to pay for the very medication that is keeping them alive. That is not the kind of NHS that we envisage because it is not a free service. That principle apart, there are serious inequities and weaknesses in the current system that must be addressed. Irrespective of our views on charging for prescriptions, Members must ask whether the current system reflects the best way to deliver medicines to those people who need them.

We must consider the categories for exemption. Aside from age, pregnancy, a war disability and income, several medical conditions are listed as exemptions, with no apparent justification for their inclusion, while others are excluded. How does that stack up in equality terms? Do we have a rational and robust explanation for why one person is exempt and another is not? Why does one person's suffering have a greater priority than that of another? Those are the questions that must be answered. The rationale must be defensible on the basis of evidence or health grounds. Why is a prescription issued by a hospital consultant free of charge, while the same prescription, written by a GP, for the same illness and the same patient, attracts a charge?

There is no good answer to that either. Why is a 50-year-old with a serious illness charged for

prescriptions, yet a 60-year-old with a different illness, who may be better off, can get free prescriptions? I could go on, but the point is clear. The current system cannot be the best, and it should be changed.

2.45 pm

As Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, however, I know that my Department's budget is neither infinite nor a bottomless pit. I have a responsibility — and I am well aware that Members will hold me to that responsibility — to ensure that the budget is spent in the most prudent, far-seeing and intelligent way for the health, social care and well-being of the people of Northern Ireland. In short, I shall decide how and where the health budget is best used to maximise its impact.

It worries me to hear evidence from patients and their families that prescription charges deter some people from having their prescriptions dispensed, either in part or entirely. The long-term costs for the Health Service of avoidable hospital treatment would improve if patients were able to afford the medication needed to treat their condition.

I am aware that people who might be able to go back to work fear that, in doing so, they will not be able to afford the prescriptions to which they were entitled when unemployed.

There are many anomalies in the system. Not only is it complex and bureaucratic, and breaks the principles of the Health Service as laid down, it is, on several grounds, hard to justify. For example, hard-working families feel that they are being taxed twice; they pay their taxes for the National Health Service and, as patients, they pay prescription charges. Northern Ireland's hard-working families deserve better. They deserve a National Health Service that is genuinely free at the point of use, and that must include prescriptions.

There are equality implications for the people of Northern Ireland in ensuring fairness and social justice. Scotland, England and Wales have recognised the fundamental flaws in the existing system. Scotland has concluded that the list of exemptions must be substantially extended and seeks a fairer alternative to the present charges. In England, a review of the list of conditions already exempt is being undertaken, and a report will be forthcoming later in the year. England also recognises that the existing system is flawed and not fit for its purpose. As Members know, the National Assembly for Wales abolished prescription charges — not all at once, but over five years.

I welcome the motion, which supports my expressed intention to establish a cost-and-benefit review for the purpose of abolishing prescription charges. The time is right for Northern Ireland to look at arrangements locally. My officials will establish a review that will inform how we move forward on this question. The

review group will include representatives of the key stakeholders involved — pharmacists, doctors, and, most importantly, patient representatives through the health and social services councils.

I want the review to take full account of the needs and wishes of patients, as well as of the practical implications for the professionals who have to deal with the consequences. The review will involve wide research and public consultation, and an equality impact assessment will be undertaken. I shall ask the review group to report back to me before the end of the year with options and recommendations. I shall bring my decisions and proposals back to my colleagues in the Executive, the Health Committee and the Assembly for approval.

Mr Spratt: I am delighted that the hon Member for Strangford Kieran McCarthy supports the inclusion of the amendment proposed by my hon Friend Tom Buchanan. The issue of prescription charges is an important one for the Assembly to debate. Our counterparts in the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales have also considered the matter. Wales has abolished prescription charges for everyone; Scotland has been more circumspect.

Although free prescriptions are a fine idea in principle, the prospect raises other significant issues that must be fully considered before a decision can be reached. From where would the extra funding be found? What other services might suffer as a result? Access to expensive but effective new drugs, which is already very limited, could be reduced further.

The current exemption list should be reviewed, as it disadvantages those with certain lifelong or terminal illnesses who depend on regular medication. For example, patients who receive free prescriptions for diabetes may also benefit from free prescriptions for other ailments. Some may ask whether that is necessarily fair. Those patients can avail themselves of an all-round free prescription service while others with life-limiting cystic fibrosis cannot access free prescriptions for anything. A review of the current list of exemptions should be carried out, and I am delighted that the Minister has announced one this afternoon.

Initiatives to control the number of prescriptions being issued should also be investigated, so that the service is not taken advantage of or misused in any way. We do not want to reach a position in which over-the-counter drugs that are already available are sidelined in favour of free prescriptions. The sale of over-the-counter medications must be monitored. GPs will also need to monitor whether patient demand for free prescriptions increases. How will GPs react if that occurs? Those patients and families who are living with terminal or lifelong illnesses should be considered.

Free prescriptions already benefit many groups of people, such as those on low incomes and women during and after pregnancy. There is clearly an argument that those who can afford medicines and are not dependent on prescriptions should not necessarily be exempt. We also need to calculate the likely amount of drugs that would be wasted if all prescriptions were to be free of charge, and, again, how that might be monitored. If people no longer value their medications, compliance will suffer and more money will be wasted.

It seems reasonable that patients who are subject to compulsory treatment orders should not be expected to pay for their medication. That should be a ground for exemption in any new list of conditions.

In considering the shape of a further list of conditions, it is widely felt that all patients who are terminally ill or have lifelong conditions should be exempt from paying prescription charges. It is felt that many other specific conditions should be included on any new list. Among those most commonly mentioned are cystic fibrosis, cancer, asthma and mental illnesses.

I am pleased to support the motion and the amendment.

Dr Deeny: I congratulate you on your appointment, Mr Deputy Speaker. A lot of people were congratulating you yesterday. I have worked out that if all 108 of us were to congratulate all the new Deputy Speakers, we would be here until Christmas. I sincerely wish you well, as I do the other Deputy Speakers and, in his absence, the Speaker himself.

The issue is very important to me as a GP. I do not have much to say, because it has all been said, and I do not want to be repetitive. I am in my twenty-seventh year as a doctor. Apart from one year in Australia — 1985-86 — I have spent all that time in the NHS. I am delighted to hear the representatives of all parties going right back to the fundamental principles of the NHS, which was set up just after the Second World War.

Like many GPs, I believe in the fundamentals, concepts and ethos of the NHS: equity for all patients; free at point of use; funded through general taxation; and available to all on the basis of need. That final point is important, because as recently as this morning there was a radio discussion about the possibility of people being refused healthcare, and operations, if they are too obese, or if they smoke. That is a dangerous and wrong road to go down. That, however, is an issue for another day.

Healthcare should be universal, and there should be equitable access for all. Most of my GP colleagues would agree that those are the tenets of the NHS. I absolutely support the motion. As I am also wearing my GP hat today, I am delighted to hear Members from all parties expressing concern for “poor” GPs.

Some Members: Poor? *[Laughter.]*

Dr Deeny: I do not mean poor in the financial sense, but certainly in the administrative sense. That point should be taken on board.

In the 26 years in which I have worked in the NHS, I have seen huge and dramatic changes, and the cost incurred is a big issue. The spiralling costs of operations have gone through the roof, and investigative procedures and drugs are now very expensive. A course of oral drugs for shingles can cost more than £100. That is one example of what drugs can cost in 2007.

Healthcare costs are increasing. I fully support my colleague and namesake's motion, but constituents will want us to address other equally important, or more important, healthcare issues. The important word is “prioritisation”. Not enough operations are being done — waiting lists must be tackled. There are not enough front-line healthcare workers, or enough doctors or nurses, and the number of available hospital beds is a problem. I worked for five years at a hospital and I have now worked for 21 years as a GP, and I cannot accept trolley waits in modern-day healthcare. To have human beings on trolleys waiting in hospitals is an indictment of any Health Service in the developed world. That would not happen in a veterinary hospital, so resolving that situation should be a priority for us all in the Assembly, in particular for our new Minister of Health. I am delighted to see him in the Chamber, along with several members of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

Mental health has always been the poor sister in healthcare. It is necessary that the Assembly look at that issue, and I think that a will exists to do just that.

We have talked about 90% of prescription items being exempt. One benefit of the introduction of free prescriptions would be that it would do away with prescription-exemption fraud. Another issue that has been mentioned is what GPs call “poly-pharmacy” — where a patient who, although not in an exempted category, is not well off and has six or seven medical conditions, for which they pay six or seven different charges. That is wrong.

The review should look at certain simple medications that are currently free but that perhaps should not be available on prescription. The dangers of having free prescriptions across the board are that patients may not appreciate the medication and that there will be wastage. Regardless of the situation, GPs will always have the problem of poor compliance, which is something that will also be looked at during the review.

3.00 pm

Mr O'Dowd: Does the Member agree that the primary objective of any Executive or Government should be the promotion of the good health and well-being of all its citizens and that one of the most significant steps forward that the Executive could take would be to

reintroduce the Investing for Health strategy at ministerial and Executive level? I did not want to interrupt the Minister during his announcement this afternoon.

Dr Deeny: Yes, I agree.

I welcome the amendment. I know the good Member from West Tyrone Mr Buchanan very well, and I know that he has a deep interest in health. I agree with his amendment, although I would prefer that the word "criteria" replaced the phrase "list of conditions".

We must be careful when dealing with this matter. For example, rubs, sprays and lotions that people currently get on script should be taken off prescription. That issue should form part of the review. However, we must ensure that very important medications are kept on script, and those prescriptions should be free.

Mr Buchanan mentioned that it would be difficult to deal with a list of drugs as opposed to a list of conditions. I do not agree with that. Doctors would be much happier to deal with certain drugs. Indeed, doctors would know what drugs should be on script and what ones would be better given over the counter. For example, somebody could ring the doctor's surgery to say that they have a serious back injury and ask for a spray, but that spray may only be needed for a sports bag. People could say that their child has a serious fever and needs Calpol, but it may well be used just for teething. Different scenarios must be considered.

I agree with my colleagues across all the Benches that it is wrong that less-well-off people who suffer from conditions such as cancer, multiple sclerosis, debilitating rheumatoid arthritis and chronic heart disease have to pay for prescriptions, while a 60-year-old millionaire may well get Calpol free on prescription. That is wrong, and it is an issue that we must consider.

People have asked how free prescriptions will be paid for. I do not know. Again, this is a subject for discussion in the review. However, we have been told that the reforms that will arise from the review of public administration will help front-line services and will focus on patients' needs. If those reforms do what they say on the tin, money should be available for many more front-line health services and for patients. Thus, that is one area in which money could potentially be found. I was delighted to hear the Minister say that we as a group should push for a very substantial and decent healthcare budget. I hope that that will be the case.

We must deal with all the other front-line issues — hospital bed shortages, trolley waits, operations and mental health — and ensure that important medications are kept on prescription while very simple medications that really do not belong there are taken off prescription. If we can deal with all that, I believe that we can realistically look towards the introduction of free prescriptions for all in Northern Ireland.

I support the motion.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls upon the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to establish a cost and benefit review for the purpose of abolishing health prescription charges as has been carried out in Wales; and to review the list of conditions that currently entitle patients to free prescriptions in order to reduce anomalies.

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow one and a half hours for this debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to wind up the debate. All other Members will have five minutes. One amendment has been received, and it is published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes to wind up.

Ms S Ramsey: I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses concern at the current state of child and adolescent mental health services, particularly the lack of child and adolescent in-patient beds and dearth of trained staff to run these services; and further calls on the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to take urgent action to address this situation in keeping with the Bamford Review.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

I thank the Business Committee for allowing this motion to appear on today's Order Paper. I tabled the motion last Tuesday and its inclusion sends the clear message that the rights of children and young people are a priority for the Assembly.

I accept the amendment proposed by Dolores Kelly and Carmel Hanna, which adds to the strength of my motion, and I thank them for that.

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

During the debate, I shall refer to the cases of young people who recently died as a result of suicide. I offer my heartfelt sympathy and condolences to their families. I hope that they will understand that I am referring to their loved ones in order to bring about action that will help to prevent other young people and their families from suffering in the same way.

Last week, several young people died as a result of suicide in west Belfast. That is more than a tragedy. At least two of those young people were being treated for mental-health difficulties. One of them, Bronagh Gallagher, was the teenage mother of an 11-week-old baby. Bronagh had struggled with mental-health difficulties and had been admitted to hospital twice — in June 2006 and at Easter 2007 — following paracetamol overdoses. When Bronagh died last week, she was still waiting to be referred to a psychiatric nurse. The tragic loss of Bronagh's life might well have been prevented if the North had the type of mental-health services that she needed, which offered the support that could have helped her through her difficulties.

Members will be painfully aware that our communities have been struggling for quite some time with the suicides of young people such as Bronagh.

In 2005, Daniel McCartan died as a result of suicide on the evening of the day on which he had requested to be admitted to psychiatric care. His request was refused

because he was considered to present a low suicide risk and no adolescent in-patient beds were available. A complaint lodged by Daniel's parents is being investigated. The results of that investigation should be reported soon, which, hopefully, will shed more light on what can be done to prevent such tragedies.

Between 2005 and 2007, what has changed for those young people who badly need access to professional care and support? The Bamford Review has been initiated, a suicide strategy has been formulated, and there has been a small injection of funding, but it appears that, in practical terms, very little has changed. I am gravely concerned about our ability to provide the services needed by children and young people who face mental-health difficulties.

In 2005, 213 people died as a result of suicide in the North. Of those, approximately 35% were aged between 15 and 34. In 2006, there were 291 reported suicides. West and north Belfast have some of the highest levels of suicide, with the rate in west Belfast standing at twice the regional average. Make no mistake: that experience is not limited to the North — it affects communities across the island.

There is a dearth of adolescent inpatient beds in the North, as well as in the Twenty-six Counties. In each year from 2002 to 2006, 60 or more local young people had to be placed in adult psychiatric wards because of a lack of appropriate beds.

The local child and adolescent psychiatric inpatient unit cannot operate at full capacity because of a lack of trained staff. There is evidence that, even now, the unit is operating under strained staffing levels that prevent it from using all its available beds and providing adequate staff cover for lunch and breaks. I commend the staff of the unit because they are working under enormous strain. I heard this morning that, on several occasions, no female members of staff are on duty, particularly during the night.

Added to that, and equally worrying, are reports that some of the anti-depressants prescribed for children and young people may have adverse effects and increase the risk of suicide. Surely the Minister will agree that we need an urgent review of the drugs that are prescribed to young people under the age of 18 and the impact of those drugs.

In January of this year there were 30 vacant posts in the mental-health profession, specialising in the treatment of adolescents. That requires a radical and urgent response. The response that young people need is much more complex than solely increasing the number of psychiatric beds or the number of health professionals — necessary though that may be.

It is estimated that 10% to 15% of adolescents face mental-health difficulties; locally, that means about 16,000 children and young people. However, only a

tiny minority will need the sharp-end psychiatric services because many community-based services, if provided early, will make a real difference. It should be — and is — possible to provide the kind of care that young people need. The Assembly knows that the difficulties with child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) are not simply at the sharp end but also in the wait for appointments and in providing young people with the kind of early intervention that can prevent at least some of them from needing more intense services.

Often, that requires a catalyst in the system that can co-ordinate and enable access for young people, and that needs to be developed and supported at community and family level. We need a focus not simply on mental health but also on emotional well-being. Good emotional well-being and mental health means having the capacity to build positive relationships and to cope with the ups and downs of life; it means young people being able to realise their potential and having the opportunity to develop emotionally and socially. We need to consider the whole of young people's lives and not just focus on particular disorders or treatments.

There are proven models. For example, the Mount Sinai Medical Center in the United States offers a service that is centred on the young person: even if young people attend with a physical condition, they are offered a full review of their mental-health needs. That results in those needs being addressed quickly and successfully.

There is a need for both community-run mental-health services and more specialist tier three medical units to integrate and triage their provision. We have, at times, two tandem services: GPs refer to child and family clinics; and social and community services use community-based mental-health services. For example, community and voluntary organisations used to be able to refer a young person straight to CAMHS. Now, however, the pressure on the system is such that no new referrals are being taken and the community services are having real difficulty in accessing services. Children using triage need the right service at the right time.

I recognise that the Minister has just taken up his post and I want to thank him for attending today's debate. However, I am sure that he will feel the tragedy of the situation affecting young people and recognise the need for urgent action. Although the outworking of the Bamford Review will make a difference, its sheer complexity and volume mean that we could lose sight of the urgent action that is needed now. Since the Minister is here, I want to ask him some questions.

Does he agree that there is a need for the following actions: an urgent review of the anti-depressant drugs that are prescribed to those under the age of 18 to ensure their safety; the development of a regional service that draws on international best practice for children and

young people at risk of suicide; workforce training and development for all staff in the health and personal social services and in schools and youth and community work so that they can be a point of contact for young people at risk of suicide or with mental-health problems?

Does the Minister agree that there is a need to increase the resources available at community level for early intervention prevention services? Will he agree to look at the better integration of community and medical services? Will he ask the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority to carry out a review of CAMHS provision at the Knockbracken Healthcare Park? Will he immediately address the staff shortages that prevent the full functioning of the child and adolescent inpatient unit at Knockbracken? Will he make funding available for the development of a full range of services and ensure that it is ring-fenced so that the funding cannot be used for other services?

I also encourage the Minister to consider the development of a children's task force for areas of high deprivation where children and young people face severe problems. Organisations such as Barnardo's have been promoting that for some time.

I have asked the Minister several questions; I hope that if he cannot answer them today, he will read Hansard tomorrow and get back to me on some of those issues.

3.15 pm

There are Members still to speak in this debate who have, for a long time, championed the rights of children and young people. I hope that they will support the motion.

Mrs Hanna: I beg to move the following amendment:
At end insert

“and provide an action plan with a timescale for implementation.”

My amendment calls for an action plan with a timescale and targets for implementation of the proposals contained in the Bamford Review. Its purpose is to add sharpness and focus to the motion.

Our community is emerging, slowly and painfully, from more than three decades of intense civil strife. There has been a significant fallout for our young people as a result of the killing of 3,700 people in our conflict and the injuries and trauma suffered by more than 30,000 others. Children and adolescents have either themselves been victims or have watched our society being brutalised. A breakdown of law, order and family values has occurred in many areas. We are reaping the whirlwind, and that price will continue to be paid by the vulnerable in our society, and those vulnerable young people who, even in a peaceful society, may find it difficult to get a decent start in life.

Before I entered politics I was employed as a registered nurse and midwife. I worked in the casualty department of the Mater Infirmorum Hospital through

most of the Troubles. More recently, however, I worked for the South and East Belfast Health and Social Services Trust. Its headquarters are at Knockbracken Healthcare Park, which was formerly known as Purdysburn. That word still strikes a chill in the heart of many people of my generation, who grew up with a feeling of stigmatisation about mental health. As children, we were warned that we could be sent to Purdysburn.

The Bamford Review and other reports have, thankfully, shed some light and fresh air on mental health and have helped to destigmatise it. However, even in recent times, separate provision has not been available for children and young people with mental-health issues. Many still have to share wards with adults, and with psychiatric patients, often with far more serious conditions.

The Bamford Review made it clear that, because of Northern Ireland's higher levels of social and economic deprivation, its civil strife and the higher prevalence of psychological morbidity in adults, the incidence of mental-health disorders in children and adolescents in Northern Ireland is greater than in the rest of the United Kingdom. The Chief Medical Officer for Northern Ireland, Dr Michael McBride, has reported that more than 20% of our young people suffer significant mental-health problems before they reach 18 years of age. That encompasses young people with eating disorders, substance and alcohol abuse problems, and with developmental difficulties often associated with mental-health issues. As Sue Ramsey said, it includes those at risk of suicide and young people who have committed suicide. We must explore the underlying factors in order to reduce and prevent any more of those awful tragedies.

In recent years, there has been a huge increase in cases in all of those areas, which underlines the urgent need to put an action plan in place with a timescale and targets. The Bamford Review did an excellent job in setting out the required actions. Now we must set aside the resources that will make those actions a reality and in an achievable timescale. I am sure that some Members know of the problems that are caused when no bed is available for a young person suffering an acute mental-health crisis. He or she is either not admitted to hospital at all, or is not admitted to the most appropriate setting. It is never what is best for that young person.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the trusts are aware of those problems, and more beds are becoming available.

I am not sure that the exact number of beds required has ever been quantified, but it must be done. The level of provision needed will become more apparent when other parts of the strategy, including good mental-health promotion and early intervention within the community,

are in place. When that happens, it will be easier to quantify the exact number of acute beds required.

More importantly, as with healthcare in general, prevention is better than cure. We must get to grips with and tackle the causes of mental-health problems in young people. Early intervention, at a stage where the impact of the illness on the young person may be less severe and where there is a far better chance of early recovery, is necessary. The positive health agenda must be tailored towards the needs of young people so that more of them will never have to consider using and abusing alcohol and substances.

Many in society are obsessed with celebrity, body image, competitiveness and consumerism, with the aim of making some people a lot of money. Many of those obsessions can impact badly on young people — who perhaps do not have much self-confidence to begin with — lowering their self-esteem. Parents, educators and anyone who is in contact with children need to spend more time listening to them. That issue will feature in this afternoon's debate on children who are looked after by the state.

The Bamford Review mentioned at length the need for professional staff and training in the education sector, because schools have been found to have been very effective settings for intervening in aggressive and acting-out behaviours and involving pupils in initiatives to promote better behaviour. In order for schools to play an effective role, teachers need greater access to training in the skills and knowledge necessary to address the mental-health needs of young people, including fostering good mental health in the classroom and knowing when pupils need to be referred to more specialised staff.

Where appropriate, mental-health professionals should work in schools, providing help to individual children who are beginning to show signs of mental-health difficulties. Those difficulties sometimes arise because young people are vulnerable, perhaps due to domestic violence, bullying, parental alcohol and substance abuse, and family separation. Providing well-delivered services can help young people to develop coping skills. That requires the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department of Education to work together.

The need for the training and development of the workforce that delivers mental-health services is covered in detail in the Bamford Report. Qualities such as a positive attitude and sensitivity must be developed. Although caring for young people with mental-health problems can be very challenging, it is also very rewarding. Good working conditions for staff are imperative, as is appropriate, regular and updated training.

I wish to refer to the rights of the child in relation to the issue of mental health. The United Nations

Convention on the Rights of the Child has been ratified by the UK Government, and its principles and practices must be the basis of all our actions. The UN Convention gives children the right to the highest attainable standard of mental-health care that is culturally and medically appropriate and is provided in a safe environment. Mental-health provision should not discriminate, but should always be in the best interests of the child, and the child's view should be respected.

I appreciate that the Minister is still getting to grips with the most complex of all Government briefs, of which mental health is a specialist area. I wish the Minister well in his term of office, and all Members will wish to be supportive. After responding to the motion, I hope that he will bring a detailed action plan and appropriate timescales before the Assembly in due course.

Mrs I Robinson: I add my condolences to those already expressed to all families in Northern Ireland who have suffered the tragedy of a suicide. Suicide knows no barriers, be they of religion, colour or creed.

Most Members agree that the entire area of mental-health provision is abysmal. A root-and-branch reform to tackle the deficit of provision across all areas of mental health, including for depression, anorexia, potential suicide victims, self-harmers or children who are abused and at risk, is required.

The key theme of the Bamford Report for children and adolescents is the development of a holistic and integrated mental-health service for children and young people that crosses organisational and institutional boundaries. Closer partnerships and better working relationships will be vital if such a vision is to succeed.

I want to take this opportunity to concentrate on the role that collaboration with the education sector can play in child and adolescent mental health. The Bamford Review's July 2006 report — 'A Vision of a Comprehensive Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service' — recognised the important role of the education sector and its interface with children and young people. It was recommended that the Department of Education and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety should aim for greater co-operation in planning and commissioning services in mental health and education — even through the establishment of firm interdepartmental links.

Schools have been found to be very effective settings for intervening in aggressive and acting-out behaviours, as was recognised in the Audit Commission's report 'Misspent Youth'. The crucial contribution that could be made by people in the education sector — both in schools and in youth services — must be appreciated. Partnerships with other agencies will enhance the effectiveness of school-based interventions and are to be encouraged. Practitioners in education need to have greater access to knowledge and to training in the

necessary skills to allow them to address the mental-health needs of children and young people. Such skills will include the fostering of positive mental health in the classroom and awareness of when it is appropriate to refer someone on to more specialised staff.

Another recommendation in the Bamford Report was that a study of the mental-health needs of children in Northern Ireland should be commissioned as soon as possible; otherwise, we will not have the most reliable information for the planning of services. The Hardiker model of four levels of need is used extensively in the planning of children's services; the Bamford Review proposed a similar four-tier model. An opportunity exists for health and social services planners and commissioners to co-ordinate their services much more effectively. That would encourage the development of common language across the services in social care, education and mental health.

It was suggested that the promotion of mental-health services, and the prevention of mental-health problems, in the school setting should be developed across all schools to include independent schools' counselling services, the health-promoting school and pastoral-care initiatives. There is a need for educational, health and mental-health professionals to work in schools to provide early assistance for children who are beginning to show evidence of mental-health difficulties. Independent schools' counselling services provide children and young people with a listening ear and someone to turn to in the school setting. Those services provide accessible one-to-one support for vulnerable children and young people in coping with a range of issues including domestic violence, bullying, parental abuse and family separation.

This topic is so vast and wide that five minutes is insufficient to consider all the problems that we all acknowledge exist within the mental-health structures. However, when the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety sits, I would like to think that it will undertake an in-depth review of the outpourings of the Bamford Review and that it will hear from the people delivering the services at the coalface about what they think of the Bamford Review.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: When Members consider how to tackle and treat mental-health problems, we can see that one of the biggest problems is found in society itself; and when we remember that the answer to mental-health problems in the Victorian age was to lock people away, and when we realise that there may be a patient in Northern Ireland who has spent the past 38 years in an institution, we begin to realise that the difficulties remain.

The existing mindset is one of the greatest challenges to attempts to change attitudes to mental health.

3.30 pm

Those who were involved in the development of the Bamford Review believe that it lays the foundation for future policy in Northern Ireland. It is one of the most important policy papers to be produced during the last two decades on the treatment of children and adolescents. The review recommends not only an aspirational framework, but a practical set of guidelines that should govern how we assess the success or failure of the treatment of young and adolescent mental-health patients. The proposer of the motion painted a vivid picture of the difficulties that are experienced by families affected by teenage suicide, which makes one realise that the time has come for politicians to take this matter seriously and to do something about it.

We have undoubtedly inherited a legacy of neglect, but the Bamford Review shows where we must travel. Now that we have assumed responsibility for our own affairs, we must strive to make the Bamford Review a reality, instead of an aspiration. The norm should be individualised, comprehensive, inclusive services with minimum restrictions, a family focus, early intervention, a guaranteed transition between child and adult stages, and a case-management approach. Make no mistake: that will take time.

There are major cultural requirements. A widespread understanding of mental disorder is required, which must include an understanding of the differences among mental problems, disorders and illnesses; the grades of severity and recurrence among those states; what constitutes normal and non-normal behaviour; and the importance of environmental factors in the treatment and diagnosis of problems. Above all, we need understanding and tolerance, and an open-minded and positive approach.

Mental-health issues recently hit the headlines due to the Muckamore case, on which I do not wish to dwell. However, that case taught us that there was a problem in the system. Members must be vigilant and ensure that there are no more hidden defects.

The Chief Medical Officer has estimated that one fifth of all young people suffer significant mental-health problems by their eighteenth birthday. It has also been estimated that 45,000 children and young people, aged five to 15, suffer from moderate to severe mental problems, and that 340 of those people should be hospitalised to some degree.

Of the young people suffering from mental-health problems, 38% are homeless. That brings a new dimension to the problem because history and statistics have proven that young people who suffer from mental defects experience a series of mental problems later in life. Furthermore, children with learning disabilities are more vulnerable to the full range of mental disorders, and it is believed that one in 10 children indulge in self-harm. It is sobering to think that one in six people

who were killed during the Troubles were under the age of 19. The time has come for Members to take this matter seriously and do something about it.

Mr McCarthy: As an Alliance Party representative on the all-party group on mental-health issues, and as an ardent supporter of the recommendations contained in the excellent Bamford Review, I support the motion and the amendment. Everything that can be done to improve mental-health provision for children and adolescents in Northern Ireland must be a priority for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

As Members have said, the 2006 Bamford Review contains many recommendations. Paragraph 4.6 states:

"The Department of Education and DHSSPS should set up an inter-departmental group to facilitate joined-up planning and commissioning of services in mental health and education".

Recommendation 2 states:

"A study of the mental health needs of children in Northern Ireland should be commissioned as soon as possible."

That recommendation is based on paragraph 3.68, which states:

"One of the targets set in the CAMH policy statement was that a commissioning strategy for delivering services based on identified need, and meaningful and measurable objectives should be in place by 1 April 2000. While there has been some progress towards a commissioning strategy the issue of properly identifying need was never addressed."

As has already been said, the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) has highlighted the importance of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which has 54 articles and was ratified by the UK Government in 1991. Article 27, paragraph 1, states:

"States Parties recognize the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development."

The Government are responsible for assisting parents and other persons who have responsibility for children to implement that right. Carmel Hanna referred to that issue in her contribution.

It has been noted that children who live in deprived areas are very vulnerable. Save the Children launched the annual child poverty report for 2007, 'A 2020 Vision: Ending Child Poverty in Northern Ireland', in this Building today. It refers to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's 'Investing for Health' 2006 update, which offers section 75 analysis of suicide and self-harm in Northern Ireland. There is much to be gained from reading that report.

Many Members have referred to the Bamford Review, and I cannot praise it highly enough. Recommendations 5 and 15 are important on the issue of child provision in mental-health issues. Recommendation 5 states:

"Practitioners in education must be given training in the necessary skills and knowledge to address children's and young people's mental

health needs, including fostering positive mental health in the classroom, and referring to more specialised staff when appropriate.”

Recommendation 15 states:

“Mental health promotion and prevention in the school setting should be developed across all schools to include Independent School’s Counselling services, the health promoting school and pastoral care initiatives.”

Members had the pleasure of debating the Bamford Review in the Transitional Assembly. Every party agreed that, when we are in a position to do so, we should implement the review. The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is still in the Chamber, and I implore him to implement the review when he has the opportunity to do so. That implementation will take some time, but we must make a start and be seen to do that.

Northern Ireland needs more professional staff and funding for good mental-health provision. For too long, mental health has been the Cinderella of the Health Service, a fact that has been acknowledged by everyone involved in mental-health issues.

I offer my sympathies to the proposer of the motion, Sue Ramsey, who has experienced suicide in her area. Throughout Northern Ireland, we are all affected. In my constituency of Strangford, there has been a number of suicides.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member’s time is up.

Mr Shannon: Am giein ma’ bakin tae tha ammendement an aa’ unnerstaun that tha topick is emoativ an taks in a wied range o’ issues an proablms.

Tha issue o’ “inpatient caer” is sumthin aa’ wush tae haylicht especially as it hiss’ bin broucht tae my attentshun by my constituents twa mony tiems in shokin an sad waes.

But nae metter about tha different coverin o’ tha single proablim tha unnerlyin issue still houls aa’ disturbinly saem soart o’ theem – an that is aa’ lack o’ suppoart.

I support the motion completely. This emotive topic spans a wide range of issues and problems. I wish to highlight the issue of in-patient care, because my constituents have brought it to my attention in shocking and saddening ways too many times. No matter how it is cloaked by the individual problems, the underlying issue retains the disturbingly similar theme of a lack of vital support.

I want to dwell upon the issue of children with autism, as the lack of time allocated to this debate prevents me from highlighting all the issues that I would like to. I am familiar with the scenario of the care of one autistic boy. His parents do everything for him — they wash him; dress him; cook for and feed him; they clean, bath and toilet him; they amuse him; and they hug, kiss and love him. He depends on his parents for his every need. When he is at school, they do the washing, ironing,

cleaning, shopping and try to find time to work in order to pay the bills. They love their son with all that they have and all that they are, but, sadly, love is not enough to get the family through the sheer exhaustion and the emotional and mental strain.

It is up to the community and to us as elected representatives to step up to the plate and help that boy and his parents. We can do that by supporting them and offering them the best that our society can to ensure that they do not reach the point of no return.

The major problem with the current system is simply that there are not enough places available. That is an issue worth highlighting too. It is estimated that one in 100 children has some degree of autism. That means that more than one in 100 parents has the additional stress of caring for a child who needs extra care and attention. Depending on the severity of the disability, that care can range from helping with a few extra hours of homework to doing everything for the child for the whole of his or her lifespan, which is likely to be just as long and healthy as anyone else’s.

For example, I know one family with an autistic son and two young daughters. The mother, who gave up her job to care for the family as best as she could, applied for respite care to enable her to take a break and spend time with her other children. She was put on an emergency waiting list, but, two years later, she still has not had a weekend off. For three hours a week, a trained professional provides care for her son to allow her to spend time with her daughters, but that is the sum of her relief.

She has sought help from all the organisations and charities, such as Home-Start, and they have tried to help. However, the crux of the matter is that the volunteers are not trained to deal with her troubled son. Autism is a severely misunderstood condition, and only trained professionals with patience and understanding know how to deal with autistic children. Even those who are trained can find the work a strain, due to the unpredictable nature of the disability.

There will not be enough resources to deal with the ever-increasing numbers of children suffering from autism. The Welsh Assembly has found that the number of children diagnosed with autism in Wales has increased by 124%. I might table a question to the Minister concerning the figures for Northern Ireland, because I believe that there has been an equal increase here.

There is no long-term plan in place; there is insufficient funding, and, therefore, there is no hope for the parents and the children. To be forewarned is to be forearmed. The number of children with autism is rising, and we sense the effect that that is having on society and on individuals. I cited two examples of families in my area who are suffering. We must stand up for those people and develop a plan so that we and

the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety can do everything possible to help.

These families are not asking for much. They are not asking for more than they are entitled to. We are being asked to give them only what they need and what we can provide, which is support. I therefore support the motion.

3.45 pm

Mr Savage: Mr Deputy Speaker, I congratulate you on your elevation to high office. I know that you are very capable of carrying out the duties of your new post.

I share the concerns of those who have already spoken in this debate. The current poor state of the child and adolescent mental-health service is unacceptable in twenty-first century Northern Ireland. The lack of trained staff to run mental-health services, coupled with the lack of child and adolescent inpatient beds, is appalling. I accept that no single agency can deal with these problems on its own, but as a matter of urgency I call on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to meet with the various agencies with an interest in this in a bid to resolve this crisis while, at the same time, keeping within the recommendations of the Bamford Review.

Some months ago, I attended a school in Dungannon for the education of mentally handicapped children and adolescents. On my arrival, I met a young lady with triplets of seven or eight months old, one of whom was mentally handicapped. She handed me the child, which I held in my arms. I knew what the child required in terms of funding and support methods. Yet when the child's mother asked me about funding and support, I could only state what was currently on offer, and it was pitiful, to say the least, that I had to tell her that there was little or no help available. I vowed that day that if ever I got into a position where I could help in the area of mental health, I would do my utmost.

This situation is untenable. We must never forget that we are talking about human beings, and we are obliged to note that we, as elected representatives, have the ability to help as the terms of reference of the Bamford Review state:

“to recognise, preserve, promote and enhance the personal dignity of those with mental health needs”.

At some time in their lives, one in four people will be affected by mental illness, which is the equivalent of 27 Members out of the 108 in this House. That is a shocking statistic. Carers of those with mental-health needs must not be forgotten — they continue to play a key role in caring for those in our society with mental illness. Carers and their work are often forgotten. If we are to solve these problems, carers should be afforded the right to make an input, as they have the experience and understand what needs to be done. We must provide immediate solutions that are imaginative, practical, even radical, cutting right to the heart of the matter and

meeting the needs of all those with mental illness. This can only be achieved with collaboration and co-operation with all relevant stakeholders, from both inside and outside the health and social services sector.

The solution must, in all ways and at all times, reflect the needs of the children and adolescents with mental illness.

I am pleased to support the motion.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): It was said earlier that this is a very complex issue, and that is no exaggeration. First of all, I put on record that I am committed to improving the mental-health services for children and adolescents. It is essential that our children and young people receive mental-health services that meet their needs, and that is why I intend to implement the recommendations of the Bamford Review for children and young people. Indeed, I accept all of those recommendations.

As Members are aware, the full report of the Bamford Review is due to be published this summer. However, the section dealing with children and adolescents was published last July, and some of its recommendations have already been implemented. It is clear that prevention will be the key element in improving services for children and adolescents. Indeed, the Bamford Review revealed the staggering statistic that more than 20% of young people could have significant mental-health problems by their eighteenth birthday. It estimates that 45,000 children and adolescents in Northern Ireland, aged between 5 and 15, could have a moderate to severe mental-health disorder that requires intervention from specialist child and adolescent mental-health services. The estimates also suggest that around 340 children and adolescents need inpatient services.

Those statistics give some indication of the size of the challenge that we face. Of course, mental health has been the Health Service's Cinderella service since time immemorial; indeed, Bob Coulter talked about the Victorian approach of locking people away in their hospital beds. However, we have moved slowly away from that culture.

The statistics highlight the extent of the problem that our young people face, and they also make clear the need for all of us to take sustained and determined action. After all, children are our future, and if people are our biggest asset, then children are of utmost importance. They are our responsibility. We want to prevent young people from suffering as a result of mental ill health, and we want to promote good mental health by providing accessible and effective treatment services. We can do that by developing a comprehensive and high-quality range of services, from early intervention right through to specialist inpatient treatment. If we have effective services upstream when young people first

face mental-health problems, we can reduce the risk of those young people's developing more serious problems that require inpatient hospital treatments at a later date.

Some Members may be aware that the post of director of mental health and learning disability, the establishment of which was a key recommendation of the Bamford Review and which was announced in March last year, has now been advertised twice. Although interviews were held in March, we have been unable to appoint anyone to the post. In order to avoid any further delay, I have made the key decision to not advertise the post nationally and regionally again but to appoint immediately a board of experts who will advise ministerial colleagues and me about the implementation of the Bamford Review. That board will fulfil the role of the director.

As Members are aware, mental health and learning disabilities are two distinct streams, and this board can act as a champion for both streams — a new mental health and learning disability board to give greater impetus to the Bamford agenda. The Bamford Review will finally deliver in full this summer. The role of the board will be to challenge my Department and others who provide these vital services to some of our most vulnerable. Until the post is filled, Bamford will not be driven forward seriously enough.

I hope that that step will go some way towards meeting some of Carmel Hanna's concerns about implementing an action plan. The board will drive the process and will challenge my Department. Having a body of experts to advise me on mental-health issues reflects the fact that we are making a priority of this issue, and it shows clearly that it is a complex and diverse subject that needs urgent attention.

The new arrangement will ensure that innovative thinking and different perspectives will be brought to bear on many issues. I have asked officials to let me have proposals on how we will put this in place, and I expect to see that work completed quickly.

It is no secret that there have been, and continue to be, difficulties in the local statutory provision of specialist mental-health facilities for children and young people. Sue Ramsey made the point that there are difficulties in accessing appropriate treatment and that when inpatient treatment is necessary, the shortage of beds has been a problem. Currently, there are 15 available beds for young people up to and including the age of 13 in the child and family centre, and eight beds in the interim unit at Knockbracken.

As Members know, there have been major problems at Knockbracken, not least of which was that it took until 2006 to recruit a replacement for the consultant who was suspended in 2004. At one stage, when one unit was closed down as a result of that suspension and another had been burned in an arson attack, there were no beds available for adolescents. That major shortage

of beds is being rectified, but not quickly enough. By the summer, 12 additional beds will bring the total number available to 27.

In addition, the health and social care trusts are taking steps to deal with recruitment difficulties. Highly specialised skills are required, and the trusts are striving to bring staff levels in the units up to the necessary levels. It is often a question not of finding beds but of sourcing the staff to man them.

Progress is also being made on two new specialist mental-health facilities at Forster Green Hospital, for which significant investment plans are in place. The one for adolescents, costing around £5 million, will replace the existing facilities and provide 18 beds. The second facility will replace the current child and family unit and will have an important educational facility and a specialist psychiatric hospital for children. It will also replace an existing 15-bed unit, giving an anticipated total of 33 beds by 2009, which is well within the range suggested in the Bamford Report. However, the report also stated that the number of beds should be reduced and that ways should be sought to deal with mental health conditions outside the hospital environment, with inpatient care as a last resort. The conclusion of the reassessment was that 33 beds would be sufficient for the community service infrastructure, and that is the situation as it stands. I accept that it is not wholly satisfactory, but the focus is on early interventions to reach children with mental-health problems at the earliest stage, and the recruitment of staff with appropriate skills will be crucial in achieving that.

No one can deny that mental-health services for children and adolescents have suffered from chronic underinvestment. That must change. Significant funds are being, and must continue to be, invested. New money has come from the children and young people funding package, and another key factor to come out of the Bamford Review was the establishment of crisis intervention teams.

To some extent, that relates to the point that was made about urgent intervention and action to prevent suicides. One such team is already in place in the Eastern Board area and encompasses several skills. The first of the crisis intervention teams, which will have the ability to treat patients immediately or involve other specialists as necessary, will be operating by June 2007. It is hoped to increase the number of teams to one per board in order to provide immediate intervention, help and referrals.

4.00 pm

Those proposals do not provide all of the answers, but they show that steps are being taken and that the situation is being addressed. Crisis intervention teams will assist in providing appropriate, timely clinical intervention for young people, with the aim of preventing patients' problems from developing into more serious

conditions. In some cases, they will remove the need for inpatient admissions. Around £500,000 is being channelled into the crisis intervention teams for 2006-07, and a further £1 million will be invested in the following year.

Although there have been some difficulties in recruiting staff, the boards have used in-year funding to improve other services to children and young people with mental-health problems; for instance, waiting lists have been addressed. Waiting lists are too long, but I am told that they have been halved in the past two and a half years. At that time, over 1,000 young people were awaiting a first appointment, but that number has been reduced by half. The waiting lists remain too long and are unacceptable, but progress has been made.

Mrs Robinson mentioned the important role that schools have in promoting mental-health services. Additional money has been provided from the Department of Education, through the children and young people's fund, to provide counselling support to pupils so that problems are identified and dealt with as early as possible. Funding of £750,000 was provided for 2006-07, and £1.8 million is being invested in 2007-08. That investment has enabled all post-primary schools to have access to counselling. I share Members' concerns about the need to do more to develop those services, and I will ensure that those issues are urgently responded to and treated as priorities.

As Members know, the Bamford Review has a major resource implication. Total funding for mental health in Northern Ireland is around £175 million per annum. The Bamford Review conservatively estimated that that figure needs to be doubled. The additional funding will not be granted in one year, because the required staff skills are not available, but that is the level of resource implication involved. However, we must make provision for those funds. We are doing approximately half of what needs to be done, and our efforts need to be literally doubled.

I accept the Bamford Review and its recommendations. I share the concerns of the proposers of the motion, and of the amendment, and the other Members who have spoken. I will seek to ensure that the Department performs appropriately and shows urgency in dealing with the issues that have been brought before the House. I have stated some of the measures that are being brought forward, but there is still much to do.

Mrs D Kelly: All parties in the Transitional Assembly welcomed the publication and recommendations of the Bamford Review, and we all shared the dismay of mental-health practitioners, sufferers and their carers at the failure of direct-rule Ministers to give any additional financial resources to implement the recommendations. I thank the Minister for attending the debate. Such a show of support already shows the

dividends of a devolved Assembly. Across Northern Ireland, there are high expectations that the devolved Assembly will listen to, and act in the best interests of, the people.

Several Members talked about the conflict and its impact on the mental health and well-being of our children and young people, as did the Bamford Review. It is unfortunate that neither the First Minister nor the Deputy First Minister was able to secure any additional funding for a peace dividend to look at the emotional, psychological and physical needs of our children and young people.

The SDLP has no difficulty with the content of the motion, but we were concerned that, like the Bamford Review, it did not set out a clear action plan with detailed objectives to be achieved within a reasonable time frame. The Bamford Review on child and adolescent mental health services contains a number of recommendations that do not necessarily require additional funding, but rather new ways of working.

We heard the Minister referring to the unfortunate failure to have the new director in place in March 2007. However, I welcome his commitment to having a panel of experts. My only plea is that they should be real and true advocates and not be tied to a trust, Department or board for any source of funding — they should be true advocates for the people who are suffering.

The Bamford Report sets out a four-tier approach to working together, and we have heard many Members speaking about the need for collaboration between the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Services and the Department of Education. Indeed, the Minister has also given a commitment to having more coherent working in his Department, as regards health and social services personnel, as well as interdepartmentally.

Levels of deprivation are much higher in Northern Ireland, and there is also poverty. One Member mentioned the launch of the new report from Save the Children, the fact that 100,000 children are living in poverty in Northern Ireland and the impact that that has on their mental, emotional and psychological well-being. However, the report also refers to funding deficits, and the Minister has said that we are only half way towards getting the funding that is needed.

Many Members highlighted personal experiences and have spoken well about the people they have known as friends, neighbours and children who took their lives because of poor mental health and, perhaps, other factors. Everyone in the Chamber can relate to someone who has taken his or her life, and it is unfortunate that services were not there at the point of need, and that not enough beds were available. I welcome the fact that the Minister has said that additional beds will be made available. However, as he rightly said, there will still not be nearly enough.

Specialist beds are required for different conditions. Members talked about the particular needs of carers — for example, those who care for people with autism and other learning disabilities. Although there is a need for inpatient services and treatment intervention, respite for carers is needed also. When the Minister is looking at the provision of services, I trust that he will look across the whole of Northern Ireland and, in particular, to the region west of the Bann. Parents who may have other children, and other caring responsibilities, should not have to trek across to Belfast on a regular basis to visit their children.

The Minister outlined clearly a number of actions that he is already taking. In fairness, and given that the Health Service is complex, he does seem to be hitting the ground running, and I congratulate him.

However, perhaps he will confirm that one of the key recommendations of the Bamford Report was that a study of the mental-health needs of children in Northern Ireland should be commissioned. That is long overdue, and indeed some work and a report were to have been completed by 2000. Planning to meet needs must start from a baseline, and I ask the Minister to ensure that commissioning that study will be one of the key actions he will take on board quickly. I trust that he will report progress to the Assembly at the earliest opportunity, and well within the year.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am delighted to hear the Minister's remarks about the Bamford Report, and that he accepts the report in its entirety. That is very welcome.

Every Member who spoke in the debate has pointed out the lack of attention that has been given to services for children and young people. There has certainly been a lack of coherent planning and investment.

Our higher levels of deprivation have also been mentioned, and the legacy of 30 years of political conflict on mental health and emotional well-being has not yet been fully realised. Child and adolescent mental health services are wholly inadequate and have resulted in some of the cases that Sue Ramsey mentioned earlier. The difficulty is that young people and their families wait for months and sometimes years for appropriate treatment.

We have learned that young people are now being transported to England for treatment, with no regard being given to the social disconnection and distress that that causes them and their families.

Despite the practical and technical difficulties that the Minister outlined about securing staff and resources, the fact must not be ignored that that is a flagrant abuse of the rights of children and young people under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Assembly must ensure that everything that can be done will be done. It must invest heavily in mental health services for children and young people to ensure

that that culture does not continue. Financial investment is needed, and many young people need individualised care. Pathways will evolve through the integrated provision of services that includes the Youth Justice Agency and other agencies from the education, community and voluntary sectors.

I accept the points that were raised by other Members, who acknowledged the role of the education sector at the interface with children and young people. That has been widely recognised. The Bamford Review recommends that the Department of Education and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety should set up an interdepartmental group to facilitate and collaborate in that field. That group must be established as soon as possible. The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety must contact the Minister of Education on the matter forthwith.

Much has been said in the debate, all of which is welcome. Members are encouraged by the Minister's prioritisation of mental health for all and, in particular, for children and young people. I support the motion and the amendment. Go raibh maith agat.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly expresses concern at the current state of child and adolescent mental health services, particularly the lack of child and adolescent in-patient beds and dearth of trained staff to run these services; and further calls on the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to take urgent action to address this situation in keeping with the Bamford Review and provide an action plan with a timescale for implementation.

Care Matters Strategy

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has allowed one and a half hours for the debate. The Member who proposes the motion will have 10 minutes to speak, with 10 minutes allowed for the winding-up speech. One amendment has been received and is published on the Marshalled List. The Member who proposes the amendment will have 10 minutes to speak, with five minutes allowed for the winding-up speech. All other Members will have five minutes to speak.

Ms S Ramsey: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls upon the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to set out his plans to improve the outcomes for children “looked after” by the state and for the implementation and resourcing of the Care Matters Strategy.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I applaud the Business Committee for accepting this important motion. It gives the Assembly the chance to throw a spotlight on a vulnerable and needy group of children, particularly when Members consider the subject of the previous debate.

I have no difficulty in accepting the amendment, and I want to thank its proposers. I agree that the issues that affect children and young people cut across several Departments. It is important that the Executive prioritise those issues. That would send out a strong, clear message that children and young people are important in the Assembly.

It is crucial that the debate takes place in the Assembly because it allows locally elected Members to deal with the issues that affect children and young people and to take actions that will make a difference. I thank the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his attendance. I hope that he is not fatigued after attending three debates back to back. I hope that he will listen to my questions and return to me with the answers if he does not have them today.

4.15 pm

Paul Goggins recently launched ‘Care Matters in Northern Ireland — A Bridge to a Better Future’. I am conscious that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is being asked to respond to a policy document to which he had no input, but, based on his last speech, he will be influential in determining its success or failure. I know that the Minister shares my view that this issue demands to be prioritised as much as acute hospital services, trolley waits and prescription charges, which we debated earlier.

Children who require state care are among the most vulnerable in society, and, as evidenced in other places, their life chances are not the same as those for children who have not been in care. Key statistics that are recognised by the Department of Health Social Services and Public Safety show that only one in 10

school leavers who have been in care achieve five or more GCSEs at grade A to C, compared with three in five for school leavers who have not been in care; children who have been in care are 10 times more likely to leave school without any qualifications; looked-after children aged 10 and over are 10 times more likely to be cautioned or convicted for a criminal offence; care leavers are six times more likely to be unemployed than school-leavers who have not been in care; and more than 25% of women who have been in care become pregnant before their twentieth birthday.

Clearly, there is great cause for concern, and it is fair to say that the current situation does not offer much hope for the 2,500 children who are currently in the care system.

Research and consultation with young people who have experienced care paints a picture of instability, insecurity and, often, isolation. Frequent placement and school moves, ever-changing professional input and a lack of support to deal with the traumatic experiences of their childhoods have all been voiced as key issues by that group of young people.

It is against that backdrop that my party welcomes the consultation paper, ‘Care Matters in Northern Ireland – A Bridge to a Better Future’, that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety published in March. It goes beyond the Westminster Green Paper, ‘Care Matters’, and sets out a challenging vision of how Members might improve the outcomes for children in care and, more importantly, for those who are on the fringes of needing care and their parents.

The document was produced by various Government Departments and has proposals that transcend children’s pathways through the care system. The proposals also dovetail with forthcoming legislation and policy on adoption and with the Children (Leaving Care) Act (Northern Ireland) 2002, which was passed by the previous Assembly.

The consultation document considers how family support measures for children on the edge of care could be improved and makes radical proposals to restructure social services to facilitate early intervention, therapeutic support and new ways to work with families. The document also makes interesting proposals for specialist foster parents, with links to residential units, and for lead individuals to ensure improved health and education outcomes for children in care. For looked-after children, there are useful proposals that are designed to ensure that they have the best opportunities while in care and during outside activities.

The document seeks to improve safeguards for looked-after children through innovative proposals to reform the independent visitor role and to ensure that the new health and social services trusts and trust boards exercise corporate responsibility. That is

particularly welcome. In addition, there are proposals to enhance opportunities for children in school and further education.

I appreciate that the document is subject to consultation and that that will limit what the Minister can say and the commitments that he can make. However, 'Care Matters in Northern Ireland – A Bridge to a Better Future' is innovative and challenging and has been well received. Members will be glad to know that it is not controversial. Although many of the proposals can be implemented without resources, others require funding. I seek assurances from the Minister and wish to hear his Department's thinking on how outcomes for those children will be taken forward.

Before doing that, I wish to put down a marker about the funding of family and childcare services in general. During the last debate, the Minister for Health, Social Services and Public Safety said that the mental-health service was a Cinderella service. I go further, and say that services for children and young people are the Cinderella services of the Department. Therefore, I ask that the Minister gives an assurance that the funding for childcare services will not be cut back and that additional money will be provided.

For some time, it has been documented and accepted that spending on family and childcare services in Northern Ireland has been low in comparison to the average figure in England.

Recently published figures from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for the year 2004-05 put average personal and social services spending per capita at £287 in the North, compared to £402 in England — a large gap that features year after year in previous comparisons.

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

The considerable investment in the children's fund and, more lately, in the children and young people's funding package has been extremely welcome, but we are seeking to implement policies such as Care Matters from an unacceptably low baseline. That matter has been recognised by the Children's Commissioner, and Sinn Féin looks forward to receiving a copy of the research on funding of family and children's services by the Department of Finance and Personnel and NICCY (Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People). Hopefully, that will underline the need for investment in Care Matters and other services to families and children.

Does the Minister agree that work should begin on the implementation of that agenda, particularly now that proposals do not require funding? Will he seek to appoint a task force to advance those proposals?

Given the creation of five new super-trusts — one with 22,000 staff — will the Minister also assure the

House that boards will exercise their responsibility for corporate parenting as a matter of priority? Is the Minister prepared to write to the chief executives and chairpersons of the five new trusts to emphasise that point?

I am conscious that I have only a few minutes. I have a number of questions for the Minister, and I will write to him if need be.

Will the Minister advise the Health Committee on developments at the end of the consultation period at the earliest opportunity? Will he confirm that he intends to ensure that the measures included in the family support strategy — which are important because of their relevance to Care Matters — are funded from the children and young people's funding package? Will the Minister confirm that the recently announced £4 million for family support will continue beyond 2007-08?

The 'Care Matters' consultation paper is silent on the issue of funding. How will the Department resource the strategy, and what is its estimation of the cost of the full implementation of the proposal? Will the Minister offer a guarantee that, within the Programme for Government and funding bids for his Department, he will ensure that this strategy gets a high priority?

The Minister showed great enthusiasm during his speech, but the Assembly has formed similar strategies in the past. I thank the Minister for his interest in this matter, and I will listen carefully to his response. I hope that we will soon be able to demonstrate much-improved outcomes for children and young people, particularly those in care, and I hope that the consultation document and this debate act as a bridge to a better future.

Mr Easton: I beg to move the following amendment: Insert after "Assembly"

"encourages the Northern Ireland Executive to make the protection of vulnerable members of society one of its key objectives, and"

It has been said that a society can be judged by how it treats its most vulnerable. Going by Northern Ireland statistics, that is not very well, particularly in relation to looked-after children. Positive outcomes for that group have been unacceptably low. Protecting the most vulnerable members of society should be a prime focus for the new Executive.

Some 9% of looked-after children of school age were suspended from school in 2002-03, compared to 1.7% of the total school population of Northern Ireland. A further 1.7% of school-age children were expelled in 2002-03 — slightly higher than the figure for the same group in England, which was 1.1%, and much higher than the rate among the total school population in Northern Ireland. Some 22% of the 1,263 school-age children who are looked after by local trusts in Northern Ireland at 30 September 2003 had a statement of special educational needs, compared with 27% of the same group in England, and 4% of the total school population in Northern Ireland.

The proportion of care-leavers achieving five or more GCSEs at grades A to C compares very badly at 11% with that of all Northern Ireland school-leavers, 59% of whom attain such grades.

Care-leavers in Northern Ireland are in general 10 times more likely than school-leavers to leave care without gaining any qualifications. Indeed, 51% of all care-leavers left care without gaining any qualifications, compared to 5% of all Northern Ireland school-leavers. Only 11% of young people left care having gained five or more GCSEs at grades A to C, and a further 26% left with one to four GCSEs, grades A to C, in 2002-03.

Some 57% of the care-leavers whose economic activities were known were involved in education, training or employment. That compares poorly to the figure of 91% for all 16 to 18 year olds in Northern Ireland. Ten per cent of the 986 looked-after children aged 10 and over in Northern Ireland were cautioned or convicted in 2002 and 2003, compared to 10% of looked-after children in England and 1% of all children in Northern Ireland. Of those who were convicted, nearly 66% — almost two thirds — were boys.

The Care Matters strategy is an innovative and far-reaching document that goes beyond its English equivalent. The estimated costs of implementing its recommendations are in the region of £30 million to £40 million over three years. That seems to be an enormous sum, but it must be weighed against improving children's lives and achieving better outcomes where reducing pregnancies and improving mental health and social functioning are concerned. It is argued that many of the proposals will not require any funding; rather, political will and leadership from the DHSSPS and other Government bodies will be necessary. Given that the Department has not committed to resourcing the strategy, I do not understand why it has included it in its bids. I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say about the subject.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Members who moved the motion. I can speak on the subject with some personal knowledge, as I am a registered foster carer.

Given the enormity of the situation, few people have a good understanding of it. There are 2,436 looked-after children, 53% of whom have been looked after for more than three years. Administrators of social services must ask the key question: what is best for the children? We should all identify with that. However, I question a system that keeps children in care for many years without their being adopted to make them a permanent part of a family.

Most children are fortunate enough to have significant adults in their lives: parents, family members and teachers. All act as mentors and role models, and, occasionally, advocates. Not every child is fortunate enough to develop those relationships, but every child

in care should be facilitated so that they can have that type of mentor. Not only will that person offer befriending, support and advice to young people, he or she will do so from a position of independence from the care system.

I understand that social services in England and Wales have a duty to provide an independent visitor for every child in care who has had little contact with their birth parents. Those visitors are often volunteers who offer a befriending service for children who have infrequent contact with their parents. The visitors' role is set out in The Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 and regulations.

The potential to develop that role goes beyond children's contact with their parents. Children could be provided with an independent source of advice and encouragement, and, where a child wishes, advocacy. Research on children in care has shown how much they value the role of the independent visitor. It is vital that all children experience stability and permanence in their family. Those factors facilitate positive attachments and resilience and provide the basis for a transition to independent living and adulthood.

4.30 pm

Most children are provided with a stable family life by the family into which they are born. However, we need to be proactive in supporting children without immediate family or wider networks by finding families to provide consistent care for them. Where children cannot be adequately cared for, it is imperative that the authorities move swiftly to restore their sense of permanence, security and normality by giving them an alternative family environment.

Thankfully, for many children care is a positive experience. Foster carers and staff in residential units devote a lot of energy and commitment to the children whom they look after. However, we know that some children in care have a different experience. Sadly, too many find themselves in placements that do not meet their needs. In 2002-03, over 20% of all children who had been looked after for more than a year had changed placement at least once. Fourteen per cent had changed placement only once, 3% twice, and 4% three times or more. We know that the lack of permanence and stability in the lives of children and young people in care can contribute to poor educational attainment, low-self esteem, and disruptive and challenging behaviour, leading some of them into conflict with the law.

In Government documents, we often see pleasant phrases such as "child centred planning approaches" or: "tools such as lifestyles planning, mapping and pathways".

Let me be clear: none of those things can compare with the real love and stability of a permanent home and family. Many children remain in care throughout

their childhood up until the age of 17 or 18, at which stage they need to become self-reliant. I make a plea for Government officials to become more proactive.

Mrs Hanna: I welcome this strategy. It proposes many radical changes that are long overdue. The strategy sets out a comprehensive and holistic package of proposals addressing the problems that children in care in Northern Ireland may suffer from. We have many children who are not in school, who have mental health problems, who have alcohol or drug problems, or who are teenage parents or young offenders. Put simply, that is unacceptable and needs to change.

The strategy has sound principles: family support, partnership and a multidisciplinary approach. The underpinning vision of the strategy is to reduce the number of children and young people in care by 20% and to improve outcomes for young people in care, so that we at least double the proportion of care-leavers who are in employment, education or training at age 19. Yet, while targets are important, we must remember that sometimes a care placement is the best place for certain children at certain points in their lives.

In Northern Ireland, there is a lack of high-quality foster and residential carers — that is not to take away from the excellent carers that we do have, but we need to encourage more people to take on this demanding but extremely worthwhile role. Being a carer is a very challenging task and it is something that requires support. Proper, up-to-date training needs to be provided for carers — training in communication, in managing bad behaviour and, indeed, in encouraging and nurturing the young people and showing them affection. Improvements in training for residential carers and in the general standards of care homes are long overdue.

There is important research on the value of kinship and keeping siblings together, but, again, the proper support, training, financial support and monitoring need to be in place. The strategy outlines the importance of care plans for children who are in care. I believe that the role and purpose of the care plans need to be clarified and made more user-friendly.

It is important that the children are involved. The issue of advocacy has already been mentioned and it is certainly addressed in the consultation document as well. A good example of children's advocacy, VOYPIC — the voice of young people in care — is mentioned. That should be developed further.

Questions of implementation and resourcing are rightly highlighted in the motion, and they need to be addressed to bring this strategy forward. At all times the child's needs must be put first, and confidentiality for the child is paramount. Many social care professionals working on the ground with children in care have expressed their concerns that confidentiality of the child's private life is essential if their trust is to be retained.

The strategy also emphasises the need for specialist training for professionals in the field. Social care workers, health professionals and professionals in the education and library boards require proper training in how to deal confidentially with the complex needs of children in care.

A key message in the Care Matters strategy is early intervention. That is particularly important for children who are at the edge of care. Early intervention can pay off. Sometimes the resources will have to be redirected to preventative services so that social care provision can focus on this rather than crisis management.

Education is also addressed in the strategy. Health is mentioned too, although I would like there to have been more focus on this, especially on mental health. I am very supportive of the objectives of the strategy; namely, to improve the outcomes for children in care — children who are the most vulnerable in our society. Lastly, evidence suggests that insufficient joined-up working has caused some of the barriers to improvements across relevant authorities — both statutory and voluntary. There now exists an opportunity for a fresh start.

Mr McCallister: The Care Matters strategy, which aims to improve outcomes for children, is a vitally important part of what this Government is about. If the Government exist to do anything for people in our society, it must be to protect and defend the weakest and most vulnerable members of that society. Therefore, it is absolutely imperative that these measures are adopted and taken forward.

The whole process needs to be much more streamlined. For example, the average time from care to an adoption order was three years and 10 months during 2003-04; a wholly unacceptable delay in a child's life.

Much of the Government policy actually works against, and prevents, the spirit of the idea of placing children permanently with families as early in their lives as possible. Many children in care are moved in excess of 12 times in the first six years of their lives. There needs to be an immediate overhaul, not only of the social services procedure but of the legal process, to streamline bureaucracy and red tape in order to place these young children.

I know from my discussions with my Friend and party colleague, the new Minister, how vitally important he accepts his role to be in this respect. He wants to get in and actually break this cycle of school expulsions, low academic achievement, unemployment, unplanned pregnancy and low self-esteem; and to replace hopelessness, and in some cases real individual human tragedy, with a sense of hope.

Therefore, I have no difficulty in supporting the motion.

Mrs M Bradley: It could be said that there is a general assumption that when children are taken into care, their lives are back on track and that they have, in a way, been rescued. Nothing could be further from the truth. This is only the beginning of the story.

In my own constituency, it is evident that in the case of older children, the same problematic behaviour displayed in their natural home is still very prominent in their care facility — be it a statutory place of care or a foster home.

It is easier to assume that there could be something of a strain within them that naturally gives rise to their bad behaviour, non-compliance and their generally obvious talent for antisocial behaviour. However, the sad fact is that long before these children reached the clutches of our social services, many of them lived a life of fear in an environment filled with disrespect, poverty and general misguidance. Others arrived there, perhaps, through poor parental health or marital problems. They are simply visitors to the system and manage to leave relatively unscathed.

Surely the main aim of our care system should be to attempt to repair whatever damage has been done and help instil the care and respect that these children have been denied, in order to help redirect their lives and nurture a positive experience while they are in care. Unfortunately, this is not the case in many instances, and the experience becomes one that is fraught with difficulties, misconceptions and general failure — failure by those charged with the caring role to care in the true sense of the word. The stigma attached to being in care can be a huge barrier to a child's well-being and self-image.

We need to do more to improve the very heart and soul of care. The effects of the review of public administration (RPA) — which could for a time destabilise and structurally challenge many statutory bodies charged with delivering the very core of looked-after services — will have a huge impact on how those improvements to care can be achieved.

Many looked-after children's lives have been marked by uncertainty and disrespect, and many have been largely ignored, with their feelings and opinions undervalued for years. Is it any wonder that they do not know how to communicate with anything other than defensiveness? Their entire mental and physical being must be convinced that they have worth and that, more importantly, someone cares enough to allow them to establish a firm foundation that they can build upon to form an approach to adulthood that will benefit them and those around them. In a fast-changing world, we need long-term solutions — not quick fixes and then a hop, skip and jump onto the next casualty of life. Positive, sustained and valuable support after the rescue is vital.

The transition from childhood to adulthood is a rocky road for those making the journey with the support of

their family. So, a child in the care system needs to get information and advice such as that education is important and parenthood is no bed of roses. The latter is a hard and thankless task in many instances. Good mental and physical health is essential and the wisdom to know when to ask for help is vital, something that the young people themselves identified. They want to know when the time is right for them to ask for help. Those are only a few of life's lessons that every child needs to learn — and learn before he finds himself sitting in the middle of all the difficulties trying hard to climb back out.

Many of our young people leaving, or who have just left, the care system find themselves in those situations almost immediately. Teenage parenthood is the most common scenario for those either in care or just leaving it. It is my fervent hope, as a mother and a grandmother, that the pending strategy will make a difference to the lives of those thousands either in the system or teetering on the edge of it. Furthermore, I hope that the Minister charged with the responsibility of Health, Social Services and Public Safety will take the opportunity to ensure that it is properly implemented in conjunction with all the relevant statutory bodies so that it will be effective in real time and not effective in one area and totally non-existent in others. A holistic approach is our only hope to give vital help to those who need it and to show them that this will not be a piecemeal approach but a real and honest attempt to give them back their self-respect, while teaching them how to live a safe, peaceful and happier life than, perhaps, they were used to.

Minister, I wish you well in the job that you have undertaken. It will not be an easy one. I hope that you will see that this strategy is one that will be very effective for the good of all our young people.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim mo bhuíochas leat as an deis labhartha a thabhairt domh ar an cheist thábhachtach seo na bpáistí atá faoi chúram altramais. Ós rud é gurb é seo an chéad uair domh ag labhairt agus tú féin sa Chathaoir, déanaim comhghairdeas leat as ucht do cheapacháin chuig ard-oifig LeasCheann Comhairle agus guím gach rath ort sa todhchaí.

Tá suim ar leith agam sa cheist seo ar dhá ábhar: sa chéad dul síos, is múinteoir scoile mé; agus sa dara cás, is tuismitheoir altramais mé. Ar an dá ábhar sin, tá suim ar leith agam sa cheist seo.

4.45 pm

I have a special interest in this issue, as I am a teacher and a registered foster carer. Looked-after children are among the most vulnerable pupils in the education system, as other Members have said, and they need, deserve and have the right to the best possible education that our system can provide.

Unfortunately our education system has not served those children well, and there is much room for improvement. I support the view that our approach to the education of looked-after children must be firmly child centered, and that home, school, social services and out-of-school activities should work in a co-ordinated way to ensure the maximum emotional, physical and intellectual growth of those young people.

I accept that many looked-after children are doing extremely well in the education system, and I welcome that very much. However, I am deeply concerned that at the other end of the scale there are young people who feel, and, indeed, are, alienated from the education system. It is also a cause for concern that looked-after children are more likely to underachieve and underperform, and are disproportionately represented in statistics for expulsion, suspension and poor attendance.

One of the key elements in supporting looked-after children is ensuring that they have permanence in home and school placement.

The fostering achievement scheme, which is unique in the UK, has benefited from the children and young people's fund. The scheme has been effective in supporting young people in ways that enhance their educational development, improve their self-confidence and esteem, and help them in tackling basic difficulties in literacy and numeracy. It is important that the scheme should be expanded to include younger children and young people leaving care.

I referred to permanence earlier, and the system should endeavour to ensure that young people have permanence in the future. Where appropriate, fostering should become adoption, as was mentioned by Mary Bradley.

The fostering achievement scheme has helped to empower foster carers to become educational advocates for the children in their care. Statistics show that many foster carers are, like myself, in the 40 to 60 age range — and I will not reveal to which end of the scale I am closest. Many foster carers are no longer au fait with the changes in the education system since they attended school. The teaching of the basics in education has changed so much, and foster carers must be kept abreast of those changes if they are to support fully the children. They must be made aware of curriculum changes at primary and post-primary level if they are to be the strongest possible advocates for the education of children in their care. If foster carers are familiar with the education system, they will know better what they can do to help and support those children.

When foster carers are supported to engage with schools as strong advocates for their children, as other parents do, the children can only benefit.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time.

Mr D Bradley: I hope that in future, the fostering and achievement scheme will be expanded as I have outlined, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have been very lenient on time, as this is a very serious subject.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): It is only right that children should be a key priority for the Executive. That was touched on in the previous debate. People are our greatest asset, and children are a key part of that. My Department has special responsibility for 2,500 children in care and 1,600 children on the child protection register. I am particularly aware, therefore, of the duty that we have to meet the needs of children and young people, many of whom also have difficulties or mental health problems.

We have a statutory responsibility to children and young people through our laws, and also through our commitments to international standards such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Our special responsibility to children in care requires that we should strive to provide the best possible care. Our expectations for them should be the same as they are for our own children.

I want to see young people sitting at the heart of the Executive's wider programmes to tackle the problems faced by the most vulnerable groups in our society, including the children, young people and families whose needs the Care Matters strategy is designed to meet.

Outcomes for children in care are often poor in comparison to their peers. Sue Ramsey said that they are one of the most vulnerable groups in society; she has never spoken a truer word. Such young people, who often do not have their mothers and fathers to defend them or speak for them and do not have their wider family group to look after them, are the most vulnerable among the vulnerable.

Common problems include poor educational attainment, conflict with the law, high likelihood of being the victim of a crime, low self-esteem, poor job prospects, greater risk of mental health problems, uncertainty about the future and numerous placements in foster care or children's homes. Recently, one agency told me about an eight-year-old who had had 41 placements in his short life. The instability that that creates for a child is horrendous.

We need to develop new approaches in order to dramatically improve the lives and outcomes of this particularly vulnerable group. An imminent joint report will highlight the fact that children's services in Northern Ireland have been underfunded, historically, in comparison with Great Britain. That issue will inform this debate, and I call on all Members to support me in ensuring that the disparity in funding is addressed as a matter of urgency. We need to provide necessary and

sustained investment, right across Government, to support Northern Ireland's most vulnerable children and families.

Through Care Matters we have a unique opportunity to tackle these issues at every level. The document outlines a radical new approach to developing and enhancing services with a view to improving the lives of looked-after children. This is the start of a process that will significantly improve services for children in care. I will do all that I can to ensure that we deliver the best possible services for vulnerable children and young people in Northern Ireland. The Care Matters strategy provides us with a very positive starting point.

There are three key pillars of Care Matters: first, to prevent children from coming into care by improving family support services; secondly, to improve the quality of life in the residential care or foster care setting; and, thirdly, to prepare children to leave care. One of the problems that we have seen is that children leave care at 18. The average age for children leaving home in Northern Ireland is 22, but this most vulnerable group are on their own at 18.

That is one example of the problems that the strategy must address. It will make a real difference to all children in care, who are entitled to the same opportunities in life as children with parents.

The strategy sets out a number of ambitious goals, including reducing the number of children and young people in care by 20% from around 2,500 to 2,000, and increasing the proportion of care leavers who are in education, employment or training at age 19 to at least 80%. Again, the numbers are tragically low in that area.

When the Care Matters strategy was launched in March it received widespread support and endorsement from key local stakeholders, including Barnardo's, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children and Children in Northern Ireland. By working in partnership with such groups, we can deliver a strategy that will work and that will, ultimately, improve the lives of children in care.

The proposals are centred on six main areas: strengthening support to families and children at risk of being taken into care while ensuring that children are properly protected; ensuring that children who come into care are in the right placement and have stable placements, be that in foster care or children's homes; ensuring that the new trusts have the necessary arrangements in place to act as corporate parents for children in care; improving education opportunities for children in care; providing children in care with opportunities to take part in activities outside school and care; and strengthening support to young people leaving care, as they make the transition to adulthood.

Sue Ramsey was assiduous in asking me questions, but she will have to put them in writing because I

caught only a few of them. Some £4 million has been set aside for family support, but that is for 2007-08 only, and further funding will have to be bid for as part of the comprehensive spending review process in order to mainstream the funding beyond March 2008. The comprehensive spending review provides us with opportunities under a three-year budget and Programme for Government, but a commitment has to be included in the spending review otherwise the opportunity will be lost.

I was asked about corporate parenting, and that is included in the six key areas identified in the proposals.

I was also asked about the adoption strategy, 'Adopting the Future'. It has been consulted upon and new legislation will be brought forward. Funding is needed to improve the adoption services, including post-adoption support services. The new adoption strategy will make it easier to place prospective adoptees with adopters more quickly.

Those are some of the points that were raised, but I did not catch all of them. Members will have to write to me with any other questions, and I will happily reply or talk to them.

The Care Matters strategy is very much the start of the process. It is an excellent illustration of departmental collaboration. This is not just a matter for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety; it concerns other Departments, too. It involves the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning, working closely with staff in the trusts, the education service, careers service and further and higher education establishments to improve outcomes for children in care.

The document has been published for consultation to start discussions on issues that affect children in care. As part of this consultation process, we are arranging, in partnership with the voluntary sector, specific events targeted at children and young people to ensure that we maximise their opportunity to have their say. It is not simply a matter of adults discussing the future of children in care; it is vital that we listen to and learn from their experiences. When we have considered all the views of the stakeholders, we will be able to finalise this important policy.

I was asked about the funding implications of the Care Matters strategy. As with all funding matters, funding for the strategy will be considered by the Department and a bid will be submitted to the Executive as part of the Programme for Government and comprehensive spending review considerations.

The holistic approach outlined in the document requires the support of a number of Departments, and I hope that I will be able to enjoy the full support of my colleagues in taking it forward.

I have listened with interest to the views expressed here today. The Care Matters strategy contains proposals designed to deliver long-term fundamental reform of services for children in care, and it is essential that we get it right. They are one of the most vulnerable groups in society and they have been sadly neglected over generations.

5.00 pm

Dealing with their problems, and the issues and challenges involved, is vital. If that does not happen then the cycle will be self-perpetuating. That will be tragic because every instance represents one young life — and every single life is precious. That is why the Care Matters strategy is so important.

Mr Shannon: I am happy to give the winding-up speech on the amendment. Bringing the motion and the amendment together will cement what we are all here to achieve for the people we represent.

Statistics on children who are coming out of care are very scary. Those young people, who are in care through no fault of their own, are six times more likely to experience a teenage pregnancy; 10 times more likely to leave education with no qualifications, and are less likely to carry on to full-time education than other children.

The questions are: why are those awful statistics happening in what is supposed to be a modern country; why are children leaving care at the age of 18 to go on the dole and not into training or employment; why are they less likely to involve themselves in community activities such as sport and drama, and how can the failures that have been permitted for so long be justified? The answer to the final question is that those failures cannot be justified.

Changes can be made through taking small yet significant steps, and it is up to Members to begin the process by ensuring that the reforms set out in the Care Matters strategy are implemented fully and as soon as possible. We must at least double the number of children in care who carry on to higher education. They are just as capable as other children, given the opportunity, but they have not had the same encouragement as those from more suitable and satisfactory home lives.

Considering that up to 10% of children in care have had 10 different social workers during their time in care, it is easy to see how any encouragement to stay at school carries little weight with them. Those children have not had the chance to bond with, or develop a respect for, the person who has been working with them before that person has been moved on. There must be continuity of care to enable workers to get to know the children and gain their respect so that in conversations about the future, each child feels that the person they are talking to understands their capabilities, whether it be attending university or doing a plumbing course.

Such encouragement would form a large part in getting past the mentality of worthlessness that is, unfortunately, so prevalent to those in care at present.

Up to 40% of children are in inappropriate care — that must change as a matter of urgency. In addition, a large part of the problem is that children leave care at the age of 18, and, as the Minister said, other children normally remain at home until the age of 22 and are encouraged to do the right thing, to get that job and perhaps, promotion.

The fact that children coming out of care are left to get on with their lives at the age of 18 cannot continue — a future-care programme must be established. I welcome that the Minister has responded positively, and Members will be monitoring his progress on the issue.

The Care Matters strategy is worthy because it means that steps will be taken to ensure that the statistics highlighted will never again be seen in Northern Ireland and that funding will ensure that there is a high level of accountability throughout the system. Members must remember that these are not simply statistics, they represent the lives of the children of our Province who have done nothing wrong and who deserve a better start to their adult lives than the current abandonment that they are faced with at present.

The proposed team must be asked to: track the progress of looked-after children in education; deal with all referrals of looked-after children with regard to concerns about attendance; prepare, maintain and monitor the implementation of the personal education plan for each looked-after child; liaise with the child's school and provide training for social services, foster carers, staff in residential settings and school staff.

Training and support must be developed for foster carers, whom I admire. They deserve credit for what they do, and training and materials must be there to help equip them. The benefits of training must be actively marketed. Foster carers and key workers need more training in child development.

Other Members have spoken of the need for everyone to work together. A child's personalised education plan must include input from foster carers and key workers as well as the assigned member of the looked-after children team. The policy of extending alternative education placements beyond the compulsory school-leaving age, particularly for young people in care, should be considered.

Care Matters offers a comprehensive package for improving outcomes for children in care. It will not be easy for the Assembly, but we must take the first tentative steps towards ensuring that improvements in those children's daily lives actually take place.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. As we have heard, Care Matters sets out a

framework in which we can adapt and enhance the rights of children in care or on the verge of going into care. Care Matters is an excellent framework for action, and though we all have some reservations — I particularly share those outlined by Sue Ramsey — we want Care Matters to be a live strategy with clear, time-bound, costed actions as soon as possible.

As cited in the 2006 children's strategy by the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, the Assembly has committed itself to the overarching goals that children and young people should be healthy, have opportunities to learn and achieve, and live in safety and with stability. They should have experience of economic and environmental well-being and live in a society that respects their rights.

Sadly, as we have heard, for too many children this is not the case. Only today Save the Children has launched a report, which says that 100,000 children are living in poverty in the North. It is important that we give children and young people the support and care that they need to reach their full potential. To hear of one child being placed 41 times is nothing short of horrendous. Children and young people in care are being looked after by the state; they must want for nothing. Those children deserve the best-quality care, delivered by highly trained professionals.

There should be no equivocation about this. There should be no corner-cutting or arguments about budgets. As Sue Ramsey and other Members have said, the Care Matters strategy has been passed to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and we ask him to fast-track the implementation of its recommendations. As has already been said, that will require cross-departmental actions, as well as investment. We will raise these and some other issues with the relevant Departments and with businesses both North and South. We need the assistance of agencies such as the Children's Law Centre and other youth justice organisations in order to implement the Care Matters strategy.

We must ensure that not just some, but all the children of the nation are cherished equally. I support the motion and the amendment. Go raibh maith agat.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly encourages the Northern Ireland Executive to make the protection of vulnerable members of society one of its key objectives, and calls upon the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to set out his plans to improve the outcomes for children "looked after" by the state and for the implementation and resourcing of the Care Matters Strategy.

Adjourned at 5.09 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 21 May 2007

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Burnside: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Before the main business of the day begins, I wish to raise a very serious matter. Can the Sinn Féin Minister for Regional Development be asked to appear before the House to explain whether he is in breach of the ministerial Pledge of Office following the directives that he has sent out within his Department in an attempt to do away with the political and British identity of the state of Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom? There are many other insults to British identity, and to people of British identity, in this Province. If that is how that Minister is going to operate, he should appear before the House and explain himself. I believe that he is in breach of the ministerial code.

Mr Speaker: That is not a point of order. However, if the Member wishes to table a motion to debate the matter, he may do so.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Mr Speaker, is it possible for a report to be given to the House about an alleged incident that occurred here on 12 March at 10.00 am? Apparently, an effort was made to set fire to a boiler room in the House. Can you also report to the House on any other minor incidents that appear to have breached security, including an attempt to destroy a washroom? Are you aware if anyone is under suspicion of those crimes? Is any effort being made by the police to arrest people for those crimes? Do you believe that someone with a security pass to this Building is suspected of those crimes? Perhaps you will report to the House at your earliest convenience.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Member for raising his concerns. The incident, and how it was reported, was rather sensationalised by some newspapers. My officials have discussed the matter, and it is an issue of serious concern. However, Members will appreciate that a police investigation is ongoing, which limits me from saying much more than that.

However, when the police investigation has finished, I will certainly be happy to bring a fuller report to the House.

New Assembly Member: Mr Alastair Ross

Mr Speaker: I have been informed by the Chief Electoral Officer that Mr Alastair Ross has been returned as a Member for the East Antrim constituency to fill the vacancy that resulted from the death of Mr George Dawson. I invite Mr Ross to take his seat by signing the Roll of Members.

The following Member signed the Roll of Membership:

Ross, Alastair

Unionist

Mr Speaker: I am satisfied that the Member has signed the Roll and entered his designation. Mr Alastair Ross has now taken his seat.

Acoustics and Heating in the Chamber

Mr Speaker: Last Monday, Mr Danny Kennedy raised a point of order about the acoustics and the heating in the Chamber. I am very aware that those two issues have been raised by many Members on several occasions. There has been discussion on how those two matters, and some others that concern the Chamber, might be resolved. The Assembly Commission hopes to find a long-term solution to the problem. Hopefully, whatever work is necessary for the House will be carried out over the summer recess.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Processing of Planning Applications

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to two hours for this debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to wind up. All other Members will have five minutes.

Mr Gallagher: I beg to move

That this Assembly regards as unacceptable the length of time taken for both the processing of planning applications and the determination of planning appeals, and calls upon the Minister of the Environment to take immediate steps to clear the backlog and also to introduce more efficiency and transparency within the planning process.

I am sure that everyone here is opposed to unrestricted development, be it in urban or rural areas. The motion is not about Planning Policy Statement 14 (PPS 14); indeed, I know of nobody who wants a bungalow blitz. Instead, it is about the planning system as it currently functions.

Development should take place in a way that protects the quality of our environment, meets the needs of the community and encourages a sustainable and successful economy. Those members of the public who have had to deal with planning hold the widespread view that they are getting a poor service. Last year's annual report from the Ombudsman's Office stated that it received more complaints about planning than about all other Departments and agencies combined. More recently, the Semple Report on affordable housing was critical of planners, and it called for reform. Even more recently, last month the Construction Employers Federation stated that a priority for the Assembly must be to improve the planning system.

I welcome the fact that the Minister of the Environment, who is responsible for planning, is present this morning. However, the motion is not a criticism of the staff who work in the Planning Service. Direct rule Ministers, in the main, ignored the way in which the planning system was not equipped to cope with the volume of applications, and they refused to make available the necessary resources to achieve that.

It can take more than two years for a planning application to go through the process, which is completely unacceptable.

It is not only applications for planning permission that are delayed. The timescale to renew area plans has slipped, which has implications for economic development and the housing market. The Construction Employers Federation and other organisations consider that the absence of full and up-to-date area plans has serious implications for us, potentially inhibiting our response to social, economic and environmental needs

and not allowing us to take full advantage of the development opportunities of the peace dividend. That slippage also impacts on our meeting the rising demand for housing, with implications for affordability and the ability of first-time buyers to access the property ladder.

The escalation in house prices reflects the strong demand for housing, but planning delays contribute to rising prices. The motion asks the Department of the Environment to take steps now to speed up the planning process and to remove some of the bureaucracy and the lack of transparency that so frustrates people who use the planning system.

The hallmark of the administration of a successful planning system is a trust, based on public confidence, that all planning decisions are reached in a fair, consistent and transparent way. That is particularly important in Northern Ireland, which is one of the few places that does not have a third-party right of appeal.

The planning system, as it currently operates, is particularly burdensome for some sections of the community. For married couples with young families, who purchase a site and then face delay and uncertainty while they live in expensive rented accommodation, the planning system is a bureaucratic maze, where it is often impossible to get answers to requests for information.

In the business community, in all the main towns in Northern Ireland, retailers must respond quickly to the challenges that face them, not least from the large multinationals. The business world simply cannot afford to stand still, and the way in which businesses are treated is not acceptable. For example, the owner of a business in east Belfast wanted to submit a planning application and was told not to do so because the planners would not be able to deal with it.

Grant aid is available for the regeneration of town centres. However, offers of grant aid are time limited, with the result that, in some cases, planning delays put the grant aid in jeopardy. Several such instances in Dungannon have been brought to my attention.

Northern Ireland has a unique opportunity to build economic success on political progress. It is important that developments in one of our key industries, tourism, are not thwarted by an underperforming planning system. I am aware, as I am sure that other Members are, of plans to develop hotels at different locations across Northern Ireland, from the east coast westwards into Fermanagh, that are stalled in planning offices. Hotel developers need assurances that their enterprises, which also concern job opportunities, will be dealt with in a reasonable time frame. Some hoteliers' plans have been —

Mr Burnside: Will the Member give way?

Mr Gallagher: No, I will not give way; I am using all my allocated time to contribute to the debate.

Some hoteliers' plans have been in the system for years.

12.15 pm

I shall give an example of the duplication and unnecessary bureaucracy in planning that, in my view, can easily be weeded out. Take a replacement house, renovation scheme or new single dwelling in the countryside. An application is made to the planners and, if all goes well, planning approval is issued. With approval secured, the owner commences work and applies to Northern Ireland Electricity (NIE) for connection to the electricity supply. As Members know, such electrical work in rural areas can cost upwards of £3,000 or £4,000, and the applicant must pay a hefty deposit at that stage.

It is then the turn of NIE to apply for planning permission for a way leave, and the entire process starts over again and drags on for another year or more. There is no reason why consultation with NIE should not be carried out at the initial stage of the process, in the same way that bodies such as the Environment and Heritage Service and Roads Service are consulted. That simple change would make the process much easier and quicker for everyone involved.

Families in which one member has a disability face a really hard struggle if their homes need a small extension. Providing that approval has been granted from a council's building control department, an extension of less than 73 sq m does not need planning permission. However, a certificate of lawfulness, as it is known, is required, so an application must be made to the Planning Service, which means another delay. There is probably a good reason why a certificate of lawfulness is required, but it should not be difficult for senior personnel in the Planning Service to find a convenient and user-friendly way of issuing the certificate.

Improvements to the transparency of the planning system are required; in that regard, something can be learned from planning offices across the border. For example, in County Donegal, applicants can log on to a website and, at the click of a button, access information from the planning office. Objectors, applicants and members of the public have ready access to the details of any application.

Furthermore, at the time an application is made, all applicants know that a decision will be issued within a specified time frame. As a general rule, decisions are made within 12 weeks. It is also worth noting that the planning fee for a single dwelling in the Republic of Ireland is €64. That is significantly less than £550, which I understand to be the minimum planning fee for a single dwelling here.

Most Members are aware of long delays with the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC). Last year, the Commission received around 2,500 appeals, and determinations currently take 12 months to be issued. The PAC is independent of the Department of the Environment; it is within the remit of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM). The PAC must be required to operate within a reasonable time frame.

All these matters lie at the heart of the motion: clearing the backlog, updating area plans and urgently implementing procedures that ensure more efficiency and transparency. As I have said, the motion is in no way a criticism of the people who work in the Planning Service; rather, it is a call for better procedures and adequate resources. I urge all Members to support the motion.

Mr Weir: At the outset, I welcome the motion and indicate my party's intention to support it.

For anyone who has been involved with the planning process, there is no doubt that it is one area where direct rule Ministers have left somewhat of a mess — that is acknowledged by everyone. Planning is therefore one area where devolution has been strongly welcomed. I look forward to the remarks of my hon Friend from Fermanagh and South Tyrone in her contribution to the debate.

In highlighting the problems with the planning process — and it is right that we should — it is important that this debate does not end up being a general rant that everything in the system, or in Northern Ireland, is wrong.

We must recognise that Northern Ireland has been left with the results of years of neglect from direct rule Ministers. Although reforming the planning system is a priority, it is important that the Assembly takes sufficient time to ensure that the right solutions are achieved. Indeed, Members must ensure that the solutions that we apply do not end up frustrating the objectives that we set.

I am glad that the proposer of the motion, Mr Gallagher, stated that he is not passing the blame onto planning officers. It is important to realise that, particularly in certain areas, there has been such a large volume of applications that, with the best will in the world, it has been difficult for planning officers to cope. Mr Gallagher referred to PPS 14. Undoubtedly, in the run-up to the introduction of PPS 14, the expectation that it was to be implemented resulted in a flood of applications that overwhelmed the system.

It is important that we look constructively at the planning system to determine where common ground can be found. Unfortunately, at times, planning has tended to operate in a silo and not in a manner that allowed proper Executive consideration of the

problems. Therefore, the entire Executive must tackle the problem, to which there are two elements.

The first element is PPS 14. PPS 14 has created a large problem, both in the flood of applications that it generated and in the fact that many people saw applications submitted before its introduction as their last chance to gain planning permission. That assumption has meant that many of those whose applications were rejected are going through the planning appeals system. Due to the slightly artificial division that the Planning Service was subjected to in 1998-99, PPS 14 falls under the remit of the Department for Regional Development — I hasten to add that it is the Department for Regional Development for Northern Ireland. It is therefore important that we get joined-up solutions. A resolution to the issues surrounding PPS 14 would help the entire planning system.

The second element lies in the different approaches that the Planning Service and the Housing Executive take to replacement dwellings. A closer working relationship must be developed. For example, sometimes when the Housing Executive has designated a house as being unfit for human habitation, the Planning Service refuses permission for a replacement dwelling on the grounds that the original house is suitable for habitation. That situation shows no joined-up thinking.

It must be also recognised that different pressures exist in different areas of the system, particularly where there are acute problems. At last week's meeting of the Committee for the Environment, I welcomed the Minister's confirmation that there will be a special examination of Craigavon planning office, where there seems to be an acute problem, and that additional staff will be employed.

Where there have been changes to the planning system, particularly on procedural matters, they have not necessarily impacted fairly across the board. For example, last year, much criticism was made of the changes to the arrangements for office and site meetings. In part, those changes were driven by the sheer volume of applications and the desire to get applications moving more quickly. However, that level of overwhelming pressure did not arise in north Down, meaning that what was a good solution for Downpatrick, Omagh or Fermanagh was not necessary in north Down. Such differences must be borne in mind.

The Assembly must take its time in its consideration of the planning system. The arrangements for third-party appeals must be weighed up carefully. Although it is important that people have the right to object to decisions, we must avoid a situation whereby vexatious third-party appeals gum up the system. Obviously, if the aim is to create a much more efficient system that operates without delays, there is a severe danger that

vexatious third-party appeals will generate additional delays.

Similarly, we must be careful that, in ensuring that the planning system has proper transparency, there is no tension between that transparency and efficiency. Although transparency is important, it should not be at the cost of efficiency. Many of us would argue for the greater involvement of local accountability in the decision-making process, but we must recognise that that could create delays as well.

I look forward to the remainder of the debate. Planning is an important issue. I support the motion.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

I welcome and support the motion. I have taken on board the comments of those Members who have already spoken.

The backlog in planning applications has stemmed from the new area plans and the introduction of PPS 14. The subsequent panic and increase in the number of new applications between December 2005 and 16 March 2006 doubled the workload of Planning Service staff, putting them under severe pressure.

For example, in the Planning Service's Craigavon office, which covers Armagh, Banbridge, Craigavon, and Newry and Mourne, 5,753 applications were outstanding, taking an average of 52 weeks to process. The service originally took 12 weeks. Within a month of the introduction of PPS 14, there was a 10% loss of staff in Craigavon — mostly to the private sector, I might add. In what other service would you pay an average of £550 to £600 up front and wait up to 18 months for a decision? That is not acceptable.

PPS 14 was ill thought out and has failed to understand the needs of rural communities. It ignores the traditional rural settlement pattern and does not understand social and cultural traditions such as the sense of identity, kinship and close family connection in rural communities. People from rural communities have a right to live in rural areas and a right to demand that Government policy should support sustainable development.

In rural communities, family connections and the sense of belonging provide a support network that contributes to the alleviation of many of the social problems that are more prevalent in urban settings. The Department has not taken into account the negative impact of its policy on the long-term sustainability of rural communities. There is a clear attempt to impose a British model of rural living on rural communities in Ireland, where their nature, history and structure are very different. Rural communities in England, Scotland and Wales have been seriously damaged by the implementation of a policy of forcing rural people

to live in urban centres, which has resulted in most village services becoming unsustainable and, ultimately, has led to their closure.

The Planning Service's Craigavon office, which covers four districts, has established a new divisional support team of up to nine people. I hope that that will help to restore some stability and confidence. To ensure the effectiveness of the new team, regular monitoring will be essential. The amount of time taken to process applications is of major concern, particularly in the Armagh and Newry and Mourne districts, where it takes up to 52 weeks to process an application. The lack of consistency in the Planning Service's approach to applications is also an issue.

My party supports the motion. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Gardiner: I support the motion. A lack of engagement with the public is one of the key criticisms of the Planning Service. That was made only too clear when, pleading pressure of work, the Planning Service cancelled site meetings with local councillors. This removed at a stroke the one element of democratic input into the planning process. It reflected badly on the Planning Service, showing that it has deeply undemocratic instincts, and was deeply resented by public representatives.

The review of public administration will change the operation of planning in Northern Ireland, but it has to be said that the precise future shape of planning remains unclear. It is now unlikely that we will have only seven super-councils, since all but one of the main parties in the Assembly are opposed to that. We will have 15 or 11 councils. The operation of these new councils as planning authorities may be in doubt. The official view is that only with seven councils will those councils be large enough to act as planning authorities. Of course, the official view may be wrong. It may have more to do with pushing a seven-council agenda than with the realities of planning. Even if we have a greater number of councils under the new system, surely a group of councils could act as a planning authority.

I mention all of this because the past and future shape of planning in the Province will impact on the responsiveness of the Planning Service. There will be almost universal agreement across the Chamber that planning has been slow and deeply disengaged from the public.

12.30 pm

Mr McCarthy: Does the Member agree that Planning Service delays throughout Northern Ireland are causing more and more people to go ahead with plans and developments anyway and then seek retrospective planning permission? That can be to the detriment of neighbouring properties.

Mr Gardiner: The planning delays that people experience are unacceptable. Nowhere is that more true than on my own home turf of Craigavon. A few weeks ago, I had the opportunity to meet some people who were interested in commercial developments in the Craigavon area. I was told by the lady chief planner that it would take at least six to nine months before such developments would even be considered. That is totally unacceptable. I have drawn the matter to the attention of Ministers, and I am confident that the new Minister will take action. She has experience of such issues in her own constituency in Enniskillen.

Time, as they say, is money. Planning delays are deeply damaging to the cash flow of construction firms, and we have to remember that construction firms are among the biggest employers in the Province. I want to extend the original idea: time is money, and money is jobs. However, we must keep a watchful eye on unrestricted development. As a committed environmentalist, I believe that strongly.

In the village of Waringstown in my constituency, I have encountered what I can only describe as gross inefficiency and demonstrable neglect on the part of the Planning Service. A developer removed what remained of a sixth century rath — from the time of St Patrick — that was in the middle of the village near the grange, one of the most historic sites in the area. That act of vandalism was not prevented by the Planning Service. It could therefore reasonably be said that the Planning Service fell down on two fronts: it held up legitimate development, and it did not prevent one of the worst examples in living memory of the vandalism of a historic site by a developer.

I am not in the business of being unreasonable. Apart from being a major employer, the construction industry has done much to improve the quality of life and the urban landscape of the Province. The construction industry is being unreasonably restrained by planning delays. That is serious because it impacts on the economy. The housing shortage has pushed property prices up to such a degree that the property market is in danger of overheating. Planning delays and a lack of building land are two important factors in that; another is the alarmingly slow process of the revision of area plans. It all amounts to bad management of the planning system. Whatever system this Assembly devises —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mrs Long: I welcome the opportunity to participate in today's debate, and I declare that I am a member of Belfast City Council's town planning committee.

This is not a debate on PPS 14, and planning delays are not solely a rural phenomenon. We have to ensure that our Planning Service is robust, open and accountable. The processes should be efficient and simple to use. However, I do not necessarily believe

that that means that outcomes should always be changed, and I do not believe that Members would seek a relaxation of standards. They would certainly not seek a relaxation of standards when representing their constituents as objectors in other fora. Objections are part of the process.

We have to consider delays at source when developing our area plans, in which there are unacceptable lag times. There is no overlap; instead, there are huge gaps while new plans are developed — despite the fact that the time limit of 15 years for each plan is rapidly expiring. Belfast is a classic example. In 2001, the Belfast urban area plan expired; now, in 2007, we are just about to go into the public inquiry phase of the replacement for that urban area plan. Within that gap in the policy framework, speculative applications increase. The pressure on the Planning Service is therefore much greater. To avoid a glut of speculative applications, we should focus on having good robust policy in place.

Policy frameworks must be implemented robustly, so that the grounds on which planners take decisions are clear to everyone — objectors, developers and local elected representatives who play a part in the process. There should be no inbuilt delays during which people bicker about matters that are clear policy noes.

Members need to deal with the fast-tracking of applications that are economically sensitive. Reference has been made to the issues that surround affordable housing, but the impact on the economy when larger applications are caught up in the same queue as applications for small single-storey rear extensions is equally important. There is merit in having the ability to fast-track those applications, but only within planning policy guidance. Just because an application is economically beneficial does not mean that its planning merits, environmental or social, should be simply discounted. It is important that we do not go down that route.

There is clearly an issue with the recruitment and retention of staff in the Planning Service that needs to be addressed. Anyone who regularly deals with local planning headquarters knows that planners are getting younger as senior and experienced members quit the Planning Service to work in the Republic of Ireland, England, Scotland or Wales or in the private sector in Northern Ireland. Members need to address staff retention and morale in the Planning Service if we are to get high quality decisions made by experienced planners.

While the planners and the Department have responsibilities, there is also a responsibility on local councillors — and I speak as a councillor — not to introduce unnecessary delays into the system by holding spurious meetings about applications where, while it is known that there is no prospect of a change of opinion, the opportunity to influence voters is huge.

If we politicians take individual responsibility for our actions in that respect, we could fast-track quite a number of applications. Developers also have a responsibility to read policy frameworks, to be aware of what is and is not acceptable and to try in that context to produce plans that meet the basic planning policy guidance. Very many applications —

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Long: I shall not as I am drawing near to the end of my allotted time.

Developers must read the policy and make applications that are consistent. Many applications are in the system for a long time in Belfast because people are in negotiation with the Planning Service about a submitted application that constitutes overdevelopment. I do not want such applications to be simply pushed through as approvals, although I will make reference to that in my final comments.

I would like to see all decisions taken quickly, in a way that does not reduce standards but increases efficiency in the process. Good plans that are consistent with planning policy and meet all the requirements should be quickly approved. Poor plans that are inconsistent with policy should be quickly refused. That does not mean that environmental concerns on our built heritage should be overlooked, but rather they should ensure no unnecessary delay. In addition to the Planning Service, developers and local councillors also have a responsibility.

Mr Wells: I must declare an interest in this issue: I trained as a planner, and some of the staff that are suffering pain in various divisional offices are people who went through Queen's University with me many years ago —

Mr Weir: The pain started early, then.

Mr Wells: It was not before the Boer War, although it feels like it.

Members need to put the issue into perspective and look at it from the angle of a hard-pressed employee of the Planning Service. I am glad that Mr Gallagher did not take the opportunity to criticise the staff, as I do not believe that they are to blame for the current situation.

Two offices that I deal with provide an example of the current problem: in Craigavon it can take between 18 months and two years for an application to be processed, whereas in Downpatrick the timescale is just three or four months. Why have applications in Downpatrick that were submitted in December that have been approved already, whereas an application in Craigavon may take two years to be approved? The reason is volume: the difference between the two offices is a huge backlog of speculative applications for single dwellings clogging up the system in Craigavon, while in Down district such applications are out of the

system, leaving only those for extensions, hospitals, roads or schools.

The reason for the current problems is the considerable stress that the Planning Service is under. Applications were running at three and four times normal levels during 2005-06, so it is no wonder that planners are having difficulty meeting their targets.

In some divisional offices the average age of a case officer is 27, which is far too young for the complex nature of the job. Their average age is so low because a large number of more experienced planners are being siphoned off to private practice or to offices in the rest of the UK and the Republic of Ireland. Is it any wonder that there are difficulties? The average case officer in Craigavon handles more than double the number of applications that their equivalent in England or in the Republic of Ireland does. Therefore the problem must be examined in that context.

The figures for the Planning Appeals Commission are quite frightening. In 1994-95, it received 608 appeals; in 1995-96, it received 1,100 appeals; last year, it received 2,600; and this year it is on course to receive 3,000 appeals. There has been a fivefold increase in the number of appeals but only a 10% increase in the number of commissioners; their number has increased by just four. Is it therefore any wonder that the system is under enormous stress? Members must also take that into consideration.

It is a fact of life that many important planning applications are drowning in a sea of bungalows. It is a bit rich of the SDLP to complain about the planners, given that it was the party that encouraged the trend. Until the issue of single dwellings in the countryside can be resolved, applications for them will always be predominant. The Planning Appeals Commission has told me that 81% of the appeals that it receives concern single dwellings in the countryside.

The situation in Northern Ireland as regards normal planning — planning that does not involve single dwellings — is fine, with applications being processed quickly. However, once the factor of speculative applications for single dwellings is added, the whole issue becomes complicated. I would like some hon Members to accompany me to Craigavon to see the sheer weight of numbers of such applications and the difficulties that staff there have to deal with.

I welcome Mrs Long's comments about councillors' responsibilities. Until recently, some councillors in Northern Ireland were holding three, four, and perhaps five, site meetings on an individual planning application when they knew full well that it did not have a pup's chance of getting through. They were just trying to show constituents that they were being active so that they could get their votes.

Mrs D Kelly: Does the Member agree that on many occasions at such site meetings applicants were able to point to another site that had been approved, that did not require a site meeting and that was not in keeping with planning policy? How were elected representatives supposed to explain that?

Mr Wells: Unfortunately, the view expressed by planning officials at that stage would have been that a bad decision had been made and that that would not be repeated. I have come across that situation many times.

The other problem lies with agents. In South Down, agents are submitting scores of speculative planning applications that are being dumped into the planning office. The agents do not answer requests for information or further detail; they leave their client high and dry and then go to their local councillor and ask him to sort things out. That problem will continue until agents in Northern Ireland develop a professional attitude.

Therefore the issue is not black and white; it has many shades of grey. Ultimately, however, staff are doing an excellent job in difficult circumstances.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr McKay, and I remind Members that this is his maiden speech.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Sinn Féin fully supports the motion and thanks Mr Gallagher for moving it. The Executive and the Assembly are responsible for ensuring that the Planning Service provides a service, as its name suggests. Having to wait more than two years to have a planning application for a house processed is not good service.

The planning process is supposed to be completed within 12 weeks. In Banbridge, Newry and Mourne, and Armagh, average processing times are over 12 months. That is totally unacceptable. Being unable to speak to, or contact, case managers and planning officials, and not having phone calls returned, whether the caller is a member of the public or an elected representative, is not reflective of a good service.

Let us not beat about the bush: the Planning Service is in crisis and has resorted to downgrading customer service in order to lessen an overbearing workload. The result is that applicants are no longer entitled to site meetings, and, in some cases, office meetings, to try to overturn a Planning Service decision.

Sinn Féin believes that the Planning Service needs to be overhauled. Its decisions need to be more transparent, understandable and accountable. We do not need a planning bureaucracy in which the opinions of local people and elected representatives are discarded.

In my North Antrim constituency, well over 30,000 people signed a petition against the mining of lignite; indeed, all political parties were united in opposing

that proposal. However, the Planning Service unveiled a draft area plan that still left the door open for opencast mining in the area.

A review of planning policy must take into account such environmental concerns as well as the need to protect rural communities and services. Protecting the environment must be a core objective of any comprehensive rural planning policy.

12.45 pm

Sinn Féin fully supports the implementation of measures that deal effectively with sewerage provision for one-off housing. We want to encourage the environmental footprint of houses to be as small as possible, and, to that end, we wish to see geothermal heating systems and solar and wind energy used to maximum effect. Planning applications for one-off rural houses that incorporate those systems should be encouraged.

Sinn Féin believes that a fundamental change in the planning process is needed. Currently, planning permission is granted for a piece of land regardless of ownership — the permission rests with the site, not the individual. Permission should be granted to an individual under specific criteria: he or she should be the only person who can take the development forward through the building process, and that should be followed by an occupancy agreement. The planning process should be based on set criteria.

Sinn Féin also proposes a restriction on the number of planning permissions granted for one-off houses in the countryside to any one individual. Rural planning should support people who wish to build a home in a community, not those who just wish to live in a big house in the country. The issue of speculation must be addressed, as it is having a negative effect on rural communities.

As my colleague Cathal Boylan said, we welcome the establishment of divisional support teams to provide assistance in dealing with the planning backlog, and we hope that that will help to address the problem. However, the two major problems of service delivery and planning policy remain. Both these areas must be changed radically if the public are to regain confidence in the Planning Service. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Donaldson: I congratulate Mrs Foster on her appointment as Minister of the Environment; I am delighted that she has been appointed to that post. I have been following with interest the articulation of her green credentials — which goes against the grain, at times, for those of us who look to another colour. Blue is the colour for me after Saturday's game.

I welcome this debate and thank the Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone for proposing the motion. It is an important issue and, although I recognise the difficulties that the Planning Service has in dealing

with the current large volume of applications, it must be addressed. I therefore have no difficulty in supporting the terms of Mr Gallagher's motion.

We must, however, recognise that the solution is not a simple matter of issuing a ministerial edict. There are long-term issues that must be addressed, not least the staffing arrangements in the various divisional planning offices. My good friend the Member for South Down Mr Wells, my other colleagues and other Members have mentioned recruitment difficulties and the fact that the private sector can offer much more attractive terms to experienced planning officers, which makes staff retention difficult.

However, there are clearly disparities between offices. In my constituency, I deal with the divisional planning offices in both Downpatrick and Craigavon. I recognise that Craigavon has a larger volume of applications to deal with, but it is unfair that my constituents who live in Lisburn can get an application dealt with much more quickly than my constituents who live in Dromore in the Banbridge area. That issue must be examined.

There is also an issue in regard to the larger applications that come before the Planning Service. I had the experience of an application in my constituency that was submitted by Coca-Cola for the relocation of its premises from Lambeg to Knockmore Hill. I must commend the Planning Service for the efficient manner in which it dealt with that application. From beginning to end, it took only six months to process what was a major application, deal with all the issues and issue an approval.

If that standard could be emulated in other major planning applications, it would send out a positive message from Northern Ireland plc. To attract investment to Northern Ireland, and to improve the economy, we must convey that we will not allow bureaucracy to impede the facilitation of investors. Of course, we acknowledge that due process must be followed and planning policy considered and applied fully.

The other side of the coin should be considered also. Dobbies Garden Centres, a large Scottish company that has developed garden centres across the United Kingdom, submitted a planning application for a new garden centre in my constituency. Its experience of the planning system in Northern Ireland stands in stark contrast to its experience in other parts of the United Kingdom. For example, last week, it received planning approval for a new garden centre in Southport. From submitting the application to getting the approval took eight weeks.

In Northern Ireland, its current application for a site adjacent to the M1 at Lisburn has been in the planning system for almost two years. Dobbies has opened a large number of garden centres in Scotland, England and Wales, and nowhere else has it experienced such delays as in Northern Ireland. After all, it is merely seeking planning permission for a garden centre. A

disparity exists, as some applications pass through the system relatively quickly, while others take much longer.

I am sure that there may have been factors that have complicated the process for Dobbies, but I simply hold up its experiences as an example of the improvements that must be made to deal with larger planning applications.

I welcome the debate. I know that the Minister will take on board what has been said and that the Planning Service will do its best to respond positively to the constructive criticism.

Mr Armstrong: It may surprise Members to learn that I have a degree of sympathy with the Planning Service. It is trying to operate a system that was developed in a piecemeal fashion during the 30-odd years of the Troubles when planning policy was, understandably, well down the Government's list of priorities.

The planning system is in crisis. During the long years of the Troubles, the Planning Service was able to cope well with the number of applications that it received. That is hardly surprising: Northern Ireland was seen as a depressed region of the United Kingdom in which business confidence was low. People were leaving our shores to build lives elsewhere, and house prices were relatively depressed compared with the rest of the United Kingdom.

However, due, in part, to the increased confidence in the future of Northern Ireland after the ceasefires and the Belfast Agreement, there was unprecedented growth in the number of planning applications. We are experiencing a rise in immigration, as people return to Northern Ireland and others come here in search of new and better lives.

The Planning Service was unprepared for the huge increase in its workload. If it is to keep pace with developments, it requires massive investment in resources and manpower. When it held the Environment portfolio in the previous Assembly, the UUP did its best to remedy the situation. However, as the Minister of the Environment is sure to find out, the Planning Service requires a massive investment to even stand still, let alone tackle the backlog of applications.

Northern Ireland is facing a housing crisis. Property prices have escalated at a frightening rate and show no sign of stopping. Although that may be good news for existing homeowners, it is a nightmare for those who are seeking a foothold on the property ladder, particularly first-time buyers and young couples.

Many factors are contributing to the situation, including the fact that people are living longer, getting married later in life, and choosing to live alone. Also, homes must be found for those who have come to Northern Ireland in search of better lives.

Those factors, which all affect today's housing market in Northern Ireland, did not have the same impact even

10 years ago. I have not even mentioned the disastrous impact that the direct rule Administration policy of PPS 14 had on development in the countryside and on rural life — a way of life that is subject to enough major pressures without having to contend with ill-conceived policy.

If the Minister is to put the words of the motion into effect, it will be not be enough for her to say that she requires additional resources, which, of course, her Executive partners would have to agree. It may well be the case that additional resources are required, but the Minister must ensure that existing resources are deployed with maximum efficiency. If Northern Ireland is to prosper, it must have an effective and efficient planning service. In delivering outcomes, the service must not only be fair, but must be seen to be fair. The Minister has a job on her hands, and I wish her well with it.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I pay tribute to my colleague Mr Gallagher for his comprehensive overview of planning policy and the delays in the Planning Appeals Commission. I note Mr Weir's valid point about replacement dwellings. I have encountered a ludicrous case where the Housing Executive has deemed a property unfit for habitation, but the irrationality of planning policy — or of interpretation, I should say — has resulted in one agency determining the structure unfit, and therefore fit for replacement, yet another insisting that the property be incorporated into a new-build project. Were I developing that house, I would have grave concerns about the future well-being of the property.

I had thought long and hard about the contribution I would make today but, on Thursday evening, I received an email that said it all. It was from the parents of a child with autism. They have given me permission to read their correspondence in today's debate. It reads as follows:

"Patsy, as you will recall, we spoke recently at the coffee morning held by Autism NI at Magherafelt District Council offices, and you had also helped earlier in respect of the above application. It was lodged in September 2006 with PAC, when we were told it would take about 9 months to be heard. Then, a couple of months back, we were told it would be August. Now we are being told it could be 2008.

As you may remember, we are applying to build because of our son Conor, who has autism. We accepted we would have to wait on the appeal being heard, but to keep on seeing it being pushed further and further out means we are losing the chance for this to have an impact on his life. Research has shown that any intervention to help a child with autism, is most beneficial if it occurs before he is 10. We originally made this application when Conor was 6, as it stands he will be 9 when it is heard, so that even if it were successful, he would be at least 11 before we would have built.

Patsy, as you are now chair of the Planning Committee at The Assembly, we would be very grateful for any help you could give in respect of having our appeal heard, whilst it could still make a difference to our son's life. We understand there is a procedure to follow, but surely one that takes 3 years is not feasible. Many thanks for your involvement."

The family needs a house that will allow Conor to attend the school that is most suited to his needs and simultaneously avail of the extended family network for support. I say to Mr Wells that this is one of the genuine cases, not involving speculators but decent people from the rural community who just want to live where they were reared with the extensive support that is available to them.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGlone: I am sorry; I cannot. My time is nearly up.

The real irony is that the senior planning officer involved with the case was going to recommend that the application be approved. However, because the application concerned the needs of a young child, it got bogged down in the bureaucratic interpretation of a group meeting, where common sense was lost. Thereafter, a refusal was issued.

1.00 pm

The cost of the resulting appeal must also be taken into account, because the planning consultant must be paid. However, that family's case is not exceptional. They have given me permission to highlight it here today to provide an example of real, human issues that affect good, decent people who simply want to get on with their lives.

Today's debate is necessary because of unsuitable planning policies, unnecessary delays and inadequate resources. I know of 80 vacancies in the Planning Service. Perhaps the Assembly should examine the pay structure and working conditions there, because experienced planning officials are leaving. I cannot fault them for doing so, but they are needed to process planning applications and to deal with the delays and inefficiencies that clearly exist.

However, as a consequence of such delays, jobs are being lost, house prices are rising at a ferocious rate and, more importantly, the needs of people such as young Conor are being lost sight of. There must be a major shake-up and review in the Planning Service, and some of the policies of PPS 14 —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr McGlone: OK. Thank you.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a Leascheann Comhairle.

This afternoon's debate is important. It is crucial that Members send a message from the Chamber that there must be a change in planning policy and its structures. On several occasions we have seen that the Planning Service is a bureaucratic system that acts as a quango, with little or no consultation with councillors or elected Members. That is unfortunate and means that planners impose area plans with little or no

consultation. Often barristers fight out the details, but the people affected are not involved, nor are the needs of the area considered. The area plan, therefore, is not acceptable to the community, which does not perceive its implementation as relevant.

Members have also seen area plans being completely distorted under new planning legislation. Unfortunately, when Lord Rooker was here, he drove a horse and carriage through all the legislation and left us with no planning strategy whatsoever. He dismissed advice, even from his officials, on how to deal with planning. He was another bureaucrat who came over to tell people how to design their houses, where to build them and where to live.

Most disappointing are the lack of consultation in rural areas and the fact that the backlog is building up. A simple planning system could be introduced. Currently, planning applications are being submitted for building on perfectly good, mature, derelict sites with surrounding trees and various other advantages. However, because the existing building is derelict and no longer recognised as a house, and particularly since the introduction of PPS 14, planning permission is refused, without any consideration.

The planners can issue several deferments. If an application goes before a council, there can be only one deferment. However, when the application goes back to the planners, they state that certain changes are required. When the applicant complies, the planners impose more conditions, and that process is repeated again and again.

I am dealing with a case in Pomeroy that has been going on for two years. The Department has issued eight deferments. On eight occasions, the applicant has completely changed the type of the house to accommodate the planners' requests. Yet he is still being told that if he does not meet certain conditions, the entire application will be refused. The applicant has incurred massive costs because of the architectural consultants involved at different stages. The application has been unnecessarily delayed for two years and the house completely changed from what he originally wanted. There must be some means of dealing with such cases. A straight line of information must come from the planners to applicants about what is required to meet their demands.

Members know that the worst backlog of applications is in Craigavon, where the same person who held back applications and caused a backlog in Omagh, Cookstown, Dungannon and all over the place is now based. That particular lady deliberately holds up and blocks applications, because she does not believe that any planning permission should be granted in rural areas. Rather than removing the planning legislation, it may be necessary to remove the personnel who create the blockages. There must be a

new approach to planning, one that involves and consults people. No one wants bad planning.

I have heard from the residents of an area where building took place to modify a cement works at an industrial site that is situated in the middle of their housing estate. A year after that building started, those modifications have been completely finished, yet it has emerged that no planning permission was ever issued for the site. The planners say that they cannot do anything to stop the developers: the developers proceed without planning permission at their own risk. That situation has become more and more common.

Enforcement has, therefore, been a problem. Objectors are not being listened to, and planners will not enforce the legislation. There is enough legislation to allow planners to deal with such situations. The problem with PPS 14 is that a situation has developed in which refusal of planning permission in rural areas has created a backlog in applications and increased demand for housing in urban areas because people cannot find anywhere else to live. It is important that the Assembly urges the Environment Minister to resolve the issue of PPS 14 and move the process to a new position. Existing planning legislation must also be enforced.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I welcome the debate that has been brought to the Floor by Mr Gallagher. It is a worthwhile debate on an issue that the Assembly must get to grips with and must also encourage the Minister to get to grips with. Planning rests at the heart of the community's ability to make economic progress. Too often, as other Members have mentioned, planning delays have affected business and private opportunities.

I agree with Mr Gallagher's opening comment that no one wants to see bungalow blight across the countryside. Of course, for the record, I had better point out that no one wants to see two-storey house blight across the countryside either. People want to see a planning process that allows for sustained and appropriate development. The regulations that were in place prior to PPS 14 did allow for that. Unfortunately, due to scaremongering, an unfair policy was introduced by the Secretary of State's Department which was uncalled for and caused a great deal of injustice.

Planning has slowed down. Some people wrongly assume that that is due to there being too many planning applications in the process. That is not the sole reason. Too few people recognise how many objections to legitimate planning applications there are, and they also slow the process down. A wrong attitude exists that an acceptable planning objection must be supported by at least 1,000 people. That is not the case. Planning Service officials listen to a good objection when they hear one. They do not need 1,000 people to tell them that an objection is a good, sound

one. Likewise, if there is a good, sound reason to grant planning approval, they will not need 1,000 people to tell them that either.

The most frustrating aspect of the planning system, which I believe the Member for Lagan Valley Mr Donaldson referred to when he talked about business opportunities in his constituency — in particular, Coca Cola — is that most businesspeople who require the Planning Service see their opportunity being slowed down by the planning process. I can mention numerous such projects in my constituency, such as that of a new tourism facility at the Giant's Causeway; a new golf facility at Bushmills; and the restoration of Galgorm Castle. Those projects received widespread support from the councils and the community. Unfortunately, two of those cases have been slowed down by five years, and the other by six years, while the developers wait to be allowed a proper hearing and to be given either an approval or a refusal. Those delays are not acceptable. There must be a fast track for applications that have significant business or tourism qualities. A central unit deals with large projects. I hope that the Minister will go to that unit of her Department and press it to be more proactive, to take on board such cases and expedite them in a way that allows for quick decisions.

Not everyone will want approval to be given to a planning application; nor will everyone want approval to be refused. However, people want to be given an answer. They are entitled to that. The sooner that people are given an answer, the better, because then they can start to make plans and move on.

However, what frustrates most people is the lengthy gestation period, during which applicants are told that they "possibly" or "perhaps" will be granted planning permission. That is not the fault of the Department of the Environment or the Planning Service per se. The fault lies with the Planning Service's fear of taking a decision. I hope that it will be encouraged to take decisions. Under local Ministers, the necessary leadership is in place to take those decisions to make headway with planning applications, thus allowing business to flourish.

The planning applications under discussion are significant applications that have implications for business and for the betterment of Northern Ireland. The Planning Service should be encouraged not to delay them, so that applicants will not be frustrated. If that happens, our economy will make progress. I hope that the Minister will be able to respond to the points that were raised about the central unit in the DOE that deals with large projects.

Mr Speaker: Before I call Mr Burnside, I remind the House that it is his maiden speech. I ask Members to respect that.

Mr Burnside: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Having served at Westminster, I do not mind whether there are any interventions. I shall accept them.

I support the main thrust of the motion. To sum it up, the motion is designed to make planning faster, more efficient and more transparent, and we are all in favour of that.

I congratulate the Minister on her position — I never thought that I would see her in a unionist/Sinn Féin Executive. I wish to put one or two items on her agenda for her early days in the job. The UK as a whole has one of the worst planning systems in the world. Without hiring any new consultants, the Minister could consider international examples of much more efficient planning systems for rural development, such as the commune system in France and the Swiss system. I highlight rural development, because I do not mean planning systems for new airports, although the French and Swiss are also better at planning for those. If the aim is to radically speed up the planning system in Northern Ireland, the Minister should look at some international examples of planning systems.

The second point that I wish to put on the Minister's agenda for consideration comes from personal experience.

Mr S Wilson: Does the Member accept that France, especially when it comes to major projects, adopts a steamroller approach to planning? Any local objections are simply overridden. Is the Member suggesting that we should do that in Northern Ireland?

Mr Burnside: No, I would not go that far. I shall give an example of slow development at UK airports, such as Heathrow, of which I have some experience. The UK lost out badly there. It will take 20 years to build terminal 5 at Heathrow, yet it would take five years to build an equivalent terminal in France. That is bad for the UK generally. There must be consultation — we do not want to take a steamroller approach.

My second point is that, more than 130 years ago — after the famine and before the Irish Land Acts came into force — many more people than are now doing so were living in small rural settlements. By small rural settlements, I mean settlements of one or two farms. As I have said, that was before the Irish Land Acts, after which landlords sold farms to tenant farmers. My family were tenant farmers in Secon in Ballymoney who then bought the land.

The small rural settlements were wiped out, and that is when countryside life started to disappear. Therefore we ended up with farms owned by former tenants. I hope that in the new environmentally friendly world in which we now live, and given the many grants, incentives and subsidies that are being given to environmental development, the Minister will ask her Department to

look at those old settlements — where they were and where gaps exist in the countryside — to see from where financial benefits could possibly be obtained.

I applied to do up an old building on my farm and, in turn, three labourers' cottages. The roof of the building had come down and there were cattle in the shed. There are many examples of such properties around the Province. I said that I would do it up in its original form, but my planning application was turned down. With due respect to the large population of people in Northern Ireland who live in bungalows, if I had applied to build a bungalow, I would probably have received my planning permission. One must be very careful when talking about bungalows in Northern Ireland. Those who canvass here realise that many votes can be lost by being anti-bungalow.

1.15 pm

The Minister's Department should review the incentives, benefits and criteria that apply to old buildings in the countryside. I do not mean just the great buildings and old houses that belonged to the gentry; the sites of old settlements could be considered for environmentally friendly development, and incentives, benefits and grants made available. Members should learn from the past. The process must be speeded up and made more transparent and efficient, but, in doing so, Members must consider the countryside and how to get people back into it. I do not mean bungalow development; I mean local communities and villages. If Members look around their local townlands, they will see where the old settlements were. That is the right sort of development for the Province.

Those are two items for the Minister's agenda, and I am sure that she will consider them efficiently, effectively and transparently.

Mrs D Kelly: I congratulate the Minister of the Environment, who has a wealth of experience in rural Fermanagh, on her appointment. I am sure that there are many issues being raised today that she is well acquainted with from her former life as a councillor.

Some years ago, Craigavon Borough Council expressed concern to the divisional manager of the Planning Service about the backlog of planning applications awaiting decision. We were assured that there was no issue of staff resources. Other Craigavon councillors will support me in that recollection.

Members have heard much about PPS 14, which has had a huge impact on the planning backlog. It is good to hear Sinn Féin acting as a team in relation to PPS 14 on this occasion, considering that a former, and I emphasise "former", Member of this House initially supported it.

Neither I nor my party will take lectures from the Member for South Down Mr Wells. Even his own party

will not take lectures from him. In the Transitional Assembly, one of his colleagues said that every party should have a Mr Wells. I am not sure about that — he is on his own on environmental issues, and housing in particular.

As a former occupational therapist, I make a special plea to the Minister, as she considers planning process reform, for a fast-track approach to disabled persons' facilities. Members heard my colleague Mr McGlone highlight a particular case. Unfortunately, it is not an isolated one. Members could all give examples of people who are waiting, or in some cases have passed on. Not only must they go through the rigour of the planning process, but there is also an unacceptable delay in housing grant approval.

I recognise that problems with the planning process cannot be resolved solely by the Minister of the Environment. She and the Minister for Regional Development have interdependent responsibility for PPS 14, and I look forward to an early elimination of that iniquitous policy. The planning process also relies heavily on regional development strategy and housing growth indicators. Overall, the planning process depends on many other factors, not just staff and resources. I am glad that Members have been unanimous in not criticising staff, but recognise the pressures that they find themselves under.

Nonetheless, the planning process is far too unwieldy. It is not fit for purpose or fit for Northern Ireland. Members have mentioned objections and objectors, and it is interesting that the Northern Ireland Ombudsman Tom Frawley has received more complaints relating to the planning process, applications and decision-making than all of the other Departments combined. That highlights the need for third-party appeals to be heard at an early stage, which the SDLP has supported.

I hope that the Minister will reflect on that and look to examples of practice elsewhere, including the Republic of Ireland, where if a decision has not been made within a specified time frame, and there are no adverse comments, it is deemed to be approved.

The onus is on people to submit their objections at an early stage in order that third-party appeals can be heard.

People want to know what politics has to do with them. Planning is not just about where we live; it is also about where we work, eat and play. The community in Northern Ireland has the huge expectation that this Assembly will make a difference to their lives. Indeed, the Department of the Environment could make a considerable impact if the planning process were reformed speedily.

Mr S Wilson: I congratulate the Minister on her appointment, and I look forward to working with her Department to ensure that we have an efficient

planning process. As Members have pointed out, such efficiency is important if we are to realise the economic growth that Northern Ireland requires. Planning policy and good planning decisions lie at the heart of driving the economy. Without them, the construction, manufacturing and tourism industries will find that they cannot advance.

Some Members have also stated that there are huge deficiencies in the planning system. Several reasons have been given for those. They have been blamed on agents, on architects submitting shady plans and on the nature of the plans themselves — are they clear enough, are they too prescriptive, or should they be a bit more vague? The Minister is getting all sorts of advice about the matter, some of which is contradictory — some people want more consultation and others want less.

Mr Kennedy: What do you want?

Mr S Wilson: I will come to that in a moment; I am sure that the Member will be very interested to hear what I want.

Many reasons, including staffing, have been given for the deficiencies. Planning delays fall into two categories, the first of which concerns major planning applications. The biggest problem lies with those. For example, in my East Antrim constituency, plans for a marina in Larne have been with the planners for nearly five years; a proposal to extend Glenarm quarry, which will retain about 100 jobs, has been in the planning system for over two years; and a major tourist proposal for Magheramorne quarry, which could have a significant impact on the whole of Northern Ireland and fits in with all the sustainable development requirements, has been with the planners for over a year, and there is no indication of what the outcome will be.

We need to consider staffing first. Some Members have already pointed out the number of staffing vacancies. We are losing staff to the private sector and to the Irish Republic. Indeed, many staff are leaving as a result of the uncertainty that the review of public administration has brought because they do not know where they might be located. They are now seeking certainty by going to other jobs. Therefore a range of issues, including pay and conditions, giving certainty to staff and reducing the overload of work, must be addressed.

The second category involves consultations. They have not been mentioned much this morning, but I have tabled questions about them in another place. The delay in planning applications often rests with those with whom the planners have to consult. On average, the Environment and Heritage Service takes between six and eight months to respond to a consultation; Roads Service takes an average of three months; and Water Service takes an average of two. All those

response times are outside the limit that has been laid down for dealing with the entire application. The Minister needs to address that. If, as I suspect, some of those consultees simply believe that the Planning Service will have to wait for them to respond, perhaps we should lay down rules declaring that if they do not respond within a certain time, we will assume that they have no response to make. They might be geed up a wee bit when they realise that their views will be ignored if there is unnecessary delay in responding to a planning application.

A role that has not yet been mentioned is that of the Planning Service management board. Councillors were pilloried — sometimes quite rightly — for sending applications to the management board simply to show voters that they were doing something. A strict filter system has been established. However, when an application is sent to the management board, the board may take a long time to respond. Recently, I dealt with a case in Belfast in which the management board took four months to write back, saying that it could do nothing with the application because it fell outside its remit. How long would it have taken the board to respond had the application fallen within its remit? The role of the management board must be addressed.

Those are just two of the issues that the Minister should take up.

Mr B Wilson: No Member will disagree with the aims of the motion. The present backlog of planning applications is unacceptable. However, we must examine why it came about and how it might be resolved. Most importantly, we must ensure that any action taken will not lead to deterioration in the service provided.

There is no quick fix to the problem. Some of the measures proposed to resolve it would significantly reduce the quality of service. For example, the previous attempt to speed up planning applications resulted in the virtual abolition of site meetings and the introduction of severe restrictions on referrals to the Planning Service management board. Although that might have helped to speed up applications, it significantly reduced the level of accountability, local input and democratic control.

The backlog of applications, and the time that it takes for PAC referrals, are important issues that highlight the serious problems within the Planning Service. In particular, the service finds it difficult to retain experienced staff. In information that we received on the Planning Service, Members were told that the average age of a planning officer has fallen from 40-something to 26. That does not suggest the high degree of experience required to deal with more complex issues, particularly appeals to the PAC.

Recently, there has been a tendency for newly trained staff to leave the Planning Service after two or

three years to take up higher-paid jobs in the private sector or in public bodies, especially councils in the Irish Republic. As a result of that loss of experience, new entrants are required to take on more responsibility without the guidance of experienced staff.

That lack of experience will inevitably lead to delays in the processing of applications and to an increase in the number of mistakes made. For example, the north Down section should have a complement of six officers, but, at present, there are only two. Two officers have resigned in the past month. That is unacceptable, and if allowed to continue, it will, inevitably, lead to a backlog. Mr Gallagher has not suggested how the retention of staff might be addressed. At present, morale in the Planning Service is low: perhaps we should consider a review of salary levels and conditions of service.

We must also ask why the backlog has arisen. There is no substantial backlog of routine cases in north Down or in other urban council areas — although there is a backlog of more complex cases. The problem seems to lie in more rural council areas, particularly in those west of the Bann. It is clear that, prior to the introduction of PPS 14, there was a massive increase in the number of applications for single dwellings in some council areas. In the Fermanagh and Dungannon council areas, almost 1,000 applications for single dwellings were submitted in the three months before the introduction of PPS 14 in 2006. That contrasts with five such applications in north Down. Such an increase in applications made a backlog inevitable. No system could cope with an increase on that scale.

That backlog in applications is reducing, and will continue to do so. In the same three months of this year, applications in the Dungannon and Fermanagh council areas dropped to 223 and 216 respectively, a fall of 76%. Overall, the total number of applications for single dwellings has fallen from 6,400 to 2,500, a drop of 61%.

That fall in applications should help to take some pressure off the planners and enable them to reduce the backlog further. Latest figures show that that trend is now established. The backlog is very slowly being reduced.

1.30 pm

Furthermore, the pressure on planners could be relieved by increasing the number of areas in which development is permitted and by reducing the number of applications for minor extensions. However, relaxation of the level of scrutiny of applications must be resisted, together with the temptation to “nod them through” only to improve figures, or because of political pressure. High standards of scrutiny must be retained, and that requires experienced and well-motivated staff. That experience cannot be achieved overnight.

The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster): I am delighted to be here and to take part in the debate, and I congratulate the Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone on securing it. Many Members hold strong views on the issue and wanted to speak in the debate. I welcome the opportunity to provide some explanation of the current situation and to set out, as far as possible, how I intend to move forward.

First, I echo the wishes of Members for an effective and efficient planning system in Northern Ireland. As some Members said, it is essential to the future of our economy and to the provision of our infrastructure, our employment, our homes and our transport networks. Moreover, it is pivotal to the stimulation of regeneration and the promotion of sustainable development.

I welcome the positive comments made by Members with regard to the staff in the divisional offices; I know that it will be of some comfort to staff. I acknowledge that our current system does not function as well as it should, largely due to the significant challenges that it has faced in recent years. There has been an unprecedented escalation in the workload. The number of applications rose by more than 60% between 2000 and 2006. There have been a growing number of planning appeals, an ever-increasing level of public participation in the planning process, and resource difficulties, arising from an increasing level of professional staff turnover. We have heard much mention of that in the debate.

However, not all of the problems are on the supply side. Delays are frequently caused by the submission of poor-quality or inappropriate applications, for which applicants and agents must bear responsibility. All of those pressures have come at a time when the public expect — and demand — improvements in service delivery.

Although those difficulties are, largely, outside the control of the Planning Service, the current level of service is not what is wanted. In an effort to address that, the service has, in recent years, been committed to, and actively engaged in, a major reform and modernisation programme. Already, that has brought about significant legislative reform, streamlining of the development plan process, refinement of the arrangements for consulting councils — and I shall say more on that anon — and the implementation of new procedures to quality-assure applications on receipt.

Applications with potentially significant economic or social benefits for Northern Ireland have also benefited from a sharper focus. A new strategic projects and design unit has been working closely with the Strategic Investment Board and with Government Departments to ensure that infrastructure projects in the investment strategy for Northern Ireland are managed efficiently through the planning process. One example of that is the new South West Acute Hospital in Enniskillen.

Significant private-sector projects are also being processed as quickly as possible, particularly when there has been productive pre-application engagement. My hon Friend Jeffrey Donaldson mentioned Coca-Cola in Lambeg; the Ikea proposal is another example.

In addition to the modernisation programme, the service has recently completed an extensive recruitment and promotion drive to fill a significant number of vacancies for planners across the organisation. Furthermore, as my Friend Peter Weir from North Down mentioned, the Planning Service has created a divisional support team to address workload pressures on the development control side, particularly the backlog of applications already in the system. Initially, that team of 10 is based in the Craigavon division, and I am happy to tell Members, especially those who have dealings with that division, that it will have a breadth of experience and will not consist only of junior planners.

On top of that, a number of key projects in the modernisation programme are due to be completed over the remainder of this business year. Most notable will be the implementation of the Electronic Planning Information for Citizens project (e-PIC) — a comprehensive information and computing technology solution that will enable the agency to deliver a more effective, efficient and transparent service. The e-PIC project will deliver new and improved ways for the community to access the information and services of the Planning Service through electronic channels as well as an improved, faster and better-quality service. The system will provide a portal for the online submission of planning applications and will allow partners of the Planning Service access and input to the information that they need to make decisions or be involved in the decision-making. The e-PIC project will provide an up-to-date planning policy and area plan coverage. I believe that that will deal with the issue raised by the Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone Mr Gallagher who moved the motion and has made comparisons with the practice in the Republic of Ireland. The new e-PIC system is intended to allow people to manage their planning applications as they go through the system.

The impact of these reform measures will only be realised in the longer term. There is much work to be done to bring about a planning system that fully meets our needs and expectations. However there are already positive signs. Significantly, the number of decisions issued by the agency during the last business year, over 28,000 in total, exceeded the number of applications coming in by 5%. It is also significant that the live caseload has dropped by over 3,500 applications.

The motion also suggests that the system lacks transparency; I have difficulty in accepting that. The Planning Service has operated an open-file policy since 2001 — anyone can call into a planning office to see

the contents of a file, and many people do. The agency also fulfils its obligations under the Freedom of Information Act 2000; indeed it is the biggest provider of information in the Department of the Environment. Legislative reforms enacted last year have enhanced this openness through measures such as the removal of Crown immunity from planning control and by making provision for strengthening community involvement in development proposals. The implementation of the e-PIC system later this year will open up the system even further, facilitating the delivery of a completely electronic planning process.

On the matter of planning appeals, not an area for which I have responsibility, I understand that the Planning Appeals Commission has experienced an expansion in workload over recent years, which has not been directly matched by a corresponding increase in resources. The commission has implemented a number of measures aimed at improving efficiency and effectiveness, and this has been reflected in an increase in output of over 200% between 2002-03 and 2006-07. However, in spite of the considerable success of the combination of measures introduced, the benefits continue to be overtaken by the dramatic rise in incoming appeals. The Commission's need for resources continues to be closely monitored by OFMDFM, which is responsible for it.

I turn now to some of the specific issues that have been raised by Members in this debate. Mr Gallagher, who moved the motion, mentioned cases in which the Planning Service failed to deal quickly enough with applications dependent on grant aid — delays that put the grant aid in jeopardy. In future, the Planning Service will work to prioritise applications where grant aid may be jeopardised by delay. Special arrangements are also in place in divisional offices to ensure that economically significant applications do not get stuck in the backlog.

Mr Gallagher also raised the issue of electricity consent applications. I am meeting with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment this week to discuss planning issues and single consent regimes for large energy schemes. However, the current legislation defines what falls into the category of development and what is permitted development not requiring express planning permission. Under current legislation, an NIE line to a dwelling requires planning permission. That has to be applied for separately in a planning application that is normally submitted by NIE after the householder makes an application for the dwelling.

There is, of course, no reason why one application cannot be submitted by the householder after the route of the line has been agreed with NIE. More generally, I wish to consider what opportunities there may be to widen the scope of the current permitted development

legislation so that we can perhaps find some way to deal with that issue.

Mr Gallagher also raised the matter of third-party rights of appeal, as did Peter Weir and Dolores Kelly. There are many pros and cons with third-party rights of appeal. The pros include equity and natural justice; on the downside, there are the associated costs and the impact on businesses. Potentially, third-party rights of appeal could affect the efficiency of the process and make it slower than it is at present. I will consider very carefully with colleagues the impact that third-party-appeal arrangements would have on the system and where the balance of advantage lies. I also expect that third-party appeals will be an issue that will be addressed by the review of environmental governance team, which is due to report to me at the end of May 2007. That report will, no doubt, come before the Assembly in due course.

Mr Weir referred to the lack of joined-up thinking in relation to replacement dwellings. As Members know, the policy associated with that falls under PPS 14. I do not have responsibility for that; it is part of the Minister for Regional Development's portfolio. However, I am sure that it will come before this House sooner rather than later, and that there will be an opportunity to discuss the matter then.

Mr Boylan mentioned the Craigavon planning process, and I hope that I have been able to address some of his concerns with regard to the team that is going in there to offer support.

Mr Gardiner talked about delays in the planning process affecting the supply of housing land, leading to a shortage of social and affordable housing. The recent report by Sir John Semple on affordable housing confirms that planning is only one of the factors — and I know that Mr Gardiner will recognise that — that impacts on the housing supply. My Department has agreed to participate in an interdepartmental working group, led by the Department for Social Development, to follow up on the recommendations in Sir John Semple's report, including the use of article 40 agreements, and to critically examine what planning can do in relation to that. That said, developers are to be encouraged to submit better-quality applications — a theme that has run through this debate — accompanied by all the necessary information and to engage in pre-application discussions, particularly for larger housing schemes.

1.45 pm

Mr Gardiner referred to consultation with councils, a point also picked up by Mr Molloy. Indeed, local councils have been greatly frustrated by the way in which that has gone forward. Revised guidance was issued to councils in November 2006, following work by a joint working party involving the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) and the Planning Service. Over recent months, terms of

reference for the formal review of the arrangements envisaged by Lord Rooker have been drawn up by the Planning Service and agreed with NILGA. It is expected that a consultant will be appointed shortly and that the review process will take three months to complete from the date of appointment. The review will involve consultation with stakeholders, including NILGA, council officers, council members, Planning Service staff and applicants.

I understand that Mr Gardiner is in correspondence with my Department about the Waringstown issue, and I am sure that I will be speaking to him about that in due course.

Naomi Long raised the issue of staff retention and the need to keep up staff morale. That is very important. I hope that the message goes out from this Chamber today that this debate is about process and not about Planning Service staff, who are trying to deal with inordinate levels of work. I welcome her comments about councillors, developers and agents not introducing any more unnecessary delays to the system. Mrs Long also made the point that she did not want to see a reduction in the standard of decisions being taken forward.

Naomi Long complained about the Belfast metropolitan area plan. I agree wholeheartedly with her. My officials have been working on that, and — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Several conversations are taking place in the Chamber. I remind the House that it is vital that we observe protocol when any Member is speaking.

Mrs Foster: Thank you for that protection, Mr Speaker; I did not even notice.

Discussions on the Belfast metropolitan area plan have taken place with colleagues in jurisdictions that have experienced similar difficulties. I intend to publish a consultation document on the issue in the autumn.

Jim Wells referred to the amount of stress that the Planning Service is under. He also spoke about the speculative nature of applications for single dwellings and the role that agents sometimes play.

Mr McKay talked about a Planning Service that is in crisis. I do not agree, but I realise that issues need to be addressed. Hopefully, the new devolved Administration, along with the Member's participation on the Environment Committee, will mean that those issues can be addressed.

Mr Donaldson spoke about long-term issues, such as staffing. He also mentioned specific issues such as the Lambeg decision, for which he was full of praise, and another decision for which he was not full of praise. I know that he intends to write to me about the latter.

Mr Armstrong had sympathy for the planners, and he also indicated rightly that many factors — not just

the planning problems — contributed to the housing difficulties.

Mr McGlone, the Chairman of the Committee for the Environment, spoke passionately about a child with autism. I would like to inform him and his colleague Mrs Kelly that I am considering a fast track for facilities for disabled people. Indeed, I have encountered that often in Fermanagh and South Tyrone. I do not want to see genuine cases of need being left in a backlog and not being dealt with.

Mr Molloy had concerns about consultation, and I hope that my comments about the council consultation have dealt with those.

Mr Paisley Jnr mentioned three specific cases. I am fully aware of the issues that surround those three matters, and I will advise him and other Members on those in due course.

After having a go at me politically, Mr Burnside said that the UK as a whole has the worst planning system. Coming from a unionist politician I find that rather strange, but there it is. Scotland actually has quite a good planning system, and I know that representatives of my Planning Service will visit Scotland in the near future to speak to planners to learn about how they have dealt with matters there. Mr Burnside also mentioned that the Ulster Unionist Party wanted to go back to before the 1880s — I hope that that is not the headline that comes out of this debate.

Mr S Wilson: They might have some seats then.

Mrs Foster: That is true. I am pleased to announce that the policy for refurbishment rests with the Department for Regional Development, and I am sure that the Member will be happy to take the matter up with the Minister there.

As I said, Dolores Kelly mentioned disabled-facilities grants, and I will hopefully be able to develop that. She recognised that PPS 14, the regional development strategy and other matters do not rest within the remit of my Department. She also mentioned third-party appeals.

The system in the Republic of Ireland will be considered; however, it is significantly different from that which exists in Northern Ireland. It has some attractive aspects. For example, there is a legal obligation to decide on applications within a specific period. However, it also has significant downsides, such as the potential for poorer quality decisions to be made given that there is a less flexible approach to consultation. I will consider all of that further in the context of having a wider look at other regions.

Sammy Wilson spoke about good planning decisions and how they lie at the heart of the economy. He also mentioned consultation. I am happy to announce that the chief executives of the Planning Service and the Environment and Heritage Service have been working

very closely on consultation, and they will continue to do so. A service level agreement was signed with EHS in March of this year, providing for a current target timescale of 30 working days for a consultation response in 75% of cases. The aim is to work together to reach a progressive reduction to 15 days in 75% of cases.

Moreover, work is continuing on the streamlining of administrative arrangements to ensure that planning consultations are properly focused and targeted, and that the potential for delays is minimised.

Brian Wilson mentioned the lack of experience of planners, and other staffing difficulties.

This has been a wide-ranging debate, and I shall take much from it. Now that devolution is here, I hope that my Department can be more responsive not only to Members on the Floor of the Assembly, but also to the Environment Committee.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Gallagher: I acknowledge the Minister's comprehensive response to the issues that were raised during the debate. That detailed coverage has left my task of winding up the debate pretty easy.

A unanimous view has been expressed in the Chamber that, with the Planning Service in its present state, there are long delays, which are unacceptable. The Minister indicated that she intends to set in train actions that will address some of those matters fairly quickly.

I welcome the comments of Brian Wilson, who rightly pointed out the importance of Planning Service staff morale and of not doing anything to decrease it. It has been generally acknowledged that the role of staff is currently particularly difficult, and that their workload is very heavy. As with any organisation, we must understand that there are human beings at the heart of the Planning Service. I was careful, in moving the motion, not to apportion blame and to make it clear that the motion was not concerned with criticising the people who work in the planning system.

Mr P Ramsey: Does the Member agree that one way to deal with this matter is to work on non-contentious matters? During suspension of the Assembly, much good work has taken place at council level. Derry City Council, in conjunction with local planners, is examining a method of addressing non-contentious matters on a weekly basis. In the presence of the Minister I hope that there will be no regulatory, bureaucratic or procedural objections to the council's initiative, which could assist planners in the processing of applications.

Mr Gallagher: I thank the Member for that intervention.

The Minister made some other comments that made the debate worthwhile, including outlining her intention to examine the exasperating delays in the Planning

Service that are endangering the time limits for those who wish to avail of grant aid. That is a welcome development, and she expressed her intention to meet the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment about that matter. That is encouraging, as are her comments about facilities for the disabled. I also welcome her comments on the point that I raised about cutting bureaucracy. I welcome the forthcoming meeting with NIE on that matter. I hope that that will lead to some progress, and that it will allay the fears of the public.

As a result of the debate, problems have been recognised. Sammy Wilson asked what I intended to do about the problems, but the motion does not require any particular intention from the Assembly other than to examine the matter in detail. In light of the contributions of Members, and of the Minister, this has been a very worthwhile debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly regards as unacceptable the length of time taken for both the processing of planning applications and the determination of planning appeals, and calls upon the Minister of the Environment to take immediate steps to clear the backlog and also to introduce more efficiency and transparency within the planning process.

Affordable Housing Crisis

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to two hours for the debate. The proposer of the motion has 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes for the winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes each. One amendment has been selected and published on the Marshallled List. The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes for the winding-up speech.

Mr Shannon: I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses serious concerns about the affordable housing crisis, and calls upon the Minister for Social Development to co-ordinate urgently with the Housing Executive, Housing Associations, and all other relevant bodies, to release and set aside land for new build projects and to report back to this Assembly with the strategy and timescale that is finalised.

‘The Guardian’ newspaper saies tha Norlin Airlan bes the property hotspot o’ Europe. This bes the crux o’ the affordable hoosin issue. Hames ir far tae dear fer ordnar fowkquhan pit langside the wages oan the mainlan’. Developers pour ootbaag amounts o’ money fae their bottomless pockets. The hoosin’ authorities hae naewhere neir eneuch hooses an’ flats tae fill the gap. Sim’thing hes tae bae done aboot this an’ done richt noo.

‘The Guardian’ newspaper, in citing Northern Ireland as being the UK’s property hot spot, does it a disservice — it is the property hot spot of Europe. That is the crux of the affordable housing crisis. Homes are far too expensive for average people in Northern Ireland, where wages are lower than on the mainland. Developers shell out endless amounts of money from their bottomless pockets. Housing authorities have nowhere near the amount of houses or flats to fill the gap. Something must be done about the matter immediately.

We are faced with a situation whereby a trained professional, who could once have moved into a two-bedroom house in a nice area, can now afford only a flat, at best, until he or she marries another trained professional. Only then, using both wages, can they buy a house, but they must do so with a 90% mortgage, spending nearly 60% of their wage packets on the mortgage. Very few people can afford to do that. That is why, at this time last year, I tabled a motion in my local council expressing severe concern at the housing crisis that had developed in the Ards. That crisis is mirrored across the Province, which every Member will speak about.

Figures available from last June show that people deemed in priority need of a home in the Ards area increased to almost 1,400. The number of people in housing stress increased from 750 to 800. Those are only some of the increases that have occurred. I have been contacted by some constituents who have over 180 points and still cannot get housing. The list of those in priority need in the Ards continues to grow at

an alarming rate. The number of people on the waiting list for homes right across the Ards Borough Council area has increased by between 15% and 20% in the last year and shows no signs whatsoever of slowing down.

There must be a push for land to be set aside in the Province for social housing. The budget for the housing associations must be increased so that they can build the much-needed homes as a matter of urgency. The Department for Social Development must take dramatic steps to ensure that that happens right away.

At present, in Ards — not in Strangford — only two housing associations are building dwellings: Corinthian Housing Association and Habinteg Housing Association, which are building a total of approximately 20 to 25 properties. With respect, however, the housing associations are only picking at the edges of the need. Over 2,000 people are in priority need of housing in the Ards area at present.

David Hanson spoke of undertaking a trawl of Government Departments with surplus land. He stated that with a devolved Assembly would come the ability to use that land to provide affordable housing through private-sector development and social housing. The Housing Executive owns the land bank. It must be released to the housing associations to enable them to do the job that so desperately needs to be done.

2.00 pm

Now is the time to work in strong partnership with housing associations and other bodies. The housing crisis will get worse before it gets better.

The average house price in Newtownards has risen to £190,000, and in many areas across the Province that figure is greater. As a result, more young couples will be forced to turn to the Housing Executive for a home or leave areas completely and take their families and skills to places that are coping better with the housing problem.

It should be the Assembly’s wish that our young people should stay in Northern Ireland and not be forced from their home nation due to inadequate planning at higher levels. Why should they stay in the Province and just scrape through when they can get houses more cheaply in most areas in England, where wages are also slightly higher? That question will soon be answered to the detriment of the Province. Young people will find that there is no point in staying here, and they will leave.

The current projected build for Northern Ireland is 1,500 homes, and that does not start to answer people’s needs. A dedicated planning strategy is needed between the Housing Executive and the housing associations, and it must be put into place urgently. Land must be released and built on as a matter of necessity, not piecemeal, like a bone thrown out to satisfy short-term needs.

Too many people in my area are living in unacceptably cramped conditions; families are being split up and children are being farmed out to grandparents due to inadequate accommodation. How can families survive when they are torn apart unnecessarily? There is land to be used, and it must be released.

The Assembly has a duty to ensure the best for the people of the Province, and part of that duty involves housing. That is not to say that the Assembly is responsible for ensuring that every person lives in a five-bedroom house with a swimming pool; it merely highlights the fact that people deserve the right to be able to pay their rent or mortgage and live in accommodation that satisfies their, and their family's, basic needs. The Department for Social Development must facilitate that right by managing strategically the assembly and disposal of surplus public land for affordable housing — not providing it to developers for the highest price. Releasing land, in itself, will not ensure that that happens, but full co-operation between housing associations and the Housing Executive will, most definitely, begin the process.

The issues raised in the debate on the processing of planning applications are relevant to this debate; they are concerning, and changes to the planning process must be made urgently. The Department of the Environment, its planning policies, and planning system, can do much to improve the situation, particularly since Members have just discovered that the land a house is built on is worth approximately 50% of the total value of the entire property.

There are many reasons for making changes to the planning process, which would take too long to go into now. However, I will outline some of them. Delay in processing planning applications means that there is a huge backlog of potential houses lying on a desk in some office. As a result, developers can bump up the prices a little bit, because people have no real freedom of choice.

There has been no review of area plans to ensure that social housing needs have been incorporated. Such a review has been carried out on the mainland, through the local development framework system. That is already showing advantages, as stricter planning controls are being waived in relation to social and affordable housing. I urge the Minister to look at that issue.

Most developers automatically build accommodation for the high-earning sectors, and few want to take on the less glitzy and less profitable area of affordable housing. That difficulty can be combated by a simple method whereby planners would encourage the development of affordable housing by making it more attractive, and by the Department for Social Development possibly mitigating the cost of such developments by inflicting charges on those who do not provide cheaper

housing where it is needed. Developers would still make enough money on properties to prosper. The theory is catered for in article 40 of The Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991, which should be used to greater effect.

The planning restrictions in PPS 8, PPS 12, and PPS 14 discourage local authorities from setting aside land specifically for social housing. However, that must be done, and the Department should be able to set aside areas to be used beneficially for cheaper housing. As more new and affordable housing is developed, the crisis in the housing market should lessen.

Planning permission for sites must go hand in hand with the availability of affordable housing. Where the Housing Executive has stated that affordable housing is needed in an area, planning permission should be refused in that area until such housing is made available. I am not talking about killing free enterprise and development by using the Planning Service as a sword. However, I want to encourage developers to remember, in some small way, that affordable housing is essential and achievable.

I have told the story about a developer in Strangford who refused to sell houses to an overseas businessman and kept them for first-time buyers instead. The businessman was made an offer for ten houses from a person who wanted to buy them and rent them out, but he refused it because he wanted to keep the property for first-time buyers in his area. He made an individual decision and demonstrated that this can be done. That is an example of what should happen. If we truly want to grow and develop and keep our young skills and talents here, that should be a precedent for the rest for the Province.

I will outline some other methods of easing the crisis. The Living Over The Shop (LOTS) scheme, of which there are only a few pilot schemes across the Province, could be a way of making some properties available. Grant-aided housing renovation systems are available for houses that are falling apart. They are designed to encourage the owners to do their houses up and then rent them out or, indeed, sell them. The co-ownership threshold must be raised in line with the price of houses, and the threshold for other duties such as stamp duty should also be increased.

The crisis is undoubtedly serious, but it is not a hopeless situation. There are many ways of addressing it, and other Members will no doubt have more ideas for resolving it. The burden and the responsibility of finding a solution lie in the hands of the Assembly and the Minister for Social Development. We must not settle until a strategic plan is in place and is shown to be effective.

Accountability is the key in our newly devolved Government. Housing associations, planners and

developers need to be aware that it is necessary to solve this problem by all means possible.

Mrs Long: I beg to move the following amendment: After “projects” insert

“, to consider increasing the put-back rate on existing redevelopment areas.”

First of all, I want to thank the Member for Strangford Mr Shannon for raising this today, because it is a very serious issue for all of our constituents. Whether they are rural or urban, young or old, constituents will suffer from the shortage of affordable housing.

The statistics that the Member quoted are reflected in almost every constituency. We have seen sharp increases in the length of waiting lists and the number of homeless cases. Those lists increasingly contain people who would have been able to make their own way in the world five or ten years ago. They would not have been looking for social housing at all, but they can no longer afford to make their own way, because they are being priced out of the market.

Young people are struggling to get a foothold on the property ladder. We have anecdotal evidence of people being offered 50- and 60-year mortgages. That is not a loan; that is a life sentence. One would be need to be 18 or 19 in order to avail of a 50-year mortgage with any reasonable prospect of paying it back during one's working life. It is difficult to contemplate how anyone could take on such a debt, particularly when the sums involved are so considerable.

Older people are also being affected. The assumption is that once someone gets on the property ladder, everything will be fine, but that is not true. Those who have special housing needs because their circumstances have changed due to disability or age, or because they have suffered a relationship breakdown, find themselves in extremely difficult circumstances. They are often forced into homelessness, through no fault of their own, because they cannot afford to maintain their standard of living. The net result is that more people feel unable to purchase properties or to avail of the private rental market.

I agree with the motion stating that part of the solution lies with new sites being brought forward by the Department for Social Development, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and housing associations. I am sure that we all recognise that if the problem of affordable housing is to be fully addressed, it will require the active engagement of the private sector. That would be valuable, not only in terms of delivery, but in terms of enhancing social integration and mobility so that we have a range of different housing on every site, and people have the freedom to choose where they are going to live.

In the amendment, however, I am highlighting cases where there has been redevelopment by agencies

whose remit is included in the original motion, and low put-back rates have been achieved. I do not believe that the amendment detracts from the main motion.

Many areas, particularly urban areas, have undergone and are still undergoing redevelopment. Unfit housing has been demolished, and new and improved housing is put back in its place. That is a welcome development. My family home was one of those affected, and I was relieved to see that that was happening in my constituency.

However, I am concerned that the number of houses that the housing associations are putting back on those sites is often two or three times less than the number of houses that were demolished. Thus, there is a significant loss of housing in those urban areas, with a put-back rate of somewhere between 30% and 60%.

I accept entirely that, in many urban areas, one-for-one replacement is not possible because the houses that are being replaced are often too small to meet modern family needs. Moreover, new developments must also include a selection of housing for people with special needs and disabilities, and those plots tend to be slightly larger than the average plot. Such housing provision is welcome. However, we must examine the rate of put back on those sites, because it affects local communities. I will discuss that issue in more detail shortly.

This situation has arisen because, for several years, housing lists were either static or declining, particularly in urban areas, as people migrated outwards from the city centre. Thus, the demand for intensive development in city areas was relieved for a time. However, that trend has reversed, and waiting lists are now growing dramatically, particularly in my constituency of East Belfast. It seems bizarre that where there were once 300 houses, there are now only 50 or 60 houses. That is a cause of great concern for those of us who deal with homelessness issues and for people living in those areas who are unable to find a place for themselves and their families.

Mr S Wilson: Does the Member agree that it is even worse that suburban design is being introduced in inner-city areas at a time when attempts are being made to increase the number of properties within the city footprint?

Mrs Long: I agree absolutely, and I shall address that issue shortly.

I want, briefly, to highlight three effects of the current trend. The first is clear: a reduction in the amount of social and affordable housing in those neighbourhoods and its impact. Secondly, there has been a negative impact on local communities as regards access to services, schools, churches and so on. Other Members have mentioned depopulation in rural areas and the need for vibrant local rural communities, and that is also true for urban areas. Local urban communities

have been decimated by redevelopment and often find it very difficult to coalesce again around the services available to them. In some cases, the services that drew people to the area have been lost in the hiatus between the start of redevelopment and its completion. That has had negative effects for many parts of Belfast, and inner east Belfast in particular.

The Member for East Antrim Mr Wilson raised the issue of built form, and the environmental impact on our cities must be considered when dealing with planning issues. Traditionally, dense development occurs in urbanised areas, because the infrastructure there can best cope with such development. In urban areas, local services are accessible on foot, rather than by car, and public transport is more readily available. Therefore, there is a certain logic to having dense development in urban areas, and that is largely reflected in private developments in those areas.

However, the amount of social housing in urban areas is less than would normally be expected. In order to acquire additional sites to address the housing need, developers of social housing are often forced to compete with private developers for sites in suburban areas. As those sites are very expensive and the developments must be able to “wash their face” financially, a form of town cramming occurs in suburban areas. Developers try to maximise the number of units on suburban sites because the development has to tick over financially, but the same densification does not occur in areas that could sustain that development.

A further negative effect is the enhancement of the social precipice argument. Social housing stands out from the housing around it, so that in areas where the private housing is mostly terraced, social housing will generally not be. Similarly, in areas where the private housing is mostly semi-detached or detached, social housing will not be.

It almost increases the notion that there is some kind of social precipice between social housing and other housing, which is a destructive force in society.

2.15 pm

That is an important issue, but it is also important to touch on issues around the right to buy. That scheme has been beneficial in allowing people to move into the housing market. It is an excellent opportunity for sitting tenants to get a start. However, the build rates have not matched the sale rates. For that reason, the stock has been depleted. That is another issue that the relevant agencies must consider.

In moving the amendment, I hope that I have not cut across the thread of the original motion and that it will not force a Division. I am simply asking that the agencies consider the additional aspect of how redevelopment of urban areas is handled to ensure that not only are more sites released, but that they are used to best effect. That

will ensure that those people suffering from the housing crisis in our constituencies can be rehoused as soon as possible in good quality public housing.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Fry McCann.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

Mr S Wilson: Too many fries! *[Laughter.]*

Mr F McCann: I know that, Sammy; you must have put him up to that. *[Laughter.]*

I congratulate the Minister for Social Development on her appointment. I also congratulate you, Mr Speaker, on your election as Speaker of this Chamber.

I agree with the motion and the amendment; they go well together. However, there are points that have not yet been covered in the debate. The motion goes straight to the heart of the housing crisis. It calls on those who have the primary responsibility to build and provide social housing to come together and provide a co-ordinated approach to take us out of the crisis. The proposer of the motion must be congratulated for bringing it to the House for debate. However, the motion is a bit presumptuous in that it presumes that those who have overseen this crisis, and who are partly responsible for it, are capable of taking us out of it.

Immediate steps can be taken to assist the process of making housing more affordable. As Mr Shannon said, the release of land is one. The freeing-up of vacant property is another step, which I will deal with in another motion to be debated later. Another action would be to ensure that social building schemes are delivered on time and on programme. We must set a target of building at least 3,000 social homes a year — double the target set for the past year, and five times that which has been set for the next year.

I understand that just over 600 new starts are planned for the next year. That will certainly not impact on this current crisis, especially when the number of people presenting as homeless is around 20,000 a year. That needs to be seriously reviewed, and acted on, by the Minister.

Let us consider how well the state provided for the social or affordable housing sector in 2006-07. These figures come from the Housing Executive, although there is a discrepancy between them and those of the Department for Social Development (DSD). Belfast got the bulk of the 1,032 dwellings built, with 65 separate schemes building 408 houses. At last week's meeting of the Social Development Committee, we were told that 1,500 houses were being built. I will not dwell on the 468 houses that seem to have been lost somewhere in the process, however.

In 2006-07, in the Omagh District Council area, the number of new houses built was zero. It was the same

for Cookstown, Magherafelt, Moyle, Down, Limavady and Larne. Coleraine fared a little better, with three houses, and Strabane had a good year, with nine houses. That makes for grim reading.

Sinn Féin has for some time been calling for the discussion on social and affordable housing to be widened to include more than the usual suspects. We should involve Shelter, the Housing Rights Service, the Simon Community, Travellers' representatives, those representing the disability sector and the construction sector — everyone with an interest in housing.

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

The discussion should be time-framed and tasked to come up with a strategy that can take forward the development of mixed tenure and sustainable communities, which, after all, is one of the Government's priorities. We also await the publication of a statutory report on homelessness, put together by many sectors. That report would have provided a new beginning in dealing with homelessness, but it has been delayed for several years, trapped in various Departments, meaning that some of the information is now outdated.

Such delays must become a thing of the past. We must build a new structure with which to develop a strategy that will bring about the new beginning in social and affordable housing that we all want. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Cobain: When, this autumn, the Assembly discusses the Budget for the incoming financial year, it will be interesting to note how many Members vote to ensure that everyone in Northern Ireland has the opportunity to live in decent affordable homes, irrespective of the pressure that our parties may put on us. The aim of building affordable homes for all is achievable: all we need, as Assembly Members, is the desire to make it happen.

It would be remiss of me not to thank Sir John Semple for his excellent work on this issue in the past year. The report of his review was refreshing, packed as it was with innovative ideas, and he succeeded in moving the subject of affordable homes far up the political agenda.

The concerns surrounding the issue of affordable homes are well documented. All the experts in the housing field insist that we must build between 2,000 and 2,500 homes in the social-housing sector over a sustained period in order to address increasing levels of homelessness, waiting lists and general housing stress. There are clear links between poor housing and incidences of ill-health and poverty. In the past five years, we have been unable to meet the build target of 2,000 homes a year, and our overall record in the provision of affordable homes is a disgrace.

With that in mind, the Executive's intention to build 600 new homes reflects less than one third of what is needed. To its credit, the Department for Social Development has submitted a financial case for more resources to meet housing need. Surprisingly, however, DSD has been unable to convince the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP).

The decision taken by DFP must be set against the background of Sir John Semple's contention, stated in his report, that housing is the key to countering poverty. The DFP officials concerned should take time to examine some of the housing indicators, which might allow them to grasp the enormity of the housing problem that we face. For their information, over 30,000 households are on the Housing Executive's waiting list for homes in the social housing sector. Almost 20,000 households are in urgent need or experiencing housing stress, while more than 20,000 households are currently presenting as homeless.

In this era of joined-up Government, DFP may wish to read the recently published anti-poverty strategy in which the Government made a commitment that by 2010, every child, young person and pensioner will be living in a decent, safe and warm home. In the light of the housing programme that has been proposed, how will that commitment be met?

The provision of a comprehensive plan for affordable homes is a complex issue, simply because it cuts across several Departments. The prerequisites for tackling housing need are the provision of sufficient financial resources, robust legislation, sufficient land and a proper planning environment.

I shall use my remaining time to highlight several key issues that must be addressed. The first requirement is to impress on the Executive that anything short of 2,000 new homes each year over the lifetime of this Assembly's mandate is unacceptable. A comprehensive register of all surplus public land must be established, regularly monitored and updated.

The Housing Executive should consider a more proactive vesting policy. A programme of de-zoning unused industrial land, making it available for housing might be a better option. Allowing the release of land by the Housing Executive at less than market value, with all the proper safeguards in place, would facilitate the provision of affordable homes.

Planning Policy Statement 12 must be revisited and must include affordable homes. Several Departments have responsibility for a large bank of publicly owned land, which must be made available in sufficient quantities and locations to be used for housing.

In the current climate, in which land values increase every week, steps have to be taken to discourage developers from holding on to land as a profit-making exercise. We need to examine the time frames between

the granting of planning permissions and the beginning of construction on sites.

Many other innovative ideas should be brought to bear. However, unless we as an Assembly are prepared to place at the top of the political agenda the need to provide affordable homes for all our people, and unless we are prepared to provide sufficient resources to meet the challenges, all our words and debates will be seen for what they are — meaningless.

Mr Burns: We are facing a huge and growing crisis in housing affordability in Northern Ireland. The blunt truth is that only a select few can now afford to cope with the demands that come with the purchase of a house. To argue continually for so-called affordable housing is to mask the underlying issues. Northern Ireland requires a massive change in attitude in all aspects of house purchases. All housing must have a social element that is based on meeting the fundamental needs of the family and the individual. The upward spiral of housing costs has destroyed that objective for a growing number of people; affordability has been ruled out for the vast majority of the population.

In my constituency of South Antrim, in the Glengormley area, for example, it is commonplace to see queues of people outside estate agents. When a couple wishes to buy, both families are involved — brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles and friends all do a stint, queuing for four or five days just to place a deposit on a house.

Nine years ago, I was a first-time buyer. My wife and I bought our first house for £62,000 with a repayment mortgage of £330 a month. That was just about manageable. However, I was talking to a friend at the weekend and he told me about his son, who has just purchased a house for £207,000. On an interest-only mortgage, he is paying £950 a month. His father is distressed, because he fears that, if the housing bubble bursts, his son will be left desperately in debt.

Would renting a property not be a more sensible option for a young person in such a situation? After all, that £950 to pay for the interest-only mortgage does not include numerous other expenses that we all face — food, fuel, insurance, petrol, car tax and maintenance, and so on. First-time buyers who are paying such a huge sum for the privilege of simply securing the mortgage dare not even consider the possibility of taking a holiday or changing the car — if they even can afford to run one. Having a family will also place huge financial stress on young people caught in this vicious trap.

There are alternatives, but they will involve changing cultural attitudes towards house purchases. It is unfortunate that a stigma is still linked to the rental sector, as opposed to the private sector. That stigma is totally unjustified and is harmful to society. However, the stigma exists and the Assembly must tackle it. We

have to get the message across that people's quality of life could be dramatically enhanced by the development of a proper rental sector. In most parts of mainland Europe, and across Scandinavia in particular, the practice of renting high-quality social housing, in both the private sector and the public sector, is the norm.

Sir John Semple, who carried out a review of housing affordability in 2006, recommended that 2,500 social and affordable houses be built each year. I support those recommendations and hope that the Executive will implement them. The motion is that this Assembly expresses serious concern about the affordable housing crisis. This can only be tackled —

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

I call Mr Alastair Ross. As Mr Ross will be making his maiden speech, he should not be interrupted.

2.30 pm

Mr Ross: It is a privilege to deliver my maiden speech in this Assembly, albeit under the worst possible circumstances. It would be remiss of me not to mention my friend and colleague George Dawson, a man with whom I worked very closely for years, and for whom I had the greatest admiration and respect.

George was an outstanding orator who articulated the unionist message with clarity and conviction. He worked tirelessly for his constituents in East Antrim, and, from the vast amount of tributes that have flooded in from across the community since his death, the high esteem and regard that George was held in is clear. It is not difficult to see why George was such a popular and likeable man. He devoted much of his time to politics and to his work in the business community, with various Christian organisations and as grand master of the Independent Orange Order. However, faith and family always came first for George.

George will be sadly missed as a DUP representative on these Benches, as a unionist, a businessman and as a friend, but most of all he shall be missed as a father, a husband and a brother. As I make my maiden speech, my thoughts are with his family and those who loved and knew him best.

Despite the tragic circumstances in which I have come into this Assembly, I am honoured to represent the constituency of East Antrim. I look forward to the challenges ahead and will seek to continue the high level of service and representation that the people of East Antrim deserve.

The motion deals with a topic that will resonate with people throughout the Province, particularly those on long waiting lists for social housing or who have found themselves homeless. It is particularly relevant to people of my age who are trying to get a house and move out of the family home for the first time. Many young people, young couples and people on low incomes

are finding it increasingly difficult to buy houses as prices rise across the country, with many first-time buyers finding that they simply cannot afford to get on the property ladder. Indeed, for many people struggling to find a property, it must seem as if the first few rungs of the property ladder have fallen off altogether.

We must ensure that there are new housing developments that integrate units of affordable housing for social renting and home ownership. The fact that it is more difficult than ever to buy a house means that there is more pressure on social housing than ever before, and people who could have afforded to buy their own houses five or 10 years ago can no longer do so and have to apply for social housing.

Even couples earning two relatively good salaries cannot get into the housing market, with single people in particular being marginalised and excluded from housing. Older people can find themselves trapped in homes that they are struggling to manage financially, but they cannot afford to move somewhere smaller. With such a strain on the availability of social housing, the danger is that many people will find themselves homeless and will need to look to hostel or emergency accommodation as a short-term solution, or enter the private-rented sector while waiting to be allocated a house.

Due to the squeeze on first-time buyers, the rental sector is booming, with investors buying houses to rent — houses that first-time buyers cannot afford to buy. With many young people now choosing to rent, homeless people and those waiting on housing lists find themselves particularly vulnerable, as they often cannot afford to meet the upfront costs associated with moving into private rented accommodation. Those living on income support find it difficult enough to pay the bills without the added pressure of finding additional money for the escalating cost of renting. Therefore, the lack of social housing has a huge knock-on effect on the housing market as a whole: it pushes up the demand for the private-rental sector, which in turn invites more buy-to-let investors into the market. Indeed, it is a vicious circle.

The housing market needs to take those who are trying to get a home on a low income into consideration, as well as the rich investors. There are a number of options that this Assembly could consider: co-ownership schemes; extended mortgages; specific affordable houses in new housing schemes. It is not just a case of building new houses. The housing market should be looked at as a whole, and in particular the problem of affordable housing. First-time buyers and low-income families are being squeezed out of the housing market.

The Planning Service has an important role to play in making land available for affordable housing, the zoning of land and the granting of planning permission. However, it is important to consider other items such

as the cost of housing land, particularly smaller sites. Land-banking, the length of time that planning permission is granted for, the number of vacant houses, and the cost of sites are important factors in the overall problem.

If we really want to tackle the issue of affordable housing in Northern Ireland, all interest groups must work together to ensure that affordable homes and social houses are built. I support the motion, and I hope that the Minister for Social Development will tackle the issue urgently.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mrs Claire McGill to speak. I remind Members that this will be Mrs McGill's maiden speech and should be heard uninterrupted.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

I congratulate you on your appointment, Mr Deputy Speaker, and wish you well. I congratulate Ms Ritchie on becoming Minister for Social Development. I wish her well also.

I welcome the motion. I have voiced my concerns to the local press on the lack of affordable housing in Strabane; however, the situation in many areas in West Tyrone is equally grim. The increasing lack of affordable housing, and the adverse financial and social impact that it is having on a growing number of families, urban and rural — and I emphasise the word “rural” — is reaching crisis point. The situation will continue to deteriorate unless steps are taken to tackle the problem.

Property speculation, the growth of the buy-to-let market and PPS 14 are causing the cost of homes to spiral out of the reach of many people, particularly young first-time buyers. The lack of affordable housing is being exacerbated by under-provision of social housing and the private rented sector, which does not always provide good value for money.

The private rented sector is a source of housing for many people in West Tyrone. However, that presents major financial hardship for those who rely on social security benefits and low wages. Rents in the private sector have risen, and one of the biggest problems facing tenants in receipt of housing benefit is their struggle to pay rent. It is not unusual for such tenants to have to find an extra £20 a week from social security benefits to bridge the gap. Consequently, they can be forced to neglect other bills — even spending less on food and fuel — in order to pay their rent. More social housing is needed.

I am an MLA for West Tyrone, which is a rural constituency, and PPS 14 has made an already very difficult situation — as far as housing is concerned — almost impossible. I want to highlight the connection between the policy and its knock-on effect on affordable housing. One of the respondents to research carried out

by Advice NI, published in its report, 'Affordable Homes: Impacts of restricted access to affordable housing across tenure groups', said:

"People, especially first time buyers and young families are finding themselves having to leave the rural areas due to the ever increasing house prices."

Where do people who cannot get houses in rural areas go? Statistics can be quoted, and figures can be examined, but where do they go, where do they take their families, and what are the practical implications for them?

I refer again to the Advice NI report. It states:

"Policymakers with responsibility for housing and planning need to acknowledge the strong sense of attachment to place and community in rural areas and the need to provide viable rural housing options within this context."

I was very glad to hear one Member say that this is a cross-departmental issue. I made some notes to that effect earlier, and I would welcome the Department for Regional Development, the Department for Social Development, and the Department of the Environment working together on that matter.

I wish to mention one other example from my constituency, which concerns a young mother of two who rents a housing association home in a rural area. She wants to buy her house, but she cannot do so because the housing association's rules prevent it. Such situations must be addressed. She wants to stay in her own area, which is close to her elderly parents, and she wants to continue to send her children to the local rural school.

Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Jonathan Craig, who will be making his maiden speech. I remind Members that it is the convention that such speeches be heard uninterrupted.

Mr Craig: I support Mr Shannon's motion. One of the biggest issues facing our citizens, not only in my constituency of Lagan Valley but throughout Northern Ireland, is the total lack of affordable housing. As a member of Lisburn City Council for the past six years, I am all too aware of the serious problems that face young people, young families, people with disabilities and the elderly, who urgently need affordable social housing.

The waiting list illustrates the massive problem that faces every part of society in Northern Ireland. There are 35,000 people on the housing waiting list, 19,000 of whom are deemed to be in housing stress. That is a clear indication of housing needs. There are 7,500 people who have no homes at all.

There are many reasons for the crisis in affordable housing, but the total lack of a new-build programme for social housing must account for some of the problem. Funding for the new-build programme for the incoming year currently amounts to £90 million. That will deliver only 622 new houses, which is well short of the

Department's public service agreement target of 1,500. Not only will that target not be met, which will exacerbate the ever growing crisis, but Sir John Semple's report states that that figure should be increased to more than 2,000 to try to keep pace with the urgent demand. On a worrying note, if the Department cannot deliver 1,500 homes, how can it expect to deliver the 2,000 homes that are so desperately needed?

It is not all doom and gloom. In my constituency, I have seen the council, the Housing Executive, housing associations and the local community working together to deliver new-build projects that make a difference for many of those people who are on the waiting list. In recent years, we in Lagan Valley have, together with the Ulidia Housing Association, been able to deliver 175 new homes in the Ballymacash area. Lisburn City Council has identified other pieces of land that will deliver an additional 150 new homes that are much needed in the Lisburn area.

Although such new-build projects represent only a drop in the ocean in tackling Northern Ireland's housing crisis, they demonstrate that when councils, the Housing Executive and housing associations work with local communities, they can identify land and build houses, which will relieve the hassle and heartbreak for those families who are looking for homes.

When agencies work together they prove that they can deliver affordable housing. The way forward is therefore clear. There is an urgent need for joined-up government, with all relevant bodies working together so that additional land can be released for new-build projects. I call on the new Minister for Social Development to address the crisis that is affecting all our community.

Mr B McCrea: I notice that this is the first time in a while that Mr Deputy Speaker has not said that this is a maiden speech, so if any Members have been waiting patiently to join in, now is their chance. *[Laughter.]* I just thought that we might liven things up.

Not so long ago, Northern Ireland was considered a cheap place to live. Despite having below average wages and above average prices for staples such as food, the low cost of housing rendered it overall a relatively cheap place to live. However, that cannot be said today. Ten years ago, the average price of a house was £42,000; today, it is £153,000: house prices have trebled in the past 10 years. My colleague from Lagan Valley spoke about the serious housing issues there: the average price of a house in Lagan Valley is a staggering £235,000. It is no wonder that last year's Ulster Bank PMI Report said that two thirds of first-time buyers were unable to finance a deposit. The Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors' report on the United Kingdom states that couples with two incomes need to put aside 81.2% of their wages in order to pay the deposit and the stamp

duty. In Northern Ireland the situation is even more serious. In 2006, the Nationwide Building Society stated that property prices in Northern Ireland rose by 44%. It is staggering — and I use the word “staggering” repeatedly because the young people of this country are staggering under the burden of trying to get onto the property ladder.

2.45 pm

Northern Ireland used to export 20,000 people a year. Now, more and more people are returning. That is a good thing, but it puts more pressure on our housing stock. Members who are familiar with the Belfast metropolitan area plan will know that 60,000 homes are planned in the next 10 years — but we have identified land for only 20,000. Where are we to put the additional houses? Those factors put pressure on social housing schemes. Many homeowners, having seen the huge inflation in house prices, choose to sell and attempt to move back into the social housing market, which reduces the number of houses that might be occupied by younger couples.

The solution is in our hands. It is not good enough to say that somebody ought to do something; we are the people who ought to do something, but it is not certain what that something should be. If we were to intervene to buy more land to build more houses, inflation would increase and house prices would rise. On the other hand, going for higher-density building creates the slums of tomorrow.

If we knock down all the factories, there will be no jobs to which those people can go. Sanmina-SCI Enclosure Systems Ltd in my constituency will put 300 people out of work in a month's time. Its site is worth £27 million. We all share concerns about this issue, but I warn that it is complicated and requires proper deliberation and discussion. I am sure that the Minister will reflect on the comments made in the House, and I wish her well in coming back with a comprehensive solution to this vexing situation.

Mr P Ramsey: I congratulate Margaret Ritchie on becoming Minister. She is well up to the task, and I wish her well in the role.

Mr Shannon's motion is a very good one. Affordable housing is one of the most crucial issues facing us, and I agree with the terminology that he used: we are indeed in crisis.

The Minister's first function was to visit a social-housing apartment scheme. I welcome that choice and believe that the issue will be the crux of Ms Ritchie's work this year. She has given commitment and priority to securing much more money than is currently available for social housing.

I will speak to the amendment briefly. The reason for redeveloping homes and entire areas is because they are unfit and no longer suited to the needs of modern society.

In the context of understanding “increasing the put-back rate”, the SDLP does not consider redevelopment to have been given priority. There has been bad practice in development schemes so often in the past. We want to see services, play areas and green belts. More importantly, we want all schemes, whether social or private, to be child friendly.

Mrs Long: Will the Member give way?

Mr P Ramsey: I am sorry, Naomi, but I have only five minutes to get through this speech.

The SDLP believes that there is a cloud over the motion because of the amendment, which is not helpful.

Housing-price inflation in Northern Ireland is alarming. Starting homes in my constituency cost in the region of £200,000. That is not as much as in Lagan Valley, but it is an awful price nevertheless. John Semple's report defined affordable housing as follows:

“Affordable housing should be related to ability to pay. Affordable housing costs should not exceed 35% of gross household income.”

Given the current cost of houses, it is difficult to see how most people on average salaries can afford to purchase a house without significant economic stress. If inflation of house prices is not significantly reduced, it is difficult to see how affordable housing can be an attainable goal across Northern Ireland. The local housing market is not working efficiently, and is affected by a range of negative social and economic impacts. The economic stress caused by rising house prices, coupled with rising interest rates, is having an extremely detrimental impact on family life in Northern Ireland.

One issue concerns me, and I wish to raise it with the Minister. Housing associations across Northern Ireland can purchase single dwellings. There was good reason for that becoming the case, but, unfortunately, housing associations are now competing with the first-time buyer, and the market is being inflated. As a matter of urgency, we should review that situation. It was probably a mechanism to use money that was in the system in the absence of a rebuild programme.

The recent UNICEF report, ‘Child poverty in perspective: An overview of child well-being in rich countries’, placed the UK at the bottom of the league of the 21 richest countries in the world. The UK fared worst when it came to family and peer relationships, and the report attributed that to the fact that families in the UK spend less time together than families do in other countries. That is hardly surprising, given the time that parents are forced to spend working and commuting to meet the single main expense — costly housing. We have always had a proud tradition of prioritising family life, and it is the duty of all elected representatives to ensure that family life is protected and nurtured in the North of Ireland.

In addition to the social impact, over-inflated house prices can have a negative impact on industrial competitiveness. Naturally, when people are forced to pay over-inflated prices for housing, they need and demand higher wages. The rise in house prices takes money out of the local economy, because consumer spending is reduced. What disposable income is left for working people with a £200,000 mortgage, and what impact does that have on communities and local businesses? People are exposed to enormous economic risk. The fundamental value of a standard three-bedroom semi is probably somewhere between £60,000 and £70,000, yet the market price is about £200,000, and in some areas higher. What happens —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time, please.

Mr Newton: I join other Members in congratulating the Minister on her appointment, and I wish her well. I support the motion, but first I want to take issue with Basil McCrea, who treated Members to a masterclass on economics. I remind him that Northern Ireland was never a cheap place to live. Although some items may have been cheaper, the high cost of energy, food and other items made Northern Ireland a dearer place to live in many ways.

I support the motion and congratulate its proposer. A motion on affordable housing is timely, as it is a matter of great concern for all public representatives in Northern Ireland. There is synergy between this motion and the next, and it is difficult to address one without straying into the territory of the other. I am sure that all Assembly Members are faced daily with constituents coming into their offices to talk about being unable to get onto the property ladder or to obtain public-sector housing. Those who want to establish their independence by setting up home with a partner face a huge problem.

In my East Belfast constituency, the escalation of house prices far exceeds the ability of any young person or couple to save for a deposit, and their salaries cannot match the mortgage requirements. Not too long ago, when mortgage advisers calculated a person's ability to repay a mortgage, they multiplied the salary by two and a half or three to indicate how much he or she could afford to pay. There is no chance that that will ever be the case again. Recently, a young professional came to my office and told me that if she wanted to buy a modest two-bedroom apartment, she would have to pay eight times her salary. That is not sustainable in the long term.

Sir John Semple's informative 'Review into Affordable Housing: Interim Report' has been mentioned; in it, he quoted this definition of affordability:

"securing some given standard of housing or different standards at a price or rent which does not impose, in the eyes of some third party (usually Government) an unreasonable burden on household incomes".

As mortgages are linked to the ability to pay, there is no prospect of affordable housing for many, particularly the young. Some households will never be able to afford private housing. Therefore, as prices escalate, the demand for public-sector housing grows.

3.00 pm

All of East Belfast's elected representatives have raised the issue of housing demand and supply with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive.

There are approximately 1,100 applications for public-sector housing, affecting 5,000 people. Those people live in housing that is inadequate, overcrowded, of a poor standard or in a state of disrepair. Within three years from 2006, 557 houses will be built. That will not deal with the housing waiting list in east Belfast. The solution lies in planning, in control of the private-landlord sector and in access to home ownership.

Mr O'Loan: The Semple Report made around 80 recommendations. I have no doubt that they are being carefully sifted by the Department for Social Development and will lead to a serious plan being drawn up to deal with the issue. I want to refer to an aspect of the housing problem that the Semple Report has not addressed or made any specific recommendations about. The issue is that of tourist areas, which are attractive to buyers and developers of second homes, town houses and apartments.

The village of Cushendall on the north Antrim coast provides a telling example. The crux of the problem is that property is no longer affordable to members of the local community who want to live in the area where they grew up. The average house price in the mid-Glens has increased by at least 75% in the past year. That is not a fanciful figure or an exaggeration. One practically derelict two-bedroom house in Cushendall is on the market and heading for a price of over £300,000. Apartments in the area are being sold for over £300,000. Former Housing Executive properties, if they come on the market at all, are fetching £250,000. Members will be aware that stamp duty of 3% clicks in at those prices. How can local people, especially young couples who are trying to get a foot on the housing ladder, compete in such a market? The fact is that they cannot.

As well as serious personal implications, there are major social implications. The fate of Portballintrae, which has been mentioned, is well known: the ordinary population has almost entirely disappeared, replaced by weekend and summer visitors who generally bring their groceries from a Tesco supermarket in Belfast. Cushendall, and places like it, do not want to go the same way. Numbers in local schools have fallen and will continue to fall. Local sports clubs — particularly the successful GAA club — wonder for how long they will have a future. Club members fear that soon there will not be any young people to join them.

In the winter months, the area will become desolate, because there will be no thriving businesses and no local people living there full time. A special rural ethos is in serious danger of being lost. I have no doubt that most Members of the House are familiar with the area and know just how special it is.

This is an example of market failure. The market is providing outcomes that simply do not match social needs. As I said, the Semple Report does not deal with that special case. I ask the Minister to give it particular consideration.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Ms Anna Lo. This will be Ms Lo's maiden speech. I remind Members that they should allow her to speak uninterrupted.

Ms Lo: I welcome the debate and support both the motion and the amendment. In my constituency of South Belfast, I frequently hear of people's problems, particularly those of young couples who are not able to get onto the first rung of the property ladder because of huge increases in house prices in the area. They cannot get social housing either, because of the long waiting lists that other Members have mentioned.

The lack of public housing pushes up demand for privately rented accommodation. That subsequently encourages more investors to exploit the market. People often pay exorbitant rent for substandard accommodation. Homelessness, as Members have mentioned, has also become an increasing problem in recent years.

I urge the Minister for Social Development to adopt urgently the Semple Review's many valid recommendations. The need for those recommendations to be implemented has been well evidenced by the Housing Executive's recent report, 'The Northern Ireland Housing Market: Review and Perspectives 2007-2010', and the voluntary sector's qualitative research on affordable homes. All those reports point to a serious affordability problem throughout Northern Ireland, particularly for first-time buyers.

One recommendation from the Semple Review is for the social-housing programme to be doubled to 2,000 houses a year for five years in order to address the current housing shortage. However, I understand that DSD has a budget to build only 612 houses this year. The Department must therefore bid for extra resources from DFP in June in order to meet its target of 1,600 new social houses to be built in this financial year.

DSD must consider other issues that the review raised. Those include a more flexible planning policy, strategic regeneration activities, the de-zoning of housing land that has been withheld for speculative purposes, extending access to home ownership, and registration of all landlords in order to improve control and quality in the privately rented sector.

Empty properties must be put back on the market urgently. The Semple Report sets a target of bringing 9,500 empty houses back into the housing stock in the next five years. One reason for empty properties is the restriction that is placed on where people feel that they can live safely. The housing crisis cannot be meaningfully divorced from the levels of segregation in housing. Some 90% of Northern Ireland's population live in an area that is more than 90% "single community".

In many urban areas, rows of derelict houses and overcrowded houses are set just a few hundred metres apart. Those houses are a product of our segregation. It is formally legal, however, for the Housing Executive to allow people to choose to live in Protestant-only or Catholic-only areas. There would be a massive public outcry were a housing authority in England to allow people to choose to live in white-only or black-only areas.

I ask the proposer of the motion, as a Member from a governing party, to pledge to abolish state-sponsored segregation and to introduce proposals on how to tackle it. Ending segregated housing is an essential part of ending the housing crisis.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): First, I welcome you to your position in this new Assembly, Mr Deputy Speaker. I also thank Members for their good wishes.

The debate on affordable housing is most welcome, and it is one in which I have a particular interest. Helping to deliver affordable housing is one of my top priorities. The fact that the Assembly is debating the issue so soon after restoration tells me that it is also one of the Assembly's top priorities, and I am glad of that.

It is an issue that resonates not only with the Assembly and local councils but with many people throughout Northern Ireland. To encapsulate the problem, it is one of long waiting lists, with many people living in areas of housing stress. Young people also find it difficult to buy houses themselves or to get onto the first rung of the property ladder.

If we are to deliver successfully, not only is action by me required, but action is also required by my Executive colleagues and the Assembly — we must all row together in the same direction.

I recognise that Members — particularly those on the Committee for Social Development — have their own ideas on affordable housing. That is why I welcome the contributions to the debate and will reflect on all of them.

Affordable housing is important for a decent quality of life. Housing impacts on social, economic, environmental and health well-being. However, in recent years, Northern Ireland has experienced unprecedented increases in house values. Although there has been an element of catching up, the rises have now exceeded all expectations.

In the past year, prices increased by 37% — more than three times the rate in the South. The average house price in the North is now more than £200,000.

That may be good news for existing homeowners, but it is financially crippling for first-time buyers. They are being squeezed out of the market. Young people find it ever harder to get onto the property ladder, and that is why their numbers are falling. In 2001, 60% of buyers were first time. Last year, it was just 33%. Such an overheated market appears unsustainable.

Nonetheless, investors are still keen to buy up private property and land. That pushes prices up and impacts on the availability of land for social housing. As many Members have already said, there are worrying reports of land-banking, with some speculators holding back on the development of land to push prices up further. That causes real problems for housing associations — with land values doubling in the past 18 months. Often, land costs now account for almost 50% of the cost of a newly built house.

Direct rule failed to find the funding to meet these new circumstances. Members should be in no doubt — I inherited a woefully inadequate budget. With the help, support and endorsement of my Executive colleagues — which I hope that I have — I am determined to redress that situation. The result is that this year, as things stand, there is funding to build approximately 611 new social houses — short even of the direct rule target of 1,500 new-build social houses per year. At the same time, the number of people in housing stress is rising.

Against that background, Sir John Semple was commissioned to undertake an independent review into affordable housing in Northern Ireland. His report makes some points clear. First, there is no quick fix. Market forces are powerful and not easy to abate. Secondly, there is a lot that can and should be done by the entire Government together and by all my colleagues working in the Executive together. That is why the recommendations do not just address the Department for Social Development; action is also needed by the Department of the Environment to speed up the planning process; action is needed by the Department for Regional Development to revise housing growth indicators; and funding is needed from the Executive for a new-build social housing development programme.

Currently, I am considering Sir John Semple's 'Review into Affordable Housing Final Report'. Its recommendations make sense to me — at least, the majority of them, as I will explain later — and I want to take them forward. They will not solve the problem overnight — nothing could in these difficult circumstances. However, over time, they will make a difference. Having said that, I do not pretend that I agree with every recommendation. For example, in the

past, I have made clear my difficulties with PPS 14 — and I cannot pretend to support it now.

It would be wrong to think that the Department has been considering the way forward based only on the Semple Report. Other important initiatives are already under way.

3.15 pm

The advance land purchase initiative was introduced to help housing associations to secure land for new-build housing development schemes. So far, land has been acquired to facilitate the building of 618 homes. In fact, the Housing Executive has earmarked land to the value of approximately £76 million to be transferred to housing associations to service the development programme over the next five years.

The north-east quarter regeneration scheme at Royal Avenue will include provision for affordable housing units in the heart of Belfast. The developer will fund these, meaning that those people not in a position to afford the current high cost of apartments will be able to enjoy the benefits of city-centre living. I will soon publish proposals for the regeneration of the north-west quarter of the city centre, including the open spaces at Browns Square and Carrick Hill.

Meanwhile, an advisory panel, comprising political, community and statutory representatives, is overseeing the production of a draft master plan for the redevelopment of the former Crumlin Road jail and Girdwood Army barracks. I do not want to prejudice the panel's deliberations, but, clearly, there is an opportunity for significant social affordable housing there. I look forward to the quick delivery of its master plan.

The urban regeneration company, Ilex, Derry City Council and my Department have drawn up master plans for three sites in Derry. Plans for the regeneration of the former Ministry of Defence land at Clooney offer the possibility of providing affordable housing alongside other educational, sport and leisure facilities. My Department is transferring surplus lands at two sites in the greater Shantallow area to local housing associations for the provision of new social housing.

Outside Belfast and Derry, my Department is engaged in, or will shortly commence, master-planning work for several major, mixed-use development schemes. In all of those, the Department will consider carefully the role that affordable social housing can play.

These initiatives are all important, but I am not for one minute pretending that they are enough. I want to go further, but building new social housing requires new money. To be blunt, Mr Deputy Speaker: give me the money and I will build the houses.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Ms Ritchie: To put it simply, that is my position. I have not resiled from that view since I became Minister for Social Development. I want to get moving quickly.

I have asked my officials to audit the land held by the Department for Social Development and to assess how it could be used to relieve the housing crisis. That is just a first step. We must audit whether, and how, public land held by other Departments could be used.

I am keen to learn from the South. That is why I am arranging to go to Dublin to see how they have made use of land swaps and other measures.

I am determined to begin work immediately to initiate short, medium and long-term solutions to the growing housing affordability problem. Although my Department has the main responsibility for housing policy, the Semple Review contains a considerable number of cross-cutting recommendations that address the affordability question. Many of the commitments and targets fall outside my Department's remit. Given the cross-departmental nature of the recommendations, at this Thursday's Executive meeting, I will propose the establishment of an interdepartmental group, or task force, that would be responsible for responding to the review's recommendations.

As Minister for Social Development, I propose to chair that group. I want to invite senior officials from the Department for Regional Development, the Department of the Environment, the Department of Finance and Personnel, the Department for Employment and Learning and the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to join the group alongside officials from my Department.

I envisage that the interdepartmental group would consider the Semple Review's recommendations in greater detail and focus its efforts on progressing those that are acceptable.

It would also seek to develop programmes that have links with organisations outside central Government and establish the much-needed partnership approach to tackling affordability.

I also intend to set up an expert panel, comprising academics and other relevant experts from the housing arena, to provide specialist advice to that interdepartmental group so that we can be sure that we are getting it right. Helping to deliver housing affordability is a massive challenge, because market forces are not easily tamed. However, with firm action, and, I stress, proper funding, there is much that we can and must do without plunging existing owners into the dangers of negative equity.

The proposer of the motion, Jim Shannon, referred to article 40 of The Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991, and the Semple Report recommends that developers should set aside 20% of development schemes for

affordable social housing. That is a developer contribution that should be enforced through Planning Policy Statement 12: 'Housing in Settlements', and I will advance that recommendation via the Semple Report. I know what the Member refers to, because the draft Ards and Down area plan 2015 was published before PPS 12 and did not take account of that. There was some difficulty about the initial public inquiry, and the reconvened public inquiry reflected that fact. However, I assure the Member that I will look into the matter.

Naomi Long referred to the low put-back rate in housing schemes. I urge caution on that matter. Associations can only build —

Mr McNarry: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Ritchie: No, I will not give way. I have only a few minutes left, and I would rather continue.

Associations can only build social housing where they are supported by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. Space standards are higher in modern housing units, and the 'Housing Association Guide', which sets standards for the provision of housing accommodation, has set targets for density. That should address the point that Naomi raised.

When the Northern Ireland Housing Executive cannot support need to the extent that will enable density targets to be addressed, associations will consider the development of co-ownership housing in order to increase density. There are also planning requirements for open space — quality space standards — which impact on housing density.

Naomi also raised the house sales scheme. The Semple Report recommends that a fresh look be taken at the —

Mr Burnside: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Will you clarify whether it is normal procedure in the Chamber to refer to other Members by their first or Christian names?

Mr Deputy Speaker: It is not normal procedure, but it is up to the individual Member. There is nothing against it.

Ms Ritchie: I thank the Member for raising the issue. I do not wish to be discourteous to any Member.

The Semple Report recommends that a fresh look be taken at the house sales scheme. I am fully aware that there are concerns about the scheme, which was last reviewed in October 2004. I take careful note of the Member's views, and I will re-examine the issue.

Mr Cobain raised the issue of surplus land. I will write to ministerial colleagues to ask them to identify surplus land in the ownership of their respective ministries, or agencies sponsored by their Departments, and to release that land through the clearing-house arrangements of the Valuation and Lands Agency. I

will also consider surplus military sites to assess their suitability for social and affordable housing.

Mr Cobain and Mr McCann raised the issue of targets for new-build housing. The target for new social starts in the current year is 1,500. I freely admit that I am unhappy about that target. Were I given the money, I would build more social housing. I make that remark in the House in order for it to be on the record. The current budget will not support that number, but I will enter a bid with the Department of Finance and Personnel in the normal way, against competing priorities. I hope that my ministerial colleagues will support that bid. That is the issue: give me the money, and I will build the houses.

I welcome Alastair Ross to the Chamber. In his maiden speech, he asked what steps are being taken to help first-time homebuyers in Northern Ireland. Several initiatives have been introduced, such as the co-ownership scheme. It was assessed and reviewed last October, and I want to re-examine some issues in relation to that.

Mrs McGill raised the matter of cross-departmental issues. I readily acknowledge that there are many of those. As I said earlier, I shall present a paper to the Executive this Thursday that will tackle cross-cutting recommendations by establishing a ministerial review committee or task force to respond to those pressing issues in the Semple Review, particularly matters of housing affordability and the social housing development programme.

Mrs McGill further referred to house sales by the rural housing associations. Housing associations sell houses on the same basis as the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. If the Member will give me the details of the case in her constituency, I shall look into the matter and respond.

My colleague Mr Ramsey brought forward an issue concerning housing associations. Suffice to say, housing associations are able to purchase single dwellings, and the Department for Social Development has a fast-track system to assist them in doing so. Associations might indeed find themselves in competition with other buyers, but the Department will support associations where value for money is apparent. However, my Department cannot support cases without regard to cost. I shall therefore discuss the matter further with Mr Ramsey, if that is appropriate.

My colleague Declan O'Loan raised the issue of second homes in rural, coastal areas, particularly in tourist areas. That area is difficult for me as Minister for Social Development, since I have no remit to interfere in the private housing sector, where individuals have a civil right to purchase where they choose. Moreover, any tax on second homes is an issue for the

Treasury. However, I shall discuss the matter with Mr O'Loan at his convenience.

Robin Newton raised the issue of housing problems in east Belfast. Representations about that have already been made to me, and I have agreed to visit the area, when my diary permits, to see the problems at first hand.

As I said earlier, no quick fix will solve the problem overnight. However, together, as an Assembly and an Executive, a Minister and the Social Development Committee, we can make that difference. I look forward to that.

Put simply, I must reiterate that if my Department were given the money, we should be only too happy to build houses. There is a severe housing crisis throughout the North of Ireland. Many people are in housing stress, and many are on waiting lists for allocation of a property by the Housing Executive or by a housing association on the basis of need and according to the common selection scheme. Many young people are in crisis because they cannot obtain a first house, due to low income and the improvement in local living standards mentioned by Mr Newton.

I want to be able to address those issues. Members also referred to the matter of high rent in the private sector. Those are issues for a ministerial review team. I should be very happy to take that forward with the Executive's approval, but I must wait until Thursday for that.

I thank Members for their contributions, and I look forward to working with every Member on this vexatious issue.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Minister. I wish you well in the task ahead.

3.30 pm

Mrs Long: I welcome the comments of the new Minister for Social Development and her interest in affordable housing, as demonstrated by the fact that her first public engagement was to visit a social housing site. I also wish to assure the Minister that "Naomi" is one of the nicer things people call me, and I will not object to it. *[Laughter.]*

I also welcome the institution of an interdepartmental group to take this issue forward because it has implications for a number of Departments, not least because of funding. Mr Cobain and others, including Fra McCann, rightly highlighted that the budget for the Department for Social Development was inadequate, and that it required more resources. That is correct and — given the social and financial implications of poor housing on people's mental and physical health, on their ability to be economically active and productive in the workplace, and on social and family breakdown — it is a worthwhile investment.

Mr Burns, a Member for South Antrim, mentioned the stigma attached to rental and social housing, and that there needs to be societal change. I agree, and believe that by integrating social, affordable and private development in single developments, many of those barriers can be tackled, especially if the styles of the different developments are comparable.

The DUP Member for East Antrim Mr Ross mentioned that young professionals and single persons can be marginalised. It is true that those who are working often find it hard to get private rental accommodation, as landlords see them as a riskier source of income compared with those who receive housing benefit.

Claire McGill mentioned the review of housing benefit levels and suggested that they should rise so that people are not forced to spend their benefits on meeting that housing gap. I agree that that is an issue that requires attention. My biggest fear is that unscrupulous landlords will drive up rents artificially, with little tangible benefit to tenants from the inflated rents, albeit that they have the surety of their rent being paid. That issue needs to be handled carefully, so as not to exacerbate inflation.

I will deal with concerns expressed specifically about the amendment. Basil McCrea suggested that denser housing equates in some way with slum living. That is nonsense. One only needs to look at the city-centre apartments in private development areas, which attract a premium, to see that that is not the case. What makes the quality of a housing development good or bad is not the floor space of the individual properties, but the amenities and services that are provided to it. If a development is of high quality and suitable, and given the large proportion of the housing list that is made up of single people, it seems acceptable that some of those properties may be slightly smaller, while slightly larger properties should be available to accommodate families and others, with social services available. The best should be available to all. However, I do not advocate that we simply cram people in.

Mr Ramsey expressed concern about the put-back rate. I assure him that I simply ask for it to be considered along with the other options. I do not suggest that it is a straightforward issue and that it should be escalated; rather that we need to ensure that the density of development reflects the character of the local area. I conceded that it is neither possible, nor desirable, that there should be a one-for-one put-back rate in streets such as the one that I grew up in, where there were 37 to 40 terraced houses that would not be considered large enough for current needs. However, when the put-back rate is reduced to 25%, it is wise, at least, to review the situation and work out why that is the case. We need decent, open-space standards in those developments. However, many people with those standards are deprived of services and connectivity in

their communities — often in suburban housing estates, many of which are around the edges of my own constituency. Open space does not necessarily equate with quality development. It has to be well-used and well-managed open space that is available and actively used. That requires a certain critical mass of the local community and, in my experience, the lack of critical mass in some communities — even the urban ones with very few services available to them — has led to the further depletion of available resources.

I do not simply ask Members to increase the put-back rate, but to consider it in the overall mix. A comprehensive review should examine all aspects of the question. I hope that Members will not divide the House on the amendment.

Mr Shannon: I thank all Members who have contributed to the debate. I congratulate the Minister as well. She indicated that affordable housing is her number-one priority — I am glad to hear that. She also said that if she is given the money she will do the job. I thought that she was going to start building on the day that she was photographed wearing a hard hat and holding a spade.

I am happy to accept the amendment. It complements the motion, and Mrs Long said clearly that the idea is to include the consideration of increasing the put-back rate in the process. If that is the intention we shall have achieved a brave bit. She cited a case where 300 houses had been replaced by 50. That is perhaps an extreme example; however, it underlines the fact that it is important to build as many houses as possible in order to maintain the density in the area and to take maximum advantage of a redevelopment. For instance, these days most people do not want a big garden, although some do. My colleague Sammy Wilson loves working in his garden on a Saturday and tending the strawberries and raspberries.

Mr McCann referred to new build in Belfast and in rural communities. That is an important issue. Much of the new build has taken place in Belfast — that is where the Minister was pictured. However, I look forward to the day when she will come to Strangford to mark the start of building in that part of the country. There have been only 25 new houses built in the Strangford area in the last 18 months — a rate of 16 a year. There is an obvious imbalance if that is compared with a new build of 600.

Fred Cobain mentioned affordable housing and commended Sir John Semple's report. He also pointed out that housing is part of the anti-poverty strategy. It is to be hoped that when, as the Minister for Social Development stated, all of the other Departments involved — DRD, DOE, DFP, DEL and OFMDFM — come together, all of the issues can be addressed.

Members referred many times to the social element. Housing need in Strangford is extreme, but every Member

will have an example from his or her own constituency, and I accept that. One of our new colleagues Mr Ross spoke for the first time in the Chamber; however, he also spoke as a first-time buyer, and that gives him knowledge of the difficulties that people face today.

The need for social housing was raised frequently. Mrs McGill mentioned rural properties and private rental properties. That raises an issue that has not been touched on in the debate — private housing and private rentals. Rents are rising dramatically. In Newtownards, a two-bedroom or three-bedroom house costs upwards of £500 a month. Housing benefit does not go that far, so that issue must be addressed.

Mr O'Dowd: Does the Member agree that if the millions of pounds paid out in housing benefit to private landlords were circulated through the system back to the Housing Executive and then into DSD, the money problems that the Minister faces would be less acute?

Mr Shannon: I thank the Member for his intervention and endorse his comments. Clearly, if the rented accommodation in my area and all other areas were taken together, it would amount to a multitude of money, compared to the present position.

Mr Craig mentioned 600 new houses. They are not even the tip of the iceberg when it comes to addressing the need for new housing. Sir John Semple said that 2,000 homes are required, so it is obvious that 600 will not address that. In her response, the Minister outlined some of the areas that she intends to take on board with regard to setting land aside. However, she did not indicate how much money will be available for social housing this year. I accept that the more money that is available, the more houses can be built.

Mr McNarry: On the question of the Budget, does the Member agree that the Minister said four times today that if her Department got the money, houses would be built, and that in saying so she was admitting that without any money from the Brown package, from selling military sites, from selling off land belonging to the Department for Social Development, she really cannot build any new houses for affordable housing and her hands are tied? That is her problem. Regardless of any platitudes made today or any task force set up, unless the money is made available, from Brown in particular, she can do nothing. Where is this money from Brown? When are we getting it?

Mr Shannon: I thank the Member for his intervention.

The Minister has said, I think on four occasions, that if she were given the money, she would do the job. That has not changed; the situation is exactly the same. She also said that she has a certain amount of money for the Department for Social Development within the Budget, and she is going to do that. She has made this issue her number one priority. She has stated that in the Chamber, and Members will be keen to see that the job is done.

Basil McCrea mentioned the fact that couples with two incomes would need to put aside 81·2% of their wages for a deposit and stamp duty.

Pat Ramsey said that if the mortgage is the biggest part of a couple's financial commitment, it impacts on the whole family.

My colleague Robin Newton outlined the increasing gap between wage earnings and house prices. That has been the issue for every Member who has spoken today.

Mr O'Loan referred to property prices on the north coast — one of the reasons for that is that people are buying second homes there. That illustrates the point because the ordinary person who lives there cannot buy, and that is obviously a concern for Members.

The Minister replied very clearly about what she intends to do. She referred to land that has been earmarked for the next two years. The proof of the pudding is in the eating. I look forward to the issue of social housing being addressed by the Department for Social Development and the Executive as well.

I welcome the Minister's commitment to article 40 of The Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991. As we will be wearing our different hats I am aware of how that issue will be addressed. I am glad to hear that commitment because Strangford will not lose out on that particular proposal, and that is good news.

The Minister's commitment to the redevelopment areas and the redevelopment plans is encouraging. She spoke a lot about Belfast, the north coast and north Antrim. I am sure that the Minister will visit Strangford sometime.

It worries me that there are 19,000 people on the priority housing list in the Province. Of those, 2,000 are in Strangford where there have been only 16 new builds in the last 12 months. Considering that, and the fact that 2,000 are needed, the need in Strangford exceeds that of other parts of the Province. The Minister should consider that.

I realise that the Minister for Social Development has a social conscience, and I believe that she will give a commitment to social housing. Members look forward to her carrying out the commitments that she has made today, and we will be keeping an eye on that.

Thank you very much.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly expresses serious concerns about the affordable housing crisis, and calls upon the Minister for Social Development to co-ordinate urgently with the Housing Executive, Housing Associations, and all other relevant bodies, to release and set aside land for new build projects, to consider increasing the put-back rate on existing redevelopment areas, and to report back to this Assembly with the strategy and timescale that is finalised.

Vacant Properties

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to two hours for this debate. The Member moving the motion will have 10 minutes and 10 minutes for the winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

3.45 pm

Mr F McCann: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes that some 36,000 homes lie empty across Northern Ireland; calls upon the Minister for Social Development to take immediate steps to tackle the scandal of vacant properties; and recognises that this could go a long way to deal with the serious crisis which exists in the provision of social and affordable housing, highlighted by the Semple recommendations.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

For the second time today, a motion has come before the House that addresses the housing crisis that we face across the North of Ireland. We can discuss serious problems such as the supply of social housing, the problems of planning and of land supply, of creating an affordable sector, or of the housing selection scheme — the list is endless. However, one problem that often escapes attention is that of empty dwellings — homes left vacant, often for many years. Many homes are left empty so that they can accumulate as much value as possible before the owners sell them for huge profits. It has been estimated that more than 30% of all empty properties fall into that category.

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

In 1991, more than 31,000 homes lay empty; in 1996, the figure was more than 33,000; in 2006, the total stood at 38,000 — those are the most recent figures. That is a scandal, but it is not a new phenomenon. Those figures have been in the public domain for many years and are issued by the Department for Social Development's statistics branch on a quarterly basis. Sinn Féin has raised this matter several times with various Ministers, and I have no doubt that other parties have done likewise, but our words have fallen on deaf ears.

We raised the matter in the Chamber during a debate of the Transitional Assembly, but now we need to act. We have a local Minister and a new Executive; we now need the political will to respond to the scandal of 38,000 homes that are lying empty while thousands of people are homeless or trapped on waiting lists. However, that problem is not untypical of the way that the housing sector has been organised in recent years. As I speak, 4,898 houses stand empty in the greater Belfast area. Some of those houses have been empty for years, others are in various states of disrepair, while others could accommodate tenants right away.

South Belfast has the highest number of vacant dwellings, with 2,350; north Belfast has 1,200 empty properties; there are 810 in east Belfast; and 520 empty dwellings in west Belfast. In Lisburn, 1,460 dwellings are empty; in Derry, the total is 1,800. Right across the state, there are batches of empty homes while we are in the midst of a crisis in housing supply. Would that be tolerated anywhere else?

The Minister must take urgent action to ensure that vacant dwellings are brought into the general housing stream. Can Members imagine what impact the availability of 38,000 dwellings would have on the housing crisis? In a short space of time, they would help to overcome the lack of supply in the social rented sector and help to kick-start an affordable sector; they would go a long way towards eradicating the present waiting list and would allow us to start to deal with the growing problem of homelessness.

Empty properties create huge social problems: they are a danger; they are magnets for antisocial behaviour and vandalism. How many Members have had to phone the housing section of their local council or the Housing Executive to have a house blocked up because they cannot find out the identity of the owner? How many times have Members phoned the Fire and Rescue Service because someone has set fire to an empty house? Often, that same dwelling has lain empty for so long that it has fallen into disrepair and affects the houses on either side. The owners cannot be traced or simply ignore any approaches made to them. How many times have Members had to go to a vacant house that is being used by antisocial elements to torture local residents or which is being used as a drug den by the local supplier to peddle death to our young people? What image do so many empty dwellings send to the public — that an area is on its way down; a picture of dereliction; an area not to enter?

In my constituency, I continuously push for empty houses to be brought back into use. I have seen houses being so heavily vandalised in a few short days that demolition seems to be the only answer. That leaves its mark on communities, and I stress to the housing authorities that speedy action is essential in the battle against dereliction.

Sinn Féin believes that measures are needed to bring empty dwellings back into use. That may not be easy, but it should not stop us from making a start.

This issue was identified in the recommendations of the Semple Review into social and affordable housing. No house in public ownership should lie empty for more than three months. Those homes should be refurbished and brought back into use for tenants. That should be a priority for the Executive, and such a commitment would make a huge impact on the crisis in affordable housing.

Sinn Féin believes that the use of compulsory purchase orders should be seriously considered as a way forward when derelict property and properties that are vacant for 12 months or more could be used for social or affordable housing. A fair and transparent appeals procedure should be put in place to deal with any objections.

Furthermore, Sinn Féin believes that other penalties should be implemented. The rateable value of the house should increase if the owners refuse to comply with any order that is issued by the housing authorities. Such penalties may quickly change the attitudes of the owners of those vacant properties. It is essential that the Assembly send out a warning that whatever action is required, it will be taken to bring those dwellings back into use. That is owed to the many thousands of people who are in hostels, sleeping on the streets, or in priority need of housing. I ask Members to support the motion.

Go raibh maith agat.

Mr S Wilson: I welcome the motion in the name of — I think he is called “Fry” McCann. I think he, like myself, has eaten too many of those.

I welcome not only the content of the motion, but its tone. I am glad to see that, as a member of Belfast City Council — perhaps after being subjected to the presence of the DUP — Mr McCann is a bit more progressive than some of his country cousins.

I am sure that if the Minister for Regional Development had written the motion, it would have been different. It would have read: “This Assembly notes that some 36,000 houses lie empty across here.” The notion that Northern Ireland should be called “here” is ridiculous. I suppose that the Republic of Ireland must be called “there”. Members on this side of the House are afraid to say “Hear, hear” when they hear something from the other side with which they agree in case the other side thinks that they are supporting the Minister for Regional Development’s stance. The public has laughed at that ridiculous situation.

I can imagine someone phoning the Department for Regional Development to ask: “Is the Minister there?” — to which an official would answer: “No. He is here.” The caller might ask: “Can I speak to him?” — to which the official would reply: “No, he is not here.” The caller might then say: “But you told me a minute ago that he was there.” The official would reply: “No. I said he was here, but he is not here.” *[Laughter.]*

Mr O’Dowd: On a point of order, I always find the Member’s contributions to debates very amusing, and this is no exception. Although I am more than happy to listen to it, is it relevant to the debate?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Mr Wilson, you must return to the motion.

Mr S Wilson: I will, Mr Deputy Speaker. However, I can only conclude that any member of the public who engaged in the conversation that I have outlined would have the right to think that the Minister’s staff were not all there — whether or not they are not all here. Laughable as that may be —

Mr D Bradley: Will Mr Wilson accept that what he has just said is neither here nor there? *[Laughter.]*

Mr S Wilson: I accept that it is neither here nor there. I hope that the Deputy Speaker will accept that it is neither here nor there. However, I hope that I have made my point. I am glad to see that at least some Members of Sinn Féin have got past the ridiculous politically correct nonsense that one cannot refer to Northern Ireland, the very country in which they want to take part in ruling. The second reason that I am happy —

Mr O’Dowd: Will the Member give way?

Mr S Wilson: I have only five minutes. However, I will give way — why not?

Mr O’Dowd: It was actually the Business Office that changed the terminology of the motion, not our Member.

Mr S Wilson: So it is neither here nor there to him either. The second reason that I am happy to see the motion is that Sinn Féin — who were for so long responsible for creating so many vacant homes through the long terrorist campaign in Northern Ireland — is now in the position of putting houses into use for their proper function, instead of wrecking them. The DUP takes some credit for that.

I shall make two further points. First, in the public sector, as the proposer of the motion said, there are far too many houses that are lying vacant. Those homes lie vacant because of delays in pushing through orders to fix them. In some cases they are held for decanting purposes when major renovation schemes take place, although Members can cite examples of houses held for decanting that have never been used. However, if it is pointed out to the Housing Executive or housing associations that a house is vacant and has not been used for a year, they reply that the house is being held for decanting purposes. That is nonsense. There should be a stricture on housing associations and the Housing Executive to ensure that any of their properties left vacant for more than three months are brought back into use. If a house becomes vacant and needs work, that work should be carried out quickly and not held up until a larger contract is available.

There is the ludicrous position in the private sector of people buying houses to hold — not to let — and those houses are sold six months later for an inflated capital value. The Minister of Finance and Personnel could address that issue by demanding that rates are paid on houses whether they are occupied or not. That may force

the owners to bring houses back into use because they would face a financial penalty if they did not.

There is the matter of houses held for grant-aid purposes while applications for grants to improve them are processed by the Housing Executive. We must ensure that those cases are dealt with quickly and not held over for long periods. There are several measures that could be taken, and I trust that the Minister will address the issue so that the problem can be overcome.

The Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Basil McCrea, and, while it is neither here nor there, I ask him to stick to the motion.

Mr B McCrea: Mr Deputy Speaker, I thank you for the direction. I would have been in danger of being wrong-footed. I thought that the Assembly was going to have a bit of fun and games, but Mr Wilson has taken us off in a completely different direction, and I feel quite inadequate to follow him. However, I will do my best.

I say a very loud "hear, hear" to the motion. Vacant property is a serious issue. In Dromore, where I am opening my office, there is a house nearby that has trees growing out of it. That cannot be right.

Mr Weir: That is the Green Party.

Mr B McCrea: That is the Green Party. *[Laughter.]* No one can say that the Assembly does not have a green policy.

In the centre of Lisburn, there is a string of eight retail properties opposite the museum that are not occupied because people are looking at the capital valuation they can accumulate on a month-by-month basis. I heard what Mr Wilson said, and if it is possible to make a 44% rate of return on a property on a year-on-year basis, we are all wasting our time. Frankly, as far as the proposer is concerned, it makes no difference whether one can get rates at 50%, or if something is clawed back; 44% cannot be beaten anywhere else.

To return to the motion, I believe that the issue can be split into two parts: what is going on in the private sector, which has been mentioned, and what is happening in the public sector. Lisburn, as the proposer of the motion said, has 133 vacant properties, which is 3.2% of the total housing stock. However, when I asked the Housing Executive what the problem was, I came across two issues. The first is a schemes-related contract. I was not sure what that meant, but I am told that it is important to the Housing Executive. The second issue is let for improvement. Organisations, so I am told, cannot run at 100% efficiency and some vacant properties are needed to allow for renovations and people moving in and out. However, it is disingenuous to say that there are 36,000 empty homes available. The survey of the Housing Executive domestic vacant rate —

Mr F McCann: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: Of course. Since we are being so friendly, I might as well.

Mr F McCann: The Member raises a valid point. However, Sammy Wilson referred to decanting, but there will be only one or two houses used for decanting as a scheme is carried through, so that does not make much of an impact. Lisburn has approximately 1,400 houses lying empty, and that is an indictment on the housing services for not bringing them back into play in the general housing market, especially with the number of people waiting to be rehoused.

4.00 pm

Mr B McCrea: I am grateful to the Member for his clarification of that point, which we both agree on.

The Housing Executive's review of domestic vacant property shows that 32% of vacant houses were classified as unfit and 14% were defective. Therefore, around 50% were useful. The rates review survey found that of the properties thought to be vacant, 21% were occupied, 30% were awaiting another tenant, 24% were derelict and 7% were being modernised. That brings to mind the quote: "Lies, damned lies and statistics".

I agree with the sentiment behind the motion, and I think that there will be general agreement that derelict property is a disgrace and ought to be dealt with. Dealing with it in a simplistic manner, however, is not the answer. We need to understand fully what is going on and find a satisfactory solution, and I am sure that the Minister for Social Development will take these points on board.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Member for West Belfast Mr Fra McCann for moving the motion. It is an important motion that draws attention to a serious problem for the community.

The number of vacant houses quoted in the motion is 36,000, which is 5.4% of housing stock. In England, 3% of the housing stock is vacant, so there is a significant difference between here and there. There must be compelling reasons for that difference, and it is important that we discover what they are.

If the Minister and the Department for Social Development find creative ways of making vacant properties serviceable, we could achieve a sizeable increase in the public housing stock in a few years. That would make a significant dent in the waiting lists.

If vacant housing were reduced to 3%, in line with England, we would increase our housing stock by approximately 16,000. That would be a tremendous achievement and, combined with new-builds, could successfully address much of our housing need. It would go a long way to addressing the urgent housing need of 17,000, which is currently outstanding.

The Semple Report clearly outlines that a carrot-and-stick approach must be used. It is wrong for people

to hoard and bank property in order to make a killing. It is important that penalties be imposed on those who attempt to do that. One possibility is a rating system that levies rates on vacant domestic properties. Semple goes to the extent of saying that, after a year, a 200% tax liability could be imposed. That would dramatically emphasise to the property owners who are deliberately allowing their properties to remain vacant that they should either rent or sell the properties to those who need them.

So there has to be a mixture of stick and carrot. As far as the carrot is concerned, it is important to provide incentives for those who own derelict properties to put them to good use again, such as the introduction of a generous grants system. Indeed, the properties could be vested and sold at a discount rate to first-time buyers, who could then take advantage of a generous grant regime to return those properties to proper habitable use.

It is important to be innovative in approaching the problem, and I hope that the Minister will encourage those who are advising her within her Department to think of innovative schemes that can come on-stream soon. That would assist in alleviating the tremendous housing need problems in many areas. I encourage the Minister to think carefully and to act quickly.

Dr Farry: Like others, I commend the Members who tabled the motion for bringing this important issue before the Assembly.

We have already heard about the 36,000 empty properties in Northern Ireland, roughly one in 20, or 5%, of the available housing stock. That situation is simply not sustainable. It shows a failure in the housing market, and it must be addressed.

Mr Maginness has already referred to the rating system and the financial incentives and penalties that could encourage people who possess empty properties to put them to much better use. I would go one step further and suggest that the Assembly consider asking the Chancellor for the power to either eliminate or reduce VAT on renovations — another proposal that was mentioned in the Semple Report. In particular, people who own big old properties that they have difficulty using would be encouraged to turn them into apartments, rather than simply knock them down and build new apartments in their place. That would protect many historic buildings, especially in the greater Belfast area.

The issue on which I want to focus has not yet been addressed today — residential segregation. Like any form of arbitrary division between people, residential segregation creates major distortions. In very crude terms, the basic problem is one of vacant properties in so-called Protestant areas and housing pressures and long waiting lists in some so-called Catholic areas. Often those areas are no more than a few hundred metres apart, but

territorial considerations are clearly getting in the way of addressing the housing need.

That problem carries significant costs, a point that was first addressed by Dr Jeremy Harbison in his research for the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) in advance of the consultation on 'A Shared Future' in 2002. It will inevitably be addressed in the research that OFMDFM has commissioned from Deloitte & Touche LLP, and which this Assembly is currently awaiting.

A range of measures must be put in place to address this problem. First, we must tackle the "them versus us" mindset that creates competition over territory and resources. We must tackle the notion that territory can be marked out as Protestant or Catholic, and we must ensure that housing is provided on the basis of need, not on the basis of an applicant's religion.

Although there is clearly a problem with public attitudes, there is also a problem with the housing authorities that get caught up in this territorial issue. My colleague Anna Lo has already referred to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's policy of effectively accepting that people can, by right, have single-identity housing. We are so conditioned to accept the historical divisions in this country that we have all too readily accepted that people have a right to live in a Protestant area or Catholic area. However, there would be an international outcry if we applied that approach to race and talked about white, black or Asian areas. Indeed, segregating housing on the basis of religion would be deemed illegal in any other country in the world.

Much more emphasis must be placed on mixed housing. Having been critical of the Housing Executive, I shall be generous and recognise that it is making major strides in that area with a number of pilot projects. Those initiatives must be developed much further and are supported by the Alliance Party.

We must also protect people who live in mixed housing areas. When intimidation has arisen in the past, there has been the novel notion of punishing the victim — forcing the victim to relocate, rather than tackling the perpetrator. That approach must change, and we must provide security for those people who wish to mix together.

Fundamentally, there is a major challenge for the Assembly to address the divisions in society. If, four years from now, we have not done that, the Assembly will have failed. We must note that, since the ceasefires in 1994, more peace walls have been built in Belfast keeping people apart and dividing housing areas. The challenge of tackling division touches on all public policy areas, not least that of housing. Tackling division is one way of addressing the issue of vacancies. I accept that tackling division is a multifaceted problem, but it

is crucial that the Assembly gives proper recognition to how segregation creates costs across society.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Lord Browne. As this will be Lord Browne's maiden speech, he will not be interrupted.

Lord Browne: This motion and the motion in the name of my colleague Mr Shannon debated before it adequately reflect the real and unquestionable housing crisis in Northern Ireland. As homeowners, we all appreciate the rapid rise in property prices and the difficulty that younger people face in attempting to make that initial step onto the property ladder. More importantly, as public representatives, we are all acutely aware of the challenges in providing social housing: the level of waiting lists, the lack of new builds and the state of the existing housing stock.

As stated by Mr McCann in the text of the motion and in his remarks, Sir John Semple's report into the provision of affordable housing is a crucially important document. It offers many ways in which tangible gains could be accrued from a host of policy shifts and initiatives from the Department for Social Development. I therefore welcome the public remarks made by the Minister, Ms Ritchie, that Sir John's report is at the top of her desk. I wish the Minister all the very best in her new post.

At the heart of the motion lies Sir John's suggestion that potentially up to 36,000 vacant dwellings could be refurbished to a liveable standard. It seems to be an obvious, efficient and effective method of adding to the available housing stock, providing homes already serviced by infrastructure and facilities. At the same time, it will revitalise communities that currently lie dormant, besmirched by a lack of social investment and underfunding. Many pockets in my constituency of East Belfast would benefit if the resources for such a scheme could be found.

As the Minister said, developers are all too often outbidding the Department in the purchase of land in areas of social deprivation that are crying out for social housing. As a result, scores of luxury turnkey apartments are being built on land that would otherwise have provided homes for those most in need. Although such apartments arguably add to an area, with price tags of over £200,000, they are firmly out of the reach of families and individuals, who have little or no other housing options. Private housing provision certainly has its place. However, the Department for Social Development must have the resources and the vision to play a long game in relation to land purchase and, if necessary, the ability to thwart the negative effect of land banking.

I was both interested and shocked to learn that the agreed definition that Sir John used for affordability rests at 35% of a householder's gross income.

I was interested in that because that sets a tangible level for purchasing a property, but I was also shocked by how far financial expectations are out of kilter with realistic purchase prices and rental costs.

4.15 pm

Although people who remain unemployed in the long term because of disability or any other contributing factor will, naturally, be catered for, those in a full-time employment and working for the minimum wage would have less than £300 a month to pay towards their dwellings. A landlord or bank would be more likely to laugh at them than hand over keys, yet thousands of people regularly find themselves in such a position.

Similarly, the days of securing a mortgage of twice, three times or even five times a person's annual income are well and truly over. House buyers can only expect to receive a mortgage for an amount that is simply deemed manageable by their lender, and certainly for a longer period than the standard 25 years. While it may be predicted by some, the result of a property crash and the negative equity that would inevitably follow would be unbelievably catastrophic to an economy that is, I believe, finally starting to find its feet again.

There is no quick-fix solution to the housing problem, but nevertheless a solution is required. I have no problem in supporting this motion and that proposed by Mr Shannon in the earlier debate on affordable housing. I hope that this issue will be afforded the importance and Assembly time that it deserves —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your time is up.

Lord Browne: I hope that in time we will establish a level of stability and sustainability.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I offer my congratulations on your appointment and wish you well.

I thank the proposer of the motion, my party colleague Fra McCann. Last week's 'Strabane Chronicle' reported that a young family living in a house in a row of 11 Housing Executive properties in one of the town's estates was put at risk by a fire in one of the derelict houses in that row. According to a family member, it was not the first time that a fire had been started there. That family member fears that sooner or later someone will be injured — perhaps a resident, one of the children, or a member of the emergency services.

Apparently, the derelict houses in the row have been vacant for over two years. In my experience, the Housing Executive has done a lot of good work in Strabane, but in this particular case, local people feel that something should have been done much sooner.

As a general principle, responsible bodies and organisations should refurbish and re-let vacant properties as soon as possible to provide housing opportunities, to

prevent vandalism and to ensure the safety of residents. Several Members have already made that point. Five hundred and fifty-five households have applied to be put on the waiting list in Strabane, 197 of which have reported housing stress. Omagh has a waiting list of over 600 households, 160 of which are in urgent need. As I said in the previous debate, we must not forget that there is a human side to the statistics and that there are people in real difficulties.

Given that there is a lack of affordable housing, undue delay in dealing with vacant properties is unacceptable. I wonder what causes the delay: is it bureaucracy? We must determine whether bureaucracy is preventing regeneration programmes, particularly those that are planned in conjunction with the community and voluntary sector, from moving forward efficiently and effectively.

Our progress in dealing with vacant properties — particularly in dealing with the kind of scenario that I have outlined — has to be much quicker. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Spratt: I support the motion. The extraordinary level of vacant homes is an unacceptable waste of resources. Given the current housing climate, which was so well debated earlier, that waste is unjustifiable. I am sure that, like me, other Members can tell stories of long waiting lists for public housing in their areas. Even in the cases of most need, when the applicant has a high number of points, there is no guarantee that they will be accommodated quickly. When somebody who is in dire personal circumstances comes to a Member, it is hard to explain to them why their problems cannot be resolved urgently when many homes in the locality lie empty.

There are many working-class areas in South Belfast — particularly Protestant ones — about which it is an understatement to say that housing is a problem. In this debate, we should consider not only the wasted potential of vacant property but the negative impact that it can have on the surrounding environment. That is a major problem in the Village area, which is in the Donegall Road area of my constituency, in which there are hundreds of unoccupied properties. Property in the public or private sector that is allowed to lie vacant in the long term can drag the character of an area down. A house that lies empty for any significant length of time — especially if it is allowed to become derelict — can become an unattractive focal point in a neighbourhood, no matter how well maintained the remaining homes. It can become a hazard to the health and safety of local people and a magnet for antisocial behaviour, as was said earlier in the Chamber. Threats to the appearance and harmony of an area can originate from one house, but Members can imagine the impact on a community when such threats emerge from 400 houses.

I acknowledge that vacant homes are not the only problems that face the Village area. The Blackstaff ward has one of the highest levels of housing deprivation in Northern Ireland. A great deal of the occupied housing is also in an appalling condition. Some residents are without proper heating or proper bathroom and lavatory facilities. That should be unthinkable in the modern age. It is essential that such problems are tackled in parallel with the problem of vacant homes.

The existence of so much vacant property acts as an impediment to improving an area and exhibiting the pride of the local community. It also acts as a significant barrier to inward investment. Investment can often play a major role in lifting neighbourhoods out of deprivation. It should be noted that the existence of vacant property is an issue for the business as well as for the residential sector. A number of sites and buildings around Belfast could provide an economic boost to their vicinity if their potential were harnessed and put to use.

It is early days for the new Executive, but it is in locations such as the Village that devolution will have to make a difference. The problems in the Village are not new, but the poor conditions have been allowed to exist for far too long. Studies have been carried out and strategies have been drawn up, but those are of little comfort to people who live in such conditions. Measures have to be implemented in the Village area; we have to see a vast improvement as soon as possible in the vacant properties and in all the other problems of the area. That has to be one of the most urgent priorities in South Belfast. Consequently, I have to warn the Minister that she will probably hear from me and from other representatives of the area in future.

Mr Elliott: The House has heard much about the urban areas of the Province, so it will come as no surprise that I want to talk about the problems of vacant properties in rural areas of Northern Ireland. Today's three motions — the processing of planning applications, affordable housing, and vacant properties — are closely linked and come into one domain.

Statistics show that the west of the Province has the highest number of vacant properties, with the Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council area having the highest proportion — 10.8% of private housing stock is vacant. Close behind are Cookstown, Omagh and Fermanagh, which all have a high percentage of vacant properties. Why? It is linked to the planning process and affordable housing, which the previous two motions were concerned with.

A major issue is the planning criteria for vacant or replacement dwellings. Applicants go to great lengths to prove to planners that their dwelling has not been abandoned. As soon as that has been proved, the planners ask for proof that the house is not structurally sound, because if it is it must be repaired rather than replaced.

That is one bureaucratic system that the people of Northern Ireland can do without, and I hope that the Minister takes that on board. Although planning is not in the Minister's direct remit, I hope that she, along with the rest of us, can influence it, because it is costing the people of the Province a vast amount of money.

Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council has the highest percentage of vacant properties, yet it has a huge number of foreign workers, which the factories in the area cannot do without, who cannot get homes — just like local people. Property has become unaffordable and first-time buyers cannot get homes. I ask the Government to take that issue on board.

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

Interestingly, recent statistics highlight that in 1992 some 31,000 homes were vacant, a figure that has increased to about 36,000. If that trend continues without being addressed, in another 10 years the figure will have increased by 10%. Therefore I ask that the issue be dealt with urgently.

Mr Campbell: I support the motion and note that many Members mentioned the extent of the problem. As Chairman of the Committee for Social Development, I assure Members that the Committee will take an abiding interest in the topic.

Over the past 15 years, the figures for vacant dwellings — despite a slight variation between 36,000 and 38,000 over the past year or two — have oscillated between a low of 30,000 and a high of 40,000; at present the figure is 38,000. The problem of vacant housing stock has not emerged in the past two years — although it has undoubtedly been exacerbated in that time — it has been an abiding problem for which a solution has not been found. I hope that the Minister will look for an innovative and progressive solution.

I note that the Semple Review mentioned an empty homes agency. The Committee and other Members and I may want to look at that and see how it might work.

4.30 pm

However, if we examine much of what passes for empty homes as a global phenomenon — be there 30,000 or 40,000 — there has been a combination of problems in housing estates in many parts of Northern Ireland. Problems such as antisocial activity, paramilitary involvement and other issues associated with some of the housing estates have contributed to a perception that these are not desirable places to live.

In the view of many, the Housing Executive has struggled to allocate one or two houses to keep the voids ticking over. That approach has not worked. In my constituency there are several large estates, and the perception is that they are not desirable places in which to live. The problem is compounded, and there are not only 10, 20, 50 or 100 empty properties but

hundreds of voids. In one case, the Housing Executive eventually had to issue a demolition order, because it could not allocate certain properties and get them back into circulation.

There must be a cross-cutting approach to this problem. The Housing Executive cannot merely look at the issue and try to allocate properties in those estates despite the problems — some of which may be throwbacks to the 1980s — still being there. That has obviously not worked.

There must be a co-ordinated approach between the Department for Social Development, the Department of the Environment and the police. In other words, the message must be sent to people who live in those estates that there is no place for drug dealers and those who breach the law or engage in antisocial activity. Such people are not welcome there, and everybody, including all public representatives, must support that drive to get rid of lawbreakers.

If the Department for Social Development and the Department of the Environment do that, areas of perceived unattractiveness can be changed into areas that are attractive and desirable. That will be a more likely key driver to getting a resolution rather than the piecemeal approach that appears not to have worked over the past 15 or more years.

I hope that the Minister adopts an innovative and dynamic approach. Members have mentioned the escalating prices and the fact that homeowners simply sit tight on an acquisition that grows in value every day. There are individual properties like that, and we must do something about that, but we have whole areas in the social-housing spectrum in which hundreds of properties are void. That can, and must, be tackled. I hope that the Minister will have listened to this debate, will listen to the Social Development Committee's proposals and will come up with a solution to the problem.

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie):

I welcome, you, Mr Deputy Speaker, on your first occasion in the Chair and my colleague Mr Dallat, who was in the Chair previously. I wish you both well.

I thank the Members, Fra McCann and Mickey Brady, for bringing this serious and vexatious issue to the House. There is absolutely no doubt that there is a serious problem with housing, that there is a crisis, which was identified in the previous debate, and that the issue of vacant property must be addressed. There are many reasons for properties lying vacant, many of which are due to the past conflict situation, antisocial behaviour and drugs. They present a hazard to the community and must be addressed.

Never mind the "here" and "there" that Mr Wilson mentioned earlier, we are in the here and now, and we must address this matter.

I wish to set out the background to the problem. As the motion states, at least 36,000 homes lie vacant across Northern Ireland. Given the current crisis in the provision of social and affordable housing, this debate must serve to bring the problem to the fore and to seek solutions.

I agree that the availability of 36,000 homes would certainly help to relieve the pressure on the supply of housing, but, as the Member for Lagan Valley Basil McCrea said, a more complicated picture lies behind that headline figure. Only a small proportion of those properties are social housing. The majority of those homes are in the private sector, and data is not available on the reasons why they are vacant. However, we know that 14,000 of those properties have been declared unfit, and only 5,000 social dwellings are currently unoccupied. More than half of those social dwellings are undergoing major repairs, improvements, or are being used for decanting — which means that families occupy them temporarily while their own social houses are renovated.

Mr Shannon: Does the Minister agree that, rather than using such properties for decanting, perhaps mobile homes would be more suitable so that houses can be released immediately?

Ms Ritchie: I thank the Member for his intervention, but gone are the days when such families would be placed in caravans or mobile homes. I have had personal experience of seeing people living in mobile homes or caravans in winter while their Housing Executive properties were being renovated, and I saw water running down walls, extensive condensation, and many people who suffered from ill health as a result. Several years ago, SDLP representatives sat on the board of the Housing Executive and their intervention ensured that people would no longer have to endure living in mobile homes and caravans during decant periods.

Around 700 houses are vacant due to their locations and about 1,000 are earmarked for resale, development or demolition, which leaves only about 300 that are available for immediate re-let. Why are those properties vacant? It is primarily due to location. Non-traditional types of housing have also proved unpopular, such as maisonettes, which are difficult to let.

The growth of new property in the private-rented sector at various locations, combined with favourable housing benefit levels, make the less popular dwellings even more difficult to let. Although some empty properties are derelict, many are empty due to changing population profiles, and some are vacant due to the fairly recent practice of investors purchasing properties for capital growth value only. It is no longer “buy to let”, but “buy to sit”. That is unacceptable; empty properties are a luxury that we can no longer afford.

As well as being a valuable but unutilised asset at a time when housing demand is rising, empty properties attract antisocial behaviour. Such properties are unpopular

with those living in neighbouring properties, and they blight existing communities as they fall into disrepair because their physical condition quickly deteriorates when neglected.

What is currently being done to address those issues? Working in partnership with the Housing Executive, the Department has put in place a number of measures to address the problem of empty homes in both the public and private sectors. For instance, estate strategies involving improvement, sale or selective demolition have been put in place in many areas.

The general oversupply problems of the growth centres that are in towns such as Craigavon, Antrim and Ballymena have been systematically addressed. The situation has improved, although further work is needed. There has been demolition and environmental improvement work at interfaces. Urban renewal programmes that have involved the improvement or replacement of dwellings, or a combination of both, have been introduced in private areas.

The Housing Executive can avail itself of several laws to intervene when domestic property is unoccupied or where, due to deterioration, property is likely to become, and remain, vacant. The Housing Executive's power to vest land and dwellings for housing has been used extensively to facilitate large-scale redevelopment and regeneration in areas where poor housing stock was concentrated.

The Housing Executive also has powers to secure those vacant private-sector dwellings that cause a nuisance or damage to adjoining occupied properties. It also has the power to encourage owners to bring properties that are in disrepair back into use. The private-sector grants scheme can assist owners in improving existing dwellings and bringing vacant stock back into use.

The law also empowers the Housing Executive to acquire land and dwellings and to pay compensation to the owner or occupier. Significantly, however, none of the provisions outlined provide it with powers to bring empty private-sector dwellings back into use.

As Members will now realise, vacant properties create a significant and complex problem that has no easy or quick solution. Against that background, last year the Department for Social Development initiated a review into affordable housing. That review made several recommendations about the high level of empty properties in Northern Ireland. To move forward, many recommendations require cross-Government working.

As I said in today's earlier debate on the affordable housing crisis, this Thursday I will propose to the Executive that an interdepartmental group or task force be set up. Given the views that the parties expressed in their manifestos and the comments that were made in today's debates, I look forward to getting support from

all the Executive parties, because the crucial issue is money. To put it bluntly, if I had the money, I would build the houses, and I would deal with the problem of empty properties. Semple's 'Review into Affordable Housing' recommends the introduction of measures to encourage the return of empty dwellings in the private sector to housing use.

There must be a more proactive approach to managing empty homes in the social and private sectors. I want to act on that, which is why I wrote to the Housing Executive today to ask it to produce an empty homes strategy, along the lines that Semple recommended. That strategy will address several areas, such as creating and maintaining a register of homes that lie empty for longer than six months and making greater use of existing powers to occupy and vest empty homes. It will also create initiatives to encourage owners to bring properties back into use by using private-sector grants, it will set up a rental-support scheme to help owners find suitable tenants, and it will provide housing management advice.

Subject to the findings of that strategy, I will also consider introducing legislation to extend the powers of intervention along the lines of the English empty homes management order. In my letter, I asked the Housing Executive to provide me with a progress report on the empty homes strategy by the summer. However, that is a short period in which it has to do a considerable amount of work.

It is worth noting that 5.4% of the housing stock in Northern Ireland is vacant, compared to 3% in England, where there are plans to further reduce that percentage. My Department will set the Housing Executive a target of moving towards a level of empty properties. Within five years that target will be 1% above the English level, as recommended in the Semple Review. The Housing Executive will also consider developing a scheme to provide for the release of empty social-sector properties for purchase by first-time buyers who are on low incomes.

I will also ask my colleague the Minister of Finance and Personnel to make strong representations to the Chancellor of the Exchequer to reduce to 5% the VAT that is levied on refurbishments.

4.45 pm

Often, empty properties are easy to spot, because their vacancy is usually a result of neglect or failure. However, many apartments have been purchased by investors to sit empty; they are harder to deal with. No lights are on and nobody is at home. That situation must be dealt with. I hope that those investors will take that simple message from the debate. In order to rectify the situation, Semple has recommended that rates should be payable on vacant properties, with liability rising to 200% if vacant for a year or more. It should no longer

cost nothing to leave a property vacant. The increased cost may deter investors from buying to sit and may encourage them to return to buy-to-let investment. It may also encourage owners of derelict properties to deal with the unfitness of the properties or to sell them. However, the issue will require further discussion across Departments before it can be agreed upon.

If Semple's recommendations are implemented, the Department for Social Development will need professionals and the public to bring such properties to its attention. Creating awareness of the empty homes problem and marketing the role of the Housing Executive, of professionals and of the public will be essential. Everyone in the wider community has a duty in that regard. Dealing with empty homes will encourage regeneration and vibrant, sustainable communities. It will help to achieve the shared future that Dr Farry referred to earlier.

I want to deal with points that were raised by Members. Mr Basil McCrea referred to the empty homes strategy. I have already mentioned that I have written to the Housing Executive today. I hope that it will have reported back by the summer. Rest assured that if it has not, I will pursue the issue with it. My colleague Mr Maginness referred to the reduction in the percentage of empty homes. The Semple Report recommends that my Department should set the Housing Executive a target of 1% above the English level of void properties within five years, and that the empty homes strategy should address the issue. I will monitor its progress closely.

Dr Farry referred to the shared future. I have no problem with that. As part of the Good Friday Agreement, it was envisaged that people should be able to participate in a shared future. With regard to housing, they should be able to choose to live where they want, free from intimidation, wherever they feel safe. However, as has been stated earlier in the Assembly, just under 95% of Housing Executive developments are occupied by more than 70% of persons from one or other of the two major communities. Therefore, a new approach must be developed in order to make the shared future that has been envisaged a reality. I intend to pursue that.

Mrs McGill raised the issue of empty properties in Strabane and inaction by the Housing Executive. In my experience, the Housing Executive goes to great lengths to secure vacant or void properties. Steel shutters — which I do not like, because I believe that they send out their own message — are placed over windows and doors. Unfortunately, however, the scourge of antisocial behaviour is always present, and vandalism occurs despite regular checks being carried out. It was distressing to hear the report that Mrs McGill brought to the House. I will ask the Housing Executive for a report on what is wrong in that specific case. If Mrs

McGill provides me with the exact address, I will pursue the issue and write to her.

Jimmy Spratt raised the issue of the Village area of south Belfast, which has been the subject of much debate, both internally in the Housing Executive and the Department, and externally in the Village community. Certain demands have been made of my Department and me. However, the issues that the Member raised are serious. My Department, in conjunction with the Housing Executive and representatives from the local community, is working towards regeneration of the area.

In the past week, officials from my Department met to agree a way forward to regenerate the area, and another meeting has been arranged. I am aware of the problems. I have been pressed about those problems and have received letters from representatives of the Village community. I hope to visit the area shortly to meet the local community, to see the problems at first hand and consider how a resolution might be achieved. Obviously, that goes for other areas, whether they are in Belfast, Derry, towns throughout Northern Ireland or in the rural communities —everywhere for which the Department for Social Development is responsible.

Mr Shannon: Even Strangford?

Ms Ritchie: Even Strangford. *[Laughter.]*

I welcome the Chairman of the Committee for Social Development Mr Campbell's participation in the debate. He referred to the DSD, the DOE and the PSNI working together. I expect that the empty homes strategy, which I have already commented on, will come up with innovative approaches to cross-agency working to bring those properties back into use. I will ensure that my officials pass on Mr Campbell's ideas, along with the numerous others raised in the Chamber today, to the Housing Executive.

I am determined to lead my Department in implementing initiatives that will ensure that valuable, much needed resources are not wasted. I appreciate that some empty homes in Northern Ireland are a legacy of the past, but, with the recent return of power sharing, now is the time to deal with the problem of segregated communities and the housing problems that it has created. That step is not easy, but people in Northern Ireland must move to the situation where peace lines and segregated mindsets are removed and where communities can become more integrated.

The Assembly must work towards a shared future in which housing plays a major and pivotal role, and which will impact on the social, environmental, health and economic well-being of local communities. As Minister for Social Development, I wish to bring my Department to that point.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Ms Carál Ní Chuilín for the winding-up speech.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. For the record, I wish to point out that you have mispronounced my name, Mr Deputy Speaker. I have heard 20 different pronunciations of my name.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have the same problem sometimes.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Yes, I understand.

I welcome the debates on the motions this afternoon, which have been very good — and fair play to Fra McCann and Jim Shannon for moving them. There is an obvious synergy between the issues, and the level of interest in both of them has been indicated by the fact that the Minister for Social Development has been on her feet answering questions for 20 minutes each time. Both motions have touched Members in different ways.

Claire McGill is right; it is the people behind the statistics who matter most. The fact that there are 30,000 to 40,000 empty houses is an indictment to all Members, and I welcome opportunities for interdepartmental approaches to the issue.

Naomi Long raised an issue about the Right to Buy scheme, which concerned equality, and that is at the heart of the matter. In the past, people have tried to purchase their homes, but they are now in the situation where they cannot afford to do so. Access to housing is a big problem.

Most people have been accustomed to waiting between 10 and 15 years for a house, and many have accepted dereliction as a way of life. There is now an opportunity to consider an old problem with new thinking.

I welcome the idea of an empty homes strategy, and it should be introduced as a matter of urgency. Having such a strategy will send a clear message to private developers that they can no longer land-bank while people are living in hostels and house prices in local communities are driven upwards. In addition, the statutory responsibility of the Housing Executive will be brought to book, and people who live in hostels, or who are on waiting lists for homes, will get the clear message that Members are collectively taking their case as far as possible.

I welcome the Minister's comments on the north-west quarter and other quarters, and her remarks on other areas of development. I encourage her to talk to the residents' groups and to the people who live in the derelict communities and on the interfaces. Only they can tell the true story of what it is like to live there. Only they will appreciate the value of this debate and the action that I hope will be taken as a result.

Unless we tackle the problem of vacant properties head-on and put a value on people, their lives and their communities, we will be condemned to talking about dereliction for evermore. We must use the new era of power sharing to look at the issue pragmatically. We must have vision and be innovative, but we need to look beyond the laudable sentiments of a shared future. The issue is not about tribal politics and accepted segregation. It is about need, not greed.

I welcome and support both of the motions that have dealt with affordable housing, and I commend all my colleagues who have participated in the debates. I look forward to future debates on increased powers for vesting. I support interdepartmental co-operation and the call for more money, because houses cannot be built on sentiment alone.

Go raibh maith agat.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes that some 36,000 homes lie empty across Northern Ireland; calls upon the Minister for Social Development to take immediate steps to tackle the scandal of vacant properties; and recognises that this could go a long way to deal with the serious crisis which exists in the provision of social and affordable housing, highlighted by the Semple recommendations.

Adjourned at 4.57 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 22 May 2007

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

The First Minister (Rev Dr Ian Paisley): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. It has been brought to my attention that at some Committee meetings in this Building there has not been enough room for the general public or, on one occasion, the press. I ask you to look into the matter so that accommodation can be made available for those who wish to attend Committee meetings.

Mr Speaker: I will consider how the press and the public might be better accommodated. I remind the House that accommodation here is a very difficult issue. It will be a priority of the Assembly Commission in the coming months and years.

Mr McElduff: On a point of order. Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I wonder whether it is an absolute requirement that Members should wear a jacket when addressing the House. Has short-sleeve order been introduced yet?

Mr Speaker: The protocol regarding dress code in the House is very clear, and I should not have to remind Members about it.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Single Equality Bill

Ms Anderson: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises that discrimination operates in many different ways and on many different levels and encourages the Executive to bring forward harmonising legislation, in a single equality Bill, for discussion and consultation at the earliest opportunity.

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom labhairt ar son an ruin. In moving the motion and reflecting on our responsibilities, as Ministers or MLAs, to build a new society that guarantees equality for all in a shared future, Sinn Féin welcomes the fact that the single equality Bill is to be high on the agenda of the new Executive. Discussion on this key cross-cutting exercise has been ongoing for more than six years.

As we look to build a new future for all of our people, let us equip ourselves with the instruments and competency to do so.

Members, we live alongside discrimination and exclusion every day. Some of the barriers that inhibit our development as individuals, communities, or communities of interest, can be blatant or unseen. For example, women continue to suffer discrimination in gaining employment; in salary levels in the workplace; and through under-representation in public life. We have only to look around the Chamber to see what we must do. There is a long way to go to achieve proportional representation of women in this Chamber, among others.

As a legislative Assembly, we have the obligation and the power to put in place an equality framework that looks to the future of our developing and increasingly complex society. In the North, the fragmented array of legislative instruments applies different standards of protection across the discrimination strands. That has proved difficult, confusing and costly for individuals who are seeking to assert rights, and for employers and service providers who seek to understand and observe their legal obligations. Confused law is no law at all, and when that is added to the fact that discrimination is, in many cases, a multiple-identity issue, then the case for harmonisation is compelling.

The legislation in force is a hotchpotch of different Acts that need to be brought together into one compelling Bill, which sets out clear protections against the discrimination of groups, especially children. We need a robust conciliation and interpretation of the different legal instruments, which will harmonise and enhance them to produce a Rolls Royce of legislation.

It is no protection against discrimination that the law should simply declare discrimination to be illegal and leave the burden on victims to bring justice for themselves or their peer groups. An effective anti-discrimination Act must stipulate, in enforceable law,

the positive action that needs to be taken to ensure that discriminatory practices cease. It must include obligations on those who discriminate to undertake positive action to change existing practices that are discriminatory.

It has long been recognised that a "same-treatment approach" will never be enough to deliver substantive equality; and by that we mean equal outcomes. After all, people and groups do not start from the same place. Because of the discrimination and disadvantage suffered by certain groups, the playing field is not level, and additional measures are therefore needed to address those issues if equality is to be achieved. A combined affirmative-action/anti-discrimination model should be the baseline from which future legislative improvements are made.

It is clear to us that rather than merely affording grounds to make direct and indirect discrimination unlawful, the single equality Bill must contain positive duties to promote equality of opportunity and deliver substantive equality in society of the type that protects everyone.

It is our collective responsibility to move that process on.

A consultation exercise in 2002 was to have been followed by a draft single equality Bill, but that did not happen. Instead, it was decided that a further consultation exercise should be undertaken to consider in much more detail the key issues and main policy options. That second exercise, which took place in 2004, was wide-ranging and detailed, as were many of the responses that were received from key stakeholders.

The second consultation document identified the overall aim as being the harmonisation of equality law into a single legal instrument, and set out the principles on which such an instrument would be based. Among the stated principles were:

"to acknowledge ... human rights ... in their broadest sense, ... to demonstrate no regression from existing law ... [and] to minimise the tendency for [the creation of] hierarchies of inequalities".

Members should consider the process that is required from this point on. Two major public consultation exercises have already taken place and have secured substantive responses from all the key stakeholders, whose positions will not have significantly changed. Much work has already been done, which we must use and build on. I urge the Executive to introduce a draft single equality Bill that reflects the weight of submissions already received. It is vital that we progress this without any further delay and take the lead in developing a robust Bill that will prevent discrimination and promote equality of opportunity for all in the North.

We must legislate to respect the different needs of all the people who live here. If we merely plug gaps and, in effect, force the existing provisions into a single instrument, we shall end up with a cobbling exercise,

not a harmonisation exercise, and that will offend the principles of minimising hierarchies of inequality.

Therefore, let us build on the First Minister's remarks on 8 May about the past being the ways of yesterday. Let us set a course to make the discrimination and exclusion that many in our society have suffered, whether in the Shankill or Shantallow, the New Lodge or New Buildings, a thing of the past. Let discrimination and inequality belong to the ways of yesterday. I urge all Members to grasp the huge significance of what we do today. It is our obligation to do so. Our people deserve no less, regardless of their religious denomination or the colour of their skin.

Ba mhaith liom an rún a mholadh. I move the motion.

Mr McCausland: The issues of equality and human rights are important, and they should certainly be embedded in the heart of our vision for Northern Ireland. We can trace those issues back to the time of the Enlightenment, especially to the time of the Scottish Enlightenment. In fact, one of our local folk, Francis Hutcheson from County Down, contributed much to the development of the Scottish Enlightenment. These are issues that we should feel comfortable with.

However, the motion gives me cause for concern. The issue of a single equality Bill is a long-standing one. The proposer of the motion has mentioned the extensive consultations that have already taken place on the issue — but how extensive and inclusive were those consultations? I suspect that if we went out into the centre of Belfast, or any other part of Northern Ireland, and asked people on the street what they knew about a single equality Bill, or whether they were aware of the consultations that took place or had been asked to contribute to them, the vast majority would say that they knew nothing about it.

10.45 am

The reason for that could be that so much of the consultation has been conducted through what is generally described as "the voluntary sector". I refer to some figures about that sector, which has taken such a key role through organisations such as the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) on those matters. The monitoring reports of the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland for the years 2002-04 show an employment pattern of significant and increasing disadvantage — some might say, discrimination — against the Protestant community in the voluntary sector. The 2004 employment figures for NICVA, which is supposed to represent the community, show that only 40% of its staff came from the Protestant community, whereas 60% came from the Roman Catholic community. Other key organisations in that sector — for example, the Rural Community Network — have reached the stage at which their representation from the Protestant community is less

than 25%. Consequently, there is an issue about how inclusive and representative much of the consultation has really been.

There is another matter to which I wish to draw Members' attention. We are grateful to the Equality Commission — the key organisation in the equality sector — for sending a briefing by email yesterday in which it calls for greater enforcement powers. It might wish to use those powers against itself. This is an organisation that is tasked with monitoring and changing employment patterns in every section of Northern Ireland society, yet it cannot get that right itself. Among its staff there is a 60% representation from the Roman Catholic community — only 40% are drawn from the Protestant community. That is a deterioration from 2002, when Protestants represented 44% of the workforce and 56% came from the Roman Catholic community.

Key organisations in the voluntary sector, and the Equality Commission itself, have significant work to do to make themselves fit for purpose, so that there can be real debate and engagement on the issue of equality, the type of legislation that is required and, indeed, the sort of commission that is needed. We must get those matters right. It is an absolute disgrace that the Equality Commission, year after year, has abjectly failed to improve the position of its own employment pattern.

Before proceeding with a single equality Bill, we must demand that the Equality Commission and the voluntary sector, which represents — or so it claims — communities across Northern Ireland, put their house in order. For that reason, I oppose the motion.

Mr Kennedy: I welcome the opportunity to speak in this important debate. I want to make some preliminary remarks in respect of my new responsibility as Chairperson of the Committee of the Centre. I shall then outline some personal remarks on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party.

The Committee of the Centre has met on only one occasion since restoration and has not had the opportunity to consider a single equality Bill. I shall therefore limit my comments, as Chairperson, to more general observations on the proposal for a Bill to harmonise equality legislation and on the role that the Committee may wish to take on that issue.

I expect that the Committee will attach considerable importance to equality issues and will be provided with a detailed briefing on the work of the equality directorate in the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) at the earliest opportunity. The Committee has provisionally included in its work programme a discussion of policy issues that relate to a single equality Bill.

In advance of more detailed consideration by the Committee of the Centre, I nevertheless wish to signal the Committee's interest in the single equality Bill and

its expectation that it will be involved in discussions and consultations on the Bill and related policy matters.

In its early consideration of policy matters that relate to the single equality Bill, I expect that my Committee will wish to be entirely satisfied, most importantly, that the objectives of the proposed Bill are clear, unambiguous and understood by all those who have a relevant interest. Without such clarity, it will be impossible to assess whether the provisions of the Bill will achieve the intended outcomes.

I have no doubt that my Committee will wish to see robust evidence that the Bill will produce real and tangible benefits for all those whom it aims to protect. I anticipate that my Committee will wish to be reassured — while welcoming, in principle, the value of harmonised legislation — that the provisions of the Bill are practicable and will be implemented without unnecessary bureaucracy.

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

I turn to my own view and that of my party. The Ulster Unionist Party believes that, for too long, the issue of equality in Northern Ireland has been the subject of a politicised mantra, and that, for too long, it has been used as a political football, particularly by Sinn Féin. The equality issue has been used to somehow justify ideological agendas that belong to yesterday. Just as we must build a new society in Northern Ireland, we must confront the challenges of securing equality of opportunity for all. We need an equality agenda that deals with the twenty-first century and that is not stuck in the past.

There is a good case for a single equality Bill that brings together equality protections, simplifies procedures, and rationalises the numerous and, at times, extremely burdensome provisions of existing legislation. There is an economic and social imperative to guarantee equality of opportunity. A prospering economy and a fairer society require equality legislation that is robust and flexible, secures equality of opportunity for all, and provides effective remedies to unfair discrimination. That is why the Ulster Unionists will support a single equality Bill that provides appropriate equality safeguards.

Mrs D Kelly: My party and I support the motion, unlike Mr McCausland, who appears to lack knowledge of the membership of the voluntary and community sector. I wish to begin by placing on record my thanks to the community, voluntary and private sectors for their valuable contributions to the single equality Bill process to date.

Mr McCausland: Does the Member accept that the figures that I quoted were all taken from annual reports that have been published by the Equality Commission?

Mrs D Kelly: Indeed, but those figures relate to the employment make-up of those organisations, not the membership make-up. I am aware that many community and voluntary sector members represent the loyalist, Protestant and unionist sector. Anyone can pick out statistics to make particular points.

It is unfortunate that, for some in the DUP, equality is still a matter for Catholics. I hope that the DUP will take an objective interest in its own communities, which suffer from inequality in many ways.

I will now return to my original point. The community, voluntary and private sectors responded in detail to the consultation on the issue, and brought to the table ideas and facts we can depend on: if only the response from the Government were so dedicated.

Under direct rule, the single equality Bill was occasionally degraded and treated as a political pawn, as was much else. That was disgraceful, given the position of all parties on equality and rights. However, it would be unforgivable were that situation not to improve now that we have control of our own decisions.

The eyes of the world are upon us now as they will not be again for some time. This is our chance to show that Stormont will offer a regime of equal opportunity and that no one will be discriminated against in the way that so upset our history. I am deeply concerned that if we continue as we have started, we will let ourselves, and our voters, down.

Never has it been clearer that there is a mandate in the North for power to be shared, and to be seen to be shared. A single equality Bill must reflect the wish of the people. No Member is here on a mandate of discrimination. However, unwillingness to co-operate with the creation of the Bill, and lack of effort and drive, are a backhanded show of support for the discrimination that tore our society apart in the past.

As I said earlier, the response to consultation on the single equality Bill was remarkable. A variety of intelligent and well-argued responses covered a multitude of positions, but represented much shared ground as well. In light of that, the consultation report that was released in March — quietly, and to a select few — was, to put it mildly, frustrating. Various reasons have been suggested for the paper's brevity, lack of detail and absence of imagination, but none was convincing.

Indeed, the matter has been on the long finger for too long and the Assembly must move quickly on it. However, that is no reason to ignore the progress that has already been made: quite the opposite. Even the framing of the process has, suddenly, gone into reverse. It was clear that the remit of the Bill was to mainstream legislation and to harmonise as far as possible — not as little as possible. However, that is what we hear from the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy

First Minister — in a whisper, of course, so as not to upset anyone.

I wonder how comfortable the people who elected us would feel about their rights and liberties being handled in that way. I suggest that the public likes its politicians to behave openly and accountably, to get on with the job of working together and to come up with the kind of results that befit their salaries. Let us inject some common sense into our approach, and get on with doing just that.

Working together accountably means engaging with the detail of the local framework, while remembering the considerable protection given by European legislation, on which we can all rely and agree. However, it is not necessary to look continually over our shoulder at Westminster. We must do something impressive and directional in the Assembly, and present that to Westminster as evidence of our capability.

The North is currently a global leader in terms of equality legislation. Is that a reason to be half-hearted, or outright resistant, when engaged with improving the system? I think not. Let us keep the ball rolling, and capitalise on the one area in which we really excel. Let others come to us to learn about best practice.

I urge the Assembly to take a consistent view of all areas, and urge Members to remember their parties' policies.

Mrs Long: On behalf of the Alliance Party, I welcome, in general, the wording of the motion. However, my comments will make it clear that I take issue with some of what the proposer of the motion said in moving it.

The Alliance Party welcomes the opportunity to comment on the matter. The party has, for some time, supported the introduction of such legislation, and its members are pleased that that will be taken forward.

A single equality Act should amend, standardise, harmonise and extend equality law in its application, not only by extending the scope of the existing regimes but by further innovative thinking and development. New areas of equality of access to employment and services must be considered. Also, as medicine progresses, for instance, there will be increasing discrimination on the basis of genetic predisposition. We must be aware of such developments now as we review the legislation.

There should be no regression in what we do; protections should be upwardly enhanced as we harmonise.

There should not be a hierarchy between forms of discrimination. However, the Alliance Party believes that too much prevalence is given to religious and political matters above all others in Northern Ireland. That leads not to equality but to discrimination against

those for whom religious and political affiliations are not an issue.

11.00 am

The Alliance Party believes that our approach to equality must be governed by certain principles, and I will put them on the record. The individual citizen is the foundation of society, and all individuals are of equal worth and should be treated as equal citizens. Individuals are also members of religious, ethnic, cultural and regional communities. Those identities are open and fluid, and people can hold a range of identities and loyalties to different structures and different levels of government.

Citizens have different needs, and equal treatment requires full account to be taken of difference. When equality ignores difference, uniformity of treatment leads to injustice and inequality. Society needs to be cohesive, as well as respectful, of diversity, and it should nurture diversity while fostering a common sense of belonging and shared identity among its members.

On that basis, I will touch briefly on three issues. First, although I am in favour of the principle of equality of outcome, I cannot subscribe to the notion that it should be engineered. It is important that we end discrimination rather than choose to reverse its direction or target; we should seek to end discrimination completely. To merely reverse the direction and change the targets of discrimination would be destructive and discriminatory towards others. Furthermore, we should not rest at saying that equality of opportunity is sufficient. We should not shy away from taking affirmative action to build capacity and to encourage participation. We can do that and yet stop well short of positive discrimination.

Secondly, on the issues of fair employment and equality monitoring, it is vital that we continue to adequately review and monitor equality in employment and recognise the importance and improvements that have been made over the years. However, the use of community background, particularly the residuary method for identifying people with a community with which they have chosen not to identify themselves, for the purposes of monitoring is an unacceptable breach of human rights.

People have the right to define their own identity, and that right should be equally respected whether the identity is common in this society or rare. The cornerstone of equality is that everyone is treated equally. Therefore, those who choose not to associate themselves with a community designation must have their choice respected as much as those who choose to associate with a designation. To continue using the residuary method of designation for monitoring purposes undermines the basis of equality in society.

We must therefore review how equality is monitored in order that people are not discriminated against.

Thirdly, the motion states that:

“discrimination operates in many different ways and on many different levels”.

However, I want to address one way that is pertinent in this place. The lack of equality in the Chamber between Members who choose to designate themselves as unionist or nationalist and those who choose not to so designate is a matter that the Assembly must take seriously. In previous debates, Members have discussed the need for increased diversity in the Chamber. It is therefore vital that the voting mechanisms of the Assembly are reflective of that diversity.

The discrimination in the Assembly's voting system must be addressed so that those of us who choose to define ourselves in more inclusive ways are not ignored or counted as less important in key votes. The current voting system dismisses a positive statement of our identity as a member of the United Community group as simply “Other”. Until that inequality in the Chamber is dealt with, it will be difficult for us to have credibility on the issue of equality outside it.

Lord Morrow: The DUP has great concerns about the motion. My colleague David Simpson and I sought to table an amendment to the motion that would have resulted in universal support in the House. It is regrettable that it was not accepted, but we must debate the motion as we see it.

I listened to the proposer of the motion and was appalled to hear her be selective in who would benefit from a single equality Bill and who would not. I remind the Member that there are many victims out there, and she would know something about them.

They were not mentioned. They are not to be included. My party would include them, and would defend and uphold their rights. For that reason, we sought to table an amendment.

No political party is opposed in principle to an equality Bill. However, these issues seem to take legs, and to go in all directions. They often lose the focus of what they are supposed to deliver. We must ensure that it is the public — those who are not being treated equally — who benefit in the end; not barristers' bank accounts. We used to criticise the amount of equality legislation and its impact on workloads, and we talked sarcastically of the development of an “equality industry”. Things have deteriorated to such an extent that that situation now exists. The “equality industry” has become a professional term. One website for diversity managers, equal opportunities and social inclusion workers advertises itself as the “home of the equality industry.” Is that what we seek? Is that the equality we set out to achieve? Hardly; yet there are

many lawyers who are only too happy to see that industry continue and mushroom even further.

In his recent blog on the website of 'The Guardian', Peter Tatchell argued for a comprehensive equal rights Act in Great Britain, that would ensure that:

"all forms of discrimination were tackled in a uniform and coherent way."

He went on to stress that upgraded protection should be provided on the basis of :

"marital status, social background, genetic inheritance, physical appearance, area of residence and medical condition."

Just where would any finance minister begin to deal with every individual who might have a gripe about any of those issues?

In 2002, Rogers Brubaker argued that potential benefits to individuals were being lost on account of a phenomenon which he termed "groupism". He stated that an equality industry, or set of vested interests have exaggerated the importance and significance of group social identities at the expense of the individuality of the people concerned.

He maintained that that was harmful to minority social groups and that the vested interests of the equality industry — to which he attributed "groupism" — have been created by state recognition of social group statuses and their inscription into equality measures.

Recognition by the state generates its own dynamic in the agendas and the positions of organisations claiming to represent minority groups and individuals. The new equality "mega-quango" across the water, the Commission for Equality and Human Rights, is up and running. It is estimated that it will spend about £50 million a year. Trevor Phillips will become the chairman, but of his 13 fellow commissioners, three are trade unionists, two are academics, three are civil servants — or quangocrats — and three are professionals in non-governmental organisations. Only two have jobs in the wealth-creating sector. They will be paid salaries of between £130,000 and £134,000.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

I congratulate my colleague Martina on tabling the motion, and I welcome the opportunity to take part in debate. A variety of legislation attempts to deal with inequalities in all areas of life. Sometimes that leads to unnecessary confusion. A single equality Act has the potential not only to harmonise equality law, but to extend the scope of equality legislation.

A single law can address the interests of everyone and provide a framework for achieving equality for everyone. However, much more than a commitment is needed to prohibit discrimination and to promote equality of opportunity.

Any single equality Bill must be underpinned by equality of access, of outcome, and of condition.

Last week, we debated the under-representation of women in public life and the consequences of that for the development of policies that are sensitive to the needs of women. There are many areas of life in which women face discrimination.

I wish to concentrate on the elements of a single equality Bill and any related consultations that are of particular significance to women. I support the broadening of marital and family status to include all persons with dependents, whether they are married, single, or cohabiting — including opposite-sex and same-sex couples. That would provide a greater degree of security for many people through entitlements to pensions and other benefits, and in the general treatment that they receive.

The under-representation of women in large sectors of the economy is of critical importance. That issue cannot be tackled effectively without affirmative action that is directed at the structural barriers that prevent women from participating equally within the labour market. Despite the Sex Discrimination Act 1975 and other equal pay legislation, there is still a problem of low and unequal pay for women. Women earn on average only 81% of male full-time earnings, and female workers remain disproportionately concentrated in low-wage jobs.

The recommendations of the equal pay task force on flexible working patterns, the provision of childcare, and the tax benefit system must also be examined and potentially addressed by a single equality Bill if we are to achieve equality of outcome.

Pregnancy and maternity continue to be a chief basis of discrimination against women. There has been a clear increase in the number of cases taken to employment tribunals. Clarification is needed in the single equality Bill so that direct discrimination on grounds of pregnancy is defined as direct discrimination on grounds of sex.

If the single equality Bill is to be effective as a tool for enforcing the rights of all groups to equality of treatment, and for preventing all forms of discrimination, there must also be effective protections against victimisation and harassment.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Ms J McCann: No; I only have a short time to complete my remarks.

In the short period of available time, I have succeeded in highlighting only some of the important measures for ensuring equality of opportunity and outcome for women. The task of tackling deeply rooted discrimination and changing attitudes must be at the core of any commitment to end all forms of discrimination,

particularly against the most vulnerable in society. I hope that the Executive will publish a draft single equality Bill for discussion and consultation at the earliest opportunity. I support the motion.

Mr Campbell: I imagine that every political party, in Northern Ireland or elsewhere, is in favour of equality legislation, provided that it delivers what it is supposed to — a more equal society. My party does not oppose a single equality Bill in principle, but examination of what fair employment legislation has, in practice, delivered in the past leaves us with a jaundiced view of what such a Bill can achieve.

For example, we have seen the passing of the Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998, and the Fair Employment (Northern Ireland) Act 1989 — both pieces of legislation that would no doubt be endorsed by those who are promoting the single equality Bill. Implementation bodies emerged from those pieces of legislation: the Equality Commission and its predecessors. What results have the Equality Commission, and the legislation that provided for it, produced in Northern Ireland?

11.15 am

The Equality Commission is supposed to oversee issues regarding gender, religion and race. There is no doubt that the problems that continue to exist with gender are improving. It might be argued that they are not improving quickly enough, but they are improving. Issues to do with race need more work, but they are improving. The one area in which there is no improvement is the one that the hon Member for North Belfast Mr McCausland mentioned: the Protestant community in Northern Ireland. There is no improvement there; in fact matters are getting worse in spite of legislation that was made in the House of Commons and supported by those who say that they are in favour of equality. That makes the DUP very jaundiced about a single equality Bill.

The Equality Commission in place today does not rail against the discrimination of members of the Protestant community who apply for jobs in the police force — it actually supports that. It says that that is good. The Equality Commission is supposed to be against discrimination, yet it is in favour of it, and we are asked to support legislation like that. The Equality Commission that exists today does nothing about the worsening Protestant under-representation in the Civil Service. It recognises the issue but does nothing about it — and people want us to support an equality Bill that would replicate that?

It is easier proportionately for a Roman Catholic to become a member of the Police Service than it is for a Protestant to become a housing officer, but there is no implementation of the 50:50 rule as regards recruitment to the Housing Executive. Under-representation is

becoming worse because of legislation that we were told would deliver equality.

Those people who are prepared to say that they want equality for all should begin to turn the magnifying glass on the area where a lack of equality is getting worse and tell us what they plan to do about it.

Mr Storey: Does the Member agree that those who expound the virtues of equality need to ensure equality for Christians in Northern Ireland who have grave reservations about legislation that has been introduced that discriminates against them because they hold a particular religious view?

Mr Campbell: That is the case, and I thank my hon Friend for his point. Many in the Christian and evangelical community feel that they are being disadvantaged, and legislation that the Assembly is considering must address that. A Minister said yesterday that we have got to feel comfortable with the wording of legislation — but it also has to deliver the goods. If a single equality Bill could do that then the DUP would support it, but past experience shows that such a Bill would not, and that it would actually make matters worse for my community. Come up with the goods that will deliver pure and genuine equality, and we will support them.

Mr Elliott: Who could argue with the wording of the motion, which states:

“discrimination operates in many different ways and on many different levels”?

Of course it does. What concerns me is that mostly when republicans talk about equality and discrimination, one would think that they are the only people who are being discriminated against in the Province. That is far from the truth, and other Members who have spoken have alluded to that. The Member who moved the motion, as Lord Morrow said, almost talked of selective discrimination and selective equality. I am concerned that we will bring forward equality legislation that will actually discriminate against a section of the community in Northern Ireland.

Victims have been mentioned, but they have often been ignored in the equality process. What equality and rights did the families of the victims Fred Love and William Hassard in Fermanagh have when Sinn Féin/IRA erected a monument to an IRA murderer right beside where their family members were murdered by the IRA?

What rights and equality did the people who were killed in the Enniskillen and Omagh bombs or the Kingsmill massacre have? We could spend all day asking about the equality that those victims had. I am interested in hearing from Sinn Féin Members how they propose to address equality for those victims but, as yet, I have not heard anything.

Mr Storey: The IRA statement of 2005 endorsed the IRA campaign, describing it as “entirely legitimate” and handed over the baton to the party that sits opposite. Does the Member agree that the serious question must be asked of the party opposite whether it is of that view today?

Mr Elliott: I cannot disagree with the Member's comments, and I thank him for them. That question needs to be answered by those Members on the other side of the House — not by me. Those people are now in the Government of Northern Ireland, sitting in the Executive of this Assembly. Have they changed? They serve as Ministers acting on behalf of Her Majesty The Queen and her realm. I hope that they have changed; if so, I want to hear it clearly.

Any single equality Bill should not deal only with the issues of inequality and discrimination that I have mentioned — and I have talked about some negatives. The Bill should set a positive framework for the promotion of equality, especially for traditionally marginalised groups, such as people with disabilities and those with learning disabilities. Effective remedies for inequality must place an emphasis on disability. The distinct nature of disability inequality demands a focused approach in order to recognise the long-term social, economic and institutional nature of the discrimination and disadvantage experienced by disabled people.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was adopted in December last year and signed by our UK Government. The Convention, which is awaiting ratification at Westminster, offers clear progress on a range of areas. Those include raising awareness, protecting the integrity of the person, personal mobility, independent living, access to information and many more.

The single equality Bill may not, as yet, be able to legislate for the changes that will arise once the UN Convention is ratified by the UK. However, it is important to strengthen disability protection from the outset in anticipation of ratification. I therefore call for proactive and inclusive support for anything that emerges from this equality Bill. However, those on the other side of the House should realise that if there is to be equality, it will be for everyone, not only for those who seem to believe that they are the only people who have been discriminated against.

I was quite interested in the comments of the Member for West Tyrone Barry McElduff who asked if short-sleeve order had been introduced in the Chamber. My recollection is that it is an army regulation — I wonder in what army Mr McElduff picked that up.

Mr Dallat: Mr Deputy Speaker, I congratulate you on your elevation to high office.

The introduction of a single equality Bill presents new opportunities to go much further than harmonising anti-discrimination laws. Indeed, it is an ideal opportunity to extend protection well beyond that demanded by European Union directives. Furthermore, it is our opportunity to frame Northern Ireland's equality legislation more positively and to include proactive duties to promote equality of opportunity. In a world that is full of inequality, there is a need to demonstrate that, beyond a shadow of doubt, this is a fair place where reasonable adjustments are made in order to recognise disability and where there is fair participation by two communities.

The underlying principles of the single equality Bill must include a commitment to the following core principles: upward harmonisation of existing anti-discrimination and equality coverage; fulfilment of the Belfast Agreement mandates; adherence to European law and international best practice; provisions in accordance with existing equality duties under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998; and a positive, unified conception of equality — something that I have not heard this morning.

Several issues arise from the effort to harmonise existing laws. In particular, there must be no watering down of those laws. The added protection offered by section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 must be ring-fenced. Protection must be given to marital and family status, and there must be a clear understanding of what is meant by “disability”.

I share many people's concern that adequate protection is not offered to those who continue to experience the wrath of the paramilitary groups that still terrorise communities. It is unacceptable that families, having been intimidated out of their homes, are given nothing more than a piece of paper from the PSNI advising them that there is information that suggests that their lives are at risk. It is unacceptable that those families are left homeless — often for long periods of time — with little intervention from the Housing Executive or the Northern Ireland Office. That is not equality in any democracy. My heart goes out to those families who continue to experience inequality caused by terror groups who do not seem to have discovered that their day has gone — I hope, for ever.

Enforcement is all-important; any legislation that is not followed through is, to all intents and purposes, as useless as a handbrake on a canoe. The SDLP believes that there is an ideal opportunity to complement the Bill with a single equality tribunal, and that an independent equality appeals tribunal is justified. None of that rules out the increasing role for mediation that was suggested in the consultation paper.

There should be a recognition that considerably greater statutory powers and resources will be required

if an outcome-based approach to equality is to take root. In that respect, as in the fields of enforcement and monitoring, the Equality Commission has shown itself to be of great value.

Finally, let me emphasise the need to promote the extension of positive action measures to all grounds. Positive measures should be allowed, so as to ensure fair participation or good practice in order to facilitate full equality in practice. In these circumstances, and in an atmosphere of partnership, all our citizens are winners and there are no losers. Equality is no longer a demand — it is a right, enshrined in the Good Friday Agreement and emulated by genuine democracies throughout the free world. Sadly, there is much still to be done. Equality is not the remit of one party or another, but of all of us.

Here, at least, we can make a difference — although it is long overdue. In other parts of the world, through famine, disease, war, and unfair trading practices, there is no equality, no justice, and no hope. Let us go forward positively, accepting that in the past many people in both communities did not have equality — not even the right to live.

Finally, I was interested to hear Mr Storey calling for the rights of religious groups. A very short time ago he complained about a religious icon on Royal Mail postage stamps. I think that that underlines Mr Storey's hypocrisy.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún, agus ar dtús ba mhaith liom cothrom na Féinne a thabhairt do Martina as an rún a chur romhainn.

I commend Martina for proposing this motion. She also raised the matter at a meeting of the Committee of the Centre last Wednesday afternoon. She has highlighted the fact that the current legislation is very fragmented and that it needs to be pulled together and strengthened in the form of a harmonised single equality Bill. Martina also said that there was an obligation and an opportunity to do that now and that we have the power to deliver on the matter. The Executive can lead the way in this matter if they, and the Members of this House, have the political will.

It has also been pointed out that, to date, consultation has been extensive and that substantive contributions have been made to at least two major consultations so far.

11.30 am

Nelson McCausland said at the outset of the debate that he supported equality. However, I was counting the seconds until he said “however” or “but”. It was like one of those goals that is scored in the first minute of a football match. Nelson was very quick to qualify his support for equality by immediately reaching —

Mr Storey: If the Member is so keen to ensure that others are precise in their definition and support of equality, will he now condemn the IRA's 35-year murderous campaign and admit that it could not be described as having been in the interests of equality?

Mr McElduff: I thank the Member for his irrelevant intervention.

However, when Nelson McCausland spoke in support of equality, I was counting the seconds until he said “however” or “but”. He then said that he was against the motion. If Members were to read the motion, I do not know how they could be against it yet claim to support equality. The motion states:

“That this Assembly recognises that discrimination operates in many different ways and on many different levels and encourages the Executive to bring forward harmonising legislation, in a Single Equality Bill, for discussion and consultation at the earliest opportunity.”

How a Member can suggest in one breath that he supports equality but in another that he will oppose the motion defies my understanding.

The DUP needs to show more maturity in examining motions. The important matter is not from where the motion has come; it is about its substance and whether a Member or party agrees or disagrees with it. The DUP should stop the silly practice of objecting to Sinn Féin motions and instead examine the substance of the issue at hand. A Latin phrase can be applied to that practice: the DUP could be said to be playing the game *ad hominem*. That party should therefore look at the issues, not from where they emanate.

When Danny Kennedy spoke as the Chairperson of the Committee of the Centre, I was conscious that we have not yet had a full opportunity to discuss single equality legislation at Committee level. Danny asked the interesting question of whether such proposed legislation would result in tangible benefits. I think that it would. He also asked whether equality legislation is a political football or a politicised mantra. The motion is searching for equality: it does exactly what it says on the tin. It is about introducing composite and harmonised equality legislation that focuses not on yesterday's agenda but on tomorrow's. Some unionist contributors to the debate seem to be nervous about recognising that discrimination either existed in the past or exists now and has been suffered extensively in the past by nationalists, among others, across the board.

Dolores Kelly defended the reputation of the voluntary and community sector. The debate was being taken in a different direction at that time, so her contribution was very valuable.

The DUP should be more objective and examine aspects of its own community, such as education. It is well known that the unionist political parties, particularly the DUP, are doing a very bad job of

representing Protestant and unionist children and young people who come from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. We need only listen to —

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

Mr McElduff: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am delivering my winding-up speech.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Simpson: Although we clearly do not want to see anyone being discriminated against, the new Administration must tread carefully. In recent years, Northern Ireland has spawned an equality industry. In the 10 years since 1996, 4,735 cases of religious discrimination at work were reported, with just 50 of those being upheld.

Staff costs and fees were estimated at £2.2 million, and none of that total included the cost of getting legislation passed or appointing equality watchdogs. Of course, to Sinn Féin, and also to the SDLP, minor details such as efficiency or budgetary constraints appear to be of little concern. They might well relate to a former Congressman of the United States who once said:

"A billion here, a billion there, pretty soon you're talking real money."

Where has all of this got us? We are now in a situation where Christians who run guest houses have the choice of allowing practices to occur under their roofs that they find objectionable, or of being dragged through the courts, or of selling up. Those choices will be faced in the full knowledge that parties in this Chamber approve of every penalty faced and every hardship endured by those families.

It is also the case that if anyone in any part of Northern Ireland sees a news report about an assault in another distant part of the Province and decides that, regardless of evidence and how it was reported, the assault was a hate crime, that viewer can pick up the phone and report his or her perception to the local police. The incident is then recorded by the PSNI as a hate incident, regardless of any evidence to the contrary. There is a danger that if such a proposal were not handled correctly it could make the situation worse. It could multiply costs, turn even more ordinary, law-abiding people into criminals, find ever-new ways to set aside the right to expression and freedom of speech, and further restrict civil and religious liberty.

It is no surprise that such a proposal is made by Sinn Féin's spokesperson for Protestant and unionist outreach. That is a contradiction in terms if ever I heard one. If someone from the proposer's background thinks that she can reach out to unionists, she must think that she can sell snow to Eskimos.

The Executive must consider a number of points, including the basic question of whether such a Bill is necessary or desirable.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Simpson: No, I have almost finished. The Member had her opportunity.

The Assembly must look at the whole question of costs and efficiency, and, indeed, consider whether some new piece of crippling legislation is needed. It should also set about undoing some of the bad legislation that has already been passed, and make right some of the deep wrongs that have been done in the name of equality.

I reaffirm the DUP's commitment to genuine equality for all. The DUP will not be supporting the motion, as it would put us deeper into the mire that we are already in. I urge every Member to do likewise.

The Deputy First Minister (Mr M McGuinness): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

I congratulate you, Mr Deputy Speaker, on your elevation to your new position.

I am pleased to address the Assembly on the matter of equality. Equality and anti-discrimination measures are cornerstones of international law. The legislation already in place to protect the vulnerable defines our standards as a community. The mark of an advanced society is that it tackles inequality and protects the vulnerable.

Equality is an important principle. It is a priority to work together to eliminate inequalities. The concept of having new equality legislation has been around for a considerable time. Work was begun by previous Administrations, and the first Programme for Government identified a single equality Bill as an objective. Consultations took place to seek views and to evaluate what a single equality Bill might look like, because it is recognised that this is a large and complex area.

Direct rule Ministers made it clear that their preference was that a Bill should be taken forward by a restored, devolved Administration. When launching the 2004 consultation, John Spellar said that, ideally, he would like to see the legislation brought through the Assembly so that those who had initially decided that there should be legislation would have the opportunity to debate and shape it.

Since 2004, there has been much progress in strengthening different areas of equality legislation. That has resulted in extra protection on the grounds of gender and for those with disabilities. Recognition of the importance of this issue and a commitment to making progress on it were included in the St Andrews Agreement in October 2006. Now that there are

functioning, devolved institutions, the Assembly can finally focus on bringing the legislation forward.

I thank all the contributors to the debate today. Nelson McCausland asked how extensive and inclusive the consultation has been — the Equality Commission survey of 2006 showed that there was 92% support for a single equality Bill and that a majority recognised that discrimination occurred on many grounds and in many ways. We are currently talking to a wide range of stakeholders including employers' representatives, trade unions, the Churches and the voluntary and community sector. The 2004 consultation was wide-ranging and targeted the same groups.

Dolores Kelly argued that OFMDFM is suggesting the implementation of minimal harmonisation in the community. Proposals for the extent of harmonisation have yet to be put to the Executive, and there is no presumption of minimum harmonisation.

Several MLAs argued for extending the grounds to provide new protection for areas of marital status, genetic predisposition and victims. In bringing forward proposals for a Bill, the Executive will consider the case and the evidence for introducing new grounds.

Gregory Campbell spoke about equality legislation having to be comfortable for everyone. Equality legislation is about protecting everyone's rights. By implementing equality legislation, the Assembly must ensure that all rights, without exception, are protected.

What is the purpose of a single equality Bill? Equality is a right regardless of gender, religion, race, political opinion or other defining factors. Any equality legislation must effectively embrace diversity and enable people to fulfil their potential.

Mr McNarry: The Member who moved the motion, Ms Anderson, mentioned 'A Shared Future' and social engineering. Does the Deputy First Minister agree with me that it would be helpful if the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister clarified whether or not there is official endorsement of 'A Shared Future', given that his predecessors were unable to endorse it in the past?

In addition, does he agree that it would be useful to know whether the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister is responding jointly to today's debate? Finally, does he accept that, regrettably, in the light of his party's tone during this debate, my party has altered its opinion of the nature of, and the reasoning behind, this motion and is unable to support it.

The Deputy First Minister: Whether a party decides to support or oppose the motion is a matter for that party. Today, I am speaking on behalf of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister.

11.45 am

As many Members know, and as the motion states, discrimination can operate in many different ways and on many different levels. It is not always easy to recognise prejudice and intolerance, but it is all too apparent to those who suffer as a result of discrimination and inequality. In June 2006, the Equality Commission commissioned an independent survey of 1,000 adults, 'Awareness of Equality Issues amongst the General Public'. The findings indicate that some 17% of the adults who were surveyed felt that they had been treated unfairly or had been harassed in the previous three years. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

The Deputy First Minister: It is therefore important that we address discrimination issues for all parts of our community. It is essential that we continue to build an inclusive, progressive and equal society, and that we welcome and celebrate diversity and difference.

The first public event that the First Minister and I organised took place in Stormont on 9 May, when we invited people from a wide range of backgrounds and nationalities who have chosen to come here to live and work among us. We wanted to thank them and all those people who have brought their skills, expertise and unique culture into our society. We spoke to people from all ethnic backgrounds, and the fact struck me that we are all united in our desire to make this society a better place in which to live and work. At that event, the First Minister and I made clear our determination to tackle and stand against all forms of prejudice and intolerance. We wanted to show that the Administration celebrate and welcome diversity. That event was about showing political leadership in a tangible way, and it was a clear statement of our opposition to inequality and discrimination.

The business sector has also recognised the benefits of maintaining equality standards. If a society is based on inequality and discrimination, the best person does not always get the job or promotion.

I wish to take a little time to put the concept of the equality agenda in context, to outline some of the progress that has been made to date, and to describe briefly the way ahead. My officials are engaged in a series of meetings with key interested groups. Those officials are listening to the views of those groups and are keeping them informed of our current thinking. I am conscious that that work has been ongoing for the past eight years, so there is a justifiable sense that the issue must be resolved early in a way that makes a real difference.

The Administration intend to present proposals to the Executive for their earliest consideration and approval. Those policy proposals will detail the range of available protections, any changes that we consider

necessary or desirable, and the arrangements that will be put in place to ensure the continued effectiveness of any possible provisions, examining, in particular, the role of the Equality Commission.

What is our thinking, and what are our principles? There is a strong argument about the need to streamline and consolidate the legislation into one legal instrument. Our purpose in considering the issue is to ensure that the most effective protection is available to all people.

Much work lies ahead, but we remain absolutely committed to the view that equality is a right and that it is good for individuals, the community and the economy. It is our intention that any possible equality legislation will provide an effective framework for everyone in our increasingly diverse and multicultural society. We need to send a signal to all people that our future will be based on justice, equality and protection from discrimination.

I welcome today's debate and the focus that it has brought to this important area of work. I look forward to working constructively with the Assembly on this vital issue.

Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that they must all switch off their mobile phones, however attractive their ringtone.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat. As the proposer of this motion, I appreciate the fact that the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister are present for the debate. I have listened with keen interest to many of the contributions. It is important that all Members recognise that this motion is a serious attempt to put in place a law that will be effective for everyone in society. I am not at all singling out the nationalist and republican section of our society; I am talking about the Protestant, unionist and loyalist community, the nationalist and republican community, and all those who do not identify themselves in those ways. This legislation should be introduced for everyone's benefit.

Despite what David Simpson said about me and the work that I am involved in as director of unionist engagement, I know from conversations that I have had with many people from the Protestant, unionist and loyalist community that there is an appetite for engagement. Inequality and disadvantage definitely exist within that community. I care as much about the fact that only 2% of children in the Shankill area pass the 11-plus as about under-representation in Shantallow and elsewhere. I care about all our children across this society. It is unfortunate that the UUP has arrived at the conclusion that it has.

The motion states:

"That this Assembly recognises that discrimination operates in many different ways and on many different levels and encourages the Executive to bring forward harmonising legislation, in a Single

Equality Bill, for discussion and consultation at the earliest opportunity."

As Members, we have an obligation and a duty to put in place an equality framework to address the fragmented array of legislative instruments that are causing confusion across society. Let us build on the opportunity that we have. Let us take advantage of where we have come from and all that has happened since 8 May. We have a duty and responsibility to build a genuine shared future on equality. For that reason, I ask Members to reflect on the motion and to support it. Go raibh maith agat.

12.00 noon

Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 42; Noes 45.

AYES

Ms Anderson, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Brolly, Mr Burns, Mr Butler, Mr W Clarke, Mr Dallat, Dr Deeny, Mr Ford, Mr Gallagher, Mrs Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Lo, Mrs Long, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mrs McGill, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McHugh, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr Molloy, Mr Murphy, Mr Neeson, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mr O'Loan, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Ms Ruane.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr P Maskey and Mrs McGill.

NOES

Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dodds, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Sir Reg Empey, Mrs Foster, Mr Gardiner, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr McCallister, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Mr McFarland, Mr McGimpsey, Miss McIlveen, Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr Paisley Jnr, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr K Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Savage, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Craig and Mr McQuillan.

Question accordingly negatived.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As Members know, the Business Committee has arranged to meet at lunchtime today. I propose therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 12.06 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Training for Junior Doctors

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one and a half hours for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes for a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes. One amendment has been selected and has been published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes for a winding-up speech.

Mr Ford: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls for assurance from the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety that junior doctors will be offered appropriate training to ensure that their careers, and patients' care, are protected.

As others have done, Mr Deputy Speaker, I congratulate you on your reappointment to your office. We look forward to seeing you preside over real business, rather than your duties of last summer.

Before discussing the motion, I must first declare an interest: I am the father of two junior doctors, both of whom have been affected in different ways by the disaster that is the so-called modernising medical careers (MMC) scheme. However, as the motion makes clear, my friend Kieran Deeny and I are also seriously concerned about the scheme's effects on patient care.

The MMC scheme had all the hallmarks of a modern Government project: it addressed a system that, although working, could undoubtedly work better. However, instead of incremental changes, the scheme proposed massive and radical changes, many of which had limited justification. Among those changes was the new medical training application service (MTAS), which depended on a new and untried computerised scheme to administer applications for jobs on behalf of every junior doctor in every region of the United Kingdom. The information technology failed continuously — now where have we heard that before in Government projects?

The term “junior doctor” conveys a rather misleading impression. The term actually covers all doctors other than hospital consultants and general practitioners. It does not mean only those doctors who are just out of university; it means the vast majority of doctors who staff our hospitals and who provide life-saving care for our constituents 24 hours a day and 365 days a year.

In an effort to address the problems that ensued from the scheme, different ad hoc schemes have been developed in each of the four nations of the UK. There has been a desperate attempt to ensure some continuity

in the National Health Service when doctors are due to take up their new posts in early August. In the meantime, every significant body of medical opinion — not just the junior doctors themselves, but the royal colleges and representative groups of consultants — has expressed its opinion on the fiasco. Those opinions have ranged from concern to absolute horror.

Two days ago, the chairman of the British Medical Association (BMA), Mr James Johnson, felt obliged to resign apparently because he had not expressed his concerns forcibly enough. For those of us who had never before seen the medical profession rising up, as a whole, to protest, that was an indication of how serious the situation is.

The Department of Health in Whitehall has set up a review, but the review team is “top-heavy with DoH apparatchiks” — not my words, but those of a large group of medical professors in a letter to ‘The Times’ last week.

In one respect only has the scheme been different from a classic new Labour scheme. This Government does not apologise — not even for the Iraq war. However, the Secretary of State for Health was forced to apologise to doctors for the distress that she had caused. So far, no apology has been made to patients for the harm that they may be caused. In such circumstances, it is little wonder that doctors are so upset and annoyed, and it is little wonder that the abbreviation MMC has had a number of spin-offs, of which the politest is probably “making medics cry”.

We are clearly in the middle of an ongoing crisis; so what is to be done? I welcome the actions of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety here. In particular, I welcome the reopening of the interview process. Those who were denied first-round interviews by the deeply flawed process — flawed in its implementation and designation — will now have the opportunity to be considered for their other choices. Even that compromise is deeply flawed.

In no other field of employment, particularly in the public sector, would it be acceptable for candidates for the same positions to be interviewed under different conditions, with no proper shortlists, on widely different dates, probably by different panels, and with those who are called to the second round of interviews inevitably tagged as the failures from the first round. That hardly reflects equal treatment of all applications, which is surely a prerequisite of any public appointments procedure.

I know of cases of doctors who have failed to be called for interview for posts in specialisms in which they have experience and have passed postgraduate exams. However, those doctors were interviewed for posts in their lower choice specialisms, for which they were less qualified and experienced. The system is fundamentally flawed.

Even the letters of offer from various specialties leave candidates with unacceptable dilemmas. Should candidates accept early offers from their second choices, or should they hold on in the hope that, due to others turning down offers, one of their first choices becomes available? That scenario would be difficult in any job. However, it is not a one-off job application. The current design of MMC means that that issue cannot be redressed later.

Currently, interviews are supposed to cover a seamless progression from the newly instituted foundation-year programme through to consultant grade. Therefore, the system works fine when junior doctors get the positions that they want and realise their ambitions during the first stage of the process. If they achieve that initial step, they know that they have begun the seamless progression.

However, what happens to the majority who do not get the post that they want or do not get any post at all? What happens to those who fail at their one and only attempt to begin a career for which they have trained for several years and in which the general public, as taxpayers, have invested heavily? The current system is not only damaging to the prospects of the individuals concerned — it is seriously damaging to public welfare and the public purse.

I am not a lawyer, but I know a little about employment matters. It seems to me that any doctor who fails to get the post that he or she wants as a result of this deeply flawed and variable process, could almost certainly have redress through the courts. However, I do not get the impression that people wish to take those cases through the courts. Rather, they want to be treated fairly, to have the opportunity to make progress in their careers, and to contribute to society. They do not want to seek compensation because of their failure to achieve those objectives.

The willingness of the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to take the issue seriously is a positive sign. I am grateful to him for attending a briefing in the Long Gallery that was organised by Northern Irish Medics, and for his recognition that this matter requires urgent action. Today, he has the opportunity to add substance to that commitment.

It is clear that the current year's process is so flawed that it cannot possibly be used as the basis for the future career patterns for the nearly 1,000 junior doctors who want to serve the people of Northern Ireland. It would be unacceptable for any doctor to lose his or her career, and the Minister has previously confirmed that, at this stage, more than 100 doctors could be affected. It would be almost as bad if doctors were forced into second-choice training posts or non-progression staff grades, with no further chance of starting on new career paths.

The current process compresses two years into one. With the introduction of the F1 and F2 training posts

for those who are just out of medical school, there must be no question of doctors being refused posts on the basis of over-qualification. As a potential patient, I would rather visit an overqualified doctor than an underqualified one.

The Minister has stated that it is not possible to return to the previous training scheme. That may be the case, although there are many who wish that it had been returned to a few months ago.

Doctors — and the entire population — have a right to expect the Minister to confirm that he will ensure action on several key points for the future. His first priority must be an assurance that when new appointments are made this August, there will be no compulsory redundancies among those junior doctors who wish to continue working in Northern Ireland. That will require the Department to initiate an urgent review of medical staffing across the region, in every grade.

His second priority must be the full option for transfer among posts next year. In other words, this year's appointments, under the current flawed process, of junior doctors who are dissatisfied with their posts, should be effective for one year only.

The third priority is that there must be recognition that the current number of posts proposed for the future is inadequate to provide for the needs of the NHS in Northern Ireland, and for those who are currently engaged in medical training. It must be ensured that adequate posts are available to provide the care that our constituents require.

I further ask for the Minister's agreement to set up a review group in Northern Ireland to examine the conclusions of the national review of MMC, as well as an assurance that such a review will be broadly representative of the medical profession and the wider community, instead of being stuffed with departmental apparatchiks.

I thank the Minister for his attendance and for taking the matter so seriously. I commend the motion, and I have no problem with the amendment that Dr Coulter will propose, as it merely adds some flesh to the motion that Dr Deeny and I tabled. I ask for the support of the House and urgent action from the Minister.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I beg to move the following amendment: At end insert

“; and that there is a review of junior doctor workforce planning, to be reported to the Assembly.”

The crisis over junior-doctor training is potentially the most damaging that the Health Service has faced since its inception some 60 years ago. The level of breakdown that it represents, and the extreme damage that it has done to morale among our junior doctors, is difficult to exaggerate.

I know that the new Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is deeply committed to solving the crisis, and I compliment him for attending a mass lobby by junior doctors in Parliament Buildings on 16 April. That showed his good intentions towards the professionals in the Health Service, as did his pledge at that meeting to put the junior-doctor training problem high on his agenda. That made a huge difference to the morale of our junior doctors who, up to that point, had been ignored by officials and direct rule Ministers. I understand that the Minister met with junior doctors again on 3 May.

It takes, on average, £250,000 to train a doctor. That means that any level of unemployment among doctors represents a massive waste of public money. Up to 200 junior doctors could be unemployed as a direct result of the training system in Northern Ireland, and a further 212 could be unemployed in two years' time when fixed-term specialist-training appointments run out. The maths of that is straightforward: 200 times £250,000 equals £50 million of public money squandered, which is indefensible.

Across the UK, the problem is even worse. There are 32,000 eligible applicants for only 18,500 jobs. That represents a crisis of massive proportions. Indeed, to define the current situation as a crisis is a massive understatement. The UK Government's position on the matter is best described as a rout. One element after another of their position on MMC has collapsed. The chief executive that headed the MMC operation has resigned. The chairman of the BMA has also resigned, as the House has already heard from Mr Ford.

After making some tremendous mistakes, which included sending doctors to two appointments on the same day in different parts of the country, the computer system that was built for the BMA was eventually abandoned, after the details of thousands of doctors were leaked.

For the first time in my long career, I have heard responsible doctors talking of strike action, which has not happened in 4,000 years of medical history.

2.15 pm

What alarms me most is that, in the midst of this crisis, we are losing some of our best young doctors. I have had reports of mass recruiting by the state of Victoria in Australia. Hospitals there are recruiting many of our best young doctors, most of whom will never return to this country.

Even more alarmingly, I have had reports of some of the best medical students from our top medical schools abandoning medicine altogether. Many have gone to work in London in financial services and other careers. This whole episode has been a gross betrayal of the vocation of many junior doctors by a cynical and exploitative UK Government.

It is high time that the Government got their hands off medical training. This surely must be the lesson learned from this dismal episode. Medical training should be a matter for the professionals and no one else. Medicine is a serious, life-and-death business. Petty bureaucrats who lack proper medical training should not be involved in it. Control of medicine and medical training must be returned to the professionals.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up. My apologies, it is not.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I thought that you had given me 10 minutes at the beginning, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Spending must be on front-line services, and key decisions must be made by a medically qualified, clinically aware leadership. I know that the Minister has taken steps to end the worst excesses of the MMC catastrophe; he did so within days of taking office. It was important for us to break with the rapidly deteriorating English MMC situation, and the Minister was decisive in doing just that. He has the best interests of the Health Service, its patients and professionals at heart, and the future of the Health Service in Northern Ireland is much safer now that it is out of direct rule hands.

I thank the proposer of the motion for accepting the amendment. I believe that the House fully supports the motion.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Storey: All who have been in contact with the medical profession recently will be aware of the grave concern this issue has caused among junior doctors. The Assembly should note the high level of dissatisfaction among junior doctors regarding the changes to the postgraduate training-course application process.

Today, we are also reminded that this is the sort of issue that is of ultimate importance to the people that we represent. It would be easy for the House — as it has done in the past under the Hain Assembly — to blame others; to say that others are responsible for this problem. If devolution is to mean anything to our communities and constituents, it is as an opportunity to ensure that we learn from mistakes, and that we put in place processes that are manageable and that can deliver.

Everyone accepts that the introduction of a new system of training for junior doctors has been a chaotic mess. It may yet bring an end to the political career of the Secretary of State for Health. We await the outcome of that matter.

The online application process was a fiasco, and recent security breaches resulted in the personal details of applicants being made widely available on the Internet. That does not inspire confidence in multimillion-, or perhaps, multi-billion-pound IT systems that are being introduced in the NHS. We should sound a note

of caution to our own Minister to ensure that any new proposals for new processes do not fall foul of the same problems.

There are reports that the initial application tests were so poor that a nurse applied for a training post for hospital consultants. The result of the judicial review sought by Remedy UK is due later this week. No posts across the water are being offered until the second week in June, but here in Northern Ireland offers were sent out by email last Wednesday night — the night before the Health Committee had the opportunity to discuss the issue at its initial meeting the next day. That was done in the full knowledge that this debate was to take place today.

We need more doctors, not fewer; I think that we are all agreed on that. There is a concern that the service offered in our hospitals will be undermined by a shortage of experienced doctors currently employed in the NHS.

The Department has argued that the controversial system of run-through speciality training posts was the only way to allocate posts for 2007-08. Many doctors do not share the view that run-through posts are key to having sufficient doctors working this August. It has been explained to me that that was not necessary: the Department had the option of making appointments for one year only. These would have been fixed-term speciality training posts. I welcome the Minister's presence for this debate and will be interested to hear from him what consideration was given to that option.

The use of single-year appointments could have ensured that doctors were in post for 2007, while the longer-term appointments could have been held over until a fairer and more reliable recruitment process had been put in place. Furthermore, it would have meant that postgraduate medical education remained compatible with training in the rest of the United Kingdom.

Will the Minister give my constituents in North Antrim an assurance that he will review these changes in order to ensure that the Department employs the most effective recruitment policy, in the interests of effective healthcare and the well-being of patients? The level of concern has been so high that it has even been argued —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your time is up, Mr Storey.

Mr Storey: It has even been argued that the medical training application service's online recruitment process could present a risk to patient safety. I trust that that will not be the case.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I was cautious about calling the Member's time in case I got it wrong again.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am delighted that this motion, and the amendment, is before the House and that the Minister is present to hear what appears to be cross-party support for junior doctors.

I am sure that, since our election, we have each heard representations from the British Medical Association and Irish Medics about training and the securing of posts. Recently, as David Ford and Rev Robert Coulter said, a few of us held an event in the Long Gallery where we heard at first hand of the difficulties experienced by junior doctors and by their families. Today the Assembly has an opportunity to record its support for the motion and the amendment and, crucially, to support the junior doctors, who are the bedrock of the future of the Health Service.

Any review must look at the number of speciality training posts, with a view to expansion. It is critical that the number of training posts be linked to care for workforce training, not only to support and protect the careers of junior doctors but to protect patient care. Today we can see that there is cross-party support for junior doctors, and for the motion and the amendment.

The key issue is that we must not lock junior doctors out of training. That would be bad for them and for the Health Service. We need to ensure that junior doctors are able to avail of appropriate training — specifically, that they are able to reapply next year at the appropriate level, so that they are not locked out permanently. There needs to be more useful and meaningful employment for them here. We need to support the junior doctors, at a time when their morale must be very low, to ensure that there is no more displacement and that we do not lose our finest to Australia. We need to ensure that the financial investment that we as a community have made is secured here.

Everyone agrees that this saga has gone on too long. Members need to take charge of the situation and ensure that the needs of our junior doctors and our Health Service are protected now and in the future. Go raibh maith agat.

Dr McDonnell: I will be brief, because the proposer of the amendment has made many of the points that I wished to make. I would like to emphasise that our National Health Service, with its many faults, is still one of our most precious public assets and is highly valued by all our constituents, regardless of their politics or the party they support.

Having formerly been a junior hospital doctor, I wish to put on record that they are not students — they are not even housemen. Junior hospital doctors are also not hospital consultants. They are medical people who have been housemen, who have completed their initial university education and training and who have spent a year in the hospital system. They are in the process of building a lifelong career in a particular speciality.

Until now, there has been a fairly logical progression, in steps of two or three years at a time, from houseman to senior house officer, registrar, senior registrar, and so on, which took eight to 10 years to complete. That

medical training is in the process of changing, which is where the MMC scheme has come in. There will be instant consultants — the new system is suggesting that training can be completed in five years rather than the previous eight to 10 years.

The new system is OK, broadly speaking, if one accepts that some flaws need to be ironed out. It may work better in England, due to circumstances in many of the English regions, but it will not work well in Northern Ireland or Scotland where a much more localised system has worked well in the past. I believe that the MMC scheme may be one short cut too far.

The intention is to put newly qualified housemen into a fixed, intensive career path for five years. However, that will remove many opportunities for them to specialise or do six months in areas of interest. Rather than receiving a rounded medical training, they will be getting very intensive, focused training running through their careers.

2.30 pm

My main concern is that many junior doctors are either married to, or cohabit with, other doctors, and some of them have children. The new system could send one doctor to the far north of Scotland and the other to Land's End, leaving their children somewhere in between. At this point, those children do not know where they will be going to school in September. Many doctors will lose out due to the inadequacy of the system.

Mr Easton: The people best qualified to analyse and assess the weaknesses and strengths of any organisation are those who work in it. They know the problems and are often best able to identify the solutions. That is the case in the Health Service. Junior doctors and other medical practitioners are saying in no uncertain terms that the Government's modernising medical careers (MMC) initiative has led to massive discontent in the profession throughout the UK.

The evidence suggests that the current crisis could lead to an exodus of highly- and expensively-trained young doctors from all over Northern Ireland and the UK. The present process is fatally flawed — and fudging decisions and tinkering with the process will not produce the efficient streamlined system that is required. An independent review of the situation in Northern Ireland is required in order to deliver a system of training and allocation of posts that is competitive yet equitable.

In particular, the system must be tailored to the specific needs of the Province. The Assembly must ensure that young doctors in Northern Ireland have the right to a validated system that ensures that applications are matched to appropriate training positions and that no cohort of trainees is disadvantaged.

Those young doctors carry heavy responsibilities in their day-to-day work, and it is incumbent on the Assembly to ensure that they are content and satisfied

with their conditions of service in a profession that can be hugely demanding. Specifically, young doctors must be provided with equal opportunities to acquire the skills and experience necessary to create a twenty-first century Health Service.

To avoid the profession suffering extreme damage, attention must be paid to the opinions that doctors are expressing so publicly. If Members respond to the challenge speedily and sensitively, a workable solution is possible, and we must take on board the opinions of those who have the expert knowledge and experience needed to devise such a solution.

I call on the Minister to do all in his power to ensure that junior doctors in Northern Ireland have equal and direct access to appropriate training to ensure the protection and development of their careers and the well-being of the patients whom they serve with such care and dedication.

Mrs Foster: As colleagues have said, this issue is very important. It is not often that doctors contact politicians — I do not know why — but because of how strongly they feel about this issue, many have done so. The impact on their morale must not be underestimated. It is difficult enough to try to run an efficient Health Service without the staff being made to feel unhappier and adding to the many pressures under which they work.

As Dr Coulter said, the last thing that Northern Ireland needs is an exodus of more local doctors to other parts of the world. He mentioned Australia, and I am sure that other countries also benefit from the expertise of doctors from Northern Ireland. As Members know, there has been much talk about the brain drain. The loss of junior doctors is adding to that problem, which should cause Members increasing concern.

I have a concern that relates specifically to my constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone. As the Erne Hospital does not have any registrar grades, it usually takes in about six senior house officers each year. Those six young doctors have more than two years' experience, to enable them to deal with any issues that may confront them.

My particular concern is that, under the new system, those senior house officers will not have gained two years' experience. That will put a lot of pressure on the young doctors and on the consultants who will have to provide back-up cover. The most important concern for me, as a representative from the area, is the patients who will visit the hospital. I know that hospital staff will continue to be professional and to do their best. However, that concern must be recognised. I trust that the Minister is aware of the issue with regard to the Erne Hospital.

More generally, the Assembly must ensure that junior doctors are not denied the opportunity to acquire training posts and, in effect, be locked out of the system. It is

imperative that next year there will be sufficient training posts to accommodate those who have been unsuccessful this year. Crucially, spending a year in a post that they might not ideally have wanted must not be allowed to be a disadvantage in obtaining a training post. For some time, my party has argued for better workforce planning across the NHS. The problem is indicative of the need for that.

Equally, career guidance at every stage of a person's medical career must improve drastically, be that at school, university or at postgraduate level. It is essential that trainees are able to obtain employment in England, Scotland and Wales, because Northern Ireland cannot afford to be out of step with training on the mainland. I hope that the Minister will respond to some questions in his remarks. For example, are there any circumstances in which clinical experience can actually prove to be a disadvantage to applicants? What effect will the changes to MMC posts have on the cost of doctors' salaries to the local NHS? I would be grateful if the Minister responded to those questions. Unfortunately, due to time pressures, I will not be able to remain in the Chamber. However, I will be able to read his comments in the Hansard report.

I am glad that the motion is being debated. I congratulate the proposers and Dr Coulter for his amendment. I look forward to the rest of the debate.

Mrs Hanna: As health spokesperson for the SDLP, I welcome the opportunity to support the motion and the amendment, to express my concern about the plight of junior doctors who are caught up in the new application system and to offer them my support. I agree with the proposers of the motion that the Assembly must call on the Minister to assure the House that junior doctors will be offered appropriate training in order to ensure that their careers and, importantly, the safety of patients are protected.

Junior doctors are angry and demoralised by the unfairness of the system, which fails to select the best applicants for jobs and threatens to damage the careers of thousands who are left without a place on the training ladder. Members are aware that the application system has been riddled with problems; with reports of lost applications, applicants being considered for specialities that they had not applied for and serious security breaches.

I welcome the Department of Health's decision to ensure that all eligible junior doctors who submit an application will be interviewed and that there will be a workable solution. A specific long-term review of the heavily criticised online system must also be carried out. That is absolutely essential if patients are to be provided with the best doctors and the highest standards of care and treatment. Our doctors and specialists of the future deserve high-quality medical training. A

commitment from the Department of Health to supply that will convey the message to junior doctors that they are valued. It must be ensured that no doctor in training loses out on a career as a result of Government mistakes or poor workforce planning.

There is a fear that taxpayers' money is being wasted if our locally trained doctors are attracted or, indeed, forced to take up employment abroad. The National Health Service simply cannot afford to allow that crisis to continue.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): Events over the past couple of months have proven to be difficult for doctors in training and for their families. I am familiar with the issues, having heard them at first hand before I took up my ministerial post. I welcome the opportunity that this debate offers to comment on this important matter.

Much has been said about the recruitment process for junior doctors. I will set out what I will do to address the difficulties.

Before that, I wish to clarify that the priority of my Department, and of the Health Service, is the continued provision of safe, effective treatment and care for patients by a range of healthcare professionals, including junior doctors. The measures that have been taken, which I will now outline, ensure that continuity of care.

The retention and development of existing skills in the healthcare workforce is an important consideration, and I will take some moments to put that issue into context. There has always been an annual round of recruitment, and therefore competition for posts. There have always been doctors who have been successful in securing training posts and some who have not. In addition, I wish to emphasise the distinction between the recruitment process for training posts, known as the medical training application service (MTAS), and the restructuring of postgraduate medical training, known as modernising medical careers (MMC). The aim of MMC, which was launched in 2003, was that:

"the end product of the training process, whether a hospital doctor or a general practitioner, should be a high-quality, well-trained and accredited doctor who can deliver the care and treatment patients need in the modern NHS".

All Members can support that aim.

The first stage in the reform of training saw the introduction of foundation programmes. Those programmes are available to medical graduates in the first two years of their careers, and they enable them to develop basic practical skills and competencies in medicine, which include clinical skills; effective relationships with patients; high standards in clinical governance and patient safety; the use of evidence and data; communication and other necessary management skills and decision making; and a wider understanding

of where and how medicine is practised. Again, all Members can support what is on that list.

In August 2005, 230 medical graduates were the first under MMC to enter foundation programmes in Northern Ireland. It is that group of doctors, with others, who now seek to enter the next level of training. Feedback from recruitment to foundation training has mostly been positive, although there have been reservations.

The UK-wide MTAS was used successfully as the recruitment vehicle for foundation doctors for 2007. However, that system proved to be anything but satisfactory or successful when used for recruitment to speciality training. Problems began to emerge in February 2007, when applicants were advised of the results of the shortlisting process. Events moved quickly, and, because Northern Ireland was under direct rule, the Secretary of State for Health, Patricia Hewitt, called for a review of MTAS to be carried out before the end of March. My Department kept in contact with the Department of Health review team throughout that period.

At the same time, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) locally got the BMA, consultants and health trusts to agree to a more suitable and acceptable approach, which was announced on 5 April — again, pre-devolution. DHSSPS abandoned MTAS at that point.

In Northern Ireland, all eligible applicants have been offered interviews for each job for which they applied. Those interviews are under way and follow a process that is identical to earlier interviews. The Department has assured the BMA, and I assure the Assembly today, that all reasonable steps have been taken to ensure that equity is maintained for the entire interview process — one of the points that Mr Ford made. Offers of appointment started to be issued on 27 April and continue as each set of interviews is completed, and the process will be completed by the end of May.

2.45pm

There have been calls for the abandonment or postponement of the process. Practically, that is not possible. Any further delay in the recruitment of over 600 junior doctors would seriously jeopardise the ability of our local Health Service to operate from 1 August, the date when doctors take up their posts. Furthermore, the delay would prolong the anxiety of junior doctors, bearing in mind that many of them still await the results of interviews conducted last March.

In effect, the practical steps necessary to keep the system going must be determined, while, at the same time, addressing the flaws that have been identified this afternoon. The consequences of delay are far-reaching. Doctors will not be recruited to take up posts in August. Existing contracts will expire, leaving doctors without a post, a place in a training programme or

anything else. That will leave our trusts with a destabilised and depleted medical workforce and will place an unprecedented threat on the ability of the Health Service to function. Patients could be put at risk and essential treatments delayed, and patients and patient care must be protected.

Allowing the continuation of the recruitment process and the issue of job offers ensures that the trusts are able to fill the posts in August. There will be stability, and patients can have confidence that there will be continuity of high quality, safe and effective services.

Along with other Members, I appreciate that the MTAS recruitment process has brought high levels of concern and uncertainty to a dedicated and committed workforce. This year, just over 600 training posts are available; that is roughly the same number as last year. There have been no cuts in the training places; however, as I said earlier, competition for posts is not new and, as with any competitive process, it is inevitable that some doctors will be disappointed.

Locally, our labour pool has been fairly constant, and the recruitment process in previous years has not generated significant unemployment. The system used this year has opened up applications, and many doctors living and working outside Northern Ireland may have applied to work here. It is too early in the recruitment process to estimate how many, if indeed any, locally-based doctors will be without a post. Apart from those designated as training posts, doctors who are unsuccessful can apply for a range of other Health Service posts, such as clinical fellowship posts. The situation is no different from that of last year.

The delay in completing the recruitment process has had a knock-on effect for others. The local deanery, the Northern Ireland Medical and Dental Training Agency (NIMDTA), received around 900 first-preference applications for Northern Ireland. With over 600 training posts and approximately 170 additional posts, it is clear that a number of applicants will have to pursue their second, third or fourth preferences. That may mean taking up a post outside Northern Ireland.

At present, offers are being made to successful doctors. They will take up their posts in August 2007. At this stage, it is impossible to pledge that every doctor who wants to take up a post in Northern Ireland will get a job here. However, I will take all reasonable steps to address any significant surplus in the local medical workforce. I assure the Assembly that I believe in retaining the important skills and potential of these people in Northern Ireland.

I am aware that doctors who are unsuccessful in securing a speciality training post are concerned about being locked out of further opportunities to enter training in their chosen speciality. The rigidity of that aspect of the process will be examined.

Therefore, I now announce a local review this year of the process. That will analyse the difficulties, take account of the lessons learned and chart a local approach to the way forward, including the lessons learned from changes to the training and recruitment processes.

The Secretary of State for Health, the Rt Hon Patricia Hewitt MP, announced a national, independent review of the reforms to date, to be chaired by Sir John Tooke, and we will analyse carefully its findings.

However, it is also important that a local review examines the local problem. I am a great believer in local solutions for local problems, and the Department is looking at ways of addressing the concerns of the local junior doctors.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in agreement with the BMA — the consultant body on local trusts — has acted early in an effort to minimise the concerns of the local medical workforce. Up to now, interviews have been offered to all doctors who have applied for a post in Northern Ireland, and offers are being made. Further difficulties regarding the rigidity of the process have been recognised, and the local review that I requested will address the whole process — including the difficulties and concerns about any potential surplus in the local medical workforce. The Department will contribute to the independent national review, and it will continue to work closely with trusts, the Northern Ireland Medical and Dental Training Agency — the deanery — and the BMA to agree the way forward. Steps have also been taken to ensure the stability of the Health Service and the delivery of its services.

An attempt to answer, for example, Mr Ford's four questions, may be based on the fact that we are taking forward a local review, and medical staffing issues will be part of that. The inflexibility of the process about which Mr Ford asked, and the number of medical training posts kept regularly under review, will also be examined. The review will not be local apparatchiks from the Department under the Tooke review, as Mr Ford suggested. It will involve key stakeholders from the Health Service, and that is an important factor.

The Department has taken steps to address the concerns of junior doctors. The problem has been ongoing since February. It is most important to ensure continuity within the Health Service, and we must ensure that 600 junior doctors get posts and that those posts are filled in August. Otherwise, the Health Service will be seriously destabilised. There are still difficult issues to address, but I am confident that the measures already taken, and the local review that I have requested, will address the problems that have arisen. I assure the Assembly that meaningful steps will be taken to ensure that a recruitment process for speciality training will be put

in place — one in which our Health Service patients and doctors can have confidence.

Mr McCallister: I thank the Minister for his statement. My colleague Dr Coulter mentioned the distress that had been caused to the junior doctors and health professionals by the problems in the Health Service, and the blow to the profession's morale. Therefore they will be relieved to hear that the Minister is following up, with actions, on the concerns that he had on this issue before taking office.

There have been many issues and concerns raised from Members on both sides of the House. It appears that everyone supports the Ulster Unionist amendment and wants to see a locally accountable review of how best to move forward from the whole fiasco and sort out the problems that it has left.

Mr I McCrea: Does the Member agree that the best way forward is to knock this on the head? Should we not accept the Minister's review, take on board its proposals and, finally, implement them, but allow the junior doctors to take up posts now?

Mr McCallister: The Minister cannot stop the review. It must take place, and the Minister has assured the House that it will be quick and that it will continue. He has also given guarantees that the doctors will be placed in their new positions and that the interview process has already commenced. I do not accept that that will cause much of the problem.

My colleague Mr Elliott had hoped to attend to express the concerns of doctors in Erne Hospital. Unfortunately he cannot be here because the Committee on Agricultural and Rural Development is meeting. It is unfortunate that Committees meet when there are important duties to attend to in the House. Mr Elliott is most disappointed that he could not be here.

Rev Dr Coulter eloquently described the damage to morale caused by the over-centralised process, and Dr McDonnell the chaos engendered by sending doctors to different parts of the country. It is a comfort to all Members that the Minister is reviewing the situation, and is determined to have safe and effective treatment and follow-up care for patients, so that no patient is put at risk. That is the crux: no one wants to see patients endangered because of this mix-up. I have therefore no difficulty in supporting Dr Coulter's amendment.

Mr McNarry: Does the Member agree that it is a total and absolute disgrace that we bring a Minister into the Chamber and less than 25% of Members attend? What sort of message does that send to the public on such an important health issue? Members cannot be in the Chamber, and cannot participate in the debate, because of commitments to Committees. The Member will agree that it is time that something was done about that. Members alone should decide which issues have primacy in this House.

Mr McCallister: I could not agree more with my colleague. Mr Elliott has been lobbied on an issue that is important to him and to all the people of his constituency, Fermanagh and South Tyrone. That he cannot attend the debate because of duties in the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development should be a matter of concern to all Members. What should take priority here, the Assembly in plenary session or a Committee? The system should be that Mondays and Tuesdays are set aside for plenary sessions of the Assembly, and Committee business conducted on Wednesdays and Thursdays. I have, therefore, no difficulty in agreeing with Mr McNarry, and I express my discontent just as forcibly as he has done.

I support and commend Dr Coulter's amendment.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call on Dr Deeny to conclude and wind up the debate on the substantive motion.

Dr Deeny: Thank you for allowing me to participate in the debate, which is of obvious interest to me in a professional capacity. It is good to see that the Minister has attended the debate on this important issue. Points have been well made by Members right across the House.

My mother, who is now 82, used to tell me when I was growing up that there were only two important things in life, both of which began with the letter "H". They are — in order of importance — happiness and health. I used to think that she was off the plot. However, as I grew older, I realised that she was absolutely spot on.

I hope that we are looking forward to a happier time in this part of the world: whether you call it Northern Ireland or the North is entirely a matter of choice —

A Member: Or here. *[Laughter.]*

Dr Deeny: Or here. That is entirely a matter of choice.

I hope that a brighter and happier future beckons all of us. Being happier, we should then turn our attention to the second of the two "Hs", our health. The last thing we need is a situation where health professionals and doctors are leaving our shores.

I have no wish to repeat what other Members have said, but I will advert to comments made by others to remind people of how serious the issue is. Junior doctors have serious concerns. They have declared that the medical training application service and the modernising medical careers system are seriously flawed; that they should be abandoned; and that, for this year, we should revert to the previous system.

3.00 pm

In a report, Liam Donaldson, the Chief Medical Officer in England, promised that medical training would be "flexible in design and operation" and "respond to changing service needs".

I shall give Members some recent, if not up-to-date, figures. Of the 2,687 applicants to be interviewed for

medical jobs in Northern Ireland, 1,162 have been interviewed and 1,525 are still to be interviewed. There are 906 first-choice applicants and 386 specialist training run-through posts; doctors who get those go on to become consultants. There are also 231 posts that are fixed-term specialist training appointments (FTSTAs), and there are 617 posts in other fixed-term, dead-end jobs.

As Rev Robert Coulter correctly mentioned, between 200 and 300 junior doctors could be unemployed this year. There is potential for further unemployment in two years' time when the FTSTAs come to an end. I must again highlight the vast amount of money that could be lost to the Northern Ireland economy as a result.

As a doctor, I am delighted that this issue has already been discussed in this Building, at an event in the Long Gallery. As I said then, this issue is about junior doctors, but it also concerns patient care — patients should always come first in the Health Service. I am deeply concerned that doctors are being rushed through the system. Doctors are being promoted to consultant level far more quickly than years ago. I am not saying that the system was right years ago, but, including five years as a student, it generally took 11 years to become a full-time consultant.

Those doctors who are GPs like to be able to refer patients to Health Service professionals with lots of experience who we can trust to be good. My concern is that this system is a cheap, quick-fix solution by central Government, intended to increase consultant numbers in order to meet targets set by waiting-list initiatives. We GPs are ticking boxes more than we are seeing people. That serious concern is shared among medical professionals. It takes a lot to get any doctor off his or her butt, but 10,000 to 12,000 of us marched in London this year in protest at this situation. That shows the level of concern. I was scared by research that suggested that 70% of junior doctors had considered leaving medicine as a result of the changes.

The MTAS computer system has produced different results in different parts of the UK. I point out to the Minister that the recent announcement that the MTAS computer system has been shelved will not affect the situation, as the same process is running offline. We should not get confused: the uproar about information being divulged online has been dealt with; however, the process itself is still wrong and needs to be reviewed. In Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, candidates are being offered interviews for all four of their choices. In England, all interviews are being honoured, with an additional guaranteed interview for the applicant's first choice of post.

The MTAS computer system was suspended on 26 April and declared no longer operational on 15 May. In England, the second round of interviews will be conducted by each local deanery in order to be fair. There is no plan for a second round of interviews in Northern

Ireland; all jobs are to be appointed in the first round. The Minister has said that that will be reviewed, and it should. As David Ford said, people who miss out on jobs in the area of their medical expertise and interest in the first round will not get another opportunity to apply. That is clearly unfair.

A judicial review at the High Court has been ongoing in recent weeks, brought about by the junior doctors' pressure group, Remedy UK. The report is due to be made public tomorrow.

The computer system has been abandoned, but the selection and recruitment process that it supported remains and will continue offline. That issue needs to be examined. There should be a second round of applications in Northern Ireland as there is in England. By the way, the abandonment of the MTAS system was not a decision but a statement of fact, as the computer system was not working and is not working.

As my colleague David Ford said — and I heard the Minister saying that the matter is going to be dealt with in the review — there has been serious concern about interviews being carried out in two batches, at different times, with different panels and in different circumstances. Clearly those interviews are not considered to be equitable, and the matter must be looked at.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety said that it is right and fair that there should be competition for admission to any specialist training, and I echo that statement.

There is another concern that has to be dealt with. Experience is a very wonderful and much needed quality, and I have mentioned the importance of experience in all professions and walks of life, particularly when dealing with people's lives. However, in the MMC programme, experience is a barrier to appointment at the lower levels, and experienced doctors are finding it much more difficult to gain appointment at lower levels unless people drop out — that is their only chance.

Training will be shorter under the MMC programme and will result in less-experienced consultants being in charge of patients. Measuring competencies will not replace experience.

The MMC programme has been inflexible, and training has been underdeveloped. Indeed, the training methods that are expected to replace the traditional apprenticeship model have yet to be developed. The MMC programme is to undergo a thorough review, and as Sir John Tooke, the head of the review, has said, it is crucial that the inquiry seizes the opportunity to examine the broader context underlying the recent difficulties and not just the mechanics of the process. It must scope the fitness for purpose of the current arrangements in the light of the rapidly evolving healthcare environment. Let me be clear: this is an inquiry into the MMC programme.

To conclude, recruitment should continue, with all jobs being given a one-year fixed term to allow for fair competition next year for the run-through consultant positions. Upper limits on the experience bar to entry should be removed at all levels. Next year, we should have an increase in the number of posts at higher levels to be fair and competitive. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety should undertake a full review of medical staffing across Northern Ireland to include not only training posts but staff and trust posts as well. I encourage Members to support the motion and the amendment.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls for assurance from the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety that junior doctors will be offered appropriate training to ensure that their careers, and patients' care, are protected; and that there is a review of junior doctor workforce planning, to be reported to the Assembly.

Assaults on Emergency Workers

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The Member who moves the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes for the winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes. There are two amendments on the Marshalled List. Members who move the amendments will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes for their winding-up speeches.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Government to introduce legislation in Northern Ireland to make it an offence punishable by imprisonment for a period not exceeding 9 months, or by a fine not exceeding level 5 on the standard scale, or both, for all persons assaulting emergency workers engaged in the pursuit of their duty or impeding persons assisting such emergency workers. These emergency workers are to include all registered nurses, registered midwives, registered medical practitioners, ambulance crew, fire fighters, prison officers, social workers and mental health officers when they are in pursuit of their duties, either on or off hospital premises, or such place where they normally might pursue their professional activity.

I beg to move amendment No 2: Leave out all after “Assembly” and insert

“believes that legislation should be introduced in Northern Ireland, at the earliest possible moment, to make it an offence punishable by imprisonment for a period not exceeding 9 months, or by a fine not exceeding level 5 on the standard scale, or both, for all persons assaulting registered nurses, registered midwives, registered medical practitioners and health workers when they are in pursuit of their duties, either on or off hospital premises, or such place where they normally might pursue their professional activity.”

There is so much that could be said on this issue that 10 minutes will not allow me to cover everything.

I originally intended to introduce this as a private Member’s Bill during the time of the Transitional Assembly, at which point I would have been in the position of needing to call on Her Majesty’s Government to introduce what is essentially a law-and-order measure and therefore solely within their competence.

However, it is envisaged that policing and justice powers will be devolved to this Assembly, perhaps in the not too distant future. In consequence, I am calling on the Assembly to make a clear and unequivocal statement that it intends to act in this matter when it is within its competence to do so.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

I also originally intended to introduce a comprehensive emergency workers Bill that would have covered all classes of emergency workers. However, I have since restricted this to registered nurses, registered midwives, registered medical practitioners and social workers. This is because I have since been advised that new enactments have been passed at Westminster in the past year to cover the eventuality of attacks on ambulance workers and firefighters. These have appeared in the form of the

Emergency Workers (Obstruction) Act 2006, which refers to ambulance workers, and The Fire and Rescue Services (Northern Ireland) Order 2006, which refers to firefighters.

That is why I am introducing an amendment at the same time as I am introducing this motion before the House today. It does not mean, however, that I have abandoned my attempt to introduce a comprehensive Bill to cover all classes of emergency workers. However, I still believe that it is necessary to make legislation simple, understandable, consistent and comprehensive.

That will be a matter for the time when the Assembly has devolved policing and justice powers. For now, let it suffice that the Assembly make a clear and unequivocal statement that it is going to do something about assaults on Health Service staff when it is in a position to do so and that it will, by creating a new category of crime — and I emphasise a new category of crime — make clear how seriously it takes this problem.

Article 3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on 10 December 1948, states that:

“Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of the person.”

I also contend that it is the responsibility of the Government to create a regime of law and order that contains penalties that will act as a real, effective and specific deterrent to those who would threaten the security of a person at work, thereby creating an atmosphere in which individuals feel secure in the execution of their duties at work.

Nowhere is the Government more in dereliction of their duty than in guaranteeing the security of the persons of health workers engaged in the normal course of their duties — whether on hospital premises, on an emergency call or on a mercy mission. This includes the security of nurses, doctors and all health workers in accident and emergency wards and on emergency call-out.

The litany of violent incidents involving attacks on health workers has become a depressingly regular feature on the news. Whether it is a knife-wielding hooligan attacking a security guard at the Ulster Hospital in March 2006, or shots being fired at an ambulance in the Dunclug estate in Ballymena in May 2006, or a lady doctor being attacked in the accident and emergency department of the Ulster Hospital in January 2006, all of these incidents are unacceptable. They are a wake-up call that action is needed.

A survey of 4,996 doctors across all disciplines and places of work was carried out by the British Medical Association (BMA) in Northern Ireland in November 2006. The survey was subsequently published under the title ‘Violence in the workplace. The experience of doctors in Northern Ireland’ in November last year. Some 44.4% of hospital doctors said that violence in the workplace was a problem.

3.15 pm

Fifty-one point four per cent of doctors in accident and emergency departments described violence as “very much a problem” in their workplace. Sixty-three per cent of senior house officers said that they had reported incidents of workplace violence. Those findings, from a survey of nearly 5,000 doctors, show that there is an absolute need for the new measure that I am suggesting.

Assaults on emergency workers are a sign of the breakdown of the norms that govern the proper operation of our society. If the matter is not addressed in a robust and effective manner, it will lead to a serious breakdown of the fabric of society. Therefore, early and effective action against violent attacks on health workers is not just about protecting workers from assault, however commendable that may be: it is about drawing a line in the sand for the whole of society. It is about saying clearly that that line must not be crossed, that it is the boundary of what will or will not be tolerated, and that it is one of the immovable norms that govern the way we all lead our lives in our society.

A charge of common assault is no adequate redress for a physical attack on a health worker. It is not just a question of penalties; it is a matter of the definition of the crime itself. There is nothing common about assaulting a nurse, doctor, or health worker engaged in attending to those who are not able to help themselves. It is not just a matter of assault; it is a different class of crime altogether. Indeed, it is beyond the pale.

When I considered the problem some time ago, what struck me about it was that existing law was inadequate to deal with it. What we were really doing was fitting old laws on assault to what was, essentially, a new situation. In the past, people did not assault nurses, doctors, ambulance workers or firefighters, so there was no need for a specific law to deal with such assaults.

It is a new class of crime. It is different from assault because it involves attacking mercy workers. It is a crime against society and against the norms of society. It is not just a matter of someone throwing a punch at another person or attacking another person, however violently. Therefore, it is a crime that should not come under the classification of common assault. It is very uncommon assault. It is a crime that offends against all that makes for a decent civilised society.

It was at that point in the thinking process that I realised that a specific new law was needed to deal with attacks on health workers, and not a mere tinkering at the edges of existing law. A piecemeal adaptation of existing law would totally fail to recognise that there was a separate and frighteningly new problem and would not tackle the scale and seriousness of the issue.

Law-making should begin with the problem, rather than simply tacking it on to an existing and known crime. Otherwise, it fails to identify when serious new

problems arise in society and often, in consequence, fails to adequately deal with them. That is what I found so refreshing in the approach taken to the problem in Scotland. Scotland has a new Parliament, with a new way of doing things. It is not hidebound by all the flummery and woolly old-fashioned thinking that has so befuddled law, law-making, and law enforcement in our country. In Scotland, by grouping these attacks on nurses, doctors, ambulance workers and firefighters into a new emergency workers' law, Scottish society proclaimed that it had a problem and showed what it was going to do about it.

I call on all right-thinking people in the House, and in the country, to support the motion.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Speaker: Members may be aware that a delegation from the Senate of Canada is visiting Parliament Buildings today.

Some of the delegates have taken their seats in the Gallery. On behalf of the Assembly, I extend the warmest welcome to the hon Noël Kinsella, Speaker of the Senate of Canada, and to the Senators and other distinguished guests.

I call Ms Carál Ní Chuilín to move amendment No 1.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom fáilte a chur roimh ár gcúairteoirí. Your pronunciation was better than the Deputy Speaker's yesterday when he got my name wrong; however, he is not here.

On behalf of Sinn Féin, I also welcome our Canadian visitors.

I beg to move amendment No 1: Leave out all after “Assembly” and insert

“deplores all attacks on health care workers and emergency workers when they are in pursuit of their duties; supports the work of the Zero Tolerance Strategic Group; and further recognises that an effective strategy to reduce attacks on our emergency workers should include legislation, community engagement and participation, education and media campaigns; and calls on the Executive to support this approach.”

Although I have moved amendment No 1, I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak to the motion. We need to lead by example on community engagement and participation. We must go beyond condemning attacks by getting involved with the community and by standing with the emergency workers. Fire and Rescue Service workers in north Belfast, and also in Derry, have the mobile phone numbers of Sinn Féin elected representatives. Any time that they have been attacked they have rung us, and, along with residents and community activists and workers, we have led by example to ensure that we did all that we possibly could to reduce such attacks.

Likewise, when nurses leaving the Mater Hospital in north Belfast were being attacked by stone throwers, we met staff at the hospital gates and walked them to the bottom of the Cliftonville Road.

The Tar Isteach youth group, which supports the community by painting murals, is also calling for an end to attacks on healthcare and emergency workers. Those workers must be protected, respected and supported.

Therefore amendment No 2 does not go far enough. Although Rev Coulter explained that existing legislation covers Ambulance Service and Fire Service workers, his amendment still falls short of the essence of the motion.

However, this debate gives all Members an opportunity to unequivocally support all those workers. It also gives us an opportunity to develop education and media campaigns. We all have the chance to support our emergency workers — after all, they are the people who supported us in all conditions and on whose support we constantly rely. I call on the Executive to support that approach. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Easton: I am contributing to this debate as someone who served in the Health Service for 14 years before becoming an Assembly Member. I have had ample opportunity to experience at first hand the professionalism and dedication of those who serve the public by working extremely hard in accident and emergency situations. We in Northern Ireland are privileged to have the selfless dedication of workers of a high calibre who are highly trained and experienced.

Throughout my life, the ordinary people of this Province have been required to conduct their lives against the background of brutal terrorism and destruction. The impact of that is still with us, and it is manifest in the aggressive and often violent behaviour that characterises our society. It is made worse by the underlying pressures on young people, with the result that many of them have little or no respect for authority.

We hear reports on an almost daily basis about outrageous attacks on doctors, nurses, security staff, Ambulance Service personnel and firemen as they perform their duties.

Their lives are threatened, and the lives or well-being of those they serve in crisis situations are also put at risk.

As elected representatives, we must make it clear that such behaviour is totally unacceptable and that the culture of mindless thuggery cannot be tolerated in a civilised society. In seeking to change that culture, legislation must be introduced that ensures our support for people to go about their work in serving the whole community free from the threat of fear or violence.

We must respond to all forms of criminal violence in a way that emphasises our abhorrence of such behaviour. We may wish to punish attacks on emergency workers

and Health Service personnel with particularly severe penalties.

The retribution exacted by society through the legal system must reflect the seriousness with which such crimes are regarded. We owe an enormous debt to those who serve us in the emergency services, and they are entitled to our unequivocal support.

Mrs Hanna: I support the sentiments of the motion and the two amendments. However, the first amendment appears to change the motion entirely, and the second amendment takes the focus completely off emergency workers — as has been explained. I attempted to amend the motion, but felt that we required a new title — if not a new motion — to ensure that it was more inclusive. Nevertheless, I certainly support the sentiments.

Emergency workers and healthcare workers are particularly vulnerable to attack due to the special nature of their work. Not only are the lives of the workers at risk, but if they are assaulted, attacked, obstructed, or hindered in any way from carrying out their duties, then the lives and personal safety of those they are attending in a professional capacity are also at risk. We must include healthcare assistants and student nurses, and we must ensure that we do not exclude any pertinent staff unintentionally.

As has already been said, the Assembly does not have the authority to pass legislation until justice and policing have been devolved. Nevertheless, the proposed legislation alone is not enough. It must be part of a wider package of measures that will address the causes of attacks on healthcare and emergency workers and provide solutions to reduce the problem in a real and meaningful way. Relevant representative bodies and agencies must be consulted heavily, so that a comprehensive package is produced.

The increase in violence has been brought about by various factors, including the fact that violence is often used as a means of solving problems, and an increase in drug and alcohol use. Many studies carried out in healthcare settings have implicated staffing patterns as contributors to violence due to a shortage of front-line staff. Employers of healthcare workers — primarily the health and social care trust chief executives — must assume a full and accountable responsibility for such issues, as well as addressing other contributory factors. Assaults are higher at night when staff numbers are reduced, and also in accident and emergency departments, where the likelihood of tempers being frayed due to long waiting times is a factor.

The rates of violence on healthcare and community service facilities are much higher than the documented rates, as episodes of violence are often unreported. Many victims believe that they are to blame and initially think that the violent act was a result of some inadequacy on their part. It is important that the mental cost of violence

on the victim is recognised — even if there is no physical injury. Professional counselling services must be offered automatically.

I welcome the re-establishment of the zero tolerance strategic group, and the PSNI's pilot scheme at the City Hospital has proved helpful. It should be noted that the Royal College of Nursing has called for improved hospital security and design.

3.30 pm

Managers must be advised that the revision of adequate measures to prevent violence needs to be given a high priority. Some safety measures may seem expensive or difficult to implement, but they are necessary to adequately protect the health and well-being of health and care workers. The Department must show leadership by condemning violence against its staff.

The current volume of attacks is totally unacceptable, and it is continuing to rise. Measures must be taken to improve security and to forge a closer liaison with the PSNI to ensure that culpable offenders are prosecuted and face the rigours of the law. The Department has a legal and ethical responsibility to guarantee the safety of all healthcare staff. The Assembly must urgently get to grips with this matter. Such violence and aggression are totally unacceptable in any civilised society.

Dr Deeny: As the only independent Member of the Assembly, I welcome today's Canadian visitors to Parliament Buildings. I have visited Vancouver three times, most recently last year, and I know how friendly the Canadian people are.

I agree with the previous contributor, Carmel Hanna, that violence against Health Service workers has reached almost epidemic proportions, and that it is totally unacceptable. I agree with other Members who said that protection from such violence must be extended to all front-line health and emergency workers.

I have heard increasing reports of workers in other professions who have to deal with abuse, such as teachers. The Health Service is beginning to take that problem seriously, but that is not the case in the teaching profession. Teachers are often left to their own devices to deal with such problems. However, that is a separate issue for another day.

This debate is not intended for discussion of the causes of violence against emergency workers, but it is worth mentioning that the lack of discipline that has become prevalent among young people is manifesting itself as a lack of respect for those who try to help them, with the result that workers are being attacked. That is disturbing. Such behaviour was not much of a problem when I started working in the medical profession almost 27 years ago — now it happens regularly. Indeed, a few years ago, the life of a female colleague of mine was put in danger outside an out-of-hours health centre.

Violence is a problem in the workplace for half of all doctors, as the Rev Dr Robert Coulter said. Doctors who work in hospitals are most likely to report an experience of violence in the workplace, followed by GPs.

Our ideas and strategies for tackling abuse should not be confined to the consequences of physical violence. Verbal abuse is rife, and is an equally important problem.

Staff at my medical centre have encountered such verbal abuse. Members of the public have threatened the reception staff, saying, for example, that if a certain course of action were not taken, there would be consequences. Currently, we have no way of proving that such abuse has occurred, although in some out-of-hours centres, telephone conversations are recorded. A closed-circuit television (CCTV) system was recently installed at our medical centre, primarily to deal with vandalism. Such measures are being taken across the Western Health and Social Services Board area in an attempt to deal with theft and vandalism, as well as the abuse of medical staff.

I have some figures on verbal abuse: in 2005-06, the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service reported 61 cases of verbal abuse, and one of the Belfast healthcare trusts reported 902 cases. The most frequently cited reasons for violent attacks on doctors were: dissatisfaction with the service provided; intoxication from alcohol or drugs; and personal problems.

It is important to mention that in fewer than half of cases action was taken subsequent to the violent incident. Therefore, on some occasions, employers and health authorities do not provide sufficient backup.

Those of us who have been working with the public for years see this as a reflection of our society. We practise defensive medicine, we worry and we sometimes side with the perpetrator rather than the victim. Employers and health authorities must stand up for their staff.

It is worth noting that the figures that I have mentioned apply only to cases that have been reported. Many instances of verbal and physical abuse go unreported. Within the past month, I have received a letter from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety saying that we should have zero tolerance by the end of September.

I urge all Members to support the motion and the two amendments.

Mr Moutray: Unfortunately, Northern Ireland is still a violent place in which to live. Although there is less paramilitarism and terrorism, the news is still filled with reports of vicious assaults and crimes. It is difficult to be sure whether the Government's turning a blind eye to lawbreakers over the years has contributed to this development, or whether it would have happened anyway.

One of the most disturbing aspects of this violence is the number of attacks on hard-working healthcare staff.

Those attacks are a blight that shames and disfigures our society. In the past year, in my constituency of Upper Bann, there have been 71 verbal attacks and 70 physical attacks at Craigavon Area Hospital. Beyond the hospital setting, in the community, there were 62 verbal attacks and 30 physical attacks on staff working for the Craigavon and Banbridge Community Health and Social Services Trust.

Emergency workers have the lives of other people in their hands, and often their great responsibilities are not reflected in their remuneration. They are forced to put their own lives at risk because of threats of violence. Attacks on these staff must be utterly condemned. It is despicable that violent acts should be committed against those serving the community in such vital roles. Those attacks cannot be allowed to continue; all agencies must work together to eradicate them.

Some individuals seem to regard healthcare workers as prime targets. It is disgraceful that those who serve the public on a 24/7 basis — often in highly pressurised circumstances — find themselves at risk of personal injury. Every effort must be made to instil confidence in staff and patients that everything possible is being done to protect them. These are public-sector employees, so there is an onus on Government to protect them. Hospitals can be isolated places, particularly at night.

Every year there are several thousand assaults on National Health Service workers across the United Kingdom. Society must send out a message of zero tolerance of those attacks. The punishment should, in this case, undoubtedly fit the crime. This issue deserves the support of the entire House. I support the motion and ask other Members to do likewise.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom labhairt ar son an rúin ar ionsaithe ar oibrithe éigeandála. The issue of assaults on emergency workers needs to be highlighted in the public arena. I thank the Rev Coulter and Mr Gardiner for tabling the motion. Sinn Féin recognises the intent and sentiment underpinning the motion but feels that it does not provide the required holistic approach.

Sinn Féin agrees that greater support and protection should be afforded to emergency workers, who all too often are in the front line and face attacks at work. The figures for violent incidents between 1 April 2006 and 30 September 2006 show that violent attacks against healthcare staff are on the rise. More than 3,231 attacks were reported in that period, compared with a total of 2,806 in the previous six months.

Appropriate sentencing for attacks on emergency workers is of the utmost importance, but a holistic approach must be applied to the issue — such an approach is lacking in the motion. The focus of any strategy that deals with attacks on the emergency services must prioritise prevention as a primary way in which

to stop those incidents from occurring in the first place. Legislation in itself will not solve the problem.

A strategy to deal with attacks on emergency service personnel can be broken down into five areas: education; the use of media; participation; community engagement; and legislation. The Fire and Rescue Service is one agency that is already striving to tick all five of those boxes, and we commend all those in the service who are being proactive on that issue.

When I was on the Fire and Rescue Service board, I was greatly impressed by the number of cadet schemes that the service carried out. Those schemes involved direct engagement between the Fire and Rescue Service and young people who were involved in antisocial behaviour. Local community groups and/or individuals referred participants in the schemes to the service.

The local intervention fire education (LIFE) scheme is a five-day community engagement project aimed at 14- to 19-year-olds. Those young people have been referred by local community groups, which believe that they would benefit from a week's interaction with Fire and Rescue Service personnel at a local operational station. Those young people have been excluded from school or society, or are in danger of becoming involved in antisocial behaviour. A main aim of the LIFE scheme is to build a better understanding between young people in our community and Fire and Rescue Service personnel.

The education of our youth — the group most often involved in attacks — must become a priority. Attacks on emergency workers need to become socially unacceptable. Funds should be allocated to community engagement initiatives that allow for a greater comprehension of the effect attacks on its vital resources have on the whole community.

Sinn Féin fully supports the work of the zero-tolerance strategic group, which was established in 2005 to develop and promote best-practice guidance in order to achieve a cultural shift in the approach and attitude towards emergency workers and to help to eradicate violence from the workplace. That group has developed an action plan that ensures that measures are in place to support staff in the emergency services.

The Fire and Rescue Services (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 is strong legislation. Article 57(1) states that:

“Any person who assaults, resists, obstructs or impedes —
(a) a fire and rescue officer in the execution of his duty”

— or her duty — is guilty of an offence. Article 57(3) states that any person guilty of such an offence shall be liable:

“on conviction on indictment, to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 2 years or to a fine, or to both.”

That is legislation that firefighters, with whom we have consulted, would not want to see diluted in any way whatsoever.

The Ulster Unionists' amendment deals with only certain groups of emergency workers. Sinn Féin believes that there should be all-encompassing legislation to deal with attacks on emergency workers to ensure that all emergency workers are equally protected. An approach that sees different pieces of legislation drafted for different sets of emergency workers would not make sense but create imbalance and confusion.

The problems will not be solved simply by slapping on tough sentences. Yes, tough sentencing and zero tolerance are needed, but without the introduction of proper preventative strategies that involve community engagement, outreach and efforts to achieve a cultural change, we will not see a sizeable reduction in the number of attacks on emergency services. Sinn Féin believes that any legislation on the matter must take account of all emergency workers — *[Interruption.]*

Tacaíonn Sinn Féin leis an leasú.

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry to interrupt, but I must remind Members to turn off their mobile phones, please. I know that, on occasion, we all forget to turn them off, but it is important to remember to do so.

Mr McKay: I support amendment No 1.

Mr G Robinson: In the past, there have been almost 6,000 attacks on health trust staff across the Province: 1,681 verbal attacks and 4,245 physical attacks. That is an absolute disgrace.

3.45 pm

The DUP supports the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the law's zero-tolerance approach towards offenders. It is a sad state of affairs when uniformed police are employed to protect staff in accident and emergency departments in Northern Ireland. All staff must be encouraged to report any abusive or violent acts that are perpetrated against them. They should not shy away from involving the PSNI.

In March, Belfast City Hospital released figures that show that two of its accident and emergency staff were attacked every week. In my constituency of East Londonderry, there have been 54 verbal attacks and 110 physical attacks on members of staff of the Causeway Health and Social Services Trust. Across Northern Ireland, there were over 5,000 attacks. A British Medical Association (BMA) study, 'Violence at Work: The Experience of UK Doctors', sought:

"to explore the incidence of violence against doctors in an attempt to understand better the extent of such incidences and the impact such violence has on the lives of doctors."

Violence in the workplace is a problem for almost half the doctors who responded to the BMA survey,

and more than one quarter of respondents felt that the situation had worsened in the previous year. Two out of five doctors indicated that they had experienced violence over the previous 12 months. Some had been attacked or threatened more than 20 times. Those most likely to be attacked worked in psychiatry and obstetrics. Most attacks took place in a ward or in a doctor's office. Twenty per cent of attacks occurred outside normal working hours. The most frequent excuse for violence is dissatisfaction with the service provided. We must have a zero-tolerance approach. Attacking innocent staff members is totally unacceptable, and that message must be sent out, loud and clear. I support the motion and the Ulster Unionist Party amendment.

Mr Gallagher: The motion is about a serious, worrying and dangerous emerging trend. Both the motion, in the name of Bob Coulter, and the amendment, in the name of Carál Ní Chuilín, reflect the fact that there are several dimensions to any solution that will adequately deal with the problem of assaults on emergency workers.

The use of violence, whether it is assault, threat or intimidation, anywhere in the workplace is a serious matter. However, attacks on emergency workers are particularly deplorable and completely unacceptable. As the proposer of the motion mentioned, some of the worst attacks have been on firefighters and ambulance staff; those attacks have been highlighted in the media. The attacks are not confined to urban settings; they can occur anywhere in Northern Ireland. The same goes for accident and emergency units, where there have been some vicious attacks on staff. Those attacks have occurred at hospitals across the North, and they have not only been on medical staff but on staff working in administration and on reception.

The situation is so bad that some healthcare trusts have had to employ security staff at certain hours, particularly at weekends, to protect their medical staff. That means that resources that should be providing care and filling gaps in the Health Service are being used for that purpose. We all have a duty to do more to protect those workers, because the situation is grave. Jail sentences must be considered as an appropriate punishment for the worst offences, and thought should be given to other forms of punishment for less serious offences. It is worrying that the ongoing attacks on ambulance staff and firefighters, in particular, are sometimes directed against them by schoolchildren, who can be as young as eight or nine years of age.

Because of that, some thought and backup resources must be given to delivering education programmes. I have no doubt that some of the young people responsible for these attacks are caught up in such acts because they do not understand the full consequences of their irresponsible behaviour. Through enlightenment and educational programmes, many young people would learn respect for those who are in the front line of

delivering emergency services and, very often, save lives in so doing.

We must do everything possible to stamp out assaults and thuggish behaviour towards emergency workers. A package of measures should be introduced to help end such behaviour.

Mrs Long: I wish to concentrate on the issues between the two amendments, and I welcome the opportunity to make even a short comment on this most serious of issues. Attacks on emergency workers place staff in danger, as has already been said; but they also risk patients' lives, waste resources and place the wider community at risk. I welcome the fact that the Assembly is trying to tackle the issue.

I have difficulties with both amendments to the motion. Although the Sinn Féin amendment is to be commended for its breadth of approach in seeking to tackle the issue, it fails to consider a legislative tool in order to effect change. The Ulster Unionist amendment is strong in that it proposes a legislative tool, but it is rather deficient in the short, specific list of people that it would cover. Having considered both amendments, I tend towards that of the Ulster Unionists on the basis that it better establishes the principle of an aggravated offence in respect of assaults on emergency workers. If that principle were to be established, it would be easier to add in other workers than to have to establish the principle in the first place.

I have outlined why I shall support the Ulster Unionist amendment. However, I wish that it had been possible to come up with a composite amendment to better reflect that the problem requires not only a legislative tool, but the broader approaches mentioned in the Sinn Féin amendment. It is unfortunate that, on this occasion, a composite form of words that adequately reflects the aims of both amendments could not be found.

Mr Dallat: Although it is not customary to refer to anyone in the Public Gallery, Mr Speaker, I thank you for dispensing with that convention today. I wish to extend a welcome from the SDLP to our Canadian friends. For many years during the Troubles, Canadians did not visit. Now that they are returning, I hope that they bring lots of inward investment.

Like Mrs Long, the SDLP believes that there are deficiencies in both amendments to the motion. We are struggling to decide which one to support. However, the SDLP does not for one moment question the intentions of Rev Robert Coulter, who has given many years of commitment to the Health Service.

Assaults on emergency workers are often physical, resulting in serious injury. However, they are also verbal, leaving no evidence or grounds for complaint or sympathy. That is fundamentally wrong, and it has led to long-term psychological scars in some of our

finest emergency workers who have been off work for long periods of time, in some cases indefinitely.

On a Sunday morning recently, I unexpectedly had to take a member of my family to the accident and emergency department of the Causeway Hospital in Coleraine, where the care and attention received was first class. However, only a few hours earlier, the hospital had been the scene of much abuse.

Emergency staff must run the gauntlet of abuse from people who lack appreciation of a Health Service that is under stress and lacking resources, but committed to saving lives. It is unfortunate that the practice of abusing emergency workers has become a way of life — a form of cowardice meted out by people who have neither the manners nor the patience, nor even the lowest level of basic tolerance, towards doctors, nurses, social workers and others who are dedicated to the care of society.

Similarly, it is impossible to understand why Fire and Rescue Service personnel are attacked daily as they answer emergency calls. Who would stone a fire crew and their appliance? That is difficult to understand, but it happens.

Who would beat up a prison warden who is committed to the rehabilitation of those who have carried out serious crimes? The answer is: the very people who are given all the resources and opportunities to begin anew.

The Assembly must take affirmative action to end the abuse, assaults, threats and other forms of violence that emergency workers experience daily, particularly at weekends. However, until we obtain control of criminal justice matters, we cannot take affirmative action. In the meantime, we can offer only platitudes.

Every weekend, accident and emergency departments and police cells are filled with people who stretch those services to their limits. Society as a whole must rediscover the need to appreciate the work of public service workers, particularly those who are employed in the emergency services. There should be a public outcry every time an ambulance, a doctor, a nurse, or a fire crew is attacked. However, that will happen only when we realise that the continued abuse of emergency personnel will force them to withdraw their services from a society that appears to stand idly by while they suffer in silence.

Let the motion kick-start a new campaign to educate and inform all those who would physically or verbally attack emergency personnel. Television information campaigns are not enough. We must follow through on this matter, and, by our own example, we should seize every opportunity to educate and inform, and to raise the level of appreciation and admiration for our colleagues in the emergency services. At the same time, we must shame the attackers.

Although sentencing may be one option for us to consider, we could also give consideration to community service for culprits, perhaps making them work alongside emergency personnel in order to bring home the unpleasantness of mopping up blood and vomit in an accident and emergency department, or picking up the broken glass after a fire tender has been bombarded with stones.

Mr F McCann: Will the Member give way?
[*Interruption.*]

Mr Dallat: I do not have enough time.

Mr F McCann: Is the Member listening to the Ulster Unionists, or is he going to make his own decision?
[*Laughter.*]

Mr Dallat: Much as I would like to give way, the Member has just succeeded in putting me off my speech.

Finally, I repeat that until we take control of criminal justice, we cannot be of service to those emergency workers of whom we speak so passionately. I apologise to Mr McCann.

Mr F McCann: It was better when it came from the heart, John.

Mr Speaker: Order.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I thank the Rev Dr Robert Coulter and Sam Gardiner for proposing the motion on such an important matter. I also place on record my support and admiration for the work that is carried out by our emergency personnel, often in very trying and difficult circumstances.

It is appalling to think that those who dedicate themselves to saving lives and to public service should be subjected to physical and verbal abuse. That includes Ambulance Service staff, doctors, nurses and those in the front line in accident and emergency departments, as well as other staff in the health and social care sector and in the Fire and Rescue Service. Although they do not fall within my area of responsibility, I include Prison Service personnel and the police, all of whom have served all the people of Northern Ireland without fear or favour throughout the 30 years of the Troubles.

Despite heightened publicity and public awareness, statistics for the past year show that attacks on emergency workers continued to increase. There were 5,926 attacks on health and social care workers, the majority of which were physical assaults — a 6% increase on last year's figures. Of all of those attacks that we can identify, 130 were against ambulance staff, 107 were against doctors, and, alarmingly, 3,377 were against nurses.

The Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service was also in the firing line. Last year, it reported seven personal injuries and 37 attacks on appliances, which is wholly

unacceptable. I support any reasonable measure that is aimed at ending such attacks.

4.00 pm

Mr Shannon: Does the Minister agree that the Fire and Rescue Service's cadet scheme is first class and takes young people out of estates? Another scheme, run by community safety partnerships and funded by the councils, gives young people from the estates an opportunity to work together in teams, to experience discipline and to make a contribution. Will the Minister consider introducing such schemes across the whole Province? Schemes in the north Down and Strangford areas have been very beneficial, and I am sure that many other areas could benefit too. One Member spoke about such schemes earlier. The schemes are good, and I would appreciate help from the Minister.

Mr McGimpsey: I thank Mr Shannon for that. As has been said, the NI Fire and Rescue Service board and the Fire and Rescue Service understand that there is no one-size-fits-all remedy. A composite of remedies and measures is required. Mr Shannon mentioned some remedies, and legislation can also be a remedy. I will discuss those issues in due course.

When staff are doing their jobs out in communities, it can be difficult to identify the people who might be attacking or threatening to attack them or their vehicles. However, even when inside buildings or institutions, staff can be subject to unacceptable and inexcusable levels of abuse. Currently, there are some things that can be done for them.

Mr F McCann: Will the Minister take an intervention?

Mr McGimpsey: I will sit down again, but then I want to get through my speech.

Mr F McCann: Every contribution today has talked about education and a strategy for dealing with problems, but that is lacking in the Ulster Unionist Party's motion. Cárál Ní Chuilín's amendment covers a number of factors not covered by the motion. It covers how we can involve the community.

Mr McNarry: On a point of order. I want to ask about procedure.

Mr F McCann: I ask the Minister to use his good offices —

Mr McNarry: How relevant is the intervention?

Mr Speaker: Order. It is unparliamentary, when one Member has the Floor, for another Member to try to intervene and stay on the Floor. Continue, Mr McCann.

Mr F McCann: A number of factors have not been taken into account in the motion. I have been trying to work out where the "9 months" in the motion came from, because it is contrary to what the Fire and Rescue Service has said it would require, and it is also not what the zero tolerance strategic group would like.

There is therefore logic in supporting the wider amendment tabled by Cárál Ní Chuilín. Does the Minister agree?

Mr McGimpsey: Mr Speaker, I will endeavour to —

Mr McNarry: Will the Minister give way?

Mr McGimpsey: Yes.

Mr Speaker: Point of order.

Mr McNarry: With respect, the point of order is past now. It was about how relevant the intervention was, and I was able to gauge an answer to that in a few seconds. The intervention became a speech in support of a particular party.

Mr Speaker: Members should know that, under Standing Orders, it is up to a Member to decide whether he wants to give way. If he does give way, the Member can expect many things, as we have seen on previous occasions.

Mr McGimpsey: That is very helpful, Mr Speaker. Thank you — I will endeavour to battle on. To get back to this serious issue, there are things that we can do for staff who are attacked. In November 2006, legislation passed at Westminster made obstructing or hindering emergency workers a criminal offence for the first time. Under the provisions of the Emergency Workers (Obstruction) Act 2006, which extends to Northern Ireland, a person guilty of doing so is liable on summary conviction to a fine not exceeding level 5 or £5,000 on the standard scale. In addition, a criminal justice Bill that will make it an offence to create nuisance or disturbance on National Health Service premises will be presented for its first reading in Westminster in July. It is intended that that, too, will apply in Northern Ireland.

As Mr Shannon mentioned, the Fire and Rescue Services (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 has provided for specific penalties on conviction of those responsible for assaults on, or obstruction of, fire and rescue workers and those who assist them. That is the standard for which we should aim in terms of legislative protection for the emergency services.

The problem is that Northern Ireland needs one consolidated piece of legislation. The Assembly must consider how best to respond to those who are found guilty of unacceptable behaviour against the emergency services. I am sure that Members have looked at the Emergency Workers (Scotland) Act 2005, which makes it an offence to:

“assault or impede persons who provide emergency services; and for connected purposes”.

Therein lies another useful phrase. One of the problems, as Carmel Hanna said, is the difficulty of defining the term “emergency workers”.

Fra McCann mentioned the Sinn Féin amendment. Unfortunately, it excludes social-care staff. Therefore,

if the amendment were made, social-care staff would be excluded. I am sure that that was not the intention, but it highlights the difficulty of defining who should be included in the protected group. The Scottish Parliament have gone for “emergency workers”, and that is what we want to do through composite legislation.

It is wrong to believe that legislation and stronger penalties are the only answers. There must be more to the solution than that. In fact, there is more to it than that. For a successful prosecution, for example, a complaint must be made, the perpetrator identified, and the case taken successfully through the legal system. Not every healthcare worker wants to face that process. Therefore, we need to be able to provide support to staff and not rely on those individuals who have been affected by violence to bring proceedings against the perpetrators.

In such matters, employers are key to lending support, but it is a contradiction of the ethos of caring for carers if carers have to take people to court. Therefore, while there is a need for tough legislation, there is an equal need for sustained community action.

Several initiatives are already being taken. Members have mentioned the publicity campaigns, personal alarm systems for lone workers, CCTV and increased security in accident and emergency departments. Most of all, I am happy to endorse the zero tolerance approach initiated by my predecessor and adopted by all health and social care employers against violent or abusive behaviour towards staff.

I understand that the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service is willing to consider a pilot scheme to install CCTV in fire appliances. It is, of course, an indictment of our society that such measures are necessary, but we must deal with the problem. We must direct our primary focus at patient care, which means that we must protect all those who work in the healthcare system.

Therefore, although legislation is important, the main focus must be on reducing the number of attacks. That is most likely to be achieved by focusing on community activity, with, as Jim Shannon suggested, fire officers from local stations going to talk to schools and local groups.

The figures that I have quoted show that more needs to be done to protect our emergency workers. Such unacceptable levels of violent behaviour must not be allowed to continue. Today's debate is a welcome contribution to raising the profile of the issue. However, even if the Assembly agrees the motion, as elected representatives we must not think that we have resolved the matter or done as much as we can. We should ask ourselves how best to provide leadership in our constituencies. We must pay tribute to the community groups and community workers who do so much work and make such a contribution to protecting Health Service workers.

Members will be familiar with images of violence recorded on CCTV in accident and emergency units. In most instances, the attackers are patients, many of whom have mental-health problems or other difficulties or traumas. It is not simply a matter of enacting legislation, because prosecutions are often inappropriate.

I am happy to accept the aim of the motion to take more direct action. However, legislation is by no means the end of the story. Tackling nuisance will go some way to address the problem, but I share the view expressed by other Members that we need to go further. I will consider the example set by the definition in the Scottish legislation and make composite legislation to protect all emergency workers and promote a culture of zero tolerance towards violence and abuse directed at staff.

There is an unacceptable level of violence in Northern Ireland towards emergency workers and other staff working in public services, and all Members agree that it must be eradicated or reduced as much possible. The measures that I am considering with the Assembly must be taken forward.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Éirím a thabhairt tacaíochta don leasú a chuir Carál Ní Chuilín os comhair an Tionóil. Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a thabhairt don Oirmhinneach Coulter agus don Uasal Gardiner as an ábhar seo a thógáil inniu.

Tá ár meas agus ár n-aire de dhíth ar na hoibrithe éigeandála — agus go háirithe ár dtacaíocht iomlán.

I support the amendment for the reasons outlined by my party colleagues Daithí McKay and Carál Ní Chuilín. Rev Coulter and Mr Gardiner deserve our thanks for bringing such an important issue to the Floor, and I welcome the many contributions made today.

In response to Rev Coulter's motion and amendment, Sinn Féin is not opposed to new legislation but, as Daithí McKay has already stated, my party implores the Assembly and the Executive to conduct a detailed examination to identify the most effective action and legislation. It is also important to identify what additional complementary measures are required to assist the ending of attacks on emergency workers. We cannot, and should not, rely solely on stronger legislation to end such attacks.

I welcome the Minister's presence in the House and particularly his commitment to listen to all reasonable proposals — and Sinn Féin's are entirely reasonable. We all know what we mean by the term "emergency workers". The Sinn Féin amendment did not include social-care workers; it is also worth pointing out that Rev Coulter's amendment did not mention them either. The Minister should take note of that.

The Sinn Féin amendment seeks to put proper emphasis on the required measures. The first step is to

ensure that attacks on emergency services become a matter of public debate. That will require engaging with communities to highlight the issue and to bring the emergency services into personal contact with the community, particularly young people, who are the main perpetrators of the attacks. The scheme devised by the Fire and Rescue Service, which Daithí McKay mentioned, highlights the need not only to create awareness of the problem but the importance of establishing practical measures to end it. That can be replicated across the sector.

Carál Ní Chuilín highlighted the recent spate of attacks on Fire and Rescue Service personnel in Derry, who have been drawn into the area because wheelie bins have been set on fire — acts that have been widely condemned in the community. However, the response to those attacks is different from the past. It has been led by the leadership of the Fire and Rescue Service in Derry and has included public debate, good media coverage, and a number of community fora. All political parties and local councillors have supported the initiative.

Crucially, a number of practical measures have emerged, including Fire and Rescue Service visits to certain areas to deliver educational and familiarisation exercises. In addition, several local people provided the Fire and Rescue Service with their mobile phone numbers so that they could be contacted in the event of similar fires, to provide information about the nature and threat of the fire. The initiative has also ensured that Fire and Rescue Service personnel were seen as friends and neighbours, as well as providing a valuable service.

There was a noticeable reduction in the number of attacks, but, importantly, there was greater communication between the services and the community.

4.15 pm

I accept that that is not a panacea for all the attacks in accident and emergency departments, as do other sector workers across the range. However, community awareness and ownership will, in the long term, prove a more successful means of tackling such problems than simply creating more and more legislation.

As public representatives, we must offer more to our health and emergency services than the promise of legislation; they deserve our support. Thus, Sinn Féin's amendment asks the Executive and the Assembly to build upon the good practice of the Fire Brigades Union's strategy, stretch it across the other sectors and put in place the resources necessary to achieve that across the Six Counties.

Sin mo mhéid. Iarraim bhur dtacaíocht don leasú.

We urge Members to support the amendment.

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

Mr Gardiner: I thank the Minister for his attendance and his input into the debate. I thank also all the Members who participated in support of the motion moved by my hon Friend Rev Dr Robert Coulter.

Certain points stand out in the debate that deserve our attention. The key point was a comment made by Dr Coulter that attacks on nurses, doctors and health workers never happened in the past. They are new and deeply shocking incidents and, as such, merit the creation of a special new offence under the law. As Dr Coulter put it, common assault is a category of crime that is not adequate to describe these events; they are, as he said: "most uncommon assault".

No matter what debate may take place about whether assault means a physical or verbal assault or both, the fact remains that it is an increasingly common pattern of behaviour that we must do something about. To allow it to continue, unremarked upon and without legislating for it, would be negligent.

We all appreciate that the Assembly will not obtain the power to legislate on this matter until policing and justice powers are devolved. That does not mean, however, that we should not declare our intention to legislate as and when power is devolved to the Assembly. The Assembly should make a statement of intent.

We appreciate that since the motion tabled by Dr Coulter before the Transitional Assembly, Westminster legislation, in the form of a private Member's Bill — later extended to Northern Ireland — and an Order in Council have legislated in part for attacks on emergency workers, such as ambulance drivers and firefighters.

That does not mean, however, that the Assembly, when it gets devolved policing and justice powers, should not introduce a comprehensive Bill to cover all emergency workers, both those referred to today in the amended version of that private Member's Bill — doctors, nurses and health workers — as well as ambulance drivers, firefighters and other emergency workers.

Our colleagues in Scotland introduced comprehensive legislation, which created a new category of offence with greater tariffs of punishment, to deal with the problem. New legislation could supersede all earlier legislation, and that could be made plain in an annex to the main Bill.

We are marching increasingly alongside our colleagues in Edinburgh and Cardiff. Our First Minister is currently establishing cordial relationships with his counterpart in Edinburgh, Mr Salmond.

The Scottish way of doing things, by creating a comprehensive Bill and a new category of offence, which is punishable with higher tariffs, might well recommend itself to this House. It seems a more logical way to proceed than allow the situation to be covered by random enactments.

The situation that this measure seeks to address is very serious and cannot be treated lightly. There is a positive need to set attacks on nurses, doctors, midwives and health workers aside from ordinary criminality. That is why Dr Coulter and I will seek assurances from the Executive, and specifically from the First Minister, that once policing and justice powers are devolved, they will move swiftly to introduce a new law that protects health and emergency workers and creates new punishment tariffs for attacks on them.

Such an Executive-sponsored Bill would reflect the entire Assembly's widespread condemnation of those attacks. It would be a unanimous expression of the collective political will of all the parties and public representatives in Northern Ireland to cherish and value health and emergency workers and to create punishments that are much more severe than those that are associated with common assault for anyone who attacks those workers.

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that amendment No 1 standing on the Marshalled List in the name of Carál Ní Chuilín is the Sinn Féin amendment. Amendment No 2 standing on the Marshalled List in the name of Dr Coulter is the Ulster Unionist Party amendment. Before we proceed, it is important that we get the procedure right.

Before I put the question on amendment No 1, I advise Members that if amendment No 1 is made, amendment No 2 will fall, and I will put the question on the motion as amended.

Question, That amendment No 1 be made, put and negated.

Question, That amendment No 2 be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly believes that legislation should be introduced in Northern Ireland, at the earliest possible moment, to make it an offence punishable by imprisonment for a period not exceeding 9 months, or by a fine not exceeding level 5 on the standard scale, or both, for all persons assaulting registered nurses, registered midwives, registered medical practitioners and health workers when they are in pursuit of their duties, either on or off hospital premises, or such place where they normally might pursue their professional activity.

Fishing Industry

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes for the winding-up speech. All other Members will have five minutes. *[Interruption.]*

Order. Quite a number of Members are moving about.

Lord Morrow: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it not the convention that, when you are addressing the House, every Member should be in his or her place, or at least be seated? That assertion has been repeated umpteen times, but it is conspicuous that some Members are here simply to defy your authority on that.

Mr Speaker: I have tried, as you may have noticed yesterday and today, to take my seat during debates — and when they are finished — in the hope that Members who want to move in and out of the Chamber will do so then. Unfortunately, it seems that people start to move in and out when I rise to my feet. Let us therefore have some respect for whoever is in the Chair.

I have received correspondence from the private secretary to the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development expressing regret that the Minister is unable to attend today's debate —

Mr McNarry: That is a shame.

Mr Kennedy: She is fund-raising.

Mr Speaker: Order. She is on a visit to the United States on departmental business. The Minister has, however, arranged for the Minister for Regional Development to attend the debate on her behalf.

One amendment to the motion has been received and is published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and 5 minutes for the winding-up speech.

Mr Kennedy: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it in order for a Minister to wind up in a debate that is not their responsibility departmentally?

Mr Speaker: The Minister's not being here today was raised in the Business Committee. I have received a reason for non-attendance from the Minister's office. It is not out of practice for one Minister to attend on behalf of another, as Executive responsibility is collective.

Mr Kennedy: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I ask you to give additional consideration to the point that I have raised, as it upsets an important principle. It is a big departure from custom and practice when any Minister can be substituted from another Department and can expect to answer to an important Assembly debate that is not their direct responsibility. I ask you to reflect upon the matter and to bring forward a more considered view.

Mr Speaker: In the past, it has been the practice of this House that Ministers fill in for each other for various reasons.

Mr McNarry: On a further point of order, Mr Speaker. You mentioned that the Business Committee was aware of the unavailability of the Minister of Agriculture; however, its members were not aware of a substitute. Should the instance occur again, would it be in order that the Business Committee should be made aware of a Minister nominating another Minister? You refer to Executive responsibility; if a Minister wished to nominate a substitute perhaps they might look to the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) to speak for the Executive, rather than somebody from their own party who has more specific knowledge of roads than he does of fish.

Mr Speaker: I will bring back a further report on the issue.

Dr W McCrea: The Minister was unable to attend, as she is on official business, and we accept that that is so; her non-attendance is no discourtesy to the House. However, I ask you, Mr Speaker, to look at it very carefully as it does not just apply to today's situation, but should form a principle for Ministers in the future. A Minister has been substituted who has no portfolio for the occasion.

Mr Speaker: As I have said, I will report back to the House on this.

Mr Shannon: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the struggle that the fishing industry is subjected to and calls upon the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to urgently appoint a committee to oversee the fishing industry and ensure that their best interests are catered for at the highest level.

There ir twa differ clesses o' faschermen – thaim at fasch fer crack an' thaim at fasch fer fasch. In oor province there ir men wha need faschin – no fer the crack fer tae get a day ir twa awa tae sport wi' thair freens, bit tae feed thair femmelies – the saime es thair faither an' es faither afore him did. Faschin isnae an oot o' date joab – look tae Icelan' an' the Nordic States an see hoo they ir thrivin'. Hit's a guid chuse o' career – especially gien the roughness o' fasch we hae in the Airish Sea.

4.30 pm

There are two types of fishermen: those who fish for sport and those who fish to earn a living. In the Province, some rely on fishing, not as a sport or a way of spending a day relaxing with friends but as a means to feed their families, just as their fathers and grandfathers did before them. Fishing is not an outdated job — look how Iceland and the Nordic states flourish. It is a viable career choice, especially considering the bounty in the Irish Sea.

Why, therefore, do fishermen in Northern Ireland struggle so desperately? There are literally plenty more fish in the sea, yet hard-working men, dedicated to providing a good life for their families, sit idly at home. They watch the rapid reduction of their money and wonder should they simply take a job in the local fibreglass factory or Asda store. The EU's interference in their careers, combined with a lack of strong and proper representation to stand up to such intrusion, are to blame.

I must express some frustration and anger about the Minister's first visit to Greyabbey in my Strangford constituency, which also includes Portavogie. She outlined her aims for the farming industry — and rightly so. I do not dispute them, but she did not mention fishing, for which she also has a remit. I hope that the Minister will respond positively to my concern about that, either personally or through her substitute in the Chamber today, the Minister for Regional Development.

For many years, fishing has been the poor relation in the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD). Hut 5 on the Stormont estate is renowned in the fishing industry; people often wonder what exactly happens in the fisheries division that is based there. I tabled today's motion because an industry-led committee to answer the industry's questions quickly and adequately is required.

The restrictions on white fishing, such as the Irish Sea being off bounds, in an attempt to renew cod stocks, mean that those men have little chance of feeding their families without help. It is not that they are lazy or refuse to adapt. Rather, the EU's seemingly futile directives mean that their boats are banned from fishing for 10 weeks, during which time the families must exist without a wage. They are not in that situation because they want to be, but because of a decision that was made without any thought being given to them or attention being paid to their valid and important opinions.

When similar restrictions were applied to the Scots, the Scottish Executive Environment and Rural Affairs Department, which is the Scottish equivalent of DARD, issued tie-up packages to the affected fishermen to enable them to survive. DARD did the same thing for a few years but then stopped, citing first that it was illegal and then that it was not cost-effective.

To do what is right is rarely the cheap option. However, that does not negate the fact that those men are being stopped from doing their jobs. They have not chosen that line of action, and they should not be penalised, but no one is doing anything to change it. That is why Members must endorse the motion. Apathy towards the fishing community is killing it slowly, and those at the highest level of Government, who have allowed the restrictions to be applied, are most responsible for the decline. It is high time for those at the highest

level to rectify that wrongdoing, note the importance of the fishing industry in Northern Ireland and attend to its needs. That has not been done for the past five years, and it is not overly dramatic to say that the fishing industry simply will not survive a further five years of the neglect and apathy to which it has been subjected.

There is no doubt that some half-hearted attempts have been made. Despite the decline in white fish, there has been an increase in quotas for other fish stocks such as nephrops, to which fishermen should be able to transfer their fishing. However, some vehicles do not easily lend themselves to such a transfer, and that issue must be addressed. In 1999, some 40 trawlers fished full-time for white fish. By 2006, that figure had dwindled to eight trawlers. How much lower can the figure sink before action is taken? Soon, fishing will be merely a recreational sport and no longer a career in Northern Ireland, while it flourishes in other areas where nowhere near as many restrictions apply.

In Portavogie, which is in my constituency of Strangford, fishing is the biggest employer. When the net is cast for fishermen in Portavogie, those who are employed in the industry do not necessarily come from the town but from the surrounding villages. It is the Assembly's duty to ensure that those men are not left high and dry again. Fishing has been a mainstay of the Province for centuries, yet it may now die out due to decisions made by people in Brussels who do not understand, or even care to understand, the fishermen and the problems that they encounter in their livelihoods.

The drift away from fishing by the young is particularly worrying. To fill that gap, Lithuanian and Polish workers are taking their place. However, they want full-time work. When conditions are bad at sea and full-time work is not available, they will move on to new pastures where work can be found. Where will the next generation of fishermen come from if it cannot be proved that fishing offers a viable career for the young, and not just a job for the sake of the good old days? At present, fishing cannot be shown to be a viable career. We must strive to ensure that the industry is given the opportunity to flourish again.

Recently, the Strangford Lough Fishermen's Association — representatives of which are present in the Gallery — sent me a letter outlining its valid fears. As I carefully considered them, it struck me that if proper representation were made or, indeed, if there were a method by which that could be done, most of the problems would be solved. I have written to the Minister, Michelle Gildernew, seeking a meeting. I await a date for that meeting. The people whom I represent look forward to it.

It must be understood that the EU has reduced the amount of fish that can be caught and, therefore, the income that is brought into fishermen's households. It

has all but eradicated the confidence that those hard-working men have that the measures implemented by the Government have been to anybody's benefit but that of the scientists whose grants are continually funded without question.

Morale in the fishing industry is the lowest it has been for many years. The Department listens to the information supplied by scientists who continually flag up statistics; it is vital that the practical hands-on knowledge of fishermen be given equal credence. When fish show up on the scanners of fishing fleets, that cannot be ignored, no matter what results the scientists have come up with. The fact remains that the men on the boats are seeing huge shoals of fish that they cannot touch; they have been told that those fish do not exist. These men have been doing the job for much longer than the EU has been dictating to them. Their reports should be given the same weight as those of the scientists, if not more.

The crux of the matter is that there is no body that is composed of fishermen and that can state and prove their case. Dedicated people who attempt to make representations at Brussels are, in many cases, brushed aside. That must not continue. Representatives such as Alan McCulla from the Anglo-North Irish Fish Producers' Organisation and Dick James from the Northern Ireland Fish Producers' Organisation are crying out for a committee to be set up comprising fishermen, people who have a future in fishing, their elected representatives and Government officials who are dedicated to doing their best to achieve what is best for the industry. That should be granted as a matter of urgency.

No longer should fishing be the poor relation of agriculture. Fishermen are entitled to, and must have, the ear of the Minister. The way to do that is through an accountable committee, created to relay fishermen's knowledge and fears and their proposed solutions to problems that are faced by the industry to the Minister, who, it is hoped, will subsequently be able to represent them with full and clear understanding of the situation. To be forewarned is to be forearmed. Undoubtedly, there have been problems with previous representation in Brussels. However, proper representation is needed here as well.

I am happy to accept the amendment, because it complements the motion as a way of making progress. The facts show the problems that fishermen face. Those problems are not self-inflicted: they have been inflicted by faceless people who are unaccountable to the people of the Province. A way of offsetting that is to set up a committee that will care and will ensure that fishermen are no longer under-represented. The men who I see in the harbours are not faceless; they are men who have homes to heat and children to feed. Those men and their families are the people who are so adversely affected by EU directives, and they must have a voice in the

Assembly, at the highest level of Government, which will carry on and be heard in Brussels.

Mr McCallister: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after "Assembly" and insert

"recognises the challenges facing Northern Ireland's fishing industry and will facilitate the creation of an all-party fishing industry group to promote the interests of, and secure a sustainable future for, the fishing industry and fishing communities."

I am pleased that the proposer of the motion has accepted the amendment.

For a long time, the fishing industry in my constituency of South Down has provided a solid income for many fishermen and their families and played a crucial role in bolstering the local economy. However, times are changing and Ulster's fishermen increasingly face arduous and gruelling financial hardships. Over the winter, fishermen in South Down endured the worst season on record. In the run-up to Christmas, thanks to the bad weather, the local fleet only managed to put to sea on a few occasions.

Ms S Ramsey: I thank the Member for giving way. I hope that I will not eat into his time, but I notice that the clock has not started. The Member will probably be given additional time.

This is a serious debate, and I wish to commend the proposers of both the motion and the amendment, but I could not let this opportunity pass. The amendment mentions the setting up of an all-party group to deal with the fishing industry. I am concerned about whether the fish will be male or female, because last week the UUP would not support an all-party group to deal with women's issues in the Assembly, saying that there were too many working groups.

Mr McCallister: I am sure that if the Member wishes to join the fishing group we can look into it, although I am not sure how many fishing families she represents.

The bad weather and the situation in the opening two months of this year provided for a difficult winter for the fishermen in South Down. That resulted in severe hardship for those who rely on the sea for their living, compounded by the fact that many of those who tried to claim benefits were refused help.

For too long, the fishing trade in Northern Ireland has been an inferior partner to the agriculture industry, and the Government have not made it the priority that they should have. Last year, at the disastrous fisheries council in Brussels, where the quotas that the industry will depend on next year were set, Northern Ireland's fishermen lost out to other fishermen in the European Union. The negotiations were conducted behind closed doors. No one, except those in the room, knew what was going on and what deals were being concocted between and within member states.

The failures of the European Union's involvement in our fishing industry are plain to see. The UK's whitefish fleet is an example of that. The following is from a speech by Struan Stevenson, a Scottish Conservative MEP:

"It is a sad indictment of the disastrous Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) that after 20 years of quota cuts, TAC (Total Allowable Catch) restrictions, de-commissioning schemes, lay-offs, tie-ups, emergency closures and redundancies, we have seen 60% of the Scottish whitefish fleet scrapped and thousands of jobs destroyed, despite the fact that the core tenets of the CFP were aimed at preserving and protecting fish stocks and maintaining and enhancing jobs in the fishing industry."

I agree entirely with Mr Stevenson. There is no level playing field in Europe. Directives come from the EU, and there are great disparities in how they are interpreted and implemented in the different member states.

Although it is an accepted fact that much of the policy that impacts on the fishing industry is decided in Brussels, I believe that it is now time for the Assembly to do more than has been done in the past. I want the Assembly and the newly formed Executive to formulate a united approach to fishing policy, with the core aim being for the industry to be properly represented and protected.

Since taking up my position as an MLA for South Down, I have been contacted about several issues, such as compensation for Strangford Lough fishermen — an issue that has been ongoing for several years — and Kilkeel harbour, which has been an issue for 25 years. I firmly believe that an all-party fishing industry group in the Assembly is a proper first step that can promote the interests of the fishing industry and help to secure a stable future for vital fishing communities.

4.45pm

Fishermen from these idyllic places are not asking to be treated differently to others; they are seeking a fair livelihood for themselves and their families. For these reasons I ask the House to support the amendment.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I support the motion, and I thank the Member for moving it for debate. I am not 100% sure about the amendment — the model looks weaker than that set out in the motion.

People working in the Irish fishing industry must have their say in the future of the local seafood industry, and the Assembly must provide imaginative and workable ideas, which can reverse the extremely regressive policies of previous Administrations. In supporting the motion, it is vitally important that Members work together to improve the plight of hard-pressed fishing communities in the North of Ireland.

The Assembly must therefore examine ways of developing an integrated all-Ireland approach to fishing, or the dramatic decline of the seafood industry will be

impossible to reverse — not only in the North, but throughout the island.

The British Government have failed local communities in this matter, as they have in many others, and Members are faced with an industry that is on its knees because of successive quota restrictions and longer tie-up times.

In my constituency of South Down, the decision to allocate fishing towns and villages, such as Kilkeel, Annalong and Ardglass, priority rights from the integrated development fund, and the setting up of a steering group, which is representative of local councils and the fishing industry, were positive initiatives and steps in the right direction — but much more needs to be done.

A holistic approach must be adopted to address what is an extremely complex issue. It is important that people working in the seafood industry have an input into shaping its future. Strategic alliances will succeed in promoting a coherent action plan and are essential for the industry to develop.

Clearly, the North can benefit from closer co-operation with the Twenty-six Counties, where strategic development is located within the wider context of rural development.

There also needs to be greater emphasis on the protection, or conservation, of stocks to ensure the long-term sustainability of the fishing industry, particularly in relation to the white-fish fleet.

Fleet renewable subsidies in the South have attracted critical comparisons from the North's fishing industry. Many representatives who have participated in negotiations in Brussels view fleet renewal as an essential element of fleet restructuring.

Fish are a renewable resource and one for which there is an increasing demand from consumers. The future for the industry should therefore be extremely positive. Despite this, the fishing industry in the North of Ireland is in crisis. Clearly the British Government's priority focused on England, Scotland and Wales. The National Assembly for Wales and the Scottish Parliament recognise the importance of supporting their negotiating teams in Brussels, as, of course, do the Irish Government. The Northern Ireland Assembly must take control of this issue and fight for a better deal in Europe.

For too long the Six Counties has suffered from the piecemeal approach adopted by successive British Governments. We now need locally elected politicians to work in partnership and on a North/South basis. It is important to develop the all-Ireland institutions, because when one compares the investment made by the Irish Government in its fishing industry with the investment being made in the North, it is clear that the North of Ireland's interests would be better served if the issue were tackled on an all-Ireland basis. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr P J Bradley: I am glad that the proposer of the motion has accepted the amendment, because I was unsure which of the two to go with. As my decision would have depended on what was said, I am happy that a compromise has been reached.

Sea fishing is an industry comprising people who specialise in what they do, and their skills are beyond question. Members from constituencies on the County Down coastline know well that those specialists provide a living for themselves and the in-harbour and on-land employments associated with the fishing industry.

For more than a decade, the fishing industry has been subjected to many and varied threats, and efforts were made by politically-driven groups to assist where possible. For a short period, I was a member of the fisheries task force, which was led by elected representatives from Newry and Mourne, Down, Ards and North Down councils. I understand that that task force has finished its work, and if that is so, it may be time to consider setting up an all-party fishing industry committee.

Such a committee — if formed — would not be given a statutory role, but it may have an informative role to play through giving evidence to the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development when matters pertaining to the fishing industry are on the agenda.

I remember occasions during the previous Assembly when Alan McCulla of Anglo-North Irish Fish Producers' Organisation, which is based in Kilkeel, and Dick James who represented the Northern Ireland Fish Producers' Organisation, which is based in Portavogie, addressed the Friday morning sessions of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development. Those men represented 150 to 200 members of their respective organisations, and their input was invaluable. They provided the Committee with first-hand information, and increased its knowledge of the industry and its problems. Unfortunately, most of their visits related to the threats to the trawlermen, their families and the industry.

As agriculture spokesperson for the SDLP, I have recently made references to the lack of parity between the farmers of Northern Ireland and their counterparts in the Republic of Ireland. I have also referred to the millions of euros of Government handouts that have been given to farmers and food processors in the South.

Today's motion encouraged me to log on to the website of Bord Iascaigh Mhara — the Irish Sea Fisheries Board — to check how the fishing industry in the Republic is being treated by its Government. I learned that four complementary integrated programmes form the core of the board's grant-aid support to the sea fisheries sector. Like its counterpart here, a decommissioning scheme was available to the Republic's fishing industry, which offered grant-aid to fishermen who wished to withdraw from the fleet permanently.

Fishing fleet development measures are also in place in the Republic, which provide grant assistance to promote investment in the existing fleet and improve safety, quality and efficiency of fishing gear and fuel on board vessels.

I have recently spoken to a number of people in my constituency who were, or are, involved in sea fishing. Many of them were critical of the lack of real support that they received from the UK Government. It was explained to me that some trawlermen are putting to sea in 30-year-old boats, while those of Clogherhead — a few miles south of Kilkeel — are putting to sea in modern, 1,000 horsepower trawlers.

There is also a supporting measures programme in place in the Republic for sea fisheries development. That programme provides grant-aid to support a total investment of up to €33.8 million over six years to benefit fishermen, their families, vessel owners, producer organisations and other industry-associated groups.

I also learned, from the Bord Iascaigh Mhara website, about an available diversification programme, which provides up to €9.2 million for investment over five years in assisting diversification from the commercial sea fisheries sector into sea angling and marine tourism. The main elements include the provision of safety equipment and the introduction of new and modernised second-hand vessels.

If — or should I say when — a new committee is in place, its first exercise should be to seek delivery of incomes for Northern Ireland fishermen equal to those being achieved by other fleets around the coast of Ireland.

I accept that some Members may have political difficulties in promoting a common fisheries policy on the island of Ireland, but considering the nature of politics, and given the new era into which some believe we are entering, it should be possible — with the support and encouragement of DARD, the co-operation of the Republic's Department of Communications, Marine and Natural Resources and its Ministers, and the MEPs — to structure an all-island strategy for the reform of the common fisheries policy to ensure the future of the fishing industry and fishing communities.

Our fishermen and their families deserve the Assembly's full support. I support the motion as amended.

Mr Ford: I apologise to the proposer of the motion for not being in the Chamber to hear all of his opening speech. However, I did catch some of it elsewhere.

As a former member of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, I confess to a distinct sense of déjà vu. Some issues that apply to the fishing industry are not well known across the community. Although those relating to agriculture and rural development may well be encompassed by Members who do not represent purely urban constituencies, some issues concerning

the fishing industry and fishing communities are noticed all too often only in the two constituencies that depend most on fishing. It is important that we do not wait for the usual December crisis time: we should seriously consider an issue as important as fishing now.

As a former member of that Committee, I recall the frequency with which the former Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, Ms Bríd Rodgers, would attend to talk about her ambitions, yet we knew that she would end up in the back row of the UK delegation — with a relatively limited role within that delegation. She would return to the Committee a week or two later and effectively apologise that nothing better could be done.

There must be long-term engagement, seeking not simply to crisis manage, but to take fully on board the issues. Mr P J Bradley mentioned the effective lobbying at times by the two fishing organisations led by Mr McCulla and Mr James. However, there is no point in their lobbying if they speak only to a small group of MLAs once or twice a year whenever a crisis arises.

That is why it is valuable that Mr Shannon has tabled the motion. Although we are talking about a small number of communities, there is a significant employment issue, both with respect to fishing and to fish processing. Members are aware that fish processing had been declining in those communities. Were I not sitting beside Naomi Long, I might mention that fishing is now more significant to the Northern Ireland economy than Harland and Wolff. However, Belfast-centric journalists do not seem to notice that there are issues of real concern to small-scale industries elsewhere.

I welcome the motion and appreciate the concerns that it expresses, but the tone of Europhobia that accompanied Mr Shannon's remarks do not help when we seek to engage in issues of conservation and employment. We must ensure that engagement from this region and from the Assembly is based on best, sound scientific advice. If that means that we need different scientific advisers to ensure that such evidence gets across in Brussels, so be it. However, it is not helpful to express difficulties solely in terms of faceless bureaucrats in Brussels who do not know what is going on.

I am concerned at the way the original motion is phrased. I am unsure what is meant by "a committee to oversee the fishing industry". Therefore Mr Shannon's acceptance of the amendment brings considerable advantages. Let us be clear: responsibility for supporting the fishing industry lies with the Minister — or, this afternoon, with another Minister who happens to be here — and the Department, supported by the Assembly, and in particular, by the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development. That is where the responsibility should lie. I am not sure what a wider committee could do. There is a danger in suggesting that we should set up another Committee to take away from the statutory

functions of DARD. However, the proposal to establish an all-party working group ensures that there is forward movement in the Assembly and that Members are acting together. The amendment improves the motion in that respect.

Unfortunately the amendment does not call for the Minister to take action as the original motion did; it might have been better to phrase it differently. However, we have highlighted that there are issues that need to be addressed and that are of concern to the Assembly as a whole. It is important that pressure on the Minister is maintained, regardless of how the motion is phrased.

It will be interesting to hear from the substitute Minister. I trust that his presence is an indication of a specific DRD responsibility that impinges on DARD in this respect, although I am aware of no such responsibility. It is important for the Assembly to send out a message of support to the fishing industry. While we must consider the overall economic needs of Northern Ireland, we should not get sucked into ignoring the needs of smaller communities that are suffering at present.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Dr W McCrea): I welcome the opportunity to speak on an important issue. I am delighted that my colleague has brought the matter before the Assembly.

For too long, the fishing industry of Northern Ireland has been the Cinderella, always in the background, always expected to work hard, and yet always an easy target for cutbacks and regulations. Why is that so?

5.00 pm

Very simply it was because no one seemed to care about an industry that was considered by many to be in decline, an industry that was seen by some as old-fashioned, an industry overseen by a Minister who believed that he had more important portfolios to attend to and therefore was not able to exercise his imagination or give his mind to dealing with the issues facing the industry. Yet fishing always has been and always will be a part of Northern Ireland's way of life. Year after year, men risk their lives to put food on our tables, and how we ought to thank them for that. But how do we thank them? Let me give you some of the facts and the figures.

On 19 April 2006 my hon colleague and fellow Member of Parliament, Mrs Robinson, secured a debate in the House of Commons on the fishing industry. With her permission, I will read an extract from the Hansard of that debate and put it on the record of this House:

"In 1993 213 commercial fishing vessels were registered in the Northern Ireland fishing fleet, but by this year that figure had fallen to a staggering 130. Whereas there were 44 white fish boats in the Northern Ireland fleet five years ago, there are now only 12. In Portavogie, where there were once more than 100 boats in the fleet, there are now just 40. Between 1999 and 2003, the average profit before depreciation of a Northern Ireland-based white fish trawler

fell by 76 per cent. to just £10,400. The average profit of a nephrop trawler fell by 48 per cent. to £15,600."

In spite of all this, in 2005 Northern Ireland-registered boats landed fish totalling £27.3 million. Again, as is the case in the whole of agriculture, those with the most sweat on their brow, reap the least harvest.

Are things getting any better? Is the DARD Fisheries Corporate Plan 2006-09 the visionary directive it is stated to be? In December 2005, the European Agriculture and Fisheries Council decided to reduce still further the already low quotas for many key Irish Sea fish stocks for all the main fishing grounds of the Northern Ireland fleet, although with a helpful increase in the nephrops quota. The council also, for the seventh successive year, closed areas of the Irish Sea to white-fish fishing from the 14 February to 30 April 2006. During 2006, further restrictions were imposed on the number of days licensed fishing vessels were permitted to fish within the cod recovery zone. This included the Irish Sea, where those constraints translated into a further 10% reduction of effort for nephrop vessels and a 15% reduction for white-fish vessels.

How much can our fishermen rely on the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and its new Minister? During a recent presentation to my Committee, senior officials outlined the Minister's priorities, but fishing did not even get a mention. Not one word. So where is the priority? The Minister has declared herself to be rural champion, but my Committee will not judge any Minister on what she says but on what she does. Unless she wants the fishing industry to go the same way as her pig industry, she will have to do something very quickly about the situation. The officials outlined the Department's five goals, but I believe that the Minister's primary goal with fishing should be to save and protect it as an industry and to ensure that fishermen have an income for the future, for their families and for the betterment of our country's economy.

Mr Hamilton: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this issue, especially so early in the life of the new Assembly. It is important not just because of fishing's economic impact, but because fishermen and others working in the sector will tell you that they feel that they get second-class treatment by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development.

The proposer of the motion has already referred to a prime example of that Cinderella status. In her first press statement, the new Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development made not one mention of the fishing industry — not one sentence on an important area of responsibility in her Department.

That snub follows in the finest traditions of the former Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, Lord Rooker, who could not find a free date in his

diary to go to Brussels to assist in the negotiations to set the fishing quotas for 2005.

The fishing industry is a much smaller sector than farming. However, as Mr Ford said, in those parts of the Province where fishing is the number one industry, this issue is of paramount importance and means a great deal to people. Certainly, the fishing industry deserved a reference in the Minister's first public utterances. The DUP's support for the motion, as amended, is an attempt to end that second-class status.

As is stated in the motion, the fishing industry is being subjected to a very real struggle to survive. A once thriving industry in the County Down towns and villages of Portavogie, Kilkeel and Ardglass, it is a shadow of its former self. Those difficulties and stresses have already been documented and repeated in the Chamber today.

Despite those many difficulties, the fishing industry contributes significantly to the local economy. Although traditional catches such as cod, whiting and plaice may have fallen in value and volume, between 1993 and 2004, a total value of £207 million was landed by the Northern Ireland fleet. In the first three months of this year — three months that are difficult for fishermen because of the weather — £4.6 million worth of fish have been landed. Obviously, that amount is enhanced when the fish are processed and value is added. Therefore, even during its dark days, the fishing industry still makes a major contribution to the local economy.

The importance of the industry can be seen nowhere more clearly than in the fishing villages themselves. Places such as Portavogie, in my constituency, are all but dependent on the fishing industry for employment. That is not just on the boats, but in onshore jobs, such as processing and engineering, and in support organisations such as the Northern Ireland Fish Producers' Organisation Limited. Of course, many of the jobs in shops and other services in my constituency are dependent on the money that is generated by the fishing industry.

Due to the centrality of the fishing industry to the economies of places such as Portavogie, and the difficulty of ending dependence on the industry for jobs and local economic growth, I have wholeheartedly supported the work of Ards Borough Council and the Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority in schemes that the Member opposite mentioned earlier. Through a successful application to the Integrated Development Fund, a £1.5 million capital works programme and development master plan for Portavogie has been established.

The master plan is aimed at enhancing tourism potential in the area, creating several small business units to assist with diversification, and improving the local environment. It is hoped that the master plan will

consolidate existing jobs and create new ones. Schemes such as this are essential to the future development of our fishing villages. I hope that the new Minister will fully support them in the future.

Sometimes it seems as though the fishing industry is under assault from all sides. If fishermen are not being bashed by Brussels, they are being let down by the Department with responsibility for fishing, or they are being subjected to silly and stupid stunts by so-called environmentalists — some of which occurred in the North Sea in recent days.

Other Members and I are unapologetic defenders of the fishing industry.

Dr W McCrea: Will the Member take encouragement from the fact that the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development decided today to invite representatives of the fishing industry to its next meeting?

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for making a good and valid point. Fishermen and others in the industry will be encouraged, not only by what he has just said, but by his previous comments on the motion. It is important that those in the fishing industry learn that the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development will put the future of the industry at the top of its agenda, ensuring that it receives priority attention.

As I said, other Members and I, including the Chairman of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, are unapologetic defenders of the fishing industry. We will do all that we can to fight for fishermen in the face of European intrusion, Government inaction and the insensitivity of certain environmentalists.

Hopefully, the House will agree the motion, and following the formation of an all-party group, I will do all that I can to revitalise an important part of our local economy.

Mr Savage: I warmly welcome the debate, and I consider it a privilege to speak on the matter.

When Lord Rooker, who was referred to earlier, was responsible for the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, Northern Ireland's fishing industry was often overlooked. Many Members will remember that in December 2005 he left our fishermen high and dry when he failed to attend the annual meeting in Brussels of the EU Fisheries Council, which allocates fishing quotas for the year ahead. That was the final straw for many.

I hope that the new Minister will be more proactive in Brussels in defending our Province's fishing industry and in supporting the work of our MEPs, especially that of my colleague Jim Nicholson. For more than 17 and a half years he has fought in the European Parliament on behalf of our fishermen. I know that many Members have assisted him in that work. He is always there, and that is very near and

dear to the hearts of many. As a Member of the European Parliament it is his duty to attend that Parliament and to defend our industry. Perhaps the Minister will elaborate on what she will do to further the industry's interests in Brussels.

Mr Elliott: To which Minister is the Member referring? I do not see her in the Chamber.

Mr Savage: My colleague knows very well what I am getting at.

Many of our fishermen's woes arise from the EU Fisheries Ministers' meeting each December. I want that annual charade to end. Every year, the European Commission promises to settle that ridiculous situation; such a settlement is long overdue. Yet, every Christmas, we face drastic quota cuts. It is time that the European Commission started listening to the people who work in the fishing industry.

The common fisheries policy, in its present form, is not capable of creating a viable, sustainable industry for our fishermen. Our fishermen matter — they are very important people. They make a vital contribution to the local economy, and they ensure that the fishing industry has a future. That is crucial to the sustainability of many communities in the Strangford and south Down area, such as Kilkeel, Ardglass and those communities that are along the County Down coast.

I warmly welcome the amendment, which was tabled by my hon Friends. The point has been well made that the creation of an all-party fishing group would, at present, be better able to pursue the interests of fishermen and the fishing industry. All of us are stakeholders in ensuring that a sustainable future is secured for our fishermen. Clearly, the Assembly must consider how we may scrutinise more effectively the actions of Whitehall and, more importantly, those of Brussels when it comes to fisheries policy. Perhaps a fact-finding visit to our counterparts in Scotland would be a worthwhile exercise — we could share ideas and concerns. People in the fishing industry all have problems. I therefore support the amendment.

Mr Kennedy: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Before the Minister for Regional Development responds to the debate, which should properly be responded to by the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, I raise, again, the issue of ministerial substitutes. I ask you, Mr Speaker, to consider the entire issue in advance of the next plenary session.

I also offer what I hope is a helpful suggestion, which is that in the event of any Minister being unable to be present in the Chamber to respond to a debate that, on his or her return, he or she should be provided with a copy of the relevant Hansard report. He or she should be given an early opportunity, by way of a ministerial statement, to respond to the issues that have been raised. That would be a more appropriate and

satisfactory way of dealing with the non-availability of individual Ministers. I ask you to take that suggestion seriously and let the House know your view at the outset of next business, early next week.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

5.15 pm

Mr Speaker: I have heard what the Member said, and I will respond to the House. I am sure that the deputising Minister has heard a clear message from the House, and I am sure that the appropriate Minister will possibly make a statement.

Mr O'Dowd: On a point of order, Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. It appears from Mr Kennedy's constant interruptions that he is more interested in the six o'clock news than he is in the plight of the fishermen. The Executive told the Business Committee that the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development would not be available for this debate, yet the proposers were still prepared to move the motion.

Mr Kennedy is a member of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee, and the matters that he has raised today would be better dealt with there.

Mr Kennedy: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. With respect, these matters are for you, as you preside over the conduct of business in the Chamber. I raised a point of order for your consideration and ask you to reflect on it.

This is not about trying to get on the six o'clock news; it is about the good conduct of business in the Assembly.

Mr Speaker: I have already agreed to come back on your point of order, Mr Kennedy.

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I apologise for the deep disappointment that my presence has caused. *[Laughter.]*

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Murphy: The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development was not available, and that was known before the motion was moved. However, it was decided to go ahead and debate the motion, and I am pleased to be able to respond.

My colleague Michelle Gildernew asked me to stand in for her today and to respond to the debate. The Minister is in the United States to promote the agrifood sector as part of the Rediscover Northern Ireland programme. She wanted to be present for the first debate on fisheries in the restored Assembly, but, unfortunately, the timing of the debate did not allow that.

I commend Jim Shannon and Simon Hamilton for tabling the motion and securing the debate and for representing the concerns of the fishing industry. I

assure them that my colleague Michelle Gildernew and I share their concerns and that we are determined to work with the industry to secure its long-term future. Officials from DARD will study Hansard carefully, and if I have missed some of the points, Michelle Gildernew will pick up on them later and respond in correspondence or in any other appropriate way.

Shortly before taking up office, Michelle Gildernew met the key fishery stakeholders to hear at first hand about the main issues facing the industry. At that meeting she stressed several key points in her approach to fisheries. She made it clear that she wanted to secure a sustainable future for the industry, for it to be more attractive to young people, and to maximise the contribution that it made to the economies of coastal communities. She stressed that to achieve that she would work in close partnership with the key stakeholders and promised to be a strong voice on behalf of fishermen both in dealings with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in London and with the appropriate bodies in Brussels.

I listened carefully to the points that were made during the debate, and it is clear that much of what was said reflected concerns about the level of fish stocks and falling quotas for the main white-fish species and their impact on the viability of the fishing fleet and processing plants. That is the biggest challenge to the survival of the industry and its future development. However, if that challenge is met, there is scope for significant development.

The market for seafood is buoyant, and there has been growth in the demand for fish and fish products of all types. Consumers are increasingly aware of the nutritional and health benefits of eating seafood products. It is imperative for the industry to grasp the opportunity that that market presents.

Among the issues raised was the impact of the common fisheries policy. My colleague the Minister has already stated that she intends to be a strong voice in Europe and will take a lead role in the development of our negotiating position for this year's vital December Agriculture and Fisheries Council.

Preparations for this year's council have already begun, and the Minister and the Department will be working closely with industry representatives over the coming months to deliver the best possible outcome in December. High on the first list of priorities will be the Irish Sea fish quotas and resistance to further cuts in fishing efforts. We will argue for increases where they are sustainable and will strongly resist further cuts in fishing days in the context of what has been done already to reduce effort.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, William McCrea, mentioned cod recovery measures. There is concern that the

existing Irish Sea cod recovery measures have not worked. The European Commission is undertaking a review of these and other similar arrangements in EU waters. That will be an opportunity to develop management arrangements that are more appropriate for the Irish Sea, and will enable the rebuilding of stock to sustainable levels.

A considerable challenge lies ahead, and the Department, fishery scientists and the industry must work together to achieve a positive outcome. The basis of such an approach has already been established. The industry-led nephrops working group involved catchers and processors, and worked closely with the Department and its scientists to help secure a 70% increase in the nephrops quota for 2007.

Many fishermen are sceptical of fishery science. However, robust science was the key to persuading the Commission's advisers that last year's increase in the nephrops quota was sustainable and justifiable. We must continue to strengthen our scientific knowledge of the Irish Sea fish stocks, and support research that will lead to better management decisions and better opportunities for our fishing fleet.

The Irish Sea data enhancement pilot project is an example of what can happen. The idea was promoted initially by industry, and a subsequent proposal was put jointly to the Commission by the UK and Ireland at the last December council. That is an important piece of work, and has the potential to influence the way that fisheries in the Irish Sea are managed in the future. It is significant, too, because it brings together industry, scientists and government from all jurisdictions, with a shared interest in seeing the development of sustainable fisheries in the Irish Sea. The project will result in improved data for fish stocks and that, it is to be hoped, will make a valuable contribution to the review of cod recovery measures.

Jim Shannon expressed views on tie-up aid. There are strong views about decisions by direct rule Ministers to refuse to provide tie-up aid for vessels targeting white fish in 2006-07. We want to have a sustainable and profitable fishing industry with a long-term future. We are committed to assisting the industry to adapt to changing circumstances and exploit sustainable fishing opportunities. Although no aid was provided in 2007 to allow vessels targeting white fish to tie up, I was pleased to note that a grant of £220,000 has already been provided through the Northern Ireland Fishing Task Force to white-fish vessels to assist them in diversifying to other sustainable fisheries. A further £370,000 is sought to extend this scheme. I cannot comment on the position for next year; that decision is dependent on the outcome of the cod recovery review process, and future management arrangements.

From 2000 to 2006, almost £25 million has been committed to the fishing industry under the Programme for Building Sustainable Prosperity. We expect the new European Fisheries Fund to provide around £24 million over the next seven years. This summer, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development will be consulting on the NI operational programme for the European Fisheries Fund. The Department will fully involve the fishing industry to ensure that the funding provides well-targeted support to improve the competitiveness of the industry, and to help the coastal communities that depend on the industry for their livelihood.

Small inshore vessels, targeting mainly shellfish, now comprise over 58% of the vessels in our fishing fleet. The sector has the potential to provide an enhanced contribution to the industry, but it is essential that it is developed in a sustainable way.

Earlier in the year the inshore fisheries stakeholder advisory group presented its report on the review of inshore fisheries to the Department. The Department is considering its recommendations, with a view to developing a draft inshore fishery strategy for wider public consultation.

John McCallister mentioned the problems at Kilkeel harbour. I fully appreciate the points made on access to the harbour in difficult weather conditions. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has agreed to fund a technical study to establish whether a breakwater is feasible, to gather the information required to develop a business case, and to justify the cost of around £13 million.

Mr McCallister also mentioned compensation for fishermen in Strangford Lough. The aid available is affected by a ban on mobile gear, which has been mentioned. I understand the frustration felt by these fishermen. A proposal made to the European Commission for reasonable compensation failed to secure approval for state aid, and other mechanisms for support have not been identified. My colleague Michelle Gildernew will be happy to meet with the Strangford Lough fishermen to listen to their concerns and to consider the scope for assistance.

The motion calls on Michelle Gildernew to appoint a committee to oversee the fishing industry, and to ensure that its best interests are catered for at the highest level. There is also an amendment to include an all-party group.

The Agriculture and Rural Development Committee will have an important role to play in developing the debate and ensuring that the needs of the fishing sector are addressed. However, it is also vital to involve key stakeholders from the fishing industry as we develop strategies and policies to underpin the development of a sustainable fishing future for the region.

I have mentioned a number of examples of how the Department is already working closely with the industry to ensure that its views are heard and that the industry can contribute to decision-making about fisheries management. It is vital that the Department, the fisheries scientists and the industry all work together to ensure that there is a profitable, sustainable fishing industry that will be attractive to younger people so that they can continue to exploit the natural resources available in the Irish Sea for future generations.

Michelle Gildernew has promised to be a strong and effective representative of the North's fishermen at the highest levels in Government. She is committed to working closely with industry groups and to involving them as she plans and prepares for negotiations in Brussels in December.

During this year, her Department will also develop proposals to strengthen the inshore sector. One of the recommendations of the stakeholder advisory group was the establishment of an independent inshore fisheries group to focus on inshore fisheries and to work with the Department on developing this sector. Michelle will want to consider this proposal carefully in the context of today's debate and ensure that effective arrangements are in place for stakeholder involvement in fishery matters.

I am sure that Michelle will take into account many of the constructive points made during today's debate as she seeks to develop a more cohesive approach with the fishing industry over the coming months. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Elliott: I thank and congratulate Mr Shannon for tabling the motion and my colleague John McCallister for tabling the amendment.

I also welcome the Minister's announcement of his commitment — or, at least, the Department of Agriculture's commitment — to the fishing industry. Although his speech did not address all of the issues, it certainly gave a broad general commitment to the industry.

I was pleased to hear the Minister say that the current Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development is in America promoting something called Rediscover Northern Ireland. I am pleased that she is doing that and that the Minister who is here has managed to bring himself to say "Northern Ireland".

The agriculture and fishing industries sit very well together, because they have similar difficulties and problems. It has been said that fishing is often the poor partner of agriculture. I believe that there should be no poor partner; both industries are difficult for those who are involved in them, with lots of hard work, and they deserve a proper return for their efforts. That is why this Assembly must commit itself to the fishing industry in Northern Ireland.

Mr Ford from the Alliance Party mentioned *déjà vu* — the sense of "here we go again", back to the same old argument. The challenge for this new Assembly is to do something about it. We cannot continue to shut the fishermen out. I would welcome the appointment of a committee to promote the fishing industry, but any such committee should work in tandem with all concerned — the industry, the scientists and the environmentalists, as the Minister said. We often hear those groups speak with three different voices, but a cohesive approach is essential if further progress is to be made.

The Chairman of the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee, Dr McCrea, talked about how fishing is the Cinderella of the agriculture industry, and there was talk of how the Minister before the previous Minister often had other engagements that appeared to be more important than fishing industry engagements. I hope that those days are gone and that the new Ministers are committed to the fishing and agriculture industries.

5.30 pm

Unfortunately, some of the schemes that have been set up in the past have not proved to be successful. In fact, they have been definite failures for the fishermen of this Province. The word "quota" has been used by every Member who spoke during the debate. That word is used throughout the agricultural industry — there are milk quotas and fishing quotas.

How would the manufacturing industry like quotas? How would the textile industry like quotas? Quotas are necessary at times, provided that they are fair and equal. The difficulty is that, as we have heard so often, Northern Ireland does not get an equal slice of the cake in Europe. Other countries in the European Union have openly flouted quota systems. Italy has flouted the milk quota system for years, and it appears to get away with it, but the same does not go for Northern Ireland's fishermen or agriculturalists, who must stick rigidly to the rules that are laid before them.

P J Bradley mentioned young people who often criticise current policy, and I cannot disagree that that is a problem. The challenge for the Assembly is to do something about that and encourage young people back into the fishing industry and the agricultural industry. I support the motion and I call on the House to do likewise.

Mr Shannon: I thank Members for their valuable contributions. The debate has clearly highlighted the problems that face the fishing industry, and the impact that those problems are having. I thank the Member for South Down John McCallister for tabling his amendment. The debate on the motion and the amendment has encompassed all the main issues, and I hope that we can make a difference for the fishing industry.

The setting up of an ad hoc committee would provide an opportunity to bring everyone with an interest in this matter into the process. I hope that that would include the two representatives of the fishing industry who were mentioned by the Chairman of the Agriculture Committee. It would be useful if those who are involved in the industry could provide us with the necessary information to help us to make the right decisions.

Mr Clarke of Sinn Féin was correct to point out that the seafood industry is important. The fishing industry is not just about the fish in the sea or the fish that are caught — it is also about those who process the fish onshore, who bring economic benefits to their area. Mr Clarke said that the main areas that would benefit were Strangford and south Down. He also said that the fishing industry was a valuable resource, and it is, but he also referred to it as an industry in crisis, and that has been a theme of all the contributions of those who have spoken in the debate.

I thank P J Bradley for his comments; he obviously has knowledge of the fishing industry. He referred to the thousands of families that are suffering from financial stringencies because of the problems in the fishing industry. He also mentioned the further processing of fish onshore. Because that processing can provide economic benefits, we must try to develop that aspect of the fishing industry. Mr Bradley also referred to wider delivery of income for the Province.

Mr Ford said that we should not wait for the impending crisis in December. His comments were clear: Members who do not represent constituencies such as Strangford or South Down, but who are members of the Agriculture Committee, should take an interest in fishing and not ignore it simply because there is no fishing industry in their own constituencies. Mr Ford made valuable comments about the elevation of fishing to higher levels in the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, and he also called for direct representation of the fishing industry.

I thank the Chairman of the Agriculture Committee, William McCrea, for his comments.

I welcome the fact that representatives from the two leading fish producers' organisations in Northern Ireland will meet with the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development. Alan McCulla and Dick James know the fishing industry inside out, and can explain the issues to the Committee. I know that Willie McCrea, as Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, will push things forward, in his words, to save and protect the industry.

I thank my colleague Simon Hamilton for his comments. He said that the fishing industry was of paramount importance in Strangford, and so it is. It is one of the major employers in the Strangford area. In proposing the motion, I said that, although Portavogie

may be at the centre of fishing in Northern Ireland, the net — to use a pun — goes beyond Portavogie and pulls many others into the industry.

Mr Hamilton mentioned the fishing initiative in Portavogie, and there are similar schemes in Kilkeel and Ardglass. Those are important, and diversification may be one answer. However, the fact is that a fisherman wants to fish. That is what he is: a fisherman first and foremost.

I thank George Savage for his remarks on the common fisheries policy. He also referred to the European influence. I hope that Mr Ford will forgive me, but I am a bit cynical about Europe. It cannot be said that I should not feel that way, given the manner in which some decisions are made in Europe to the disadvantage of Northern Ireland's fishing industry. That cannot be ignored either.

Tom Elliott, in his winding-up speech on the amendment, mentioned effects on the fishing industry. He does not represent a fishing area; I am not aware that he has any boats out in the Irish Sea. There is a different sort of fishing industry in his constituency. Even though he does not represent the fishing sector, he clearly understands the issues, for which I thank him.

It is important that the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development becomes established, so that it will be ready to win the battle to help the fishing industry. The "acting" Minister, Mr Murphy, mentioned Rediscover Northern Ireland. In the light of what has been said about "here" and "there" this week, I am very happy that he has discovered Northern Ireland — we are moving forward.

I believe that there is a commitment to the fishing industry at ministerial level, but time will tell. I have asked for a meeting with the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to discuss Strangford Lough, and I hope to have that meeting shortly. Mr Murphy said that that meeting would go ahead, and I look forward to meeting the Minister, because there are issues that must be addressed.

I am not entirely happy with the initial response that was given on behalf of the Minister, because we are looking for compensation for the members of the Strangford Lough Fishermen's Association. However, we will have the meeting and see how we can put forward those concerns. The Strangford Lough fishermen will put their case vociferously.

Mr McNarry: Will the Member be present?

Mr Shannon: Yes, I hope to be there. I look forward to the meeting, because it gives us an opportunity to deal with the issues. I am not sure whether I heard him correctly, but I believe that the Minister-in-waiting, or stand-in, if that is the correct terminology, mentioned compensation for those involved in the white-fish

industry. I will check Hansard to see exactly what was said. If that was what was said, Hansard will confirm it. However, we look forward to the meeting with the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, who will have the opportunity to respond.

The Chairman of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development also made the point that, more often than not, our representatives in Brussels — no disrespect to Lord Rooker or other Ministers — did not do the job for Northern Ireland's fishing industry. We have always felt aggrieved about that. It was a slight on the industry and a source of frustration. I look forward to having a Minister with a dedicated portfolio who will fight hard for Northern Ireland's fishing industry. I will take the comments that have been made to date as a commitment to the industry, and we look forward to participating in that work.

The development of a strategy and the identification of key movers in the industry were also mentioned. There are key movers in the industry, and the further development of offshore processing is a primary concern for the two main fish producers' organisations.

As I said earlier, fishermen want to fish. Not everyone wants to diversify; many would rather do the job that they have been asked to do.

We look forward to monitoring the commitment that the Minister has given today, and we look forward to the fishing industry being given a real shot in the arm. That industry is a major employer that creates jobs. It can do good and provide an economic boost, not only for the Strangford and Down areas. I ask Members to support the motion.

We look forward to the response of the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development. I hope that, when she returns, she will give a commitment to setting up such a committee. If we have that committee, we will be able to sort things out.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the challenges facing Northern Ireland's fishing industry and will facilitate the creation of an all-party fishing industry group to promote the interests of, and secure a sustainable future for, the fishing industry and fishing communities.

Adjourned at 5.41 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 29 May 2007

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Speaker: During the sitting on 22 May 2007, the Rt Hon Dr Paisley, the First Minister, raised concerns about accommodation for the public and the press at Committee meetings. I can inform the House that consideration has been given to addressing the difficulties recently experienced by members of the public and press wishing to attend Committee meetings.

Arrangements are now in place to provide a number of dedicated press seats in the Committee public galleries. Priority will be given, as far as possible, to members of the public who wish to attend Committee meetings. If, after 20 minutes, any of the press seats are unoccupied, those too will be released to the public.

The arrangements will be reviewed during the summer recess, bearing in mind the limitations of the Committee rooms. I am satisfied, Members, that this is a sensible way to try to resolve a very difficult accommodation situation for everyone in Parliament Buildings.

The First Minister (Rev Dr Ian Paisley): I thank you for that reply, and I am sure that the general public and the press will be grateful to you for taking immediate steps to solve something that was causing difficulty. Thank you.

Mr Speaker: The accommodation situation for everyone in this House is probably the most important issue that the Commission is dealing with at the moment.

Also last Tuesday, points of order were raised by Mr McNarry and Mr Kennedy concerning the attendance of the Minister for Regional Development on behalf of the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development.

Members will recall that I indicated at the time that precedent existed for such an arrangement, but I have given the matter further thought. Having done so, I can confirm that, on Monday 3 December 2001, the then Minister for Employment and Learning, Dr Seán Farren, answered questions on behalf of the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Sir Reg Empey. I

further inform the House that Dr Farren gave an undertaking on that occasion that a written answer would be provided in the event of his being unable to answer any supplementary questions that were asked.

It appears to me that a clear precedent has been established in the Northern Ireland Assembly for one Minister attending in the Chamber on behalf of another, and I refer Members to page 46 of the 'Northern Ireland Assembly Companion'. I would not, of course, expect the situation in which a Minister attends on behalf of another to occur other than in the most unavoidable of circumstances, and I will continue to require written notification of a Minister's absence.

I also undertook to consider Mr Kennedy's suggestion that a Minister who cannot be present in the Chamber might be given an early opportunity, on his or her return, to respond by way of a ministerial statement to issues raised. Members will be conscious that any Minister may choose to make a statement at any time to the Assembly, in accordance with Standing Order 18. I assure the House that I will continue to accommodate the making of ministerial statements in the House.

Mr Kennedy: Thank you very much for clarifying the points of order raised, Mr Speaker. Given that we are in a new Assembly — a more democratic Assembly, apparently — I ask whether consideration could be given to any change in the custom and practice that you have indicated, or to the precedent that you have outlined.

Mr Speaker: I think that most Members would agree that I gave the points of order that were raised a fair airing in the House last Tuesday evening. I wonder why those points of order were raised, but I must say that I am not prepared to answer any further points of order on the issue. The matter has now been dealt with, and dealt with completely. I understand where the Member is coming from, but I feel that I can add no more to what has been said this morning.

Establishment of the Independent Health Coalition

Mr Speaker: I wish to advise the House that I have received a letter from Dr Kieran Deeny, notifying me that a new political party was added to the Northern Ireland register of political parties on 16 May 2007. The new party's title is the "Independent Health Coalition". The Electoral Commission has confirmed that party's registration. Dr Deeny has indicated that he wishes to be known, and to represent his constituents in the Northern Ireland Assembly, as a member and leader of the Independent Health Coalition.

Letter from the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister about Executive Committee Decisions

Mr Speaker: I inform the House that I have received a letter from the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister that advises me of three decisions that the Executive took at their meeting last Thursday. A copy of the letter has been placed in Members' pigeonholes and in other places, such as the Library.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Mr Speaker: I wish to advise the House that the Business Committee has agreed that the three motions that appear on the Order Paper as Committee Business will be treated as business motions. There will, therefore, be no debate.

Committee Membership — Committee for Employment and Learning

Resolved:

That Mr Alastair Ross replace Mr Jim Wells as a member of the Committee for Employment and Learning. — [*Lord Morrow.*]

Committee Membership — Committee on Standards and Privileges

Resolved:

That Mr Alastair Ross replace Mr Adrian McQuillan as a member of the Committee on Standards and Privileges. — [*Lord Morrow.*]

Pension Trustees

Resolved:

That the following Members are appointed as the Trustees of the Assembly Members' Pension scheme:

Mr John Dallat

Mr David McClarty

Mr Trevor Lunn

Mr Jim Wells

Mrs Michelle O'Neill. — [*Rev Dr Robert Coulter.*]

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Free Personal Care

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for this debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to wind up. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes. Two amendments have been selected and have been published on the Marshalled List; the proposers of the amendments will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes to wind up.

I wish to advise the House that, following discussion at the Business Committee, I propose to reintroduce an arrangement that applied previously in the Chamber. Members may recall that when speaking times were limited to less than 10 minutes the Speaker would exercise discretion in allocating up to one additional minute to a Member who had accepted one or more interventions. I hope that Members will welcome the reintroduction of this arrangement, which applies immediately.

Mrs Hanna: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls for free personal care for the elderly, which was agreed in principle in the last Assembly, to be introduced as a priority within a set timescale.

In proposing the motion, I am not anticipating opposition from any part of the Assembly. I also wish to state that I accept the amendments tabled by the Ulster Unionist Party and the Alliance Party.

Free personal care has been debated on several occasions by previous Assemblies, most recently by the Transitional Assembly on 19 December 2006. All who spoke in that debate were in favour of the motion tabled, though there were some nuances of opinion and differences in emphasis.

The time for debate, discussion and analysis has passed. Members need to move the issue forward: to have it anchored firmly in the Programme for Government; to identify the funds needed for free personal care; to prepare the necessary budget; and to ensure that free personal care is implemented equitably and comprehensively across Northern Ireland within a defined period.

Personal care is defined as helping a person with feeding, toileting, washing, dressing and grooming; helping a person in and out of bed; help with mobility; and assistance with medication — matters which do not necessarily require the services of a trained nurse or other health professional, but which, by any realistic definition, are integral to and inseparable from healthcare.

The SDLP has supported the principles of nursing and personal care set out in the 1999 Royal Commission

report 'With Respect to Old Age: Long Term Care — Rights and Responsibilities'. Although that report is eight years old, the essential principles have not changed, and we in Northern Ireland are no further forward.

From a practical perspective, and speaking as a registered nurse who has worked in assessing domiciliary care for the elderly, I know that no health professional would disagree that it is impossible to separate nursing and personal care. The complexity of trying to separate the two elements is counterproductive and a bureaucratic nightmare.

10.45 am

The current system of separation creates great uncertainty about future care for elderly and vulnerable people who are at a stage in their lives when they should be able to take for granted the provision of free care when they need it. That has always been our understanding of the National Health Service. The NHS is still the most socialist, progressive and popular initiative ever taken by a UK Government. The elderly have paid National Insurance contributions all their lives; they expect to receive care at point of need, but it is not available to them.

Personal and nursing care are not separated when older people are in hospital, so why should they be separated when patients are at home or in residential care? There are obvious anomalies that can have awful consequences for families. For example, a patient suffering from cancer is entitled without question to free nursing and personal care, but the family of a person suffering from Alzheimer's disease — an increasingly common condition as longevity and the proportion of elderly people in society increases — can find that their relative is not entitled to personal care. A complex and spurious differentiation is made between health and personal care, and the authorities have interpreted the Coughlan judgement as not applying to mental-health needs — mental health is yet again the Cinderella of the Health Service.

Members will recall the Coughlan judgement, which was made in the Court of Appeal in 1999. The ruling was that as healthcare was a primary need for Mrs Coughlan, she was also entitled to personal care. At least two 'Panorama' programmes, the last in July 2006, showed that many elderly people were being forced to sell their homes because of perverse, bureaucratic and complex decisions by health trusts and Government that sought to undermine the impact of the Coughlan judgement by complicating matters relating to healthcare with bureaucratic nit-picking over words such as "complex", "intense" and "unpredictable". For example, trusts were saying that someone with a medical problem could be admitted to hospital in a crisis, but that if the patient's condition

were stabilised, under Government guidelines the patient could be deemed no longer to require healthcare.

It angers me that the bureaucratic prevarications, evasions and legal fees employed by the Government in England and Wales are racking up unnecessary costs which would go a long way to paying for the care required. 'Panorama' pointed out that people were being unjustly deprived of their homes to fund their personal care and cited a figure of around 80,000 homes surrendered in Great Britain. I have written to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to request a corresponding figure for Northern Ireland, but I have not received a straight answer.

The introduction of free personal care in Scotland was legislated for by the Scottish Parliament in 2002 and provides a useful template for the Assembly. At that time, implementation of the package was costed at £250 million. Usefully for us, the Scottish Parliament's Health Committee has reported on the experience of introducing free personal care, discussing the positive and negative aspects of the measure and indicating mistakes and lessons that we can learn from.

On the positive side, the Scottish Parliament's Health Committee found that free personal care had provided greater security and dignity. It had allowed for older people to be cared for more readily at home, eased the burden on carers and reduced delayed discharges, so freeing up NHS resources. It had largely brought an end to bureaucratic disputes between agencies over responsibility for the care of the elderly. It had led to fewer complaints to the Ombudsman about care of the elderly. Overall, it had been introduced swiftly and comprehensively.

On the negative side — and we can learn from this — the Scottish Health Committee found that the funding formula put in place was too complex, and that waiting lists were in operation. A lack of clarity in the guidelines for eligibility was noted, as was the failure to increase funding in line with inflation, and confusion remains over the exact remit of the policy.

The Scottish Committee's report is certainly essential reading for Members of this House. I am sure that the Minister will learn from the Scottish experience and that he will ensure that any possible loopholes that permit mechanisms that effectively ration free personal care will be closed when the requisite legislation is drafted here.

I appreciate that the Assembly has no tax-raising powers and that it administers a block grant from Westminster. In the current year, expenditure will be in the order of £15 billion; I shall stand corrected if that figure is incorrect. I also appreciate that, if the motion is passed, the financial consequences will need to be costed. However, I anticipate that the cost of introducing free personal care will be a comparatively small

percentage of the health budget — around 1·82%, which is about £80 million. The financial implications were costed during the last Assembly, and I appreciate that costs will have changed, but that is just a ballpark figure.

It is beyond dispute that the elderly population is increasing both in absolute numbers and in percentage terms. Age Concern has estimated that, by 2036, 24% of the population will be aged 65 or over. That is almost double the percentage in 1996. The Health Department has rightly put much more emphasis on the public-health agenda and has focused more on community and primary healthcare — doing the simpler things better and earlier.

We all know of older people who have been knocked off their feet, either because they need a podiatrist to attend to their feet or an occupational therapist to approve an adaptation to their home. We also know that older people thrive when they are kept active and physically and mentally alert. If we build on the public-health agenda, people will remain healthy, and we may end up looking at reducing the need for free personal care.

It is long past time to give older people the dignity and equality to which they are entitled and to remove them from the shadow of unnecessary worry when they have many other challenges to face. The Minister has many competing priorities, and I sympathise that he has tough decisions to make. I know that he will approach this matter sensitively, and he will certainly have my support. However, the previous Assembly agreed to introduce free personal care. Indeed, had it not been for suspension and other glitches, the money would have been available and free personal care would have been implemented by now. I believe that this Assembly will also demonstrate broad consensus. It is incumbent upon us to act on the matter.

Mr McCarthy: I beg to move amendment No 1: Leave out all after the second “Assembly” and insert

“, to be addressed as a new priority within the forthcoming Comprehensive Spending Review, and provided for in the 2008-2009 Budget onwards.”

I very much welcome the debate, and I thank Carmel Hanna for returning this matter to the Order Paper. It is a pity that Mrs Hanna’s party, and other parties, did not support me on 24 June 2002, when I stood in this very spot and pleaded with all Members, and the then Health Minister, to include my amendments to the Health and Personal Social Services Bill. Had that support been forthcoming, I have no doubt that free nursing and personal care would have been a reality a long time ago and that a great many of our senior citizens would have received that benefit.

My amendment gives us the opportunity to practise what we preach. Little progress has been made since the suspension of the last Assembly in October 2002.

There must be no more equivocation or setbacks. My amendment states simply that the Executive Budget for 2008-09 should contain funding to introduce free personal care through the comprehensive spending review.

Free nursing and personal care for Northern Ireland have been debated on the Floor of the House before. On 27 February 2001, Mr Nigel Dodds, the current Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and I tabled similar motions, the outcome of which would have led to the introduction of free nursing and personal care for everyone in Northern Ireland who required it.

In fact, the Assembly resolved:

“That this Assembly notes the decision of the Scottish Parliament to provide the elderly with free nursing and personal care and calls on the Executive Committee to make similar provision for the elderly in Northern Ireland and to promote greater well-being of the elderly in this part of the United Kingdom.” — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 9, p327, col 2*].

The Assembly also resolved:

“That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to implement in full in Northern Ireland the recommendations contained in the report by the Royal Commission on Long-Term Care published in March 1999.” — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 9, p327, col 2*].

The Royal Commission’s report was a detailed document that examined every aspect of the care of our elderly. Its recommendations were wide-ranging and far-reaching, and they included the cost implications of providing care for those elderly people who need it. One of the most obnoxious and objectionable proposals is that people should use savings, plus the value of their home, to pay for care. MLAs — and people elsewhere — totally disagree with the proposal that people who need care should be forced to sell their home in order to pay for it in their latter years. That must surely be regarded as repugnant and grossly unfair — people have worked hard and been prudent so that they can buy a home, often with the help of family. It cannot be morally justifiable to force those people to sell their home in their twilight years. The state should recognise that, by that stage of their lives, people here have made sacrifices to society, and it should therefore provide the necessary care.

Shortly after the Assembly agreed in February 2001 that free nursing and personal care should be introduced, the Executive commissioned an interdepartmental group to examine personal care. In August 2002, that group’s report was presented to the Executive, and, in September 2002, the Executive asked that further work be done on options and costs. Of course, the Assembly was suspended in October of that year and no further progress was made. I contend, therefore, that that report is lying somewhere gathering dust: nothing has been done, and it could be revisited.

The Royal Commission's report is a blueprint for the way forward. All credit must go to the Scottish Executive, who accepted the Commission's recommendations. Free nursing and personal care were introduced in Scotland on 1 July 2002 and have been successful so far.

I am glad that, in the recent elections in Northern Ireland, all the parties included in their manifestos a commitment to introduce free personal care if, and when, the new Executive were formed. Our new Executive have now been formed and are operational. I appeal to Members to support my amendment. It beefs up the motion, and, if agreed, it would give our elderly people and their families the peace of mind that they richly deserve. Let us all move in this new Assembly from promise to practice, and prove that we mean what we say.

The need for nursing and personal care comes to many of our constituents. The loss of the ability to care for oneself is distressing enough without the added indignity of being means-tested and charged for services that one would definitely not wish to have to use at all. We must treat our elderly with respect, dignity and fairness. We have a duty to provide what is necessary to meet their needs. We also have a duty to implement the excellent work that was carried out by the Royal Commission team, which included Professor Bob Stout from Northern Ireland. Only this week, he made an impassioned plea to the Assembly to implement the Royal Commission's recommendations so that our elderly and carers can benefit. Let us not forget that we will all be elderly some day.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr McCarthy: Tony Blair himself said that he did not want to live in a country in which the only way in which our elderly could receive care was as a result of being forced to sell their family home. He also noted words that the author of the Royal Commission's report used. He said that:

"The moral test of Government is how that Government treats those who are in the dawn of life, the children; those who are in the twilight of life, the elderly".

The author went on to say that those who are in the shadows of life — the sick, the needy and the disabled — also need to be similarly treated.

I hope that the new Health Minister and Executive agree with those words, and that they adopt the Royal Commission's findings and recommendations and implement free personal care for the elderly without further delay.

11.00 am

I ask Members to support my amendment. Enough time has been given to this important subject: the Executive — through the comprehensive spending

review — must include funding for free personal care for 2008-09.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I beg to move amendment No 2: Leave out all after the first Assembly and insert

"accepts the recommendations of the Royal Commission on the Long-Term Care of the Elderly; supports in principle the introduction of free personal care; calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to report on the fiscal, workforce and administrative preparations required to implement the policy; and asks the Executive to consider the costs and method of delivery in the context of the Comprehensive Spending Review and in light of the other budgetary pressures facing the Executive."

When the Assembly voted in 2002 to introduce free nursing care for the elderly, it was made clear that it would be a transitional position. That was agreed within the context of establishing the cost of free personal care and securing resources for its funding. It is important to remind Members of that, because it sets today's debate in a proper context — one of fiscal responsibility. That responsibility is the whole purpose of the Ulster Unionist Party's amendment. The Assembly must make informed and responsible decisions, and I am asking the Health Minister to establish what the full cost of such a measure would be.

Today, the Assembly is engaged in unfinished business. That business must be finished responsibly, and Members must remember their accountability for public finances. When the subject was raised in the Assembly in 2002, I said that the identification and the procurement of adequate funding was the only issue that precluded action; that remains the case. That was the responsible course of action to take in 2002, and it remains so today. The Assembly must learn that wish lists — without the ability to procure the money to deliver them — are worthless. While I believe that the time for action is now closer, it is just as important that the Assembly should proceed properly by demonstrating fiscal responsibility five years on.

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

Our sister institution, the Scottish Parliament, has provided a good example of how a regional devolved body can make a real difference to social policy. It enables us to get away from the one-size-fits-all approach so often taken at Westminster with no account for regional preference.

In 2005-06, free personal care in Scotland cost 1.73% of the Scottish health budget, and that equates to the 1.85% estimate that the Assembly Health Committee reckoned that it would cost here in 2002. Despite some problems with its implementation, the Scottish policy is seen as one of the new Parliament's successes. This year alone the policy has received a clear, if cautious, vote of confidence from an inquiry by the Scottish Parliament's Health Committee and from research published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, which said that:

"Scotland's go-it-alone policy of providing free personal care for older people at home and in residential and nursing homes has created a fairer system without undue public spending."

However, it is important that the Assembly take note of some of Scotland's implementation problems. If an enabling Bill is introduced in the Assembly, such problems will need to be addressed for the implementation plan for free personal care for the elderly to work to its optimum. It is not merely a question of how much the free personal care will cost; the modalities of its implementation and delivery are equally important. As the saying goes: the devil is often in the detail.

Some people in Scotland who qualify for free personal care are experiencing some problems with their attendance allowances, while those getting free nursing care in England are not similarly penalised.

That appears to be partly due to a lack of communication between the Department for Work and Pensions in Westminster and the locally controlled Health Department.

Protocols must be put in place to avoid the manifest unfairness of people being paid an attendance allowance in England but not elsewhere. However, the discrepancy appears to be more than mere coincidence. Five years on, the quirks of delivering the policy have resulted in a massive erosion in the differential between Scotland and England — a differential that was wide several years ago, and seems to be much smaller today.

In England, contributions to nursing care for those who have been assessed as being in the highest band have increased to £133 per week. As people in England who receive nursing care do not lose their attendance allowance of £62.25 per week, the margins between the two countries are decreasing; Scotland's funding provides £145 per week for personal care and £65 for nursing care. Those figures have not risen since 2002. A person could receive £195.25 in England compared to £210 in Scotland.

We need to consider that differential and establish whether the attitude of the Department for Work and Pensions is not a deliberate administrative act designed to frustrate a regional policy. We must establish the true extent of the differential. That is where a report by the Minister of Health on the fiscal, workforce and administrative preparations required to implement the policy, as mentioned in the amendment, would come into play.

In Scotland, the money that is transferred to local authorities to administer the scheme is ring-fenced. There are concerns that it might be necessary to do that here, as councils may be tempted to dip into the pot to offset other programmes. There are other issues from the Scottish experience that need to be addressed in a local Act. One issue is the apparent operation of

waiting lists by some councils in Scotland. There is also ongoing uncertainty regarding definitions; for example, what constitutes food preparation and whether that counts as personal care. Clarity in a local Act would ensure that its operation would not be watered down and that the legislators' intentions would not be frustrated. Essentially, we are asking for a better Act or a better course of action.

It is important that the social legislation enacted by the Assembly reflects the current configuration of society. Existing legislation reflects a very different Northern Ireland when, in 1971, some 45.9% of Northern Ireland households were owner-occupied. By 2001, that figure had risen to 68.8%.

The dramatic increase in home ownership in Northern Ireland will remove an increasing proportion of people from the publicly-funded personal-care safety net while those with modest savings and who own their homes, which they do not want to realise, will be left vulnerable to prohibitive care costs. It will destroy the lifetime savings of many families — savings that have already been taxed several times by Government — leaving many older people who have been prudent with their savings with no other option but to sell their homes or leave no assets to their families.

I suggest that that is just another health tax. Given the current levels of home ownership, that situation cannot be said to represent the welfare state, as it is such a departure from its founding principles.

I ask the House to support my amendment, which blends the desire for action on this front with a fiscally prudent and sensible way forward, remembering that we are spending taxpayers' money.

Mrs I Robinson: When in opposition, it is certainly easy, if not always wise, to make ambitious demands. In positions of responsibility, things become more difficult. During one of the previous Assemblies I was delighted when free nursing care was introduced. At that time certain individuals tried to make political capital by saying that free personal care should also be introduced, in spite of the fact that money simply was not there to allow that. In the end it proved better to have half a loaf than none at all.

Mr McCarthy: Will the Member give way?

Mrs I Robinson: I will not give way. The Member has had an opportunity to speak. I did not hear the SDLP or the Alliance Party indicate how they wish to raise the money for this, given that we have a fixed and finite budget.

As we discuss the motion, we must pay careful attention to the costs involved, and I say that as someone who is determined to see free personal care in Northern Ireland at the earliest possible opportunity.

An economic analysis of the introduction of free personal care in Scotland shows that the policy has cost more than expected. For example, in 2002-03 it cost £127 million rather than the £107 million that was planned. Similarly, in 2003-04, £143 million was spent rather than the £125 million expected. Nevertheless, this still represents only 0.6% of the Scottish Executive's total budget of £25 billion, and can have had only a relatively marginal impact on spending in other areas.

Unfortunately, however, waiting lists have emerged in Scotland that have restricted the demand among elderly people for free personal care. A statistical snapshot, taken on a single day last February, showed that 4,005 people were waiting to be assessed and that a further 709 people had been assessed but were still waiting to receive a service.

The report anticipates that a major increase in the number of people aged 85 and over may lead to a potential tripling of the public costs of personal care by 2053.

Mr McNarry: With regard to the costs — and I understand the train of the Member's thoughts, given the fixed and finite budget — is the Member, as Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, confident that the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister will be able to negotiate successfully the financial package that we all await this year to boost spending on health in Northern Ireland over the next three years? That would be a great help towards meeting our needs.

Mrs I Robinson: I thank the Member for his intervention. Naturally, that will be decided by the Executive, and I am aware that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety will push for additional funds, which I hope will be forthcoming. However, we have a finite budget, and we have to live within its means. It is very dangerous to raise the hopes of the public when it may not be possible to fulfil them.

Mrs Long: Will the Member give way?

Mrs I Robinson: No, I will not give way. I am going on now. *[Interruption.]*

Mrs I Robinson: Another Member keeps interrupting, Mr Deputy Speaker, from a sedentary position. I have already indicated that I will not let him make an intervention. Please tell the Member to sit quietly. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mrs I Robinson: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

However, a further shift towards providing more care services at home, combined with policies to promote healthier life expectancy, could significantly reduce the projected bill. Several wider lessons and conclusions can be drawn from the Scottish experience.

Free personal care has the capacity to support clients' wishes for person-centred care that is sensitive to individual needs. Shifts in the balance of care can moderate costs; it is important that projections of future trends do not merely reproduce existing models of the balance of care.

11.15 am

A new approach to costing care packages, which avoids problematic classification of tasks and their allocation to different budgets, could address many difficulties for individuals and for the delivery and costs of service provision.

Free personal care has made provision for those of modest means, especially women and people with conditions such as Alzheimer's, more equitable. For those groups, personal-care payments are no longer a burden, particularly towards the end of their lives when such care is vital. However they still face charges for some aspects of their care. There is a need for balance between nationally agreed priorities and local authority autonomy. I support the amendment.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the motion. In 2006 there were 181,000 women aged 60 or over and 101,000 men aged 65 years or over in our population. People of pensionable age make up 16.3% of the total population. Sixty-seven per cent of men and 60% of women aged 65 to 70 have a long-standing illness. A survey conducted by Age Concern found that 40% of older people believe that they are treated differently from the rest of the population because of their age.

Free personal care for older people should be supported and, once implemented, should be subject to continued improvement, updating and monitoring. The challenges presented by an ageing population impact on all aspects of society. By 2040 the proportion of people over 60 will have doubled, with a 57% increase in the number of people over 75. Therefore, in the provision and implementation of free personal care for the elderly, it is essential to get it right at the political and policy-making levels.

Many older people feel that politicians do not empathise with them, so we must listen to what they are saying and be proactive in addressing their needs, concerns and aspirations. Older people require both dignity and security in the way their long-term care needs are met. The views, needs and aspirations of older people must be taken into account fully regarding personal care. Personal care, both at home and in residential care homes, must be provided free at the point of delivery.

For elderly people, the need for long-term care is unpredictable and happens through no fault of their own. Certainly, the cost of good quality long-term care is very high, and most people cannot afford to meet it.

For the majority of older people, the ability to pay for personal care is outside their means and therefore out of their control.

Most care for older people is provided by unpaid carers, many of whom are unaware of their entitlement to a carers assessment, which could improve the help they get and give them some respite. Improving help for carers may lead to a situation where some older people may not have to go into residential accommodation just as quickly, as it is often not the best option. Indeed, evidence from healthcare professionals shows that after going into residential accommodation, elderly people can become institutionalised very quickly.

I accept that the whole area of care is complex and expensive, but it is something that we need to address urgently. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Buchanan: I support the motion. Care for elderly people will only worsen if it is not properly managed. Therefore, politicians must ensure that those who require and are entitled to personal care receive the type most suitable for them. Politicians must seek to empower the elderly in our community, giving them the dignity and respect they deserve, particularly when they face the challenge of illness.

I welcome the call to put free personal care for the elderly high on the Assembly's list of priorities, with the aim of resolving any outstanding issues as soon as possible. However, we must recognise that the introduction of free personal care would involve a major funding commitment by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

The Scottish Executive have agreed to provide free personal care to people who are aged 65 and over, whether it is required at home, in hospital or in a care home. The Scottish Executive have also agreed to provide all those people with free nursing care. The statement by the Royal Commission in September 2003 welcomed the action that was taken in Scotland and encouraged other devolved Governments to consider taking the same step. The Royal Commission highlighted the ongoing problems with funding for long-term care, pointing out that most patients are under pressure to finance their own care, burdening both themselves and their families. We, too, should consider that point. Patients and their families cannot be short-changed. In order to avoid unnecessary confusion, it would be beneficial to define what is meant by the term "personal care". The Royal Commission has set out guidelines that make a distinction between personal care and nursing care. It would aid the process if we had a clearer outline of such differentiations and clearer guidelines on the age at which people will benefit from the proposed free care.

Although patients can meet certain costs, the long-term implications have to be considered. External contributing factors need to be assessed because, in the current climate, the economy is growing and prices and the cost of living are rising, affecting the cost of care provision. We are an ageing population, and demand will therefore escalate, increasing the pressures on families who are coping with the needs of their elderly relatives.

Providing personal care at home, thus decreasing the number of elderly patients who are admitted to hospital, would, of course, be beneficial if the right practices were adopted to provide that care at a high standard. A high benchmark will have to be set for the quality of personal care, so that patients do not receive a second-rate service. It is worth considering how best to evaluate new management processes, and it is worth asking whether we have enough qualified, trained and experienced staff to deal with an increase in the number of patients, each of whom will have individual care demands.

As was discussed in the Transitional Assembly in December 2006, people could be expected to contribute towards living and accommodation costs, for example. However, when people have worked hard all their lives to ensure that there was provision when they needed it most, they should not be expected to pay for personal care. Our primary concern should be people's quality of life. The service must therefore improve for everyone — the patients, the families and, of course, the staff who work so hard to administer essential care.

I support the motion.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I, too, support the motion. As Kieran McCarthy said, the Assembly has debated this issue several times over a number of years, and all parties have called for the Executive to introduce free personal care. Kieran will be glad to know that our party — because the proposer of the motion has accepted both amendments — will support the motion.

I thank the proposer of the motion for securing today's debate. As Assembly Members, we must commit ourselves to not allowing the issue to be forgotten. Free personal care must be introduced at the earliest opportunity. By 2020, more than half the population of Ireland will be over 60. In a previous debate on the issue, I stated that our society would be judged on how we treated our young people and elderly people. Children and young people are our future but, as Kieran said, the only certainty in life is that we will all get old. Therefore we will be judged on how we treat elderly people.

We must address discrimination in the provision of health services to older people. The introduction of

free personal care is essential. We must also address the needs of carers — we have all heard their stories. I was formerly a member of the Health, Social Services and Public Safety Committee, and I have listened to the families and friends of people who need care. They have told me about the work that they do 24 hours a day, seven days a week. I commend all those people who are currently caring for family and friends.

We have an ageing population, and some people have complex needs. Care for the elderly is becoming more difficult. Many people want to continue to live in their homes, but they will need support for that. We have a duty to provide that support.

In a previous debate on free personal care, and again today, Rev Robert Coulter informed us of the cost of introducing free personal care in Scotland and of the possible cost here. He also said that the UUP made commitments in its 2003 and 2005 election manifestos, and that the issue is, in his words, “unfinished business”. I say to him: let us finish that business; let us work for the introduction of free personal care.

I was going to say that I welcomed the Minister's attendance. He has popped out for just a few minutes, but he has probably the highest attendance record of all Ministers — he has been here every week. That is the reality of taking on the role of Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Health matters will impact on a daily basis. However, I want to commend the Minister's commitments during a previous debate, in which he said that he would implement all the recommendations of the Bamford Review. Therefore I call on him to indicate today that he will implement — I am sure that he will — all the Royal Commission's recommendations on free personal care.

Several Members referred to the Scottish model. What does free personal care mean in Scotland? Members highlighted some of the difficulties, including the failure of the Scottish Executive to enforce clear guidance in key aspects, such as the preparation of meals. Although we can take on board how the Scottish model has worked, we must learn from it and ensure that any mistakes are not repeated here.

In conclusion, I want to give a special mention to all those groups from the community and voluntary sector that have placed this issue at the heart of the Assembly. They have placed their trust in us. Therefore let us ensure that we take this matter forward and implement free personal care for the elderly at the earliest opportunity. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Easton: I am told that in the tiny Buddhist kingdom of Bhutan, high in the Himalayas, it is the expressed ambition of the King to govern in a way that contributes to the maximum well-being of his countrymen and countrywomen. That should be our

mission in the Assembly, and no group of people is more deserving of consideration than our senior citizens.

I am glad to say that the DUP has an impressive record in placing the needs of older people at the top of its agenda. The warm homes scheme and the free public transport arrangements for those over 65 years of age are examples that spring to mind.

The DUP election manifesto set out a number of objectives that, if achieved, would help our senior citizens to enjoy an active and full life in comfort and security. It must be our ambition to honour our election pledges. Helping older people to claim benefit entitlements, preventing cold-weather-related deaths, and having in place measures to make people feel more secure in their homes are important objectives of this party. This afternoon, we will debate the issue of fuel poverty, and, in the near future, we hope to debate the extension of the travel scheme to include those over 60. We hope to support proposals on those matters.

It is, however, the matter of equal and free personal care for the elderly that is our current focus. Members will recall that the DUP backed the introduction of free nursing care, and that has benefited thousands of elderly people in Northern Ireland. That was an important step in the right direction, but it stopped short of tackling the difficult issues associated with delivery of free personal care for the elderly at the point of need.

We are all familiar with instances in which the savings of people who have prudently provided for their old age and the equity in family homes have disappeared like snow off a ditch when old people become unable to care for themselves or when support is not available or is exhausted.

That can be devastating, and it seems very unfair for families to feel penalised in that situation. Families are aware that those who do not own their own homes and have no savings or resources receive the full measure of residential and other care at no cost. It is easy for individual Assembly Members to court popularity by calling for measures that will have broad public support, without considering the financial and other implications. I am aware that we do not have unlimited resources. However, that must not limit our vision for the future.

This is a critical issue, and I believe strongly that we must focus our attention on the need to make a commitment at the earliest possible moment to introduce free personal care for older people in Northern Ireland. In considering that, it would be helpful to benefit from the experience of other communities, in particular that of the Scottish Executive and local authorities in Scotland. We owe it to those people, now advancing in years, to show

respect for the contribution that they have made to society in very difficult times.

11.30 am

The quality of the lives of the older generation has been blighted by 40 years of terrorism and instability. The Assembly must do all in its power to ensure that the debts that are owed to them are honoured in their twilight years. Elderly folk must be treated with the care and respect to which they are entitled. I strongly support the call for the Executive to undertake a review to establish what resources are required for the implementation of free personal care for the elderly. Indeed, I want to know whether the Minister can afford it out of the existing health budget.

Mr B McCrea: I support the motion in the strongest possible terms. In particular, I support the amendment put forward by my colleague, the Rev Dr Robert Coulter. I am grateful to Mrs Hanna for bringing the matter to the attention of the House and giving the Assembly the chance to debate it. I am also grateful for the gracious manner in which she has accepted the amendments. It is a pity, therefore, that members of the Alliance Party have sought to introduce a totally unnecessary note of rancour to the debate. *[Interruption.]*

In order to avoid the interjections that are made, pathetically, time and time again — and if the Member will stop talking and listen — let me reiterate: the decision that was made in 2002 to introduce free nursing care but not free personal care was intended to be a transitional arrangement until the cost of free personal care was established. That point was made quite clearly by Mrs Robinson earlier in the debate. It is crucial that the resources be secured to honour that commitment. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind Members that speaking from a sedentary position is not permissible. Members must ask the Member who is speaking whether they can make an intervention.

Mr B McCrea: In response to Mrs Hanna's enquiry, I can say that, according to evidence that was provided to the Health Committee in May 2002, the cost of free personal care in Northern Ireland would be between £40 million and £50 million. That equates to around 1.85% of Northern Ireland's £2.7 billion health budget for 2004-05 — in the region of what is being paid by the Scottish Parliament. I have taken on board the fact that there are issues with that that must be properly investigated.

Two Royal Commission reports on the long-term care of the elderly, in March 1999 and September 2003, have recommended the introduction of free personal care underwritten by general taxation and based on need rather than wealth. That is the fundamental point of the discussion. The Royal Commission noted that:

"It is true that some 70% of older people in long-term care get some state help with the costs. Many of these people will have had to use their not necessarily large capital, including the proceeds of selling their house, and so suffer the indignity of being reduced to penury before state support kicks in."

That cannot be fair, Mr Deputy Speaker.

It should not be the case that people must sell their homes before they can get some form of support. It sends out all the wrong messages; that one should not save or buy a house. That is not the right way forward. Although many people enjoy the current boom in house prices, what benefit will it be to them when they must sell their homes in order to get support? Furthermore, one must pay through the nose in order to have that privilege.

In 1999, the Royal Commission made the key point that:

"The system at the moment helps people who are poor, demands that people of modest means make themselves poor before it will help, and affects people to a lesser degree the richer they are".

Once again, Mr Deputy Speaker, that cannot be fair or just. The Royal Commission described free personal care for the elderly as being:

"in the best tradition of social policy in this country",

ensuring welfare, security and dignity for those of modest means who work, pay their taxes, save and own their own homes.

That is at the heart of democracy. Therefore, I support both the amendment and the main motion.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I thank Mrs Hanna for bringing an important subject to the Floor of the House and those who spoke in the debate. Members clearly want to make progress, and, most importantly, the public whom we represent expect the issue of free personal care to be addressed. It is a huge bone of contention for people that, having paid taxes during their entire working lives, they may be forced to sell their homes to pay for care in their twilight years. It seems inherently unfair to many people that only those too frail to continue living independently in their communities have to face that situation. The current charging policy hits the most vulnerable and frail in society. That is why the UUP's manifesto includes a commitment to introduce free personal care.

Bearing in mind what has been said this morning, Members must be clear on what is meant by free personal care. It involves payment to cover the cost of helping people with personal tasks that they would normally do for themselves, such as dressing, eating, washing, bathing, toileting, getting in and out of bed, moving around their houses and keeping safe.

In line with the recommendations in the Royal Commission's report on long-term care for the elderly,

it does not mean that all services in care homes would be free. People who live in care homes would continue to contribute, to the extent to which they are able, to the cost of living there, and, therefore, they would be treated in the same way as people who receive care services in their homes.

It is useful to bear in mind some of the headline figures to indicate the financial implications on the budget. The estimated cost of providing social care services is estimated at £252 million for residents in care homes and £134 million for those living in their own homes. The figure for charges to people receiving care stands at £78 million.

This is not the first Assembly's debate on free personal care. Some Members have referred to the February 2001 decision of the former Assembly that the Royal Commission's recommendations, including free personal care, should be implemented in Northern Ireland.

It may be helpful for Members if I outline progress subsequent to that Assembly debate. The Executive established an interdepartmental group to examine the financial and other implications of introducing free personal care. When the group presented its report in July 2002, it estimated the cost of free personal care at between £40 million and £60 million.

The cost of providing free personal care for those who are in residential homes is reasonably simple to estimate. However, it is difficult to estimate what can be described as the latent demand — the extra demand that would be generated as a result of providing financial support, because some currently informal care may become formalised. The experience in Scotland clearly demonstrates that that happens when free personal care is introduced.

The Executive requested that the group carry out further work, but the Assembly was suspended before it could report back. Despite continued calls from Assembly Members, the direct rule Ministers firmly held the view that because of the financial implications and potential wider impact on spending priorities, any decision on free personal care should be left to a restored Executive.

As the Assembly is now restored, Members have another chance to discuss and progress the issue. Some progress has been made on implementing several of the Royal Commission's recommendations. In April 2002, a 12-week "property disregard" was introduced, which means that the value of a person's home is not taken into account for the first 12 weeks after his or her move into a care home. That period was designed to allow people time to recuperate and regain as much capacity for independent living as possible, before having to make what is often an irreversible decision.

In October 2002, payments for nursing care were introduced. That means that £100 a week is paid by the

health and social care trusts for those nursing home residents who are responsible for the full costs of their care.

It is useful to consider that the Royal Commission broke down costs into three components. The first component was accommodation and food, which was estimated to cost £235 a week. Secondly, personal care was estimated to cost £130 a week, and, thirdly, nursing care was estimated to cost £100 a week. Nursing care is provided free in nursing homes. Personal care in residential homes is not free, and that is the matter under debate. The view of the Royal Commission was that if one lives in one's own home, or in a residential home, it is reasonable to expect one to make a contribution towards one's own accommodation and food costs — food, lighting, heating, and so on. Support for food and accommodation costs is subject to graduated means-testing: if one cannot afford it, one gets support.

Payments for nursing care were introduced in October 2002. As other Members have pointed out, as far as the Executive is concerned, personal care policy is a work in progress that is moving forward.

Since 2002, the limits on the amount of savings or assets that are used to determine how much someone should pay towards the cost of their care — and consequently, how much financial support to which they should be entitled — have increased in line with the limits in England. Those figures now stand at a lower limit of £13,000, and an upper limit of £21,500. That is a form of means-testing. Taking those limits on assets into consideration, it would be very difficult to find a house that is not worth more than £21,500. The point is continually raised that when people become elderly and frail and require support, they end up having to sell their homes. That is clearly unfair.

It is important that I point out that those developments apply to all client groups, because this matter does not affect only the elderly. The 2002 work was based on the important assumption that the section 75 equality requirements of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 would not permit the introduction of a scheme that was limited to specific age groups, irrespective of need. That important consideration must be borne in mind throughout all of our deliberations. Section 75, which governs our activities, states that measures cannot be confined to a specific age group. However, many of us view the recommendation that personal care should be provided free as of vital importance. That has not been delivered, and it is my intention to put that right.

I view personal care as one strand of the work that we must do to ensure that we treat our elderly with dignity and respect. For too long, care of the elderly has meant little beyond institutional care, isolated from friends and family. That is changing, but I am

determined to accelerate that change. We know that, where possible, people want to maintain their independence and remain in their own homes, with appropriate assistance.

We must build capacity in our communities to support our elderly. We must provide services that stop our elderly from being unnecessarily admitted to hospital, simply because there are not sufficient services at a time of crisis. Helping elderly people to maintain their independence must be our primary concern. My Department's reform and modernisation agenda is already seeing resources being redirected to the community to enable us to do that. Moreover, an extra £4 million is being invested in 2007-08 to further develop the flexibility and responsiveness of domiciliary care services in people's own homes. That is a fundamental requirement for older people who have long-term conditions or other complex needs.

11.45 am

I remind Members that domiciliary care covers the costs incurred in a person's residence, and includes personal care. Therefore, covering personal care has gone part of the way; however, that is not good enough. We must go all of the way. Part of the way does not help care-home residents who must pay for their personal care, and who are, in effect, punished for the misfortune of ill health or disability. In a civilised society that cannot be right, and I intend to do something about it.

As much as I should like immediately to implement free personal care, I should be negligent in my duties as a Minister were I to bring forward proposals for consideration by my Executive colleagues, without an up-to-date assessment of the costs and potential implications for other services. The most recent estimate, carried out in June 2005 for a direct rule Minister, put the cost at £45 million. However, that estimate was based on assumptions used by a Scottish Executive interdepartmental group in 2002 and amounted to little more than a superficial update. Such an important decision must not be taken based on assumptions and figures that are more than five years old.

An estimate of costs depends on the number of people in care homes and the likely increase in demand for formal care. In the two parts to that calculation, the first is reasonably easy and the second is much more difficult. The number of people in care homes remains fairly static, but the latent demand is difficult to ascertain. The Scottish Parliament's 2002 report estimated the potential cost of the move from informal to formal care to be up to £23 million. That was the cost then of latent demand.

The model of free personal care used by the Scottish Executive for the past five years is available to consider. That means that there are five years of data to

access, and it is important that Members take the time to do that. There is also an opportunity to learn from the practical experiences of the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly in tackling this issue. I want to ensure that my proposals are based on sound information about costs and volumes, to be clear that all potential options have been examined, and that the final decision is sustainable and in the best interests of the vulnerable people who rely on our services. Reports on waiting lists in Scotland must also be sought.

Dr Deeny: Did the Minister hear the leader of his party on Radio Ulster this morning, talking about the subject of costs? Furthermore, was he encouraged to hear a Member of the Scottish Parliament, on that programme, who said that there is a wonderful service for elderly people in Scotland, and who seemed pleasantly surprised to state that free personal care cost less than 0.5% of the Scottish Parliament's budget. If that equates with here, should it not give all Members encouragement to move on this issue as soon as possible?

Mr McGimpsey: That is exactly what I am doing, and I will now set out the steps to move forward.

Whatever the final model, significant funding must be found and it must be sustainable. Therefore, I am commissioning a comprehensive update to the information relating to costs that will consider the lessons learned from Scotland and Wales and identify other potential options. I want to move forward as quickly as possible.

There are other options that did not form part of the original report. In particular, it cannot be right that the family home is sold to fund care. I have asked officials to report to me by October on the options that can be taken forward under the existing legislation and constraints, particularly with regard to the exclusion of the family home from financial assessment. That is one of the key issues.

Introducing personal expenses allowances and raising thresholds before asking for contributions are also being considered. Currently, if an elderly person has minimal assets, their only income is their pension, which is then taken off them and they are given back £20 a week for spending money. That is neither adequate nor fair. Therefore I am developing those three points, all of which are covered by existing legislation.

Primary and subordinate legislation must be passed and detailed written guidelines produced if any model that involves making a payment on the basis of assessment is to be introduced. Therefore with the best will in the world, the date that Kieran McCarthy outlined in his amendment is not achievable, although I will question my officials about that again. In fact, 1 April 2010 is the earliest possible date that free personal care can be introduced. That is the earliest date, going through the legislative process —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Minister's time is up.

Mr McCallister: This is a timely debate that concentrates on an issue that should be an immediate priority for this Assembly.

The Ulster Unionist Party is committed to providing security, dignity and welfare for our older people. It believes that those values should shape our society's approach to valuing and protecting the elderly as vital members of the community. Indeed, that has been a long-standing commitment of our party for some time.

The motion alludes to the fact that the previous Assembly agreed in principle to the introduction of free personal care for the elderly. Dr Coulter, my colleague Mr McCrea and Mrs Robinson spoke about the decision that was taken in 2002 to introduce free nursing care but not free personal care. That decision was intended to be — as the Royal Commission recognised — a transitional position while the cost of free personal care was established and resources for its provision were secured. However, it is my firm belief that now is the time for the Assembly to act, to take the next steps required and to deliver on this key provision.

Two Royal Commission reports — one in March 1999 and another in September 2003 — recommended the introduction of free personal care for the elderly. Such free personal care would be:

“underwritten by general taxation, based on need rather than wealth.”

As my colleague Mr McCrea mentioned, the Royal Commission made a very strong statement when it stated that:

“It is true that some 70% of older people in long-term care get some state help with the costs. Many of these people will have had to use their not necessarily large capital, including the proceeds of selling their house, and so suffer the indignity of being reduced to penury before state support kicks in.”

One of the most important statements in the 1999 report stated that:

“The system at the moment helps people who are poor, demands that people of modest means make themselves poor before it will help, and affects people to a lesser degree the richer they are and better able to afford the sums required.”

All Members who have spoken today mentioned that in July 2002 the Scottish Executive introduced free personal care for the elderly, the introduction of which was supported by all political parties in the Scottish Parliament.

Mrs Robinson quite rightly mentioned budgets and overspend. However, the Minister made clear in his statement that whatever results from any discussion of the matter must be sustainable.

In a previous debate on prescription charges, I asked why Northern Ireland should be any different from any other devolved region of the United Kingdom. Evidence

that was provided to the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety in May 2002 stated that free personal care in Northern Ireland would cost between £40 million and £50 million. As has been mentioned, that equates to 1.85% of the 2004-05 health budget.

Mr McCarthy: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCallister: Given that the Member has been trying all day, why not? *[Laughter.]*

Mr McCarthy: Will the Member concede that before the recent elections both his party and the DUP — and everybody else — were quite aware of the funding requirements for free personal care, yet went ahead and said that they would introduce it? What is the delay? What is stopping him now from giving the people what was promised?

Mr McCallister: Did the Member not hear the Minister? He is not sitting very far away from him. I understand and accept that, because I am significantly younger than him, I am not in such a rush. *[Laughter.]*

The Minister has already made it clear that the earliest that free personal care could be introduced would be April 2010. Every party in the Assembly has commended the Minister on his attendance at health debates. He gave a full account of some of the progress that has been made on all of the issues and with regard to changes to the limits.

As I have said, free personal care has to be sustainable. There is no point in delivering it for one or two years and then finding that the Executive has run out of money. It has to be sustainable. Mrs Ramsey mentioned some of the failures of the Scottish system. We should look at some of the failures but also at some of the successes, learn from both, and move forward on the issue.

Dr Farry: It is fair to say that this has been a useful debate, if for nothing else then because it has been an opportunity for people to set out their positions on this important issue. We have moved from the situation in opposition, where everyone gave empty promises, to one where we face the challenges of delivery. It seems that we all agree on the principles of the issue, but there are different levels of commitment to delivering it. The Assembly seems to have no problem in supporting the issue when it is asked to do so in principle, but when challenged to commit, the Assembly baulks on every occasion.

The key issue is one of priorities. Members are right to speak of a fixed budget. The Alliance Party understands that we have a fixed budget.

Mr Weir: I note that the Alliance Party's amendment refers to this as “a new priority”. Which of the current priorities are they going to drop in order to make this issue a new priority? Are priorities simply

going to be added ad infinitum, so that nothing becomes a priority?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his intervention; I was going to come to that point.

The Alliance Party will go further and accept that we are operating within tight fiscal constraints, with an unsustainable financial subvention from the Treasury. The challenge for the Assembly is to find the money within the existing budget, as with any other new spending priority that the Assembly might want to adopt. That is what happened in Scotland — the Scottish Executive found the money within their existing budget, without any new money from the Treasury.

The point is that we have a locally devolved Assembly. We are here as locally elected representatives to reflect the spending priorities of the people who put us here. We are not here simply to accept decisions made by other people.

Mrs Robinson talked about fixed budgets. If we are talking about fixed budgets, is that not an admission that the Assembly will not change the situation that existed under the direct rule Ministers? The key challenge is to put the issue into the comprehensive spending review. Within that, there will have to be a reassessment of all priorities.

Ms S Ramsey: I am conscious that there are two amendments and that the proposer of the motion has said from the outset that she accepts both. I would like some clarification of the difference between Dr Farry's amendment and the Ulster Unionists' amendment.

Dr Farry: I am glad to give that clarification. Our amendment gives a commitment to delivery on this issue. The Ulster Unionists' amendment says that it will have to be considered among other priorities; it does not give a commitment at all.

Mr McCrea mentioned the challenge of finding between £40 million and £50 million to fund free personal care. I am glad to see that he has got the cost right on one issue — the Minister has referred to £45 million. Budgets change all the time — that is the point of the comprehensive spending review. We have to reflect different challenges and demands on the budget. We all know that there are pressures on health funding. We have an ageing population, and budgets need to change to address that.

12.00 noon

The DUP's Alex Easton referred to Bhutan, which is one of the few absolutist monarchies in the world. It is also one of the world's poorest countries and has a low life expectancy. I hope that Mr Easton's comments do not reflect the direction in which Northern Ireland is going.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel has said that his target is to find efficiency savings of 3% in the

forthcoming Budget. The Alliance Party, in its election manifesto, stated that £1 billion was being wasted annually in managing Northern Ireland's divided society, which does not allow us to invest in the quality changes in public services that the people of this country demand. If the will is there, the money is available to address the inefficient way in which services are delivered and to find a new way forward. The Alliance Party is confident that the money can be found in the existing Budget limits.

It has been said that this issue must be dealt with in a transitional phase. The issue of free personal care was introduced in the Scottish Parliament in 1999, and legislation was in place by 2002; there were Royal Commission reports in 1999 and 2003. It is now 2007, and we are told that free personal care will be introduced in 2010. That is 12 years from the Good Friday Agreement, in which the Assembly was first envisaged. How long is a transitional period? Must an entire generation of our elderly people miss out on the opportunity for free personal care because the Assembly does not have the will to address fundamental financial issues and the question of delivery?

I urge the Assembly to back the Alliance Party amendment. The issue of free personal care must be addressed in the context of the comprehensive spending review. The people of Northern Ireland should have been given a firm commitment — not empty promises — about delivery a long time ago. The Ulster Unionist Party amendment waffles, procrastinates and gives no firm commitment. The Alliance Party amendment gives the people of Northern Ireland what they asked for and what all parties promised in their election manifestos. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I will have to ask the Member for Strangford what he had for his breakfast this morning.

Mrs M Bradley: As many Members have said, we will all grow older, and, no doubt, the majority of us will experience an illness of some description in our later years, some people more than others. However, for older couples, the prospect of one partner requiring personal care is frightening, given that for homeowners, their home will be either partly or wholly consumed by the Government to pay for the partner who requires care. That is blatant robbery of the dignity and self-worth of one partner and a basic roof over the head of the other partner. That scenario can cause health problems for the partner left at home; if that partner requires care, his or her home is well and truly gone.

The debacle of free personal care has been debated in the Assembly Chamber since 1999, and it is now high time that Members acted. People are genuinely suffering, physically and financially, and the Assembly has the power to ease that suffering or, at least, give

those people the peace of mind that they will be looked after with the dignity that they deserve.

During the first mandate of the Assembly, my colleague Mark Durkan, as Minister of Finance and Personnel, allocated funding for the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to implement a free nursing-care scheme. However, that first year's money was returned unspent. The Health Minister and her team did not produce the necessary legislation on time, thereby missing a golden opportunity. That was a shameful and disgraceful mismanagement of fiscal opportunities, given that, when proposals were introduced, the Executive gave a commitment to provide money for free personal care.

Acting as a united front, we should not allow incidents such as that to happen during this period of devolution. On 19 December 2006, we sat in the Chamber and unanimously passed a motion that the incoming Executive would prioritise the introduction of free personal care in Northern Ireland. I call on all Members to give their full and unequivocal support to today's motion to move this issue forward urgently.

We owe that much to those in our community who cannot fund their care requirements personally. People who are able to take on that expenditure are few and far between, so it is up to us to help in whatever way we can.

The people who need free personal care are those who have struggled for years to keep our country going while its heart and soul were being bombed out. Had it not been for them, it is more than likely that we would not have an economy of any description, poor though it may be at present.

Carers, be they family or friends, are under pressure, undervalued and underpaid — that is blatantly obvious. As a spokesperson for the elderly, I have a close working relationship with many charitable organisations charged with looking out for the welfare of older people. The issue of carers, and their role, is high on the list of priorities at every meeting.

Carers are normally overworked, yet many would not admit it, as it could be seen as a complaint that they must care for a loved one 24/7. The situation must be resolved. One national charity predicts that, by 2036, the percentage of the Northern Ireland population aged 65 and over will rise to 24%. By 2020, one in four European Union citizens will be aged 60 or over. We cannot wait until those figures become a reality before addressing the issue; we must do it now. Forewarned is forearmed, as they say, so we must heed those figures and pre-empt the total meltdown of our care system.

Personal care is a highly emotive issue, and any family that lives with the uncertainty of care or respite provision does not have an easy time. I have personal

experience of that, as I nursed my father, who suffered from Alzheimer's disease, until his death. However, not every family is in a position to provide care, and those families require urgent and immediate help. They do not need another series of reports; there have been enough of those.

I am under no illusion. Providing free personal care will be no mean feat or a cheap process. However, none of us in this Chamber signed up for a holiday, so it is time to stand up and be counted. According to statistics, one in four people could require that facility in years to come — that would be the equivalent of 27 out of 108 Assembly Members. That is a scary prospect, but our constituents are living with it day after day. We must not forget young people who are also affected by the situation.

We have the power to do something about it and we must act urgently. I welcome the Minister's statements; 2010 is not far away, and I hope that everything will be properly in place to help those who need it.

Mr McNarry: I thank the Member for giving way. I am grateful that Mrs Bradley mentioned the Minister's date of 2010. In line with the good debate thus far, and the sincerity and sensitivities expressed, does she agree that, in progressing the debate, it would be valuable if Members took account of the 2010 date? It is a realistic target and something to aim for. Members should therefore look more carefully at the amendment that gives a different date of 2008-09. That makes a great difference.

Mrs M Bradley: I agree.

All parties should come together to deal with the matter. I understand Kieran McCarthy's emotions in relation to the motion. The DUP appears to have watered down its opinions on the matter, so I would like its Members to come on board. Let us all agree on the way forward for the good of the people who require free personal care. We all believe that it is necessary and important, so let us all support it.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind Members that if amendment No 1 is made, I will still put the Question on amendment No 2.

The Question is that amendment No 1 standing on the Marshalled List be made. All those in favour say "Aye".

Some Members: Aye.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Contrary, if any, "No".

Some Members: No.

Some Members: Aye.

Some Members: No.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Noes have it.

The Question is that amendment No 2 standing on the —

Mr Ford: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. It has been a precedent in this Assembly that, when a significant number of voices are raised, there has always been a recorded Division. On what grounds have you refused to grant a Division on amendment No 1?

Mr Deputy Speaker: One has to find out what the definition of “significant number” is, Mr Ford. The very clear indication of the House was that the Noes had it. *[Interruption.]* Order.

Mr Ford: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, I was not querying your interpretation of the sounds made in the Chamber; I was making the point that there was a precedent in cases in which a significant number of voices were raised. Indeed, after a similar vote five years ago, the voices of only five Members were accepted and a Division granted. Clearly more than five Members shouted “Aye” today.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

12.15 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: It is my intention, therefore, to put the Question again.

Question put, That amendment No 1 be made.

The Assembly divided: The Assembly divided: Ayes 48; Noes 47.

AYES

Ms Anderson, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Brolly, Mr Burns, Mr Butler, Mr Dallat, Dr Deeny, Mr Durkan, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Gallagher, Mrs Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Lo, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr A Maginness, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mrs McGill, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McHugh, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr Molloy, Mr Murphy, Mr Neeson, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mr O'Loan, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Purvis, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Ms Ruane, Mr B Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Dr Farry and Mr Lunn.

NOES

Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr Cobain, Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dodds, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Sir Reg Empey, Mrs Foster, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr McCallister, Mr McCausland, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Mr McFarland, Mr McGimpsey, Miss McIlveen, Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Newton, Mr Paisley Jnr, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mrs I Robinson, Mr K Robinson, Mr P

Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Shannon, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr S Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Armstrong and Mr Buchanan.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Question, That amendment No 2 be made, *put and agreed to.*

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly accepts the recommendations of the Royal Commission on the Long-Term Care of the Elderly; supports in principle the introduction of free personal care; calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to report on the fiscal, workforce and administrative preparations required to implement the policy; and asks the Executive to consider the costs and method of delivery in the context of the Comprehensive Spending Review and in light of the other budgetary pressures facing the Executive.

Literacy and Numeracy

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes for the winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes. Two amendments have been selected and have been published on the Marshalled List. The proposers of the amendments will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes for the winding-up speeches.

Miss McIlveen: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes that more than 20 per cent of children in Northern Ireland leave school without having achieved the appropriate level of performance in literacy and numeracy; acknowledges the findings of reports by the Northern Ireland Audit Office and Westminster Public Accounts Committee, which indicate departmental failings in strategic leadership and target-setting; further notes that the proposed Literacy and Numeracy Taskforce has yet to be established; demands this is done without further delay; and calls upon the Minister of Education to confirm details of the resources and timescale involved for the implementation of an effective revised Literacy and Numeracy Strategy.

I am happy to accept Mr Basil McCrea's amendment, as the issue of literacy and numeracy is not exclusive to Northern Ireland.

On average, there are around 25,000 school-leavers each year. In 2003-04, 37.2% left school with three or more A levels, and 16.5% left with five or more GCSEs at grade C or higher. In 2004-05, 67,769 students were enrolled in undergraduate or postgraduate courses in Northern Ireland. That is the good news.

We often brag about the high standard of education in Northern Ireland. Our pupils consider some of the English board examinations to be easier options than those set by our own examining board. However, we need only scratch the surface and look beyond our high-performing schools to learn that 20% of our children leave school without attaining a level of competency in numeracy and literacy that will equip them adequately for life. What is more shocking is that the Department of Education was aware of that figure in 2001; that the figure has not shifted since that date; and that £40 million has been spent on tackling the problem. It does not appear to have been money well spent and the taxpayer is entitled to ask why.

It is apparent from the results of assessments carried out from Key Stage 1 through to Key Stage 3 that there is a significant decrease at each key stage. Therefore, as children progress through school, they seem to regress. As the Chairman of the House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts (PAC) pointed out, the longer that schools have the children, the worse their results get. Quite astoundingly, 7,000 school-leavers — out of a total of 25,000 — are likely to leave secondary school with a below-expected level of mathematics.

Educational underachievement is particularly acute among boys in inner-city areas. In the Belfast Education and Library Board area, boys trail girls by an unbelievable 29% and the situation needs to be tackled. The problem is more evident in deprived Protestant areas than in deprived Catholic areas: only 17.3% of pupils in schools in those areas achieve A* to C grades in GCSE English. Even more astonishingly, only 4.4% achieve those grades in mathematics.

In 1998, the Department of Education published 'A Strategy for the Promotion of Literacy and Numeracy in Primary and Secondary Schools in Northern Ireland'. The strategy was the subject of scrutiny by the House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts whose report was printed on 27 November 2006. The Committee said in its summary:

"progress in literacy and numeracy attainment levels has been manifestly unsatisfactory, and the Department has failed to show sufficient leadership in driving things forward."

After the report identifies areas of deep concern — areas that should have been identified and addressed by the Department — it contains a number of conclusions and recommendations, and calls for urgent steps to be taken to improve the teaching of literacy and numeracy in schools. That need should have been evident from the lack of improvement in basic skills since 2001.

12.30 pm

The Department is encouraged to ensure that support is focused on schools in which the leadership and management of literacy and numeracy efforts is weak. It is clear from the evidence that well-managed schools with strong leadership provide the best chance of success for our children.

Thorough and rigorous research has been called for to identify and address the significant differences between the achievements of working-class Protestants and working-class Catholics in Belfast in GCSE mathematics and English. Why is there such a disparity, when there is reasonable consistency between equivalent schools in Glasgow?

It was noted with dismay that when targets were in danger of not being met they were lowered, or the timescale extended. From the oral evidence given to the PAC, it seemed that the reason for that was that appropriate research had not been done when setting the targets in the first place. That hardly imbues me with confidence. I back the PAC's call for appropriate target-setting that communicates a clear message and for a consistent approach to those targets to be taken. Targets are supposed to be a tool of accountability. To adjust them willy-nilly makes a mockery of the whole concept.

The Department was criticised for its lack of benchmarking against comparable cities. Surely, not to benchmark is to lose a valuable tool for dealing with the issue of literacy and numeracy in schools. The

plethora of information that is available from across the UK on what has succeeded and what has failed is such a valuable resource that not to have used it is tantamount to being unforgivable.

The PAC also calls on the Department to ensure that teachers have a thorough understanding of relevant literacy and numeracy initiatives; to encourage parents to have a role in their children's education by engaging with and supporting schools; to gather and analyse data on attainment levels in literacy and numeracy in order to target improvement programmes effectively; to address the underachievement of boys, especially in the Belfast area, by drawing together research on best practice; and to narrow the gap between the highest and lowest literacy and numeracy performers in Northern Ireland schools.

In order to deal with the concerns that the PAC raised and the recommendations that it made, the Department announced that a literacy and numeracy task force was to be established in April 2007. April has come and gone, and still we have no task force. That is not good enough. Surely a Department whose knuckles had been rapped so hard would have ensured that it avoided further criticism. What else has not been done? Has the Department begun benchmarking? Is the Department providing more leadership to the education boards? Has the review referred to by the permanent secretary in his evidence to the PAC been completed? If so, does that mean that we now have realistic targets being set for our schools — targets that will not be adjusted because they are unattainable?

On 24 May 2007, the Minister announced an additional £3 million to enhance classroom resources for the foundation stage of the revised curriculum and an extra 20,000 laptop computers for primary and post-primary schools. Although extra investment is always welcome, surely the most fundamental concern is that that investment should be used appropriately. It must address the core concern of literacy and numeracy in our society. Without the establishment of the task force to address the concerns of the PAC, will we again see sums of money being thrown at a problem without a consistent plan capable of solving it? Are we to look at another six years in which 20% of our children leave school without basic literacy and numeracy skills? There must be value for money. An investment should always see a return.

It is clear that the 1998 strategy has not succeeded. It is clear that there have been gross failings in the Department. It is clear that the proverbial eye has been taken off the ball. The PAC criticised the Department for not showing strong enough leadership to the education boards; it is clear that the Minister should now show strong leadership to the Department.

I call on the Minister to establish the task force without further delay, to confirm what resources have been set aside for the implementation of an effective, revised literacy and numeracy strategy, and to tell us when we can expect that strategy to be implemented.

I commend the PAC for drawing our attention to the failings of the Department and for producing a report with such constructive and specific criticisms and recommendations. It is time that the Department of Education showed the Assembly that it has learnt its lesson.

Mr D Bradley: I beg to move amendment No 1: Insert after the first "numeracy;"

"recognises that academic selection and social deprivation contribute to the problems;"

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá mé an-bhuíoch díot as an deis seo a thabhairt domh labhairt ar an ábhar thábhachtach seo. Members will have read the reports by the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts. The Department of Education, in its response to the PAC report, put up its hands, beat its breast and outlined how it intends to rectify the shortcomings in its former strategy. Members need to know as soon as possible how that will be done, and I am glad that the Minister is present.

The Minister is very welcome, and I hope that she will respond to Members' questions. As the Member who spoke previously said, we need to know what will be done; we need the task force to be set up; and we need to know what resources will be available to it, because those will largely determine how effective the strategy will be.

I am concerned lest the new strategy should deal with the symptoms rather than tackle the root causes of the problem. Evidence shows clearly the strong link between social disadvantage and low educational attainment, which is the result of social deprivation. To address the problem of educational attainment, we must also address social deprivation.

Only 37% of school-leavers from the most deprived areas leave school with five or more GCSEs; the average across Northern Ireland is 61%. The skills base in neighbourhood renewal areas also compares very unfavourably when measured against that of the whole of Northern Ireland. In those areas, only 20% of people aged 16 to 65 are qualified to level 2, whereas the Northern Ireland average is 45%.

A review of the Northern Ireland literacy strategy, carried out on behalf of the Northern Ireland literacy steering group in October 2006, investigated substantial research on how neighbourhoods influence educational attainment. Tests for the existence of those effects on 2,500 young people in Scotland found a significant correlation between levels of deprivation in the home and

the neighbourhood and levels of educational attainment. The study's conclusions were that policies to alleviate educational disadvantage cannot be focused on schooling alone but must form part of a broader initiative to tackle social deprivation in society.

It is now generally accepted that the children who face the greatest obstacle when it comes to raising attainment levels are from disadvantaged families; they live in disadvantaged neighbourhoods or attend schools with many other disadvantaged children. In Northern Ireland there are 102,000 children living in poverty. That indicates the scale of the problems that lie ahead.

If social deprivation, which is one of the major causes of educational underachievement, is not addressed as part of a coherent strategy, the vicious circle of underachievement will continue into the next generation unabated.

That point is made in the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister's anti-poverty strategy 'Lifetime Opportunities: Government's Anti-Poverty and Social Inclusion Strategy for Northern Ireland'. I quote:

"Policy must break the cycle and the process that results in children who are born into poverty developing into underachieving young people with limited aspiration and low levels of educational qualifications and skills. They in turn become working age adults living in low incomes often in poor health and benefit dependence, with the prospect of a shorter, less healthy, comfortable and financially secure older age. They are also the adults most likely to be parents of children again born into poverty – with the cycle continuing. Policy must disrupt this process focussing on different priority needs and different times in people's lives, from early years through to childhood, adult working life and later years."

Reviewing the factors that account for the variance in educational attainment, it is evident that combinations of social disadvantage powerfully affect school performance, with a variation of up to 75% in attainment by 16-year-olds at GCSE associated with pupil intake factors. It is important to research the influence of those, and other factors, on educational attainment. Policies and strategies must be formulated to change attitudes and raise awareness of the role and value of education to the individual. Parents and communities must be provided with the resources and skills to change attitudes locally, and support must be given to the efforts of teachers and other educationalists in tackling the problem.

Tackling the multiple deprivations that have persisted in many areas for decades is obviously a priority for the anti-poverty strategy. Education certainly has a major role to play in that process not only through the formal education system but through the home and the wider community. That role should be carried out in conjunction with the Department of Health, the Department for Social Development and the Department for Employment and Learning. The proposed task force should reflect that multi-departmental approach.

Academic selection compounds problems further. Gallagher and Smith have highlighted that academic selection tends to produce a disproportionate number of schools that combine low ability with social disadvantage in their enrolments, thereby exacerbating the educational disadvantage of both factors.

Mr S Wilson: As problems with reading and writing start in primary school, and given that a reference has been made to secondary schools, how does the Member make the link between academic selection and the inability to read and write? Furthermore, as Catholic schools tend to perform better than Protestant schools in reading and writing at primary-school level, and considering that both sectors put youngsters through academic selection, how does he explain the difference at secondary-school level?

Mr D Bradley: The Member will be aware of the well known fact that academic selection skews the entire primary curriculum and has a detrimental effect on the learning ability of primary-school pupils.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr D Bradley: No. I have already given way, and I have more material to get through.

I do not accept Sammy Wilson's claim that this problem cannot be tackled at secondary school. It is something that must be continually challenged throughout the primary and secondary sectors. School factors can raise attainment by up to 14 points at GCSE level for an average pupil, so schools are obviously a good place to improve children's skills. However, a strategy that focuses solely on improving average school performance is likely to be less effective in reducing educational underachievement than a cross-cutting departmental approach involving communities, families, teachers and educationalists that addresses the causes of social deprivation as well as educational underachievement.

There is a broad consensus that early-years intervention is among the most effective means of improving educational performance and outcomes. Such intervention is likely to be an important facet of strategies that help to lift children out of cycles of deprivation and on to positive trajectories. The evidence is promising and suggests that well designed programmes are successful at raising educational attainment and have other positive outcomes in the future. The most successful programmes are defined by early and intensive intervention and include a follow-up component in the later stages of a child's development.

A structured language framework is required, based on a logical model of language that describes the knowledge, understanding and skills appropriate at each year from primary 1 through to year 10. A good foundation programme is also needed, which includes

a range of classroom teaching strategies, including phonics, modelled reading, and shared and guided reading, in addition to wave 1, wave 2 and wave 3 forms of intervention.

12.45 pm

Mr B McCrea: I beg to move amendment No 2: Insert after the first “numeracy;”

“recognises similar levels of under-achievement across the United Kingdom;”.

I thank Ms McIlveen for her acceptance of my amendment; her proposal has my full support. The modest amendment I propose specifically addresses an issue that was raised but not properly answered by the previous contributor, Mr Dominic Bradley.

The Minister of Education, Ms Caitríona Ruane, tells me that academic selection is responsible for poor numeracy and literacy in schools. That cannot be the case. The former Scottish First Minister, Jack McConnell, said in September 2006:

“we can no longer tolerate the tail of underachievement. The bottom 20% for whom standards have failed to rise significantly since 1999 — their achievements, opportunities and aspirations are a national priority”.

That is the result of Scotland's comprehensive system. The Scottish tail of underachievement is very similar to our own. Research conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 1997 showed that around 20% of Scots are at the lowest literacy level, while official figures show that the proportion of Scottish pupils from manual backgrounds obtain either low qualifications or none. That is exactly the same situation as in Northern Ireland, except that it occurs within a comprehensive system.

In England, a similar situation prevails. A study conducted in 2006 by the Department for Education and Skills into the literacy and numeracy skills of new employees showed that one third of employers had to give remedial English and maths lessons. In response to that study, Richard Lambert, the director-general of the Confederation of British Industry, said that:

“The fact that one in three employers ran remedial courses for their staff in the last year is a sad indictment of how the education system has let young people down”.

The need to tackle literacy and numeracy rates is a profound challenge that confronts us all. To tinker with academic selection for pupils at the age of 11 is not to acknowledge the extent of that challenge. Were we to accept the abolition of academic selection tomorrow, it would make no difference to the literacy and numeracy issue that we face.

Mr Kennedy: Does the Member agree that the position shared by the SDLP and Sinn Féin is that academic selection should be abolished, and that because

grammar schools achieve their cohort on that basis, the obvious conclusion is that both Sinn Féin and the SDLP are effectively advocating the abolition of grammar schools?

Mr B McCrea: That is the logical conclusion of the argument put forward. However, academic selection is not the focus of this debate. We are merely pointing out that the conclusions drawn by certain Members do not stand up to investigation.

The real issue to be tackled arises with the under fives. One of the points that I wanted to make when I asked for an intervention during Mr Dominic Bradley's speech was that by the age of three, young people have developed 50% of their language skills, and by the age of five that has risen to 85%. If pupils are not helped by the age of five then it is too late, because they will spend only 15% of their optimum language-development time at primary school. By the age of six and a half, a high-performing pupil coming from a poor background will have lost all of the gains that a low-performing pupil coming from a good background will have got at the same stage.

Mr McCallister: Last week, I attended an excellent event organised by Mr Basil McCrea, at which Baroness May Blood cited figures to the effect that 4% of children from the Shankill, but 74% from North Down, go on to higher education. Does Mr McCrea agree that a major factor affecting those statistics is parenting skills?

Mr B McCrea: I thank the Member for allowing me to raise the discussion that we had with Baroness May Blood. When we were discussing the issues on the Shankill, she said that the problem arises from young people becoming parents at the age of 14. That is an issue of child poverty. If you give people support, they will do well in life. It is too late at the age of 11 — it is certainly too late at the age of 15. It has nothing whatsoever to do with whether one learns one language or another. It is about giving support to people. It is a cultural issue.

We ought to debate evidence, rather than people's opinions and what they think. I have here a report that is supported by many child protection agencies: ‘0-5: How Small Children Make a Big Difference’. I will read part of it to you:

“The most important six years in a person's life are up to the age of five. We really ought not to be born when we are. Our brains and bodies have been busy forming inside the womb, but while we have the requisite number of fingers and toes when we arrive, our brains have not nearly finished taking shape.”

It is an evolutionary thing that has to be sorted out.

The author of the report goes on to say that he had thought the years 0-5 were the key, but that actually it is the nine months when the child is in the womb. Parents suffer stress — and I do not just mean that they have had a difficult day — because they have no money

to pay for their children's education or their toys, or to feed themselves, let alone their children. Those are the issues that put a person under stress. The result is undernourished, underfed and underweight babies. All of the statistics show that those are the children who will have problems in later life. No amount of investment in later years will make up for the loss that those children experience at that stage. That is the real cause of problems with numeracy. Those cultural issues must be tackled.

Not only is academic selection a red herring, it is mendacious to bring it up. It distracts from the real issues.

Mr D Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: I will give way, although the Member did not accord me the same luxury.

Mr D Bradley: Had the Member been listening to my speech, he would have realised that 90% of it was devoted to the very points that he is now making: that neighbourhood affects education, and that personal characteristics, prior attainment, gender, health, low income, parental unemployment, social class, housing and parents' education all contribute to difficulties with literacy and numeracy. However, I also contend that the system of academic selection in Northern Ireland has a backwash into the primary schools that has a detrimental effect on literacy and numeracy.

Mr B McCrea: I was in agreement with the Member until six minutes and 57 seconds into his speech, because during that time he talked about social deprivation. We agree that those factors are the real root cause. However, he then moved on to give us a lecture about academic selection. Quite simply, the facts do not back up his statement. Had he actually said that social deprivation must be dealt with, I would have agreed with him. Had he said that he called for an all-party group bringing in the Department of Education, the Department for Employment and Learning, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department for Social Development, I would have agreed with that. However, academic selection is a red herring. If Mr Bradley goes down that route, he is selling the young people of this country short.

The problem that we have had in the past is that we have had misguided policies led by people who did not know what they were talking about. We intend to get it right, and we will challenge information that is patently untrue. Regarding the language issue — parents, as well as children, suffer when they cannot communicate in English with the teachers because they have not had the training and the skills to do so.

Mr S Wilson: Has the Member noted that in his amendment, Mr Bradley has put academic selection first? Yet his evidence was so thin that he could only throw in a minute's-worth at the end of his speech. The Member has quite effectively demolished that minute's-worth in his speech.

Mr B McCrea: As ever, I am grateful to Mr Wilson for bringing those points to bear. The subject will not be discussed in 10 minutes; it will come forward as a body of information that will be discussed in the Committee for Education and the Committee for Employment and Learning.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Paul Butler. As this is Mr Butler's maiden speech, I remind Members of the convention that it is heard without interruption.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún maidir le litearthacht agus uimhearthacht. Is pointe an-tábhachtach é seo, agus creidim gur ábhar uilepháirtí atá i gceist. I broadly support the motion. However, I am concerned about the high percentage of children who leave school after 12 years of education without adequate skills in numeracy and literacy. The motion calls on the Minister of Education to allocate resources to implement an effective, revised literacy and numeracy strategy. All Members must ensure that the Minister is given adequate resources and support by the Executive and the Assembly to deal with the unacceptably high levels of poor literacy and numeracy skills among our schoolchildren.

The gap between the lowest- and highest-performing pupils in our education system is worrying. Many children leave school after 12 years with inadequate literacy and numeracy skills, and often have difficulty finding work or training. There is a particular concern about literacy and numeracy in non-grammar schools.

There has been focus and debate here about academic selection and the transfer test, and that should not be the sole focus of attention as the problem is much wider. However, it must be acknowledged that the transfer test and academic selection have had an adverse impact on the educational experience of our children, particularly those in primary schools. Considerable time is spent preparing children between the ages of nine and 10 for the transfer tests, which has narrowed the teaching of the curriculum, and has had an impact on the 60% of children who do not attend grammar schools. The curriculum is warped, during those important years, to meet the demands of the transfer test. Ask any of the primary-school teachers who are under pressure to teach children for the test: those children with lower attainment levels are often left without the required level of support, because pressure is placed on teachers to deliver results for the higher achievers.

A culture of education must be developed to bring parents on board to support strategies to improve their children's learning of literacy and numeracy. I welcome the steps already taken by the Department of Education to integrate schools more fully into the community, in particular the extended schools programme and other home and school liaison programmes.

Moreover, a high percentage of adults have poor literacy and numeracy skills. Research into adult literacy and numeracy shows that up to 24% of those aged between 16 and 65 — about a quarter of a million people — have poor literacy and numeracy skills.

Poor literacy and numeracy skills have an impact on the health of the individual and his or her family members. Research shows that there is a significant relationship between poor literacy and numeracy skills and the risk of offending. Much of the research carried out in prisons and centres for young offenders shows that a high percentage of people in those institutions have poor literacy and numeracy skills.

There is clear evidence that better numeracy and literacy skills in adults improves the life chances of their children and the development of their abilities and opportunities for social and economic inclusion. There must also be more joined-up thinking and action among those with responsibility, not just for education, but also for training, youth work and key related services, such as Health and Social Services.

We must also recognise the remarks of Marion Matchett, the chief inspector of the Education and Training Inspectorate. In her recent report, 'The Chief Inspector's Report 2004-2006', she wrote:

"There is, though, evidence of a more worrying side to some young people's lives. Growing up in our increasingly complex world brings difficulties and pressures unrecognised by, or unknown to, previous generations. Mental health problems and increasing obesity are emerging as major concerns. Tragically too, a number of young people ... end their own lives or deliberately self-harm. The Bamford Review includes statistics showing that an estimated 20% of young people suffer 'significant mental health problems' " —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member's time is up. Members will know that the Business Committee has arranged to meet at lunchtime today. I propose therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 1.00 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Mr Speaker: We will continue with the debate on literacy and numeracy. I call Mr Trevor Lunn, and I remind Members that this will be his maiden speech.

Mr Lunn: I welcome the debate and the opportunity to discuss an educational issue that goes beyond the debate on selection. Too much time and energy has been wasted on that one topic, and, since 1998, the previous Executive and direct rule Ministers have failed to deliver on the basic problem of school-leavers' underachievement in literacy and numeracy.

I do not have a problem with the SDLP's amendment, but it is a pity that, once again, academic selection is being thrown into the mix. It was not mentioned in the motion.

We cannot waste another decade. The problem can be dealt with, but some key points must be acknowledged. First, underachievement in education is linked to social exclusion and social deprivation. Furthermore, the Alliance Party sees another problem in the resources that are being wasted on our segregated system. Secondly, if one accepts the link between underachievement in education and social exclusion and social deprivation, each Department and each party in the Executive has a responsibility to tackle the issue and bring illiteracy rates down — at least to the levels in Great Britain. Finally, teachers are central to the implementation of any strategy and must be given the necessary freedom and the resources to do so.

The motion demands that the proposed literacy and numeracy task force be established. A task force is all very well, but it should not be used as an excuse for inaction by the Executive across all Departments.

The scale and nature of the problem must be made clear. The years since 1998 have been wasted, and the targets set then — which were subsequently lowered — have not been met. In 1998, accurate data to provide a baseline against which improvements could be measured were not available. Therefore we first need a commitment from the Executive to provide accurate figures for school-leavers and, indeed, the general population.

It is time that the debate was moved on. Underachievement in schools has lost out while the Executive have argued over academic selection. Although academic selection is important, it is well down the priority list when compared with literacy and numeracy — the damage is being done long before children reach any proposed selection date.

What is more important: the 25% of school-leavers who are functionally illiterate, or arguing about the 11-plus? The issue is not about how children are allocated to schools but the quality of resources available to them and their teachers when they get there. The debate

on appropriate education goes well beyond transfer tests, and the Alliance Party hopes that the Executive will recognise that.

Despite the inconsistencies in the statistics, some things are clear: our problem is more acute than that in Great Britain, even though our system produces better top-end results than those achieved in Great Britain. In Belfast, 70% of boys leave school with a lower than expected standard in English, and 40% of children — mostly boys — have the same problem in mathematics.

Those statistics represent failure by the Government, whether it is Executive or direct rule Ministers. The Department of Education's recent circular that followed the reports carried out by the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the PAC acknowledged that problem, as did Michelle McIlveen, the proposer of the motion. However, they did not offer a solution. Lack of resources is the usual reason given for failures in public services. We spend more money per pupil than in England and Wales, but less appears to find its way through to the pupils. The reasons are clear: bureaucracy, duplication, maintenance of school buildings and the cost of running a segregated system.

Let us end the assumption of segregation in our education system and allocate savings to proper research, special-needs provision and to schools to spend as teaching professionals see fit.

If the Executive leave our segregated society untouched, they will not be able to deliver maximum funding and resources, and our problems will continue. The task force is a fine idea, but the responsibility lies with the Executive. The Executive should collectively set a goal of bringing levels up to Great Britain standards by 2011. Education standards and social exclusion cannot be tackled without addressing segregation. A governing party has brought this motion, and the Executive should achieve significant progress by the end of this Assembly's term, or it will be judged a failure.

Mr Weir: At the start of the debate, I want to declare an interest in being a member of the South Eastern Education and Library Board, although — *[Interruption.]*

A Member: Suspended!

Mr Weir: Open brackets, suspended, close brackets!

I welcome the motion, but I will first focus on the two amendments. The DUP is happy to support the Ulster Unionist amendment as it helps focus on the fact that, while we have problems, they are not unique to Northern Ireland. The average proficiency levels of numeracy and literacy compare reasonably well with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries — our real problem lies with the lower-performance pupils.

While the DUP supports that amendment, it does have a major problem with the amendment in the name

of Mr Bradley dealing with academic selection and social deprivation. The DUP will not listen to lectures from the SDLP or Sinn Féin on this. Sinn Féin is in no position to argue on anything to do with numeracy considering that, last week, it had counted up to 10 and then found in fact that there were only four there in the first place. *[Laughter.]* Perhaps, instead of wasting time with the unionist outreach officer, it might reach out to its constituents in the South of Ireland and likewise the SDLP.

We are disappointed that academic selection is seen as the be-all and end-all: as if, if it is disposed of, all our ills will be cured. If academic selection were abolished tomorrow, it would not benefit the system and could well lead to its developing as it is in England, where the richest parents simply pay for some form of public-school education, thereby widening the gap of social deprivation.

The other part of the amendment clarifies the fact that social deprivation lies at the heart of this. We have seen the difference in the results between Belfast and the rest of the country, between boys and girls, and between the Catholics and Protestants in Belfast. This is what we should address. It is telling that the PAC report on academic selection stated that:

“We would caution against a simplistic view that structural change is the answer to this problem. The differences which we have highlighted between Roman Catholic and Protestant children in socially deprived areas suggest that there are much more profound difficulties at work than the system of selection. If the education system in Northern Ireland is to undergo major structural change, it is all the more important that underlying issues influencing educational attainment are not lost sight of and give the priority they deserve.”

This is where we need to concentrate our efforts. The Department of Education has lacked leadership, as targets set since 1998, as the PAC report and the Audit Office report show, have gone unmet. The DUP seeks an assurance today from the Minister that if there is greater focus on those targets, they will not be brought down artificially in some way, simply to say that those targets have been met.

Paragraph 11 of the Public Accounts Committee's second report states:

“We were dismayed to find that when targets were in danger of not being met they appeared to be cynically lowered or had their timescale extended.”

If we are to see an improvement, it is important that it is real improvement rather than simply a moving of the goalposts. We can also learn lessons from what is happening across the water. The problem seems to be most acute in the Belfast area.

I share the PAC's concerns that a great deal of readover with cities comparable with Belfast, such as Leicester, Newcastle, Liverpool and Glasgow, does not appear to have been done. Indeed, the PAC said that it was astounded to discover that the Department had

made no attempt to benchmark the performance of Belfast against that of those cities.

It is important that we get leadership. We have seen the gap widen, and we do not simply need a task force established. Instead of rhetoric, we must see action to tackle the problem in order to improve our literacy and numeracy standards.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. This is a very important debate, and the motion is worthy, in that it deals with a serious fault in the provision of primary education in the North. The headline issues are literacy and numeracy, and the statistics are staggering. The Assembly faces a huge challenge to respond to the concerns raised.

We are all aware that many other problems affect the quality of the education that we offer our young people, not least our experience of academic selection, poor accommodation, underfunding, and an ongoing failure to respond to the many calls for action from the teaching profession. It is small wonder then that so many teachers are demotivated and that so many young people emerge from the education system demoralised and ill prepared for the challenges of life and employment.

Other Members who have spoken have contributed to additional aspects of this important debate, as indeed have the Members who moved the two amendments. However, I wish to refute the oft-repeated claim — thankfully, though, it has not been made in the Chamber today — that we already have a world-class education system in the North. I am sure that many Members have heard that claim on the airwaves and in various debates. We do have many excellent schools, and we do have many fine teachers, who are dedicated to imparting an appreciation of learning to their pupils. We also have thousands of brilliant, clever and creative young people, but we do not offer them a world-class education system. To insist that we do is to be complacent and self-delusional. It is time to end efforts to protect and maintain the status quo in education. We must wake up and smell the roses.

It is clear that more needs to be done than simple compliance with the recommendations of the Audit Office and PAC reports. The education system requires a complete overhaul and a determined policy-driven agenda to account for the reality of a changing world. From primary to third level, the education system must be equipped for, and capable of, educating young people for the knowledge-based economy that we must strive to build.

Although I agree that the need to address the numeracy and literacy failure rates is vital — for that reason I support the motion — a broader, strategic approach is needed to revamp and refocus the entire education experience. That is why I strongly welcome the Minister of Education's decision to authorise the deployment of

20,000 laptop computers and additional resources for language tuition. We must provide an education system that values every student and that gives a variety of options to match natural abilities. The brain drain of our brightest and best talents is testimony to a serious lack of connection between education and what is needed to rebuild the local economy.

I hope that the Assembly and our team of Ministers will endorse the imperative to develop an approach to education that will, in time, benefit all aspects of their individual briefs, whether in academia, economic development, health, agriculture, or construction and its allied trades.

Our approach should be governed by the knowledge that the challenge of forging a more prosperous and stable future begins in the classroom. I hope that today's debate will see the emergence of a more holistic and realistic recognition of the failure of the status quo in education.

So no more idle claims about the existence of a world-class education system here. We could — and should — have one, and that is the challenge and opportunity. Go raibh maith agat.

2.15 pm

Mr S Wilson: I congratulate the Member who tabled the motion for raising the issue. It is important that youngsters leaving school are able to read, write and play their part in society.

It is disappointing however, to hear the response from the SDLP, which again has raised the red herring of academic selection. The proposer of the amendment should have read the House of Commons report on the issue. The Committee that compiled the report was, mostly, made up of Labour party members who were against academic selection, and Conservative party members who did not know what they believed, and yet — after departmental officials said that they would address the issue through structural change and do away with selection at the age of 11 — the report stated that the Committee would:

“caution against a simplistic view that structural change is the answer to this problem.”

The Committee highlighted the point on which the proposer would not respond to me. Why do youngsters at Catholic schools with academic selection perform better at reading and writing than youngsters at Protestant or controlled schools that also practise academic selection? It is nothing to do with academic selection; instead — as other Members pointed out — it concerns a range of complex issues.

The strategy that began in the last Assembly has failed, despite having over £40 million thrown at it, and millions more spent on special-needs teachers, classroom assistants and materials for schools. My

worry is that, just as the previous Sinn Féin Minister for education failed to address the issue by throwing money at it, the current Minister is not showing much promise in her early pronouncements.

It is a little early to judge her; however, I will outline some of the topics the Minister has mentioned. She has publicly suggested that the age at which children start school should be delayed, despite all the educational research indicating — as Mr Basil McCrea mentioned — that children should begin their education early and develop, for example, their language skills. The most formative years are early in a child's life.

In addition, the Department that the Minister oversees wants the enriched curriculum to cover the first couple of years, meaning that, rather than learn to read, write and count, children play with sand, build blocks, stick wee things through holes, dance and sing — anything but learn.

Mr Kennedy: We do that here too. *[Laughter.]*

Mr S Wilson: That may be the case, but it is not an accurate description of the Assembly. The Minister has to address the whole question of what happens in those formative years at school.

Mrs Long: Will the Member give way?

Mr S Wilson: Certainly, although I have only five minutes.

Mrs Long: Does the Member accept that those people who have experienced the enriched curriculum will not share his jaded view, given that parents and teachers have seen that, although there is not as much progress in the initial years, in latter years the scheme pays off?

Mr S Wilson: The Member's interventions are always worthwhile, which is why I gave way. She highlighted the point that I made, because the Department and the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) have refused to publish the results of the early pilot schemes. If one looks at schools in the Shankill area that took part in the scheme, and the schools in the Falls area that did not, the results are better from the schools in the Falls. I know that that example is only a small snapshot, but Members should bear it in mind. The full results of the pilot schemes should be published.

Another aspect of the Minister's approach that worries me is her idea for children to learn another language at an early age. The Minister has not spelled it out, but I suspect that Irish is quite high on her list of priorities.

If we are going to spend money on language teaching, we should put resources into proper teaching methods so that youngsters can learn to read and write in the language that they will have to use in this country throughout their careers. We will judge the Minister on that.

The reports from the House of Commons and the Northern Ireland Audit Office highlight many issues that have to be addressed. I trust that the Minister will address those issues and that we will have a first-class education system so that we can deal with the problems that we have been discussing.

Mr K Robinson: I declare an interest as a governor of two controlled primary schools in Newtownabbey.

I preface my remarks by congratulating the Members who have brought this important issue to the House. However, I remind the sponsor of amendment No 1 that, although social deprivation does indeed have an enormous impact on children's educational progress, those children are already seriously disadvantaged before they enter primary school. Problems do not suddenly emerge when children are 11.

Many Members have referred to percentages and statistics that, in a cold and clinical manner, have focused on underachievement in numeracy and literacy. I should like to humanise the discussion of the impact of that underachievement. For an individual, the dramatic impact of failing to reach the required levels of proficiency in either or both of those skills can be devastating. We all know our initial reaction when we visit a foreign country but do not have any grasp of its language, but can Members imagine facing that prospect every day in their own land, or imagine being surrounded by pieces of paper or public signage most of which they cannot decipher? Can Members imagine that sense of isolation?

Literacy is one of the foundation stones of our modern society. An inability to master it excludes an individual from communication with others. It is little wonder that, if a person is faced with officialdom and is unable to comprehend what is going on, embarrassment and frustration can spill over into violence. That is what can happen to individuals, so perhaps we can begin to appreciate the cumulative impact on tightly knit communities that do not have the required proficiencies. It is little wonder that frustration breaks out into communal violence and feelings of total exclusion.

We must seriously address the scourge of multiple deprivation that so disfigures parts of our society and is particularly endemic in the Protestant working-class areas of our capital city. It is one thing to recognise the problem, but it is quite another to understand it and address it meaningfully and coherently. Anyone who has read the scathing comments in the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee's report will have been struck by the forthright language. Indeed, if the Department of Education had been a school and had received an inspector's report couched in such language, the head would have received his P45 and the governors would have been replaced instantly. The report acknowledges that underachievement among

boys is a “cultural challenge”, and it urges the Department to take urgent steps to address the “very worrying position of boys” in the Belfast Education and Library Board area. Has the Department taken such steps? If not, I trust that the Minister will explain why not.

The Public Accounts Committee also raises the concern that:

“children in Protestant working-class areas may not be enjoying equal educational opportunities.”

If that is true, how long has the scandalous situation been going on? Was the Department unaware of the situation, or had it simply not addressed it? The Public Accounts Committee also stated that it:

“expects the Department of Education to take urgent steps to improve the teaching of literacy and numeracy”.

The question therefore arises: was that inadequacy being identified in regular inspection reports? If so, why did the Department not respond energetically to address problems with that core function? It would appear that the educational establishment has failed in its central objective of producing a literate and numerate population — one that is able to sustain and improve people’s quality of life and deliver the much vaunted “knowledge-based economy”, as referred to earlier. We hear that phrase quoted glibly on many occasions. The failure has condemned individuals and whole communities to a future with little prospect of self-improvement or employment, and it raises the spectre of increasing marginalisation. The outward manifestation of that despair, especially for young males, is the increasing risk of involvement in truancy, violence, street crime and gangs. The only graduation ceremony awaiting many young males at the end of that preventable process is entry into prisons and young offenders centres.

Low esteem, low self-confidence induced by low levels of literacy and numeracy, and low expectations create the cannon fodder for gang culture as surely as those factors did in the past, when they provided the foot soldiers for paramilitarism. In the new dispensation, those lads are the same vulnerable lads who are being ensnared by the shadowy figures who inhabit the world of drug dealers. Boosting literacy and numeracy levels and providing quality preschool education is a better long-term investment per head than having to expand our prisons to cope with the victims of this complex social problem.

Parents in those deprived areas will also need coherent, long-term educational support. The Department would be well advised to examine the retention of male teachers in the profession, as they often provide the only positive male role model that those boys may encounter.

Mr Speaker: The Member’s time is up.

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

This is a very important debate, which is obvious from the passionate way in which Members are engaging. I welcome the fact that it is taking place. We have a big challenge ahead of us; we must eradicate poor literacy and poor numeracy once and for all. It is a blot on our society.

Is díospóireacht an-tábhachtach í seo agus cuirim fáilte roimpi. Tá dúshlán mór romhainn — caithfimid deireadh a chur leis an drochlitearthacht agus leis an drochuimhearthacht. Is crann smola ar ár sochaí iad.

The importance of all pupils gaining expected levels of literacy and numeracy cannot be overemphasised. Literacy and numeracy are the building blocks that will ensure that all children are given a fair chance. We must create the conditions where confident, articulate and creative young adults emerge from our school system. For too long, the education system has failed too many of our children. Now is the time to shout, “Stop”. Now is the time to make changes that will ensure that wherever children live, whatever community they come from, they are given the opportunities that they need to develop.

I welcome the comments of Michelle McIlveen and other Members about the cycle of deprivation and the need to break that cycle. We have an obligation to do that. Any strategy that does not deal with the link between social deprivation and educational attainment is doomed to failure. Any strategy that does not look at the importance of the role of preschool education is doomed to failure. Any strategy that does not address the issue of objective need is doomed to failure.

We have an enormous challenge on our hands. There are some interesting initiatives, such as the extended schools policy, but they need to be developed. The anti-poverty strategy, which Mr Lunn and Mr Dominic Bradley mentioned, provides a framework for a wider approach. No one can deal with this challenge alone. The Department of Education can and will lead, but it cannot do it alone.

In 1983, as a much younger woman than I am now — and I can see some Members practising their numeracy skills as I speak — I worked in Nicaragua for a few years. The country was just coming out of a dreadful war in which more than 80,000 people were killed. There was crushing poverty and disadvantage. The new Government set strategic targets, one of which was to eradicate poor literacy. The entire society became involved in this campaign. People from the cities went to rural villages and taught the peasants how to read. In doing so, they learned about parts of the country that they did not know existed. People in the towns worked with children in schools, community

centres and some of the poorest shanty towns. In a few short years, they had achieved something incredible.

Nicaragua won the UNESCO literacy prize for the most effective literacy campaign in the world. I will never forget the shining, earnest eyes of some of those children, living in the poorest conditions, as they learned to read. The texts that they learned were tailored to where they lived. If the children were from rural areas, the texts were about the seasons and the soil, about when they should plant and harvest their crops. In other words, it was relevant to them, so they were stimulated.

At lunch before the debate, I joked that if young boys were taught literacy through discussion of football teams and where they are in the league, they too might be stimulated. Someone suggested that there was no better place to find numeracy skills than in a bookie's office. I am sure bookies' numeracy skills are better than any that we have. On a more serious note, the point that I am trying to make is that we need to make education relevant.

We too are coming out of conflict; we too need to put in place a strategy that works. Let us make poor literacy and poor numeracy history. That is a challenge for everyone in society, not just for disadvantaged schools or areas. We know what the barriers are and that they are often passed from adult to child, from generation to generation. It is particularly hard for those parents who lack confidence in their own basic skills to impart confidence to their children.

2.30 pm

Data reveals a gap in performance between the top-performing schools and those that perform less well. That gap is present among both selective and non-selective post-primary schools. There is a tail of underachievement in the primary phase. I agree with Peter Weir that data must not be doctored: a spade must be called a spade and the problem must be dealt with. Hiding statistics does not help anybody.

However, I will throw out a challenge: progress at Key Stage 2 has been steady, with 78% of pupils achieving level 4 or above in English in 2006 — an increase of 11% since 1998. Similarly, 80% of pupils achieved level 4 or above in maths — an increase of 8% since 1998.

Mr Dallat: Does the Minister agree that the previous Minister of Education lowered the targets for literacy and numeracy on three occasions? That might help to explain why the targets have been met.

Ms Ruane: I will answer that question later in my speech.

In 2006, 74% of children at Key Stage 3 achieved level 5 or above in both English and maths; a 3% increase in English and a 8% increase in maths. Those achievements are proactive. However, there is much work still to be done.

The recognised level of performance for entry to further education or onto the employment ladder is the achievement of five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C, or an equivalent level 2 qualification. Some 37% of children did not achieve that standard in 2006. Underperformance is concentrated in the most disadvantaged communities. Being caught on the bottom rung of the career ladder because of poor literacy and numeracy skills is bad not only for young people, but also for employers and the North of Ireland as a whole. Each year, 4,000 pupils leave school without the necessary literacy and numeracy skills.

That is reinforced in the PAC report. Because he quoted from it earlier, I dedicate the following quotation from the report especially to Sammy Wilson:

“The importance of developing competency and confidence in the key skills of literacy and numeracy at an early age is reflected in the worrying statistics which show that the skills deficit among pupils in [the North of Ireland's] schools increases as they progress through primary education and into the secondary sector.”

What happens between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3? Children are tested by the 11-plus. The entire primary system, particularly from age 9, is distorted by academic selection. To pretend that there is no link between that and underachievement at secondary school is to delude oneself.

Mr S Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Ms Ruane: As you are the Cathaoirleach of the Education Committee, I will give way on this occasion.

Mr S Wilson: Does the Minister accept that the biggest drop in performance occurs between Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2, long before youngsters prepare for the 11-plus? The number of children who reach the target falls from 95% in Key Stage 1 to 76% in Key Stage 2. The real drop occurs before academic selection kicks in. After the 11-plus, performance only falls from 76% to 73%.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat. The Member and I must debate that issue. Perhaps children are being put into school too early.

There must be an honest and open discussion on the effects of academic selection on the system. I make a heartfelt plea to Members to have a long, hard think about employing a system that has been abandoned everywhere else. I note the Tories' recent abandonment of it. I ask Members to engage in that discussion with the best interests of all children at heart.

I welcome Mr Dominic Bradley's important amendment. However, this is a huge issue that requires full debate at a later date. The 11-plus and academic selection cannot be helpful to literacy and numeracy if thousands of children are told at that level that they are failures.

Secondly, a strategic approach is required to deal with the 4,000 young people that are failed by the education system every year. That involves everyone: the Executive; every Department; society; schools that achieve results, and those that need support. It is crucial to target resources on the basis of objective identification of need, whether in Rathcoole or the Falls Road, the Bogside or Lurgan, the Shankill Road or Downpatrick, the Glens of Antrim or the Fermanagh Lakes.

Thirdly, children need to be empowered, and they must always be the focus of our efforts. The Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) made an interesting contribution to the question of democracy in schools, and I welcome Mitchel McLaughlin's comments on a much broader framework for Assembly debates. Power and democracy are key issues that must be addressed. Bullying also impacts on poor literacy and numeracy and must be tackled. I welcome NICCY's input, and I look forward to meeting Patricia Lewsley and her dynamic team. Only when children are empowered will their self-esteem and confidence grow.

Although Basil McCrea is not in the Chamber, he will be delighted to hear that a new, revised curriculum will be phased in from September 2007. Literacy and numeracy will be at its core, but it takes a far less prescriptive approach, and educators will have much more say in what is taught. The fun must be put back into education, and a broader view of education must be taken. The amount of sport, music, citizenship and more relevant learning in schools must be increased.

My Department is also putting in place a broader range of subjects for children and young people to create different pathways to higher and further education. I am surprised by what Sammy Wilson said. He must have missed my announcement of new language and sports programmes. For the record, Irish is only one of the languages being considered; ethnic minority languages are being considered too. I met with the GAA and the Irish Football Association (IFA) about working together to implement a dynamic programme.

Both programmes will operate on an opt-in basis, whereby schools would select their preferred sports and languages. As Sammy was speaking, I had a nice image of him playing in the sand, listening to music and learning Polish, but I will leave that for another day.

I remind Members that the United Nations and the EU play a crucial role in forming policy for this island. I hope that some of our people will be in Geneva to help with that process and to do so they will have to be fluent in a couple of languages.

The school improvement policy concentrates on how every school can be a good school through self-evaluation and self-improvement. Michelle McIlveen referred to two pieces of research that are under way. The first

aims to identify what works to deliver higher levels of literacy and numeracy in comparator cities in Britain. The second is examining the differences in the literacy and numeracy outcomes between the controlled and Catholic maintained sectors, boys and girls, and high and low performing schools. I will initiate a third piece of research into levels of literacy and numeracy in comparator cities in the South of Ireland.

Dynamic leadership is essential in schools, as are links between schools and communities and between schools, communities and parents. One of the findings contained in the House of Commons PAC report related to the underperformance of pupils in the Belfast area. In 2006, only 35% of pupils in non-selective post-primary schools achieved five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C. To address the issue, the Department has engaged with the Belfast Education and Library Board on a proposal for long-term strategic intervention in those schools that draw the bulk of their pupils from disadvantaged areas.

However, Belfast is not the only place that has problems, and, wherever they exist, problems must be addressed in the same strategic way. For too long, the area west of the Bann has been ignored, and that imbalance must be addressed. I will carry out a comprehensive assessment of all areas across the North to ensure that no area is left out.

Mrs I Robinson: Will the Member give way?

Ms Ruane: Sorry, I have very little time left. On another occasion, I will give way.

To address effectively poor levels of literacy and numeracy, additional resources to the £1 billion total schools budget and the £6 million spent every year on particular initiatives directly related to literacy and numeracy are required. The Department is preparing bids for consideration under the comprehensive spending review, and I look forward to the support of all Members at every level when those bids are placed.

I will consider the recommendation to establish a task force to deal with poor literacy and poor numeracy throughout the North of Ireland. We should be thankful that that task force was not established in April 2007: it would have been a very different body, as it would have been established under a direct rule Minister. I will consider this matter further.

Education is one of the most important areas of public expenditure. If we get education right, matters such as the economy will — with a better skilled and more flexible workforce — improve. The proper provision of education will also have an impact on other areas such as health and benefits.

I look forward to working with the North/South Ministerial Council, the British-Irish Council and the

Executive. We are already sharing best practice through the North/South working group on literacy and numeracy.

Caithfimid todhchaí a chruthú dár bpáistí agus dár n-aos óg. Tá áiméar againn deileáil leis an cheist phráinneach seo is saol an Fheidhmeannais seo, na Comhairle Aireachta Thuaidh/Theas seo agus i saol na Chomhairle na Breataine-na hÉireann seo. If I have not covered all the points that have been raised during the debate, I will be happy to write to the Members concerned. My general point is that poor numeracy and poor literacy is a scourge on our society. If Nicaragua, a developing-world country, can win the UNESCO prize as a result of its action on the matter, surely we can take similar action.

Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that it is important that they speak through the Chair.

Mr Kennedy: I thank and congratulate the proposers of the motion, Miss McIlveen and Mr Ross, and I also thank Mr Basil McCrea for tabling his amendment. At the outset, I should indicate that I am a member of the boards of governors of Bessbrook Primary School and Newry High School.

We have heard much about the background to this matter, including details from the Northern Ireland Audit Office report and the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee report. I remind Members that, predating those reports, the Education Committee of the former Assembly —

Mr S Wilson: Of which the Member was Chairman.

Mr Kennedy: I was Chairperson, and Mr Wilson was a very distinguished Deputy Chairperson. He told me to say that. *[Laughter.]*

The Committee raised serious ongoing concerns about underachievement and standards in numeracy and literacy. Therefore the subject is not a new matter of concern, and we must place this debate in that context. The illiteracy and innumeracy problem that faces Northern Ireland is now on a frightening scale. We have a mountain to climb.

The main source of data on the matter, which is admittedly rather out of date, is the International Adult Literacy Survey of 1996, which was conducted by the OECD. That survey indicated that almost one in four Northern Ireland adults, at that stage, was placed in the lowest category of literacy performance. It was exactly the same for numeracy. It is worth spelling out that people in that lowest category are, for example, unable to read fairly basic everyday instructions on a medicine bottle, train timetables — or perhaps even a speech made in this Chamber. *[Laughter.]*

To place Northern Ireland's problems in perspective, we are by no means unique. Sadly, the proportion of

people who are in the lowest category — the one-in-four figure — in Northern Ireland was very similar to that in England, the United States of America, and, indeed, the Republic of Ireland. That begs the question of whether poor literacy is a problem for the entire English-speaking world.

I was disappointed at the tabling of the SDLP's amendment in the name of the Member for Newry and Armagh Mr D Bradley. It was unhelpful to introduce academic selection to the debate because, plainly, that is not a factor in anyone's education until, at the earliest, the age of eight or nine.

2.45 pm

Simple logic confirms that the sooner problems with literacy and numeracy are dealt with, the better. The earliest possible time to do that is at nursery school or playschool. That is when problems begin to emerge and when the greatest effort must be made to deal with them.

I share the view of other Members, particularly that of Mr Lunn, that literacy and numeracy is a crosscutting issue. Responsibility falls primarily to the Department of Education, but the issue is also relevant to the Department for Employment and Learning, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and others.

Numeracy and literacy goes beyond the issue of academic selection. I agree with Mr Weir that independent schools would undoubtedly arise with the abolition of grammar schools and academic selection. Nor will the abolition of academic selection do anything to improve social mobility for people from poorer backgrounds.

There has been the usual old, tired and rehashed ideology from Mitchel McLaughlin and the Minister of Education. Her contribution was high on rhetoric but low on detailed strategy. Members were told of Nicaragua. Action is required in Newtownards and Newry. Members must not get stuck in an ideological time warp.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá áthas orm achoimriú a dhéanamh ar na hargóintí a rinneadh ar son an leasaithe. Sílim go bhfuil ár gcás cruthaithe — agus cruthaithe go láidir. The case for my amendment has been well made.

Mr McClarty: Is it not in order for a Member who speaks in a language other than English to translate what he has said to the other Members?

Mr Speaker: The Member is putting forward a proposal. It is up to that Member to get the message across, and I am sure Mr Bradley will do that.

Mr D Bradley: I had translated what I said. *[Laughter.]* I suggest that Members take a few ranganna oíche — Irish language night classes — and brush up on their Irish before they take me to task.

The case for my amendment has been well made, and even the Member for Lagan Valley, who took issue with me on some points, agreed that he would come 90% of the way with me. He was with me in the belief that social deprivation is one of the key causes of literacy and numeracy problems. Mr Weir expressed the same sentiment, and I welcome at least that degree of support from those opposed to me. For the information of those opposite, I actually said that academic selection compounds literacy and numeracy problems by producing a disproportionate number of schools that combine low ability and social disadvantage — thus doubling disadvantage.

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

From Sinn Féin, Paul Butler mentioned the gap between the lowest and highest performers in the school system. He described it as alarming and expressed the necessity to narrow that gap. He also mentioned the adverse impact of academic selection and how the backwash from selection adversely affects the primary school curriculum and the efforts of teachers to come to terms with problems of literacy and numeracy.

He also stated that 24% of 16- to 65-year-olds have poor literacy and numeracy skills. That is detrimental to their health and increases the risk of offending and reoffending. He also said that the life chances of children increase whose parents have better numeracy and literacy skills than others.

Mr McLaughlin refuted the claims that a world-class education system exists here. He mentioned the long tail of underachievement and the need for the whole education system — from primary level to third level — to equip people for the knowledge economy.

Any new strategy should not just implement the recommendations of the PAC and Audit Office reports and others. The opportunity should also be taken to initiate the type of research and cross-departmental approach that is needed to tackle the root causes of educational underachievement — which lie in social deprivation — in order to ensure that any future strategy works at family, community and school levels.

It is important, through research and evaluation, to maintain what is effective and to implement any new measures that are needed. The opportunity should be taken to assess the effectiveness of those existing TSN measures that are used to address underachievement as part of schools funding.

Any strategy that attempts to address educational attainment, without at the same time tackling the underlying social deprivation that causes it, is doomed to failure. Adopting that approach will result in continual strategising without ever achieving any worthwhile goals. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Mr Ross: The debate has been lively, and a wide range of views has been expressed.

First, I concur with Mr Kennedy that, as entertaining as the Minister's holiday stories were, perhaps it would be more prudent for her to concentrate on Northern Ireland rather than on further afield.

Also, further to her anecdotes about bookies helping children with numeracy, perhaps if those children studied election results, their numeracy skills would improve.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr S Wilson: That would certainly help with those questions that deal with minus numbers; subtraction might be useful, given the election results from down South.

Mr Ross: I thank the Member for that insightful intervention.

Despite the Province's excellent education system, and I repeat that — the Province's excellent education system — it is a sad fact that too many children in Northern Ireland leave school without reaching appropriate literacy and numeracy standards. I thank Basil McCrea for moving his amendment, and, as he said, the problem of underachievement in that area is not unique to Northern Ireland.

It has been stated that boys, particularly those who attend Belfast schools, struggle — two thirds of them fail to reach the expected level in English. The Department of Education has told the PAC that around 20% of children are unable to master the reading and writing skills that are expected of them. That is despite the fact that a great deal of money has been spent on the area.

In recent years, the Department of Education has frequently altered and adjusted its numeracy and literacy targets, but it has not been as committed as perhaps it could or should have been. Numerous initiatives to deal with failing schools have been introduced, and too often, just as those endeavours are beginning to have a positive impact, their funding is cut short. Clear targeting of specific areas of concern and a consistent and clear strategy are required.

Members have given facts and figures on and reasons for underachievement. Indeed, ways in which the problem can be tackled have been suggested. However, the number of children in Northern Ireland who live in relative poverty is one of the most significant factors. Various reports have shown that such poverty has a severe impact on educational achievement.

As has been mentioned, it must be recognised that boys, particularly Protestant boys, are underachieving in school.

I find it disappointing that some Members opposite have tried to link educational underachievement with the selection system. That is a red herring. The education system in Northern Ireland consistently produces better results than those for England, Scotland and Wales. Undoubtedly, some schools are failing and need to be improved, but we do not do that by destroying those that are working. Rather, we need to focus our efforts on improving numeracy and literacy skills in the schools that are failing. Indeed, academic selection has been shown to be a way by which pupils from areas of social deprivation can improve their abilities and move upwards, out of poverty.

I hope that the Minister will accept that selection is favoured by the vast majority of people in Northern Ireland and, indeed, is now secured in legislation; and that she will work with all of those interested and the Committee for Education in bringing forward a system of selection that will benefit the children of Northern Ireland.

As Mr Dominic Bradley has said in the second part of his amendment, we can clearly link underachievement with social deprivation. Although financial resources are important, we should not tackle the problem by simply throwing money at it. We need to lift aspirations, particularly those of children who live in areas of social deprivation. They need to see education as a means of escaping the poverty trap and a way in which they can give themselves the best opportunities in life.

For this to happen it is imperative that there is some degree of parental involvement and help at home. Encouragement and enthusiasm can help to lift a child's attitude to school and learning. It has also been shown that sending a child to school having had a good breakfast can help to boost their performance and concentration, and that is relevant. One such project in the Sunnylands area of Carrickfergus in my own constituency was the "Parents and Kids Together" initiative, which included parents in the learning programme. The knock-on effect of that is that parents who perhaps lack some core skills have the opportunity to be in that learning environment.

Education must be accessible to all, irrespective of age, community background or any disability that a child may have. Breakfast clubs and after-school clubs can have some part to play in that, by ensuring that children have a good start to the day with a hearty breakfast and can have a suitable place to do their homework after school. Many of those projects can be run in conjunction with local businesses.

We have heard about early years education, and Mr Basil McCrea made a valid point about its importance. That is why my party does not want to see a move towards fun-based learning in early-years education.

Finally, I am concerned that the Minister would like children to start school a year later. Education is an

asset, and the DUP does not believe that dumbing down the curriculum or giving some children less schooling would be beneficial.

It is also important that we not forget about those children for whom there are extra barriers. It is a sad fact that fewer children who are blind or partially sighted leave school with adequate qualifications than do children who are not. It is therefore important that the Minister also ensures that blind and partially sighted pupils have the same resources available to them as their sighted counterparts.

During the debate we have heard that leadership in schools is important. We must recognise that teachers in difficult areas often have a difficult task. There is a concern that, unless children are kept motivated, they will lose enthusiasm. It is therefore important that we have good teachers and good headmasters to keep them motivated.

Education is an important foundation of life. It is vital that every child be given the best possible start in life. The attributing of blame to academic selection in Mr Bradley's amendment has meant that this House will most likely divide unnecessarily. I therefore encourage the House to support the original motion and Mr McCrea's amendment so that the Assembly can send a united message that it is time that the Department urgently took action to tackle the problems of inadequate literacy and numeracy skills.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that if amendment No 1 is made, I will still be putting amendment No 2.

Question, That amendment No 1 be made, put and negated.

Question, That amendment No 2 be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes that more than 20 per cent of children in Northern Ireland leave school without having achieved the appropriate level of performance in literacy and numeracy; recognises similar levels of underachievement across the United Kingdom; acknowledges the findings of reports by the Northern Ireland Audit Office and Westminster Public Accounts Committee, which indicate departmental failings in strategic leadership and target-setting; further notes that the proposed Literacy and Numeracy Taskforce has yet to be established; demands this is done without further delay; and calls upon the Minister of Education to confirm details of the resources and timescale involved for the implementation of an effective revised Literacy and Numeracy Strategy.

3.00 pm

Domestic Violence

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

Ms J McCann: I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses concern about the level of domestic violence and its impact on children, and calls for the proper resourcing and full implementation of the government strategy 'Tackling Violence at Home'; supports funding for local crisis and support services for families experiencing violence; supports an expansion of the network of refuges so that no man, woman or child in need shall be turned away.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Any work relating to domestic violence forms part of the promotion of human rights and the elimination of all types of discrimination. The impact of domestic violence on families is devastating. It is estimated that one quarter of all women experience domestic abuse at some stage in their lives and that almost half the women who are murdered are killed by their partners.

Anyone can be a victim of domestic violence, and victims can be of any age, sex, race, culture, religion, education, employment or marital status. The violence can include physical, sexual and emotional abuse. Although both men and women can be abused, most victims are women and children.

Children and young people can often be the forgotten victims of domestic violence, and research indicates that 11,000 children in the North of Ireland are in the same room, or in the adjoining room, when physical violence occurs. In families where there is domestic violence, children are also frequently abused by the violent parent, which can have damaging long-term effects on the children's mental health, sense of identity and ability to form relationships. For young people, there is an increased risk of self-harm, drug and alcohol misuse, and they may run away from home.

Elder abuse is also a form of domestic violence, and it has become so prevalent that Help the Aged has launched a high-profile campaign to help to stop elder abuse in order to raise awareness of the issues. Elder abuse is most common in the home environment, and those affected are usually neglected or abused by someone they know.

Domestic violence requires a response that takes account of gender-specific elements and the broader gender inequalities that women face. Political direction is needed to ensure that a clear, consistent message is provided, together with a co-ordinated approach to the

prevention of abuse and the provision of services to families that experience domestic violence.

We must ensure that services and support networks, and especially refuges, are in place so that anyone who is a victim of domestic violence can access them easily. Last year in the North of Ireland, some 20,000 calls were made to the domestic violence helpline; 1,069 women and 1,026 children used Women's Aid refuges. One in five women in Ireland has experienced domestic violence at some stage in their life.

Domestic violence is a major public threat, and the Tackling Violence at Home strategy could create a fundamental shift in the way that society responds to domestic violence. However, the full implementation of that strategy will require innovative thinking by all Departments and by those working in the statutory, voluntary, community and business sectors. One successful outcome of the Tackling Violence at Home strategy was a high-profile publicity campaign; that resulted in an increase in the number of victims who contacted the 24-hour helpline and other services.

Key issues regarding domestic violence have been identified: to prevent it happening in the first place; and to change public attitudes. It has also been recognised that any awareness campaign must extend to schools. Preventive work in schools is currently conducted on an ad hoc basis, so it is crucial that preventive programmes are introduced as part of the school curriculum.

There is also a need to shift the focus onto the abuser and to introduce new, and develop existing, compulsory rehabilitation programmes as part of the preventive campaign. Training mechanisms for the agencies involved in tackling domestic violence will ensure that the preventive element of the strategy will produce more positive results.

Recent statistics show that there has been an increase in the number of incidents of domestic violence being reported to the PSNI. It is believed that that has come about because of a combination of factors, which include the Government's advertising campaign and the PSNI's more proactive approach to recognising domestic abuse as a crime.

Despite changes to the legislation in 2004, there are still problems in the civil and criminal justice systems in the North of Ireland as regards domestic violence cases. Women's Aid made several recommendations in respect of the Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims Act 2004, which, unfortunately, were rejected. Those recommendations included widening the powers of the courts so that a breach of an occupation order would become a criminal offence, and removing the time limit on occupation orders, so that, in cases where violence had been used or threatened, an order would last until protection was no longer needed.

Although the 2004 Act has brought about some improvements, women still do not have confidence in the criminal justice system due to experiences many of them have had when they have attempted to prosecute their partners. Evidence has shown that there has been leniency towards the perpetrators of domestic violence and lower sentences than if the same crimes had been committed against strangers. Further steps are needed to ensure that violence against women overall, and domestic violence specifically, are given an appropriate importance in the Government's policy on crime reduction and community safety.

Further changes are earmarked in strand two of 'Tackling Violence at Home — Action Plan Number 1: 1 October 2005 to March 2007', which include training for staff who work in the Public Prosecution Service and other justice agencies. This is to be welcomed, as it will result in women feeling more positive when they seek help.

The Department for Social Development's co-ordinated working approach with organisations such as Women's Aid to set up refuges is another positive aspect of how the strategy can make a difference. The availability of refuges saves women's lives. Partnership working and inter-agency support will ensure that adequate provision of refuges and services to support the victims of domestic violence are maintained and developed.

I will conclude with a quote that shows the seriousness of domestic violence:

"If it were between countries, we'd call it war. If it were a disease, we'd call it an epidemic. If it were an oil spill, we'd call it a disaster. But it is happening to women and it's just an everyday affair. It is violence against women."

We need to give political leadership on domestic violence and ensure that the strategy is properly implemented and resourced. Therefore, I hope that Members will support the motion. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr I McCrea: This is a serious debate on domestic violence. The DUP shares the concerns expressed about domestic violence and the need to protect the victims involved directly or indirectly. Unfortunately, the steps taken to raise awareness about domestic violence are not enough to prevent it from happening, nor are they encouraging every victim to report incidents to the police.

According to 'Tackling Violence at Home: A Strategy for Addressing Domestic Violence and Abuse in Northern Ireland', the police are responding to over 400 domestic violence incidents each week on average, and over 700 families have to be rehoused as a result of violence in the home. The document also states that most domestic incidents are not reported. Due to the sensitive nature of the issue, it is important that Members respond to the needs of those trapped in abusive or violent

environments, by providing them with practical and emotional support during their rehabilitation.

Preventive measures, through continuous, targeted marketing campaigns to raise the profile of services available to those suffering from domestic violence, supported by ease of access to those services, are essential. Such campaigns could include educating children from primary-school age about domestic violence and making available informative literature and points of contact, should they need it.

Media campaigns and the promotion of agencies should continue and should not be threatened with closure due to lack of funding or Government support.

A prompt response to cases of domestic violence and thorough investigative work carried out by the relevant bodies, be it the PSNI or other specific agencies, would be needed to secure both the short- and long-term safety of the victims involved. Support networks must be readily available and implemented, which could be suited to individual cases, accompanied by child protection procedures. We must examine the resources available for support measures and action any changes that need to be made.

The Assembly cannot, and will not, tolerate domestic violence or any other form of abuse. We should do all that we can to ensure that those people who are trapped in abusive situations can avail themselves of options to protect themselves and their families. Sadly, the abuse of elderly people in their own homes and by their own families is on the increase.

Figures published by the Home Office reveal that domestic violence will affect one in four women and one in four men in their lifetime, and that 35 assaults will have taken place prior to the victim's first call to the police. Research also shows that approximately 95% of victims are women and children.

What are the practical hurdles that prevent calls for help being made? How can services better aid the emotional constraint involved in making that first call for help? The Home Office has highlighted the Northern Ireland Women's Aid 24-hour domestic violence helpline as a point of contact for victims. According to the Women's Aid Federation, the helpline received 20,261 calls last year. That service should be supported as the demand is very high.

The population of Cookstown district, which forms part of my constituency, is approximately 32,000. In the past year, Cookstown Women's Aid dealt with 1,042 calls for assistance. Of those, 42 women fled to the Women's Aid refuge, bringing with them 41 children. In addition, 72 women were given the support to enable them to remain in their own homes.

Providing enough quality refuges to cope with demand to ensure that no one is turned away or made homeless

as a result of domestic violence should be our objective. However, consideration must also be given to the provision of practical support to allow victims and their families to remain at home. The Women's Aid floating service, funded by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, helps counter potential homelessness as a result of violence in the home. That service should remain as a lifeline for victims and their families.

We echo the welcome given by Women's Aid to the inter-agency co-operation intended to alleviate the pressures on the refuge network and support the call for a more detailed implementation of the Government's 'Tackling Violence at Home' strategy.

Mr McClarty: I am in total agreement with the wording of the motion. The Ulster Unionist Party is committed to strategies that free the victims of domestic violence from that cruel and wicked form of abuse. Domestic violence is, unfortunately, an all too common occurrence in our society. It can never be justified or defended in any way. It is an evil blight that continues to haunt far too many families in Northern Ireland. Thus, we need an effective and sustainable strategy to confront domestic violence that will bring the issue into the open and tackle its root causes.

Whatever form domestic violence takes, it is rarely a one-off incident. More usually, it is a pattern of abusive and controlling behaviour through which the abuser seeks power over his or her victim. Domestic violence occurs across society regardless of age, gender, race, sexuality, wealth or geography. Statistics show, however, that most domestic violence is committed by men against women. Victims of domestic violence suffer on many levels, such as health, housing and education, and lose the freedom to live their lives as they wish and without fear.

To read the definition of domestic violence is to realise the true horror of such crime. Physical violence includes slapping, punching, beating, kicking, and wounding with knives, often leading to permanent injury or, indeed, death. Emotional and psychological abuse includes constant criticism and public humiliation, such as being described as useless, ugly or worthless. It can also include threats to kill or harm the woman or her children; intimidation, bullying, being locked in or isolated from family and friends; the withholding of food or sleep and being made a prisoner in one's own home. Sexual abuse includes being raped, sexual degradation and being forced to have sex in ways that hurt and injure.

In my constituency of East Londonderry, I have had to help rehouse women away from abusive partners on far too many occasions. Those are extremely harrowing cases to deal with.

3.15 pm

Members have mentioned the disturbing figures published by the PSNI that reveal the shocking reality of the problem. I am horrified by the fact that there has been a 36% rise in the number of domestic incidents reported in the past two years, with the most recent figures showing that the PSNI attends a domestic incident every 22 minutes.

Compared to the previous year, the number of domestic incidents reported to the police in 2006-07 has risen by almost 1.7%. In 2006-07, there were 23,000 domestic incidents. To put that into context: there were four times as many domestic-related crimes as there were drug offences.

'Tackling Violence at Home', which was published in October 2005, is an important document, which gives Government recognition to the fact that domestic violence is an issue of such immensity that it warrants a strategy and must be tackled on a cross-departmental basis.

Now that devolution has returned to Northern Ireland, the time is right for the Assembly and the new Executive to commit to ensuring that the 'Tackling Violence at Home' action plan is fully and properly resourced and implemented.

I support the motion.

Mrs D Kelly: For many years, the crime — and it is a crime — of domestic violence was a taboo subject. People either turned a blind eye or, in some cases, rationalised it. There was a general belief that what went on between a husband and wife was nobody else's business.

Thankfully, it is now recognised that such attitudes are unacceptable, and the 'Tackling Violence at Home' strategy includes measures such as raising awareness and the need to provide education programmes for children and young people, and the general public.

However, despite some improvements, the number of reported domestic violence incidents continues to rise. For example, from 2003-04, there was a staggering increase of 36%, which accounts for a total of 23,059 domestic incidents. Last year, there was a further increase of almost 400 reported incidents. In 2003-04, three women were killed.

Behind each of those statistics lies a world that few of us can fully comprehend, where a person has suffered mentally, emotionally and, oft times, physically and sexually at the hands of someone in whom they placed their trust and love. Although the statistics record the number of incidents, they do not show the total number of persons affected.

The motion refers specifically to children, many of whom suffer the long-term consequences of violence

in their homes. There is also the issue of learned behaviour, which applies to both victims and abusers. Children, after all, learn what they live.

Previous Members who spoke mentioned a wide range of issues. I want to use my time to support the motion in general and, in particular, to support the need to invest in the expansion of the network of refuges to ensure that help is available when it is most needed. After many years of suffering, asking for help is one of the most courageous steps that a victim of domestic violence takes.

The 'Tackling Violence at Home' strategy calls for specific measures for advocacy and for the creation of networks for children's services.

I acknowledge the work of the community safety partnerships, which offer practical help such as panic buttons and additional home-security measures. Such measures make a difference. People need to feel safe in their homes and be confident that help will be available when it is needed.

The PSNI has a key role to play. Its strategy was discussed at the most recent Policing Board meeting. All the strategies, although well intentioned, will be judged by the difference that they make in real terms.

Given the joined-up action plan that is required across a wide range of Departments, agencies and the community and voluntary sectors, it is imperative that, as a matter of urgency, an inter-ministerial group on domestic violence is formed. On behalf of the SDLP, I call on the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to ensure that the need to deliver on the 'Tackling Violence in the Home' strategy is on the agenda for the next Executive meeting. It is expected that the Assembly and the Executive will deliver for all the people of our society, particularly those who are most vulnerable.

Dr Farry: I congratulate Ms McCann for tabling this important motion. It is heartening that I join Mr Ian McCrea and Mr McClarty in speaking to the motion and that the issue has not been left to female representatives to debate. It is an issue for all of society, so it is important that we all turn our attention to it.

The formal definition of domestic violence as set out by the Government is:

"threatening behaviour, violence or abuse ... on one person by another where they are or have been intimate partners or family members, irrespective of gender or sexual orientation."

That definition illustrates the multifaceted nature of the problem. As Members have said, it is important to recognise that the issue is a much broader one than just physical violence, which is how domestic violence is often conceptualised. We must consider psychological intimidation, emotional problems, sexual abuse, financial control and denying one's partner proper freedom and human rights.

Many, but sadly not all, offences can be viewed as criminal, but there should be no doubt about the severity of the problems, as they can lead to attempted murder and murder. Domestic violence can occur in a range of contexts. Although it remains the case that the vast majority of incidences are of a male acting against a female partner, we also must be conscious that the man is the victim in about one in four cases of domestic violence. A point that is often neglected is that domestic violence can also occur in same-sex relationships. Those with different sexual orientations can sometimes feel marginalised in the public-policy discourse.

The most important message to come out of the Assembly today is that domestic violence is completely unacceptable. It has consequences not only for the victims, their family members and the perpetrators but for society as a whole. The Government's strategy, 'Tackling Violence at Home', is a reasonably comprehensive document, but the key issue is delivery and ensuring that the resources are there. It is critical that a balanced range of interventions is available, starting with education and awareness, through to support for victims and the formal use of the criminal justice system. For too long, domestic violence has been regarded as taboo, but gone are the days when what went on behind closed doors stayed there. What happens behind closed doors must be a concern for us all.

There has been a 36% increase in incidents of violence being reported to the PSNI. That figure points to victims' increased willingness to report such incidents. However, the official statistics reflect only the tip of the iceberg. Much more must be done in education and awareness to give victims of domestic violence the knowledge and confidence to make a complaint and to dial 999 when they are in imminent danger. There should be no stigma associated with being a victim or with seeking help.

I am concerned that the officially reported statistics are heavily skewed towards incidences of domestic violence that involve physical force. There is not a general appreciation that much wider problems exist for which people should also seek help. Everyone has a right to feel safe in his or her home. Safety at home goes right to the heart of people's sense of their personal security. When someone does not feel safe because of domestic violence, either the perpetrator must be dealt with or the victim must be given the courage to leave the former home and to leave the relationship. Priority should always be given to dealing with the perpetrator rather than to imposing more burdens on the victim. However, that will not always be the case. When someone needs to be rehoused, the resources must be available so that he or she can make that leap and be rehoused in safety.

One area of the Government's strategy to which greater concern must be given is the issue of how to deal with perpetrators. Much attention has been given

to ensuring that perpetrators receive very little tolerance and are properly dealt with by the legal system. However, the perpetrators of domestic violence may not always be readily identifiable. They may not have an obvious propensity towards violence or anger.

These problems may only happen in the family home. Sometimes people, who to all outward appearances are mild-mannered, may instigate a lot of problems domestically. It is important that we appreciate the range of potential perpetrators in society. Among those identified as perpetrators, there is a very low take-up of programmes addressing domestic violence. The danger is that perpetrators fall into the system only after a criminal case has been taken against them — and only once they reach that threshold are they referred for anger management or other forms of address, such as programmes run by the Probation Board for Northern Ireland.

It is important that we identify and encourage people who know that they are causing difficulties and that those people are supported when they try to seek help. As a society, we need to appreciate that this is a very difficult and complex problem with wide-ranging consequences. Our priority must be to provide the victim with support and to ensure that those who are responsible for abuse are held accountable, personally and before the law. We must understand the wider nature of the problem; a lot more research needs to be done. This is not simply a problem among people with a history of violence, or with a difficulty in controlling alcohol or substance abuse; it concerns people who have a wider range of difficulties that we need to sort out.

Mr Shannon: Ivery day in the Proavince atween 12 and 14 men er wimen state an attak bi' aa' pertner.

Maistly aw it is wimen baetin. But iver aa' quartar o' dimestick abuis is kerried oot oan men, although no needit kerried oot bi' wimen.

Ther er iver three scor o'thes tak plaes aa'dae. Albins yin o'tha feertnin things aboot thes figures is that they gaun nae whor neer mirrer tha real thin.

Iver aw tha Proavince ther wus aa' fawin aff o' incidents o' 6·1%. In my ain area o'tha Airdes ther wus aa' raisin o' 169 occurances that is iver 20% mare which taks intae accoot yin case o' attempted murder an 25 threats er canspiren tae murder an iyer 260 tiems o' actual bidily herm. An tha maist worrin aspeck is that aa' muckle lok o' times they irny repoarted.

Every day in the Province, between 12 and 14 men and women report an attack by a partner. While it is often portrayed as “woman-beating”, over a quarter of domestic abuse is carried out on men, although not necessarily carried out by women. There are over 60 incidents a day, and perhaps one of the scariest things about these statistics is that they nowhere near reflect the reality. Although over the entire Province there was

a decrease in incidents of 6·1%, in my own area of Ards there was an increase of 20% — 169 more occurrences — including one case of attempted murder, 25 threats or conspiracy to murder and over 260 incidents of actual bodily harm. The most worrying aspect is that a huge number of incidents are not reported.

Domestic violence is no respecter of person; it covers a multitude of sins, if that is the right terminology, including anything from physical or sexual violence to emotional and mental abuse. Every year, over 11,000 children live in an atmosphere of domestic violence every day of their lives — that is, they are in the same room or the next room to where abuse takes place. I commend the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children for the help that it gives the community and for the excellent work that it does for those people who need help. These statistics seem more like those of a Third World country, rather than of a seemingly civilised nation.

In Northern Ireland, there are over 60 domestic-violence incidents daily, and domestic violence has the highest rate of reoffending. Why is this? Is it because a high proportion of people charged with a form of domestic violence can still go home and do it all again? We talk a lot about drugs to our youth in schools, we take time and the money to ensure that our children are drug free — that is necessary and essential as the culture of drug-taking unfortunately grows. However, a call to the police is three times more likely to concern domestic violence than drug-related problems. I am not for a minute suggesting that we spend less time on drug awareness, but more attention should be drawn to the fact that too many people in the Province abuse their partners and their children and that such behaviour is unacceptable.

I have outlined the seriousness of this situation in the Province, but how do we combat the problems shown by these statistics, bearing in mind that thousands of other offences take place but are not reported? We must apply the reforms on tackling violence at home, and a report is a good way to start.

3.30 pm

Sadly, it is often easier to go home after an attack and hope for the best than it is to go through the long and often complicated procedure of being rehoused. More than 700 families are rehoused every year by the Housing Executive due to domestic violence. However, it is easy to see that that is nowhere near the real total number of cases. This matter often comes up in my office, and probably in the offices of many other Members across the Chamber. We must address this matter.

A clear starting point would be to show victims that there is a viable option, other than going straight back home to the violence. We must fully fund women's shelters and homes that provide a short-term place to

stay while waiting for long-term accommodation. I am reliably informed by a worker at a Women's Aid hostel not far from my home that it has repeatedly had to turn away women who needed shelter, often sending them as far away as Lisburn. That results in children being moved away from all that they know, and results in mothers having to move away from their support network of friends and family.

It is important that we address this issue for the benefit of the next generation in the Province. They must understand that domestic violence is disgraceful, disgusting and completely unacceptable. Such violence can be stopped by openness and by ensuring that it is no longer seen as a private, behind-closed-doors affair. Domestic violence affects everyone in the Province in some way and, therefore, it is the responsibility of the people as a whole to put a stop to it. I support the motion.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion. I speak on behalf of Women's Aid and other groups in my constituency.

Members have mentioned the need to prevent domestic violence. Emphasis and focus should be placed on the abuser or the perpetrator rather than, as happens in many instances, the women who are involved in incidents. In order to tackle the increase in domestic violence, the attitude of the courts, the justice system and the PSNI must change. Domestic violence is being perpetrated against women; it is a crime and it is unacceptable.

Women's experience as victims, in many instances, is that they are themselves treated as criminals. It is totally unacceptable that only 4% of the perpetrators come before a court. There is something wrong in how the judiciary, the courts and the PSNI handle such situations. The current situation is unacceptable, and the message of the general public must be that women cannot be treated in this society in such a way.

I turn to the impact of the judiciary and the role of the family courts. Vulnerable women who have been the victims of domestic violence and who care for young children should be protected by the state. They should not be subjected to state bullying and intimidation by the family courts and by so-called welfare officers.

This week, one of my constituents could not attend a sitting of a family court. She submitted a doctor's letter that stated that she would need to be admitted to a psychiatric unit unless she took a break from the considerable stress that she had been under — caused, largely, by the family courts. She did not turn up in court, and Judge McFarland ruled that the hearing should go ahead without her, despite the fact that he is not medically qualified to comment on her health. The judge ruled that the father of the woman's child should be allowed contact. The child is five and does not know of his father's existence.

The judge also ruled that the mother should be given two weeks to explain the father's existence to the child. He further ruled that the mother is never to be allowed to leave Northern Ireland, despite the fact that she comes from elsewhere. She was threatened that social services would become involved and that the child would be taken into care if the child were made aware, either now or in the future, of his mother's hostile feelings towards the father or the fact that she believed that the child had been conceived by rape, because that would be construed as emotional abuse. A penal order to commit the mother to jail if she did not comply with those rulings was issued.

All of that was done in the woman's absence and without her being able to have her say, which even the most violent criminals are allowed to do. In the view of her GP, she is in a very vulnerable state and receipt of a letter from the court containing those types of threats could well have tipped her over the edge into suicide, perhaps taking the child with her. Would the judge have taken responsibility if she had taken that course of action? Women have committed suicide in similar instances.

In another example, a constituent of mine was hit by her ex-husband in the presence of many witnesses. She obtained a non-molestation order against him. On appeal by the husband, that order was lifted. The couple is also in dispute with the family courts. The husband has failed to attend the High Court on at least three occasions. When the court met to establish a new hearing date, the judge neither threatened to imprison the husband nor to hold him in contempt.

Those cases show a marked difference between the treatment given to the perpetrator of violence and that accorded to the victim. The role of the family courts should be to intervene where children are at serious risk rather than to provide a means for solicitors and barristers to make money. They should not encourage violent fathers to pursue contact with the family at the expense of the health of mother or children. All solicitors should have to encourage parents to accept mediation and to come to agreement. Courts should be the last resort.

Family courts should not have such extensive powers as they have at present; rather, their powers should be curtailed. They should not be allowed to use the threat of jail to force already vulnerable women to comply with rulings that are against the best interests of their children or to make victims of those involved in domestic violence and rape. They should not be allowed to make prisoners of women by preventing them from free movement within these islands. That has occurred in many instances. Women should not be threatened with the removal of their children for non-compliance with the courts. Go raibh maith agat.

Lord Browne: I support the motion. Domestic violence has been a problem in our and many other societies. However, in recent years, thanks to the work of the agencies involved in tackling the issue and to media coverage, we are all much more aware of the problem.

However, we do not focus sufficiently on the impact that domestic violence has on children. While the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) provides a voice for children at statutory level, the plight of individual children, often in horrendous circumstances, needs to be heard. That is what I wish to focus on.

Children who suffer as a result of domestic violence not only have to leave familiar surroundings, toys, friends and relatives behind; they are often expected to settle, among strangers, into the unfamiliar setting of a refuge. That can lead to regressive behaviour, such as bed-wetting, attention-seeking or becoming withdrawn. It has a very bad effect on children.

Children need stability and continuity in their lives. Often in this situation, continuity is provided mainly by schools. However, when they are in a refuge, children are often unable to attend their school of origin either because of the distance or the cost of transport. That should not be allowed to happen. The manager of an independent refuge in my East Belfast constituency has campaigned for years to find a resolution to the transport problem, but without success. Rather, the issue has been passed between the education and library board and the health and social services board, each claiming that responsibility lies with the other. I hope that the restructuring of the education and library boards and health and social services boards will bring an end to different services and provisions based on postcodes.

I refer to the motion passed last week on social housing. The lack of such housing has a serious effect on victims of domestic violence. The longer victims stay in temporary accommodation, the more disruption is caused to normal family life. The longer they stay in hostel accommodation, the more availability of emergency accommodation for other victims is restricted.

Recently, the provision of overlap in housing benefit has been withdrawn. Families are now expected to move out of refuges and take up the offer of a tenancy without being given any time to apply for grants to furnish the new home. That results in families moving into new properties without the bare essentials and in some cases without beds.

If those families apply for private-rented accommodation, as an alternative to social housing, there is often a gap between the cost of that accommodation and the amount of housing benefit available to them. For people who are already on benefits, the need to subsidise the cost of private-rented accommodation

places them in financial difficulties, and the long-term result is child poverty.

Many of the measures that we have heard about today are reactive. More preventive measures must be put into place. Rather than simply passing more money to existing services, the Assembly must ensure that services are as effective as possible and are focused on the most important needs.

Every Member must take responsibility for the way in which children are brought up and educated. Members will agree that that can only take place in a safe environment that is free from violence and aggression.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr McCallister: The Ulster Unionist Party welcomes and supports the motion. Today's debate illustrates clearly the level of cross-party support for it.

The House must consider the approach to ending domestic violence. It is encouraging that the PSNI is taking a proactive approach to dealing with it, resulting in the 36% rise in reported incidents. That must continue, and Members must evolve that strategy and consider the elements that are working best.

Mr McClarty described the various aspects of domestic violence: criticism, public humiliation, threats, physical and sexual abuse, and financial control. As Lord Browne mentioned, we must not forget the effects that witnessing such violence can have on children.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is back in the Chamber, which illustrates how important the issue is to him. Tackling domestic violence is not the responsibility of one Department alone. The approach must be taken forward on a cross-departmental and inter-agency basis, making full use of Northern Ireland's very active community and voluntary sector. Huge issues have been teased out in the debate, and we must co-ordinate them to find a more holistic approach to tackling this very serious problem.

Domestic violence crosses all sections and strands of society. Virtually no section of the community is untouched. Therefore, I have great pleasure in supporting the motion.

Mr O'Loan: I work closely with Women's Aid in Antrim, Ballymena, Carrickfergus, Larne and Newtownabbey — I apologise for the long list.

Women's Aid is an outstanding organisation, with a high level of commitment. As well as having professional staff, it is run by many volunteers. It is a sad fact that it is still a very necessary organisation in today's society. It provides a range of services, of which its refuge accommodation is the best known. It also provides floating support to women who have remained in their own homes. It trains vulnerable women to enhance

their knowledge, self-esteem and confidence. It provides a court support service.

Women's Aid is innovative. One of its programmes works with male perpetrators of domestic violence. It is pioneering a multi-agency risk-assessment conference, which is an important initiative to improve the quality of partnership protection for vulnerable women and to reduce the risk of repeat victimisation.

In my constituency, Women's Aid is experiencing great difficulty in attracting funding to finish off its excellent Naomi Centre in Ballymena, even though finishing that project would make it self-sustaining.

I have already brought that, along with other matters, to the attention of the Minister for Social Development.

3.45 pm

The psychological, emotional and financial costs of domestic violence are huge. The financial costs alone are staggering. Government estimates of those costs, which include legal and court costs, healthcare, emergency housing and benefits, amount to £0.5 billion annually in Northern Ireland. That is an amazing figure, but those are official Government statistics. There are far-reaching physical, social, emotional and psychological effects on mothers and children. Five people each year die as a result of domestic violence in Northern Ireland, and 700 families are rehoused. The PSNI attends 60 domestic incidents every day.

Children are the silent victims. Some 11,000 children are living in violent homes; we can only begin to imagine the traumatic effects of that. I support the many practical points to support children that were made by Lord Browne.

The 2005 report 'Tackling Violence at Home' contains much that is good. Public attitudes to violence against women in particular have changed significantly in recent years. It no longer has the degree of acceptance that it once had. That is true of relevant professionals and wider society. However, it remains a crime that is largely hidden and seriously under-reported. Despite the fact that the identity of the perpetrator is usually known, there is a very low conviction rate of about 5%. More progress needs to be made in taking cases with or without the involvement of the victim.

The three-strand structure of prevention, protection and support in the report is a valid one. If there is more done to prevent domestic violence, there is every reason to hope that the costs associated with protection and support will be reduced.

Despite all the talk of partnership working in Government, much more needs to be done. The problem starts at the top, where four, or perhaps more, Departments have a role to play in the issue. At the point of service delivery, there is sometimes a lack of co-operation between agencies to put the needs of the victim and

children at the centre of the action. There is no strategic approach to the issue of resources; if there is, I certainly have not seen it. Funding is granted on a hit-or-miss, try-here, try-there basis. There is a serious need for a more considered approach to the vital issue of funding. Those working in this essential area, including volunteers, deserve more support from the system.

The issue of elder abuse is closely linked. A study into the prevalence of the abuse of elderly will be launched in this Building, and throughout the UK, on 14 June. Members should receive an invitation to that event today. Elder abuse is another issue that has been hidden under the carpet and needs to be examined and responded to by the care and justice systems. There is a strong argument that specific legislation, such as that in Scotland, is required in Northern Ireland.

Domestic violence is one area where the Assembly can make a difference. I welcome the general support for the motion. Let us ensure that it is effectively addressed in departmental actions.

Ms Purvis: I support the motion and welcome the opportunity to debate this very important issue. I shall highlight a number of points, but I do not intend to rehearse many of the arguments that have already been made.

It has been long recognised that there should be a multi-agency approach to tackling the issue. Furthermore, education is the key to getting to grips with domestic violence. It was recognised some time ago that there was a need for the Department for Social Development, the Department of Education, the Department of Health and the criminal justice system to work together in order to tackle domestic violence. In recent years, much has been done to increase the reporting and reduce the rates of domestic violence.

The funding of refuges through the Supporting People initiative has been crucial to Women's Aid. It is crucial to know that funding has been secured and that beds will be provided for victims of domestic violence, and it is to be welcomed. However, the needs of survivors are much more complex than a roof over one's head. They include counselling, financial independence, advice services and education. Survivors of domestic violence face multiple and complex issues.

Research has shown that survivors face greater risks when they leave an abusive relationship. Many women — and men — have died as a result of leaving abusive relationships. That is when they are at their most vulnerable and when resources should be targeted where they are needed most. Support services are crucial when women or men are leaving abusive relationships.

Women's Aid provides a vital service in dealing with survivors of domestic violence and is absolutely key to keeping domestic violence high on our political agenda. It is recognised that more women than men are

affected by domestic violence. It follows, therefore, that the majority of services are provided for women. However, men are increasingly subject to domestic violence, yet there are no Province-wide services for men. Very often the statistics do not show the number of men in abusive relationships.

Accommodation services are not provided for men with children. A man can go to a hostel on his own, but he cannot take his children with him because there is insufficient accommodation. Separate accommodation is not provided for men and children who are leaving abusive relationships. There are no specific information services, support services, legal services, or helplines only for men. Full implementation of the strategy should include services for men.

Education is the key to tackling domestic violence. As some Members suggested earlier, there should be programmes to address the behaviour of perpetrators. Children should be taught in primary schools about what is acceptable, and what is unacceptable, behaviour in our society. Children live what they learn. Domestic violence is unacceptable. The Department of Education is failing to meet the action points that are outlined in its strategy. That must not be allowed to happen. We must not take our foot off the pedal with regard to domestic violence.

I understand that domestic violence crosses all classes and religions — and none. I am witnessing ever more instances of domestic violence in increasingly marginalised communities. That is horrendous. Frighteningly, it appears to be becoming more acceptable in those communities. A young couple sought help from me — a 16-year-old girl with a young child, and her 17-year-old partner. She was covered in bruises and he was covered in scratches. I asked them what had happened to them. They said that they had been fighting with each other. They thought that that was totally acceptable in front of a young child. That is happening more and more in marginalised communities. Violence between partners, of whatever nature, is perceived as acceptable. It is not acceptable behaviour. It is not OK.

Again, education is the key. The action plan should be reviewed to ensure that each Department is delivering, including the Department of Education. The issue cannot be tackled successfully without a cross-departmental approach. We need to keep our foot firmly on the pedal. I support the motion.

Mrs I Robinson: There is no question that domestic violence is one of the hidden crimes in today's society, and one that has devastating effects for many hundreds of people each year. The results of domestic violence are catastrophic. It destroys families. It leaves deep emotional scars and, on occasion, results in death. When the subject is discussed the focus tends to be on

the immediate victim, the person towards whom the abuse is directed. That is, of course, right. However, quite often, we forget the impact of domestic violence on the family of the victim — not least, the children.

The impact of domestic violence on child development depends on a variety of factors, such as gender, cultural background, the nature and extent of the abuse witnessed, the amount of support received, and age. There are various aspects of a child's life that can be negatively affected by domestic violence, including health, intellectual development, family and social relations, emotional and behavioural development, education, social presentation and self-care skills. Essentially, all aspects of a child's life can be affected.

Foetal damage can result from physical violence against the mother, including foetal fracture, brain injury and organ damage, and young children may suffer physical assault as part of the violence against a parent.

Parents who are depressed have been shown to respond less frequently to their baby's signals or to modify their behaviour according to that of their infant. Research suggests that that can lead to delays in an infant's expressive language and ability to concentrate on, and complete, simple tasks. Babies will largely develop their emotions and behaviour from those who are caring for them. A depressed parent who is experiencing domestic violence may withdraw emotionally, and that can be mirrored in the infant. Children as young as 18 months old can become upset and distressed during angry exchanges between parents.

With regard to children in the three- to four-year-old age group, a parent suffering from domestic violence will be limited in his or her capacity to protect their child from physical danger and provide the child with feelings of safety. The child may show a lack of interest in his or her environment and have poor intellectual development.

In the five- to nine-year-old age group, children are at an increased risk of physical injury, extreme anxiety and fear, which brings an increased risk of medical problems, including injuries and convulsive disorders. Children can also display other health-related symptoms, including stomach pains, headaches, asthma, allergies and disturbed sleep patterns.

In the 10- to 14-year-old age group, children may be left to cope alone with the physical changes that accompany the onset of puberty. If children have a parent suffering from depression brought on by domestic violence, that can increase the risk of psychological problems in the child. Children will fear being physically hurt in the abusive situation, and that can impact on the children's education and academic competence.

For those over 15 years of age, the relationship between extreme parental behaviour and that of a child is complex. If a parent has been emotionally

unavailable to a child, that child may not have had the opportunity to discuss contraception or how to behave in close personal relationships. Children in that situation may have grown up with inappropriate role models and a poor attitude to, or understanding of, sexual relationships.

The 'Tackling Violence at Home' strategy was launched by the NIO in 2003 and ran for a year and a half from October 2005 to March 2007. The strategy initially set out a number of initiatives to address domestic violence and to improve services to victims under the headings of prevention, protection and justice, support, and other priorities. The domestic violence unit, in conjunction with the regional steering group and its subgroups, was to be responsible for the development of future annual action plans at regional level to take account of changing pressures, priorities and available resources.

Domestic violence is an emotive issue, and it would need more time for debate. However, I am sure that it will be discussed in the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

Mr B McCrea: At this stage of the afternoon, Members have probably heard all the statistics. I have remained in the Chamber because I care passionately about this issue. Members speak from the heart on issues that engage them, which is when the subject is brought home.

However, there is a danger of debating in terms of statistics, and there is a sad and tragic story behind every statistic. I will not try to fill the entire time that is available to me but instead highlight some of the issues that I feel are important. I hope that that encourages the development of a proper policy.

4.00 pm

First, it is worth pointing out the high incidence of domestic violence. Everyone is surprised to hear how many incidents are reported, but the actual number is much greater. Domestic crime represents 25% of all reported violent crime; however, much of it goes unreported, so the problem is even bigger than we realise.

Someone mentioned earlier in the debate — forgive me, I have forgotten which Member — that one of the most courageous things that victims can do is report an incident of domestic violence and ask for help. Strange to say, I visited the neighbourhood of the proposer of the motion to talk to women there about this issue. Their cry for help was evident in the fact that they had come to the meeting, and they talked about the practical difficulties of dealing with domestic violence. For example, they mentioned that, even in the event of a very bad incident, they would not want a police car turning up at the house with full flashing lights, because that would raise all sorts of issues. We must try to work out how we can encourage people to report domestic violence and how we can support victims in a way that

is appropriate to their circumstances and the environment in which they live.

It goes without saying that education is an issue. I have recently had cause to sit in the reception room of the PSNI station in Lisburn, while waiting to see other people. There is not much to read there, so I was struck by two posters that were on display, one dealing with the effect of domestic violence on women and the other with the effect on men. The story they told really made me think. That is an example of the importance of education and of bringing domestic violence out into the open, as Dawn Purvis mentioned. If we do nothing else, we must make it understood that domestic violence is simply unacceptable. It is the elephant in the room that we do not really talk about, but unless we talk about it and find ways of dealing with it, the situation will remain unresolved.

We talked earlier about the effects of poverty, and, in particular, the effects of child poverty. I can think of nothing more distressing for children than witnessing domestic violence in their home. The numbers of such incidents are quite significant, and Mrs Robinson mentioned how they can affect children's development. People talk about stress, but stress is not having a hard day at the office — stress is seeing your mummy and daddy fighting. There is a proven link to neurological damage, which creates a cycle that is very hard to break and which carries on from one generation to the next.

In conclusion, it is important that we bring this issue to the fore, provide facilities to support those in most need of help, and identify ways of making it easier for people to report this crime — and not necessarily through the police, as I realise that that raises certain issues; although, in serious cases, the police must be informed.

I completely support the motion.

Mrs Hanna: I support the motion, and I thank the mover of the motion for tabling it. It has taken us about 30 years to get to where we are now, and I pay tribute to Women's Aid and others in the voluntary sector who have petitioned tirelessly for recognition and for funding for the establishment of refuges. I congratulate, support and encourage the victims who have had the courage to speak out. It is very difficult for anyone to admit that they are not part of a happy family. Indeed, victims used to be told that they had made their bed and must lie in it. Thank God we are somewhat more enlightened now and are able to give some more support.

During the past 10 years, there has been some advancement in inter-agency co-operation; the establishment of an interdepartmental working group; the establishment of a regional steering group on domestic violence in 2004; the introduction of the Family Homes and Domestic Violence (Northern Ireland) Order 1998; the appointment of domestic violence officers

in the PSNI; and the establishment of local domestic violence partnerships.

Nevertheless, domestic violence remains a problem in Northern Ireland. It occurs in all sectors of society, and it has damaging consequences for the victims — especially children. Members have heard the statistics: at least 11,000 children are living with domestic violence; domestic violence accounts for one in five cases of violent crime here; an average of five people are killed each year, and 700 families rehoused, as a result of domestic violence. The free telephone helpline receives around 20,000 calls a year, but many incidents still go unreported.

‘Tackling Violence at Home’ is an action plan published by the Health Department in October 2005, and it defines domestic violence as:

“threatening behaviour, violence or abuse (psychological, physical, verbal, sexual, financial or emotional) inflicted on one person by another where they are or have been intimate partners or family members, irrespective of gender or sexual orientation.”

Domestic violence has a devastating effect on the victims, and that is addressed in ‘Tackling Violence at Home’. The Government’s vision includes:

“The development of better, more equitable, accessible and effective service provision”.

As all the Members who have spoken today have said, those services must be cross-departmental. That is where the Assembly must get involved; Members must familiarise themselves with the range, appropriateness and standard of current provision.

The Assembly must answer some questions that are thrown up by the action plan. For instance, should all refuge provision be standardised? Everyone knows that each victim has different needs. Children who have witnessed domestic violence will be terrified, but will understand why their mother has taken them — usually in a hurry — to a strange environment. However, they will still miss their familiar bedroom, toys and friends, and they may have to change schools. They are vulnerable and need support.

There are also the children who have not witnessed the violence — the marital rape or verbal abuse — because their mother has protected them. In those cases, the removal to the refuge leaves the children bewildered, resentful and emotionally distressed; they do not understand why they are being moved from their home and separated from their father.

What about the older child — the lad or the teenager — who has witnessed the violence, and who has sometimes intervened to protect his mother and, perhaps, been beaten as a result? Where does he go? There are no appropriate facilities for children of that age. Refuges are not suitable for male teenagers. We must ensure that women in refuges are provided with the freedom

and support to make decisions on whether to reconcile with their partners, if that is appropriate and if the prognosis is considered to be reasonable. Furthermore, information should be available to their partners on how to seek help from the Men’s Advisory Project.

Refuges are essential and have proved effective over time, but we must examine whether there is an equitable spread and whether there is adequate provision in rural areas. In some cases, especially in the best interests of the children, it may be desirable for the victims to remain at home with support from domestic violence officers. Also, the floating support —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mrs Hanna, your time is up.

Mrs Hanna: I support the motion.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I reiterate what others have said and welcome the opportunity that this debate has afforded the House to support the motion and to send out the clear and unequivocal message that domestic violence is a crime that should not be tolerated under any circumstances.

Members have repeated the statistics many times, but they are worth repeating, because domestic violence is a problem that has a devastating impact on the lives of victims and their families. Eleven thousand children in Northern Ireland are living with domestic violence; five people — mostly women — are killed each year; 700 families have to be rehoused each year as a result of violence in the home. Those statistics are staggering. If those people were the victims of sectarian, inter-community or interface violence there would be a huge public outcry and enormous media interest.

It is the epidemic that nobody talks about, that no one seems aware of, and it needs to be tackled effectively now. Statistics show that in 2005-06, the number of incidents reported was 23,000; on average every week police attend over 400 domestic violence incidents and deal with 100 domestic assaults on men and women, and we know that there is serious under-reporting. These figures may only be the tip of the iceberg.

Sadly there are still outdated attitudes to this form of violence, as it was, to an extent, historically acceptable. Often victims continue to live with the abuse out of fear, or because they do not have the financial independence to leave, and children are routinely used as tools to control and keep the victims with their abusers. Often, victims are reluctant to pursue a case through the courts because of concerns about the consequences of a prosecution and the impact that they might have on the family. Family members may be reluctant to see a relative sent to jail or to see the family break up.

It is a form of violent abuse that affects people right across society, from all cultural, social and ethnic

backgrounds and all age groups, and the vast majority of victims are women, although a significant number are men.

Violence in the home has a particular impact on the development of children, who are very much the silent victims. The long-term effects on children who suffer or witness domestic violence can lead to significant problems. A few weeks ago, we had a debate about looked-after children and examined their outcomes, and the outcomes for children from violent homes are very similar — poor educational achievement, mental-health problems, increased likelihood to be victims or perpetrators of crime and so on. It is dreadful scenario, a huge and urgent issue that costs an estimated £180 million each year.

'Tackling Violence at Home', a cross-departmental strategy addressing domestic violence and abuse was launched in 2005 with three key themes: prevention, protection and justice, and support. Prevention works with victims and offenders and raises awareness through media strategy. Protection and justice works towards garnering more legal protection for victims and families and works with the police, prosecution services and the probation service. Support deals with refuge provision and housing. The Housing Executive plays a key role in these matters. In addition, the regional steering group has been set up, representing the NIO, the Department for Social Development and the police and the Courts Service. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is evolving a strategy and producing an action plan. There are also the local domestic partnerships that support people on a community level.

A lot is being done — but a lot more needs to be done. Women's Aid runs a number of refuges. There are currently 15 refuges and move-on centres and two women's hostels which have 16 units, bringing the total to 160 family and single units across Northern Ireland. Ensuring that victims have a safe place to go when they are affected by violence is crucial. Today's motion calls for an increase in refuge provision in Northern Ireland, and it is my intention that that and the appropriate support services refuges are made available to the victims of domestic violence.

4.15 pm

The Department for Social Development's Supporting People initiative, carried out through the Housing Executive, has played a crucial role in the provision of emergency refuge and temporary accommodation to those who suffer domestic violence. Mrs Hanna asked whether more refuges were the best way forward. There is no doubt that refuges are needed for those victims of violence who are forced to flee violent homes, because they act as a haven, safe from harm and abuse, where

families are able to rebuild their lives. Where the need for refuges is identified, it must be met.

The other question, raised by Mrs Robinson, is why families that have endured domestic violence should face further distress in being forced to leave their homes. It is the violent abuser who should leave. Children must be given every opportunity to remain in the familiar surroundings of their home and to stay at the local school with their friends. There is greater protection and support available now for families that wish to stay at home. Changes have been made to the law to improve enforcement of non-molestation restraining orders, which are aimed at helping victims. More needs to be done because of the fear and intimidation factor.

The Housing Executive and registered social landlords can now repossess properties from tenants whose cohabitants have been driven out by domestic violence. That means that when a wife and family leave, the Housing Executive and landlords have the ability to seek possession of the property in order to help the victims return to their home. I want to see that protection strengthened so that more families are able to remain safely at home. That is a major challenge for Government: how do you create protection for a mother and her children in their own home, when the threat is coming from within that home? That is a challenge that Government must tackle.

The 24-hour free telephone helpline service provided by the Northern Ireland Women's Aid Federation, which provides vital support and advice for victims of violence, is one of the initiatives happening under the strategy. Under the protection and justice strand, there have been a number of developments in support of victims, such as the police getting greater powers. With regard to prevention, we must get the message across to everyone that domestic violence is never acceptable, making it less of a taboo subject by ensuring that attitudes change across all sections of society. Recent public information campaigns can play a part in that.

Research reveals a staggering statistic that I was unaware of before looking into the issue: 30% of domestic violence starts during pregnancy. Abused women have a higher rate of miscarriages, stillbirths, premature labour and injuries to their babies. My Department has introduced a new policy to ensure that expectant mothers are asked about domestic violence when attending routine antenatal classes. We need to put more procedures in place around maternity care for early identification of women at risk. I intend to strengthen the process of identifying victims in the near future, so that anyone who attends an accident and emergency unit or doctor's surgery with a physical injury is asked about domestic violence.

There are other initiatives being taken forward under the strategy: awareness training and mentoring for Health

Service staff; counselling and anger-management services provided by the Men's Advisory Project; support services for children who suffer domestic violence, delivered by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. Guidance is also being produced for MLAs and MPs to help them to better identify victims of domestic violence and, consequently, provide information on the support services available. We need to tackle this hidden problem head on and bring it out in the open.

My party's commitment is to secure extra resources to address domestic violence, and I will be approaching my Executive colleagues to ensure that the issue is given the funding priority that it deserves. The full implementation of the strategy that we have debated will have many potential benefits for the victims of domestic violence. I am determined that those benefits will be realised. Dolores Kelly spoke about taking this issue to a different level. To do that, I will seek the agreement of my ministerial colleagues to establish an inter-ministerial group on domestic violence. Cross-departmental work will be key. We will have to go above and beyond the level of officials and establish an inter-ministerial group.

Domestic violence is a crime and is not acceptable in any circumstances. A great deal has already been achieved but much more needs to be done to prevent violence in the home and to offer greater protection and support to victims and their children. Keeping families, including children, in their own homes when domestic violence occurs must be a major priority. We all must work harder to make that happen. We need to consider and then implement new ways of working that will support mothers and children to ensure that they do not endure the upheaval of leaving home. We also need to consider how we can work more closely with abusers, so that we can replace violent and negative patterns of behaviour with more positive ones. As we know, patterns of behaviour can self-perpetuate through the generations.

Working together, we can make a dramatic difference, making domestic violence totally and absolutely unacceptable in society. We must ensure that appropriate resources are in place to provide support for victims. I support the motion.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

I am delighted to have been asked to speak on the motion and I commend my colleague Ms McCann on bringing the issue to the Chamber for a full and proper debate.

I start by reaffirming the fact that every person has the right to live free from abuse, neglect and exploitation, and also to live without the fear of any of those things. I remind Members that an Amnesty International report of December 2006 stated that the NIO direct rule

Government was failing victims dismally. The report went on to state that there was a systematic failure to tackle violence against women. That is not a situation that this Assembly should inherit willingly. The Administration must act to ensure that protection and support is available for the most vulnerable members of society. To that end, I welcome the comments of Members today. I believe that we will make progress on this issue and make a difference.

Members have spoken of the need to protect victims and about how abuse of the elderly has become more prevalent. They have also spoken about domestic violence being a cruel and wicked form of abuse that occurs too often. A number of Members spoke of the need to tackle the issue on a cross-departmental basis. As has been said, domestic violence is a serious crime. There have been some improvements in services over recent years, but the number of people affected is still increasing. I welcome Dolores Kelly's call on the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to deliver on the strategy immediately. Some Members acknowledged that domestic violence is not just a female problem. It is important to realise that it is a problem that we all have to deal with, not just the female Members.

I welcome what was said by Members about the need to remove any stigma from being a victim of domestic violence. We will need to address that in any strategy. A number of comments were made about the negative impact of domestic violence on children — the effects on their schooling and on their inner life. I am glad that we will be able to make progress on such issues.

Some of the statistics that Members have outlined have been startling. I will not go over them again, but the truth is that most cases of domestic violence are not reported. It is also true that domestic violence can happen to anyone — whether male or female, young or old, disabled or non-disabled. Everyone can be affected by domestic violence in its many forms.

I want to highlight the specific area of domestic violence towards older people and vulnerable adults in the home.

In recent years, increasing concern has been expressed about the abuse of vulnerable adults and a growing realisation of the scale and complexity of the problem. Although public awareness of the issue is growing, much needs to be done to provide greater protection for those people.

Adult abuse can occur in all walks of life. Some people are more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation, because they are already disadvantaged members of society. People who have learning, physical or sensory disabilities; those with mental health problems or who are chronically sick; older people and others, such as victims of domestic violence, are all vulnerable to abuse.

It is important that any person who is thought to be suffering abuse is treated as an individual and that any allegations are taken seriously, ensuring that the person's dignity is maintained at all times. It is also vital that properly resourced support services are available for those who need assistance.

In conclusion, I fully support the motion and I am glad that there is cross-party support for it in the Chamber. Political direction must be given in order to deal with the major social problem of domestic violence.

Go raibh maith agat.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly expresses concern about the level of domestic violence and its impact on children, and calls for the proper resourcing and full implementation of the Government strategy 'Tackling Violence at Home'; supports funding for local crisis and support services for families experiencing violence; and supports an expansion of the network of refuges so that no man, woman or child in need shall be turned away.

Fuel Poverty

Mr Deputy Speaker: The next item on the Order Paper is the motion on fuel poverty. The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The Member who is proposing the motion will have 10 minutes to speak and 10 minutes for the winding-up speech. All other Members will have five minutes.

Mr Cobain: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Social Development to review the strategy for the eradication of fuel poverty, particularly amongst pensioner households and households with children.

I thank the Minister for her attendance at the debate. As well as her departmental and Executive interests in the issue, she has a deep personal interest, and she will work with the Committee for Social Development to ensure that fuel poverty is eradicated as soon as is practicably possible.

I will repeat the question that I asked the Minister at the Committee's meeting on 24 May 2007, because, as she knows, I do not believe that I was given a definitive answer. Will she honour the commitment given by the last Administration on fuel poverty, which is that by 2010, every child, disabled person and pensioner will live in a decent, warm home?

Unlike other policies, failure to deal with fuel poverty will result in an increase in the number of people who die from cold-related illnesses. Last year, the figure was 1,360. Several illnesses, such as asthma and heart and respiratory diseases, are either caused, or made worse, by a lack of heat in the home. Older people are more vulnerable than most.

Many homes with poor energy efficiency are also in poor repair. Older people are more likely to live in that sort of accommodation. The winter fuel payment of £200, which was once welcomed as a useful addition to older people's energy budgets, has been eaten up by the huge increases in energy costs that have been imposed by energy providers during the past several years, and older people have been forced to make a choice between fuel and food.

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

Northern Ireland has the highest level of fuel poverty in the United Kingdom. That number will rise dramatically with the introduction of water charges, particularly among pensioners, individuals on low incomes and the working poor. Those charges are a regressive tax that will fall hardest on those who are least able to pay.

There are no recurring costs associated with fuel poverty: it is an entirely capital cost. We can, therefore, through various economic models, predict the cost and the length of time required to eradicate fuel poverty.

4.30 pm

The Minister and the Executive must demonstrate the necessary will to carry that through.

Several other issues must be considered alongside the fuel poverty strategy in order to ensure that all those who are eligible can access fuel poverty programmes. The first task is to set up a programme to provide front-line benefit advice to assist people who live on low wages, the working poor and those who live in near-benefit households, particularly older people. The programme must ensure that all those vulnerable groups have all the relevant information that is needed for them to access the programmes.

Clear links must be developed with those devising any new anti-poverty strategy in order to ensure that such measures address fuel poverty. No anti-poverty strategy could be complete unless it fully deals with that issue. There is a growing need for the fuel poverty strategy to be as flexible as possible, particularly for the rural poor, most of whom live in isolated rural properties and need special provision to deal with their particular needs. Greater emphasis must be placed on energy efficiency to ensure that all existing programmes are adequately funded. Many groups that could be classified as poor use pay-as-you-go meters. As a method of debt management, energy companies should promote such metering as a matter of good practice. Energy suppliers should target vulnerable customers by offering energy efficiency packages and, equally importantly, benefit advice. The Executive should encourage all Departments, the advice sector and any new council structures to advise and encourage individuals who are trying to cope with fuel poverty, particularly those living in social exclusion.

The Assembly could adopt a more radical approach to addressing fuel poverty by encouraging the energy industry to reduce tariffs for customers who are on low incomes and by imposing an affordability tariff — as is being considered for water charges. That would have an enormous impact on those living in fuel poverty by giving them the benefit of additional heating provision. The warm homes scheme has been quite successful but could be better targeted. With additional benefit advice, a growing number of those who are on low incomes, near-benefit households and older people could be reached.

Health professionals should encourage those on the front line to include instances of fuel poverty in initial care reports and to assist with the provision of possible sources of information on the subject. The Department for Social Development (DSD) should ensure that, before any funding is provided to the advice sector, there is specific provision for dealing with energy efficiency and fuel poverty.

The Housing Executive and housing associations should move as quickly as possible to ensure that

low-income families and those living in fuel poverty have access to forms of renewable energy, because they represent the most viable long-term solution to fuel poverty. Landlords and owner-occupiers should be encouraged to access grants in order to ensure that renewable energy is available to as many households as possible.

The Northern Ireland levy should continue to support the warm homes scheme by topping up its funding by £1.6 million each year until 2010. The remaining funding should be used to provide a full package of energy efficiency measures, including cavity-wall, loft and tank insulation and an effective and efficient heating system for those qualifying households, which means that have no central heating, solid fuel or electric heating.

I have made a few suggestions but I am sure that, as the debate unfolds, Members will hear many more views on the subject. The fuel poverty strategy is unlike other strategies, and if the Assembly is unable to overcome fuel poverty in the foreseeable future, the number of deaths as a result of cold-related illnesses will continue to rise. That, I suggest, is unacceptable to everyone in the House.

Mr Hilditch: I support my colleagues' motion, which calls for the Minister to review the strategy to eradicate fuel poverty. The motion is presented sensibly, and there will hopefully be a reasonable outcome. If the wish lists that are being brought forward through private Members business continue to grow, the Executive will be in crisis trying to meet those demands in the future.

As politicians, Members should be fully aware of the impact of fuel poverty on communities: the serious health implications for the elderly and young children; the vulnerability of those with disabilities and chronic illness; the impact on the environment; children's educational attainment; social inclusion; the condition of the housing stock; the problems caused by cold and damp homes that force people to seek alternative accommodation; and imposing further setbacks to already disadvantaged communities.

Much background work has already been carried out, and it does not make pretty reading. Although figures can fluctuate Province-wide, the 'Interim Household Condition Survey', published in 2004, established that Northern Ireland has the highest level of fuel poverty compared to other regions of the United Kingdom.

Considering the various types of house occupancy — owner occupied, privately rented, Housing Executive and housing association — some of the 26 council areas have a rate of fuel poverty approaching 50%. Carrickfergus Borough Council, in my constituency, has a public perception of little social deprivation and a degree of affluence, yet 23% of households live in fuel poverty — almost one in four homes.

The eradication of fuel poverty must be a top priority for the devolved Government. That became evident to me when I recently attended the launch of the Chief Officers Third Sector group (CO3) on behalf of the Committee for Social Development. During the networking opportunities at the event, many people representing the voluntary, community, charities and housing sectors raised their concerns and expressed the hope that the Assembly, and particularly the Minister for Social Development, will make the necessary progress to lessen, and eventually eradicate, fuel poverty.

The Department for Social Development's fuel-poverty strategy was launched by the then Minister, Mr Spellar, in November 2004. Two and a half years into the strategy, it will be interesting to hear the new Minister for Social Development's assessment of the targets set in the strategy, primarily the eradication of fuel poverty in vulnerable households by 2010, and in non-vulnerable households by 2016.

The fuel-poverty strategy was also aimed at encouraging a partnership approach to tackling fuel poverty involving Government Departments, public-sector organisations, those in the energy industry and, most importantly, those in the voluntary and community sectors. Again, it will be interesting to hear the Minister's assessment of the strategy, considering that there was extensive consultation prior to its publication.

It has been suggested that, after the launch of the report, little attention was paid to the efforts, views and ideas of those who had been consulted. The strategy therefore failed to effectively deliver measures to tackle fuel poverty — and that is before any criticism of the lack of resources made available through the strategy.

From experience in my constituency, I wish to highlight two areas that have proven difficult: elderly owner-occupiers who just fail the means test; and those who, even though on benefit, rent privately and who must be of pensionable age to qualify for assistance. If those sections of the community sought alternative accommodation through social housing, the Housing Executive system would never cope and, indeed, might collapse.

There are other aspects of fuel poverty that could be discussed, but I join others, inside and outside the Chamber, in calling for a review and a rethink of the strategy.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome any discussion on the eradication of fuel poverty, and the motion will contribute to that.

Reports on child poverty have recently been published by Save the Children and Barnardo's. In a specific example of fuel poverty from a Save the Children booklet, a mother tells of her experience of the social fund. She did not get a crisis loan and had to ask her oil company whether she could receive weekly heating-oil deliveries. She had the oilman write out a bill with the

cost details, but because it was not stamped as being paid, she did not get the loan. She said that she would not have sought the loan had she not been in crisis. Members can only imagine the added stress in an already difficult situation.

Save the Children argues that the social fund should be more flexible. Barnardo's has also made the point to me that, generally speaking, schemes to eradicate fuel poverty tend to be geared towards older people. If that is the case, perhaps that could be considered; however, a lot of evidence suggests that older people are still the group most likely to suffer from fuel poverty.

At the weekend I spoke with the manager of the Western Health Action Zone. She said that some older people on certain pensions do not qualify for the warm homes scheme and that they feel unfairly excluded. She feels that this should be addressed. She also made the point that winter fuel and cold weather payments should be paid in vouchers that are redeemable for fuel bills only.

Some older people are not always keen to adapt to change, living for the most part in maybe one room that can be heated to some degree, while other rooms remain cold and damp. Those older people do not always claim their entitlements. This could be because of stigma or the complexity involved in making an application. The manager of the Western Health Action Zone believes that a locally dedicated officer would be invaluable in such situations. It is crucial that such an officer be funded through mainstream funding.

However, in researching the fuel poverty issue, I was struck by the number of organisations and Government bodies that are engaged in tackling fuel poverty. There is no shortage of strategies either, whether currently operational, proposed or implemented. One group in particular, the Northern Ireland Fuel Poverty Advisory Group (NIFPAG), appears to be sizeable: it includes personnel from the health action zones, Energy Action Grants Agency (Eaga plc), Phoenix Gas and Northern Ireland Electricity (NIE). What role would it play in the context of the review proposed by today's motion?

To give a brief outline, the advisory group's remit is to consider and report to the inter-departmental group on fuel poverty, which is composed of senior civil servants from right across the Departments. The advisory group will report to that group on the effectiveness of current policies in delivering reductions in fuel poverty and comment on additional policies that may be required; identify barriers to reducing fuel poverty and propose solutions; comment on the Government's findings on the nature and extent of fuel poverty in the North of Ireland and have oversight of the fuel poverty strategy, assessing the resources required, publishing an annual report and reviewing strategy as necessary.

It held its inaugural meeting in June 2005, and I presume that its first annual report came a year later — I could not actually get the date when I checked it on the internet. It is called: 'Tackling Fuel Poverty: A Partnership Approach.' The foreword describes the report as a "landmark publication" and, significantly, notes that:

"The Advisory Group is delighted that its Report will inform the work and priorities of the Inter-departmental Group on Fuel Poverty".

Therefore, I am wondering whether work has already been done, and if so, what stage it is at. Does the proposer of the motion intend —

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

Mr P Ramsey: I welcome Fred Cobain's motion and thank him for moving it.

I think everyone in the Chamber would agree that it is totally unacceptable that in 2007 large numbers of people in Northern Ireland are still suffering from fuel poverty — a result of low incomes, homes in poor condition and the rising price of energy.

In 2004 the number of households in fuel poverty in Northern Ireland stood at over 150,000 — almost 24% of Northern Ireland's households. That number will have substantially increased and may well have completely eroded the reduction from 33.3% to 23.9% achieved between 2001 and 2004, despite the good work of the Department for Social Development, the Housing Executive and its partners in improving the housing stock so that there is greater fuel efficiency.

There is no doubt that low income levels coupled with energy price hikes have forced many people into the fuel-poor bracket. That is particularly the case for low-wage households. We must understand better the fuel-poverty landscape and the dynamics that affect it in Northern Ireland so that we can model the impact of energy price rises on fuel poverty.

4.45 pm

Recently, a fuel-poverty indicator was announced in London. It uses census and housing-condition survey data to map the distribution of fuel poverty across England, and will help target resources. It is particularly disappointing that no such initiative has taken place in Northern Ireland despite the same data sources being available here. I am sure that the Minister will help us to obtain that.

Until there is an accurate model, Members cannot be sure about the extent of the problem at any given time, how best to address it, and where to target resources. There must be downward pressure on electricity and gas prices through investment in infrastructure, the advancement of all-island and international energy markets and investment in the electricity grids to allow for greater international competition.

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment should work vigorously to promote sustainable energy generation that is smaller-scale and locally owned and distributed using successful models, such as in Köln, Germany, and those in Denmark and Sweden. Farming communities could benefit by becoming suppliers of heat and power using energy crops, wind power and anaerobic digestion. Local generation of heat and power ensures greater price stability, reduces vulnerability to international fuel-price fluctuations and ensures security of energy supply.

The utility regulator must work with energy suppliers and meaningfully address the development of social tariffs, which will avoid the exclusion of lower-income groups from the best available tariffs — often referred to as the poverty premium.

Priorities for improvements in areas where there are poor insulation levels in households or low take-up of available programmes must be examined. The Housing Executive's latest housing-condition survey shows that there are particular problems relating to the insulation of homes in isolated rural areas and inner cities. The most likely residents in such homes are elderly people or those in low-quality, private-rented accommodation, many of whom are vulnerable due to their age and economic circumstances.

The income threshold at which households can qualify for grants for energy-efficiency measures must also be examined. Many people who are working and whose income is below £15,000 a year are suffering from fuel poverty. Fifty per cent of households experiencing fuel poverty will have an income of between £7,000 and £15,000, and yet many will not be eligible for grant aid because they do not have a passport, or qualifying benefit. The income threshold must be raised if eradicating fuel poverty is to be taken seriously, and eligibility criteria in mainstream programmes, such as the warm homes scheme, need to be widened to include low-income households.

Funding should also be sought to allow advisers from the warm homes scheme, or other programmes, to carry out preliminary benefit checks to ensure that people in the homes they visit are aware, and are in receipt of, their full benefit entitlements.

It is disappointing that, despite the Chancellor's announcement in the 'Pre-Budget Report 2006' that £7.5 million in additional resources to support area-based approaches to tackling fuel poverty — of which £1.2 million is to be provided for the devolved regions — we have heard nothing in respect of its deployment in Northern Ireland. That is another area that the Minister must examine. Surely, that would provide an opportunity to deploy resources to support benefit entitlement assessment with a priority towards rural

areas where take-up of programmes, such as the warm home scheme, is lower.

Fuel poverty needs to be tackled from the perspective of household incomes, housing conditions and energy prices —

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

Mr P Ramsey: I support the motion.

Ms Lo: It is well documented that the main causes of fuel poverty are the combination of low income, high fuel prices and energy inefficiency. The groups that are particularly vulnerable have been identified as the elderly, people with disabilities and families with children. It must be acknowledged that the Government have done much in recent years to reduce fuel poverty by improving social-housing conditions, providing the warm homes scheme and winter fuel payments, and so on.

However, increasing energy prices over the past three years have probably offset those benefits. The recent increase in rates will also have an impact on low-income families and elderly people.

Last September, Help the Aged stated that more than 1,500 elderly people had died from cold-related conditions since 2000. In a report published last week, Barnardo's, my previous employer, stated that almost 27,000 families with children were currently regarded as being in fuel poverty in Northern Ireland. All those figures are unacceptable. Much more must be done, and a more focused approach, targeting low-income families and elderly people, is required urgently. That is why I wholeheartedly support the motion.

In June 2004, NIFPAG published a range of recommendations. The group called for more joined-up Government thinking, and it linked fuel poverty to the anti-poverty strategy, because of the prevalence of low incomes and fuel poverty in Northern Ireland.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Department of Education, the Department for Social Development, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, the Social Security Agency and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development should all re-examine their policies in order to maximise the targeting of schemes and joined-up working.

A greater focus on energy efficiency solutions and carbon reduction is required to improve heating systems in Northern Ireland. Government and the regulatory authorities, in conjunction with energy suppliers, must explore the development of social tariffs that will enable a reduction in prices for low-income customers. The Northern Ireland Electricity pay-as-you-go type of metering technology should be promoted as good practice that provides benefits to customers by encouraging energy efficiency and offering discounted tariffs. Given the impact of low incomes on fuel poverty, the

Government should also link pension payments, benefit payments and minimum wage levels to fuel costs.

The statutory and voluntary sectors must promote a greater awareness of fuel-poverty-related benefits and entitlements, particularly among hard-to-reach groups such as the new ethnic populations, so that they can alleviate the hardships of increasing fuel costs.

Mr Craig: I congratulate Mr Cobain and Mr Beggs for securing this debate on fuel poverty. Northern Ireland suffers greater fuel poverty than other regions of the UK because of higher fuel costs and lower average incomes. Undoubtedly, the biggest single contribution towards eradicating fuel poverty would be to increase the incomes of the lowest earners. All the figures show that levels of fuel poverty increase as income decreases, and even if all Northern Ireland's housing stock were brought up to an acceptable level of fitness, around 17% would still remain in fuel poverty.

Oil and gas price rises have meant that people who were previously just under the threshold of spending 10% on their energy bills can now be brought into the fuel-poor category. Figures provided by the Department for Social Development show that owner-occupiers make up the biggest band on the fuel-poverty scale: over 50% of fuel poverty is endured by homeowners. Although fuel poverty among other sectors has fallen, the level of fuel poverty among homeowners has remained unchanged.

One third of the dwellings that are in poverty were built before 1919. Over 44% of those who are in fuel poverty are retired.

I am glad that the previous devolved Minister for Social Development took great steps to reduce fuel poverty, through the introduction of the warm homes scheme. However, it is right that we keep pushing for progress in this area. The Minister should review the strategy that has been put in place. There are areas where improvements could be made that would contribute further to the final eradication of fuel poverty in Northern Ireland.

I am surprised that my constituency of Lagan Valley, with just over 6% of the population of Northern Ireland, received only 3.5% of warm homes funding and had the third lowest take-up of new heating installations under the scheme. That is something that must be readdressed.

Energy efficiency measures are one of the most important areas to consider. The Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) has published a report claiming that UK households could save up to £230 a year on their energy bills and cut annual carbon emissions across the country by more than 30 million tonnes just by heating homes and generating hot water more efficiently. For many households in fuel poverty in Northern Ireland, £230 a year would make a significant impact. The

Minister must take that into account when carrying out any review of the fuel poverty strategy.

The warm homes scheme has proven to be a qualified success, Lagan Valley excluded. Although the heating element of the scheme has now been extended to those over the age of 60 who are in receipt of disability-related benefits, there are still possibilities for extending the scheme. Working households, in particular, currently do not meet the criteria for warm homes, but, if they are in work but only receiving a very low income, they can easily find themselves in fuel poverty.

The Minister has placed her focus on social housing; she has emphasised that several times. In the construction of such houses, she can help to ensure that the problems of fuel poverty are prevented in the future. The Minister should look towards ensuring that all new social housing built in Northern Ireland meets the EcoHomes standard.

I again congratulate the Members for bringing forward the motion and I hope that the Minister will be able to review the strategy for tackling fuel poverty in Northern Ireland and making it a thing of the past.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I want to talk about the overall issue of fuel poverty, but with particular reference to my constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone. The Government's targets of eradicating fuel poverty for vulnerable households by 2010, and totally by 2016, are a complete failure at this stage. Sixty per cent of those in fuel poverty are pensioners, and Fermanagh and South Tyrone has one of the highest proportions of elderly people and low-income families. Another contributory factor is that 12% of houses in Fermanagh and South Tyrone are deemed to be unfit for proper heating or human habitation, but people are still living in them. That contributes to fuel poverty and the difficulties of living in an environment that is acceptable by today's standards.

A household is defined as being in fuel poverty if it spends more than 10% of its income on fuel and is unable to heat the home to an acceptable level. Often, low-income families are also in food poverty, as has been proved today.

Families no longer eat quality food, and that contributes to the difficulties. The cost of living — people may need two incomes for mortgages and cars — pushes costs such as fuel to the bottom of the agenda of family needs. Visiting a pensioner's house would bring home to anyone just what cold temperatures some people are prepared to live in. None of us would be prepared to live in the kind of temperatures of houses that I have visited — and certainly not in the winter. Their need is great. Such people often end up in accident and emergency departments as a result of falls brought on by hypothermia. Those are all contributing factors, and those who are ill are not always able to make use of energy or heating grants.

5.00 pm

Fuel poverty is assessed on energy efficiency, income and fuel costs. The Department for Social Development's 'Ending Fuel Poverty: A Strategy for Northern Ireland' stresses the need for homes to become energy-efficient through properly working, efficient heating systems, advice on conserving fuel and good installation. The warm homes scheme has addressed this since its introduction, but the system of accessing services often excludes the most vulnerable and needy in our society. Potential users must make direct contact with the authorities in order to access the scheme and surveys have to be carried out. Those most eligible for the scheme should be automatically offered the service rather than having to fight for it.

The winter fuel allowance for pensioners should be index-linked, and, with 60% of pensioner households involved, it should be extended to those on full disability living allowance to allow people who cannot move or have low mobility to live in warm conditions. Grant aid to upgrade heating systems should be easier to apply for and should be given priority; the Northern Ireland Housing Executive strategy document suggests that Housing Executive homes should have their heating systems upgraded and replaced by 2010. Removing back boilers and conventional methods of heating from some houses might have been a retrograde step, as people are now limited to oil fires only. Oil, unlike gas, has to be paid for upfront rather than monthly; many people find such upfront payment difficult.

Private landlords should not escape their duty to provide adequate, efficient heating in homes, although at present many tenants find that that is not the case. Homes have not been updated and tenants are living in substandard accommodation, yet they have no choice because they cannot make anybody accountable. I support the motion. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Storey: There is little doubt that the well-being of a society can be judged by the state of its poorest or most vulnerable members. Therefore the DUP supports the motion and thanks the Member who brought this important issue to the Assembly. If fuel poverty is one of the benchmarks for judging the state of our poorest and most vulnerable members, our society is far from well. Many of our citizens, through no fault of their own, are not beneficiaries of social justice nor do they get the helping hand that they have a right to expect. The motion is loaded against social injustice and cries out for fuel poverty to be made a priority — not merely an issue for yet another strategy that fails to meet its targets.

More than 100,000 homes in the Province in which the head of the household is over 60, suffer from fuel poverty. It is unacceptable that an estimated 2,000

people will die in the Province because they are living in cold houses and cannot afford heat.

Members should bear that statistic in mind as they debate the issue. Fuel poverty causes deaths in our communities, so it is a matter of the highest priority.

Members referred to the DUP Minister in the previous Assembly who pioneered the warm homes scheme. This Assembly must go further and develop a fit-for-purpose strategy to deal with the social injustice of fuel poverty, both among the elderly and in families with children. Research carried out a few years ago suggests that around 40,000 houses in the Northern Health and Social Services Board area were fuel poor, and it was estimated that over 4,000 homes fall into the fuel-poor category in my North Antrim constituency, particularly in Ballymoney. That is unacceptable in a time of greater economic prosperity. Questions must be asked and answers found, not only for my constituents, but right across the Province.

In Ballymoney, we have begun to address the fuel-poverty issue by aligning agencies and developing household-friendly strategies. The Ballymoney Warm Homes group, in conjunction with the borough council, has launched an affordable fuel stamp scheme to help homeowners budget efficiently so that they can afford heating oil. The scheme is supported by a local partnership and involves oil retail outlets. It is a good example of how simple homeowner-friendly schemes may be developed and can impact positively on households.

There are those who are economically hamstrung, such as the elderly, and impoverished families with children, who need more than advice. They need a helping hand.

I am glad that the Minister is present. The Assembly should urge her to empower her Department to develop a Province-wide strategy to encourage budgeting and saving for home heating oil. Furthermore, she should prepare a careful estimate of the funds required to support the elderly in that through the winter, and should factor that into her future budgets.

I ask the Minister to provide an update for Members on the pledge given by her predecessor, Minister Hanson, in July 2006 in the Long Gallery in this Building. On that occasion, he made reference to the provision of free solar panels for some 1,200 fuel-poor homes in Northern Ireland. We await the impact of that. I support the motion.

Mr Beggs: I too support the motion. In 1842, Edwin Chadwick presented scientific evidence to support his findings that deaths from disease were:

“powerfully influenced by the physical conditions under which the population is placed — as the external and internal condition of their dwellings, drainage and ventilation.”

Cold, damp homes contribute to illness and even death. I pay tribute to Northern Energy Action Northern Ireland for the compelling information in its booklet ‘Fuel Poverty: The Health Imperative’. In it, the group indicates that cold can be a killer, especially among pensioners. In temperatures of below 16°C there is an increased risk of respiratory illness; below 12°C, cardiovascular changes increase the risk of stroke and heart attack; and below 5°C, there is an increased risk of hypothermia. Help the Aged estimates that, in 2004-05, 1,280 older people in Northern Ireland died from cold-related illnesses. That must not be allowed to continue.

In 2004, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive advised that heating a three-bedroom house would cost £1,711, using basic electricity. That cost might be reduced to as little as £395 if a modern condensing boiler system were used. All social houses must be upgraded to become well-insulated and fuel-efficient homes.

Fuel poverty is much wider than the social-housing sector. In the private-rental sector, many homeowners or tenants also suffer from fuel poverty. The warm homes scheme, administered by Eaga plc is designed to address that for those in the private sector who qualify, upgrading home insulation, or even providing complete central heating systems for some through the warm homes plus scheme.

However, according to the Northern Ireland House Condition Survey 2004, there was a decrease in fuel poverty in the social housing sector from 37% in 2001 to 18% in 2004. There have been dramatic increases in energy costs since then, however, and winter fuel premiums have remained static since 2000. There is a clear need now for the Chancellor to increase that in line with fuel inflation — not ordinary inflation, but fuel inflation.

The Northern Ireland House Condition Survey 2004 indicated that 71% of homes in fuel poverty are now in the owner-occupied sector — up from 51% in 2001. This worsening situation needs to be addressed.

With increasing numbers of tenants in the private-rental sector, there will also be a need to review policy and programmes to ensure that this sector is not overlooked. For some, the private-rental sector means high rents and poor housing conditions — clearly fuel poverty.

Pensioners account for 54% of the fuel poor. Most pensioners have low incomes and are living in older houses that are costly to heat. While many programmes have been run to encourage benefit uptake, it has been estimated that a third of pensioners have yet to take up their means-tested benefit entitlements. Some pilot programmes involving partnership working between statutory bodies and the community and voluntary sectors have been successful in encouraging uptake. Clearly that needs to be widely repeated throughout Northern Ireland.

There is a significant cost to the National Health Service for this inadequate housing. Cold and damp related illnesses have a knock-on effect, and tackling them will result in fewer visits to GPs and fewer prescriptions, and the winter pressure on our hospital beds will be lessened.

There are also educational costs associated with fuel poverty. Cold, damp conditions lead to mould growth, which exacerbates asthma and leads to wheezing. They can also lead to higher levels of bacteria and viral infection. Children suffering from fuel poverty miss school and can become educationally disadvantaged. There is a clear need for the percentage of children in families on out-of-work benefits for each constituency in Northern Ireland to be addressed. The Joseph Rowntree Trust has indicated that these figures are not available for Northern Ireland.

There is urgent work to be carried out here, and I urge the Minister to review the policy to reflect the changes that have occurred.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members to remain quiet during speeches.

Mrs M Bradley: The issue of fuel poverty affects all realms of society, from the cradle to the grave. Older people are afraid to heat more than one room at a time and often wear outdoor clothes while indoors to keep warm. They do not eat properly so that they can afford their heating bills. This is not an unfamiliar story to young families either.

There is also evidence that those who live in what are classed as affluent areas are also suffering from the effects of fuel poverty. With ever-increasing interest-rate rises, and another one pending during the summer months, this problem will only get worse.

The real difficulty is in identifying those who are suffering from fuel poverty, and even then there is no guarantee that help can be given, particularly if one or other partner is currently employed. The unemployed at least have a fighting chance of receiving some type of help. However, many of my constituents are already in a lot of debt because of the disgraceful sham of the tax credit system. As overpayments occur on a continual basis, it has become common practice for the Inland Revenue to seek repayments through the child tax credit allocation, leaving little or no benefit going into the household. Those people are in real dire straits.

Speaking in my capacity as party spokesperson for the elderly, I have already requested that there should be an immediate increase in the winter payment this year. Fuel payments, and more importantly the basic state pension, must be reviewed as a matter of urgency to bring them into line with inflation.

Millions are spent on notifying the general public of unclaimed benefits by the older members of our

society. If so much is unclaimed, the winter fuel payments can be increased. It will go some way towards saving a life, because this is how serious a problem fuel poverty is.

There have been and will continue to be deaths until something is done. Since the publication of the Department for Social Development's fuel poverty strategy in 2004, the average income has increased by 6%, benefits have increased by approximately 2%, and fuel prices have increased by a massive 70%.

5.15 pm

Shamefully, nothing has changed since 2004. If anything, the number of homes that are fuel poor has increased. Therefore, it is vital that we review the entire strategy, as it is clear that there has been no improvement in the situation. In 2004, Northern Ireland had the highest rate of fuel poverty, and it may still retain that top slot. I support the motion, and I commend Roy Beggs and Fred Cobain for bringing it to the House.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank Mr Cobain and Mr Beggs for proposing the motion, which I support.

In 2004, households that were headed by older people were much more likely to be living in fuel poverty. Some 39% of people aged between 60 and 74, and 42% of those aged 75 and over, were more likely to be suffering from fuel poverty than younger age groups. Some 79% of dwellings built before 1945 have repair faults. Older people are more likely to live in older houses, which are less likely to be energy efficient. The Housing Executive's Interim House Condition Survey of 2004 clearly demonstrates that a large proportion of older people are living in accommodation that is in an unfit state of repair, or below the decent home standard.

In 2006, some 6,000 homes had insulation measures installed, at a total cost of £11 million, and the winter fuel payment was received by 320,000 people. That is not an index-linked figure, as has been mentioned. However, it should be index-linked, because otherwise it is an arbitrary figure.

Despite those measures, the rising costs of oil, gas and electricity leave many older people on low and fixed incomes at risk of fuel poverty. A house is in fuel poverty if the occupants have to spend more than 10% of their income in order to maintain an acceptable temperature throughout the home.

Fuel poverty has even encroached on the Assembly. Recently, there have been complaints about the temperature in the Chamber — a Member described it as being like a stepmother's breath on the back of one's neck. On a more serious note, consider how difficult it is for a household in fuel poverty when one makes a comparison with the Assembly, which has large resources for heating.

Since 2001, some 1,500 older people have died of cold-related illnesses, which is an appalling statistic. A recent report from Save the Children indicates that almost 7,000 children in my constituency are living in poverty in the Newry area. A family of two adults and two children is considered to be below the poverty line if it has a benefit income of £289 or more.

Fuel poverty has an impact on the health of the old and the young, and that impacts directly on healthcare provision. There are many schemes in operation to help relieve fuel poverty — the warm homes scheme has been lauded, and has been effective. However, only a concentrated and properly funded initiative to tackle fuel poverty will have any effect. That includes the provision of affordable social housing, and a realistic rate for benefits.

An old and often-used cliché states that the measure of any society is how it looks after its most vulnerable members, namely the old and the young. Unfortunately, we have a long way to go to fulfil that obligation. I support the motion. Go raibh maith agat.

Lord Morrow: I welcome the debate. I would like to pay tribute to the Energy Action Grants Agency, which administers the warm homes scheme and which was established some years ago. That organisation does a superb job. In Eaga plc's table for the Province's 18 constituencies, my constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone is near the top for take-up.

Therefore, the people of Fermanagh and South Tyrone have benefited from that scheme, and I want to put on record the appreciation of all those who have done so, to date. Some Members have a working knowledge of the warm homes scheme and were quite close to it at its introduction. It has been of benefit to many elderly people; however, things have moved on. Perhaps it is time for some new ideas and for changes to be made. I also welcome the presence in the Chamber of the Minister for Social Development, Margaret Ritchie. I have little doubt that she will devote energy and enthusiasm to the issue. I look forward to hearing what she has to say.

Another increase in gas or oil prices may be an inconvenience for some people. However, for many families across Northern Ireland, it can push them across a barrier, which results in their paying out more than 10% of their income on energy bills. That is something that must be checked. It is a situation that, as the motion highlights, is increasingly common for older people and for many working families on low incomes. It is a very real challenge for those in greatest need. We often read of older people who have to make the choice in winter between heating their home and eating.

Good work has been started by previous Ministers and by the introduction of a fuel poverty strategy here. However, I support a call for a review into the strategy

as it would allow the Assembly to help implement changes that could make a real difference to people's lives. Unfortunately, the Minister does not have control over the winter heating allowance payable to pensioners. Nevertheless, I hope that she will make representations to the Chancellor for an increase in that payment, on which many older people rely heavily.

Many people were confused after receiving the one-off payment for heating in 2005 — which was not repeated last year — because they believed it was to be a yearly increase in their fuel allowance. I ask the Minister to make some representation to the Chancellor on that matter too. I suspect that her call for an investigation into that payment would have some impact.

The Minister might also consider a review of the warm homes scheme. Although it is not a perfect scheme, it is a good one and has been very successful. It needs to be reviewed as some years have passed. In the case of households with children in particular, there may be some scope for the Minister to investigate how the scheme might be widened out with a review of benefits entitlement.

There are many people who could save a significant amount of money if they received some very simple home-insulation measures. While the Minister is very conscious of cost issues, the measures would ultimately pay benefits to the Northern Ireland Budget through a reduction in health costs, given the implications of living in poorly heated property.

A review of the fuel poverty strategy will be welcomed so that a proper investigation can determine its effects. As some homes are lifted out of fuel poverty, the focus should be shifted to those people who are harder to reach and much more vulnerable. Incidentally, there are many people who qualify for assistance but, unfortunately, do not take up the offer. The Minister, her Department, and those who administer the scheme have some responsibilities here. I have no criticisms of those who administer the scheme; however, I want a greater effort to be made in reaching those families who would qualify for assistance but who do not avail of the scheme, or do not know about it. That is not due to lack of publicity — it has been widely publicised. Nevertheless, I would like to see a greater uptake of the scheme.

I could say much more, Mr Deputy Speaker, but I realise that my allotted time to speak has expired and that you are going to tell me to quit.

Mr Deputy Speaker: You are absolutely right, Lord Morrow.

Mr Burns: I welcome the opportunity to speak about fuel poverty, and I am glad that that the issue has been raised so early in the life of this Assembly.

Fuel poverty is a serious problem in all our constituencies. We must ensure that we follow through with the targets that are set out in the fuel poverty strategy, which aims to eradicate fuel poverty in vulnerable fuel-poor households by 2010, and in all households by 2016. There have been significant developments to meet those targets in the past few years, and I welcome all initiatives to ensure that fuel poverty is eliminated.

Northern Ireland has been shown to have the highest rates of fuel poverty in the United Kingdom, with one in three households suffering from its effects. Research has shown that fuel poverty damages health and social well-being. It particularly affects people from vulnerable groups. Evidence has shown that people who live warm homes are healthier, and their children are more likely to reach their full potential.

Northern Ireland's fuel poverty strategy was published in November 2004. It aims to end fuel poverty by the dates that I have already mentioned and to ensure that no household in the social rented sector suffers from fuel poverty. The main figures for the Housing Executive's 'Interim House Condition Survey 2004' were based on the 'Northern Ireland House Condition Survey 2001', and, given the considerable time lag between then and 2007, significant developments have been made in dealing with fuel poverty. I call for the urgent publication of the 'Northern Ireland House Condition Survey 2006', so that we can envisage current conditions in the housing sector and view fuel-poverty rates in Northern Ireland.

There are several main causes of fuel poverty, including high fuel costs, low income and poor energy efficiency. The relevant Ministers must look at those issues, and their Departments must work together to ensure that development and improvement in those areas will lead to the eradication of fuel poverty.

Considerable progress has been made in reducing fuel poverty in Northern Ireland between 2001 and 2004. However, the constant change in fuel prices and the introduction of higher rates for householders does not show the aggregate picture of what has happened between 2004 and 2007. Hikes in fuel prices may even have made improvements null and void.

One of the most vulnerable groups affected by fuel poverty is the elderly. Help the Aged reported that 1,500 elderly people in Northern Ireland died in the winters between 2000 and 2006. There were 449 deaths in 2005-06 alone as a result of fuel poverty.

Fuel poverty leads to several adverse health effects. In 2004, the Health Promotion Agency said:

"People experiencing fuel poverty can suffer from many ... conditions relating to cold homes costing the Northern Ireland health service around £30 million each year."

New figures are available about the cost to the Health Service, but it is easy to assume that those figures are not decreasing sufficiently, if at all.

The number of people experiencing fuel poverty will increase with the introduction of the new capital-value-based rates. Older people who live alone in their family home are distraught about the situation in which they find themselves, and many are trying to reduce their fuel bills by living in, and heating, one room only. They are embarrassed to admit that they are struggling.

The Department for Social Development announced in January 2007 that the Housing Executive was to undertake the largest solar-panel installation scheme in Europe. That scheme will see about 1,200 fuel-poor homes benefit from a 100%-funded solar panel. That will reduce fuel bills and provide people with affordable and sustainable heating solutions. Some £70 million has been spent on tackling fuel poverty and £20 million has been spent on improving energy efficiency through the warm homes scheme.

5.30 pm

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie):

I welcome the motion and the many contributions from Members. Time permitting, I will try to address all the issues that have been raised — if I cannot do so today, I will happily write to individual Members.

A household is in fuel poverty if, to maintain an acceptable temperature throughout the home, it has to spend more than 10% of its income on fuel. Fuel poverty impacts on all aspects of life: housing, health, the environment, children's education and social inclusion. It leads to cold, damp homes. It forces people to make a choice that nobody should ever have to make, between food on the table and warmth in the home.

As many Members have said, fuel poverty can drive people into ill health, thereby placing a serious burden on our health services, and it can also impact on mortality rates. Those issues need to be addressed by my Department, and, on a cross-cutting basis, by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and, perhaps, others.

Therefore, it makes a lot of sense to tackle fuel poverty. Fuel poverty is, of course, influenced by three factors: poor energy efficiency, low incomes and high energy costs. Members will be aware of the vital role in tackling poor energy efficiency of initiatives such as the warm homes scheme and the Housing Executive's improvement and maintenance programmes. In the last financial year, these programmes spent £44 million, which meant that around 16,000 homes were provided with energy efficiency measures.

In the past year, the volume of work carried out under the warm homes scheme has increased — the number of homes involved has increased from 8,250 to

10,000 — and the eligibility criteria for central heating systems have been extended to include those aged 60 or over who are in receipt of non-means-tested disability-related benefits. In addition, funding is now available for a number of fuel-poverty partnership schemes, which operate in conjunction with our main programmes and help to address the needs of those vulnerable people who might fall outside the scope of the warm homes scheme.

These schemes are also supported by Northern Ireland Electricity (NIE), which works in partnership with a range of statutory, voluntary and community organisations. Through the NIE energy efficiency programme, between 20 and 30 schemes are delivered each year to help customers to reduce energy use and, therefore, bills.

In 2007-08, NIE will manage a £4.5 million package of measures aimed at providing central heating and insulation to priority vulnerable households across Northern Ireland, thereby helping to provide affordable warmth to households that are not eligible for the warm homes scheme. I think that Mr Cobain referred to that. Those schemes depend very much on the drive and determination of those in the private and voluntary sector to tackle fuel poverty. I pay tribute to the members of those partnership schemes.

The success of those programmes is clearly shown by the fact that 97% of properties in Northern Ireland now have some form of central heating; 78% have some form of wall insulation; and 95% have loft insulation. As a result, the number of households in fuel poverty has fallen from 33% in 2001 to 24% in 2004.

A full survey was carried out last year, and I eagerly await the findings, which, unfortunately, will not be available until October. However, I will be meeting the Housing Executive next week when I chair its annual performance review, and I will specifically ask what the interim report tells us about the 2006 house-condition survey. I have already let the Housing Executive know of my intention to ask about that.

I am concerned that fuel prices have increased considerably in the past two years. Those increases have not helped our situation, though there were price reductions in gas and electricity earlier this year.

Many households with an annual income below £15,000 are likely to experience fuel poverty, and such provisions as the winter fuel payment, the introduction of pension credit and the various benefit uptake projects are aimed at helping to maximise household incomes. I hope that more people will avail of the benefit uptake programme that I launched two weeks ago. Research has raised concerns about the number of people who appear not to have claimed the support to which they are entitled. It is intolerable that vulnerable people are missing out on support that is rightfully theirs, and I am determined to address that issue in my time as Minister. The Social Security Agency's benefit uptake

programme for the year ahead will target the people who are entitled to support, for instance, those who have a disability or a long-term illness as well as pensioners, carers and families with children.

Benefits are only part of the solution. The best route out of poverty for most people and their families is work. However, some of those who experience fuel poverty are the working poor, and it is important that we do everything possible to address that growing problem. That is why I intend to commission further research into establishing the extent of the problem, and I assure the House that the findings and recommendations from that research will be fully considered. Through the national minimum wage and tax credits — £550 million per annum in Northern Ireland — we will also strive to ensure that people will be better off in work than on benefits.

Considering our higher fuel prices, there is now a more pressing need to conserve energy and explore new forms of renewable energy to help reduce the impact of the volatile fossil fuel market.

Mr McGlone: The Minister referred to the extensive levels of fuel poverty, and 76% of households that experience fuel poverty — among them young families and pensioners — have an annual income of £10,000 or less in many cases. The positive benefits of energy-efficient measures that the Minister referred to are being substantially undermined by the fuel prices that are escalating disproportionately to income. Has the Minister given any consideration to the use of bioenergy? It would have two advantages: the potential environmental benefit; and, importantly, it would provide a cheaper home-heating alternative to fossil fuels.

Ms Ritchie: I thank Mr McGlone for his intervention. The Assembly is up to the challenge, and the environment and renewable energy fund is making a major contribution towards the development of technologies that will enable a more widespread use of renewable energy. That will not only contribute to environmental improvements; it will help us further reduce fuel poverty.

In response to Mr McGlone, I intend to explore the use of biomass heating in housing-association developments this year, but I will write to him with a more detailed response.

The environment and renewable energy fund has been allocated over £60 million for 2006-08, and it will allow us to test out technologies to increase the use of renewable energy: the use of solar panels; biomass energy in the form of wood-burning boilers; and the development of pilot community-based heating systems in social housing.

A fuel-poverty focus has been added to the fund, and, as a result, approximately 1,200 fuel-poor homes in the private and social sectors will benefit from 100%-funded solar panel installation in 2006-08, and that will lead to

reduced fuel bills and make a significant contribution to the objective of creating affordable warmth.

It is only through the continued efforts of all who are involved that we will realise the vision of a society in which people live in warm and comfortable homes and are not worried about the effects that the cold will have on their health.

A great deal has been achieved, but there is more to do. I intend to reactivate as soon as possible the interdepartmental fuel poverty group, which will be under my chairmanship. That group will consider innovative ways of tackling fuel poverty. I am confident that, by working in partnership, we will continue to make significant progress in tackling the problem.

I want to pay tribute to the fuel poverty advisory group, to which Ms McGill referred, for its hard work over the past two years and for the time and effort that it has given freely to assist on fuel poverty. I hope to engage with it in the near future. I have read the group's annual report, and I acknowledge that the previous Administration accepted 30 of its 37 recommendations. I will look afresh at the seven recommendations that were originally rejected to see whether there is any merit in their introduction. I am prepared to consider any proposal that will help to alleviate the scourge of fuel poverty in our community, and I would be grateful for the support of the Assembly and the Committee for Social Development.

Many issues were raised during the debate. Mr Cobain referred to a question that he asked me at the meeting of the Committee for Social Development the other day. I can say quite categorically that I wish to continue with the previous Administration's target to eradicate fuel poverty in vulnerable households by 2010. Lord Morrow asked whether I would make representations to the Chancellor of the Exchequer. I will be quite happy to do so and will forward a letter to him tomorrow. I firmly believe that pensioners deserve what they are entitled to. They face higher fuel costs and very high costs for other consumable products. If we have any concern for the public, pensioners should come first.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Ms Ritchie: Mr McHugh asked how likely it was that the Department for Social Development would meet the target of eradicating fuel poverty by 2010. Notwithstanding the impact that higher fuel costs and lower incomes have in Northern Ireland, I intend to work towards that target. I will seek the support of the Committee and the Assembly in so doing.

Mr Cobain asked how much the eradication of fuel poverty would cost and how long it would take to achieve. Along with my departmental officials, I will continue to commit resources to the eradication of fuel poverty for as long as it takes. Currently, we are committing £40 million a year to that task. Mr Cobain

also asked what action the Department had taken to ensure that those who are most in need receive all the benefits to which they are entitled. Under the warm homes scheme, a benefit entitlement check has been introduced. Originally, that check was to be only for those who qualified under the warm homes scheme, but there are plans to extend the check to all who apply under that scheme. I will take on board what Mr Cobain said.

I have addressed questions on the levy that is to be placed on energy producers by saying that Northern Ireland Electricity will provide and manage the £4.5 million package of measures that is aimed at providing central heating and insulation for vulnerable households across Northern Ireland. I am aware of other related issues, and I will write to Mr Cobain about those.

Mr Ramsey asked about the fuel poverty indicators that are used in Great Britain, and he asked why they are not used in Northern Ireland. They have been piloted in England, where an annual house condition survey is carried out. We do not carry out such a survey in Northern Ireland. The results of the 2006 pilot survey will be published shortly, and I will be talking to the Housing Executive about them next week. That will give us the opportunity to consider progress, and I will reconsider the value of measuring annually our progress in tackling fuel poverty.

Mr Ramsey also asked what measures were being taken to address fuel poverty at local level. Many groups are involved in such work — for example, Bryson Charitable Group, the Health Promotion Agency, Northern Ireland Electricity, Phoenix Gas and the energy efficiency advice centres. I will write to the Member about the matter.

I am aware that I have not answered some points that were raised, but I will write to the Members concerned.

5.45 pm

Mr Cobain: I thank the Minister and all Members who participated in the debate.

Every issue that has been debated today is a matter of financial priority for the Executive. Many Members are hopeful that, because of its local autonomy, the Assembly will be able to prioritise the needs of people who live in this part of the United Kingdom. As the Member for North Antrim Mr Storey mentioned, the issue of fuel poverty is different from other issues because if it is not eradicated the number of people who die from cold-related illnesses will dramatically increase in coming years. That is what makes the issue distinct from all the other matters that have been debated.

I took issue with the Minister's comment that the best route out of poverty is through work. That comment cannot be applied to the working poor who, despite being in work, are still poor. For older people and

pensioners who have worked all of their lives, working is not an option. When it is suggested that people should go out to work, we must be careful about to whom we are referring.

The vast majority of people who experience fuel poverty are those who are socially and economically deprived — a fancy term for “the poor”. Those people are the most vulnerable in society, and the Assembly must protect them. The way to ensure that as many people as possible have access to the fuel-poverty programme is through advice. I have listened to the Minister, and other Ministers in the past, say how unfortunate it is that so few people take up the benefits to which they are entitled. A large number of people who live in deprived areas are not always advised about benefits in a way that they can easily understand.

If the Assembly wants to ensure that as many socially and economically deprived people as possible benefit from the warm homes scheme, it should be done through front-line advice. The Committee for Social Development discussed that issue last week. It is essential that there is independent, free advice at source — in the community. The Assembly should encourage, promote and pay for advice programmes. I hope that the Minister will take that issue on board.

There is a need for new forms of renewable energy such as solar panels, which have the potential to reduce fuel bills for the working poor by up to 25%. They can be installed quickly at a fixed capital cost, and I encourage the Minister to explore that route.

The warm homes scheme has been successful. However, it must be reviewed and extended to include all people who are over 60 years of age, not only those who are over 60 years of age and on low incomes. The scheme must also be extended to people with disabilities and young families. Although it is an additional financial burden, small amounts of money can make huge differences to fuel poverty.

Further consideration must be given to affordability tariffs. The Assembly is prepared to examine affordability tariffs for water charges; it is essential that they be considered for energy costs.

We must do whatever we can to improve the quality of life of those who are socially and economically deprived — the poor. No anti-poverty strategy could be complete without the inclusion of a fuel-poverty strategy. It would be ludicrous to suggest otherwise.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Social Development to review the strategy for the eradication of fuel poverty, particularly amongst pensioner households and households with children.

Motion made:

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

ADJOURNMENT

Funding for Resurfacing of Roads in the Strangford Constituency

Mr Deputy Speaker: Today is the first time that there will be an Adjournment debate in this mandate of the Assembly. Therefore, I remind Members that there will be no winding-up speech, the Minister will have 10 minutes to respond, and the only Question to be put at the conclusion of the debate will be that the Assembly adjourns.

Mr McCarthy: I thank my colleagues on the Business Committee for allowing me to bring an important item of business to the Floor of the Assembly, and I am grateful to Members for staying in the Chamber at the end of a long and busy day. I also thank the Minister for Regional Development, Conor Murphy, for being here this afternoon for the debate. Many people who reside in the Strangford constituency and I regard the deplorable condition of many of the roads as a major problem. The same cry for help comes from the tip of the Ards Peninsula beyond Portaferry to the edge of the constituency beyond Saintfield, Carryduff, and so forth.

The constituents of Strangford are hard-working taxpayers and ratepayers. They expect, and deserve, their fair share of Government expenditure on whatever sphere of social activity may be under discussion. The subject of today's Adjournment debate is the improvement of road surfaces, which is high on the list of the many complaints that I receive from local people. My constituents expect me and other elected colleagues to push for better conditions, and that is the purpose of today's debate.

I put on record my appreciation for the work carried out on the roads by the local Roads Service section office. However, given its limited resources, it can only do so much. I am sure that the Minister for Regional Development will respond to any requests for additional resources by quoting statistics, and he will say that the Strangford constituency gets its fair share of the roads budget. Those who live there, and are out and about throughout the constituency, have a different view.

The Strangford constituency, as everywhere else in Northern Ireland, has, unfortunately, experienced its fair share of road casualties, and Members sympathise with all those families who have suffered. Every Member has a duty to do what is necessary to prevent further occurrences. If such prevention requires additional investment in road structures, the relevant authority must provide it. All too often, nothing is done until someone is killed or seriously injured, and then remedial action is taken. That is not good enough.

Many constituents and I are concerned about the poor condition of the A20 and A2 roads on both sides of the Ards Peninsula from Newtownards to Portaferry and beyond. Many people use those roads daily to travel to and from work. I can assure the Minister that, because of the many humps and hollows, twists and turns, sunken service covers, drainage and gratings, flooding, and so forth, my constituents are exhausted even before they reach work in the morning.

Something must be done. If increased tourism and business are to be supported and encouraged, more investment is needed on those roads. Such investment would provide value for money not only for residents of the locality but for visitors who come to enjoy the area.

The Ards Peninsula and the rest of the Strangford constituency have much to offer — outdoor activities, sports and stunning scenery. There is a racing track at Kirkistown, numerous golf courses, beautiful beaches, Exploris — the Northern Ireland Aquarium in Portaferry — and abundant caravan parks. All those activities require a good-quality road network, which there currently is not. Members must ensure that the tourism potential of the area is met and that constituents prosper.

I also appeal for vast improvements to the area's rural roads. In Strangford, people suffer from facilities that were originally built for horses and carts. The road network must now cater for enormous tractors, silage trailers, combine harvesters, large milk tankers, and so on. The people expect better in the twenty-first century.

In recent times, water mains have been provided to many districts throughout the constituency. I acknowledge that that is a major investment, but it entails the ripping-up of many roads. That has resulted in an inadequately smooth or level surface being reinstated. Already, I have received complaints about the Ballyeasborough Road, Gransha Road, Loughdoo Road, Rubane Road, High Street in Portaferry, Main Street in Greyabbey — the list goes on and on. I expect that Roads Service officials will insist that nothing but the best replacement surfaces will be tolerated after the Northern Ireland Water roadworks are completed.

I must also highlight the concerns of local residents, who have had difficulty convincing the Roads Service to provide traffic-calming measures in areas where they feel that someone will end up being killed or seriously injured — particularly in housing developments. The same goes for requests for short lengths of footpath. I appeal to the Minister for Regional Development to ensure that investment is provided that enables every precaution that might avoid road casualties in Strangford — and in every Member's constituency.

I cordially invite the Minister to visit my constituency to see for himself the daily nightmare that people who use its roads endure. I apologise to Members and the Minister for delaying their journeys home. I am sure

that the Minister will travel home on good roads, and in the comfort and luxury of a limousine. The rest of us will have to struggle on with what we have got. I ask that the Minister consider the issues raised in the Adjournment debate.

Mr Hamilton: I congratulate Mr McCarthy for securing the Adjournment debate on this issue, which is of importance to our constituents. I am sure that, over the course of his time in office, the Minister will hear another 17 similarly well-put cases and representations for the resurfacing of roads across Northern Ireland's other constituencies. However, in Strangford, there is some justification for making the case.

An answer to a parliamentary question to the previous Minister with responsibility for regional development, David Cairns, highlighted the maintenance expenditure between 2001 and 2006 for all council areas. In the Ards area, which covers the majority of the Strangford constituency, less than £20 million was invested in roads. In the east, people repeatedly hear about how bad roads are in the west of the Province. To illustrate that, for the same period, Fermanagh and Omagh received more than £30 million of investment for road maintenance. Given its population and the length of roads there, less than £20 million of investment in an area such as Ards is comparatively insufficient.

Understandably, Mr McCarthy concentrated on the Ards Peninsula, which is his stomping ground, but I wish to draw the Minister's attention to life outside of the Ards Peninsula. Roads throughout the constituency, particularly on the western side of Strangford Lough and into mid-Down, also suffer from poor surfacing and standards.

6.00 pm

Moreover, I wish to draw his attention to the state of many urban roads. The Strangford constituency is a mix of urban and rural settlements, and the local section office recognises that many streets in towns, such as Newtownards, are in need of repair, but it does not have the resources to deal with them.

This is an important issue in the Strangford constituency for three reasons. First, as the proposer mentioned, there is tourism. Strangford Lough is beautiful, and regularly draws many tourists. There are many attractions, such as the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust (WWT) at Castle Espie, Mount Stewart — both of which are in rural areas — and the Exploris aquarium at Portaferry. It is vital that roads to those areas are kept in a good state, not only for ease of access and attractiveness, but for the impression of the area that they generate.

Secondly, it is important economically. There are many small-to-medium-sized companies located in rural areas in the Strangford constituency, so there is an understandable need for good road access for those companies to transport their goods to market and import raw materials as quickly as possible.

Thirdly, and most importantly, the proposer mentioned the commute into Belfast. The drive between any part of Strangford to Belfast is becoming increasingly difficult and frustrating for those who commute daily. It is an area of relatively high employment, but, because of economic setbacks over the years and the decline of traditional industries, most people work in the Belfast area. That has an impact on the roads, many of which are totally unsuited to the volume of traffic and are, therefore, under strain.

Mr McCarthy mentioned the A2 and the A20 on the Ards Peninsula; in addition, the A22 from Comber to Belfast has always suffered problems with drainage and is ill-equipped for the amount of traffic that uses it.

It would be remiss of me, in a debate on roads in the Strangford constituency, not to raise the issue of the need for new roads, particularly in the context of the pressure on current roads to cope with the volume of traffic.

I thank the Minister for his reply to two questions that I put to him a few weeks ago about the anticipated commencement of construction work in the autumn on the southern distributor road in Newtownards and the Frederick Street link. I hope that they go ahead, because they are badly needed for investment purposes and for easing congestion.

There is also a need for the third phase of the Comber by-pass to be constructed. All these new roads and others will alleviate much of the pressure on existing roads and diminish the need for constant repair and maintenance on them.

I congratulate the Member for bringing this important motion forward, and it is good to have the opportunity to raise an issue specific to the Strangford constituency. I concur that the issue is regularly brought to our attention by our constituents. Although a few people want to talk about the strategic roads, such as the Comber by-pass and the relief roads for Newtownards, the issues that come to our doors are, by and large, about repairs, maintenance and the need for resurfacing. I hope that the Minister can address this issue in a way that is satisfactory to all in Strangford.

Mr McNarry: I want to talk about roads in general, and road surfaces in particular, in the other 17 constituencies. I ask the Minister why Strangford's roads, particularly their surfaces, are considerably worse than those in the other 17 constituencies. Members will be relieved that I will not talk about the other 17 constituencies today. However, I ask the Minister to tell us why Strangford's road surfaces are the worst in Northern Ireland.

Not only is Strangford the most beautiful constituency in Northern Ireland — it must rate on a par with many exceptional constituencies in the United Kingdom. Yet, somehow, I suspect that news of Strangford's beauty has escaped the Department of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment (DETI), which is unable to direct potential investors towards Strangford on a regular basis. Clearly, the Tourist Board has long forgotten where Strangford is, and the Department for Regional Development's (DRD's) priorities must lie elsewhere.

The only — and totally unacceptable — reason for that neglect must be that DETI, the Tourist Board and DRD are only too aware of the chronic state of Strangford's roads and therefore steer clear of pushing investment or encouraging tourism in the numbers that the area deserves; and in the case of DRD it is too embarrassed to even commence with a wish list for road resurfacing.

The traffic-transfer system serving other constituencies that share carriageways entering most, if not all, parts of the Strangford constituency is a decent one. Thereafter, however, the condition of many of the roads deteriorates. Residents, local people and local road users are forced to use not just second-rate road surfaces but, in many cases, fifth-rate road surfaces. It is clear that the upkeep of our roads does not keep pace with road usage or with the needs of the family vehicles on the roads due to the almost non-existent regular bus service to the many villages and townlands throughout the constituency. I recognise that that does not fall within the Minister's remit: at least, I do not think it does. Nevertheless, the car is the only way to get about.

I could use all my allocated time to simply list all the roads in Strangford that require resurfacing. However, I want to emphasise that driving in Strangford can be very dangerous: hazardous for drivers and hard on the vehicles. Many of the roads are tracks, and too many are full of potholes and poor repairs followed by repair after repair. They are uneven and greatly neglected.

Strangford deserves a commitment from the Minister and his Department. A positive review is required that challenges the internal departmental criteria of what is accepted as resurfacing and provides a new definition —

Mrs I Robinson: Does the Member accept that the situation is not totally the fault of the Roads Service and that the Planning Service is sitting on a major development plan for Castlebawn, for which we await a decision? The road infrastructure for that project — if it got the go-ahead — would relieve a great deal of the traffic congestion in Newtownards.

Mr McNarry: The Member's point — she is also the Member of Parliament for the area — is well made, although it may be an opinion on which she and I will differ not too many days hence. I am sure that the Minister will take note of her views, but for the purposes of Mr McCarthy's motion I wish to deal solely with the issue of road surfacing. Those are the matters that we are being asked to address.

I want to say to the Minister that the criteria that I mentioned when seeking a new definition must move away from the acceptable norm that road surfacing —

as produced in Strangford — gives value for money. When we get down to it, a resurfacing job amounts to a scattering of stones covered with a tar membrane, which takes the workers an hour or an hour and a half, and away they go. That cycle is repeated over and over again; it cannot represent value for money, because the problem is not being solved.

When it comes to the resurfacing of roads, it seems that the Department has adopted a quick-fix mentality. In my experience, repairs last only a short time. That approach may be quick, but it is not a fix, and it is certainly not a solution. I urge the Minister to address the dire plight of Strangford, which suffers such lamentable roads. Constituents suffer them every day, as do Members who travel back and forth between the Assembly and the constituency. That is a matter on which the Minister will find unanimity. When Strangford's Member of Parliament addresses the Chamber, she will probably refer to a volume of constituents' letters that is even larger than mine.

The Minister must listen to our constituents, and change the mentality of his Department. The current approach is just not working.

Mrs I Robinson: I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate. Given the rural nature of the majority of Northern Ireland's constituencies, it would come as no surprise to Members if all 18 constituencies should make a complaint similar to that articulated by the proposer of the motion.

I find it difficult to take Mr McCarthy's complaint seriously, as most of his constituency work is concentrated in Kircubbin and Portaferry. I doubt whether he could tell me anything about the road infrastructure in Killyleagh or in other parts of the constituency.

Mr McNarry: He did mention Saintfield.

Mrs I Robinson: That was good. That is a part of the constituency, and I am delighted that Mr McCarthy recognises that. Perhaps he will visit Saintfield on occasion to see what is going on in that area.

Mr McNarry: He will not visit it for another four years.

Mrs I Robinson: It should not matter that there will be no election for four years. A Member's work can make all the difference.

We all wish to see an improvement to the road infrastructure — we would be mad not to. We understand that a backlog of work built up over the years of the Troubles, which prevented spending on the infrastructure.

However, it is not all doom and gloom. I shall highlight but one example of improvement, and I make no apology that it was the work of my husband, who was then Minister for Regional Development. When he became Minister, the second thing that he did was to make a

decision to build the Comber bypass, for which people had waited 40 years and had given up hope of seeing. One member of Ards Borough Council said that he would eat his hat if he ever saw the bypass built. We gave him a hat, with salt and sugar, in case he preferred it that way. He took the joke in good spirit.

That was the second decision that the Minister took; the first had been to build the Toome bypass, which afforded no additional votes for my party, given the area in which it is situated.

I must also flag up improvements to the road network in Greyabbey. However, half the roads in the village still require attention. I have written, as a Member of Parliament, to the Roads Service on numerous occasions to ensure that people who live on one side of the village are put to no unfair disadvantage.

I note that the roads of Kircubbin are exceptionally well maintained at present. That is not due to Mr McCarthy alone. The proof of my efforts is the thickness of my files with responses that I have elicited on that matter.

Mr McCarthy: Will the Member give way?

Mrs I Robinson: No. The Member is sitting, and he shouts at me, so I will not give way.

There have been vast improvements to the roads in the Kircubbin area. I am not here as a cheerleader for DRD; but I am delighted at the improvements that have been carried out. There is much more to be done. The coastal roads of Strangford carry 17,000 visitors to Mount Stewart over a weekend. The potholes cannot be that big, or they would not be going there.

6.15 pm

I urge the Minister to look more favourably at Strangford and at the need for further investment in its roads. There is a beautiful scenic route all the way through the Ards Peninsula, from Portaferry to Portavogie, passing Mount Stewart, into Comber, and then on to Killyleagh. If we want to see results from the so-called peace process, we must have the best roads to help attract tourism.

We must underpin a working relationship with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and other agencies in order to promote Strangford for the betterment of all of its people, and for the rest of the Province, where the current infrastructure does not allow a smooth journey to the beautiful scenic areas that we have to offer.

Members who represent Strangford will take up the issue of our rural community's being disadvantaged in respect of public transport. Now that we have our own devolved institution, we can have a go at Ministers and ensure that they are accountable for the needs of our constituencies.

I am pleased that this debate on Strangford's roads has been secured. I really have to bite my tongue sometimes

when it comes to Mr McCarthy, because we often see memos that claim that he has done all sorts of wonderful things when, in fact, it was not him and he came in on the coat-tails. The DUP works very hard for its constituents and has four offices in Strangford — possibly rising to five — and four MLAs. Strangford is the first constituency in Northern Ireland to return four DUP MLAs. Going by those percentages, Mr McCarthy must have very little work to do.

I am delighted to have had the opportunity to speak.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That was very entertaining — from a distance.

Mr Shannon: Tak aa' drive along tha boannie bricht shoars o' tha Airdes Peninsula, luk at tha breath takin beauty, tha awe inspirein sights an the wee village pubs sarvin oot guid food – but as yeer daein this ye haud beter hae yer bak-sippoat wi ye as ye joulit along roads that hisnae seen proaper woark kerried oot oan them fer mony muckle years.

In 2005 mony was sut aside fer Coonty Doon an woark kerried-out. Bit tha ither sied o' tha loch hiss' bin sadly left ahint.

For those who have not followed those words, they mean: take a drive along the beautiful shores of the Ards Peninsula and see the breathtaking beauty, the awe-inspiring views and the quaint village pub serving great food, but, while you are doing that, you had better have your back support with you, Minister, for you will be jolted along some roads that have not seen proper work carried out on them for far too many years.

In 2005, money was set aside for Down and work was carried out, but the other side of the lough has been sadly left behind. My colleague Iris Robinson MP is absolutely right: some good work has been done, for which I give credit to the Department. Credit is also due to the local Roads Service office, which is very industrious and hard-working. Disappointingly, the money that is available to the local Roads Service offices has not kept track with inflation. The local office has had the same budget for the last five years — each year has been the same — but the demands on the roads have increased. A large net has been thrown out by this debate, and we must highlight those arterial routes where there are clear problems that must be addressed.

I too give credit to Peter Robinson for the Comber bypass, which has been a real plus. That shows that local accountability works, which is important. We are now looking towards phase 3 of that project, which is as critically important as phase 2.

The Castlebawn development has been lying idle for ages. Iris Robinson said that planning is a big issue, but there is a link road to the east of Newtownards, which does not seem to be any further on than it was two or three years ago.

There is also a large arterial connection between Comber and Carryduff, carrying on towards Hillsborough. The condition of that road must be addressed — if it has not been already — and I ask the Minister to take that on board.

In 2002, I requested a major investment for the A20 Newtownards to Portaferry road — I am still waiting. The queue of traffic driving up the Ards Peninsula any morning between 8.30 am and 9.00 am is often tailed back to the Maltings and on some occasions further back towards Finlays Road. The resulting traffic is an indication of the number of new-build homes and the demand for houses in the Ards Peninsula. Those issues must be addressed.

Members now have the opportunity to address the matter of co-ordination; Northern Ireland Water and DRD really need to work together. Northern Ireland Water digs up the road and resurfaces it one day and shortly after that DRD comes along and puts in new gullies and so on. Those two bodies do not seem to be working together.

There are other options — and I have already referred to the A20 — but those roads are just as winding and uneven and, subsequently, just as unsafe. I have been pressing for ages for improvements to the Mount Stewart Road, which connects Ards, Ballywalter and Carrowdore. After a slight shower that road becomes a grease pit, and cars travelling between 30 mph and 40 mph come a cropper. I have asked the Department to address that matter as well. However, the budget for the local office of DRD has not increased for the past five years, and that is worrying.

Some remedial work has been carried out on the Ards Peninsula. There have also been requests for footpaths; we have thrown the net wide, as everyone else seems to be doing. As a priority, I would like a footpath between Ballywalter village and Ballywalter Bowling Club. The club has 600 members, and the busy road connecting it to the village has no footpath.

I agree with other Members that the rural roads here are probably some of the worst around. They are cracked along the edges, and grass is encroaching on the centre of the road. Those issues must be addressed. I hope that when the Minister comes down to my part of the country — I am sure that he will accept my invitation — he comes in a car with good suspension. It will be needed to survive some of the roads in that neck of the woods.

Over the years, the A20 has been given what I call “reactionary repairs”, which usually means patching up the potholes and erecting defence barriers at accident black spots. That is DRD's reaction to any problems, and that worries me. The A20 is the main road for the Ards Peninsula, and it floods in many places after heavy rainfall. The wall along the edge of the shore still has holes in it and needs urgent work, which does

not seem to have been done. If the A20 is not used and another road is taken, that can add another 25 or 30 minutes to a journey. The issue is about commuting — getting people from where they live to their place of work.

Northern Ireland Water seems to be doing more work along the Ards Peninsula than anywhere else in the Province. I do not know whether that is true, but judging by the number of complaints that I receive, it seems to be the case. I have concerns about the time it takes Northern Ireland Water to lay new pipes. It has a response time for the final resurfacing of that road. However, in many cases, it would have been more plausible for DRD and Northern Ireland Water to work together on resurfacing roads. People who live on country roads, such as Ballyeasboro Road, Tullymaddy Road and Kilbright Road North outside Carrowdore, have experienced difficulties with their cars, some of which have been damaged as a result.

The Minister must look at the whole of the Strangford area and not just the Ards Peninsula where I live and where those incidents have occurred. He must consider the whole area, including the arterial roads between Ards and Dundonald and between Comber and Carryduff.

For those of us who live in the area, Strangford Lough is undoubtedly the jewel in the crown of the Ards Peninsula, if not the whole of Northern Ireland.

Mr P Robinson: The world.

Mr Shannon: I could not go that far — I can speak only about Northern Ireland. All those who live close by and around Strangford Lough deserve better roads. Some roads have had no work carried out on them since the 1980s. Investment in infrastructure is needed, especially on the A20. I ask the Minister to take those matters on board.

My comments are meant to be constructive. I said at the outset that much work has been done, but I must add that a lot more needs to be done to meet the demands of an increasing population and increasing traffic. I look forward to inviting the Minister, and other Members, to our area to look at what he can do. I advise the Minister not to bring a spade with him that day, but he should ensure that his car suspension is good.

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am tempted to say that that is me told.

I thank Kieran McCarthy for bringing this debate to the Assembly today. I listened with interest to the descriptions of the Strangford area. In recent years, my only experience of the area has been flying over it in a plane, heading for Westminster or London. The last time that I drove up the peninsula was when I was about 10 years old and travelling with my parents.

Mr McNarry: It has not changed very much.

Mr Murphy: I was going to say that I suspected that that comment would draw the response that the roads have not improved since then.

From the air, the Strangford constituency is undoubtedly a very beautiful part of the world. Members have talked about its beauty, the state of its roads and how they are worse there than anywhere else. However, having listened to those comments, I am tempted to say how little we know about each other's constituencies, because I also represent a very beautiful part of the world with equally poor roads. The former Minister for Regional Development and the current Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment toured my area at one stage, visiting various installations, and they can perhaps bear testament to the poor roads there — although the Ring of Gullion area is a place of great scenic beauty.

I hear what Members, particularly David McNarry, have said about the roads in Strangford being the worst of any constituency in the North, but, equally, other Members have balanced those remarks by saying that various other areas throughout the North have their fair share of bad roads. Often when we think of peripheral areas, we think of the border areas and west of the Bann; we do not get a sense of how peripheral the eastern side of Strangford can be. It is, to some extent, off the beaten track and away from the main routes into Belfast — that is certainly true of the peninsula.

I very much take on board what people have said. A lot of specific local roads issues were raised, and I have asked my officials to take a note of the Hansard report so that if I do not pick up on any points now, I can certainly get back to Members on them. I know that Jim Shannon has already written to the Department with questions on a number of the issues that he raised today, and I expect to get back to him on some of those issues. However, anything that I do miss in this summary will certainly be picked up on later.

Generally speaking, maintaining the surfaces and underlying structures of roads and footways is essential for the social and economic well-being of the North, and it is a high priority for Roads Service.

First, I should explain that the Strangford constituency covers part of two Roads Service divisions, eastern and southern — although, of course, I do not have to explain that to the Members present. The bulk of the constituency lies within the southern division, and comprises all the Ards Borough Council area along with parts of Down District Council and Castlereagh Borough Council. Roads Service funding allocations are issued on a district council basis, thus references that I will make to expenditure across Strangford are based on extrapolated figures for the respective council areas. As Members will be aware, Roads Service prepares annual work programmes covering the development and maintenance

of the network, which reflect on availability of finances. This year's work programme is currently being finalised in preparation for presentation to the respective district councils at the spring meetings attended by Roads Service.

In 2007-08, we will spend in excess of £4 million across the Strangford constituency, which will cover a range of activities, including local transport and safety measures and network maintenance. In addition, work is scheduled to commence on major roadworks projects in Newtownards — the A20 southern distributor road and the A20 Frederick Street link, which I think Simon Hamilton referred to. Both schemes will ease traffic congestion in the town considerably, and the work will progress beyond the current financial year and cost in the region of £11 million.

Programme expenditure on resurfacing in Strangford during the 2007-8 financial year will exceed £1.3 million. Resurfacing will target the more heavily trafficked roads and those roads in need of most structural maintenance in the constituency.

I assure Members that there is an equitable distribution of roads maintenance funding across the North. I accept Mr McNarry's point about the definition of "resurfacing". I hear of similar complaints in other areas, including my own constituency, about the method of resurfacing and its durability, and I will discuss that further with Roads Service officials.

In distributing the resources available for roads maintenance, which includes resurfacing, patching, gully clearing, grass cutting etc, allocations are made to four Roads Service divisions on the basis of need, using a range of weighted indicators tailored to each maintenance activity. Roads Service divisions use those indicators when apportioning funds across council areas to ensure equitable distribution as far as possible.

Resurfacing work is generally undertaken on a priority basis reflecting both the structural condition of the road and traffic volume. A system of regular inspections by Roads Service ensures that the essential response maintenance is identified and completed as necessary. Over the past few years, Roads Service has made considerable efforts in resurfacing and strengthening the main traffic routes across the North, particularly the strategic road network linking more heavily populated urban areas.

If more funding were available — and I am conscious that the Minister of Finance is in the Chamber — more resurfacing work could be carried out. In the last three years, funding for structural maintenance has been over £60 million short of the levels recommended in the regional transportation strategy. However, that must be seen in the context of correctly managing the overall Budget, which involves assessing competing priorities and making decisions. All Ministers, as much as they

would like more money to spend, are bound by the collective priorities of the Executive.

In the last three years, £788 million has been spent on developing and maintaining our road network. Some £503 million has been invested in revenue activities including maintenance, with a further £285 million spent on capital. Up to 2015, the investment strategy for Northern Ireland envisages that some £1.9 billion will have been invested in road improvements, subject to the availability of resources in future Budget rounds, economic appraisals and statutory approvals. In the three years to the end of March 2008, some £196 million will have been invested in roads structural maintenance. I assure Members that Roads Service will continue to make strong bids for additional structural maintenance funds.

Several Members, Mr Shannon and Mr McCarthy among them, voiced concerns about the number of excavations that are being opened by utility companies. Some 40,000 excavations are opened each year. However, utility companies such as NIE, BT, Phoenix Natural Gas and NI Water have a statutory right to lay and maintain their pipes, ducts, manholes and cables beneath or over public roads.

The Street Works (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 gave Roads Service regulatory powers to control street works. However, Roads Service has no control over the number of openings made by utility companies. The 1995 Order is supported by a number of codes and practices with nationally agreed standards that utility companies and their contractors must achieve. I assure Members that sample inspections are routinely carried out by Roads Service to monitor the performance of utility companies at all stages of street works from the initial excavation to the end of the guaranteed period for the reinstatement.

However, that Order does not apply to private developers who are undertaking road improvements rather than placing apparatus as part of housing developments. Private developers operate under the Private Streets (Northern Ireland) Order 1980 and the Private Streets (Northern Ireland) Order 1992, under a licence issued by Roads Service.

In order to manage street works, Roads Service has operated a computerised street works register and notification system since 2002. It is a powerful tool for co-ordinating and monitoring street works. It allows each utility company to send electronic notices of their intention to start work at a specific location to Roads Service and other utilities. The work can then be monitored and inspected by Roads Service.

Members will be aware that the Street Works (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Order 2007 became law on 7 February 2007. The Order includes powers for Roads Service to charge for and issue permits to utility companies before carrying out street works. The Order also provides powers to set dates for street works,

to specify the routes by which they are undertaken and to impose longer embargoes on further works following substantial road or street works.

Roads Service has begun the process of developing secondary legislation and is working with various utility companies, through the NI Road Authority and Utilities Committee, to introduce the legislation so that the amended Order can have some impact on the ground.

I understand that utility companies have undertaken considerable work in the Strangford constituency over the past number of years, which has caused some disruption to traffic. The work was mainly undertaken by what was, at the time, the Water Service and involved implementing significant infrastructure improvements in the area.

As already stated, Roads Service meets all agencies undertaking work on the public highway to co-ordinate the timing of works, the need for road closures, discussing alternative routes or contraflow arrangements. Any agency carrying out roadworks must fully comply with health and safety procedures while work is in progress. Some disruption is always inevitable, but every effort is made to keep it to a minimum. The statutory authorities are requested to reinstate the road and to maintain it to a suitable standard for a period of time following the completion of the works.

Some Members made specific points. I shall look at the Hansard report and reply in writing. Several Members mentioned the Comber bypass. The previous devolved Minister was congratulated on his involvement with that project. I hope that Members are as generous to me at the end of four years.

Mr Shannon: Give us an excuse to be generous.

Mr Murphy: I suspect that I will not get off to the same start as he did.

On phase 3 of the Comber bypass, there has been consultation on proposals for an additional £400 million of strategic road improvement schemes, which would be made possible through funding envisaged in the investment strategy for Northern Ireland in the period up to 2015. Over 80 formal responses to the consultation document were received, the vast majority of which supported the proposals. Many responses identified additional schemes for inclusion in the programme, including, I understand, requests for the provision of phase 3 of the Comber bypass and the Newtownards bypass. Work on analysing responses and reassessing the strategic route improvement programme is at an advanced stage, and I hope to update Members when that has been concluded.

Mrs Robinson mentioned work on Main Street in Greyabbey, which is divided into two sections. The first runs from the mini-roundabout in the centre of the village in a southerly direction as part of the A20,

which was subject to a resurfacing improvement resurfacing scheme in 2001-02. The second section runs from the same mini-roundabout to its junction with North Street and the Ballywalter Road as part of the B5 route. That section has yet to be improved. The carriageway is in a relatively poor condition, having been opened and reinstated in many places by utilities over the years, in addition to patches where potholes have been repaired. There is also a problem with the cross-sectional profile of the street.

Mr McCarthy: Is the Minister aware that funding was available for that stretch of road in Main Street in Greyabbey around 18 months ago? For some reason, the funding was withdrawn and the work never completed. That is what makes residents so frustrated.

Mr Murphy: I take on board Mr McCarthy's remarks. I shall consult officials and draft a response to his query. Funding is often proposed for various schemes but, due to budgetary restrictions, some must fall by the wayside. The Roads Service, in common with divisions within other Departments, bids for as much funding as possible but must reassess its priorities upon receipt of its budget. That may be what happened in that case, although I do not have the exact answer.

The work on the Greyabbey project will go beyond that of a normal resurfacing scheme. The costs will therefore be higher due to carriageway excavation and so on. That perhaps explains some of the problems in that area. The estimated cost of the entire scheme is £500,000. The work must be carried out in two phases and will span two financial years.

I am sure that the House will agree that maintaining the surfaces and underlying structures of the roads and footways is essential for social and economic well-being. The case was well made in relation to tourism infrastructure, and the importance that roads infrastructure plays in that. Indeed, I am aware of that factor in my own constituency. When the time comes for bids to the Department, I hope that Members will support the bids for additional structural maintenance funds. Go raibh maith agat.

Adjourned at 6.39 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 4 June 2007

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mrs D Kelly: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Many Members, and the wider public, want to know when the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister will make a statement about the junior Minister's comments, and whether he will have anything to do with equality issues in the gay and lesbian community.

Mr Speaker: That is not a point of order. The Member knows that if she wants a debate in the House on any issue, the appropriate procedure is to submit a motion to the Business Office.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Welfare Reform Bill First Stage

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): I beg leave to lay before the Assembly a Bill [NIA 1/07] to make provision about social security and for connected purposes.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Speaker: The Bill will be put on the list of future business until a date for its Second Stage is determined.

Welfare Reform Bill Accelerated Passage

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): I beg to move

That the Welfare Reform Bill proceed under the accelerated passage procedure, in accordance with Standing Order 40(4).

Mr O'Dowd: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. A Cheann Comhairle, will Members be able to respond to the Minister for Social Development's comments this morning?

Mr Speaker: Only the Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development is permitted to take part in the debate.

Ms Ritchie: The Welfare Reform Bill proposes to put into law the same social security provisions as the Welfare Reform Act 2007, which was passed recently at Westminster.

By definition, social security Bills are exceptional. The unique position of social security, child support and pensions is specifically recognised in the Act that created the Assembly and from which it draws its powers to pass laws. Under section 87 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, I have a duty to consult with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, with a view to maintaining single systems of social security, pensions and child support between Northern Ireland and Britain.

Section 87 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 recognises the long-established principle of parity between Great Britain and Northern Ireland on social security. I acknowledge that the parity principle is, to some extent, frustrating to an Assembly that is keen to pass its own laws and form its own policies. However, the Northern Ireland social security system is not self-financing. The cost of paying benefits in Northern Ireland is subsidised heavily by Great Britain.

For example, in 2005-06, to meet its benefit obligations, the Northern Ireland National Insurance fund needed a transfer of £185 million from the Great

Britain National Insurance fund. In the same period, expenditure on non-contributory benefits, which are demand led and financed from taxation revenue, was more than £2.26 billion. The funding depends on parity. Therefore, when Members ask what reason we have for maintaining parity, the answer is that there is approximately £2.4 billion worth of reasons.

This issue is centred not simply on the money; there are important administrative reasons for maintaining parity. Owing to the fact that there is, in effect, a single system for social security across Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the Department for Social Development and the Department for Work and Pensions share computer systems for the payment of benefits. If we were to consider breaking parity, we would not only have to pick up any additional benefit costs but we might have to fund new computer infrastructures. Just think for a moment of the huge teething problems that that might cause. Therefore, I hope that the Assembly will appreciate the sound financial reasons for maintaining parity.

The Bill introduces a new employment and support allowance to replace the existing incapacity benefits. The new allowance will help to give individuals more appropriate support to enable them to stay in, or return to, work.

The Bill also provides a framework to reform and improve the design and administration of housing benefit, including the introduction —

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Ritchie: No. I have barely started, and I wish to continue. Perhaps the Member's questions will be answered as my speech progresses.

The improvements to housing benefit include the introduction of a local housing allowance for the private-rented sector. The Bill also includes measures to clarify the law relating to disability allowance and attendance allowance; extend loss-of-benefit provisions; tackle benefit fraud; and clarify various aspects of existing legislation to make it simpler to administer and easier to understand — something that Members will welcome.

Parity covers not only the content of the legislation, but, as far as possible, the timing of its implementation. To ensure that certain of the Bill's proposals are implemented at the same time as in Great Britain, the necessary powers must be available as soon as possible.

The Welfare Reform Act 2007 received Royal Assent on 3 May 2007. Some of its provisions came into force on that date, with further substantive provisions due to come into force on 3 July, two months after Royal Assent was granted.

The corresponding Northern Ireland provisions cannot come into operation until the Bill has completed its passage through the Assembly and received Royal Assent. Most of the remaining provisions will be brought into

operation by a series of commencement Orders. For instance, section 58 of the Welfare Reform Act 2007, which provides an easement of the "relevant employer" condition and makes it easier for persons suffering from certain dust-related diseases — including mesothelioma and other asbestos-related conditions — to claim compensation, is due to be brought in on 24 July 2007. Section 59, which widens the group of dependants who may make such a claim, comes into operation on 3 July 2007. The Northern Ireland equivalents of these provisions are included in clauses 52 and 53 of the Bill.

Members will be aware of the consequences of some of these terrible, and frequently terminal, diseases. In order for Northern Ireland claimants not to lose out on these easements, it is vital that the provisions come into operation as soon as possible after the Westminster Act. People in Northern Ireland, who pay the same rates of National Insurance contributions and income tax as people in Britain, have the right to expect the changes to apply here with the minimum of delay.

Although the local housing allowance changes are not due to come into operation until April 2008, in Britain, powers to make regulations providing for the introduction of the new local housing allowance will have been exercised by October 2007, subject to an exception that I will explain later. It is important, therefore, that the Northern Ireland regulations be made as soon as possible after their British counterparts. The process for deciding local housing allowance that is provided for in the Bill differs substantially from the present method for housing benefit. The detail will be set out in the regulations, and the staff of the Housing Executive and of Land and Property Services, who will operate the new arrangements, need to familiarise themselves with those processes before their introduction in April 2008. Welfare rights bodies, which advise and represent appellants, will also need time to prepare for the new system.

For the reasons that I have outlined, therefore, I am asking that the Bill proceed under the accelerated passage procedure set out in Standing Order 40(4) so that Northern Ireland law on these matters can be brought into line with that in Great Britain with the minimum of delay.

The granting of accelerated passage will mean that there will not be a formal Committee Stage. However, I have discussed the Bill's provisions with the Committee for Social Development. The Committee has some concerns about the proposal to pay local housing allowance directly to tenants. I too have reservations; it could lead to tenants' getting into debt and, possibly, to more evictions. That is why I have given a firm undertaking to consider the matter further and to return to the Committee before I seek to make the necessary regulations to give effect to that proposal. In short, I

will propose regulations to give effect to direct payment to tenants only if I think that it will work properly.

I will take further advice on that and on the assessments that are under way in GB. I want to make that absolutely clear, and I have already told the Committee for Social Development as much. Northern Ireland is lucky in that housing benefit is not paid using the same computer systems as in GB. The retention of the current system, whereby payments are made to landlords, will not break parity in any significant way. Therefore, we are in the happy and exceptional position of having some leeway.

Experience shows that social security Bills are likely to be a regular feature of future legislative programmes. However, I do not, and will not in the future, seek accelerated passage lightly. In this case, there are good, pressing reasons for accelerated passage, not least of which is to allow people who suffer from asbestos-related conditions to benefit as soon as possible from the easements in the Bill.

The Bill was originally an Order in Council, which was due to have been passed at Westminster. Given that it did not complete the legislative process before 8 May 2007, I am introducing the Bill instead. This is, therefore, an exceptional situation, and, in future, more time should be allowed to consider social security Bills.

There will, of course, be opportunities for all Members to make their views known, and for the issues to be fully discussed, at Second Stage, Consideration Stage and Further Consideration Stage. I look forward to hearing Members' views on the Bill.

12.15 pm

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Campbell): On 24 May, the Minister attended a meeting of the Committee for Social Development to explain her reasons for requesting that the Welfare Reform Bill proceed under the accelerated passage procedure. The Minister also outlined the consequences of accelerated passage not being granted. The Committee listened carefully to the Minister at that meeting.

The Committee is well aware that the Bill represents a parity measure to parallel the Welfare Reform Act 2007, which applies to Great Britain. The Committee understands the importance of maintaining parity to ensure that the people of Northern Ireland benefit from reforms at the same time as they are introduced in the rest of the United Kingdom. However, at the meeting with the Minister, the Committee left her in no doubt that it could not support her request for accelerated passage if the proposed change to the method for paying housing benefit would go ahead without further consideration by, and consultation with, the Committee.

The Bill provides for regulations to be introduced by the Minister to establish the norm that housing benefit

be paid directly to the claimant, not the landlord — which is the current practice. It is envisaged that the payment of housing benefit to claimants would promote personal responsibility and empower claimants to budget for themselves; help workless tenants to develop the skills that they will need when they move into paid work; encourage claimants to open bank accounts; and promote financial inclusion and payment modernisation.

Obviously, the Committee welcomes any measures that would help to empower people to budget for themselves and assist them in returning to work. The Committee recognises that people who receive housing benefit live, necessarily, on relatively low incomes and that they sometimes struggle, with good reason, to prioritise their money.

The last question that we want people to ask is whether they should heat their homes so that they are comfortable and safe for themselves and their children, or whether they should pay the rent. The Committee has concerns that the payment of housing benefit directly to claimants, some of whom are already struggling, could result in rent arrears and a rise in evictions. That would undoubtedly put pressure on an already overburdened social-housing sector.

The Minister listened to the Committee's concerns and undertook not to introduce any regulations that would change the current method for payment of housing benefit until she had considered the matter in greater detail and had held further discussions with the Committee. The Minister has outlined her position on that matter.

Despite the Committee's misgivings about direct payments to housing benefit claimants, it welcomed the Minister's assurances that the provisions of the Bill are beneficial, and the Committee is satisfied that that is the case. The Committee will, of course, consider the practical implications of welfare reform in greater detail in the future.

In light of the Minister's unequivocal undertakings, the Committee supports the Minister's request that the Welfare Reform Bill be granted accelerated passage.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That the Welfare Reform Bill proceed under the accelerated passage procedure, in accordance with Standing Order 40(4).

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Report on Devolution of Policing and Justice Matters

Mr Speaker: I advise the House that the Business Committee has agreed that the motion will be treated as a business motion. Therefore, there will be no debate on the motion.

Mr McCarthy: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. This matter is of great importance to every elected representative and member of the community in Northern Ireland. What mechanism exists for the consultation of Assembly Members who are not members of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee?

Mr Speaker: It is entirely a matter for the Assembly and Executive Review Committee to decide how it will inform party leaders and other parties of its business. That is not the business of the House.

Mr Burnside: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Since you have ruled that there will be no debate in the Chamber, may I ask the Committee Chairperson, through the Chair, why this motion is being brought before the House at this early stage, when there is no demand from the community for the transfer of policing and justice powers and the criminal investigation into the Northern Bank robbery, carried out by the Republican movement, Sinn Féin/IRA —

Mr Speaker: Order. I ask the Member to take his seat.

That is not a point of order. Mr Burnside has been an Assembly Member for quite a while and a Member of another House for a shorter time, so he should know about procedure. This is a procedural matter, which the Committee has rightly brought to the House to be dealt with and approved.

Mr Dodds: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Will you confirm that the Business Committee recommended, and decided unanimously, that this be treated as a business motion and that if the Member has a problem with that, he should take it up with his party's representatives on the Committee?

Mr Speaker: The Member is quite right: Members should not bring to the Floor of the House for debate issues that should be dealt with by the Business Committee. It was agreed by the Committee and by the Whips that this is the best way forward, as it is a procedural matter.

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

That this Assembly calls on the Assembly and Executive Review Committee to report, by 29 February 2008, on the work which needs to be undertaken, in accordance with section 18 of the Northern Ireland (St. Andrews Agreement) Act 2006 —

(a) as to the preparations that the Assembly has made, and intends to make, having regard to paragraph 7 of the St. Andrews Agreement, for or in connection with policing and justice matters ceasing to be reserved matters;

(b) as to which matters are likely to be the subject of any request under section 4(2A) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 that policing and justice matters should cease to be reserved matters; and

(c) containing an assessment of whether the Assembly is likely to make such a request before 1 May 2008.

If the Member for South Antrim has a problem, he should consult his colleagues who sit on the Business Committee, which agreed unanimously that this motion be presented to the Assembly. It is a procedural motion, and I am surprised that Mr Burnside did not check his facts before raising such a supercilious point of order.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Assembly and Executive Review Committee to report, by 29 February 2008, on the work which needs to be undertaken, in accordance with section 18 of the Northern Ireland (St. Andrews Agreement) Act 2006 —

(a) as to the preparations that the Assembly has made, and intends to make, having regard to paragraph 7 of the St. Andrews Agreement, for or in connection with policing and justice matters ceasing to be reserved matters;

(b) as to which matters are likely to be the subject of any request under section 4(2A) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 that policing and justice matters should cease to be reserved matters; and

(c) containing an assessment of whether the Assembly is likely to make such a request before 1 May 2008.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Single Farm Payments

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for this debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to speak and 10 minutes for the winding-up speech. All other Members will have five minutes.

Mr Elliott: I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses serious concern at the unjustified delay in payment of Single Farm Payments to some farmers and calls on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to initiate the Single Farm Payment timescale for 1st December to 31st March each year; and to ensure that no farm inspections relating to the Single Farm Payment scheme take place outside the timescale of the scheme.

It is my duty to declare an interest as I am a farmer and in receipt of single farm payment. I want to thank the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, who has just taken her place in the Chamber, for being present to hear the debate and the departmental officials who are also here.

The single farm payment scheme came into effect in 2005, and this is the third year that it has been in operation. It was the result of the decoupling of agriculture subsidies from production. It was hoped that this new one-stop shop for subsidies would help to simplify the process; however, since its inception, there have been problems. Some of those are only to be expected after a seismic shift in the system, with even experienced form fillers finding significant difficulties in the completion of the necessary paperwork.

However, there have been other unjustifiable delays that could have been avoided through changes to the procedures used by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) to administer this funding.

Many who are not from agricultural or rural backgrounds may not realise the significance of the single farm payments, but far be it from them to suggest that this is a matter of farmers having their noses in a trough. It is a means of helping to maintain an agriculture industry in the Province. Recent figures show that farm profits in Northern Ireland are in the region of £190 million, but the single farm payments come to £220 million, which means —

Mr Burnside: I too must declare an interest — and this is on the Register of Members' Interests — in that I am a farmer who received a single farm payment last year, although not this year.

There are many administrative problems with this. Will the Member ask the Minister to investigate the number of lost and mislaid application forms? Many farmers in

the Province are not getting their payments because of some administrative problem in the Department.

Mr Elliott: I have no difficulty with asking the Minister several questions on that front, whether it be about lost application forms, or about failure to properly administer entitlements that have been transferred to new owners, or about single farm payment applications that have not been sent to producers. Clearly, I have a number of questions there.

I was saying that the single farm payments are clearly relevant to Northern Ireland's agriculture industry. As I said, farm profits are in the region of £190 million, whereas single farm payments are something like £220 million. That tells me that there is a real net loss of some £30 million. We farmers do not want to have to rely on single farm payments or subsidies. What we want is the proper market value for our produce, but, unfortunately, we are not getting that. Big industries, big retailers and, indeed, big processors are making big profits while the farming industry survives on a very meagre allowance.

The spiralling costs and worries that arise from not being able to meet the mounting pile of final demands for bank loans and other bills affect entire family circles in the farming community. Mr Bradley, a Member for South Down, recently put down a question for written answer and was advised that:

"At 16 May 2007 93.8% ... applicants had either been paid their 2006 Single Farm Payment or been advised that a payment is not due because of ineligibility or the application of penalties under scheme rules 2,456 applications have not yet been finalised; not all of these claims may subsequently be eligible for payment. Validation of the 2006 applications continues and the objective is to pay out at least 96.14% of the budget by 30 June 2007". — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 22, pWA3, col 1*].

I will return to that issue later, because I believe that 30 June is too late in the year.

Since the introduction of single farm payments, many farmers have contacted my office about them. Many are totally frustrated by the delays, which are often due to something minor that could be addressed quickly and without a penalty being imposed. However, they are not always dealt with efficiently by the Department. Many complaints even date back to the 2005 scheme — two years ago. At that time, many farmers were penalised because of the dreaded duplicate fields problem, brought about by simple mistakes on the parts of owners and tenants who both unintentionally claimed for the same fields. I estimate that that cost the industry in the region of £2 million, with a number of individual farmers losing their single farm payments — some for as many as three full years.

12.30 pm

The motion is in no way designed to lambaste the Department of Agriculture's staff but, rather, the system that it employs. Through regular contact with

many staff in Orchard House and other departmental officials who are involved in the operation and processing of single farm payments, I know that many of them are dedicated to their jobs and, in fact, have a lot of sympathy for farmers. Many of those officials work overtime to try to resolve as many issues as possible. In spite of that, they often bear the brunt of a farmer's frustration, which, in many instances, is justified. However, that frustration is misdirected because in many circumstances the hands of the staff are tied by the protocols and procedures under which they operate.

I do not want to sound entirely negative, so I must praise the initiative set up by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, DARD Direct, which is based at Inniskeen House in County Fermanagh. That provides a one-stop shop for all DARD queries, and despite some teething problems, for customers and staff, efficiency and practical conditions for customers have been improved.

Members must consider some possible solutions. There is a problem with resources and the streamlining of work that the staff are required to do to deal with the simple aspects of the scheme, and I do not want to see staff or the Department of Agriculture requesting additional resources. However, staff must be better targeted at the needs of the customer, and that may, on occasions, require a diversion of functions for some staff. If the processes are properly resourced and streamlined from the outset, there will be a more rapid processing of applications, a resolution of problems and, ultimately, payment of moneys.

The deadline for the completion of the integrated administration and control system (IACS) forms for this year's payment was a few weeks ago. However, there are ongoing issues being attended to from the 2005 and 2006 applications.

Farm inspections, their ensuing problems and reports are often cited as reasons for delays in payments being made. Therefore, a concerted effort towards getting those completed earlier would help the situation — particularly as DARD has said that there will be a 50% increase in claims this year. That increase will mean that the number of farms inspected will rise from 5% to 7.5%. At a time when we are hoping that the new Administration will mean a reduction in the inspection regime and red tape, that is another disaster for the industry because there is even more red tape and bureaucracy. That will impact hugely on the efficiency of the payment scheme, and considering that there are some 40,000 claims in Northern Ireland, there will be a notable increase in the workload for the inspectors.

Further to that, the separate inspections that are carried out on different dates and times —

Mr S Wilson: I appreciate the Member's comments about the inspections, the number of staff required to carry them out and the detail into which they go, but how does he suggest that the Department should deal with fraudulent applications if inspections are not to be stepped up?

Mr Elliott: The problem with the system is that many fraudulent claims may slip through the net, and the Department may not know anything about them — many ordinary farmers who merely want to go about their daily business are penalised. The Department has not caught up with those who are making fraudulent claims, so a new system is required to enable that to happen.

All farms are subject to animal identification inspections, and they undergo at least one testing per year for tuberculosis, brucellosis or both. There is no reason for those inspections not taking place on the same date, thus saving a double visit to a farm.

There is also an opportunity to pay farmers some of the money that they are owed earlier. That would help to alleviate some of their problems.

Mr Speaker: Mr Elliott, your time is up.

Mr Elliott: With respect, Mr Speaker, I had two interventions, and I think that I should have the opportunity for one more minute, but I accept what you are saying.

Mr Speaker: Only Members who have fewer than 10 minutes in which to speak will get a further minute if they give way to another Member.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Dr W McCrea): I want to be associated with the sentiments that have been expressed by the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, Mr Elliott. I am grateful that this important matter is before the House.

The introduction of the single farm payment was hailed by the EU as the new way forward for agriculture. Under the common agricultural policy reform package, the single farm payment scheme replaced 11 schemes with one single payment scheme. Farmers were to have greater freedom to farm to the demands of the market, as subsidies would be decoupled from production and environmentally friendly practices would be better acknowledged and rewarded. That was the plan in 2003, before the introduction of the scheme in 2005.

How well have the farmers done since the introduction of the single farm payment? That we are having this debate is an acknowledgement that many farmers in Northern Ireland have fallen foul of regulations. I agree with the Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone Mr Elliott that we are not criticising individual members of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. However, I genuinely believe that there

are problems at a senior level in that Department, in the area of policy-making.

Down the years, the Department has been assiduous in its gold-plating of legislation that comes from Europe rather than dealing sympathetically with farmers' problems, especially when the single payment scheme was first introduced. I cite the example of duplicate fields — an issue that has already been mentioned. When, in the first year of the scheme's operation, a landowner inserted the name of his tenant into his integrated administration and control system form — and the person who was renting the ground also submitted an IACS form with his own name on it — there was absolutely no desire on either party's part to make a fraudulent claim; rather it was a misunderstanding about the new procedure. When we spoke to Commissioner Fischer Boel about that issue, she said that the problem was not EU rules but the interpretation of them. I agree that it is a problem of interpretation.

There is also a new problem — field variance. It seems that payment may be withheld even if farmers are only 0.01 hectares out in their calculations. People may believe that money from Europe goes into farmers' pockets. I understand that, but I must point out that it is their rightful payment; it is not something that has been gifted. Therefore, they deserve to have it.

When officials from the Department appeared before the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, they said that they had successfully processed 94% of payments and hoped to have 98% cleared by the end of June. It seems that the 6% who have not received their rightful entitlement will just have to wait. The departmental officials almost boasted that they had processed 94% of claims, but what about the 6% of farmers who have made claims and not received payment? They have had to borrow money from the bank while they await the arrival of the cheque from the Department. I suggest that if we were to tell departmental officials that 6% of them would have to wait six months for their wages, there would be a hue and cry, so why delay the rightful payments to the farming community?

When the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development met departmental officials, it was informed that there is a suggestion that the number of farm inspections may be doubled over the coming year. It has been acknowledged that there is a problem with the number of inspections on farms at present, yet now we are told that the answer to some of those problems is more inspections. There needs to be a good dose of realism injected into the Department. Senior departmental officials need to wise up and realise that they are penalising the largest single industry in the Province and the backbone of our prosperity over the years.

Farmers' backs are against the wall, and they are being forced further and further into despair. The House must declare today that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development should get single farm payments into the hands of the farmers. That money is rightfully theirs, and that is where it ought to be.

Mr Speaker: In case any Members are trying to watch the business in their own rooms, I have to inform them that the system has broken down. Attempts are being made to repair it.

Mr S Wilson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. How will you convey that information to those Members who are trying to watch, since they will probably be unable to hear what you say?

Mr Speaker: I hope that they are listening somewhere in the Building.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. This debate is of serious concern to farmers and the agriculture community, and I remind those who might find it difficult to listen to debates on agriculture that the countryside is as important to them as it is to anyone else. It is not just for farmers, the Minister and the Department.

It is important that the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development has a position on the matter, and I speak as a member of that Committee. The Committee is not unanimous on this motion, although we may go forward as saying that the Committee said this, that or the other on this issue.

I tabled an amendment with regard to the timescale in the motion, but it was not accepted. The wording of the motion creates difficulty, and more effort should have been made on that. The timescale gives rise to a situation in which farmers may end up worse off. Rather than a timescale of four months to resolve all the difficulties of the issue, 12 months has, so far, not been enough for the Department to complete matters for many farmers. I should not like to see farmers, who were required to have absolutely everything right, restricted to four months. That is what Departments do; they will confine them further, and that could cause great difficulty. I do not want that to happen.

I support the farmers' organisations with regard to the cutting of red tape. Bureaucracy has been a great detriment to farmers and to the future of farming, and I ask the Minister to consider the matter. As a farmer, I should declare an interest in the debate.

How Departments interpret the rules made by the EU is of vital importance. Some farmers have had to wait 10 months for money on which they depend, yet it seems that I can get the thing resolved with one phone call. There is something seriously wrong there.

I often wonder whether there are members of departmental staff who move from somewhere else in

the Department and then find jobs in this extra 50% of policing of farmers. In some instances, it is just that. The size of a tractor in a field is measured, or a small area of gorse. We all know that gorse grows from year to year, so although there might be a large area in one year, in two years' time there might be only a small plot of an acre. That is knocking farmers out of their right to payments.

Those matters should not be treated as difficulties, and officials should not be sent out to measure for hours on end, causing the farmer worry, stress and a loss of money. The inspections should be cut. I do not want to see another 50% extra staff spending all day in making difficulties for farmers on their land.

I have no doubt that the Minister knows exactly what I am talking about. I do not want things made more difficult for farmers. It is of vital importance that the matter be resolved; that is why it has been discussed in the Committee and why I welcome this debate. I have difficulty with the timescales mentioned in the motion, and deadlines may cause further difficulty.

Simple things such as the length or size of fences, and bends in fences, have been given as reasons for farmers' not having received their rightful payments. That issue must be looked at. Instead of getting into an antagonistic debate about single farm payments, the Minister and her Department must do some work to explain to farmers and farm organisations how the matter can be resolved and returned from a European level to a ministerial level. The important thing is for farmers to receive their money. Go raibh maith agat.

12.45 pm

Mr Burns: I support the motion and thank Mr Savage and Mr Elliott for bringing the issue to the Assembly. I have no personal farming interests to declare: I do not receive any single farm payments. However, I support the rural way of life, and in my rural constituency of South Antrim, many farmers are experiencing extreme difficulties with the single farm payment.

The delay in receiving the single farm payment is of great concern, particularly to those who are suffering as a result. The main reason for those delays is the weight of bureaucracy in the Department, and, due to even more internal bureaucracy, the lack of resources to process claims. In 2005, when the single farm payment was introduced to combine all the previous types of payment, it changed to a payment based on landownership rather than production. The system is unique to Northern Ireland and has resulted in a disproportionate number of applications in comparison with other EU countries.

Northern Ireland must comply with EU regulations, but that is not the issue. Instead, the issue is finding a way to comply with regulations without making the system more complicated and cumbersome for local

farmers. Older people, some who live alone, find it very difficult to complete the application forms: a lady whom I know had to hire a solicitor to fill out the application, which left her with further unmanageable debt. Farmers also face fines for late applications, which reduces, or in some cases wipes out, the payment that they finally receive.

Inspections are another problem affecting the single farm payment. Not only is the inspection system complex and time consuming, but it is unsuccessful. Farmers have complained that inspectors act like they are strictly policing them, instead of offering advice and help. Due to the increase in the number of inspections, a review of the system must be initiated to prevent further delays.

Farmers are experiencing great difficulty in getting answers to even the simple questions that they have about their applications. If farmers want to adjust their applications after submission, it is difficult to even contact the staff at Orchard House. Politicians must ensure that there is an immediate reduction in bureaucracy, so that the single farm payment helps farmers, as was the intention of its introduction. We must insist that the £15 million that is due to be paid out reaches the farmers who need it to relieve the debt and distress that they are experiencing.

Although the Department is meeting the majority of payments, to leave some people with nothing is not good enough. The Department must address that situation by developing and revising the systems to ensure that no farmers lose out. I support the motion.

Mr Ford: As with most Members who have spoken, I have an interest to declare. Although the modest amount of single farm payment that my wife receives does not make a great deal of difference to my finances, it is listed in the Register of Members' Interests.

On behalf of the United Community group, I support the motion and congratulate Mr Elliott for his introduction to it.

The debate has reached the point where it is unnecessary to repeat everything that has already been said. However, the fact that, two weeks ago, almost halfway through this year, 6% of claims for 2006 were outstanding, is an indication of the problem with single farm payments. Its introduction, in 2005, was more complex in Northern Ireland than it was, for example, in Scotland or Wales. There were good reasons for that, given the mixture of full-time and part-time farms, and land let out and taken in conacre. The Department wanted to ensure the payments were fair, which, unfortunately, introduced some complexity, and, in many cases, area-based issues have created problems. As the Department examines the future of single farm payments, it must consider ways to

simplify it and ensure that the payments are dealt with. DARD must prevent fraud, but it is also time that the Department distinguished between fraud and minor clerical errors that are made by people whose full-time employment is not to fill in complex forms but to farm.

The fundamental problem is what the farming community views as a perceived lack of sympathy. That does not come from the individuals who administer policy, because they operate within the rules, but the perception of the gold-plating that has been going on for too long must be addressed.

I have heard the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development speak as the Sinn Féin spokesperson on several occasions. She supported the Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU) campaign against red tape. Shortly before the elections in March, representatives from all five parties spoke to UFU members in Cookstown, and there was considerable sympathy for the plight of farmers and the UFU five-point plan. The Minister has been in position for several weeks: she has had the opportunity to familiarise herself with the problems and to sort out what is necessary and unnecessary. She spoke about that issue at the Balmoral Show a couple of weeks ago, and I hope that she will soon have more to tell the House about how she intends to address the problems that she has seen for herself.

The issue is not about the Assembly's passing the motion but rather how the Department responds. I hope that the Minister can inform the House, first, about what is being done to ensure that the issue of the timing of payments is dealt with, and, secondly, how she intends to deal with minor discrepancies such as duplicate fields or land being taken for road-widening schemes that hold up entire payments over issues that amount to no more than 1% or 2% of it. Perhaps part payments should be considered; farmers are already accustomed to receiving part of their wool-clip money in one year, with the remainder being paid the following year. If part payments were made, farmers would know that they would receive at least a proportion of their money on time, even if there were concerns about minor discrepancies.

When will the Minister tell the House that she will act to move Northern Ireland away from the gold-plating culture to ensure that farmers here are treated on equal terms with those in GB, the Republic and the rest of Europe? The fundamental issue is fairness for the people whom Members represent.

Mr T Clarke: I congratulate Mr Savage and Mr Elliott for tabling the motion. Single farm payments are important to the farming community, and I am glad that the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development has already acknowledged that by pressing this issue with departmental officials.

DUP members on the Committee intend to ensure that the issue is not dropped and will closely monitor the Minister's words today. Although DUP Committee members will welcome any assurances that she can give, they will want to ensure that the assurances are backed up by actions. Single farm payments are not supposed to subsidise agricultural production, but many farmers do rely on the payment to keep their businesses running. The movement away from the old system of various payments for different enterprises to one single payment increases the relevance of that payment to many farmers, making it all the more important that they receive it promptly.

It is unacceptable that the window for payments is so large. There is no reason that the Minister should not move to ensure that payments are processed within a much tighter timescale, such as that outlined by the proponents of the motion.

It may be possible for DARD to tell us that over 90% of payments are processed on time, but that still means that many millions of pounds are in the Department's pockets rather than in the hands of the farmers to whom they belong. The farmers' banks and suppliers do not tend to work to a timescale in which there is no guarantee of when the finances will arrive.

The majority of DARD staff, whether they carry out field inspections or pay out money in Orchard House, work extremely hard to get the money paid as quickly as possible. However, the policy staff in Dundonald House must do more to ensure that EU rules are implemented locally with minimal penalty deductions and payment delays. They often delay payments through their lack of pragmatism in the implementation of EU rules.

Since the Minister took office, she has done much to examine procedures in the Republic of Ireland. Last year, the vast majority of farmers in the Republic had received their single farm payment by Christmas. Is the Minister willing to set a real challenge to her Department to guarantee that a similar percentage of farmers will receive their 2007 single farm payment in Northern Ireland as in the Republic of Ireland? Anything less will be seen as a failure by both the Minister and her Department.

The Minister has already announced that extra personnel have been put into the system; it is hoped that they will clear the current backlog. That is welcome. As she has recognised that there are problems in the system, it is vital that she should take steps now to ensure that they are not repeated next year. I look forward to hearing the Minister's proposals today; I assure her that the Committee will not drop the issue but, rather, will monitor it to see that she delivers.

Mr Speaker: I apologise to the Member for omitting to mention that that was his maiden speech.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I agree with all the contributions that have been made; Members have articulated the position of the rural community very well. I must add that farmers are currently under threat of significant financial penalties on their single farm payments resulting from unintentional errors in their applications. Difficulties have arisen in cases where both the active farmer and the landlord have claimed for payment on the same field. Thousands of applications have been affected, and the matter must be resolved. The Minister recognises that and has been dealing with the issue since she took up office.

Ireland's unique conacre system has led to huge difficulties for both farmers and landowners. Some farmers have lost a significant amount of their single farm payment for last year. Small farmers are often the worst affected, because this duplication query on their farm can comprise a large percentage of their overall claim and lead to a much larger penalty. That can result in the cancellation of the entire payment. Farmers should not have to face those financial penalties, given that the system is new and extremely complicated and that most errors are not made through direct malice. I concur with those Members who said that a percentage should be paid when small errors have been made. I think that all Members agree that the money should be in the farmers' bank accounts, not the Department's bank account.

As my colleague Gerry McHugh said, there is a difficulty with the time constraints. I am unable to support the motion because of that. My colleague wanted to submit an amendment to say that he welcomed the initiation of the joint Department of the Environment and Department of Agriculture and Rural Development review of departmental procedures, including those that relate to farming and farm payments, with the aim of reducing red tape and bureaucracy by 25%.

The motion as proposed will not benefit farmers, particularly given the tight timescale. It will not allow the flexibility that farmers require, especially in terms of errors on their forms. These undoubtedly well-intentioned UUP proposals would hurt farmers. More restrictive timescales will damage farmers and will lead to more constraints being placed on the entire agriculture community.

1.00 pm

Sinn Féin supports the UFU campaign to cut red tape. Sinn Féin also campaigned for the introduction of a farmers' charter, similar to the one that is successfully operating in the rest of Ireland. That charter must have at its heart the flexibility that is required by farmers in the face of red tape and bureaucracy.

I thank the Minister for attending the debate. It is important that the Minister states how she will reduce

the amount of red tape. Farmers must be allowed to farm, and I want to hear the Minister tell Members of extra measures that she will introduce to increase flexibility for the farming industry.

Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr William Irwin. I remind Members that this will be Mr Irwin's maiden speech, which should be heard without interruption.

Mr Irwin: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I congratulate Mr Savage and Mr Elliott on proposing the motion. I declare an interest as a farmer and as a recipient of the single farm payment.

The introduction of decoupling and of the single farm payment system in 2005 was undoubtedly the single greatest change to farming since the UK joined the Common Market. Everyone was told that the introduction of the single farm payment system would give farmers the freedom to farm. From personal experience, and from those of my local constituents, I know that that is not the case.

I believe that a common agricultural policy no longer exists in this country. Owing to modulation, farmers in Northern Ireland will experience higher cuts from their single farm payments than those in other regions of Europe and the UK. However, that will, no doubt, be the subject of a debate in the House on another day. Farmers are also facing a more stringent interpretation of EU rules, compared with other parts of Europe. It is vital that DARD rein in the policy-makers and ensure that farmers are no longer penalised for accidental minor discrepancies on their single farm payment forms.

Last year, a significant number of farmers did not get paid a single farm payment due to fields being duplicated on one or more forms. It is clear to all — with the exception of official policy-makers in Dundonald House — that there was no deliberate attempt to carry out fraud, either by farmers or landowners. It was clear that those were obvious errors. Farmers must go through the official DARD appeals system, and possibly go to court, before they get the money that they should have received in the autumn of 2005. If an independent panel rules in favour of a farmer, will the Agriculture Minister guarantee to the House that the Department will not overturn that decision?

The major problem with single farm payments in 2006 was caused as a result of field variances. Last year, a farmer in my constituency had seven single-farm-payment inspections connected to his claim. After each of the inspections, he was notified that he had no problems. However, it was identified that he had a field variation of 0.02 hectares over his 40 hectares of land. That was a 0.05% discrepancy with what was noted on his form. That resulted in my constituent being paid last week — six months late.

When he received his money, he discovered that there was absolutely no penalty for that minor discrepancy. That begs the question: why was that payment held up for so long, and how much money was wasted in sorting out that query?

It is vital that DARD staff make changes to ensure that those problems do not occur this year. The Minister's recent utterances about field variances have been, at best, feeble. Farmers do not want to hear of more inspections or be patronised by being told to recheck their forms. A practical solution to resolve the field variance problem would be to do what is done in other regions of Europe — namely, class all land that is held by a farm business as a field parcel, rather than as individual fields. It is widely believed that that would go some way towards resolving many of the issues that have been mentioned today.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome all the information that the debate has generated. I have several points to raise. Therefore, to stay within the time limit, I will run through the issues quickly.

Mrs I Robinson: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Gildernew: If you make your point quickly, Iris.

Mrs I Robinson: I represent a farming community. Therefore, I want clarification on several points. How many requests for single farm payments were received last year, and, of those, how many were allowed? How many applications for single farm payments are yet to be resolved, and what is the average appeal time? Most importantly, how many appeals that had been allowed, were subsequently overturned by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development?

Ms Gildernew: I do not have that information to hand, but I will answer the questions in writing as soon as possible.

Go raibh maith agat.

I thank Tom Elliott and George Savage for raising an issue that is important to farmers and deserves open debate. I recognise the concerns raised by Tom, George, and other Members. Many of those concerns are not new to me, and I empathise with the majority, if not all, of the points raised.

Before dealing with those concerns, I will outline the background to single farm payments, in order to illustrate the current situation. The single farm payment was introduced in 2005, as part of the reform of the common agricultural policy. Existing livestock and arable subsidy schemes, now known as the legacy schemes, were replaced with the single farm payment.

The payment comprises two parts: historic reference amounts that are based on subsidy paid between 2000 and

2002, and a land element of £53 per hectare. The application period runs from the beginning of March until 15 May. Payment can only be made on fully validated claims when the payment window opens on 1 December.

From 2005, when the scheme first opened, the number of applicants rose from approximately 27,000 for the legacy scheme to approximately 40,000 for the single farm payment. After taking into consideration the increase in applications, along with the fact that the scheme was new, DARD set and published the following payment targets: 68% of farm businesses to be paid by 23 December 2005, and 75% to be paid by the end of January 2006. Last year, the Department increased the targets to 70% to 75% to be paid by the end of December 2006, and 75% to 80% to be paid by the end of January 2007. All those targets were met, and I acknowledge the efforts made by DARD staff to achieve that outcome.

Unfortunately, not all applicants will get paid as quickly as they, Members or I would like. The Department has paid out £211,500,000 to 94.5% of farm businesses. That means that some 2,000 businesses have still not received their single farm payment for 2006. However, as I said earlier, DARD can only pay on validated claims, and, in some cases, payments are delayed because of queries about the applications.

The Department has around 570 probate and change-of-business cases. Cases involving probate cannot be paid until the estate is settled, which can take from six months to several years. Year on year, the number of cases delayed by probate remains fairly constant. The Department has written to around 100 applicants on specific issues, but, despite reminders, no responses have been received.

This year, there have also been difficulties due to field variances that were picked up during inspections. Around 2,000 cases were delayed because farmers had not told the Department about changes to the size of fields due to land becoming ineligible because, for example, a house had been built, a laneway had been improved, or an area of impenetrable scrub had not been deducted.

Many of the variances are small. However, the European Commission requires DARD to re-examine those cases and, where appropriate, correct the 2005 baseline position. Around 930 of those cases have yet to be processed.

Such unreported changes not only delay payments but have a knock-on effect on the Department's processing ability. More worrying for the Department is that the level of identified discrepancies meant that the rate of eligibility from inspections had to be increased from 2,000 in 2006 to 3,000 in 2007. The Department has

no room to manoeuvre on that increase, as it has been laid down by the European Commission.

In an attempt to resolve that issue, I have commissioned an exercise, which I announced at the Balmoral Show breakfast. In the next few weeks, the Department will write to those farm businesses that, since early 2000, have received full planning approval for single dwellings. The Department needs to ask those farmers to ensure that they have removed the area encompassing those buildings from their farm maps. In response to Mr William Irwin, the Department is not being patronising on that point. Farmers may be reluctant to check their maps, and we are asking them to do that so that we can help them. However, as I said, a quick check now may avoid a delayed payment in the future. The Department wants to help.

I shall also be announcing that additional staff will be available in mid-June to help farmers who wish to sort out their maps and their 2007 IACS single applications. I also reassure farmers that if they remove an ineligible area before my Department has identified it as an irregularity, although the Department may have to make an adjustment for earlier years, there will not be a penalty reduction for 2007.

We are at the beginning of a new era in which I hope that DARD and the industry can work more closely together to deal with those issues. I have stressed many times how much I want the Department to work in partnership with everyone involved in the rural industry and the Committee to get things right.

I shall now turn to points raised in the debate. I am totally against any unjustified delay to a payment. However, since taking up office, I have realised that in many cases the delay is a result of factors outside departmental control such as probate, farmers not replying to the Department and field variances — many of which take time to resolve. I also recognise that my Department should do everything that it can to speed up the process.

As far as the payment timetable is concerned, I would be delighted to be able to report that 100% of cases were paid by 31 March, but I suspect that the practical reality will always be different. I am well aware of some of the difficulties, and I am considering a number of options that should help to speed up the payment process.

Dr W McCrea: If the Minister wants to help the farming community, can she give a categorical assurance that, if an independent panel adjudicates on an appeal and finds in favour of the applicant, she will not overturn that appeal?

Ms Gildernew: That point was made earlier, and I took a note of it. I cannot give a categorical assurance

today. However, I will look at what I can do at departmental level.

Dr W McCrea: The Minister can.

Ms Gildernew: I cannot say that I will not overturn a decision. I will consider the issue. I want to be able to give a categorical answer, but I also want the answer that I give to be correct. I shall do my best to address that in the near future.

Unlike cross-compliance inspections, which must be completed by 31 December each year, there is no legislative deadline for the completion of eligibility inspections. However, as those are linked to the 10-month occupancy rule, it could be argued that such inspections should be completed by the end of February each year. The nature of eligibility inspections means that the findings are still relevant up to the date of the last payment, as land does not change dramatically over a period of months.

1.15 pm

Although my Department completed all cross-compliance inspections within the timescale, because of other pressure, eligibility inspections ran on into the following year. Again, I am considering proposals to speed up the process, as I recognise that any delay in inspection ultimately creates a delay in payment.

I shall quickly address some of the comments that were made during the debate. On David Burnside's point, I am not aware of a problem with lost or mislaid forms. However, if he can provide me with details, the Department will investigate them.

Dr W McCrea: He is not here.

Ms Gildernew: I see that. I thank the Chairperson of the Committee for pointing that out.

I note Tom Elliott's points about Inniskeen House. That has been a very successful DARD initiative. Mr Elliott will be aware that, in advance of the deadline for IACS forms of 15 May, the Department asked county offices to stay open later to facilitate people submitting forms.

In spite of the increases in inspections, the Department is seeking to reduce the number of inspections and is looking at creative ways to do so. However, the Department is tied by EU regulations on the inspections that must be carried out in 2007.

A number of Members raised the possibility of part payment, where part of a payment is paid initially and the rest is paid on completion of the process. I have asked my officials whether that can be done and have been told that, under EU guidelines, it cannot. Farmers have raised that problem with me, and we have tried to find ways to fix it as best we can.

Mr Elliott: Will the Member give way?

Ms Gildernew: I am sorry, but I really cannot give way. Many issues were raised in the debate, and I want to be fair to all Members.

Dr McCrea referred to gold-plating. Where there is gold-plating, I will find it. I will do what I can to get rid of it. I can assure Members that there will be no additional gold-plating. The Department will be bound by EU regulations, but it will not make them worse. Mr Burns said that our system is unique, but it is not. There is a different system in other areas, but we are not the only ones with a hybrid model. That leads to complications, but the Department felt that the system represented a fair reflection of farming practices.

As for Mr Ford's point, the 12-month period starts on 15 May, so we are not halfway through it — we are a few weeks into it. We want to get these matters right, and that is what I intend to do. I have a lot of sympathy for farmers who are in a difficult position, and I will find ways of dealing with that.

Trevor Clarke said that we were focusing on the Twenty-six Counties. Farmers repeatedly tell me that the systems that they propose are the best. I look for best practice wherever I can find it, and I will endeavour to employ best practice for our farmers in the Six Counties. Willie Clarke mentioned the issue of getting money into farmers' bank accounts. I concur, and I accept that it is very difficult for farmers when banks believe that payments have been made and farmers are still unable to reduce their overdrafts.

I wish to see the freedom to farm. Many issues require resolution in order for farmers to be able to do what they do best. The transition from old to new has not been easy for either farmers or the Department, as is the case with most new schemes.

The single payment scheme was not as simple as people had hoped. The European Commission is seeking ways to simplify the scheme, and I was pleased to hear the EU Agriculture Commissioner, Mariann Fischer Boel, say that she was aiming to reduce bureaucracy when she addressed the Ulster Farmers' Union forum last month.

I support any proposals that reduce the administrative burden on farmers and on my Department, and I have a number of ideas for the European Commission that would simplify matters. For example, if farmers could claim the same amount of money on a slightly smaller area of land, that would help to resolve some of the current land variance problems. That would help to speed up the system and ensure that payments are issued quickly.

Locally, I have asked staff to set up a working group comprising farming representatives such as the Ulster Farmers' Union and the Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers' Association — both of which have already indicated their willingness to participate — and other

interested parties to consider how we can better work together to resolve the current problems and to develop new opportunities, such as encouraging the uptake of electronic single farm payments.

I stress how important it is that farmers advise us of changes to their maths. If the Department does not tackle this issue now, it will be storing up problems for future payments. We need farmers to help us to achieve what we all want — a quick payment schedule for the single farm payment and a minimum number of inspections. That is why I laboured that point at the Balmoral Show breakfast this year.

Although I am against the unjustified delay in payments, the motion fails to recognise practicalities. For example, farmers will still have to be paid, even if the 31 March deadline was missed. Therefore, I cannot support the motion.

Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Savage: I declare an interest as a farmer in the Donaghcloney area. I support the motion.

My Banbridge constituency office is currently dealing with several cases in which the single farm payment has not yet been made. When my staff contacted the Department in an effort to sort out a particular case, we were told that the single farm payment would be made within seven to 10 days. Two weeks later, that payment had still not been received. That is unacceptable — such delays are unjustified and unwarranted.

The single farm payment removed the link between production and subsidies. This was known as decoupling and was designed to stop the food and milk mountains that were becoming prevalent throughout European member states.

However, in order to obtain single farm payments farmers were required to observe certain conditions known as "cross-compliance". Under cross-compliance, farmers are required to ensure good agricultural and environmental conditions and adhere to statutory management requirements for the protection of the environment, animal welfare and plant health. Those are big undertakings.

Those lengths, plus the endless red tape and bureaucracy that farmers have to deal with, are what is causing most annoyance in the industry. Farmers need to be allowed to do their job as custodians of the countryside instead of finding themselves buried in a mountain of paperwork.

Although farmers have enough to worry about, last week the EU Agriculture Commissioner, Mariann Fischer Boel, while at a conference in Germany called for a compulsory 10% modulation rate to be introduced through instalments of 1% a year from 2009 to finance her reform programme. According to the 'Irish Farmers Journal', this is of concern, because it will double the

current modulation rate and erode the value of the single farm payment. However, Commissioner Fischer Boel's decision to abolish set-aside must be welcomed. This will be one less thing for farmers to worry about.

Furthermore, farmers are receiving visits, often unannounced, from farm inspectors who sometimes abuse their position and at present are serving only one purpose — annoying the farmer. That has got to change.

It is particularly ironic that the Department's website states that the aim of the rural payments and inspection division is:

“To ensure that farmers in Northern Ireland are aware of, and receive, their agricultural grants subsidies to which they are entitled.”

I have also obtained figures from the Department that make interesting reading. In 2006, the number of single farm payment applications was 39,871, of which 37,359 have been paid. However, 5% of farmers have not received the single farm payment to which they are entitled. That may seem like a small figure, but it equates to 2,181 farmers, which means that 2,181 families are struggling to make ends meet. That means that there are 2,181 farmers under constant pressure, living from one day to the next, hoping against hope that today will be the day that they receive their long-awaited single-farm-payment cheques, and the burden that they have been under for quite some time will be relieved.

Surely in this age of modern technology it is reasonable to assume that the Department can ensure that all single farm payments are made on time. Such a payment delay would be deemed as unacceptable with private-sector funding. Farmers, like those in any other business, have to plan ahead, so there are always budgets that have to be adhered to. How can we expect farmers to budget and plan ahead if they do not have the funding to budget and do not know when they will receive it?

Farmers right across Northern Ireland are the custodians of the countryside. As businesses in the countryside, they need to be careful with their budgets. For businesses to thrive and prosper, they need a steady flow of finance. That is the lifeline to the rural community.

Farmers are not beggars. All they ask for is a level playing field on which they get a fair price for what they produce on their farms. That is not happening at present. Remember this: agriculture is the backbone of Northern Ireland, not of the Department. I want the Department to get that into its head.

We must ensure that the problems are solved as soon as possible so that they do not recur next year. Farmers have nothing to hide, and it is time for a fair deal for farmers. It is time that they were treated with dignity and respect and received the single farm payments that are rightfully theirs as quickly as possible.

Many comments have been made today. All those things take time. I was glad to hear the Minister speaking today, and I ask her to consider making sure that farmers receive 75% of the single farm payment by the end of October each year. That would ease their burden greatly, and Members would not have to propose motions such as this one. This is a great opportunity to highlight the situation.

I was in Brussels when single farm payments were introduced, and it was stated clearly then that it was the person who farmed the land who would be entitled to the payment. I hope that the Department will never lose sight of that point.

Mr Ford said that the problems relating to single farm payments were greater in Northern Ireland than anywhere else. That has come about because the Westminster Government have become involved and want to throw their weight about. I tell them this: if they sort out the problems on the mainland and leave us alone, we will be able to sort out our own problems.

A Member who is not here today said that a farmer is entitled to anything that he receives through the single farm payment scheme because he gets it due to hard work and the sweat of his brow. I have great pleasure in supporting the motion, and I hope that it will highlight the problems facing the farming community.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly expresses serious concern at the unjustified delay in payment of Single Farm Payments to some farmers and calls on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to initiate the Single Farm Payment timescale for 1st December to 31st March each year; and to ensure that no farm inspections relating to the Single Farm Payment scheme take place outside the timescale of the scheme.

Rights of Caravan Owners

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to wind up. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Easton: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of the Environment to put in place legislation, similar to that applying in the rest of the United Kingdom, to protect the rights of caravan owners on private sites in Northern Ireland.

The legal definition of a mobile home is the same as that of a caravan:

“any structure designed or adapted for human habitation that is capable of being moved from one place to another”.

Legislation in the rest of the United Kingdom is a product of the Mobile Homes Act 1983, which supersedes earlier legislation. It affects all those who own mobile-home sites and all residents who own mobile homes in which they live and who rent their pitches from the site owners. It also applies to all residents who had agreements with site owners when the legislation was enacted — whatever form those agreements took. It covers those who had agreements under the Mobile Homes Act 1975 and other forms of written agreement. It specifically covers those whose tenure and rights were based on an oral agreement with the site owner.

1.30 pm

We are not talking about those who rent mobile homes from a site owner or those who use a mobile home or caravan for holiday purposes. The Act is specific in its application to residents on sites that are privately owned or sites that are owned and operated by local authorities. However, it is vital that any proposed legislation review the protection that is necessary for those who use mobile homes or caravans for holiday purposes or live in caravans on a permanent basis.

The Mobile Homes Act 1983 is designed to protect the interests, and ensure the rights, of all residents whose agreement with a site owner allows them to live on a site in their mobile homes when the home is their main residence. Those rights, all very obvious and reasonable in nature, relate to security of tenure and the right to sell a mobile home on site or pass it to a family member on the death of a homeowner.

In the Act, these rights were established whatever a site owner or resident said. Rights on other subjects were discretionary and depended on the agreement reached between owner and resident. The Act places an obligation on a site owner to spell out those rights in a written statement, which sets out the implied and

express terms of the agreement that they have made. It also requires a site owner to provide specific information and to delineate clearly these implied and express terms.

The implied terms are those rights afforded to residents under the Act, and the express terms cover other aspects such as services, regulations, fees and respective obligations. Implied terms of the Act are governed by law and cannot be changed. Express terms can be changed if site owners and residents agree. They can also be changed if either party applies to court or if there is mutual agreement to involve an independent arbitrator.

There is a clear statement in the Act about the length of time that a resident can keep a mobile home on site. In most cases, residents may keep their mobile home on site indefinitely, unless the site owner brings the agreement to an end. That could happen if, for example, the planning permission of the site owner, or his interest in the land, were subject to a time limit. In that case, the resident's right would be similarly limited.

There is also a clear statement that sets out the ways in which a site owner may bring an agreement to an end. It must be done by an application to the courts or by establishing agreement through an arbitration process.

The grounds for ending an agreement are the failure of the resident to use his mobile home as his main residence; if the resident permits the condition of his home to have a detrimental effect on the site; and if the resident breaks the terms of the agreement.

A resident can be made to leave and remove his home only if the site owner has received an eviction order from the court. The Act makes it a criminal offence for anyone other than the court to make a resident leave a mobile home or to bully, intimidate or harass a resident to make his or her position on the site untenable.

Should the site change hands, the agreement between the site owner and the residents is binding on the new owner. Agreements continue to hold even if the site is sold, phased or passes by inheritance to another owner.

With regard to the express terms, the legislation developed in the rest of the United Kingdom protects the residents' rights. It requires that the express terms agreed be set out in a written statement furnished to the resident by the site owner. Again, disputes can be settled by reference to the courts or an agreed arbitrator.

I must apologise to Members; I have relied heavily on Members' patience by taking some time to outline the complexity of these matters and the impact of the legislation on the mainland, which protects those who use a mobile home as their permanent residence.

My interest in the subject has been generated as a result of the experiences described to me by a

considerable number of worried residents of a retirement park near Groomsport in my constituency. They live in Seahaven caravan park and have received letters from a company that has recently acquired the park from the previous owner. These are very decent, law-abiding people, many of whom are infirm and elderly. They have chosen to live in the park in the belief that they have been given an oral understanding that they could stay for life in the park's residential section.

However, they now feel that they are being pressured to accept new written agreements that will require static homes to be upgraded at a cost that may be in the region of £90,000. In addition, their tenure on the site may be reduced to a 10-year period, with no firm guarantee beyond that point.

The holiday-home section of Seahaven caravan park holds, I believe, 147 caravans, and the residential section has recently been increased to allow 178 caravans. Thus, we are speaking of the rights of a significant number of people.

In both cases, the residents are shocked and distraught. Many have moved there because of health reasons or because they could not find, even in old age, the cost of a conventional home. These are independent people who do not seek state handouts but merely want fair and equitable treatment.

Permanent residents in caravan sites take great pride in their homes, without regard to their circumstances, but live in fear of eviction at short notice. Many are elderly people who cannot afford to pay for a new mobile home at the whim of site owners. Just like the rest of us, those residents pay rates to have their bins emptied, have postcodes and are on the electoral register. Greedy site owners should not be allowed to bully them or take advantage of them.

Many people live in residential trailer park sites in Northern Ireland, and it is vital that legislation be put in place to protect trailer park residents against those who are more concerned with profit than with the rights of people to live in peace and contentment in their own permanent mobile home. I have received dozens of letters from constituents on this matter that reflect the view that they are being treated appallingly. I hope that I have faithfully represented their interests today. I call on the Minister of the Environment to introduce legislation similar to that which is applicable in the rest of the United Kingdom in order to protect the rights of caravan owners on private sites in Northern Ireland.

I thank my colleagues Jim Wells, Jim Shannon and Peter Weir for their assistance in tabling the motion.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The rights and entitlements of caravan owners who pay to stay on private sites in the Six

Counties must be protected. However, this is an all-Ireland issue and is not confined to the Six Counties; tourism is promoted on an all-Ireland basis, and we should, at the very least, co-operate on these matters, whether they affect Newcastle in County Down or Bundoran in County Donegal. That can only be achieved by improving the existing, wholly inadequate legislation. The motion should be adopted so that the rights of caravan owners and site owners alike can be enshrined in law.

Thousands of people holiday at caravan parks across the North, and they contribute greatly to the local tourism industry. Throughout the worst of times, as Members will know, many people used those caravan parks "to get away from it all". In my hometown of Newcastle, the caravan sites and tourist resorts boosted community relations; in seeking sanctuary, people put their beliefs aside and got on with their lives. People from both communities were affected by the difficulties highlighted in the motion; those problems must be dealt with in the same spirit. Most park owners behave in a responsible manner and provide good value for money. There are at least half a dozen such sites in my constituency, and I know that the owners of those sites would welcome legislation that provides guidance for them as well as for the residents.

There are several well-run caravan sites in Newcastle, and their importance to the local economy cannot be overstated. Some of those sites operate for 10 months of the year and not just for the summer. Although most function without difficulty, problems can and do arise. Earlier this year, a dispute between caravan owners and a local site owner caused much bitterness and was a poor advertisement for Newcastle's image as a friendly tourist resort. At the request of some of the complainants, I met the site owner in an attempt to resolve the dispute.

There was a clear lack of communication between both parties, and mediation was required to solve several issues, one of which was a problem with water pressure. Families who came down to enjoy their holidays could not even avail of proper showering facilities. The site owner claimed that the poor water pressure was nothing to do with him and that he had adequately relaid the entire site. The then Water Service claimed that the water pressure was satisfactory and that other people tapping into the water supply might have been the cause of the problem. Similar issues have caused difficulties, and holidaymakers have demanded compensation because their break was ruined.

Local councils, which look after environmental-health and public-safety matters for caravan sites, need powers to assume control of much of their running. As has been mentioned, such legislation is already in place across the water. I wish to see similar legislation introduced for the whole of Ireland.

Disputes have exposed a major flaw that has arisen because of a lack of proper legislation. Caravan owners pay hefty annual fees to keep their caravans on private sites, but, despite that, it looks as if the owners of those sites can raise fees to whatever level they want. That is another issue that caravan owners wish to see addressed.

Some caravan owners have been going to the same site for 10 or 20 years. Some of them are retired, and some are attempting to recuperate from illness. Others have invested large sums of money in their caravans, and they take a great deal of pride in their upkeep. They simply ask for fair rights, to be listened to and for their grievances to be taken on board. The last thing that they want to hear is that, if they do not like the situation, they should get off the site. That has happened at numerous caravan sites throughout Ireland. Some people, therefore, decide to leave. They end up being offered a small amount of money for their caravan, which they have no option but to accept. They then must pay extra fees to remove the caravan from the site and for its storage.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr W Clarke: I support the motion.

Mr Dallat: I also support the motion. I want to get across the message that some of the best caravan sites are on the north coast — in Portballintrae, Portrush, Portstewart and Castlerock, and right on around the coast.

Caravan owners' rights have been swept under the carpet for generations, simply because local councils could not reach an overall agreement on how to deal with the problem. Councils were unsure whether they should pass by-laws or on whom they should depend to secure rights for caravan owners.

Caravan owners on the north coast have been shouting from the rooftops for years, but all their calls have fallen on deaf ears. It is opportune that the motion is being debated, because the Assembly should take ownership of the issue and bring to an end the inequality and injustices that have gone on for too long.

Coleraine Borough Council owns the two main caravan parks on the north coast, Juniper Hill and Carrick-Dhu. The council's regulations for caravan owners on its sites are liberal. Caravan owners are not told from whom they can buy their new mobile homes or caravans — an awful practice that goes on at some private caravan sites. We are told that some type of voluntary code governs private sites, but I very much question the independence of that arrangement. That code should be supported by legislation.

I accept that mobile homes and caravans need to be replaced from time to time, in the interests of health and safety, but that is not the issue. The issue is the

monopoly that private-site owners exercise over their tenants. That is very wrong. Let us hope that, arising from the debate, something happens, and that we consider new legislation and guidance. If it is deemed proper, those powers could, in future, be devolved to local councils, which have in the past played an important role in the development of tourism, which, of course, includes caravanning.

Permanent residents have rights, which should be extended to those who choose to live in a caravan and to those who have no choice but to live in a caravan. My experience of caravan owners is that they are responsible people. They should be protected under the law, as ratepayers who comply with all the demands that are made of them. In return, they ask for nothing more than to be afforded basic rights.

1.45 pm

As has already been mentioned, caravanners make a substantial contribution to the economy. By taking their holidays at home, they reduce the amount of currency going abroad. The visitors who are attracted here from abroad bring in foreign currency. That is critical to our economy. In places such as Portrush, Portstewart, Castlerock and Portballintrae, caravan owners hugely boost the incomes of local shops, many of which are small and survive in the face of large supermarkets in the bigger towns such as Coleraine. Caravan owners also create many jobs in the service industries such as in restaurants, entertainment, and so on.

In conclusion, the issue is not simply about fair play. Those who own and use caravans play a critical part in our economy. It is well worthwhile considering legislation to ensure that they are protected with the same rights that everyone else demands.

Dr Farry: I am grateful to the proposers of the motion for bringing this important issue before the Assembly. They have rightly identified an important and significant gap in the regulatory framework in Northern Ireland.

Caravan owners are a group of consumers who do not enjoy effective consumer protection. Lest we think that the concern has been highlighted only by a number of recent prominent cases, we should remember that the issue has been a long-running problem in Northern Ireland. Someone who worked for the consumer protection organisation back in the 1980s told me that the problem was a major issue back then.

Two problems need to be addressed. Caravan owners do not enjoy security of tenure. Although most caravan park users have a written contract, some have only a verbal understanding or a verbal contract. In that sense, they stand apart from those who, being in a formal rented-property situation, enjoy much more protection under the law. Such caravan owners are also at the mercy of site owners who seem able to impose

arbitrary charges and to control or restrict trade and access to services. As Mr Dallat said, in economic terms, that equates to monopolistic behaviour. As with other monopolies, that situation represents a market failure that constitutes grounds for Government intervention.

Our legislation is now lagging badly behind the equivalent structures that exist in the rest of the United Kingdom. The current legal framework for caravan parks is provided by the Caravans Act (Northern Ireland) 1963, under which we adopted the provisions of the Caravan Sites and Control of Development Act 1960 that applied in the rest of the UK. However, Great Britain has since then enacted the Mobile Homes Act 1983, which significantly strengthened the legal protection that is enjoyed over there that, sadly, we lack over here.

It is important to recognise that we are talking about a number of types of structures, ranging from residential-park homes, which are essentially built on land for which planning permission was given for caravans to be sited, to the more traditional mobile caravans that people tow behind their cars when going on holiday. Indeed, we are also talking about people who live in a caravan as their sole primary residence. Essentially, the issue is not a problem about second homes. Often, the caravan owners are retirees who have gone to see out their final days in a residential park with spectacular views of the Northern Ireland coastline. The last thing that such people need is uncertainty about the legal situation in which such sites operate.

There are two broad problems of which the Assembly should be conscious. First, we need to address the regulatory framework. I think that there will be cross-party consensus on that, so I hope that the Minister will take forward the views of the House as quickly as possible and introduce legislation. Secondly, we need to deal with the ongoing problems that relate to a number of existing parks across Northern Ireland. For example, I am conscious of the situation in the Seahaven park outside Groomsport in the North Down constituency, where residents had an understanding with the previous owner that they could site their homes in the park as long as they wished. Unfortunately, when that park changed hands, the new owner saw things differently. Certainly, all MLAs for the North Down constituency will use their best endeavours to try to resolve that issue as best they can. I know that the MP for North Down is also aware of the issue.

It may be difficult to apply any new legislation retrospectively; I will be interested to hear what the Minister has to say about that. Unfortunately, some of the current disputes may end up in court. The main challenge for us as legislators is to ensure that proper legislation is put in place. I urge Members to support the motion.

Mr Weir: I welcome the motion. A debate on this issue is long overdue; it has been ignored by successive direct rule Administrations.

A press release from the Consumer Council, 'Caravan Owners Get a Raw Deal', highlights some of the complaints that the council has received from caravan owners:

“- The sale of caravans and amount of commission to site owners

- Being forced to buy a new caravan or to move from existing pitch”

— one of the principal issues that has directly affected the situation at Seahaven —

“- Being restricted to insurance provided by the site operator

- Fear of being 'blacklisted' and 'put off' the site if a complaint is made”.

Lest anyone think that that is a reaction to events at Seahaven or other caravan parks, that press release is dated Tuesday 12 February 2002. These issues have been ongoing for several years — Dr Farry mentioned the 1980s. Direct rule Ministers have failed to grasp the nettle and provide a proper solution. At the heart of the matter is security of tenure — the opportunity for people to live safely in their homes with the knowledge that they will not be forced or bullied out of them by the owners of the sites.

I am glad that the motion has received support from around the Chamber. Indeed, one party was so enthusiastic about it that it wanted to extend the Environment Minister's powers to the rest of Ireland. It is good that parties have united on the issue. The proposer of the motion pointed out that any solution to the problem — like the law that surrounds the area, and what needs to be done — will be complex. He rightly spent some time highlighting the issues. There is a range of different types of sites and situations. The definition of a “site” is problematic and must be examined. People may be labelled as one thing, but in the case of Seahaven, many tenants are permanent residents who pay rates and taxes and are on the electoral register as living there.

The Caravan and Camping Forum for Northern Ireland agreed at its recent meeting that a Northern Ireland equivalent to the Mobile Homes Act 1983 in respect of residential parks should be addressed. We need to put legislation in place that puts Northern Ireland on a par with the rest of the United Kingdom and gives residents the same level of protection. Circumstances in Northern Ireland may mean that the legislation is not identical. However, a Northern Ireland equivalent is needed.

Tackling the situation goes beyond the Environment Minister's remit. Other issues, such as security of tenure, fall under the remit of the Department for Social Development. I hope that the Executive will

consider the issues on a multi-departmental and multi-agency basis in order to provide proper legislation.

This is a complex issue. The latest statistics show that caravanners made a financial contribution to the economy of £11.3 million in 2004. Behind the statistics, there are human stories. People who own and live in caravans in Northern Ireland are not people who have chosen a particular route on a whim. They are not engaged in antisocial behaviour; they are people who are the backbone of communities. They are decent people. Many have gone into the situation with a lifelong commitment to their site. They consider their caravans to be their permanent base or retirement home. Those decent people must be protected. Legislation that provides some degree of equity is needed.

It is not too much to ask to simply provide caravan owners with the protection of security of tenure. The Executive must consider that issue closely to ensure that it is not put on the back burner, both for Seahaven, where the problem is particularly acute, and for other sites around Northern Ireland. I hope that Members will not need to revisit the issue in five years but can resolve it relatively easily by working together. I support the motion.

Mr Gardiner: I declare an interest, as I have owned a caravan for many years. Therefore, I naturally want caravan owners in Northern Ireland to enjoy the same rights and protection as those in the rest of the United Kingdom. Other Members have concentrated on the type of legislation required to extend those rights to owners here whose caravans are located on a private site. I will concentrate on why such an extension must happen and why more attention must be paid to caravan owners in general.

Collectively, the United Kingdom caravan, motorhome and motor-park industries have a turnover of £3 billion, employ nearly 100,000 people and serve over one million caravanners and 250,000 motor-park residents. The caravan industry is growing steadily and makes a major contribution to tourism in the United Kingdom. The English home market for tourism has many caravanners in its ranks, and I remind the Assembly that over 43 million people live within four hours' drive of the Lancashire ports, including many caravanners. That market is more readily accessible than expensive foreign markets in America and overseas. The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) should target that home market far more, and the fact that it includes many caravanners emphasises the importance of putting in place a correct range of rights.

Caravanning is undervalued in Northern Ireland, and it is not assisted in any way by officialdom to fulfil its considerable potential. The Government should help to remedy that situation by compiling and maintaining reliable statistics on the size and value of

the caravan holiday sector in Northern Ireland. The NITB should actively market caravan holidays, include them in its inspection scheme for holiday accommodation and tourism awards, and operate a grading system. The board should nominate a specific contact with responsibility for ensuring that the caravan holiday sector's interests are properly considered and for adequately communicating with it.

The Northern Ireland Tourist Industry Confederation should be reformed to act on behalf of all those with interests in tourism. At the earliest opportunity, the Government should reinstate a working group to prepare a new planning policy statement for tourism in Northern Ireland. It is not only right to extend the rights that apply elsewhere in the United Kingdom to caravanners here but it is economically sound because of the potential to benefit tourism.

Specific actions are required to protect the rights of caravan owners under the law. In September 2005, the Office of Fair Trading published 'Guidance on Unfair Terms in Holiday Caravan Agreements', in which it drew a distinction between responsible and less responsible caravan park owners. As only the former should be allowed to operate, the best way forward is to set up a watertight licensing scheme for caravan parks, which should be linked to the publication of the results of a customer satisfaction questionnaire. After all, caravans represent a substantial investment for their owners, and they have the right to expect a reasonable range of protection under the law. Therefore, I support fully the worthwhile motion.

2.00 pm

Mr Cree: As many Members have said, this vexatious problem has been with us for a long time, whether it concerns mobile or static caravans or mobile homes.

After various bodies had spent some 20 years campaigning on the matter, a code of practice was introduced throughout the United Kingdom in September 1999. That code was expected to provide the same level of consumer protection for caravanners here as had existed for those on the mainland.

In 2002, the Consumer Council noted that caravanners in Northern Ireland still lacked basic rights and that, therefore, new legislation was needed. The code of practice that had been introduced was not sufficient to safeguard people's rights and, in many cases, was not being honoured.

In his contribution, Mr Gardiner gave UK-wide statistics on the park-homes business. That is an important business that generates a great deal of revenue. There are at least 12,000 owners of static caravans, and that figure continues to grow. The Member of Parliament for North Down, Lady Hermon, asked the Secretary of State:

"what plans he has to extend those parts of the Housing Act 2004 relating to park homes to Northern Ireland."

John Spellar replied:

"I have no plans to extend the provisions as they make amendments to the Mobile Homes Act 1983, which does not cover Northern Ireland."

Therefore, it remains the case that no specific legislation here safeguards consumer rights in the park-homes business.

Since the 1960s, several pieces of legislation that were made for Great Britain have been extended through devolution to cover Scotland and Wales. It is time to address that important shortcoming and ensure that the British rights that cover other parts of the United Kingdom are applied to Northern Ireland. I support the call for new legislation so that caravanners in Northern Ireland can enjoy the same rights as others.

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

Mr Shannon: I look forward to speaking to the motion on a matter that has exercised my mind and the minds of many Members. My colleague Alex Easton and I have met with some caravan owners, and we are aware of the issues that are important to them.

The story, which should not be repeated anywhere in the Province, is one that most of us have heard. The average person is being taken advantage of and has no protection against those who seek gain for themselves at the expense of others. One such example is an elderly couple who are in retirement and who may decide to release their equity and sell their home. They may approach a park-home owner who tells them that if they buy a caravan, they can rent the land and the amenities for as long as they want them. No contract and no written agreement has been signed — just a gentleman's simple agreement. That couple then sell their home and begin to reap the benefit of their life's work, taking those holidays for which they could never find the time or money. They are also able to treat their family, and retirement looks like a happy prospect — on paper at least.

In another case, a man may become ill and can no longer work. The mortgage payments loom heavily on his mind, and, instead of declaring bankruptcy and going to the Housing Executive for a house, he sells his home and buys a caravan with the intention of having a quiet life, paying an average of £1,000 a year in rent, with the result that he affordably retains his independence.

Buying a caravan seems to be the better option for both couples, at least until the caravan park is sold and the new site owners have more than the current plan in mind for the park. The easiest way for the owners to realise their new plans is to force the tenants out by exploiting the fact that no written contract has been signed, and there is no protective legislation. The site

owners decide to say that their homes, the majority of which are less than four years old, are unfit to live in and must be replaced by more permanent homes that will cost in the region of £90,000. The residents are told that they should not worry and that if they cannot find the money to buy those homes, their own homes will be bought at a generous rate. Once more, the little people are pushed around to satisfy the whims of a big company.

What redress do those people have? How can they challenge those injustices? In short, they cannot: they signed no contract or written agreement and have no enshrined rights. They have nothing, and the Government have given them no protection. Had they known in advance what would be required of them when they bought their homes, they would not have had to deal with that shock, and they would have had the option of laying out more money to build more permanent homes at a time when it was a lot cheaper to do so. Instead, they find that, four years later, their homes are redundant. Having no contract and no indication of the needs for, and standards of, caravans meant that they were left to wander in the dark, as it were.

That is not the case on the mainland, where the Mobile Homes Act 1983 protects mobile-home owners. The Act ensures that, from the outset, set terms are in a written contract between the tenant and the owner. Express terms can be changed by agreement between the tenant and the owner or by either party's applying to the civil courts or to arbitration. That contract, therefore, expresses any requirements for homes, meaning that questions and nasty surprises do not arise in future years. Should a home be unfit for use, the park owner cannot just enforce his opinion but must engage an impartial arbitrator who is not swayed by thoughts of how much more money he could get for a piece of land without that mobile home on it, as a businessman is inclined to think. That is the obvious route to take. In any other rental situation, there are terms and conditions. Yet, in the Province, there are no means of preventing advantage being taken of someone when his or her home and future might be at stake.

There are 12,000 owners of static homes in Northern Ireland. Some are holiday homes and are not in residential parks; however, there is still no legislation to protect them — there are only guidelines. That is unacceptable.

On 26 June 2006, my colleague from Strangford Mrs Robinson posed a question at Westminster about how many caravan parks had been opened in Northern Ireland in the previous three years. The Secretary of State was unable to answer. He was able to state only how many had been granted planning permission. Why was that? Was it because the Government took no interest in the rights of caravan or mobile-home owners — except to ensure that they paid their rates?

In Ards alone, there were three planning applications for parks. However, what type of park — holiday or residential? The Government did not distinguish.

In 2003, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Des Browne said:

“The 1983 Act covers mobile homes in designated areas that are generally referred to as Park Homes. As this is a unique type of tenure and there are no such areas in Northern Ireland it would be inappropriate to introduce equivalent provisions.”

The Assembly must take the steps that should have been taken in 2003 and offer protection to residents who are clearly in desperate need of it.

Action should not be misinterpreted as an attack on park-home owners. Legislation would also offer them protection, and the recently formed Caravan and Camping Forum for Northern Ireland has discussed and agreed the need for an equivalent Act in Northern Ireland.

I take pleasure in supporting the proposal.

Mr Armstrong: As an Ulster Unionist who is proud to live in this part of the United Kingdom, I fully agree that citizens in Northern Ireland should enjoy the same rights and protections as fellow citizens who live in Great Britain. Therefore, when Members of the Assembly can make a difference, I have no difficulty in supporting the motion.

There are two separate issues. The first concerns people in residential caravan parks who are unhappy about the terms and conditions that are imposed on them by the owners of the parks. That was recently highlighted by the case of caravan-park residents in the Ards Peninsula who took grave exception to the enforced upgrading of their homes.

The second issue relates to the rights enjoyed by individuals who lease space from holiday caravan sites. That was highlighted in the last year, when Coleraine Borough Council sought to sell off some sites on the north coast, provoking opposition from those with holiday caravans on those sites. My understanding is that the legal framework that covers holiday caravan sites is the same as that which operates in Great Britain. Therefore, I propose to address my remarks to the situation as it relates to residential caravan parks.

Park homes, otherwise called mobile homes, comply with the statutory definition of a caravan, and are built to British Standards Institute standards. However, in most cases, they look like bungalows and are located in parks where planning permission allows the residential use of caravans. Those parks can resemble small housing estates, and the majority of the homes on them are privately owned and occupied as the main residences of their owners.

Mr Weir: Does the Member agree that an important factor in legislating for such matters as planning permission is that the rights of caravan owners are protected without placing an undue additional burden on them? Care must be taken with any Northern Ireland legislation to ensure that caravan owners are not penalised as well as protected.

Mr Armstrong: I agree that those people must not be penalised.

Park homes are especially popular with older people who wish to move to more suitable accommodation and to release equity. They are not only affordable but offer compactness, security and a sense of community.

Most residents own their park homes, which may cost from £15,000 to £300,000, and enter an agreement with park owners to keep their homes on plots of land, for which they pay fees of £1,000 a year on average.

Security of tenure in Great Britain is provided by the Mobile Homes Act 1983, which implies certain important terms to the contractual relationship between park owners and park-home owners. Those terms include the right to situate the park home indefinitely, to sell or make a gift of it, the right to form residents' associations, and provisions for the resolution of disputes. There can be no contracting out of those implied terms.

The Mobile Homes Act 1983 should be extended to Northern Ireland to protect mobile-home owners here. The Northern Ireland branch of the British Holiday and Home Parks Association supports that course of action. Indeed, in April 2003, Lady Sylvia Hermon of the Ulster Unionist Party tabled a written question requesting such a course of action. The then direct rule Minister, Des Browne, replied that the 1983 Act covered mobile homes in designated areas that are generally referred to as park homes and said that:

“As this is a unique type of tenure and there are no such areas in Northern Ireland it would be inappropriate to introduce equivalent provisions.”

However, as recent events on the Ards Peninsula have proved, that is no longer the case. There are park homes on at least four sites in Northern Ireland. The people who live in those park homes are entitled to the same legal protection as their fellow citizens who live in the same type of accommodation in Great Britain. Therefore, I support the motion.

The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster): I congratulate the Members who secured the debate and I welcome the opportunity to set out my Department's position. As it will become clear, responsibility for the issue cuts across several Departments and, therefore, I can only respond as far as my Department is concerned.

I sympathise with the plight of mobile-home owners described by various Members. There is a clear

deficiency in Northern Ireland legislation that leaves mobile-home owners unprotected and disadvantaged in comparison with their counterparts elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

There are two main issues: the first relates to the definition of "caravan", and the second relates to rights of tenure and inheritance. Mr Easton, when proposing the motion, referred to definitions of mobile homes and caravans as being the same elsewhere in the United Kingdom. However, the definition of a caravan in the UK is not the same as that in the Caravans Act (Northern Ireland) 1963, which is my Department's responsibility.

I will not go into all the details, but in Northern Ireland, the dimensions of a caravan are not stipulated in the 1963 Act but are determined indirectly by reference to motor-vehicle legislation relating to what may legally move from one place to another along a public road. The dimensions specified in that legislation are not in line with those in England, which were extended only last year specifically to embrace mobile homes.

On 9 February 2004, the High Court in Northern Ireland, in the case '57 Developments Ltd v Department of the Environment for Northern Ireland' said that a twin-unit caravan that does not exceed 6·1 m in width is capable of being moved lawfully from one place to another on the public highway and, accordingly, is a caravan for the purposes of the 1963 Act.

In that judicial review, Mr Justice Weatherup took the view that a caravan, for the purposes of the statutory definition, is a single structure designed or adapted for human habitation and which is capable of being moved lawfully on the public highway by towing or transportation as a single structure.

Some twin-unit caravans — or park homes, as they are more frequently known — are capable of such mobility, and being less than 6·1 m wide are capable of satisfying the relevant regulations. The implication is that the definition of a caravan would need to be brought into line with that in Great Britain, so that it embraces caravans, mobile homes and park homes.

A change in the definition would also simplify the position as regards planning control. Some mobile park homes do not sit comfortably with the definition of a caravan and may require individual planning permission.

The second issue is that, although the Mobile Homes Act 1983 uses the same definition for a mobile home as previous legislation used for a caravan, it protects only owner-occupiers of mobile homes, for whom the mobile home is their only or main residence, and it applies only when the occupier has an agreement with the site owner.

2.15 pm

Changes in the definition of what constitutes a caravan, a mobile home or a park home will have implications for planning control. That impacts on planning permission for mobile homes and park homes in Northern Ireland, where, technically, they may not be regarded as caravans and will therefore require specific planning permission in addition to that already obtained for the use of land as a caravan site. The Caravans Act (Northern Ireland) 1963 does not, unfortunately, provide a platform for further legislation to address rights of tenure or agreements between the owners of caravans, mobile homes or park homes and site owners. That Act is primarily concerned with the use of land for caravan sites and the licensing of such sites by district councils. Separate legislation is therefore required to provide protection for owners of caravans, mobile homes and park homes. The Caravans Act (Northern Ireland) 1963 cannot be used to provide security of tenure for residents of mobile homes or for agreements between them and site owners.

Furthermore, those matters lie beyond land-use planning control, and, therefore, it could be argued that they are not the responsibility of the Department of the Environment. That view is supported, to some extent, by the position in England, where the Mobile Homes Act 1983, of which we have heard much today, and amendments to that Act were promoted by Departments responsible for housing matters, most recently by the housing management division of the Department for Communities and Local Government.

I have been advised by the Minister for Social Development that, in respect of tenancy rights, although park homes have been in existence in Great Britain for some time, that housing option is relatively new to Northern Ireland, and there are currently only two recognised developments. When homes in those developments are purchased, the owner enters into an agreement with the landowner to have the home sited on the park. That is a private matter between the two parties to the agreement. Housing law deals only with the tenure rights of the rented sector. Those occupying mobile homes as their main residence are regarded as homeowners, and, therefore, they fall outside that protection.

Tenancy rights are clearly not a land-use planning matter. If they were, they would fall into my area of responsibility. I regret, therefore, that I am unable to give Members a commitment to introduce such legislation. Due to the issue of definition, to which I referred earlier, the law dealing with mobile homes on caravan sites affects the responsibilities of more than one Department. The difficulties must be explored to determine which Department is best placed to deal with them.

My colleague Alex Easton proposed the motion and mentioned the need for legislation relating not only to mobile homes but to caravans for holiday purposes. He will accept that a person who rents a caravan for a week or two is not really the problem. Rather, we are trying to focus on those who live in mobile homes as their main or only residence. That is covered by the Mobile Homes Act 1983. Furthermore, in the case of holiday rentals, no protection is provided by other caravan or housing legislation.

My Department has been in contact with the Department for Communities and Local Government on the mainland about that matter, and it has confirmed that legislation relating to caravans and mobile homes does not protect holiday caravan owners. That Department has no plans to introduce legislation in relation to holiday rentals. However, with regard to protection, regulations exist such as The Unfair Terms in Consumer Contracts Regulations 1999, which were introduced on the mainland and which extend to Northern Ireland. I regret to say, as a former lawyer, that the individuals concerned must resort to the law to challenge unfair contracts.

Mr Clarke from Sinn Féin said that the issue was not only a problem for the United Kingdom but for the Republic of Ireland. I have jurisdiction in this part of the kingdom only, so I will have to restrain myself from trying to interfere in the legislation of another state. He talked about the benefits of mediation and rightly pointed out that district councils have most, if not all, powers in relation to caravan sites at present.

After giving Members a guided tour of his constituency's caravan sites in East Londonderry, Mr Dallat spoke about the inequality between council-owned sites and privately owned sites. He also talked about the possibility of control being devolved to local government under the review of public administration (RPA). I am happy to look at that matter. As Members know, a review that was instituted in relation to the RPA is currently under way.

The current authority of district councils only covers site licences and mainly deals with physical standards and health and safety issues, not with security of tenure. District councils can, however, draw up agreements for their own sites. That is the case in Mr Dallat's constituency, where it has been successful in the Coleraine area.

Mr Farry said that it was a long-running problem, and he identified the issue as one of consumer protection. He spoke about security of tenure and identified the different structures involved. On the chance of the definition of what constitutes a caravan being retrospective, it will apply only when it has been enacted as far as planning control is concerned. That could affect what is allowed on existing sites. I cannot

comment on tenancy rights, as that is a matter for the Department for Social Development.

Mr Weir spoke about issues raised by the then General Consumer Council of Northern Ireland as far back as 2002. He mentioned the complexities of the legislation and recognised that it was not an issue for the Department of the Environment alone. He also reflected on the many human stories that have been brought to my attention — not only by him but by his colleagues as well — and urged the entire Executive not to put the issue on the back burner.

Mr Gardiner, a caravan owner himself, highlighted the benefits of caravanning to the home tourist industry and emphasised that it was a cross-cutting issue. He inquired about a policy planning statement (PPS) on tourism, saying that the issue should be reviewed. I do not have the timescale with me today, but I shall be happy to write to Mr Gardiner about the timing of that PPS.

Mr Cree mentioned the Consumer Council. It became apparent that this is a wide cross-cutting issue, with many Members referring to consumer rights. I wish to put on record that I am happy to meet the Consumer Council to discuss the matter, and I am sure that other colleagues will be too.

Mr Shannon brought Members the human stories behind the headlines, and Mr Armstrong ended the debate by referring to the difficulties surrounding the definitions of caravans.

I cannot deal with the security-of-tenure issue, although I wish that I could. However, I assure the House that I will consider the definition of a caravan and its implications for the wider debate. I can only advise people who are having difficulties with security of tenure to take legal advice on the general legal rights from their lawyers or bodies such as the Consumer Council. I mentioned those issues previously.

Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for the chance to respond to the debate.

Mr Wells: Mr Deputy Speaker, this is the first opportunity that I have had to congratulate you on your appointment. It is a seat that I occupied for a year, and I wish you every success in the future.

We are not debating a small issue. Between 12,000 and 14,000 people in Northern Ireland occupy caravans in some shape or form. That means that every constituency has an average of about 800 people concerned about the rights of caravan owners. There are over 100 caravan sites in Northern Ireland, the majority of which are in coastal areas such as south Down, Strangford, east Londonderry and north Antrim.

It is a big industry, as several Members have said, which brings millions of pounds into the economy. However, why do people's human rights disappear when they go through the gates of some caravan sites?

That is what happens. I will give the House a few examples of what is happening in my constituency to underline that.

I was approached by a lady who bought her caravan one year ago for £20,000, but her domestic circumstances changed radically, and she was forced to sell. She was offered £10,600 for her caravan — a depreciation of approximately £250 for every night she spent in it. When she tackled the owner of the Newcastle site about the offer, she was told that the price was set by 'Glass's Guide'. When she asked to see that guide, he refused. The caravan site owner told her, quite frankly, that it was her hard luck if she did not like the arrangements and that she had to buy and sell her caravan through him.

I also have an example of an elderly gentleman who paid £30,000 for his caravan two years ago but was forced to sell when he became a widower. He was offered, and had to accept, £18,000. His daughter checked around the site a few months later to find the same caravan on sale for £32,000. If those individuals are not considered to be abusing the monopoly of power that they have in caravan sites, there is something wrong.

The 10-year rule is also causing great distress in my constituency. It appears that caravan site owners have the right to tell caravan owners — regardless of the state of their caravans and of how much money they have spent on maintenance, extensions or repainting — that they must replace their caravan every 10 years. However, caravan owners are only allowed to sell their caravan to the site owner and can only buy their new one from the site owner. That places the caravan owner in a difficult position. If the caravan owner does not like those arrangements, he or she is told to get off the site. A gentleman who protested about that type of treatment on a caravan site in Newcastle returned one day to find that his caravan had been towed off the site and dumped in the field across the road. He was then told to make the necessary arrangements to have it removed.

Some caravan site owners have decided that people who use their sites are not allowed to have private insurance. I encountered a site owner who does not permit caravan owners on his sites to look in the open market for private insurance; instead, he charges every caravan owner on his site £400 insurance. Most people on that site know that they could get insurance for £150 if they went to the Caravan Club, Saga or some reputable insurance company, but the site owner demands £400 from them. As the caravan site owner buys a group policy, he is getting the insurance for less than £150 — and everyone knows that. However, when a deputation of caravan owners went to see the site owner to query the arrangement, he refused them sight of the policy and would not tell them how much

he paid for it or what it covered. The caravan owners had no option but to accept that.

Another difficulty arose at a Kilkeel site, where, until recently, caravan owners were permitted to hire a private contractor to fix their caravans, put decking round it or install new facilities. The caravan site owner spotted a gap in the market and decided that caravan owners had to come to him if they wished to do any work and use a subcontractor appointed by him. The difficulty there was that an amount was added to the overall charge for the work as a cut for the site owner who referred the work to the subcontractor. Those are some of the many difficulties faced by people on caravan sites.

Many people have their caravans on sites for which they have no written contract. The Minister of the Environment, Mrs Foster, said that it might be possible to take court action in some instances. However, that will be difficult if there is only a verbal arrangement between the site owner and the caravan owner. A further difficulty is that many of the people who are being faced with these problems are from the most vulnerable groups in society. Many of them are elderly, some of them disabled and many of them are retired. They are not in a position to take on the might of a caravan site owner, go to the High Court and sue him for breach of contract. They will risk a huge debt if they lose the case, and if they threaten to do it, their caravan might be found lying across the road having been towed off the site. Those are the difficulties that are faced.

The minimum expected by those who use caravan sites is the right to a written contract that offers reasonable terms and conditions that are not excessive, and which they can stand by and show in the event of dispute. In many parts of Northern Ireland, there are no such written contracts.

That led to the situation on the Boulevard caravan site in Newcastle, where all the tenants got letters from the site owner saying that he had decided to sell his site for apartments and that the caravan owners would have to leave the site within three months. They had absolutely no comeback, because they did not have a written contract that could be enforced.

2.30 pm

I appreciate the Minister's going into the important detail of the definition of "caravan" and the impact of extending the Mobile Homes Act 1983 to this part of the United Kingdom. I remind the hon Member for South Down — or, rather, the Member for South Down — Mr Clarke that the motion applies only to the United Kingdom. Therefore, trying to extend the powers of my hon Friend Mrs Foster to the Republic of Ireland, which is a foreign state, will not work on this occasion.

Mr Weir: Obviously, the Members opposite, having failed to get into one Executive, are trying to extend the powers of another.

Mr Wells: The Member for North Down has made an interesting point. After its recent electoral showing in the Republic of Ireland, Sinn Féin will have no role in caravan legislation — or any other form of legislation — in the Dáil for the next few years.

Members have outlined the difficulties. I accept, and appreciate, that the Minister of the Environment is in a difficult position because she can answer only the planning issues regarding caravan sites, and a few other minor matters. Many of the issues arising from the motion rest with the Minister for Social Development. It is unfortunate that she is not in the Chamber. However, I will see her tonight at the annual general meeting of Down District Council. Perhaps I will be able to have a word in her ear about her absence. I hope that the Official Report of this debate will be passed to the Minister for Social Development so that she can address the issues that she has missed by being absent from the Chamber this afternoon. It is important that, on a cross-cutting issue such as this, the Ministers can work together.

I do not care whether what is required is an extension of the 1983 Act to Northern Ireland or a new definition of “caravan”. All that I want is for vulnerable people who are living on caravan sites that have unscrupulous owners to have some basic human rights. Clearly, there are caravan sites in Northern Ireland where there are contracts and where site owners behave responsibly. I am aware of quite a few, some in my own constituency. However, there has to be some recourse against those who misbehave.

The Minister said that there is an Act that provides the district councils with some role in the licensing of caravan sites in Northern Ireland. In reality, that has no impact on the unfair terms and conditions. The council can become involved if there is an issue of public health or noise but not where the owner of a site is treating his tenants in a very unfair way. Therefore, that legislation is not of much assistance. Down District Council, for example, can dictate that a certain site has only 200 pitches, but it can do nothing about someone who offers 50% less than the market value for a second-hand caravan.

I welcome the fact that it seems that there is going to be some liaison between the relevant Departments so that we can get a basic Act for — and perhaps unique to — this part of the United Kingdom; one that deals specifically with the needs of individuals. Since the issue has been raised, I have had some caravan owners on the phone in tears. It is unfortunate that the Member for East Londonderry Mr Dallat is not here, because one of the complaints was about a site owned

by his council. Coleraine Borough Council doubled the nightly rate on its site during the North West 200 motorcycle race. The council saw an opportunity to double its fees because there was a big demand for sites that weekend. Therefore, it is not just private site owners who occasionally bend the rules. It is a pity that Mr Dallat is not here to answer for his council.

Let us show that we can effectively represent the 12,000 to 14,000 people in the Province who have caravans by giving them basic human rights and control of their affairs through new legislation.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of the Environment to put in place legislation, similar to that applying in the rest of the United Kingdom, to protect the rights of caravan owners on private sites in Northern Ireland.

Shared Future Framework

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to move the motion and 10 minutes for the winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will be allowed five minutes. One amendment has been selected and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes in which to move the amendment and five minutes for the winding-up speech.

Dr Farry: I beg to move

That this Assembly endorses the documents entitled ‘A Shared Future: Policy and Strategic Framework for Good Relations in Northern Ireland’ and the ‘First Triennial Action Plan 2006-2009’, and calls upon the Executive to make the creation of a shared society a top priority.

To say that this is, perhaps, the Assembly’s most important debate so far is not an understatement. I am pleased to see both the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister in the Chamber.

The premier political challenge that faces us is to address the continued, deep divisions in our society. As long as those divisions remain, the momentous events of 8 May alone do not, and cannot, constitute the end point for the political process. The Assembly must be conscious that sectarian and racist attitudes remain prevalent. Furthermore, the pattern of segregation is deeply ingrained, especially in residential terms.

Unfortunately, it must be recognised that, in recent years, rather than improving, those divisions have become, in some respects, even more entrenched. The majority of the badly misnamed “peace walls” have appeared since the first ceasefires in 1994, and one has even been added since the arrival of our new political dispensation.

In essence, there are two options for how this society is managed. However, there is not really a choice. The first is to continue with a deeply divided society, doing our best to manage the tensions, diverting scarce resources that could be put to much better use, and wasting huge opportunities. Those divisions carry enormous human, social, security, economic and financial costs. A society based on the idea of “separate but equal” cannot, and will not, work. The concept of a benign apartheid is an oxymoron.

The other option is to build a shared future: a society in which people can live and learn, work and play together in safety. A shared future is the only sustainable way forward for Northern Ireland.

Despite the deepening divisions in some aspects of life here, there are encouraging signs. The workplace — albeit largely because of top-down regulation — is, in effect, integrated. There is evidence of substantial

public support and demand for shared education, housing and leisure facilities. However, the aspiration for shared goods, facilities and services is often frustrated, sometimes because of lack of provision but often because of fears concerning security.

Furthermore, we must recognise the growing diversity in Northern Ireland. With regard to identity, more and more people are casting off traditional labels and challenging notions that Protestant must equal British, must equal unionist, or that Catholic must equal Irish, must equal nationalist.

Increasing numbers of immigrants are coming to work in Northern Ireland. Surely, that is an encouraging sign of our economic potential. However, their presence presents a further challenge to the traditional notions of how this society is organised, and it is time that the term the “two communities” was consigned to the dustbin.

It is important to recognise that a shared future must be more than a slogan, or a label, that can be applied to any situation where unionists or nationalists work in partnership. A shared future is a specific policy framework, out of which arises a set of policy objectives.

I commend the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister for the work on a shared future that has already been carried out, albeit under direct rule. However, that only built on the leadership that has been shown in civic society. The consultation that led to the document ‘A Shared Future: Policy and Strategic Framework for Good Relations in Northern Ireland’ saw the participation of over 10,000 people from all sections of the community.

The shared future strategy has been in place since March 2005, and the first of the triennial action plans was launched in April 2006. Some key areas named in part 2 of the framework document include:

“Tackling the Visible Manifestations of Sectarianism and Racism; Reclaiming Shared Space; Reducing Tensions at Interface Areas; Shared Education; Shared Communities; Supporting Good Relations through Diversity and Cultural Diversity; Developing Shared Workplaces; Good Relations, Community Development and Tackling Disadvantage; Ensuring that Voice is Given to Victims; Shared Services.”

A shared future is not about the elimination of difference. Instead, it is about building a society that is based on respect as well as tolerance. A shared future is also about the recognition of our mutual interdependence and the putting in place of a better framework in order to address conflict. A shared future does not conflict with equality; there is a fundamental relationship between the two.

The core principle must be equal citizenship. A shared future must be based on equality, which in turn must be based on good relations and sharing. Equally, a shared future is not about social engineering and the creation of an artificial society. In many respects, the

divisions in Northern Ireland have been engineered by past decisions. The delivery of a shared future requires political leadership, and it is important that each party in the Assembly gives its support to the detailed policy work that needs to be done.

It is important to recognise that the documents before Members are Government policy, and they will remain so. However, they are the legacy of direct rule. It is important that there is local ownership over the detail of policy; it will fall to the Executive to shape the context of the second triennial plan, which is due to be launched in less than two years' time.

The forthcoming comprehensive spending review will be a critical watershed. The promotion of a shared future could generate huge financial savings. The Alliance Party has already highlighted the fact that £1 billion is wasted every year in an attempt to manage a divided society. Much of that money cannot be released in the short term, so investment of additional resources regarding shared facilities may be required to change the pattern of the provision of services. In the long term, there will be a significant financial peace dividend, which can be spent on the improvement of public services for everybody. In the review, mixed housing and shared education must be examined; I include integrated education in that, because it is the most economically and socially viable education model.

Ultimately, a shared future should be strengthened by a shared Government. The proposed amendment is encouraging. If the Assembly can unite around the objective of a shared future, an important message will be sent out about the direction in which it has to move. The Alliance Party will pay close attention to the comments made by other parties on the issue. It is important that we do not regress from the important principles that were established through the 'Shared Future' framework document and that there is a commitment to the implementation of the existing policies in the shared future action plan.

Importantly, the Assembly must take ownership of the issue and shape the future direction of policy. If all parties are prepared to commit to the framework of a shared future, something that all Ministers took a pledge to uphold in their Pledge of Office, it will be an important achievement. The issue is momentous, and it goes to the heart of how politicians organise and deliver a better society for all.

Mr Spratt: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after "Assembly" and insert

"notes the strategic direction of and underpinning principles contained in the documents 'A Shared Future' (March 2005) and 'A Shared Future: Triennial Action Plan' (April 2006), and recognises that the Executive and the Assembly will wish to consider carefully the progress to date and bring forward detailed plans, consistent with the pledge of office, to promote the interests of the whole

community towards the goal of a shared future and a prosperous, peaceful and settled society."

Direct rule Ministers produced the first shared future triennial action plan in April 2006. Its main themes include eliminating sectarianism and racism, and enabling individuals to live and work without fear or intimidation. That is important for the Province in seeking to promote business and attract inward investment.

A main priority in the action plan was to reduce tension and conflict at interface areas. The parading issue is crucial in that. It is essential that a resolution on parades be found, otherwise much of the progress made in recent months could be destroyed.

2.45 pm

The parades issue has the potential to disrupt the efforts that have been made towards stable devolution, and there are those who would be only too keen to stir up trouble at flashpoints. The triennial action plan also commits to supporting the development of integrated and shared communities where people wish to learn, live, work and play together.

In education, the Bain Report recognised that supporting multiple education sectors such as the existing controlled, maintained, voluntary grammar, integrated and Irish-medium strands incurs significant costs. No value is added by having all those separate administrative structures. We must accept that we cannot keep schools open while losing money on expensive administrative structures. Nowhere else in the United Kingdom or anywhere in the world can match the number of different school-management types in Northern Ireland.

A previous Sinn Féin Education Minister was able to introduce a policy under which Irish-medium and integrated schools with intakes as low as 12 pupils could be opened and financed by the state. That was against an already accepted background of falling rolls, surplus places and rising costs. On that matter, Bain states:

"The establishment of new Integrated and Irish-medium schools ... increases the number of schools at a time of falling pupil numbers and, therefore, contributes to the incidence of small schools and the level of surplus capacity."

Opening new, small, integrated or Irish-medium schools because that happened to be the political flavour of the month for a particular party has had serious repercussions for other small schools in the Province.

Education and training costs 30% more per capita here than the United Kingdom average. Although we spend more because of the multiple sectors in Northern Ireland, less money reaches the pupil. Despite education spending representing 10% of GDP compared with only 5% for the rest of the UK, the actual spending for each

pupil is 14.5% less here than in England and Wales for primary schools and 2.5% less for secondary schools.

The persistence of a large number of different education systems with multiple sets of bureaucracies is no longer acceptable, particularly given the severely restricted budgets for education. Since 1922, Northern Ireland has had two parallel systems, educating mainly Protestants in state schools and mainly Roman Catholics at maintained schools. Since then, several more sectors have emerged, including the integrated sector. The integrated education sector further subdivides precious resources.

Schools from different sectors currently work effectively at local level through collaboration, planning and working jointly to meet the needs of pupils. There are many fine examples of that around the Province. It is important to build on that and to avoid undoing all of the gains made at local level by taking an excessively heavy-handed approach. I have heard it suggested that £1 billion could be saved through greater co-operation across all sectors. That is a huge overestimate, but genuine savings must be made where possible.

The anti-racism strategy runs hand in hand with the shared future strategy. Good relations among people from different racial backgrounds are essential as Northern Ireland society develops over the coming years. The DUP recognises racism as a problem in Northern Ireland and has consistently sought to help to eradicate it. Those who have recently moved to Northern Ireland from eastern Europe and other parts of the world enrich our society. Those who work in the local Health Service, for instance, are worthy of our immense gratitude. In some areas, it would now be difficult for hospitals to function without them. The Province has received great benefits from people from other parts of the world.

People of more than 60 nationalities are now contributing to our economy and society. In towns such as Portadown and Dungannon, major employers would be unable to operate without Portuguese and eastern European staff, particularly in the food-manufacturing sector. There must be awareness of — and adequate provision for — those from other parts of the world. Even simple tasks such as sending letters or completing forms can prove very difficult if English is not one's first language. Employers ought to provide induction and training programmes. Advice on rights relating to landlords and employment would be helpful, as would information on driving offences, insurance, MOT requirements and other such matters that those folk must deal with.

A study by the University of Ulster that was published in April 2000 indicated that racism was twice as prevalent as sectarianism in Northern Ireland. Unfortunately,

there are still hundreds of racist attacks in the Province each year, which is ironic given the importance that migration has played in the history of this part of the world. The DUP has actively supported legislation to deal with racially motivated attacks and has committed itself to zero tolerance of racism. As the Province seeks to move away from a period of conflict, it is of crucial importance to tackle racism and sectarianism.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom labhairt i gcoinne an mholta agus tacú leis an leasú.

In support of the amendment, I wish to separate the objective of building a shared future — which is a top priority — from the 'A Shared Future' document and its plans. Making a shared future a top priority has been cemented by Sinn Féin, the DUP and others in Government through the decision to agree to shared decision-making and shared exercise of political power in the Executive. It is not only right but compulsory that power and obligation is exercised in the Assembly, under the ministerial Pledge of Office. The remit of those obligations is defined and based on the requirements of the 1998 Act and the commitments made in the St Andrews Agreement.

It is, of course, competent and appropriate to carefully analyse and consider policy documents such as 'A Shared Future' and their current impact, and to introduce detailed plans to promote the interests of the entire community, as represented in the Assembly. However, to decide at this stage that the impact of administrative policies and plans will be to implement the agreed objective of building a shared future, is to accept an analysis and definition of our overarching responsibility that has not been tested as competent and sufficient by either the Executive or the Assembly.

Sinn Féin has, as a priority, accepted its responsibility not only to build a shared future within the context of the political institutions but to explore with the unionist community how and on what basis that shared future could develop. It must be a top priority to agree a way forward on a shared future within the framework of the legal and policy commitments that we have already agreed. That will not happen by simply endorsing administrative policy documents but by using the existing political process.

Sinn Féin has concerns that 'A Shared Future' defines the primary problem as a lack of tolerance between communities — particularly the most disadvantaged ones — and gives that definition primacy over the obligations of the 1998 Act and the commitments of the St Andrews Agreement to tackle disadvantage on the basis of objective need. There are many examples of communities and groups working to tackle disadvantage in order to build a shared future that is based on common purpose. We must build on and support such work.

It is simply politically inept to define their relationship and needs as one-dimensional and to say that their primary problem is that they lack tolerance. The experience of Sinn Féin with the disadvantaged of both communities is that such analysis is disrespectful and inaccurate, given their many achievements and capabilities.

The view of Sinn Féin, in engaging with all communities and traditions, is that building a shared future is about learning to listen to others, working out how to agree and, just as importantly, how to disagree with mutual respect. It is also about how to enable the most disadvantaged communities and groups to be treated with respect as part of building solutions rather than as part of the problem. Such a process is ongoing and cannot be achieved by simply endorsing an administrative report.

There is disagreement even in the shared future lobby over the triennial plan. Some organisations have strongly criticised the plan because it lacks goals, targets and timetables. Sinn Féin also has particular problems with that as well as other concerns that are shared by many elected representatives and key stakeholders. For example, in parts of Belfast, the notion of the shared future that we are being asked to endorse is being used as a rationale to limit the building of social housing in the name of creating neutral space around all major routes into the city. Therefore, objective need and whole disadvantaged communities are defined as problems to be airbrushed out of sight. Apart from this being plainly unacceptable in the context of our shared future obligations, as defined in our legal obligations, it is also utterly incompetent. Such a view of development in the name of neutrality and a shared future is what none of us in the Chamber should support. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Burnside: Community cohesion is becoming increasingly important across the United Kingdom. Ruth Kelly, the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government and a local girl originally from Limavady, launched a Commission on Integration and Cohesion in August 2006, so we should play a full role here in our part of the United Kingdom. The national report will come out at the end of the month.

At the time that the Secretary of State spoke of having an honest debate about cohesion — and that should be the way to proceed — a very interesting point was made by experts across the UK as a whole: the lack of ability actually to speak English is one of the key barriers to community cohesion and a shared future. In this regard, I, and I am sure many others, would be more than willing to help the Minister of Education here to understand the need to speak English as often as possible.

Community cohesion and shared future debates are often the occasion for a lot of clichés, a lot of humbug and a lot of waffle — good intentions and no detail. I must be honest and question some of the statements coming from the Alliance Party. Its proposals are full of waffle and humbug. Consider the Alliance Party's stance on the alleged £1 billion cost of so-called segregated services in Northern Ireland. The Alliance Member for East Antrim Mr Neeson stated on 23 August 2006:

“Segregation here costs £1 billion per year. Why should two schools or two leisure centres be provided, to pander to those that want to divide our society, when having only one school or leisure centre will stop segregation and make more financial sense. This £1 billion burden is destroying our economy, and the money could be better spent investing in business in Northern Ireland.”

That sounds good and simple. I want to know which schools and leisure centres is the Alliance Party proposing to close down. Which schools and leisure centres in South Antrim is it going to close down to save this £1 billion cost? There is no other way around it. It is important that the Alliance Party gets down to specifics and gives the rest of us a fully costed and itemised list of precisely where the savings are to be made.

3.00 pm

Mrs Long: Will the Member take an intervention?

Mr Burnside: I will not take an intervention from the Member as she will be summing up, and I want to get down to specifics.

The Province has a perfectly good state school system. Does the Alliance Party propose that faith-based schools should be closed, in particular those operated by the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), and that their resources should be diverted into the state school system? I would like an answer.

Those who vote for the Alliance Party would be amazed to realise that, when the waffle is cut out and we get down to specifics, there is no other way of cutting costs in that area except to attack faith-based schools.

The Ulster Unionist Party has always recognised the rights of faith-based schools, including those run by CCMS, and we have no desire to impose on them a one-size-fits-all system, which is the intention of the Alliance Party. We are, therefore, the true supporters of all communities living in this part of the United Kingdom. Integration is based on mutual respect from different communities.

A shared future cannot and should not be engineered; it should be an expression of the hard-headed good sense that gets us to work together in this part of the United Kingdom. The cliché-ridden proposals that cite £1 billion as the cost of segregation are dangerous to social cohesion in our Province, especially for the education system.

Mrs D Kelly: I begin by remarking on the unusual circumstances framing the debate: the comments made by the junior Minister, Mr Ian Paisley Jnr, were a disgrace and a shame to the Assembly; they flouted the responsibilities that come with public office. There is no better way to atone than in the approach to the shared future debate.

Such a debate should not have to take place. The Government recognised that:

“the absence of trust will set back both economic and social development.”

We have all felt our purse strings tightening and the need to be sober and precise in our financial approach: respect and good relations are central to a prosperous economic future. Few in the Chamber would disagree that unless we have the fundamentals for a shared future, we will not have the much-needed and longed-for economic prosperity.

The amendment dilutes the motion. We would prefer that the DUP amendment “endorse” the strategic direction of the ‘Shared Future’ documents rather than “note” it, although the proposer of the motion welcomed the amendment as an improvement on earlier DUP comments.

The SDLP has said for a long time that dialogue and not violence is the only answer; others are now of the same view. Let us put that lesson at the heart of our new approach.

A shared future means welcoming diversity as the cornerstone of our social, political and economic future. Respect for human rights is accepted as necessary in order for good relations to flourish in any community. For Government to work, it must be joined up and should approach human rights with a consistent zeal. Government must prepare for future generations to grow up in a society where diversity replaces division as the foundation of communities. Unlike many of our age, future generations should be free from prejudice: prejudice is not a legacy that I want to pass on to my children.

Prejudice is like a virus: if allowed, or even accepted, in one arena, it will soon appear in another. That is why we must tackle prejudice in all its forms. The ‘Shared Future’ documents allow for that to happen. Sectarianism between Catholics and Protestants has hurt us most and has crippled our society in recent times. If it is not addressed, sectarianism will continue to do untold damage.

There are other forms of prejudice, as we saw last week: homophobia, racism and xenophobia are all cancers that afflict our society. We should be under no illusion: left to spread, those cancers could be the undoing of all the progress that we have made.

History teaches us time and time again that when a group of people are oppressed, they resist. We should try to respect all groups. That is what the document is

all about: respect in all forms. We certainly need more respect from some.

As one Member said, we are now in the month of June, and the first Tour of the North parade is just weeks away. We must send out a clear message today, and we need to set an example that we are up for a shared future, sharing power not just in the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister but also at local council level —

Mr McNarry: Will the Member share the roads? The Garvaghy Road?

Mrs D Kelly: If the Member would talk directly to the residents, I am sure that some sort of compromise — without any preconditions — would be reached along the way.

There is a pledge that we have to respect —
[*Interruption.*]

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. There shall be no remarks from a sedentary position.

Mrs D Kelly: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. I was talking about respect just a moment ago.

Less than a fortnight before one of the most contentious events of the summer, let us not send a signal that our leaders refuse to put respect at the heart of things. This action plan could be the means by which we get to work on fixing the problem that is the North. However, listening to some Members, one would think that education is the sole action point in the document.

I hope that, in 30 years’ time, we are not here shouting one another down across the religious divide. Let us be working, co-operating and integrating. As we look to the future, we must remember the past. I welcome the fact that the issues of victims and the legacy of the conflict are also at the heart of the framework document. There is an onerous responsibility on the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to move quickly on those issues.

Miss McIlveen: I support the amendment.

We all want an end to segregation and division, and we all support efforts to achieve a settled society in Northern Ireland. As in the rest of the United Kingdom, we live in an increasingly multicultural society. All constituent parts of a society contribute to society as a whole. It is unfortunate that those constituent parts do not always complement each other. Ultimately, it is generating respect and understanding between those constituent parts that will aid us in our common aim of moving forward.

Northern Ireland is a society that is segregated, not necessarily out of choice but as a result of fear and necessity. There is no quick fix to the situation. It will not take one or two years — or any definitive period of

time — for the situation to be resolved. There must be a change in the mindset of the population, which has been in place for generations.

It is sad to say, but the walls that have been erected, the separate leisure facilities, the segregated education systems and the duplication of medical services in neighbouring communities exist for a reason. We must address the underlying issues. Only when the walls inside the mind are removed can those that divide communities disappear.

Historically, there has tended to be a bipolar focus on community relations problems. If there is to be a shared future that will benefit everyone in Northern Ireland, we must address other forms of division such as ethnicity, social class and disability. The cultural demographic has changed considerably in the past few years with the influx of migrant workers. We face the additional problem of integrating thousands of people who not only have different religious views but speak different languages and come from completely diverse cultural backgrounds.

A holistic approach must be adopted that governs society as a whole, not simply two communities within it. All individuals should have access to the same opportunities, and there must be parity of esteem. It must not be overlooked that sincere and strong religious convictions are, and will continue to be, held by individuals from all communities. We should not wish for anything else in the Province. However, sectarianism cannot be tolerated. A balance must be sought. We must appreciate what an alternative view can bring to a debate and not dismiss such a view because of the person who brings it.

Much good work has already taken place, and good work continues to be done, such as the Irish Football Association's Football for All campaign. There is no doubt that the large number of education providers results in additional costs. The DUP has always preferred to seek to integrate education rather than to promote another integrated sector.

In building a shared future and a settled community in Northern Ireland, both the absence and the threat of terrorism will have a huge impact. The wholehearted backing of the police by all political parties will encourage progress. The fact that one section of the community persistently and for so long refused to accept the rule of law inhibited the development of trust. Of course, many other factors were involved, including the still-recent atrocities and the reluctance to hand over weapons.

For too long, Northern Ireland has endured a peculiar situation where some local parties were very different to normal political parties. There was a distinction between fully democratic parties and others, over which question marks remained. We wanted change, and there has undoubtedly been

progress in recent times. However, it will inevitably take time to build genuine trust.

Too many communities remain under the firm grip of paramilitaries, with the result that those areas experience lower house prices and less investment. Paramilitarism must be eradicated for good so that those communities can have the potential to succeed. Only a full backing for the rule of law will assist in that objective.

In order to create a stable society after a period of conflict, victims must be satisfied that their needs have been addressed. The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) has supported the collation of an active, accessible archive of victims' narratives, and the report of the Interim Commissioner for Victims and Survivors of the Troubles advocates more funding and services for victims.

Cultural tolerance is essential in Northern Ireland. Too often, expression of identity has been considered triumphalist. Cultural expression must be respected. A careful consideration of the issues is required, taking into account the changing dynamic of Northern Ireland society and establishing a well-thought-out and structured approach that addresses the needs of our population in building trust and removing fear and suspicion.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the amendment. No one would argue against a shared future. There are differences of opinion on the document 'A Shared Future', which emanated from the NIO and negated the British Government's role and responsibilities in relation to our past and, indeed, to our future.

As we look forward to a new future in this part of Ireland through the role of the power-sharing Executive and the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, the future looks better. It is only the beginning, and there is an awesome responsibility on the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. One example of the new future was when our two colleagues evicted the NIO from Stormont Castle and put in place a new Administration. For me, that was a new beginning, and it is our responsibility, as Assembly Members, to support it.

I note that the proposers of the motion, from the Alliance Party, have said that they will listen to the amendment and judge it on its contributions. That is a sensible and realistic way to move forward. However, the Alliance Party is not the gatekeeper to a shared future, as some of its members would have us believe. It is not the sole party in this Building that wants to see a united community on its way forward; Sinn Féin shares that ambition. As I listen to contributions from across the Chamber, there are many in the DUP who also want to see a united community on its way forward.

There are many jolly nice fellows who were once members of the Alliance Party who are now high-ranking members of the community relations industry. However, that does not mean that everyone who is involved in community relations is, or aspires to be, a member of the Alliance Party. Indeed, the leafy suburbs that the Alliance Party largely represents also have barriers. They may not be physical, but they are certainly financial barriers. Such areas do not have the same open community difficulties of many poorer areas, but they have their difficulties all the same.

In proposing the amendment, Mr Spratt raised a number of issues that I wish to cover. He raised the issue of parades, which my sparring partner from Upper Bann, Dolores Kelly, also mentioned. The parades issue can be resolved in the same way that we can build towards a shared future: through open dialogue; residence groups; marching Orders; and engaging with one another on an equal basis.

3.15 pm

Mr Storey: Does the Member agree that his Sinn Féin colleague Mr McKay, a Member for North Antrim, made his feelings clear on the issue of a shared future and shared space when, at the weekend, he — a member of the Policing Board — engaged with others in videoing a parade in Ballymena? Those actions were intimidatory, and could not be seen as making a valid contribution to good community relations. His colleagues have a cheek to come to this House and try and to convince us that they have merit on the issue of parading.

Mr O'Dowd: I am sure that if the Member sat down with my colleague Daithí McKay and talked that matter through, Daithí would explain why he was videoing a parade. Video evidence is often presented to the Parades Commission. There is nothing sinister or menacing about that. I have videoed parades, and I have been videoed by paraders — I do not find that threatening or insensitive. We are moving away from what we are meant to be doing, which is sitting down together and debating such matters.

Marginalising or eradicating the Irish language will not develop a shared future. The Irish-medium sector has an important role to play and provides an important service in many communities. That is not a threat to any other section of the community. Indeed, one of the reasons that the Catholic maintained sector exists is because, in the past, it ensured that the Catholic community received a fair and equitable education. That is not the source of sectarianism — it is a symptom of sectarianism.

I congratulate those who are involved in community work because they, on a day-to-day basis, build a shared future and a shared society for all of us. I note that I have run out of time, a *LeasCheann Comhairle*.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I allowed the Member a further 30 seconds because of the intervention.

Lord Morrow: Mr Deputy Speaker, I hope that you will be as lenient with me if I am interrupted.

I suspect that no one in today's society would object to a shared future — even those who, perhaps, hate one another. I suspect that, deep in their hearts, they might feel that sharing is a good principle.

However, if we are to have a shared future, it is one thing to talk and sing about it but quite another to work at it and allow it to happen and develop. We have had 35 years that have been anything but a shared future. I am not going to go into the history books to give anyone a lecture on those 35 years, because I have my own perspective on them, and I believe that I am right, although others have their perspective and also believe that they are right.

It is one thing to say that everyone should live happily together but another to put that into action. It is time for everyone to have respect for the position of others.

There are four main ingredients that must be built into any shared future: first, the principle of consent, which is imperative; secondly, respect for the rule of law, which is hugely important; thirdly, inclusion — society must be inclusive and, to date, it has not been — indeed, the DUP has suffered as much from lack of inclusion as any other group in society; and fourthly, diversity — we are transforming into a very diverse society. The proposer of the amendment mentioned towns across the Province, including my town of Dungannon, where there is a very diverse population. Dungannon is home to people from all over Europe, and it is true to say that many factories and workplaces could not operate if those people from various communities did not fill jobs. We are developing into a diverse society.

I wish to return to the principle of consent. Our society must learn that consent is needed. That principle of consent needs to be bred into us. The result will be that although I respect those who disagree with me, they will also respect my views, even though they might disagree passionately with them.

During the past 35 years, some people felt that consent could be achieved through the barrel of a gun. History has taught us that that seldom works — a battle may be won on a particular day, but society is left numb and communities feel that they are not part of that society. If anything is to be learned from the past 35 years, it is that we should respect the rule of law and the police force, or the Police Service, or whatever terminology people want to use.

The police force cannot police Northern Ireland without the consent and support of the community. That consent also applies to the courts of the land;

people should not be able to say that they do not recognise a court, as happened recently. Given the changes that have been made manifest before us, have we not passed that stage and reached the point at which we can say that we have an inclusive, acceptable police force that can deliver law and order for everyone?

Are we going into an inclusive society? I was never afraid of an inclusive society and neither was my party. The DUP wants a society that is built on strong principles, such as respect.

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

Lord Morrow: We hear many lectures —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Lord Morrow: I did not get my extra 40 seconds.

Mr Deputy Speaker: You certainly did not. I withdrew consent for you to speak.

Mr Elliott: I hope that I will reflect some of the points that Lord Morrow was unable to make.

Members will not have any difficulty with the sentiments behind 'A Shared Future: Policy and Strategic Framework for Good Relations in Northern Ireland'. Also, I do not think that anyone living in a part of the world that has suffered for the past four decades as Northern Ireland has would disagree with those sentiments. It is agreed that good community relations are a must for the creation of a normalised, peaceful, prosperous and confident Province.

However, where has that shared future been for the past 40 years? Where was it for the people of Newtownbutler, Rosslea, Belcoo and Garrison when ethnic cleansing was taking place and they were being run out of their homes? Where was it for those who were murdered while looking after their shops or tending their animals and livestock? Where was the shared future for all those people?

I know of electoral wards in County Fermanagh — and I have just mentioned some of them — where the unionist community has diminished by approximately 50% over the past 40 years. The people who had to leave those areas are asking where the shared future was for them. They want to embrace it now, but they are saying that it was not part of their lives for those 40 years.

Mr Burnside: Will the Member add the Maiden City to the border areas that he mentioned? Where was the shared future for the 10,000 Protestants who lived on the city side at the beginning of the Troubles? Only 400 Protestants now live in the Fountain. What is the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister doing to restore confidence that the Protestant community can return to the historic city of Derry? I say that as an Apprentice Boy of Derry.

Mr Elliott: I accept that the Member is speaking as an Apprentice Boy of Derry. Although I am not one, I thank him for his intervention, and I do not disagree with anything that he said.

States such as Northern Ireland cannot enforce good community relations and cohesion. The creation of those elements is an organic and evolutionary process that, depending on the circumstances, develops in different timescales.

Yes, Government and those present today, as elected Members, must support the concept of a shared future, but a shared future cannot be forced on people. I note that the motion:

“calls upon the Executive to make the creation of a shared society a top priority.”

I am sure that all Members want to create a Northern Ireland in which everyone has the same opportunities and in which public services deliver for all people, irrespective of race, religion, age or any other criteria. We all want a Northern Ireland that has the infrastructure to support the creation and growth of a vibrant economy. We also want to create a Province to which our young people will want to return so that they can enjoy the opportunities that these changes can bring about.

The shared future that we all deserve will follow these and other developments that come about as a result of devolution. However, to try to enforce the creation of the type of Northern Ireland that is prescribed in the framework document is unrealistic and unlikely to lead to any real gains. The priority of creating a shared future should already, rightly, be high up the agenda of all Ministers and Members. We should all be striving to create a Province for all of us.

We often fail to note that we in Northern Ireland do not have a monopoly on community tensions and divisions in the devolved world. For example, many areas in the rest of the UK have encountered profound problems when attempting to successfully integrate migrant communities into the existing community. Indeed, many migrant workers coming to the UK from eastern Europe arrive here with a historical and inbuilt mistrust of their fellow migrants. Earlier this year, Gordon Brown called on immigrants to learn Britishness before being granted UK citizenship. Also, citizenship classes are being taught in schools.

I have come to realise that sometimes the community is ahead of the politicians. Politicians can learn from grass-roots development in other areas, particularly in sports such as soccer, rugby and tennis. We can find real development and a shared future in those areas.

Mr Gallagher: We are present today because we have agreed that we need shared institutions. However, I am sure that we are also prepared to admit that we do not have any guarantees about a shared future. The work of delivering a shared future for this community

is a long-term task, and the work to build trust and confidence will not be completed in days or weeks. It will take decades, and it will demand change from everyone at every level in society.

Good community relations must be based on trust among the people of Northern Ireland, and we know that they have been divided because of perceived political, religious, cultural or ethnic backgrounds.

Good relations do not demand that we all become alike and reach a common approach on every issue. However, good relations mean that, despite our differences, we recognise that we are all interdependent. That recognition of interdependence is not an alternative to human rights and equality; like them, it plays a key part in establishing a shared future.

Equality for all citizens is an essential part of any democracy, and if we are to build a sustainable community, we must work in partnership. We must work out how to remove all forms of intimidation and restrictions on people's rights to free association and how to respect people's rights to choose freely where they live and work. We still have to sort out all those issues.

However, without also working out relationships and meeting the challenges of developing new partnerships, we cannot achieve human rights and equality. Legislation is a key part of that, and some equality legislation is already in place. However, legislation in itself is not enough.

The concept of a shared future must be given meaning at community level; it must be built in the workplace and by those who influence decisions about where people can live, congregate and socialise.

3.30 pm

Partnerships to facilitate that process must be built at community level, not just at the interfaces but across the community — in the schools, in the places where young people meet, in our churches and, of course, among the victims in society.

The motion mentions the first triennial action plan 2006-09, which includes more than a dozen actions and emphasises among them the need to ensure the impartial delivery of public services guided by economy, efficiency and effectiveness. The triennial plan also identifies the promotion of civic-mindedness through citizenship education in schools and through lifelong learning.

With regard to education, I shall correct the Sinn Féin Member for Upper Bann Mr O'Dowd. Catholic schools were not founded out of sectarianism. I do not want to go too far back in history, but, essentially, it had to do with the arrangements for the appointment of teachers. Following on from that, it is important to put on record that Catholic education has had an outstanding record, throughout its history, in promoting respect for, and understanding and tolerance of, difference.

The triennial action plan also encourages a better understanding of our history. It mentions the common school curriculum and work that can be done in places such as museums and heritage centres. Members will know about the good relations panel, which co-ordinates the work of Departments. That panel is tasked with developing measurable and relevant indicators as part of monitoring evaluation arrangements. Regardless of whether Members support the motion or the amendment, the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister should make a commitment to use that work in order to bring regular reports to the Assembly so that Members know exactly what progress is being made towards a shared future for us all.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr B McCrea: When I hear people around me being happy to talk together, I wonder what the last 40 years have been about and why we had to witness the murders and killings of more than 3,500 people. Indeed, Ms Anderson went on about how the DUP and Sinn Féin appear to have sorted things out and that we should just get on with it.

I am surprised that Alliance Party Members, for the first time in some time, have not tried to slate all here except themselves for being in sectarian parties. Somehow, only they are the holy ones, able to pontificate on matters while washing their hands in the leafy suburbs.

Mrs Long: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: No. When the Alliance Party begins to focus on money — the so-called £1 billion — I have to remind myself that there is more to this than money. Should we not be doing something because it is right to do so?

The figure of £1 billion has been plucked out of the air, but when that figure is examined, 70% of the costs mentioned comprise labour. If two leisure centres are to be squeezed together, what will happen — will we be putting twice as many people into one swimming pool, and will we cut the numbers of staff being employed? Are we going to take resources away from communities? The question for my Friend the Member for North Down Dr Farry is: which schools, leisure centres or community centres is he going to close in order to save those moneys?

All change costs money; we will see that through the outcome of the review of public administration. People will say that savings can be made, but that will not be the truth. In order to effect change, we must invest in it. This is not about saving money; it is about developing our community. Four hundred million pounds of the £1 billion mentioned by my hon Friend Dr Farry relate to education.

That is the elephant in the Chamber. If the Alliance Party really wants to make such savings, huge changes will have to be made to our education system. That

cannot be done overnight, and it is not even certain that it should be done at all. We have yet to identify or settle on the reason for having an education system. Is it to give our children the best education possible? Is it to develop our communities to remove the problems of the legacy of the past 40 years? Is it to secure cultural identity? Is it to provide industry with people who have the skills necessary for us to succeed? If we take those reasons together, it is by no means certain that closing our smaller schools and bringing different schools together is the right way to go, because people have a very narrow view of the reasons behind education.

When I hear parties trumpet the issue of equality almost ad nauseam, I ask what sort of equality it is that they want. Is it equality of outcome? Should we dumb down to such an extent that everything is the same, or should we try to encourage people? Is it equality of income? Should we ensure that if everyone on one side gets a pound, everyone on the other side gets a pound, regardless of need? That does not appear right to me.

Should it be equality of opportunity? Should we try to give people every chance to succeed and select on merit? Then there is the thorny issue of positive discrimination. Every group with a vested interest says that it should be looked after better, so we get into age, race, community, religion, gender — everything. How do we deal with all those matters?

A shared future is an attitude. I hear soft words from the Sinn Féin Benches. I hear people say that they have changed, that we are all friends and that the past 30 or 40 years of terrorism do not count — that we should forget the past. That cannot be done. Sinn Féin must prove by its actions that we genuinely will move forward. When it comes to the real future, the sooner that the people of this country realise that the threat lies not within but without, the better. The competitive industries in Taiwan, China and India are after our jobs. If we realise that, we will have a shared future.

Look at what happened in the South of Ireland's general election: its electorate made it quite clear that they do not want us. Moreover, people in Great Britain wonder why they are giving us so much money. I must add that I do not think that the British Secretary of State was a squatter in my country.

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

The First Minister (Rev Dr Ian Paisley): I welcome this debate. I have listened carefully to the many constructive and measured contributions and to some that were not constructive or measured. In the time available, I will try as best I can to respond to many of the points that have been raised.

I shall preface those responses by saying that the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) is totally committed to promoting equality and human rights. The First Minister and the Deputy

First Minister are completely opposed to any form of discrimination or harassment against any citizen, and so are all in their Office and under them.

Mr Burnside: Will the First Minister give way?

The First Minister: I understand that an SDLP Member —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The First Minister has not given way, so I ask Members to resume their seats.

The First Minister: I understand that an SDLP Member is to table a motion on the promotion of equality. A full opportunity will be available for further debate. I welcome and look forward to that debate. I must say that people may hold differing views on the shared future policy, but there is no doubt that we must have a further shared society.

Like another King, I have had a dream. I have had a dream in which children can play together, in which people can work together and in which families can live happily side by side, regardless of their community or ethnic background or their religious beliefs.

Hence, I sent my children to a mixed school. They brought their Roman Catholic mates home with them and, my, they all had great appetites — I knew that to my cost — but I was happy to see them. I am glad that those people are still friends of mine today, even though I disagree with them on their religion and they disagree with me on mine and even though they disagree with me politically and I disagree with them politically. It makes sense, and it is right, that we get the people of our beautiful Province living together, working together and enjoying one another's company. I trust that we will see more of that in future.

Let me say that, having lived in Northern Ireland for 81 years, I have some experience of the ordinary man in the street. The ordinary man in the street today — whether nationalist or unionist, whether Roman Catholic or Protestant or any other religion — has within him a hope that something has changed and that we are going to move forward to better times. We in this Assembly can be the persons who can lead this community. No matter what the press, the BBC and the journalists say, we can lead the community to do this part of this island proud. I look forward to that.

Yes, each and every one of us has unique characteristics. We are distinguished from our neighbours, and sometimes those differences cause tensions. I am not you, thank God, and you are not me — you can give thanks to God if you like. *[Laughter.]*

Yes, there will be difficult choices to make, and there will be hiccups and rows. The best family has rows, but the way to have a family row is to pull the blinds, shut the doors and go for it and then to run for the Elastoplast to repair the damages. Yes, there will be difficult choices, as I have said. However, this is not a

love-in but a work-in, and we have work to do, so let us do it. We do not agree on everything but, working together, we can make a tremendous difference to those people who most need help. There is much to do.

Thank God, this society is not now filled with widespread violence. Thankfully, that has become a thing of the past. May it become the thing of a past that is buried and forgotten. Problems will still exist. Those problems continue to taint our reputation as warm and welcoming people, and they damage our economic prospects. Conflict and violence have left a profound legacy not only in those who have suffered as victims and survivors — we salute them — but in damaging relationships with people right across Northern Ireland. Time is needed to mend relationships, to heal wounds and to repair fractured communities.

Let us be clear, however, that intolerance, sectarianism, racism and violence must have no place in our society or in any other society. In my view, each of us has a responsibility to create a society that is at ease with individual diversity and with the diversity of communities. The event for minority ethnic groups that we recently hosted in this very Building demonstrated to me as never before the contribution that people who have come to Northern Ireland are making in our society. The event also demonstrated the value of each of us recognising in our own way the talent and contribution of those people who live here — whether they have arrived here recently or were born here, whether they come from north, south, east or west — whatever their community background might be. That is the basis of a good shared future that we look forward to achieving.

3.45 pm

The Executive must review carefully the progress on 'A Shared Future' and, importantly, its sister document, 'A Racial Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland 2005-2010'.

The Executive have already recognised the importance of creating a shared society. Members will recall that just four weeks ago, Ministers affirmed in their Pledge of Office that they will promote the interests of the whole country that is represented in the Northern Ireland Assembly and work towards the goal of a shared future. The Executive must build on the present situation so that words and principles become actions, so that everyone in Northern Ireland can feel at home and so that some day those problems will be consigned to history.

The new impetus in Northern Ireland is about building a shared future to which everyone will sign up and be dedicated. Whatever views my Assembly colleagues may have, I am sure that there are many in the House — the majority, I believe — who will struggle along towards the worthy goal that has been set before us.

Mr McCausland: The principles at the heart of 'A Shared Future' are partnership, equality and mutual

respect, which it sets out as the basis of good relationships. Every decent person in the country should be able to subscribe to that. I am happy to endorse the amendment that seeks to put 'A Shared Future' and the triennial action plan at the heart of Government thinking.

I do not want to miss the opportunity to respond to Members' comments. The Ulster Unionist Party Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone referred to ethnic cleansing of Protestant communities in border areas. I am glad that he raised that. The areas around the border were once shared; however, because of republican terrorism, they are no longer. If the Assembly wants to achieve a shared society, it must consider ways in which Protestant people can be brought back into those border areas so that they can, once again, be shared by the communities.

One of the most appalling examples of ethnic cleansing happened in my constituency of North Belfast. A small Protestant community in the Torrens area was subjected to systematic, sustained and strategic republican intimidation over several years, to the point where, ultimately, the entire community moved out en bloc to another area. They could not take the situation any longer. Shortly before that happened, a Sinn Féin representative in the area was present as the workmen who were putting up a security measure were put off the site by other republicans.

Mr McNarry: Is he a junior Minister now?

Mr McCausland: The Sinn Féin representative was a she, not a he.

John O'Dowd spoke about the value of Irish-medium education. He said that about a school in west Belfast that was named with the pseudonym of IRA hunger striker, Bobby Sands, so that he could be held up as a role model for the children. There is something wrong with a school that considers a republican terrorist — or any other terrorist — to be a suitable role model for children. If progress is to be made on a shared future, certain issues such as ethnic cleansing and education — particularly Irish-medium education — must be examined.

Sport was also mentioned. Miss McIlveen referred to the excellent campaign by the Irish Football Association entitled Football for All. The Football for All programme welcomes everyone: unionists, nationalists, Protestants, Roman Catholics and people from every religion. In addition to that programme, as Members have mentioned, rugby, hockey and other sports are for everyone. However, the one sector in Northern Ireland for which the same cannot be said is Gaelic sport. Its ruling body, the GAA, has a nationalist — indeed, one might say, republican — ethos or aspiration written into its constitution.

A Member: What is its ethos?

Mr McCausland: I encourage the Member to read the document, and he will discover that it has a nationalist ethos. There is no place for unionists in the GAA, an organisation that was once described by a member of the Jesuits as either politically or culturally sectarian. Who am I to argue with that assessment, given that the other week a GAA club in Dungannon organised an event in honour of an IRA terrorist? The Volunteer Paddy Kelly Cup marks the twentieth anniversary of the deaths of IRA terrorists at Loughgall, and a spokesman for the club referred to him as a hero.

When folk such as Paddy Kelly are held up to children as heroes in their schools or as role models in the sporting realm, it is clear that much work must be done. I hope that the triennial action plan will propose that the Northern Ireland Sports Council, the Community Relations Council and the GAA come together to address directly the challenges that face that organisation.

I referred to education, ethnic cleansing and sport, and another Member referred to parades. To achieve a shared future in Northern Ireland, the main roads and arterial routes must be shared. There is no way around that. It may be difficult for Sinn Féin and certain residents' groups to accept, but that is the reality of a shared future.

I have identified some of the many difficult issues that must be addressed. The triennial action plan offers an opportunity to do so. I hope that, over the coming weeks and months, the plan will address those and other issues. I support the amendment.

Mrs Long: I welcome the opportunity to make the winding-up speech on the motion. I am particularly heartened by the First Minister's robust statement today.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mrs Long: The Alliance Party, and I am sure others in the community, welcome the First Minister's robust commitment to equality and human rights, and his recognition that there must be increased sharing. The leadership that the First Minister demonstrated will go a long way to reassure those who may previously have had doubts. I hope that his words are indicative of real progress and a sign of the future of politics in Northern Ireland.

The Alliance Party tabled the motion because the current triennial action plan is the legacy of a direct rule Minister. We want the Assembly to take ownership. Regardless of the outcome of this afternoon's debate, the triennial action plan is, and will remain, Government policy. However, at such a critical time in political history, it is important that positive statements come from the heart of Government to indicate that equality and human rights are priorities. I welcome the fact that the First Minister did exactly that, in no uncertain terms.

The Alliance Party accepts the DUP's amendment to the motion, because it is important to welcome the positive interaction of all Members in the Chamber on that issue. Many will share the reservations expressed during the debate. However, Nelson McCausland's statement that the goal of a shared future must be placed at the heart of Government has reassured the Alliance Party that the DUP's amendment was tabled in good faith, not as a means of delaying progress.

Mr Spratt said that the parades issue must be resolved. Indeed, Nelson McCausland referred to territorial markings on roads and to access to the public highway. I agree that those matters must be resolved, and I do not think that anyone would dissent. We may have different views on how to resolve them, but working together, sharing good relations and putting 'A Shared Future' at the core of the drive to reach a solution will be much better than a "your rights versus my rights" stance.

There has been a great deal of conversation about education, on which I shall touch briefly. Education is given little mention in 'A Shared Future', given that it was largely under the remit of those who worked on the Bain Report. Despite Mr Spratt's comments, the Bain Report did not rule out integrated education — it queried the use of multiple sectors. The Alliance Party shares the report's concern about such use. However, if we aim to have a shared education system that is flexible enough to accommodate all the diversity in this society, we must recognise that we can achieve that either by transforming the existing provision — which is the Alliance Party's preference — or by enhancing sharing. It is not an either/or situation.

However, it is obvious to the Alliance Party that if a school in an area is unwilling to accommodate sharing and to move towards enhanced sharing and transformation, those who wish to share education cannot find that their rights are subjugated to the rights of those who do not wish to share. That is the genesis of a separate sector. If we can address that more fully in order to ensure that we create not a separate sector but increased sharing, we would meet the same objectives. The Alliance Party would welcome such a development.

I will not labour the point about division costing £1 billion. A Deloitte report has already to some degree given that figure credibility; that report will no doubt confirm that we are in the right ballpark. I do not suggest that that is a simple calculation and that the money can be extracted in the blink of an eye. I will come back to that point, but I will not get into that debate now.

Mr Burnside said that there was no way of saving the £1 billion other than by closing the Catholic maintained sector. That is not my understanding of 'A Shared Future'. The CCMS has embraced the document and is looking for ways in which to develop shared faith-

based education. It is disappointing to note that, unlike his colleague Danny Kennedy, who is Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, Mr Burnside is unwilling to commit to addressing waste in any shape or form by tackling division.

Dolores Kelly and Michelle McIlveen rightly referred to the strategy's wider remit, stating that it should include sexual orientation, race, religion and many other matters. It is vital that 'A Shared Future' does not become simply about reconciliation across denominational divisions. It has to be more than that; it has to be about building for a more diverse future.

John O'Dowd was fearful — or perhaps he was ridiculing us — that the Alliance Party was attempting to become the gatekeepers of the process by trying to keep others out. I assure him that that is not the case. The Alliance Party tabled the motion in the hope that Members from around the Chamber would support it and that they would take ownership of this critical issue.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Long: I will not; I have much to get through.

Speaking as someone who grew up in a working-class community, I assure the House that the Alliance Party has always been clear that the things that pain those communities most often result from the deeply entrenched views of the people who live in the leafy suburbs and who can retreat to their homes at night, leaving others to deal with the consequences of their actions. The peace walls in many of our working-class areas are the result not of entrenched bitterness but of fear. Those communities are often ahead of the pack in addressing such entrenched views. We certainly do not suggest that those in the leafy suburbs are immune to sectarianism — anything but.

Maurice Morrow mentioned consent and respect for the rule of law, inclusion and diversity. I agree that those matters must form the basis of a shared future; however, they apply not just to one's own interests; they apply equally to everyone.

4.00 pm

Tom Elliott was right to highlight the plight of victims and the pain from the past. Those issues are real, and there is no intent from the Alliance Party to diminish their importance. My party has devised proposals to deal with those matters sensitively at an appropriate time. It is because we take community relations seriously that the Alliance Party wishes to ensure that no further victims are created. Therefore, a more robust approach to community relations is required than has been the case in the past.

The Alliance Party does not wish to enforce cohesion, and it is not the job of Government to do that, but there should be a policy framework in place

that facilitates, encourages and supports those who are at various stages of readiness to move forward on the shared future agenda.

Tommy Gallagher recognised that legislation alone will not be enough. I agree completely. Buy-in from the community will be absolutely critical. However, policy does have a role to play to encourage and support those in the community who are ready to move forward.

I will not labour on Basil McCrea's comments — it was labour enough to listen to them. However, I will say that a shared future is not just about money. As my colleague Stephen Farry rightly said, having a shared future will affect social and human issues. The Alliance Party has never said that it is only about £1 billion of savings that could be made. Were it just about £1 billion, it would in many ways be a more trivial issue — it runs much deeper than that.

It is disappointing, if not surprising, that the Ulster Unionists have been cool in the debate, just as they were when their party held the post of First Minister and precious little progress was made on the shared future agenda. I am thankful that the current incumbent takes his role in driving forward that agenda more seriously.

Finally, the Alliance Party does not underestimate the fear in which many people in our community live. The party is neither naïve nor glib about those difficulties. Many communities are already working to deliver on the shared future agenda. The Alliance Party wants political support for those communities to continue. We do not underestimate the amount of work that lies ahead, and today's contributions have indicated how extensive that work is. However, with real commitment, Members can move forward together and give political leadership. Thomas Edison said:

"Opportunity is missed by most people because it is dressed in overalls and looks like work."

Let us not waste this opportunity because it looks like hard work.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the strategic direction of and underpinning principles contained in the documents 'A Shared Future' (March 2005) and 'A Shared Future: Triennial Action Plan' (April 2006), and recognises that the Executive and the Assembly will wish to consider carefully the progress to date and bring forward detailed plans, consistent with the pledge of office, to promote the interests of the whole community towards the goal of a shared future and a prosperous, peaceful and settled society.

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

Motion made:

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

ADJOURNMENT

Retention of the Existing A1 from Cloughogue Roundabout to the Border

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle as an deis seo a thabhairt domh labhairt ar ábhar atá an-tábhachtach do na daoine atá ina gcónaí i mo thoghcheantar.

Thank you for the opportunity to debate this matter. It is of great importance to my constituents who live between the Cloughogue roundabout and the border.

The building of the new dual carriageway between Loughbrickland and the border, to link with the new motorway to Dublin, is a welcome innovation. The new road, part of the E1 trans-European transport network, will bring considerable benefits. It will cut journey times to Dublin from Belfast and all towns en route and will facilitate economic development on a considerable portion of the island.

Although these are welcome developments, we must bear in mind the effects that the project will have on the host communities through which it will run, and we must consider their views.

I will concentrate on the effect that the new dual carriageway will have on communities between Cloughogue roundabout and the border on both sides of the existing A1, such as Fathom Upper and Lower, Killeen Upper and Lower, Clontygora, Jonesborough, Killeavy and Forkhill.

Under current plans, part of the A1 will be closed from the roundabout at Cloughogue Bridge southwards to Ellisholding Road. Local traffic travelling south will join the carriageway at Cloughogue, travel for less than 1 km to Ellisholding Road and come off there to join the existing A1 and continue onwards.

This arrangement seems totally unnecessary to local people, given the shortness of the journey on the dual carriageway and the fact that traffic joining and leaving the carriageway will add considerably to the risk of accidents and increase delays. People from those communities who work and shop in Newry, as well as local business operators, will have to join the new road for this short distance on their way both to and from work.

The Church of the Sacred Heart, the parish church of Upper Killeavy, stands adjacent to the Cloughogue

roundabout. The new road will divide the parish, and parishioners who live to the south of the new road will have to join the dual carriageway for a short distance in order to get to church. Funerals en route to the church cemetery will also have to use the dual carriageway. It seems to the local community that it would be eminently more sensible to leave open that short portion of the existing A1; to do so would both facilitate local traffic travelling to and from Newry and the church at Cloughogue and prevent the mixing of local traffic with fast-moving strategic traffic.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I know that you will agree that road safety is vital. Those of us from the area around Newry know that from our experience of the Newry bypass. The proposed arrangement will increase the risk of accidents at Cloughogue. Mixing local traffic with strategic traffic creates unnecessary risks and runs contrary to the conditions of EU support for such projects. However, that is exactly what the Department for Regional Development proposes to do. Incredibly, the Department argues that bringing slow-moving local and agricultural traffic onto the dual carriageway would be 50% safer than retaining it on the existing road.

The stretch of existing road in question is the location of many family businesses that have been built up over years by dint of the hard work of local people. Those businesses account for an estimated 250 jobs and an annual trade worth around £25 million. Closing the road will cut them off from a substantial portion of their economic hinterland. It will jeopardise their future viability and put local jobs at risk. The businesses will effectively be assigned to an economic cul-de-sac. That is in stark contrast to the situation on the newly completed stretch of the A1 at Loughbrickland, where businesses located along the route were accommodated with access.

There is strong local support for the retention of the A1 as a local route. Newry and Mourne District Council passed a motion in favour of it that was supported by all the councillors. The local clergy and community groups support it, and a petition signed by some 400 people indicates the general level of support in the area. Although an Order permitting the closure of the existing road is in place, the Department concedes that a further Order can be made to rescind it.

I am glad that the Minister is here. He is familiar with this issue, and I ask him to do all in his power to ensure that the existing A1 is retained in both directions — possibly realigned closer to the railway line — so that local traffic travelling to and from the businesses, the church and Newry itself can be facilitated.

That proposal would have the least financial impact on what is already planned and could represent a saving, as some of that work is being carried out already to facilitate the construction of the bridge at Cloughogue. I also ask the Minister to bear in mind the noise

abatement issues raised by residents of Ardcar Park, Parkhead Crescent and other developments en route.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am aware of concerns that were raised by residents and elected representatives, some of them colleagues of mine, at the closure of the existing A1 route at Cloughogue roundabout, and in particular at the public inquiry into the environmental statement and direction Order for the A1 Beech Hill to Cloughogue dual carriageway scheme. At the inquiry, the inspector permitted those to be heard, although that stretch of road was outside the remit of that inquiry. Everyone showed concern for road safety, particularly at the mixing of local traffic with fast-moving traffic. I share that concern and feel that it should be addressed and remedied as soon as possible.

I also draw to the Minister's attention the need to ensure that community groups and residents such as those of Parkhead and Carnagat are kept fully informed and updated as this major and vital element of cross-border infrastructure is rolled out. I also wish to be informed of noise and air-quality monitoring procedures that the Department will carry out when the road is completed.

Most communities acknowledge that the road is needed. It will be safer and will result in improved travel times. This phase will ensure continuous motorway and dual carriageway road from the M50 in Dublin to Newry and Belfast. However, new roads are not only about getting from A to B in the shortest and safest way, important as those benefits are; they are about much more than that. With the completion of each new road, a region must become a better place in which to live, work and visit. Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I hope that the low attendance in the Chamber is not indicative of the level of interest in the A1 Belfast to Dublin road. Nonetheless, I welcome the opportunity to update Members on the schemes that Roads Service is implementing to complete the upgrading of the A1 route to dual carriageway standard from Sprucefield to the border.

Motorists who travel that route will see that Roads Service has made considerable progress on the construction of the A1 to M1, Newry to Dundalk link road. The main dual carriageway and junctions should be opened to traffic before the end of the summer and the remaining work on the scheme completed before the end of the year.

The A1 Beech Hill to Cloughogue dual carriageway — together with four junction improvement schemes on that route, located at Hillsborough, Dromore, Banbridge and Loughbrickland — will form part of Roads Service's design, build, finance and operate

(DBFO) package 2 contract, which is currently at the final negotiating stage of procurement. My Department hopes to award the contract in the next two months.

In the meantime, preliminary site works have been carried out, and the necessary design work has been undertaken to allow construction to commence soon after the DBFO package 2 contract has been awarded. That work will be to construct a flyover junction at Cloughogue; the new dual carriageway will be carried over the junction by that flyover. The roundabout will remain at the lower level and four slip roads will link it with the new dual carriageway. Vehicular access to and from Newry and areas currently accessed from the A1 route will be via the new roundabout at Cloughogue, the new dual carriageway and the nearby flyover junction at Ellisholding Road. A pedestrian path and cycleway will also be provided between the Cloughogue roundabout and the existing A1 route.

At the public inquiries into the environmental statement and direction Order for the A1 Beech Hill to Cloughogue dual carriageway scheme, held in April and May 2005, I was one of several people who made representations objecting to the closure of the existing A1 at Cloughogue roundabout. They included reference to the inconvenience caused to local people; the detrimental effect on businesses situated along the existing route; and concerns about safety, including the use of a strategic route by slow-moving vehicles.

At the inquiries, Roads Service officials explained that the stopping-up of the A1 at Cloughogue was the result of the construction of the A1 to M1, Newry to Dundalk link road scheme.

The direction Order for that scheme became operative in December 2003 following a public inquiry. Unfortunately no representations were made in relation to the Cloughogue junction at that inquiry, and that was the fault of all of us who were public representatives in the area.

4.15 pm

However, when it came to making representations about the Beech Hill to Cloughogue scheme, that was at the discretion of the chairman, as it was not essentially part of that inquiry. Nonetheless, the case was made and well put at that inquiry, both by ourselves as public representatives and by residents and their representatives.

At the time, the local community had a desire to keep local traffic, particularly slow-moving vehicles, separate from the normally fast-moving strategic traffic on the proposed new dual carriageway. However, Roads Service explained that the physical restraints of the location meant that it was not practical to link the existing A1 to the proposed new roundabout. Those restraints included the railway line, the general topography of the area, including Cloughogue Mountain, the alignment of the Forkhill Road and the proximity of residential properties.

Furthermore, in their reports of the public inquiries into the environmental statements and the direction Order for the A1 Beech Hill to Cloughogue scheme, the inspectors accepted Roads Service's position in relation to Cloughogue roundabout and the stopping-up of the existing A1 Dublin Road. It has been stated that the scheme that Roads Service is taking forward has been subject to the statutory procedures, which have included public inquiries. In those circumstances, and despite our best efforts at the time, I am satisfied that the process was carried out properly and facilitated the hearing of objections by an independent inspector, including objections to the stopping-up of the existing A1 Dublin Road at Cloughogue junction. In that case, the inspector upheld Roads Service's position.

Dominic Bradley referred to Newry and Mourne District Council's position. I am sure that he is aware that Newry and Mourne District Council, subsequent to that, passed a motion calling on the inspector's decision to be overturned. It sought legal advice from its solicitors and was advised that it had no legal case to take. Subsequently, I am advised that, following that advice, the council did not even write to the Minister responsible at that time.

Nevertheless, despite all of that, the cases that were made at the time, and my own experience and understanding of the difficulties faced by people, given the closure of that 1 km stretch of the A1, I am pleased to advise that during the course of the scheme development, provision has been made for a third lane in each direction along that stretch of dual carriageway between Cloughogue junction and the nearby Ellisholding Road junction.

The scheme provides an advantage to motorists driving between the Cloughogue junction and the Ellisholding Road junction, including slow-moving vehicles such as agricultural vehicles and funeral cortèges, as they can remain in the third left-hand lane and do not have to merge with strategic traffic. Strategic traffic travelling on the Belfast to Dublin dual carriageway is not impeded by local traffic, including slow-moving vehicles in the third left-hand lane.

It is obviously not what representatives had argued for at the time, which was the retention of the existing A1. However, I am advised that, under the circumstances, it is the best that can be offered, despite the inspector at the inquiry finding that Roads Service's case for just two lanes in either direction was sufficient and was met. Nonetheless, Roads Service has since moved to introduce a third lane in both directions, which ensures that the key concern expressed at the inquiry by myself and others about the merging of strategic and local traffic will not now happen. It does not remove the concern entirely, but it reduces it.

Mr Bradley referred to family businesses sited along the road. Correct me if I am wrong, but there are no family businesses on the stretch of road from Cloughogue to Ellisholding Road. Family businesses are retained along the A1 up to the border and Carrickcarnan. My recollection of the inquiry was that, unless someone was making a case that the new road should be along the existing A1 road, and no new road were to be created, those businesses were always to have been retained along the old A1 stretch of the road, and that access to them would be from the dual carriageway at the Ellisholding junction and then back onto the dual carriageway at the Carrickcarnan junction. Nonetheless, if local businesses have a different case to make, I should be happy to hear it.

I know the area quite well, and I co-operated with the residents at the time. However, it was always my understanding that the existing businesses along the A1 would have been off the road, unless someone came to the inquiry and argued for a completely different road. Given that that section of the inquiry concluded in 2003, I am not aware that such an argument was made.

Dominic Bradley and Mickey Brady raised issues concerning another stretch of the road — the Cloughogue to Beech Hill section. That is a key part of the A1 and was the subject of the inquiry that we all attended. They were concerned about noise abatement and what consultation there would be with residents. I have asked Roads Service about that, and its officials have assured me that they will engage with residents and local representatives on noise abatement and ensure that a proper consultation mechanism is established between those who are designing and building the road — including Roads Service, which is overseeing it — and the people who will be carrying out the job. The contract has yet to be awarded, but when it is, the people responsible, Roads Service and the local representatives and communities, will have a proper, structured consultation mechanism so that all the issues, including noise abatement and safety issues associated with the ongoing work, will be addressed.

I am sure that the House will agree that good North/South road links are important to the economy and to the entire island. In that context, the upgrading to dual-carriageway standard of the A1 is an important project to improve our transport infrastructure. I assure Members that appropriate consideration has been given to the needs of local traffic affected by the route — including local traffic using the Cloughogue roundabout and the existing A1 — as evidenced by the provision of an additional lane in both directions between Cloughogue and the Ellisholding Road. Go raibh mile maith agat.

Adjourned at 4.21 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 5 June 2007

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

EXECUTIVE BUSINESS

Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill First Stage

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I beg leave to lay before the Assembly a Bill [NIA 2/07] to amend the Health and Personal Social Services (Northern Ireland) Order 1972 in relation to the provision of health care; to amend the Smoking (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 to provide that in certain circumstances premises may not be smoke-free only in relation to performers; and for connected purposes.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Speaker: The Bill will be put on the list of future business until a date for its Second Stage is determined.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Rural Health Task Force

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for this debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to wind up. All other Members will have five minutes. Two amendments have been selected and are published on the Marshalled List. The proposers of the amendments will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes to wind up.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls for the establishment of a Rural Health Taskforce with the objective of delivering a focused and co-ordinated response to the health needs of people living in rural areas, including:

- a shared vision and co-ordination of activities;
- the development of strategic alliances;
- proper healthcare as part of a Bill of Rights; and
- an assessment of best practice and examination of how other European countries which share common borders deal with access to healthcare.

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. A large proportion of the population lives in rural areas. Rural communities face particular challenges with regard to transport, access to services and sustainability of local communities. Those differences must be recognised and models of care to meet rural needs must be explored. However, we realise that hospitals cannot be provided at the end of every street. Indeed, in many cases, it is not hospitals that rural communities need most. That is in direct contrast to the default centralisation response embedded in the organisational psyche of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) through items such as the trauma report and the reviews of pathology, maternity and children's services — I could go on.

Suffice to say that almost all consultations and strategies under direct rule have defaulted to the centralisation of services in the so-called golden six hospitals. There are many reasons for that — a lack of staff; a lack of consultants; and a lack of clinical safety. However, most people believe that services are centralised because of a lack of vision and strategic thought in the DHSSPS and that the overarching goal is to cut costs and services.

Bairbre de Brún did much to rectify that imbalance and challenge the bias against rural communities. It is unfortunate that her ambitions and plans faltered under direct rule. A rural health task force is needed to address all issues affecting rural communities in accessing health services and to ensure that the health and well-being of people living in rural communities is paramount. Such a task force must explore how to work with the rest of the island: that is common sense. Currently, there are

two competing health systems, and it is rural communities, particularly those located along the border corridor, that are losing out as a result.

The task force should study best practice from across Europe. When faced with similar problems, other countries have developed new and innovative approaches to rural healthcare. We must learn from their example. To that end, a Sinn Féin working group visited the Centre for Rural Health in Scotland last year. The centre has worked with the Scottish Executive and in partnership with Norway. I am happy to furnish the Assembly with details. Having taken the political decision to protect, enhance and sustain rural communities, the Scottish Executive adopted a specific system of healthcare that, while not perfect, did not adopt a one-size-fits-all approach.

The Kerr Report in Scotland sought to retain, maintain and maximise the services that could be safely provided in rural towns and villages via a range of innovative proposals and models. The proposals included aspects such as extended primary care; a resilient system of urgent and emergency care, including air ambulances; a rural general hospital, which meant re-exploring the issue of general surgeons with the royal colleges; midwife-led maternity units; and 24/7 care provided by rural practitioners, etc.

As yet, there is no clear agreement between politicians and those charged with delivering services on the best way forward. Furthermore, it is true to say that those involved in delivering services have not reached agreement on the best way forward either. The outworking of that has meant that political and electoral considerations have, on occasion, dominated what should be real health considerations.

We need to look at examples of good practice, such as the strategic approach of the Cooperation and Working Together (CAWT) programme, which considers health inequalities. That programme, and others like it, should be supported and resourced. Health inequalities should become a stand-alone issue, which would help to put the information and recommendations emerging from current work on addressing inequalities into operation, particularly for those in the rural community.

The work being undertaken in the CAWT programme to address health inequalities should be co-ordinated, as it appears that everyone is doing their own piece of work. No one is co-ordinating the overall picture, and there is no overall plan. People living in rural communities therefore fall between two stools and miss out as a result.

Community and partnership development is ongoing in health action zones in the North, and the county development boards in the South should be further developed. We need to develop an ethos of considering how to tackle health inequalities in rural communities

when developing services or initiatives. That would give life to equality, and individuals could begin the process of delivering their own services.

Further health profiles for rural areas are needed. A regional health profile should be developed so that an updated plan on the health status of each region could be provided. Most of all, lessons should be learned from the models already cited in the CAWT region, such as health action zones and county development boards, which must be taken into consideration in future plans.

Sinn Féin believes that it is crucial that a rural health task force should develop a common vision for rural healthcare that will regain the support of rural communities. It should develop an innovative strategy and an action plan with which the Assembly and others can agree, and it should provide good leadership and deliver health improvements to those in most need. Go raibh maith agat.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I beg to move amendment No 1: Leave out all after “Assembly” and insert

“notes the ongoing work of the Rural Medicine Working Group and urges the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to ensure that rural communities have access to safe and sustainable health services.”

In May 2002, the Assembly adopted a policy of rural proofing all legislation in Northern Ireland to recognise the essentially rural nature of much of the land area of the Province. The implementation of that policy was placed in the hands of an interdepartmental steering group, which was chaired by the then Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development.

In 2001, a rural proofing co-ordinator had been appointed in the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD). That Department had primary responsibility for implementing the directions of the Assembly in rural proofing all measures taken by the Assembly and the Executive.

I recall that while leadership on rural proofing was firmly in the Department of the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, other Departments in the Northern Ireland Government had a less than enthusiastic approach to the issue. That ethos clearly emerged during a meeting of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development on 3 May 2002 in a session chaired by my colleague George Savage MLA.

Rural proofing was essentially about proofing draft policies and making recommendations, on a cross-departmental basis, on the implications for rural communities. In May 2002, it appeared that the interdepartmental committee had not even agreed a working definition of what rural proofing meant in practice. The Burns Report and the Hayes Report were both due for publication at that time. Then, of course, the suspension of the Assembly in 2002 intervened, and the matter has almost certainly been on ice since

then, given the somewhat patchy record of direct rule Ministers in such matters.

I mention that because the essence of what is contained in the motion is partly subsumed into the provisions that the earlier Assembly had already put into place for the rural proofing of all legislative and administrative measures adopted by the Assembly and the Executive.

If rural proofing were implemented adequately, there would be no real need for a dedicated and specific rural health task force. The rural proofing of all health issues would ensure that all the impacts on the rural community would be covered adequately.

As an example, I cite the air ambulance, which I successfully proposed when major cuts in rural Health Service cover were being proposed during suspension of the Assembly from 2002 to 2005. If there had been no suspension, then the impact of the effective withdrawal of emergency ambulance cover would have been raised through the rural proofing of that policy. As it was, there was no effective rural proofing of health reorganisation policies, and I had to lead a public campaign to demand air ambulance emergency cover for remote rural areas of the Province, especially in the glens of Antrim.

I contend that the motion has more to do with doctrinaire North/South health co-operation than with improving healthcare in rural areas per se.

Excellent, professional-led relationships already exist between health authorities north and south of the border, and those should proceed on a health-led basis without cheap political capital being made from them.

10.45 am

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: This is yet another example of a motion proposing objectives that have not been properly costed. The Assembly cannot insert proper healthcare into some bill of rights without saying how we shall pay for it. The motion is also subjective, because what is "proper healthcare"? It must be defined. One man's "proper healthcare" may not be another's. Everyone wants the best healthcare for everyone; no one can question my commitment to that aim after years of defending and extending patients' rights. However, putting proposals to the Assembly without costing them properly or saying from where the money will come does nobody any favours. In fact, it could lead to a great deal of embarrassment. Such proposals raise hopes that could be dashed for lack of available finance.

There is an ongoing examination of the situation, so let us reactivate or properly cost rural proofing as the Assembly envisaged back in 2002. This time, however, let us ensure that the civil servants implement rural proofing and that all Departments conform to Assembly policy. Let us use the machinery that we already have

at our disposal to look after the rural population. We must stop talking about it and get on with the job.

Dr Deeny: I beg to move amendment No 2: Insert after "alliances"

"• equal access to life-saving services for all, irrespective of postcode;"

I thank the two Sinn Féin MLAs for tabling this motion so soon. The issue is close to my heart and important for us all.

I take on board what Bob Coulter has said, but I cannot accept his amendment, because it is too specific. I have worked on the rural medicine working group, and, although its work is to be commended, it does not look at maternity, paediatric, surgical or accident and emergency services. The working group focuses primarily on medical services for coronaries, pneumonia and so on. Its remit is not wide enough. I have asked it to widen its scope and to look at other issues that affect people in all areas, not just in rural areas.

Health provision — or the lack of it — in rural areas is extremely important to Northern Ireland's large rural communities. Equity and equality across Northern Ireland is what this Assembly is all about, and that must also apply to healthcare provision. The Department of Health and Social Services's 'Fit for the Future' paper from 1998 cites equity as the first principle of healthcare delivery. In 2002, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's Investing for Health strategy proposed to reduce health inequalities.

The vast majority of our landscape is made up of small villages and rural communities. Some 54% of our people live in small villages and rural communities, not in the more densely populated cities of Belfast, Newry, Derry, Armagh and Lisburn.

It is important to bring to Members' attention the difference between elective treatment and emergency treatment. People are generally fair-minded and do not mind travelling long distances to receive elective treatment, which is non-urgent. Emergency treatment — when one's life is seriously threatened — is a completely different ball game. Those of us who work in front-line healthcare know that. Accessibility is vital in that area of healthcare, as it will very often mean the difference between life and death. Indeed, accessibility is really the major determinant in measuring standards of emergency healthcare provision in any area.

Therefore, however inconvenient the idea of running smaller acute services for rural areas may be, those who live in rural areas need — and quite rightly expect — to have effective, safe, modern and accessible health services, just like urban dwellers.

The motion is therefore admirable, and I support it. However, it is essential to agree my amendment in order

to stop Northern Ireland's current postcode lottery, which certainly applies to the area in which I live and practise.

I tabled the amendment because, having been a senior Health Service doctor for some years, I believe that we cannot simply accept that our postcodes should determine our standard of healthcare provision or whether our children or grandchildren will survive sudden and severe life-threatening illnesses such as meningitis, severe asthma attacks or prolonged epileptic seizures. Similarly, our postcodes should not be the deciding factors that condemn our wives, daughters and granddaughters to delivering their babies on floors or on the roadside, rather than in the safety of a maternity unit. All Members must bear in mind that such incidents occur.

I refer not just to those who have been involved in such single isolated cases in remote areas; I am talking about the many thousands of people who are at risk because of where they live. It has been well documented that in my constituency this year there were four such dangerous births in a 10-week period. Healthcare provision is essential for expectant women and for rural people in general, and a dearth of such care is, to say the least, primitive and unacceptable in any developed twenty-first century country.

I have repeatedly asked whether it is not more beneficial for those who live in rural areas to be served by a small and well-managed rural hospital rather than to die en route to a hospital in a larger location that has state-of-the-art facilities? It is fine to have facilities in huge hospitals, but they are no good to people who are dead on arrival.

It is clear that infrastructure in rural areas is far worse than that in other locations. For example, my own county has dreadful roads, no rail network and no dual carriageways, never mind motorways. There is one dual carriageway as we leave the county, but that is it. Such a poor infrastructure worsens greatly people's accessibility to healthcare provision and therefore contributes significantly to an unacceptable standard of that provision.

The problems with rural healthcare provision in Northern Ireland are exactly the same in other parts of these islands and in Europe. I agree with the Members who tabled the motion that we should learn from our European neighbours about how countries that share common borders deal with access to healthcare provision. I live in a border county, and I know that, as with tourism and infrastructure, people on both sides of the border must work on healthcare provision. That is known as joined-up thinking. Many Departments work in that way, and it has been mentioned with regard to healthcare. 'Cross-border Co-operation in Health Services in Ireland', a report by the Centre for Cross Border Studies, stated that:

"It has been suggested that people living in the vicinity of the border are materially disadvantaged on account of low levels of economic activity, rurality and geographical isolation."

The report continues:

"As need for health services is highly correlated with material deprivation, it is likely that people living in border areas will have higher than average health needs."

Indeed, Professor John Appleby's report 'Independent Review of Health and Social Care Services in Northern Ireland' demonstrated that medical admission rates for those who are from deprived areas are 41% higher than for those who are not from such areas.

CAWT is one good example of cross-border joined-up thinking on healthcare. It is good that CAWT's work, which has been ongoing for several years, covers places such as Cavan, Sligo and Enniskillen. However, an example of a dreadful lack of joined-up thinking is the main road from Dublin to Donegal, which is approximately 170 miles long. It is soon to be upgraded on both sides of the border — the A5 in the North and the N2 in the South — to either motorway or dual carriageway status.

That long stretch of modern road network will always be the main road north-west from Dublin, and many thousands of cars will travel on it, yet no acute hospital with any form of emergency services is to be located anywhere along that major route on the island of Ireland. What would happen if a major incident occurred with no emergency services nearby? That is another example of an absence of joined-up thinking, and it clearly shows the importance of adopting such an approach.

As medicine progresses and medical treatments continue to improve, the healthcare provision of the future will be different. In the not-too-distant future, GPs will lead primary-care teams in providing the majority of health services. We certainly do not want, or need, large acute hospitals at every corner. However, we must realise that there is a need for smaller acute hospitals that are equipped to provide life-saving resuscitation and ventilation services. GPs are neither qualified nor insured to provide those services. Furthermore, the failure to provide such essential services in rural areas will have an extremely detrimental effect on GP recruitment in those areas. GPs do not want to set up home and practise in an area bereft of emergency hospital backup. I can vouch for that, as it is happening in my area.

For any Department with responsibility for health to suggest that rural hospitals are no longer required because rural GPs will be able to provide such emergency services in future is to make a totally false and dangerous assertion. In fact, the lack of rural hospital services will lead to fewer GPs practising in rural areas.

Scotland has large rural communities, but there are small hospitals in the Shetland Islands, Orkney Islands, Western Isles and the Highlands. The six acute hospitals in the Highlands provide services for less than 8% of Scotland's population. Some 168,000 people live in my county, yet there is a real possibility that there will be no services for 10% of the population. The previous session of the Scottish Parliament established a steering group to focus on remote and rural areas, and the Assembly should do likewise. I intend to visit a hospital in one of the areas that I mentioned to see how healthcare is provided in rural areas.

I ask Members to support amendment No 2.

Mrs I Robinson: The motion refers to healthcare across borders. I shall focus on cross-border co-operation in healthcare, especially in rural areas. In the 1998 agreement, health was one area where North/South co-operation was to be developed. The DUP has consistently stated that it does not oppose cross-border co-operation, as long as it is based on sound practical grounds for the benefit of the people of Northern Ireland and that it is not driven by an underlying political agenda.

In the aftermath of the Omagh bomb, professionals from both sides of the border provided emergency care for victims. Few would disagree that it makes obvious common sense to co-operate in such instances, or in response to road traffic accidents, for example. Indeed, lives can be saved as a result.

One current project involving GP out-of-hours services allows patients to attend the nearest centre, irrespective of whether it is in the same jurisdiction as their home. However, we must remember that it is the people of Northern Ireland whom we ultimately serve, and that they are our responsibility. As an illustration of that, an agreement between Altnagelvin and Letterkenny hospitals includes one condition governing co-operative action that provides that no proposal should undermine the service currently provided in either hospital. Furthermore, both hospitals have vowed that co-operation must be confined to services that a particular hospital cannot see itself providing in five to 10 years.

On a slightly more negative note, the EU publication, 'Patient Mobility in the European Union: Learning from Experience', states that:

"There is also a long-established practice of residents of the Republic of Ireland accessing free care in Northern Ireland through the use of an 'accommodation address'."

The publication further states that the extent of the practice is:

"very difficult to quantify, but may be substantial."

That concern should be investigated and action should be taken.

In 1996-97, 0.3% of patients treated in Northern Ireland were from the Irish Republic. By 2003-04,

some seven years later, that figure rose to 0.4%. The corresponding statistic for Northern Ireland patients being treated across the border fell from 0.13% to 0.11%.

11.00 am

The significance of, or potential for, cross-border activity may well have been exaggerated. In its conclusions on the rationale for cross-border co-operation in healthcare in Ireland, the authors of the EU report on patient mobility admitted that:

"we have not been able to find any detailed appraisal that could be used to justify public investment in a cooperation strategy or in individual initiatives. For example, although there is a general presumption that the population of border areas suffer from unmet need for hospital services, comparative analyses of mortality and utilization data conducted for the earlier study failed to confirm this."

The people of Northern Ireland have benefited enormously from the tripartite relationship with the National Cancer Institute in the USA, and will continue to do so. Northern Ireland is producing world-class research into innovative treatments for cancer. Such co-operation, which threatens no one, is to be welcomed and can have positive consequences. However, its impact on general health provision must be kept in careful perspective. The DUP supports the Ulster Unionist amendment.

Mrs Hanna: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate. We can learn from the rural medicine working group mentioned in the motion. However, the amendment proposed by Rev Coulter dilutes the substance of the motion. I support Dr Deeny's amendment.

Rural life is often thought to be idyllic and good for one's health. However, that is not necessarily the case in reality. Deprivation and social exclusion have a negative impact on the health of people who live and work in rural communities. More research on rural health issues is required to better understand and target the complex health needs of people in rural areas and, in turn, inform policy that will positively influence their health and well-being.

I hope and expect that the new health framework will result in the adequate decentralisation of health services and the necessary coterminosity. Complementary and interdependent community, primary and acute services are required. Those services will require adequate staffing levels: doctors; nurses; physiotherapists; occupational and speech therapists; and all allied health professionals.

Many rural areas do not have a doctor's surgery or pharmacy nearby, and going to hospital requires a lengthy commute. Poor transport, poor geographical access to services and poor roads infrastructure all contribute to what is known as the "distance decay" effect on those who live in the country. Availability and choice of services in rural areas are very different to those found in the towns. Social facilities, especially for disabled people, are often inadequate.

All countries with a significant rural populace face similar healthcare challenges. In developing a vision for healthcare provision, Northern Ireland can learn how to establish best practice from its European counterparts. The highly developed Scandinavian rural healthcare system can provide knowledge and experience. Turning to cross-border co-operation, I have worked with CAWT. That body has been very helpful in that regard, but its work must be built on.

Mr P Ramsey: The Member mentioned decentralisation, and I note that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is in the Chamber. Given that thousands of people in the rural north-west are waiting for cancer screening and breast screening, why has a consultation document on the centralisation of pathology services from Altnagelvin Hospital to Belfast been published? Over 10,000 tests that were carried out over the border have been analysed in laboratories in Altnagelvin Hospital. Why is the Department insisting on centralising such services in Belfast?

Mrs Hanna: I thank my colleague for making that point. I will allow the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to answer those questions. I agree with Mr Ramsey; I support decentralisation, particularly with regard to healthcare.

Road traffic accidents are also a major problem in country areas, with young people often suffering major traumas. I am in favour of the trauma centre. However, to base the centre in Belfast will have implications for people who live in the countryside. There is concern that that will lead to a downgrading of local hospitals and will have an adverse effect on rural communities. In order to alleviate those concerns, local hospitals must remain capable of dealing with emergencies.

Training and skills retention are problematic when exposure to major trauma is sporadic and access to training courses is limited by time, distance and money. That must be tackled. An efficient and adequately trained ambulance service is essential for the provision of an efficient trauma system that is based on the principle of equity of treatment for all. The bottom line is that all hospitals must have the ability to stabilise trauma patients should the need arise.

There is also the problem of recruitment and retention of healthcare staff in rural areas. There is no quick fix when approaching the complexity of rural healthcare, but the issue must be tackled. Health promotion is crucial. Dissemination of education and information, as well as outreach working, is important for the improvement of rural communities' overall health.

Elderly people who live in rural communities endure major problems. I am a firm believer in community care. The Assembly must ensure that the right services are provided in good time to those who need them most and that those who receive help can have a greater say

in whether they stay at home in a domestic environment for as long as possible so that care in residential nursing homes and hospitals can be reserved for those whose needs cannot be met in any other way. A concentrated multi-departmental and agency approach is required.

Mr Buchanan: Members will be aware that people who live in rural areas, particularly those who live in the south-west of the Province, feel that facilities are much too heavily focused on Northern Ireland's larger population centres. No place has suffered more from a decline in rural healthcare provision and life-saving facilities than my constituency of West Tyrone. That issue has been well documented and brought to the attention of direct rule Ministers on numerous occasions over the years. I am sure that all Members will agree that people across Northern Ireland are entitled to the same level of provision, equality of access and life-saving facilities no matter from where they come.

I want to focus on primary-care provision in a rural setting. People in rural areas must be able to access services conveniently. Better-organised public transport is essential. Improved co-ordination and planning of transport schemes is needed locally and regionally. Transport considerations must be integrated into any healthcare planning for rural or remote communities. There must be multi-professional working across different disciplines. Patients in rural areas must also have access to self-management programmes.

The use of telemedicine must be encouraged. It permits increased flexibility for healthcare service providers and allows them to expand the scope and quality of services. It is also cost-effective and provides expertise that would otherwise not be available.

In order to maintain optimum services in rural areas, it must be possible to recruit and retain sufficient staff. The 2005 British Medical Association (BMA) report, 'Healthcare in a rural setting', identifies areas where recruitment and retention can be maximised. It suggests that health professionals should all have received rural placements when they were students. That opportunity should be seen as a positive contribution to a student's development. Placing students in a rural area should promote working in such an area as a positive career choice. Postgraduate training programmes must use the opportunities that are provided in rural primary and secondary care to teach healthcare professionals general skills.

Continuing professional development should be flexible and responsive to meet the range of needs in rural or remote areas. For far too long staff employed in rural areas have not had appropriate access to training, and that must be addressed urgently. Schemes to support healthcare professionals and their families in local areas are vital, and flexible employment arrangements must

be made available so that highly professional standards are retained.

The general medical services contract for medical services and primary care contains a specific adjustment to cater for rural areas. That adjustment takes population sparsity and dispersal into account and ensures that rural practices are not short-changed.

Staff working in rural areas have many extra burdens — just getting to training courses, for example, can be problematic. Given the areas in which they live, many people are often involved in providing emergency care outside a hospital setting. Healthcare in rural areas depends on two vital matters: recruitment of healthcare professionals and the accessibility and sustainability of services. To bring that about there must be more joined-up working across the Departments to ensure that there is good quality of healthcare provision in rural areas.

I call on the Minister to give a commitment that rural communities across the Province will have access to safe and sustainable services.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The debate is timely, and as someone from the rural constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone, the subject is close to my heart.

As a Member for a rural constituency that continues to be affected by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's centralisation agenda, I say that the debate should not focus on hospital services only but take a holistic view of all health services, primary and acute, and preventative public health strategies such as Investing for Health.

There is no doubt that hospital services, and equal access to them, are vital for rural communities. It should be totally unnecessary for people to have to travel to cancer services in Belfast. Chemotherapy, and similar treatments, could easily be delivered at a local level instead of having sick people make taxi journeys because of the centralisation agenda. Those services should be made available in places such as the Erne Hospital in Enniskillen and in the new hospital. The rural health task force must resolve that problem and move well beyond it.

My constituents raise concerns about a wide range of health issues and services. Recent research highlighted increasing levels of child poverty and its correlation with ill health west of the Bann, yet access to children's services in hospitals and in the community is still difficult, with long waiting lists for even basic services such as speech and language therapy and physiotherapy.

Mental health is another great concern given the social isolation of many people, particularly the elderly, in rural areas. A solution must be found to break the cycle of isolation that leads to poor mental health for which there is also poor access to services. Mental-health services should have been included in the list of

services that the new hospital in Enniskillen will provide. A further range of services could be brought to rural areas.

A rural health task force could do much innovative groundwork to improve the lot of rural communities. It cannot and should not focus only on the provision of acute services. A new approach is needed. We have looked at Scotland and at the Hebrides, areas that have proved that rural communities can be well provided for by acute and other services, which would normally be found in places such as London or Belfast.

11.15 am

Therefore precedents for such approaches have been set. Having visited the areas in which those services have been adopted and having given them consideration, it is clear that they can be used as examples.

It is not enough merely to supply the services: quality services must be provided. In order for that to happen, a health network must be established. That need not necessarily be initiated in Dublin; perhaps either Belfast or even London could establish it. People are much better off going to London for treatment that will save their lives or improve their long-term health than going to a local hospital where they will receive mediocre services. Due to certain difficulties, of which Dr Deeny is aware, that is presently the case for many people.

Although I agree with his postcode lottery theory, Dr Deeny knows the difficulties that local hospitals face in trying to deliver quality healthcare provision. Given that rural hospitals cannot offer career progression, they find it extremely difficult to recruit nursing staff and consultants and doctors. Staff members simply do not want to come to places such as Fermanagh; Belfast's greater career opportunities mean that they want to stay there. It does not matter how many new hospitals are built: if quality staff and consultants are not recruited, the outcome for patients will be no better. We know that statistics have proven that that is true of any services, even those that are provided by garages and so forth, and it applies to maternity and to other hospital services. The inability to attract highly qualified personnel plus the necessity to recruit abroad present major difficulties.

Young people must also be considered, and the lesson that preventive medicine is the best medicine should be taught in schools. Rural areas must be included in any broader consideration of education on those matters. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Savage: I support the amendment tabled by my hon Friend Dr Coulter. I commend Members from the other side of the House on their interest in rural health matters. However, I cannot support Dr Deeny's amendment, because the rural medicine working group already delivers for the rural community. As a rural dweller, I am pleased to thank that working group and to record my appreciation of its sterling work.

The second half of Dr Coulter's amendment:

"urges the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to ensure that rural communities have access to safe and sustainable health services."

I echo that call, because there is a feeling of isolation in the rural community. If one is not fortunate enough to own a car, the lack of public transport can deepen that sense of isolation, which, in turn, has a negative impact on social relations. Furthermore, isolation affects people's health as well as their access to healthcare provision and public services. Stress is a major concern for many people in rural areas, especially older people and the lonely. Sometimes, having someone to speak to can have a major impact and can bring many benefits.

The home-help programme is the main link to the outside world for some older people. It should be expanded and given a budget increase so that the elderly, particularly those who are in rural areas, can reap greater benefit from such a good scheme. I ask the Minister to consider my request sympathetically.

The needs of older people should be at the heart of a flexible and holistic response in the development of a more integrated Health Service. The value that results from older people remaining in their rural communities should be a core vision. Therefore I am pleased to support Dr Coulter's amendment.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I welcome the opportunity to debate the establishment of a rural health task force. I am aware that people living in rural areas can feel a sense of isolation and may have difficulty accessing health and other services. Many people, particularly those in the south and west of the Province, have genuine concerns about that, and the topic must be discussed in a mature and measured way.

In expressing concern for the health and welfare of rural communities, I am in no way dismissing the needs of the many urban people who also face difficulties.

My concern as Health Minister has to be for the health and social care needs of all of the people of Northern Ireland, wherever they may live. Those needs will be different in different parts of the country, and are often dependent on economic conditions and the age profile of the local population. Some needs may be specifically related to either rural or urban factors. The key point is that our system of care must be flexible enough to address those needs, irrespective of where and how they materialise.

I want to emphasise that many factors that impact on people's health cross Government Departments — factors such as housing, employment, education and the quality of the environment. Health is a cross-cutting issue that is the business of all Government Departments. My priority is to improve the health and well-being of

the whole population of Northern Ireland, regardless of where they live.

I will start by referring to the Investing for Health strategy that was launched in 2002 by my predecessor as devolved Health Minister. That strategy is regarded by many, including many outside Northern Ireland, as a model for public health strategy. Effectively, it recognised that health and well-being issues crossed a number of Departments and issues, rather than simply being "health".

The general health of the people of Northern Ireland has improved in recent years. The implementation of Investing for Health, in particular, has brought about many tangible gains. Life expectancy has increased in all areas and in all socio-economic groups. Death rates from diseases such as heart attacks, strokes, cancers and respiratory diseases — the main killers in our population — have fallen over the past few years. Among those under 75 years of age, deaths from coronary heart disease have fallen by 55%, and deaths from strokes by almost 50%, in the last 10 years. Cancer-related deaths in the same age group show an 18% drop.

However, inequalities remain, and we must not become complacent. Mortality rates in Northern Ireland are still too high and lag behind those of many other European countries. A review of Investing for Health will begin next year. I see that as a valuable opportunity to ensure that the strategy is still fit for purpose. I will also be looking for any other actions that can be taken to improve the health of our population, whether they live in a rural or an urban setting.

It is inarguable that accessing services can be more difficult for some people living in rural areas. However, it is interesting to note some key health indicators that compare the 20% most rural areas with the 20% most urban areas in Northern Ireland. Men in rural areas can expect to live, on average, about one and a half years longer than their counterparts in urban areas. Women living in the countryside can expect to live almost six months longer than those living in cities or towns. Infant mortality, a key measure of the health of a population, is lower in rural areas. The rate of teenage births in rural areas is less than half that in urban areas. The suicide rate is also lower in rural areas.

Members will understand from that that the needs of some urban communities are, potentially, as great as those of rural communities. That is not in any way to dismiss the needs and concerns of rural communities; I just want to illustrate that not all health indicators for rural communities are negative. Living in the country has its upsides.

Investing for Health is being taken forward through a partnership approach between statutory, voluntary and community organisations. A health partnership has been established in each health and social services

board area, and each partnership has developed, and is implementing, a health improvement plan for its area. That is in line with the priorities set out in the strategy document and takes account of the needs of the local population, including the particular needs of rural communities. We have some excellent examples of innovative practice involving working in partnership. The partnerships work with rural networks to take forward a range of health improvements including, for example, research to explore the impact of rural isolation on poverty and disadvantage, and the promotion of dedicated transport to enable access to services.

My Department and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) currently fund Rural Support, an organisation that provides a telephone helpline, so work is being done. I firmly believe that living in a rural area should not prevent people from receiving the necessary high-quality care. In response to Bob Coulter's point, I must say that all healthcare policies are subject to rural proofing.

My Department's strategy for hospital services was developed through the Developing Better Services programme and recognises that a balance must be struck between ease of access for all and securing the medical benefits that are realised when the expertise and technology needed for the treatment of more complex conditions is brought together in an acute centre.

Mr D Bradley: Will the Minister give way?

Mr McGimpsey: I will be happy to give way when I finish this point.

We cannot all live close to an acute hospital, but, through the plans for a network of acute and local hospitals, we ensure that everyone, including those who live in the most rural communities, has access to the required services for scheduled and emergency care. Developing Better Services delivers a model of hospital provision that ensures that the vast majority of people will be within 45 minutes of emergency care and consultant-led maternity services, and that, on arrival, everyone will have access to those services within one hour.

Mr D Bradley: Does the Minister agree that there is a pressing need to retain resuscitation and stabilisation facilities in hospitals such as Daisy Hill in Newry, and other rural hospitals, in the event of major trauma? To do so may save lives in areas where the "golden hour" may not be met because of poor rural roads.

Mr McGimpsey: There are nine acute hospitals in Northern Ireland. Daisy Hill is one of them, and it will retain the services to which the Member referred, particularly trauma services.

Across Northern Ireland, health boards and trusts have introduced plans to make their services more responsive to local needs. I will continue to drive plans

to bring high-quality primary-care and community-care services closer to where people live, and to invest in and improve the Ambulance Service, to which Mrs Hanna referred. That is another key area.

The vast majority of services that people receive in hospital settings do not need to be carried out at a large acute hospital, and local hospitals will continue to deliver those services in future, typically at outpatient, diagnostic, urgent-care and day-procedure services. The decentralisation of some services that, in the past, have been delivered solely from Belfast, such as chemotherapy for cancer patients, is also a feature of my Department's strategy.

Mr Ramsey mentioned pathology services. A new laboratory at Altnagelvin Hospital opened last year at a cost of £18 million. There are no plans to move that; it is very much part of the fabric of services in the area. Consultation on the future of pathology services is under way. By the end of February 2007, the closing date for responses, we had received 280, which we are working our way through. We are not yet in a position to decide on the future of pathology services, so I will not predict what the final recommendations might be.

Mr McGlone: We are dealing with the topical issue of healthcare and health services for rural areas. As someone who lives in a rural area, the Minister may be aware of detrimental changes to the care practice for nurses in some smaller GP practices. Those changes undermine confidence in the level of medical care available there.

11.30 am

Secondly, I was unfortunate to have to attend the accident and emergency department of a local hospital from Friday evening until the early hours of Saturday morning. I discovered that the only method of communication that medical staff had with ambulance control to obtain an ambulance was to dial 999. That is totally unsatisfactory. Some members of staff at the hospital asked me to highlight that to the Minister.

Mr McGimpsey: I thank the Member for those points. I am not in a position to comment, but I will be happy to talk to him afterwards. It is not satisfactory that the only way for medical staff to get an ambulance is to ring 999. The Department will look at that matter along with other issues concerning ambulances.

Care practices for nurses have been brought to my attention again. I have not had the opportunity to deal with the subject, however, I would be happy to talk about care practices for nurses in the Member's area.

Linking services is a critical part of the review of rural medicine, which is being carried out by the Chief Medical Officer. That review is examining how inpatient medical services can be delivered in local and rural hospital settings. I am sure that Members agree that the

review is important, and I look forward to receiving the Chief Medical Officer's assessment of the findings at the end of the summer.

The largest proportion of health and social care needs are met by primary and community services in Northern Ireland. My Department's 20-year strategy for health and social care, which is called *A Healthier Future*, is currently beginning, and will ensure a front-line role for primary and community care services. It is important that the strategy will focus on making services, such as out-of-hours services, more accessible as well as expanding the range of services that are available close to people's homes.

To support the strategy, there will be major investment in primary and community care services through an extensive network of health and care centres across Northern Ireland over the next 10 years. It is anticipated that there will be 41 health and care centres, each of which will be designed to meet the needs of the local population. It is expected that each centre will provide a generic range of services including treatment, care, information, chronic-disease-management programmes and some diagnostic services currently only provided in a hospital setting.

The strategy is about placing an emphasis on primary care — that is what people have told me that they want from local health and social care services, and that is what I want to see delivered. I will continue to work with cross-border agencies such as CAWT to explore opportunities for more effective healthcare solutions to the problems faced by people living along the border. Our health boards are working with their counterparts across the border; a cross-border pilot scheme is underway in the north-west, which is creating mutually beneficial cross-border arrangements.

I am not convinced that a rural health task force is the best way forward at the moment. I say that in light of ongoing developments — the review of rural medicine; the pending review of the Investing for Health strategy; and the prospect of duplication that may arise from the creation of another task force.

I believe strongly that rural health and well-being must involve a wider response across Government. However, I will consider how best to take forward the spirit of the motion and address the issues involved in improving the health and well-being of people living in rural communities. In doing so, I will take the views of my ministerial colleagues, as the health and well-being of our local communities is an issue for all of us. It is a shared—

Mr Speaker: I remind the Minister his time is almost up.

Mr McGimpsey: Thank you. It is a shared responsibility.

Dr Deeny: I thank the Minister for his presence. He has been at many of the debates on health, which is good.

Nobody is suggesting that there should be large acute hospitals in every town in Northern Ireland — that is nonsensical. We are talking about establishing rural hospitals that have acute services that will save lives. Such hospitals exist in the National Health Service Scotland system, for example.

Carmel Hanna, speaking as a former health professional, made a good point. We are requesting the establishment of rural hospitals that have stabilisation facilities — they work in Scotland and can work here. Such hospitals need not be huge; the important point is that their acute facilities would allow patients to be stabilised before they were transferred to larger hospitals for appropriate treatment.

The current plans to develop better services do not apply to some areas, including my own. Currently, transporting people the length of the M1 is a chance that must be taken in the hope that patients are still alive when they arrive at the acute facility.

Smaller acute services in rural areas can be run efficiently and effectively with the approval and guidance of the royal colleges. The colleges have not been mentioned, but they are important players that decide which hospitals close. If consultants' skills cannot be maintained, and facilities and services are not provided for the training of junior doctors, a hospital has no future.

Gerry McHugh made a well-made point about staff, and I agree that attracting good staff to country areas is a serious problem. The answer lies in staff rotation, which occurs in some places. If that were adopted on a wider scale, a condition for employment in larger urban hospitals would be that consultants and junior doctors would spend some time in smaller rural hospitals. If rotation were introduced, the problem of attracting doctors to rural areas would be removed and doctors' skills would be maintained. Therefore rotation is the future.

The Minister mentioned the healthcare needs of the urban population, and although I am proud of the fact that I live in the country, I do not suggest for a minute that the needs of urban dwellers should be overlooked — of course they should not. However, I have come across a mother who told me that before she has children she plans to move from her home to live with her sister because where she lives is unsafe. In Belfast, where each hospital can be seen and walked to from the others, people argue over whether a baby should be born in one hospital or another. I see that disparity day and daily in healthcare provision. We must not deny city dwellers what they need, but let us have a sense of fair play. People are actually leaving the area in which I live and work in order to give birth safely.

Despite the UUP amendment, I ask that party's Members to vote on health issues instead of according to party direction. Amendment No 1 is well made and well intentioned, but it focuses on medical care, which includes coronary heart attacks, pneumonias and strokes. That is a single area of medicine that I know and of which I have been a part. The UUP amendment relates simply to medicine. People outside the medical profession do not realise that "medicine" is simply a branch of what is known collectively as medicine. I made that point to the rural medicine working group when I told it that it must widen its scope to consider the needs of children and mothers and the future of trauma services in rural areas. If Members support the UUP amendment, they will neglect and deny the rights of our mothers and children and those of us who will suffer trauma. That amendment does not consider the needs of rural areas, and therefore, as a doctor, I cannot support it.

A rural health task force is a good idea and is the way forward. That is why I support the motion. The remote and rural steering group was established in Scotland. I assume that it is still in place, and I volunteer to investigate how the Scottish Parliament looks after rural people. Members owe it to all the people in Northern Ireland, whether they live in cities or in rural areas, to provide decent and acceptable modern-day healthcare. I urge Members to support the motion and my amendment.

Mr McCallister: The UUP's commitment to rural areas and to rural proofing is well documented. My party colleague Mr Elliott has championed that agenda for several years. I am much encouraged that this debate has not been characterised by an urban-rural divide, because that is not a helpful road to travel. Our aim is to secure quality healthcare for everyone.

I am encouraged that the Minister is, again, present for the debate. He mentioned several points that are of great interest to me. At a meeting of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety last week, I asked the Minister about establishing a good cross-departmental arrangement. On too many issues, when one mentions the word "rural" the matter immediately goes to DARD, and everyone else forgets that they share responsibility. If one mentions mental health, the issue goes to the Health Department, and other Departments forget that they too have some responsibility for those matters. The Minister has, quite rightly, made it clear that he will take up this vitally important matter with ministerial colleagues to secure a proper cross-departmental response.

Dr Coulter and I have tabled our amendment because, as Dr Coulter quite rightly said, issues of cross-border co-operation must be entirely health-led and not, as Mrs Robinson put it, driven by some other agenda. Mrs Hanna quite rightly said that we want to establish best practice. I am sure that no one in the House would disagree with that. We want best practice across the board.

Mr McHugh mentioned the Scottish experience. In the Scottish isles, there are areas of isolation that go way beyond anywhere in Northern Ireland. There may be excellent examples of best practice in Scotland to examine and from which to gain knowledge and ideas.

I do not accept Dr Deeny's arguments on the UUP amendment. Our amendment is quite clear, and I do not see how Dr Deeny can argue with urging the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to:

"ensure that rural communities have access to safe and sustainable health services."

That is what we are seeking. There is nothing weak or watery about "safe and sustainable services".

Mr Elliott: Was the Member more than surprised when the Member for West Tyrone Dr Deeny, at the last meeting of the Health Committee, indicated that no hospital should be built in Omagh or the Tyrone area?

Mr McCallister: I was very surprised that Dr Deeny did not want the building of a new £190 million hospital in his constituency.

Dr Deeny: It is not a hospital.

Mr McCallister: It is being called a hospital, and it represents £190 million of investment in health in his constituency. It was a great surprise that Dr Deeny wanted to stop that project.

I am encouraged by the Minister's comments on Rural Support and the work that his Department and DARD have been doing to fund that group. That is an organisation with which I have had previous involvement.

Our amendment sums up our approach to this matter. The Minister has, in his short period in office so far, driven home the message that he is not interested in quick fixes for health services — he wants a sustainable future for healthcare; sustainable safe access for all our citizens, urban and rural; no postcode lottery; and the best health system in the world, provided by the best staff in the world.

11.45 am

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tá sé beartaithe agam féin agus ag Carál Ní Chuilín go nglaonn an Tionól seo go mbunaítear tascfhórsa um shláinte tuaithe.

As the Speaker knows, Sinn Féin is strongly calling for the establishment of a rural health task force to respond to and meet the health needs of people who live in rural areas. We appreciate the Minister's attendance and participation in the debate and in respect of all health-related debates that have taken place in the Assembly so far.

People who live in rural areas are more likely to suffer ill health. Healthcare is a basic human requirement and

a basic human right; it should be included in a future bill of rights.

This has been a well-informed debate, and as many of those who took part have personal experience of the deficit of health services in rural areas, I am glad that the Minister has taken every opportunity to apprise himself of the special health needs of people in rural communities.

Sinn Féin will accept the amendment tabled by Kieran Deeny. It makes eminent sense to include the reference to:

“equal access to life-saving services for all, irrespective of postcode;”.

As proposers of the motion, we are not inclined to accept Rev Coulter's amendment, as it is too minimalist and does not have a wide enough scope.

Essentially, we seek strong acknowledgement of, and strong investment in, the necessary resources by the Department in relation to special health problems that arise from living in a rural community. Distance from essential health services is a real issue, and poor road infrastructure and lower socio-economic status are just some of the reasons for the major deficit in health provision experienced by people living in rural areas.

There are general low levels of health in the North, both urban and rural, but the rural situation must be accentuated.

Mr B McCrea: I thank the Member for giving way. Would he support a £190 million investment in healthcare provision in the West Tyrone constituency?

Mr McElduff: I thank the Member for his intervention. I would accept the £190 million and seek to build on it, in order to provide proper acute services in the area.

Mr Simpson: Will the Member give way?

Mr McElduff: No. I will carry on, because it gets out of hand sometimes, David.

A significant proportion of the population lives in rural areas; urban models do not support the rural situation. How often have Members heard the excuse that investing in 20% of facilities will cater for 80% of the population? The 80:20 rule and figures should be thrown out of the window.

I am glad that several Members drew attention to the CAWT model. I ask Members to study the report on health inequalities that was published by CAWT following a one-day conference in March 2005. As other Members said, CAWT is an agreement between health boards adjacent to the border with the stated objective of improving the health and social well-being of the population.

It is regrettable that too few areas for joint working have been carried forward despite the fact that health is an area of co-operation under the Good Friday Agreement. To respond to Rev Coulter's comments, Sinn Féin is not

being doctrinaire in relation to the health issue. This motion is not about cheap political capital.

Far be it from me to quote someone of whom I am not the biggest fan — and in fact on one occasion, I joined one of the DUP Members for West Tyrone and others to occupy the office of this Minister; I do not think we were breaking the law, Tom, but we did it anyway. Nevertheless, I agree with Shaun Woodward's view that North/South co-operation in relation to health was “the patients' solution”. Let us put the patients first.

My colleague John O'Dowd challenged Members to name an area of service provision or social policy where North/South cooperation would produce a better outcome than that of healthcare.

More initiatives are needed to reduce health inequalities in rural areas, not least in border communities. I commend to Members an initiative in the Carrickmore area of mid-Tyrone. The initiative is well known to Dr Kieran Deeny, who is a GP in the area. Indeed, I wish to put on the record that he is my GP. *[Laughter.]*

I appeal for calm. *[Laughter.]*

The rural link to health scheme is an excellent initiative that transports people to the local health centre to attend their appointments. The scheme also affords people the opportunity to go to the post office at the same time, for example. It was created by GPs in the Carrickmore practice, with input from the health action zone partnership and the Investing for Health strategy.

The scheme is a good example of how the provision of transport can help to meet the needs of rural communities. I hope that that pilot scheme will continue to be funded in the future. In a rural area such as mid-Tyrone, the scheme performs an essential service. As has already been well articulated, the needs of that community are great.

On the issue of North/South co-operation, I wish to highlight the issue of GP out-of-hours access. Sinn Féin is not being doctrinaire or engaging in cheap political point scoring on that issue. A person living in Lifford in County Donegal — one mile from Strabane — who falls sick in the evening or at the weekend is expected to travel to the North Western Association of Doctors on Call in Letterkenny, around 15 miles away. There is a perfectly good GP out-of-hours service just one mile away in Strabane, but that service has not been part of either of the two cross-border schemes that have been piloted to date.

Those pilot schemes struggled to get off the ground because of resistance from within DHSSPS. One scheme was located in the Castleblaney, Keady and Crossmaglen areas; the other in the Derry and Inishowen areas. A similar pilot scheme should be introduced in the Lifford and Strabane areas. That is the patients' solution; in

supporting it, I am neither being doctrinaire nor engaging in cheap political point scoring.

Sinn Féin does not support Rev Coulter's amendment, because it is too minimalist and its scope needs to be widened. My party specifically wants a task force to be established as that would be a demonstration of political will. The Minister said that he would take forward the spirit of the motion. I commend him on classic departmental-speak. What did he mean? Why will he not set up, or be seen to set up, a properly resourced task force with the objective of reducing health inequalities in rural areas? That would demonstrate real political will and real investment.

Other Members have spoken in their capacity as constituency representatives. As a Member for West Tyrone, I ask the Minister to intervene to ensure that the urgent care treatment centre and the high-dependency unit at the Tyrone County Hospital are retained, developed and expanded to meet the needs of people as a part of a wider solution to the problems of health provision west of the Bann. He should not allow an urgent-care treatment centre to become a minor injuries unit. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Speaker: Before I put the Question on amendment No 1, I wish to advise Members that if amendment No 1 is made, amendment No 2 will fall. I shall then put the Question on the motion as amended.

Question put, That amendment No 1 be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 44; Noes 36.

AYES

Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Cree, Mr Dodds, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mrs Foster, Mr Gardiner, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr McCallister, Mr McCausland, Mr McClarty, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Mr McFarland, Mr McGimpsey, Miss McIlveen, Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Mr Poots, Ms Purvis, Mr G Robinson, Mrs I Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Savage, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Spratt, Mr Weir, Mr S Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Armstrong and Mr McClarty.

NOES

Mr Boylan, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Burns, Mr Butler, Mr Dallat, Dr Deeny, Mr Doherty, Mr Durkan, Dr Farry, Mr Gallagher, Mrs Hanna, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Mr McCartney, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mrs McGill, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McHugh, Mr McKay,

Mr Murphy, Mr Neeson, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mr O'Loan, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Mr B Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr P Maskey and Mrs O'Neill.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the ongoing work of the Rural Medicine Working Group and urges the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to ensure that rural communities have access to safe and sustainable health services.

Provision of Speech and Language Therapy

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

Mr P Ramsey: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the inequalities in the provision of speech and language therapy throughout Northern Ireland, and calls on the Executive to provide adequate and equitable resources and financial support.

The motion is not intended as any criticism of, or reflection on, the good work of speech and language therapists, managers or technical assistants.

For the past five years, I have been working closely with a group of parents in Derry whose children have been statemented and require speech and language therapy. Unfortunately, for some of those parents, their children have come of age — they are 18 — and no longer have access to speech and language therapists. Their stories are alarming. However, the parents are continuing with their campaign to ensure that other children do not face similar disadvantages.

I have attended numerous meetings with health boards and trusts. I remember a meeting with a direct rule Minister whose arrogance and ignorance left a lot to be desired. He took a telephone call during the meeting and did not even introduce his departmental officials to the parents who had accompanied me. Imagine the impression that his behaviour made on those parents: it did not give them much confidence in direct rule.

In 2006, a follow-up review carried out by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) reported that over half the children who required assessment or speech therapy in the Western Health and Social Services Board area could not access those services. NICCY found also that speech and language therapy services are allocated on the basis of a postcode lottery, meaning that the area in which one lives has a huge bearing on the expected waiting time for assessment and treatment.

In my constituency of Foyle, children can wait for up to 18 months to be assessed by speech and language therapists and receive the necessary therapy. In anyone's life, especially that of a five- or six-year-old child, 18 months is a huge amount of time. Such a delay in assessment and treatment impedes a child's learning and his or her enjoyment of school.

Parents in my constituency are being forced to fight with health authorities to obtain the services that their children need and are entitled to as of right. That situation cannot be allowed to continue.

There has been systematic failure of leadership and management. For example, in 2004, John Hume tabled a series of questions in the Westminster Parliament about speech therapy services. It transpired that the most basic information about the length of the various waiting lists, waiting times and budget allocations for speech and language therapy across the trust areas was not available to the then Minister to allow for strategic decision-making, allocation of resources and equality assurance. Clearly, there was no central control and, more worryingly, no democratic interest in providing an essential service for our children.

It is clear that there are simply too few speech and language therapists in the system generally and, particularly, in some areas such as Foyle. I mentioned earlier that I met repeatedly with Health Service managers. They told me that they could not recruit and retain speech and language therapists. It turned out that speech and language therapists in the Foyle Trust area were earning less than those employed in other trust areas. That is no longer the case, but it seems that posts are simply not available for speech and language therapists who want to work in the Foyle Trust area.

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

Parents and users have serious concerns about moneys allocated by the Department through the children and young people's funding package for 2006-08. The use of that funding will discriminate against children in mainstream education who need speech and language therapy. The Department has made £1 million available. However, parents have serious concerns that the money is only to be used by special schools and language units attached to special schools. That presents a serious problem for children with special needs who attend mainstream schools in that they will not be able to avail of the services being offered to children who attend special schools. That situation cannot be tolerated.

In the Foyle Trust area, there is a ratio of one speech therapist to 3,200 children, compared to the Southern Health and Social Services Board area, which offers one speech therapist to 1,700 children. That difference in provision leaves a lot to be desired.

I want to talk about the current lack of resources and the costs that will no doubt rise from our call to provide more speech therapists. Given the money that is spent on public administration in Northern Ireland — Members are all aware of Northern Ireland's burgeoning public sector — is it not amazing that front-line services in speech therapy and other essential areas are so poor? On the face of it, given what is being spent, we should have the best public services in the world. However, we do not.

There has been a systematic and long-term failure of strategic direction from direct rule Ministers, and subsequent mismanagement, which has resulted in

cumbersome, bureaucratic systems that do not deliver the services that people need.

Non-delivery of essential services would not be tolerated in the private sector — heads would roll and companies would go out of business. In public services, non-delivery of services has been followed by inaction and more of the same. Under direct rule, questions were answered with excuses. However, that was then; this is now.

12.15 pm

The review of public administration (RPA) needs to be completed as soon as possible. Health Service management must be given the flexibility, authority and control required to make the necessary changes. More staff need to be employed on front-line services, and they should be given the backup that they need. In the Civil Service and public sector, the mantra should be: if you are not serving a citizen; you had better be serving someone who is.

We can no longer accept that the weak and vulnerable in our society are provided with desperately inadequate services. The people of Northern Ireland do not want to hear lectures about finance and cost; they want efficiency and value for money. Furthermore, public servants want to work in an efficient system that clearly delivers for the people.

I recently became aware of an early-years centre in Ballynahinch that is a centre of excellence for communications, particularly for children and others, who have communication difficulties. It is good that such an organisation exists, and I draw the Minister's attention to it. The centre is literally a one-stop shop, and it has addressed some of the difficulties that have been ongoing in the Department.

The people who attend the early-years centre have severe language and communication difficulties. One of the centre's outputs is that 71% of those children who attended the centre during their early years are now in mainstream schools. It is important that children who are statemented become involved in mainstream education and feel equal to others.

As well as providing specialist support for children, the I CAN early years centre in Ballynahinch is a centre of excellence locally, regionally and nationally and provides outreach support and training for early years facilities across the South Eastern Education and Library Board. If that project is the model of good practice, we must ensure that it continues and that its sustainability is maintained. The support provided at the centre should be rolled out across Northern Ireland to allow all children to have equal access to it.

Children cannot wait any longer, and they cannot wait for RPA to be concluded before the services that they need are delivered. People are aware that, in the

short term, there will be an overspend pending rationalisation under RPA. However, they would rather make that investment now because they know that our children are worth it. They are also aware of the long-term social and economic costs of not making that investment now. Immediate action must be taken to provide better front-line services. We already know what must be done. We need more speech and language therapists in place. We must get our children the help that they need, and we must get it done now.

In the recommendations from NICCY's 'Overview Report of Speech and Language Therapy Provision in Northern Ireland 2004/05', the late Children's Commissioner Nigel Williams stated that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland:

"should ensure that children's right to speech and language therapy is accepted and prioritised by relevant Government Departments and Commissioners and Providers of Service."

The report's most important recommendation is a fundamental concern for parents — joined-up thinking:

"The Ministers for Health and Education should make this right a reality by ensuring that policy, planning and service commissioning at a strategic level is strengthened to allow a child centered approach to be developed which meets children's speech, language, communication... needs."

That is a crucial issue for many people across Northern Ireland, some 21,000 of whom require access to speech and language therapy, and that is not currently being achieved.

Parents who are now becoming part of the campaign do not want other people to suffer the same difficulties that their own children have experienced, such as delays in communication skills and delays in accessing adequate services.

I hope that the Minister has good news to deliver today. To deal with this issue effectively, joined-up thinking is required between the health authorities and the bodies that statement children — initially education and library boards. That must be done as a matter of urgency. I commend the motion to the House.

Mr Easton: I welcome the opportunity to discuss the motion. As with many other issues that we consider, the Assembly must take the provision of speech and language therapy (SLT) seriously. Although such therapy is a particular specialism, it shares with other health services the same traits of long waiting lists and lack of resources.

Speech and language therapists undoubtedly undertake a much-needed and vital role, but the current resources for the service cannot meet the demand. That means that children and young people are losing out on a most basic right to be able to communicate effectively. Given the pressure that has been put on our Assembly and Executive to distribute finances accordingly to help to maintain services such as SLT, I urge the Executive

and the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to consider carefully the funding for speech and language therapy.

Frustration at the current situation is shared not only by the families of children and young people who are in need of SLT but by the professionals who want to provide the best possible service. For the best results, such children need regular sessions with a speech therapist. Families should not be left waiting for inexcusable lengths of time. The therapy needs to be administered effectively and consistently over time. SLT involves constant attention, and it requires the freedom to be able to adapt the situation to suit individual needs.

A report from the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People highlighted that more than 2,000 children await an initial SLT assessment and that some 3,400 who had already been assessed await the commencement of their programmes. Those findings cannot be ignored, nor can the needs of our children and young people. We must find efficient ways in which to improve the situation. Can we further encourage collaboration between trusts and universities throughout Northern Ireland so that we reap the benefits of having experienced and trained staff who can move into speech and language therapy? How can we reduce waiting lists? We cannot judge demand on huge budgets without a strategic plan for implementation. We must consider that issue before throwing money at the problem and then failing to see long-term improvements.

SLT must meet the distinctive needs of all those who require the service, including, for example, autistic children and young people. Such children should not have to go through years of their life without the necessary support to communicate in the best possible way. In too many cases, resources are just not available. No one questions the quality of the therapy that is provided, but we need to consider how we can improve and support the service. We readily acknowledge the importance of SLT and call for further work to be done to shed light on autism and to resource SLT. I support the motion.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I suggest that, although inequalities in provision exist throughout the various trust areas, there is a shortfall in provision across the North. That is not the fault of, or as a direct result of, speech and language therapists, who do a great job in difficult circumstances.

As a mother of two small children, I know only too well the stress and anxiety that all parents face when their child is ill or requires treatment. That some children must wait for more than three years is appalling. Speech and language therapy is a vital service that about 10% of all children in the Six Counties require, yet access to the service and the time that a child must wait are, by and large, determined by the postcode lottery that Pat Ramsey mentioned. Those children

who are most vulnerable and most in need usually face the longest waiting times.

Speech and language therapy is an important service that could be enhanced in many ways with a straightforward injection of cash from the Department. We need to train and employ more speech and language therapists to meet our higher levels of need. SLT is not a so-called soft service. During a recent debate, the Minister told us that mental-health services for children were seen as the poor relation, but I believe that children's services in general have had a raw deal. Let us send a clear message from today's debate that all services that children and young people require will be properly resourced and that we will listen to the concerns of those who are most aware of where need exists. A recent report from the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People highlighted:

"The overall lack of action at a strategic and or policy level as regards the concerns raised by NICCY, professionals in the field and parents/carers."

Those concerns have been ignored to date, but let us change that from today. Let us listen to those who are well aware of the services and needs in this area.

Without proper access to speech and language therapy, many of our children are being condemned to a life of poor educational achievement. That results in poor employment prospects, poor social skills development, low self-esteem and emotional and behavioural problems. Early intervention by speech and language therapists can help to prevent many of those problems and increase the life chances of many children. Undoubtedly, that would be cost-effective in the long term.

As a mother, I have focused on the positive impact that speech and language therapy can have on children. However, many other people could benefit from an enhanced speech and language therapy service — those with communication difficulties, post-stroke sufferers, young offenders and people with mental-health problems. The ability to communicate, which all Members take for granted, is being denied to many people by failures to invest in speech and language therapy. We must end that situation today. For that reason, I support the motion. Go raibh maith agat.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I congratulate the hon Members who tabled the motion. The issue of speech and language therapy impacts heavily on many people across our land. I am chairman of the board of a special school, so I know that such therapy can have a good impact on children who receive it.

The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists reckons that Northern Ireland has 57,000 preschool children who have speech, language and communication needs. As many as 5,500 of those children will have problems that persist into later life and

require specialist help. Such figures underline the importance of today's debate.

This is a significant disability, and it may contribute to other social problems, including the cycle of social exclusion, alienation and offending. That is why the problem should be considered in the round and the funding of services should be examined in the proper context, which includes consideration of how much it costs society in Northern Ireland not to act on this issue. How much does society lose through not dealing with the problem more effectively than it does at present?

The Assembly should commission empirical research and a scoping exercise that defines the true extent of the problem. Those should be followed by an evaluation of what would happen if the present levels of speech, language and communication needs were allowed to continue unabated. That would produce a proper context for action.

It is probably short-sighted to consider the provision of an adequate response to speech, language and communication needs as simply being another item in the health or education budgets. If early intervention could alleviate the problems suffered by young offenders that in turn have led to their offending behaviour, surely a case could be made for Budget savings to be set aside for those offenders.

Members have mentioned the uneven level of care throughout the Province, and that issue must be addressed. The phrase "postcode lottery" has been used again and again, and it is also relevant to this argument. There have been sub-regional differences in waiting times for referral, the availability of sufficient therapy posts, the procedures for assessing referrals, the provision of assistants to help the specialists and differing care packages. A rational and even approach is needed across Northern Ireland to address shortfalls in different geographical regions and areas of provision.

The importance of early intervention and, conversely, the dangers of late intervention are well documented. Those dangers include: developmental disadvantage; damage to social skills and employment prospects; educational underachievement; emotional problems; and behavioural problems. All those dangers must figure in the downside costs of inaction, which must be balanced against the actual costs of improving the service to meet professionally led standards of adequacy. The net cost can then be understood, and the relatively small amount of that net cost will ultimately justify this much-needed reassessed public investment in this important service.

12.30 pm

What worries me most is that, currently, there are no speech and language therapy services for children and adolescents with mental-health problems and for young offenders, and there is only limited provision

for patients suffering from brain injuries, cancer, voice conditions, and strokes, and for secondary-school children and children with Asperger's syndrome.

All of that is a reproach to us. We must look not only at the net cost approach that I have outlined, but at better, more innovative ways of spending the current budget. I support the motion.

Mr Lunn: I welcome the motion; it raises a significant issue. However, the motion does not indicate where the "adequate and equitable resources" it calls for are to come from. As Dr Coulter rightly says, debate around the issue suffers from a lack of statistics.

The scale of the problem is indicated primarily by concerns raised by health professionals, rather than bare statistics. The figures indicate that this time last year, of 17,000 children requiring speech and language therapy, approximately 15,000 were receiving it. That means that nearly 15% of children who needed the therapy were not receiving it. Overall, approximately 3,500 children and adults who have been assessed and require treatment are still awaiting it. Those are the figures that the Alliance Party has researched. I did not understand the figure that Dr Coulter gave of 57,000 preschool children in need of speech and language treatment.

As Mr Ramsey said, the evidence suggests that there is a postcode lottery, which is also the case for many other services. The trend for patients going from assessment to provision is declining in some areas. The gap is typically a few months, but in some locations there is a wait of up to two years between being assessed as requiring therapy and actually receiving it. That is particularly unacceptable for children. It is intolerable that a six-year-old child should have to wait until he is eight to receive treatment.

We need to be cautious that our attempts to provide an equitable service do not result in a reduction of the level of provision in high performing areas. The task is to bring every trust area up to the standard of the best, not to equalise the level of treatment to an average. Our objective of speeding up access to therapy should not lead to any reduction in the quality of the therapy provided. Requirements can differ significantly, so it is not enough to illustrate the issue with mere statistics.

Resources and financial support also require some thought. Fewer speech and language therapists qualify than are needed. I would like to know what the position is across the whole of the UK and Ireland. Anecdotally, it seems that Northern Ireland's school-leavers are going elsewhere to train. If that is the case, why is it so? Is there any way of encouraging them back?

Discussion on this issue has focused on the regional task force. However, the electorate has already become a bit fed up with "government by review", and "government by task force". Executive action is

required via cross-cutting policies to ensure all of the following: that finances are available; that enough therapists become qualified; that the public is properly informed about the availability of speech and language therapy assessment and provision; that underperforming trusts are brought up to the level of the highest performers; and that children requiring therapy are identified as soon as possible.

We welcome the motion, as it stands, as a great start. The Executive now face the challenges of finding where the inequalities in speech and language therapy exist, clarifying exactly what equitable resources are needed and locating adequate funding.

The determination to waste money on segregated services brings a high cost for other areas; the Executive have four years to examine that. Nevertheless, the Alliance Party supports the motion.

Mrs I Robinson: I congratulate the hon Members for proposing the motion. As the DUP health spokesperson I had the privilege, just over a year ago, of hosting a reception in the Long Gallery to celebrate the diamond jubilee of the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists. Those individuals make a hugely important contribution to healthcare in our Province.

As with all the allied health professionals, there are stringent resource limitations on what staff can achieve. Retention of people undergoing training has been a problem, and I am encouraged to see that the numbers of new speech and language therapists commencing work in the Province is growing gradually — that is to be welcomed.

Significant financial incentives have been attracting newly trained professionals to practice elsewhere; and they cannot be blamed for following that course, because people outside the Province appear to value their exemplary credentials more than we do. I am not sure of the current figure, but recently there were 20 vacancies in Northern Ireland. It has always been difficult to obtain from Ministers precise figures for the waiting times of those seeking speech and language assessment or treatment. Ministers have only been able to provide the length of waits experienced by those who received an initial assessment in the previous quarter.

A cynic might conclude that that situation could be useful to the Department in limiting negative media headlines. It cannot be difficult to obtain the waiting list for assessment or treatment across the Province, and the point was referred to in NICCY's follow-up report in 2006, which states:

"There continues to be great difficulty accessing information uniformly across Trusts. It would appear that information ... critical to effective service planning is not yet routinely collated analysed, or easily accessible. The urgent need to address this deficiency cannot be over-stated."

I appeal to the Minister to address the problem urgently. Precise numbers must be obtained so that proper resource planning can be put into effect.

There have been marked disparities in different parts of the Province. Waiting times are not the staff's fault: they do as much as can reasonably be expected. Unlike other disciplines, waiting list figures for speech and language therapy encompass adults and children. Long waits are particularly significant for children, as many of them are at an important stage in their development.

Vacancies and pressures on special schools also pose particular difficulties. I am aware of great problems at Torbank School, which is in my own constituency, and I wish to highlight the need for an urgent look at that school's needs.

One third of young people with special educational needs is statemented with speech and language needs. In order to improve that situation, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department of Education must work together in a close and cohesive format.

In 2002, the comprehensive review of the speech and language therapy workforce highlighted the need for more posts and to encourage trained staff to remain in the Province. A year ago there were 314.4 whole-time equivalent speech and language therapists in the Province, as well as another six full-time and 22 part-time support staff.

The workforce is overwhelmingly female: there are only two full-time and one part-time male therapists. The NICCY follow-up report states that more than 2,000 individuals were awaiting assessment with approximately 3,500 who had been assessed but were waiting for their treatment to start. Across Northern Ireland, over 15,500 patients were receiving treatment, which meant that to provide treatment for all those who need it, the capacity of the service would have to increase by more than one third.

Recently, 11 out of the 14 health trusts reported having inadequate financial resources for speech and language therapists. Many were also concerned about limited clerical and administrative staff and ineffective appointment systems. I support the motion.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the SDLP Members who tabled the motion, which I support.

Sinn Féin recognises the important role that speech and language therapists and support workers play in the lives of many people with communication, eating, drinking and swallowing problems. Speech and language therapists provide an essential service in the Health Service for both children and adults. Not only do they assist and work with people with communication

difficulties but they help to instil confidence in those people to express themselves to the best of their ability. There is clearly inadequate and inequitable service provision in the sector across the Six Counties. That needs to be acted on urgently.

The Commissioner for Children and Young People's follow-up review of speech and language therapy services for children and young people for 2005-06 showed that, from available information, 5,457 children and young people were awaiting assessment and/or speech and language therapy.

For assessments, the review states:

"the maximum wait stated by any Trust for community settings was just over 10 months".

The figure was even worse for waiting times for therapy. The maximum waiting time recorded between assessment and therapy was 24 months — two years. That was recorded in the former Homefirst Community Health and Social Services Trust area, which takes in part of my constituency of North Antrim.

The geographical inequity in the service is extraordinary. Waiting times for assessment last year ranged from three weeks in one trust area to five months in another. Waiting times from referral to therapy range from 15 weeks to 29 months.

Last year, 11 of the 14 trusts identified:

"inadequate financial resources and/or speech and language therapists"

as reasons for the failure to meet need. The recognised shortage of speech and language therapists is caused by recruitment and retention problems, and that means that many clients, particularly children, experience severe delays in accessing therapy.

Sinn Féin calls on the Minister to make the service more equitable across the board and to end the postcode lottery that currently exists in the sector. There is a pressing need to ensure that appropriate financial resources and more speech and language therapists are provided. The need that exists for speech and language therapists looks set to grow even more. That is why the Minister should approach the problem with a degree of urgency in order to get it addressed now.

There is greater need for speech and language therapy intervention for a number of reasons. People live longer, and many now live longer after cancer treatment. People with dementia or who have suffered a stroke — conditions that affect communication — need assistance. Problems such as autism and learning difficulty are more widely recognised. Improvements in neonatal care mean that survival rates for preterm babies with developmental problems such as cerebral palsy is increasing. Children are losing out on vital treatment, and that is simply not good enough.

If the opportunity is missed for children and young people to avail themselves of speech and language therapy services, that could have a huge effect on their development. The longer that it is left, the more difficult it will be to address some of those difficulties.

Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Simpson: I also congratulate Pat Ramsey and Dominic Bradley on their motion.

A recent review of speech and language therapy services by the Commissioner for Children and Young People showed that some 20,000 children require, or currently receive, speech and language therapy services in the Province. The findings of the then Children's Commissioner, Nigel Williams, were shocking.

In some trust areas, children and young people were forced to wait for up to 18 months to two years to be assessed by a speech and language therapist. A clear inequality exists in waiting times from the date of the referral to the first assessment. The whereabouts of a child or a young person in Northern Ireland seems to determine how long he or she must wait for speech and language therapy. I know that from experience in my constituency. Waiting times for pupils at Ceara School in Lurgan, for example, are much longer than those for pupils at Donard School in Banbridge.

I have nothing but admiration for the dedication and work of the diligent staff at all those schools in Upper Bann, especially the principal of Ceara School, Dr Peter Cunningham, and Mrs Freda Wylie at Donard School, who will be retiring next Tuesday after many years at the school. Those years of dedication must be commended.

12.45 pm

We asked direct rule Ministers for details on how many patients and young people were awaiting speech and language therapy appointments and the duration of those waits, but we were told that the statistics were not available; they were not kept. That is not good enough. To plan for the future, we must know how many individuals require services, but we are merely provided with general information on the duration of wait experienced by those who have been treated in the previous quarter. For instance, 18 months ago, more than 650 individuals in the southern health area received initial speech and language therapy assessments; 255 had waited more than three months, and 30 had waited over six months. Many of those requiring treatment are young children, and such waits for therapy can have a major impact on their development.

The Commissioner for Children and Young People's report of 2005 made several recommendations. It called for the establishment of a regional task force to address the postcode lottery that exists in service provision and an agreed maximum waiting time for

assessment and therapy. A follow-up review by the Office of the Commissioner for Children and Young People took place in 2006, which identified that some trusts had made positive improvements. However, that was not universal across the Province, and there was evidence that some waiting lists for assessment and therapy had increased — for instance, the number of children awaiting assessment in the Sperrin Lakeland Health and Social Care Trust had increased by 28.3%.

Eventually in 2006, direct rule Minister Lord Rooker announced that the task force recommended by the Commissioner for Children and Young People would be established. The task force met for the first time last year, but, to date, it has not published a report. Even though some investment has been announced, it does not address the postcode lottery or the ability of principals of special schools to access services directly for pupils.

Many children in Northern Ireland need access to, and suitable provision of, speech and language therapy. The current allocation of resources, structures of service delivery and lack of interest on the part of the Government in addressing that means that children and young people who have speech and language difficulties are being denied their basic rights.

Government officials tell us that there are not enough therapists because they drop out from their courses, or because there is no funding or insufficient funding available for them — or a mixture of all three. Perhaps the Minister will tell the House why that is so. I support the motion.

Mr McCallister: Approximately 2.5 million people in the UK have communication problems. Speech, language and communication difficulties are the most common disabilities presenting in early childhood. This year, the Education Select Committee at Westminster acknowledged that as the number of children with special needs rises, so does the incidence of communication problems.

The statistics relating to children with special needs demonstrate the extent of the problem in this country: up to 90% of children with learning disabilities have speech and language difficulties; approximately 80% of those who have severe learning disabilities do not acquire effective speech; 62% of children with mental-health disorders have speech and language difficulties; and 5% to 8% of preschool children with speech, language or communication problems and 10% of school-age children have communication problems. Furthermore, over one third of stroke sufferers have persisting speech, language and communication problems; more than three quarters of the people who have mental-health disorders have communication difficulties; and almost two thirds of young offenders have speech and language impairment or communication needs. Unfortunately, the list goes on.

Speech and language therapists provide an invaluable service in Northern Ireland, so there are serious risks to patients if speech and language therapists are not availed of, or applied for, when needed. Children with delay and communication difficulties are an exceptionally high-risk group with high rates of later developmental disadvantages.

Difficulties can arise with social skills and behavioural and emotional problems, which can lead to poor employment prospects. One third of children with communication problems, if untreated, will go on to develop mental illness, which will result in involvement in criminal activity in over 50% of cases.

The importance of the service that speech and language therapists provide is realised when we examine the extent of the need for their services in Northern Ireland. Statistics provided by the health trusts reveal that over 15,000 children and young people are currently receiving speech and language therapy in Northern Ireland, while a further 2,000 are awaiting assessment for therapy. Those individuals can experience delays of up to 24 months between assessment and receipt of therapy. Average delays range from, at best, two and a half weeks to, at worst, 9 months. That is clearly unacceptable, given the identified need of those children and young people.

When considered together, those figures reveal that well over 5,000 children and young people are still awaiting assessment and/or therapy. Up to 21,000 children and young people, therefore, require access to speech and language therapy in Northern Ireland. The Assembly must act to address this inadequate provision. The facts and figures speak for themselves. I unconditionally support the motion and commend its proposer.

Mr Beggs: I declare an interest in this matter as a member of the New Horizon Sure Start committee, which operates in Carrickfergus and Larne and is a potential recipient of funding to address the speech and language therapy needs of children in the area.

Much is made in education debates of the large number of young people leaving school with limited literacy and numeracy skills. The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists advises that in Northern Ireland there may be as many as 57,000 preschool children with speech, language and communication skills needs. If a child at preschool stage or at school has such a need and it is not addressed, how can we expect him or her to realise his or her full potential? How can a teacher cross that barrier and communicate effectively with the child? Likewise, how can the child connect with the teacher or have his or her queries answered? This is a major problem that ultimately affects the education of young children. It also affects

their social lives as they try to mix with others, even in their own homes.

Other Members have commented on the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People's report on speech and language therapy provision for 2004-05 and his follow-up report, which was launched last March. The follow-up report showed that 2,055 children and young people were waiting for assessment. Yes, it was a 17·4% drop on the previous figure, but does that simply reflect an increase in the number of children and young people who had been assessed but had yet to receive therapy? Children and young people must go through a number of lists before they start to receive the treatment that they need.

The report showed that 3,402 people in Northern Ireland were waiting to start therapy. As others have said, children and young people faced a delay of up to 24 months in the former Homefirst Community Health and Social Services Trust area, which covers my constituency of East Antrim — including Larne, Carrickfergus and part of Newtownabbey. That is unacceptable; it is ruining young people's potential, and that gross inequality must be addressed. Yet, we are told that, in other areas, the delay between assessment and receipt of therapy can be as little as two and a half weeks. Why should children and young people in my area be exposed to such a postcode lottery defect? Why is there such gross inequality in Northern Ireland? It is unfair, and it is ruining their potential in life.

Worryingly, the NICCY report on speech and language therapy provision showed that, compared with previous years, more trusts complained of inadequate financial resources, a shortage of speech and language therapists, a lack of administrative support and lengthening waiting lists. It was clear that by March 2006, when the report was published, that that situation was worsening.

Other Members mentioned the regional task force that was set up in March 2006 by Lord Rooker, the then Minister with responsibility for children and young people, to review speech and language therapy services. Who are the members of that task force and how often has it met? I am led to believe that it has met once, but a lack of clarity exists. Given the new structures in place in Northern Ireland, to whom does that regional task force report? It is important that those questions are answered and that ministerial responsibility is assumed, so that progress can be made and lessons can be learned that will improve the lives of children and young people in Northern Ireland.

When are we going to hear of any recommendations by the regional task force? When will it produce a report? One of my constituents had been on a waiting list for 13 months, only to receive a 20-minute assessment from a locum who did not have the notes from previous assessments that other professionals had conducted. As

a result of intervention, my constituent has commenced an eight-week therapy course, but what happens then? What ongoing support is available? Difficulties such as those that I have described cannot be cured in eight weeks. Those problems must be solved, and I hope that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety will help to solve them and improve the defects in the system. We must improve our young people's lives.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Members will know that the Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately upon the lunchtime suspension. I propose therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 12.57 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: The sitting is resumed. We shall continue the debate on the provision of speech and language therapy.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I thank Mr Ramsey for bringing this important issue to the House. I am aware that he has raised it with the Department on several occasions with regard to his constituency of Foyle.

I acknowledge the problems that there have been with the provision of speech and language therapy, particularly with regard to the excessive and unacceptable waiting times for assessment and treatment. I assure the House that I am focused on the issue and that improvements will be seen in the near future.

I want to outline some of the initiatives that the Department is considering. I recognise that the ability to communicate gives children and young people the capacity to participate fully in society. Without the correct assistance, children who have communication difficulties are likely to experience significant long-term educational, economic, social and health ill-effects. That is why I am keen to ensure that everyone who needs speech and language therapy has access to the appropriate services.

My Department has been working in close partnership with the Department of Education to ensure that children and young people receive the therapy that meets their needs and, consequently, improves their life chances. That type of co-ordinated partnership between Government and agencies is recognised by all who are involved in speech and language therapy provision as the most effective way forward for the planning, commissioning and delivery of services.

An increasing number of children and young people who have speech, language and communication difficulties are seeking help from the health and social services and early education organisations in Northern Ireland. Many of those children also have complex needs and medical conditions that are associated with those needs. Recent national research shows that approximately 10% of school-age children have communication problems and up to 90% of children who have learning disabilities have speech and communication difficulties. The fundamental service review of special education, which reported in March 2003, showed that the number of schoolchildren who have special educational needs increased by 70% between 1991 and 2001. Those statistics show that pressure on speech and language therapy services throughout Northern Ireland has increased. My Department is working towards tackling that need.

The former Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People recommended the establishment of a regional speech and language therapy task force, and that was established in September 2006. The commissioner produced two reports, one in 2004-05 and the other in 2005-06. The reports identified gaps in service provision and highlighted inequity in waiting times for assessment and resultant therapy across Northern Ireland. The task force comprises service users and a wide spectrum of people who are responsible for the policy and delivery of speech and language therapy. Its role is to review the provision of speech and language therapy in Northern Ireland. Working groups have been set up to investigate the key issues that were raised in both the commissioner's reports.

The task force will produce an action plan and will report its findings in December 2007 after a period of consultation. Part of the reason for the delay in the task force's work is the death of its chairperson, Dr Pamela Hannigan, on 2 March 2007. The task force usually meets every month, but has not done so for the past three months. I expect that a new chairperson will take up position in June. Pamela Hannigan was the driving force behind the task force. The task force, and indeed the sector, has clearly lost a very important champion.

It was anticipated that the task force would report in June, but it will now report to me in December, though subgroups have continued, and will continue, to meet. The task force will report after consultation with me in December 2007. It will focus on reducing waiting lists across Northern Ireland.

In response to the NICCY reports, all health and social care trusts have agreed new access targets from 25 May 2007, including targets for speech and language therapy. The new targets will comprise maximum waiting times for access to services, assessment and treatment of 26 weeks by March 2008, falling to 13 weeks by March 2009. The trusts have already started work on implementation plans to meet the targets, which are a requirement of the trusts in an effort to address assessment and waiting times.

As well as the task force and the new waiting-list targets, I confirm that significant additional funding has been provided for speech and language therapy. Research demonstrates that early identification and intervention are essential to support the optimum physical, cognitive and social development of children with speech, language and communication difficulties. Early access to speech and language therapy for children in education can significantly improve academic ability and employability in later life.

In recognition of the importance of such early intervention, the children and young people's funding package, announced in March 2006, amounted to £4

million to set up nine early-intervention multidisciplinary teams to work in extended school and other early years settings. Those teams are being recruited in the five health and social care trusts, and they will include speech and language therapists who will help to provide early assessments and interventions.

A working group has also been established, comprising members from the trusts, my Department and the Department of Education, to ensure that the teams are effective and make the most of available resources.

I also confirm that an additional £1 million has been made available for speech and language therapy through the children and young people's funding package, which will come on line in mid-2007: and, to address Mr Ramsey's point, that money will not just be for children in special needs schools. The additional resources will be used to drive down further the length of time that children and young people have to wait for assessment and therapy.

Recognising the need for additional speech and language therapists to meet increasing demand, my Department has provided funding for the training of additional therapists in the University of Ulster. The cost of training a speech and language therapy student for three years is in the region of £30,000. The Department normally commissions 30 places for training, but from 2001 funding was provided for an additional 10 student places, and that was increased in 2003 to an additional 15 places. There are currently 110 students in place. Those initiatives are being implemented by the Department to try to address the problems that we all understand and accept exist.

Mr Ramsey referred to examples of good working practice. The Western Health and Social Care Trust area, which includes the former Sperrin Lakeland Trust, introduced a care aims model in October 2005. That was a radical redesign of the service, which enabled assessment and treatment to take place at the same time, and it has reduced waiting times for treatment in the area from what could have been up to 17 months to zero. Currently there are no waiting lists for treatment in that area. It is anticipated that that good practice will be replicated in the Foyle area where similar results are hoped for. The Department wants to try to address the unacceptable waiting lists in Mr Ramsey's area.

The introduction of speech and language therapy assistants in many trust areas is another example of good practice. The assistants free the therapists from routine tasks, enabling them to devote more time to assessments and interventions. Following an assessment by a speech and language therapist, assistants can often deliver programmes to children with special needs in both special and mainstream schools.

The introduction of that mix of skills has had a significant impact on service delivery. Speech and language therapists provide advice to teachers and classroom assistants on measures that they can take to incorporate therapy into lessons. The two ongoing pilot projects being run by Sure Start in the Down and Lisburn area of the new Eastern Health and Social Care Trust demonstrate the benefits of that. The projects involve teachers and classroom assistants providing basic therapy while trained therapists provide support, but are free to concentrate on children with more complex needs. Owing to the success of those projects to date, the trust is considering introducing similar schemes in all its nursery schools.

I recognise the success of other initiatives in helping to improve the provision of speech and language therapy in Northern Ireland. The success has been achieved through working in partnership, the importance of which cannot be underestimated in helping to deliver integrated and planned services at an operational level.

Other examples of good practice in Northern Ireland demonstrate effective and co-ordinated planning approaches. Those include the language and learning project in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust area and the wraparound scheme operated by the Southern Health and Social Services Board. Those projects identified significantly improved social, health and educational outcomes for children when services are provided through a high-quality multi-agency approach.

The task force also investigated evidence of good practice in other areas of the UK, such as Scotland and Wales, which it will use to inform its thinking when producing its report. It will examine ways of mainstreaming good practice to include the delivery of speech and language therapy services in Northern Ireland. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department of Education will jointly consider the task force's recommendations to determine the way forward for the provision of speech and language therapy.

My Department will continue to work in close partnership with other Departments, the statutory sector and the voluntary and community sector to ensure that the most appropriate speech and language therapy services are available to all who require access to them across Northern Ireland.

I am committed to improving service provision, and I look forward to reading the recommendations of the task force in December 2007. I intend to demonstrate that I am not satisfied with past or current service provision and to ensure future equality of access throughout Northern Ireland. In consultation with others, I will give the matter the focus required to ensure a satisfactory outcome for those requiring speech and language therapy services.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá áthas orm achoimriú a dhéanamh ar an mhéid a dúradh sa díospóireacht go dtí seo. I am pleased to make the winding-up speech on today's debate. As Members have said, language is vital to all aspects of development throughout life. Therefore, the provision of proper speech and language services is vital. Members' contributions to the debate reflect their concern to ensure that such services are available to all those who need them, without undue delay. My colleague Mr Ramsey highlighted the situation in the Western Health Board area. He said that:

"over half the children who required assessment or speech therapy in the Western Health and Social Services Board area could not access those services."

2.15 pm

He also mentioned, as did other Members, the findings of the NICCY report, which concluded that there is a postcode lottery. In other words, the area in which a person lives has a huge bearing on the expected wait for assessment and treatment — something that was also mentioned by Mrs O'Neill, Rev Robert Coulter, Mr Lunn, Mr McKay, Mr Beggs and Mr Simpson. The postcode lottery is a major theme that has emerged from the debate and one that, I am sure, the Minister will heed. He has outlined some of the measures that he is undertaking to alleviate the situation.

Mr Ramsey also mentioned one of the core problems in proper service provision — the difficulty in recruiting and retaining staff. He underlined the need to get the resources to where they are needed — that is, on the front line. Mrs Robinson, and other Members, mentioned the fact that trained speech and language therapists find it more rewarding to work in other jurisdictions because the remuneration for their expertise and work is greater. That is something that the Minister will have to take on board as well.

Mr Easton stated that current resources do not meet demand. He referred to the frustration shared by children who are waiting for services and the therapists who are waiting to provide those services. Members have heard that 2,000 children are awaiting assessment, according to the NICCY report. Mrs O'Neill mentioned the shortfalls across Northern Ireland with waiting times of up to three years. She suggested a straightforward injection of cash and added that the debate should send out a clear message that proper resources for children and young people's services should be made available.

Rev Robert Coulter mentioned a figure of 57,000 preschool children with speech and language needs. That is an alarming statistic. He mentioned that 5,500 of those young people continue to have communication difficulties throughout their lives and talked about the impact that those difficulties have on their lives — about the social exclusion. He asked how much more it would cost not to act to remedy the situation. He called

for research into the causes of the problem and the most effective ways of dealing with it. He also mentioned the necessity to evaluate the impact of any action that is taken.

Rev Robert Coulter underlined the need for early intervention, referring to its benefits and the difficulties caused by late intervention. He also referred to the uneven level of care throughout Northern Ireland, and once again the postcode lottery was mentioned.

Mrs Robinson highlighted the fact that there are now more speech and language therapists in Northern Ireland than there were previously, and the Minister outlined some of the steps that have been taken to ensure that that is the case. However, there remain 20 vacancies to be filled. That points to the need to make the work of speech and language therapists, and the reward for it, more attractive than it is at present. We need more therapists, and we need to retain them in the service.

Several Members referred to the difficulties that they have had in the past, and more recently, in obtaining information and statistics about waiting lists and the service in general. The NICCY report called for information to be co-ordinated in a more useful way so that it is easily available to those who require it. David Simpson referred to that issue, on which I hope the Minister will take action. It is important that the information that is required from Government Departments by public representatives and experts in the field is readily available.

Daithí McKay underlined the unevenness of provision across Northern Ireland, referring to the effect that a lack of intervention can have on children's development, on their employment prospects and on their educational development. The ability to communicate is important; it affects every aspect of a person's life. Therefore, I emphasise, once more, the need for early intervention.

I am grateful to the Minister for attending the debate and for listening carefully to the points that were raised by Members. He outlined in some detail the action that is being taken by his Department to remedy the situation. I am aware that the Minister has been in the Chamber for quite a number of debates — he is possibly close to holding the record for debates attended by a Minister — and we appreciate his presence. He has acknowledged the difficulties in the system at the moment with waiting times, which he said were unacceptable, and he informed the House that his Department is focused on alleviating that situation.

The Minister acknowledged that help with communication and speech difficulties offers children the capacity to participate fully in their education, and he said that he will take action to ensure access to appropriate services. He cited some examples of good practice. I wish to add to those examples by praising

the work that is being done by the education and library boards. Speech therapists work with primary 1 teachers in the classroom to deal with speech and communication problems on the spot. That is an excellent example of early intervention, and it also helps to build the capacity of the primary 1 teacher to recognise and identify difficulties, and to intervene and deal with them.

The Minister outlined quite a few measures that are being taken by his Department, and I am sure that all Members will join me in welcoming those. However, we also look forward to the task force beginning its work again, following some difficult circumstances, which we all acknowledge. We look forward to the task force reporting to the Minister and contributing to the dissemination of good practice.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Please bring your remarks to a close.

Mr D Bradley: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the inequalities in the provision of speech and language therapy throughout Northern Ireland, and calls on the Executive to provide adequate and equitable resources and financial support.

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

Commissioner for Older People

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

Mrs M Bradley: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls upon the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to prioritise, as a matter of urgency, the appointment of a Commissioner for Older People, as previously supported by the Transitional Assembly.

I await the wrath of the Minister of Finance and Personnel for proposing the motion. However, our older people's welfare is worth more than a few columns in local newspapers, so I make no apology. I remind the Minister that his party tabled the same motion in the Transitional Assembly less than six months ago, and I want to see it expedited today. That motion received cross-party support, so I hope for no less now.

Why does Northern Ireland need a commissioner for older people? It needs one because our population is ageing, with older people fast becoming the largest population sector in Northern Ireland. The 2001 census recorded that 296,000 people of pensionable age were living in Northern Ireland. That amounted to 16% of the population. As that census was taken six years ago, those figures will have increased. Furthermore, by 2017, it is projected that 22% of the population will be aged 60 and over, a figure that is expected to increase to 30% by 2036.

In my constituency of Foyle, more than 13% are pensioners. The majority of those people face daily problems without having a champion to turn to who could insist on legislative changes, or even ensure that current legislation is being adhered to properly. A commissioner could act independently, while working with the relevant authorities. There would be none of the conflict of interest that could arise if a civil or public servant were charged with the responsibility.

We should not forget the Trojan work that agencies such as Help the Aged and Age Concern, to mention but two, have done to champion the rights of older people. Their work has been invaluable, but because such agencies lack legislative authority, they are restricted in what they can do.

What has the Department been doing to help older people in Northern Ireland? The publication in 2005 of a strategy titled 'Ageing in an Inclusive Society: Promoting the Social Inclusion of Older People' has yet to make any significant impact. To my knowledge, we are still waiting for a community safety strategy for older people, yet our counterparts in Wales — to be

followed by Scotland — have appointed a Commissioner for Older People. The Secretary of State, Peter Hain, was instrumental in delivering that post for Wales. However, I presume that he was too busy appeasing political agendas to be bothered with ensuring a decent human-rights provision for the older people of Northern Ireland.

Pensioner poverty is increasing, although the state pension is not. Fuel poverty, and its effects on older people, cannot be ignored. Of the homes that suffer from fuel poverty, 44% are occupied by those of retirement age and above. I am particularly pleased that the Minister for Social Development has deemed the issue of fuel poverty to be one of her key priorities.

Deaths of older people are obviously more common in the colder months: in 2004-05, 1,280 deaths were cold-related, with the vast majority of those older people. The numbers increase each year, mainly due to the effects of fuel poverty. Problems of isolation and a lack of community care are other factors. Unfortunately, the number of deaths will continue to rise until a Department with legislative powers to make genuine changes comes into being. Of the £7.5 million of additional resources to tackle fuel poverty in the Chancellor of the Exchequer's pre-Budget statement, a meagre £1.2 million is for the devolved regions.

That is something that a commissioner for older people, acting in conjunction with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, could investigate and use to bring pressure to bear on the Assembly.

2.30 pm

Members may do all that we can — we can debate all sorts of issues pertaining to older people — but we still leave the Chamber having had little effect on the issues that affect their lives. A commissioner would have the teeth to bring forward the desired effect. The steady progress of the children's commissioner since the initial appointment in 2003 is proof of that for all to see. Children make up 30% of the population; that was deemed high enough to justify the appointment of a commissioner. The percentage of older people is fast approaching that figure. Members must get their act together and provide that section of the community with the funding necessary to appoint a champion with the legislative powers to see that those people are not only heard but, more importantly, valued.

In less than 20 years, demographic changes will dictate that policies and programmes will have to reflect the needs of an ever-ageing society. Just because people get older does not mean that they become part of a throwaway society in which they are the commodity that is dumped. Humans are non-recyclable; we each have one chance at life. In the early years, the majority of us can depend on parents and family to take care of us. However, in later years, older people are pushed

aside, pushed about, abused and tortured by those who are charged with the responsibility of looking after them. A commissioner could help to eradicate that type of activity. Elder abuse is an unpublicised crime, and it could be made less frequent with the proper legislation. If older people had an appropriate person or Department to confide in, things would eventually change.

Discrimination is frequently highlighted in all aspects of daily life. However, there is much less outrage about ageism, which is considered less of a priority among employers. Free travel is an example of how females of pension age are denied their rights. Although in receipt of a state pension, they must wait until age 65 to avail of the concessionary travel scheme. That restricts the activities of females who are in good enough health and want to avail of the scheme to travel widely. Yet, they must stand by, demoralised and disenfranchised by a Government policy that makes no sense.

Wales has got it right. The Welsh Assembly has listened, considered and delivered. Its strategy reflects the United Nations Principles for Older Persons, which promote positive images of ageing and give older members of society a true voice. The role of the Commissioner for Older People in Wales is not simply that of a caretaker, but rather of an active agent with the power to establish and review policy and to empower those who feel vulnerable or lack the confidence to stand up for themselves.

That Members are concentrating on older people and the associated challenges does not mean that we are dismissive of the issues and difficulties that affect other sections of society. However, if Members can get it right for one part of society, then the entire society will benefit. Older people are more likely to vote, and it is likely that a substantial percentage of each Member's votes come from them. Clearly, older people want their voices to be heard and expect some action based on what they say.

Existing Government policies are neither sufficient nor effective. The same statements and strategies are referred to in news reports, but that must change. Members know the drill by now. We were put here to make changes — to make life better for all sections of all the communities in Northern Ireland. I urge Members to give the motion their full support. In the words of one of Derry's famous sons: "Things can only get better." Older people have rights too.

Mr Easton: We are all familiar with the concept of commissioners — persons who are appointed at various levels to oversee aspects of governmental administration — in global and European contexts, and in the various parts of the United Kingdom. Those commissioners deal with areas as diverse as international human rights, refugees, facets of European policy, racial

equality, the protection of children, sustainable government and data protection.

The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission ensures that citizens receive equal, full and firm protection in law. The Commissioner for Complaints in the office of the Northern Ireland Ombudsman is charged, as part of his brief, with investigating injustices that are due to maladministration in government.

The Independent Monitoring Commission is charged with helping to promote the establishment of stable and inclusive government in a peaceful Northern Ireland. It reports on paramilitary activity, the so-called normalisation process and complaints made by one party against another party or parties in the Executive level of Government.

The appointments in Northern Ireland of a Commissioner for Children and Young People and of an Interim Commissioner for Victims and Survivors have been warmly welcomed, and the sterling work that they have done to date is widely acknowledged.

However, there have been times when people may have felt that appointed commissioners have failed to operate fairly and effectively in the way that they approached their work or dealt with a particular matter. The Patten Commission on policing would, for most unionists, be at the top of that list. There are times when we might feel that we are overburdened with commissions and commissioners, but, by and large, the outcome of their work has been to the benefit of the majority of the community.

Health and personal care for the elderly has already been the focus of Members' attention today, and I welcome the action that has been proposed in those areas. However, there will always be specific areas of community life where we cannot depend entirely on the bureaucratic structure to operate with sensitivity to the needs of people in an efficient and effective way. In such cases, there are great advantages in appointing a person who is charged with the responsibility for the oversight of a specific area of public life to ensure the maximum benefits for a particular section of the community.

For that reason, I commend to the Assembly the appointment of a commissioner with responsibility for the elderly — if that is the politically correct term for those who need special attention just as urgently as other groups in our community.

There was a time when life expectancy was much shorter, and when those who lived their allotted threescore years and 10 were fewer in number. Those who lived another decade were considered to have been specially blessed. Many people today regard getting older as getting better and, in that context, our First Minister is an inspiration to us all. For many people like him, turning 60, 70 or 80 is just another milestone along the road in a busy and healthy life.

However, we are all aware that a considerable proportion of older people do not enjoy good health, or live in suitable accommodation or have sufficient income or resources to meet the needs of daily living. They may also lack the ability or understanding to access the benefits system.

There are many older folk who lack independence and who have problems with loneliness and isolation, and with employment and pension issues. Some have no access to, or ability to cope with, the technology that benefits many in our society today. They have problems with mobility, tax and inheritance matters, and many other issues.

That mature section of our community is made up of people who have, through thick and thin, held this Province together over the past 40 years of the Troubles. Their lives were blighted by terrorism and instability, yet they often do not arrive in the safe harbour that they might reasonably expect to find. Instead, they find themselves in a stormy and often unfamiliar world that is difficult for them to understand.

We owe older people a great debt of gratitude. They have paid their dues to our society and to this Province. They deserve our special attention. I support the proposal to appoint a special commissioner to protect the rights and interests of elderly people.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the motion. Over the period 1996 to 2036, it is estimated that the percentage of the population here aged 65 or over will almost double from 13% to 24%. Some 41% of older people here feel that they are treated differently from people in the general population because of their age. Of those people, 76% feel that they are treated worse than the general population because of their age. Research by the Human Rights Commission in 2001 found that it is difficult to provide evidence that discrimination on the grounds of age happens on a systematic basis, but that fear exists among older people.

According to the commission, the extent of discrimination tends to be hidden because of an absence of research, especially in relation to the healthcare system. Practical consideration must be given to planning for the future needs of a growing older population.

Older people are increasingly marginalized or treated as less than equal citizens. They are on the move through organisations such as Age Concern and Help the Aged. Campaigns by these organisations and others have moved the issues affecting older people from the periphery to the centre of the political debate. They have recognised that negative attitudes to ageing across the island have prevented the development of the policies and structures needed to address poverty, ill health and isolation.

Surely it is an indictment of Government policy that approximately 200 older people die each year from cold-related illness. Thousands more suffer from the indifference of a cold society.

Older people must be brought in from the cold, both figuratively and literally. We must support and actively pursue the political and legislative changes necessary to establish a decent standard of living, full access to services and the rights of older people to participate fully in the lives of their communities.

We must have a fundamental review of the standard of living of older people, including pension provision and fuel poverty. Creating the conditions for an equal society means recognising that many diverse groups need enhanced protection. It should be recognised that older people have made a lifetime contribution to society. Unfortunately, the standard of living of many of our older people does not meet their needs or reflect the contribution that they made.

It is vital that mechanisms are developed to value properly and recognise the contribution of older people to society. We must support older people in realising their vital role in our communities, and we must stop paying lip service to the rights of older people and appoint the commissioner as a matter of urgency.

Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Kennedy: I join others in congratulating Mrs Bradley, the Member for Foyle, for ensuring that the issue of appointing a commissioner for older people is kept high on the Assembly's agenda.

Members will be acutely aware of the need for action to improve the way in which society treats older people. Many older people know the benefit of good health and good support from their families; they have the capacity to avail of local services and enjoy a fulfilled old age; and they continue to make a major contribution to their community. Unfortunately, this is not so for too many older people. We have all come across appalling examples of crimes against the elderly and incidents of neglect and abuse in our constituencies. Behind the high-profile examples are tens of thousands of older people who are afflicted by poor health, poverty and isolation.

We live in an ageing society. By 2013, almost a quarter of the population will be of pensionable age. With this in mind, and the fact that many of us will soon fall into the category of older people — I am not looking at anyone in particular — surely now is the time for a new approach to older people's issues.

We can already see what the new approach might look like. Organisations such as Help the Aged and Age Concern have done much to draw our attention to the good practice that exists across the whole range of issues of importance to older people. There are many

good inter-generational projects in schools and communities that help to inform young people about the contribution of older people to society and which seek to counter the potential for older people to become isolated.

2.45 pm

There are excellent examples of action to improve the health and well-being of older people by encouraging them to continue to be physically active and providing insulation to help them reduce fuel costs.

While there are many examples of such good practice, there are still major gaps in our approach to supporting older people, and we need a new approach. The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister — and I am pleased to see both Ministers in the Chamber — has produced an older people's strategy 'Ageing in an Inclusive Society'.

The Committee of the Centre, which has not yet been renamed, and of which I have the honour to be Chairman, has not yet had the opportunity to consider that strategy. I do not presume to know the views of my Committee colleagues on the issue. My impression of the strategy is that it articulates successfully many of the issues that need to be addressed if we are to achieve a better quality of life for older people and to ensure dignity and respect for the most vulnerable older people.

The progress made to outlaw age discrimination in employment since the launch of the strategy is particularly welcome. However, the strategy noticeably stops short of recommending the establishment of a commissioner for older people. My view, and that of the Ulster Unionist Party, is that such a commissioner should be established as soon as possible. That would enable the cause of older people in health and education to be championed.

We are in an age of lifelong learning, and there are recreational interests, libraries and sporting facilities to be considered. Our counterparts in the National Assembly for Wales and the Scottish Parliament are already making progress. The key functions of a commissioner would be to promote awareness and understanding of the rights and interests of older people; to review the current policies and laws in so far as they affect older people; and to help promote best practice in the services being provided.

There is no need to create a bureaucratic empire or a new Department costing a fortune. The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister is perfectly capable of managing the detail. The First Minister is in a unique position to judge the value of such an appointment. I support the motion.

Mr McCarthy: “If this Assembly is to be of any use to the people of Northern Ireland, it must provide a fair deal to our senior citizens.”

Where have we heard that sentence before? Our senior citizens are proud and independent people. They have served their country well and must be protected during their retirement.

During the previous Northern Ireland Assembly, I had the pleasure of chairing a cross-party group working on the concerns and problems of senior citizens. It was called the age sector reference group, and it brought senior citizens from all corners of Northern Ireland to Parliament Buildings on a regular basis to discuss their needs and ways of overcoming their problems.

I take the opportunity of thanking those dedicated people: they are still campaigning, and it is obvious that they have not yet solved all their problems. I hope that when the Assembly is fully operational, a similar group will carry on where they left off.

However, the group is not happy about the dithering in the Assembly last week — by the DUP in particular — on free personal care. It annoys me enormously when I hear of senior citizens being denied millions of pounds in benefits, to which they are entitled, through no fault of their own. They go without just because the system is cumbersome, and they are put off by having to fill in forms. A method must be devised, through social security, where all senior citizens are made aware of their entitlements and, if necessary, given help to receive all that is due to them.

Like Members who spoke previously, I pay tribute to the efforts of Age Concern, Help the Aged, Advice Northern Ireland, citizens advice bureaux throughout Northern Ireland and groups of all sorts for assisting elderly people. Society must never accept that an elderly person must choose between eating and heating. The age sector reference group fought age discrimination and won. Our slogan, “Never on the scrap heap” at 60 for women and 65 for men is now, I am glad to say, history. I am glad to say that people now have the choice of working for as long as they see fit.

Senior citizens have been the targets of robbers, muggers and gangsters. Everyone has a duty to support the police in catching the culprits, who ought to be dealt with severely.

There are many ways in which to help senior citizens. When we have a commissioner or overseer who is solely responsible for senior citizens' welfare, this country will be able to say that it looks after the elderly well. Many issues that affect the elderly justify the appointment of a full-time commissioner. Last year, the Transitional Assembly discussed proposals to appoint a commissioner for older people. I hope that the DUP will not treat this important subject as a political football again, in the same way that it has

treated free personal care for the elderly. In February 2001, in the House, support for free personal care —

Lord Morrow: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is it in order for a Member to continually misrepresent others and to say things that are not factual or truthful? I ask the Member to be more explicit and detailed. It is all very well for him to say that the DUP has hindered and obstructed this proposal, but it has done no such thing. My party has been to the fore in challenging the issues that the Member is addressing, and I ask him to recognise that.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am afraid that that is all part of the cut and thrust of Assembly debate, Lord Morrow. Unless the Member is actually telling a lie, there is nothing that the Chair can do about it.

Mr McCarthy: If the cap fits, wear it — that is what I say.

I ask Members to recall February 2001, when everyone in the Chamber supported free personal care. When Members had no power to implement that provision, they supported it. In June 2002, however, when they had the power, they reneged on that support. In June 2007, they are still dithering on free personal care. Let us open that up to the public.

The debate has gone beyond the need to create the post of commissioner for older people. We must implement that without delay and have no more dithering. My colleague mentioned the duplication of services. When the Alliance Party advocates the appointment of a commissioner for older people, we mean just that: a commissioner who will work alongside the already existing excellent voluntary bodies.

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

Mr McCarthy: I support the motion and look forward to its early implementation.

Mr Ross: I support the motion. My party has long supported the call for the appointment of a commissioner for older people. Indeed, it was one of the pledges in our last manifesto. I therefore congratulate the Member on tabling the motion.

The DUP can be proud of its record on delivering for senior citizens. In the previous Assembly, the DUP pioneered the warm homes scheme and our Minister delivered free transport for the over-65s, enabling senior citizens to travel around the country and get on with their everyday lives.

The population is ageing, and people are living longer than ever before. It is therefore a huge challenge to provide healthcare and benefits and to ensure that older people can continue to live full and active lives. I am following with interest the new pop sensation The Zimmers, which claims to be the oldest band in the

world and which seems to be heading for a high position in the UK charts with its cover of The Who's classic 'My Generation'. In its own unique way, it is highlighting many of the issues that the older generation faces. The band originated in a BBC 'Power to the People' documentary by Tim Samuels, who travelled around Britain investigating the feelings of isolation and imprisonment that the elderly suffer.

For many older people, life can be a real struggle. Many face poverty and hardship. No pensioner in Northern Ireland today should have to choose between food, home heating and the clothes on their back. Many older people are fearful of leaving their homes. Almost daily, we hear of another attack on or robbery of a pensioner. Those found guilty of such attacks should face the stiffest of sentences for their sickening crimes.

Rising global fuel prices and the knock-on effect of that on fuel costs in Northern Ireland are also a real concern for the elderly. Rises in the cost of home-heating oil, gas and petrol hit the most vulnerable sections of our community the hardest.

The warm homes scheme is a key instrument for tackling fuel poverty, and it is concerning that my constituency of East Antrim is among the worst areas for take-up of that scheme.

Another, often hidden, problem in society is that of elder abuse. That abuse can take many forms and happens when an elderly man or woman is intentionally or unintentionally harmed, mistreated or neglected by someone whom he or she should be able to trust. That abuse can be physical, financial, sexual, verbal or emotional, or comprise acts of neglect. It is important that those who are abused can speak up and seek help from a trusted friend, relative or healthcare professional. We have already heard of the excellent work carried out by Help the Aged, Age Concern, Action on Elder Abuse, social services, hospitals and the police.

Health issues are of crucial importance. Dementia affects many relatives of people who are in the Chamber. It is estimated that 11% of people aged over 65 will have dementia by 2015, and it is imperative that we tackle that problem and ensure that the needs of those who suffer from dementia are promoted. Creating more residential and nursing home places, ensuring that elderly patients are afforded the appropriate environment in which to receive care, and improving respite provision are of paramount importance.

We should also recognise the enormous contribution of carers in our society. Some 6 million people throughout the UK, including many in East Antrim and the rest of Northern Ireland, provide unpaid help and support to relatives, friends or partners who could not otherwise manage because of frailties, illness or disability. Many of those carers are unknown to statutory agencies and other organisations that could provide support and

services. It is important that the work of carers is recognised and that support is given to them to enable them to live a full life themselves, by providing them with the help that they need.

It is important that older people are able to continue to be active participants in society without being excluded in any way. That is why we on the DUP Benches believe that a commissioner for the elderly could act as a champion for the cause of older people and ensure that issues affecting them are kept high on the list of priorities for the Executive. There are so many areas on which a commissioner could represent the interests of our elderly population. I support the motion.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Once again, Members are debating a motion concerning people in our society who suffer from wide-ranging forms of discrimination due to their age. How many times have we said that, if we had the power, we would work to ensure a strong voice for older people? How many debates or discussions have we had during which we told one another, or those representing the older generation, that, if only we had the power, the situation would be different? That time is now, folks.

I commend the Members who proposed the motion. Unlike last week's motion on free personal care, which Sinn Féin supported, the proposed measures would not cost £20 million or £30 million to implement. All Members should put our hands in the air in support of the rights of older people, and, by our actions, set ourselves on a course to begin that process. We have an opportunity to take that step today and to send out a message that every party in the House stands for better protection for those to whom we owe our very existence: those who nurtured us and took care of our ills; who provided for us in our growing years; those whom we love, but also, if we are honest, those whom we have ignored or are less tolerant with, because they do not respond as quickly as we would expect; and those who are overlooked when they seek a job.

How many times have we witnessed older people being ignored or abused by those who should have known better, and said nothing? How many times have we, in our own communities, spent time with older people who, unfortunately, fell prey to the beaters and intimidators who robbed, wrecked and abused them, and who, because of their age, were unable to defend themselves? *[Interruption.]*

Obviously, someone from the DUP finds this funny.

How many times have we responded to attacks on older people, only for the matter to be moved off our radars until the next attack happens?

Older people are not asking for something outrageous or that is beyond our power. They are not asking for something that we would not demand for ourselves. They are asking for equality, and they are seeking respect. They are asking us to show leadership and to initiate a series of measures that can proactively tackle the many problems that face older people. Let us agree that that cause would be better served by establishing a commissioner for older people, and let us look towards stronger legislation to tackle the many inequalities faced by older people.

Let us also examine the establishment of an all-party working group, the terms of which would be time bound, to produce recommendations for dealing with those problems. Let us examine the various organisations that are under our jurisdiction to see whether they can stand the test of age proofing.

We should all remember that, in a few short years, we will reap the benefits of what we sow in the House today. Go raibh maith agat.

3.00 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: Once again, I remind Members that the use of mobile phones in the Chamber is prohibited. I suggest that the standard of debate this afternoon does not require Members to set their mobile phones for an alarm call.

Mr McCausland: The welfare and well-being of older people is an important issue for any civilised and compassionate society. I am pleased, therefore, that the motion has been tabled; it is a good motion, and it has been a good debate. I believe that the motion will have all-party support. Therefore, it was disappointing that Mr McCarthy sought to introduce such a sour and divisive note into the discussion.

Mr Kennedy: He should apologise to Mr McCausland.

Mr McCausland: I can assure Mr Kennedy that I am not that sensitive. However, I do have an interest in people being accurate and truthful.

I refer to the example of the Commissioner for Children and Young People. That appointment has amply demonstrated the value that a commissioner can have in addressing the particular needs, concerns and rights of people in a sector of our society. That has been a very successful commission and office. The same benefits should be accrued by older folk who would benefit from a commissioner for older people.

Having seen the benefits to younger people of such an appointment for younger people, and drawing the conclusion that a commissioner would be of equal benefit to older citizens, we must see this as an equality issue. We live in a society in which there is much talk about equality and the equality agenda. The rights of older people to fair and equal treatment are

already embedded in that equality agenda. It is also a human rights issue, and the proposer mentioned the UN Principles for Older Persons.

We must recognise the tremendous work that is done across Northern Ireland in each of our constituencies by local, province-wide and UK-national organisations that represent the interests of senior citizens. In my constituency, the north Belfast senior citizens' forum does tremendous work: it provides a network for senior citizens and gives them opportunities and access that many of them would not otherwise have. I am pleased to say that there is also now a west Belfast senior citizens' forum.

Not long ago, over a period of months, and with the support of Belfast City Council's good relations fund, the LINC centre in North Belfast sponsored a major consultation with senior citizens groups across the constituency, and that culminated in an impressive event in the Great Hall in the City Hall. The views of the people who were consulted and the views of politicians were brought together and a report was presented. It was impressive to see the wide range of senior citizens' groups that were represented that day and how articulate and forthright many of them were in presenting their views.

Research by such groups, as well as by Age Concern, Help the Aged and those who represent the interests of carers, has helped to identify many issues that must be addressed. Some of the issues are: social care, health care, transport, income, opportunities for education and employment, and the pertinent issue of the safety and security of senior citizens, not only in their homes, but on the streets.

Many older people have much to contribute to society, through the family network and in other ways. As we seek to enhance their rights and increase their opportunities, we benefit not only the senior citizens, but society as a whole. In that process, there is a valuable and important role for a commissioner for older people. I, therefore, support the motion.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I congratulate Mrs Bradley, a Member from the Foyle constituency, for bringing this motion to the House. However, I must say that the motion has raised some problems for me. For example, do I need to declare an interest?

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: On the other hand, should the First Minister or I decide to apply for the post, does our presence today bar us from making that application? Perhaps a man of your perspicacity could give us your wisdom on that, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Kennedy: Definitely, yes. [*Laughter.*]

Mr McNarry: That is a challenge.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: In considering the motion, I tried to quantify the impact of the issue. Some of the figures that my research yielded are slightly different to those that have already been given. The figures that I found show that Northern Ireland has 275,000 people of pensionable age, which is 16% of the total population. That figure is set to rise to 24% of the population by 2013, only six years from now. In assimilating that figure, the conclusion is that one in four or a quarter of the population is aged over 60. That would suggest that we need a specially appointed commissioner to look after their interests.

The office of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People was created to look after the interests of children. In fact, a former Member of this House, Patricia Lewsley, now fills that position — very ably, I might add. The 2001 census told us that, at that time, there were 298,054 children in Northern Ireland under the age of 16. That is 17·68% of the total population. That figure is remarkably close to the 275,000 people of pensionable age, and it is lower than the 2013 figure for people of pensionable age. I would contend, therefore, that if Northern Ireland has a Children's Commissioner for 17·68% of the population, it could surely have an older people's commissioner for 16% of the population.

Setting aside the numeric argument, which is incontestable, are there any special circumstances pertaining to older people that merit the special protection that a commissioner for older people might afford them? My conclusion is that there most certainly are.

Nearly one in three people of pensionable age lives alone, and half of all people of pensionable age identify loneliness as a major problem. One in every five of older people in Northern Ireland lives in poverty, and half of fuel-poor householders here are aged over 60. However, the number of older persons in receipt of home help has decreased by 11% from 1998.

It is believed that, at any one time, 5% of older people are at risk of abuse, and one quarter of those who abuse them are their sons and daughters.

Two thirds of people over the age of 65 think that older workers are discriminated against in job recruitment, a feeling, I might add, that in many cases is born from bitter experience.

Ageism, in all its forms, is deeply contemptible. Therefore, the House should support the motion. Often, ageism is nothing more than the naked ambition and self-interest of younger people who want to sweep older people away as if they are of no account and have nothing to offer. To them, youth is nothing more than a mantra to paper over their own self-interest. They are so self-centred and narrow-minded that they disregard the wealth of experience that older people can offer.

There is much more that I could say, but I am reminded, especially, of a young doctor of my acquaintance who was working in one of the most exclusive and affluent areas of one of our great cities. She called to see an old lady, who had —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask you to draw your remarks to a close.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I support the motion.

Mr McNarry: That was quite an interesting story.
[Laughter.]

A Member: What happened next?

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I will tell you again.
[Laughter.]

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members will have to find out the end of the story at another time.

Mr Dallat: I welcome the motion, but I too regret that the first mandate of the Assembly, before its suspension, did not proceed with the issue. At that time, the need for such an appointment was recognised, and it would have gone ahead after the appointment of the Commissioner for Children and Young People, but, sadly, that did not happen.

Much time has been wasted, and many older people have had to survive — or die — without the protection of such an advocate. It was mentioned earlier that it has been left to the voluntary sector — Age Concern, Help the Aged, St Vincent de Paul, the Salvation Army, and so on — to help out.

It is clear, from consideration of the Welsh model, that the major issues have been set out. There is clearly an opportunity to use that model, update it and change it as the priorities change with life.

Why should there be a commissioner for older people? Hardly a day passes when we do not hear of issues relating to older people that are embarrassing and even shameful. That should not happen in a modern democracy that has put so much emphasis on equality issues.

Being equally poor and equally discriminated against is not, of course, a reason for doing nothing. Neither is it good enough to make an appointment and leave the future to the new appointee. Attitudes across society must change — in families, in neighbourhoods, across the range of public services and especially in health provision, in education, in jobs, in housing, and so on.

What are the benefits of having a commissioner for older people? They are endless. The prospects of a long and healthy life for older people are much greater if those people are cherished as important individuals in society, encouraged to remain active and made to feel that they still contribute to society in a positive way. That would mean that fewer older people would be forced into costly residential care at an early age,

more of them would remain free from strokes and heart disease, and we would have a better society.

A healthier society appreciates its older people, does not experience high levels of brutal attacks on elderly people, forms positive relationships with them, checks on their well-being and learns from their lifetime experiences. That already happens in many regions, especially in rural areas. However, it is hit or miss and is not universal.

The appointment of a commissioner is vital in order to rebuild good practices that were widespread in the past but have somehow been forgotten in this modern rat race that has focused on the material aspects of life while overlooking the most cherished gift that we have — our older people.

In the past, Governments have not been good to older people. They forced them to live on derisory pensions, gave them poor housing and overlooked issues such as hypothermia, isolation, fear of dying in poverty and, for many years, begrudged them free travel. There are many other issues.

In recent times, the issue of free transport has been addressed, and warm homes schemes have been introduced. Although there has been some recognition of other issues, they are still far from being resolved. Sales of emergency drums of heating oil are on the increase, and there is no need for me to tell Members who the main customers are.

As the second mandate of the Assembly finds its feet and begins to pick up the pieces of a neglected past, everyone should identify with those who were forced to live through the Troubles, complained little and are now at a stage in their lives when they could benefit from a commissioner. Let us begin. I support the motion, and I congratulate my colleague Mary Bradley, who has championed this cause for many years.

3.15 pm

Mr G Robinson: I commend Mrs Bradley for proposing the motion. As the issue has been debated on the Floor of the House before, I hope that the support that Members previously expressed will be evident again today.

Many older people are extremely able to speak for themselves — we all have constituents who raise the profile of issues that affect older people and who campaign on their behalf — but that is not the whole picture. There is no doubt that older people are among the most vulnerable in our society. They are more likely to live on low incomes, and about half of Northern Ireland's elderly live on less than £10,000 per year. As a result, many older people live in fuel poverty, as was highlighted in the House recently. Older people are also more likely to suffer from a long-standing illness

and be entitled to benefits but, unfortunately, many do not take up the benefits to which they are entitled.

Those facts outline some of the reasons why we need a commissioner for older people in Northern Ireland, but we can also draw on our experience of having the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People. We should also look to Scotland and Wales, where people have already taken the initiative. A commissioner for older people could increase awareness of the interests of older people, promote opportunities and reduce levels of discrimination against older people. The role could help us all to value the contribution that older people have given to society and — far more importantly — highlight the role that they still play.

A key role for any commissioner should be to monitor the work of the Assembly and to review how it affects older people. A commissioner would also provide the ability to fight individual cases and act as an advocate on people's behalf. Such a role would provide direct empowerment to older people, who have hitherto been able to turn to their elected representatives but have not had a direct voice. I hope that Members will support the motion.

The DUP is rightly proud of its record in this area. From delivering free transport for older people to pioneering the warm homes scheme, we can point to many achievements. However, the job does not stop there. I fully support the call that has been made, both today and previously, to introduce a commissioner who can provide a voice for older people throughout Northern Ireland.

In conclusion, I commend the work that Help the Aged, Age Concern and other agencies have done to make life a little more comfortable for our elderly citizens. I support the motion.

Mr B McCrea: I will start by thanking a number of people. In particular, I thank Mr McCarthy for introducing some vitality into the debate —

Mr McCarthy: Not vitality but truth.

Mr B McCrea: It is good to see that he is still paying attention.

I also thank the Rev Dr Robert Coulter for his comments. I can tell him that ageism is an issue that the Ulster Unionist Party takes very seriously. It is fair to say that we have checked for ageism and we have not found any sign of it as yet, but we will keep the matter under review, as it is a serious issue.

One issue that has come across is that the proportion of people who are elderly will rise from 16% to 24%. Those numbers are quite startling, as they mean that one person in four will be of pensionable age. However, the fact is that we are all living longer. As we heard from the Minister of Health, Social Services and

Public Safety earlier, the very significant advances that we have made in enabling people to live longer is one of the real successes of our society. Of course, in those additional years people need some help when concerns arise with health or with other issues. We need to understand the unprecedented challenges that such people face and how we might go some way towards alleviating them.

In February, during the run-up to the recent election, when we were all going round knocking on doors, like plenty of other people I was struck by the number of people who, after 6.00 pm when it became dark, would not open their door—

Mr McCarthy: When they saw who it was.

Mr B McCrea: I am pleased to see that Kieran McCarthy is still alive.

I was also struck, when delivering leaflets, by the number of houses that had a letterbox to the side.

Why? Kids put firecrackers through their letterboxes. It is disgraceful that elderly people keep money in kitchen drawers so that they have ready cash to hand over to burglars if their homes are broken into. That is awful: in what kind of society are we living?

Fear is not the only problem. Eighty thousand people live on their own, and loneliness is an issue. The distance that elderly people live from public transport is also an issue. Members mentioned abuse, which manifests itself in many forms: it might be an elderly person doing too much babysitting, or it might be a 65-year-old person looking after an 85-year-old relative.

The Rev Dr Robert Coulter did not get a chance to finish the story that a doctor had told him. He wanted to tell Members the story, so I will finish it now. The doctor told him about an old lady who had had a distinguished career. She had been wealthy but had been left on her own, suffering from dementia. Her daughter had robbed and abandoned her, leaving her without a penny. The daughter had obtained power of attorney, cleared out her mother's bank accounts and put the house in which her mother was still living up for sale. That sort of thing goes on.

Twenty-two per cent of old people live in poverty. However, one statistic confuses me: 49% of old people live on an annual income of less than £10,000, which means that almost one half of the elderly population lives on less than £10,000 a year, but those people are not considered to be living in poverty. That is outrageous. Inflation for elderly people is almost 50% higher than the headline inflation rate. Many people think that young people are most likely to get into debt. However, it is actually elderly people who get into debt.

There is much that we can do. We need one independent person to look after elderly people because the many issues concerning them cut across several

areas. Such a person could champion the rights of elderly people and could ensure that all Departments, not only internal champions, looked after them. All Members, including Kieran McCarthy, should support the motion unanimously.

The Deputy First Minister (Mr M McGuinness):

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am pleased to address the Assembly on the matter of older people and, in particular, on how best to deal effectively with, champion and promote issues that impact directly on them. I thank Mary Bradley for tabling this important motion.

The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister appointed junior Ministers whose responsibility is to co-ordinate policy for older people across Government and in the Executive, thereby ensuring that older people's needs are championed at every level of the decision-making process.

Mary Bradley referred to the demographic ageing of society. That represents one of the major challenges of the twenty-first century, as fertility levels have fallen and longevity has increased, with older people living longer and healthier lives. Technology has altered employment patterns — combined with changes in age structure and health, the experience and meaning of old age has been transformed.

As Mary Bradley said, statistics show that the population is getting older: between 2001 and 2041, it is anticipated that the number of people here will increase from 1.689 million to 1.723 million. Over the same period, the number of people of pensionable age will increase from about 259,000 to 495,000, which means that, over the next 40 years, the number of people in this group will almost double. By 2030, one quarter of the population of the developed world will be over 65 years of age, and almost one half of the population of western Europe will be over 50 years of age.

Such a demographic change brings not only challenges but rich opportunities to harness the experience, expertise and creativity of older people.

The fact that people are living longer and healthier lives is a cause for celebration, not least because it reflects the success of our health and care services. However, despite that, it is of serious concern that too many older people suffer financial hardship, or live lonely and isolated lives, often in fear of their personal safety.

The debate has produced a clear consensus that urgent action is needed to improve the lives of those older people who are most at risk and most vulnerable. Mary Bradley highlighted elder abuse and discrimination. In her view, current Government policies are not sufficient. Alex Easton mentioned the work of various commissions and their contribution to the political process. Mickey Brady talked about marginalisation and the need to literally bring older people in from the

cold. He also mentioned the contributions that older people have made to our society during their lifetimes.

Danny Kennedy rightly addressed crime against the elderly. He mentioned that some Members might fall into that category. He looked at me when he made that comment; I should remind him that he is not too far behind me. However, he also paid a compliment to the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister by saying that he thinks that we are well capable of dealing with the issues raised today.

Kieran McCarthy thanked people who campaign on behalf of the elderly, and I am pleased to see that some of them are visiting the Building today. He spoke about the need for everyone to support old people, particularly those old people who are abused in their own homes and who are subjected to criminal activities. He also drew attention to the importance of apprehending those responsible and supporting the police. I wholeheartedly endorse that sentiment.

Alastair Ross talked about The Zimmers — I am glad that he was not looking at me at the time. Several Members highlighted the contribution of the First Minister to the Assembly. Given the work that has been achieved over the last number of weeks, that is deserved praise. The contribution that carers make to old people is crucial. Alastair Ross touched on that when he talked about the exclusion of older people.

Fra McCann mentioned the need for a strong voice for older people and the need for all of us to support their rights. Nelson McCausland spoke of the value and success of the Commissioner for Children and Young People. He said that the motion is a matter of equality and human rights. He also talked about the importance of consultation with groups who are involved with older people.

Rev Dr Coulter asked whether he should declare an interest in the debate — every Member of the Assembly needs to declare an interest on this issue. John Dallat talked about attitudes across society and the need for those attitudes to change. He also mentioned the importance of neighbours and keeping in contact with older people. George Robinson and Basil McCrea also made important contributions to the debate.

I recently visited a house not far from my home where three people in their mid-70s, two brothers and a sister, had their house broken into, were abused in their own home, and had a considerable sum of money stolen from them. I acknowledge the positive work of Help the Aged, Age Concern, the Society of St Vincent de Paul and others who work on behalf of older people. Many Members also praised the work of those vital organisations.

The needs of older people are all too apparent.

Mr Shannon: Does the Minister also condemn an attack that took place yesterday on an elderly resident of Ballywalter, who was robbed in broad daylight in the middle of the street? That is an example of the society that we are living in.

The Deputy First Minister: I wholeheartedly condemn it, and I urge anyone with any information about that incident, or any other incident where older people are abused, to pass it on to the police.

3.30 pm

There are too many reports of disgraceful attacks on older people and burglaries in their homes, where they have a right to be safe and secure. That is apparent through the extensive body of research, which shows not only the difficulties that older people face in accessing services such as transport, but also the loneliness and lack of support they experience, particularly those in single pensioner households.

The research also shows that needs become particularly acute for those who are over 75 years of age, and those concerns are reflected in what older people have to say. There were 14 workshops held here recently as part of the development of the action plan on social inclusion. The Get Heard project made it clear that older people want to see an end to age discrimination, and increased availability of better jobs for older workers, including more support for part-time workers.

I am happy to say that some of those concerns have begun to be addressed. For example, last October new legislation was introduced to prohibit unjustified age discrimination in the workplace, which created important new rights and responsibilities for all employees and businesses here.

People are living longer, healthier lives, and it is essential that the talents of older workers do not go to waste. They must have the opportunity to continue working if they want to do so. Age regulations will accelerate a culture change in the workplace and will impact on every aspect of the employment relationship from recruitment to retirement.

Age regulations also represent a very positive addition to the current body of anti-discrimination law and will make a practical difference to many people. However, legislation alone is not enough. Progressive policies are also required that will identify the barriers and problems faced by old people in their daily lives and remove those barriers while keeping to, and being guided by, the United Nations Principles for Older Persons.

The previous devolved Administration established an interdepartmental and inter-sectoral working group to develop a strategy and an action plan to improve the lives of older people. That work was completed during suspension, and it falls to the Assembly to ensure that

the strategy and action plan are fit for purpose as a matter of priority.

The first action plan to deliver the objectives of the current older people's strategy and progress report has been published. It covers many important areas of public service including housing, transport and community safety. Specific examples of the positive actions include the all-island free travel scheme for older people; a benefit uptake programme aimed at ensuring that older people receive all the benefits to which they are entitled; and a fuel poverty strategy, which aims to eradicate fuel poverty in all vulnerable households by 2010.

Later this year, the Executive will consider and agree on a future action plan for older people. It is evident that there is much support in the Chamber for establishing an independent office of commissioner for older people. Such an office exists in Wales but not in Ireland, England or Scotland, and we therefore intend to examine the previous Administration's Ageing in an Inclusive Society strategy, with a view to ensuring that the commitments therein reflect the views and priorities of the new Executive.

The case for a commissioner for older people will be discussed with ministerial colleagues and the Executive, and proposals will be brought forward. Our proposals will look at how best to champion the needs of older people and the costs and benefits of different options. Ultimately, our proposals must be those that are most likely to deliver the positive outcomes that our older people deserve.

Mr Kennedy: Will the Minister give way?

The Deputy First Minister: I have just finished, but I will give way and I will answer.

Mr Kennedy: I seek the Minister's assurance that the Committee of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister will have full access to any new proposals and any consultation exercise.

The Deputy First Minister: We are fully committed to working closely and in harmony with the Member's Committee.

Mrs M Bradley: I thank all who took part in this worthwhile debate. I will attempt to touch on what everyone said without delaying proceedings, as I am conscious that there is more work to do.

Alex Easton took part in the debate and talked about the illnesses that older people have to contend with and how they often feel left out. Mickey Brady mentioned the contribution that older people make to society and said he would like them brought in from the cold. Danny Kennedy talked about neglect, abuse and ill health and how it was time for a new approach.

Kieran McCarthy said we should have a fair deal for older people, including cold-weather payments. Alastair Ross talked of crime against the elderly, fuel costs and

health issues such as dementia. Fra McCann talked of attacks on older people and the motion on free personal care for the elderly that my colleague Carmel Hanna moved in the Assembly last week.

Fra McCann also said that older people feel undervalued. It is important that we carry through what we do agree for our older people today and do not just talk about it.

Nelson McCausland mentioned the value that a commissioner could have and how that is an equality issue — perhaps even a human rights one.

Rev Robert Coulter said that we need a commissioner and gave us some percentages. He pointed out the value of the Children's Commissioner and how the same could happen for our older people. He did start to tell us what sounded like a very good story, but unfortunately he did not get to finish it — so, perhaps some other time, Dr Coulter.

John Dallat said that older people could either survive or die and said that the Welsh model might be useful to us. He said that we should all be ashamed of the attacks that take place on older people, and he too supported a commissioner.

George Robinson also supported a commissioner. He said that there are many older people who cannot speak for themselves and that a commissioner would help them greatly.

Basil McCrea talked about the elderly being afraid to open their doors. We all know that is true from our own areas, where they have five and six bolts on their doors. God bless them — I do not think that people could get in to them if there was a fire. I hope I have left no one out.

The Minister himself spoke then, and I welcome his saying that he will look at the situation and at the need for a commissioner. After all the years in which this has been talked about, the facts and figures show why we should have a commissioner for the elderly. I urge the Minister to do this sooner rather than later.

I thank Members for their contributions. I hope we can all look forward to the day when the elderly get their commissioner and feel valued and safe in their homes. We will all have played a part in that.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls upon the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister to prioritise, as a matter of urgency, the appointment of a Commissioner for Older People, as previously supported by the Transitional Assembly.

Post Offices

Mr Shannon: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the grave threat to rural communities with the closure of up to two hundred Post Offices in Northern Ireland, and calls upon the Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister to use their office to support the retention of Post Offices by advocating the use of Post Office services for governmental and council business as far as is practicable.

Hit wusnae sae lang sine at we met in this chammer an' taaked aboot the ill daeins agin oor Poastal Service an hoo needfu' hit wus tae houl oantae es monie poast offaices es cud bae kep'. Well the situation bes the saime noo – gif hit isnae a baager hannlin- bit thair bes a bag differ. Instead o' a "Pretend 'Semmelië" es yin member cried hit in the las' debate aboot this issue in Janwerry aa the tim' o' the Transitional 'Semmelië, we ir noo a devolved 'Semmelië at bes fit tae maak a differ an' pley a baag pairt no onie tae houl oantae oor Poast Offaices bit tae mak' thaim betther.

It was not so long ago that Members met in the Chamber and discussed the attack on our postal service and the necessity of retaining as many post offices as possible. The situation today is the same, if not worse, but there is a major difference. This is not a "pretend Assembly", as one Member called the Transitional Assembly during the debate on post office closures in January; this is a devolved Assembly that can make a difference and play a major part in the retention of our post offices and their enhancement.

The bare essentials remain as they were: it is planned that up to 200 post offices will be shut. That is the crux of the matter, and problems arising from that are especially evident in rural communities, which continually and consistently bear the brunt of the Labour Government's machinations; the closure of rural schools because they are supposed not to be viable; draft planning policy statement 14 (PPS 14), which will prevent growth and the retention of family units; and higher petrol prices, which make the now necessary daily journeys into town for necessities more expensive. In addition, little support is given to the agriculture sector. Ultimately, the Labour Government have attacked the culture and diversity of country life. Furthermore, the closure of a local post office often leads to the closure of a local shop that often doubles up as a post office and which cannot survive alone; or of a shop next door to the post office that has lost business because customers will now use the shops beside the post office in the bigger towns. The new arrangements will be great for town businesses — most of which are thriving — but not so great for village life, which centres round the small businesses that are the core of the village.

It has been estimated that 82% of small businesses will be adversely affected by the post office closures,

and 15% of them attribute the success of their business to the presence of the post office. The knock-on effect of the post office closures will be the closure of a further 50% of rural businesses. Make no mistake: the closure of post offices is part of the incessant attacks on rural life by those who do not understand or will not try to understand how anything outside the city looks or works.

My constituents who live around the Ards Peninsula or in Lisbane, Killinchy and Ballygowan consider the post office to be an invaluable part of the village, and for many it is a connection to services that they would otherwise have no access to. Some elderly people are holding on to their independence for as long as possible before succumbing to the institutionalised nursing or residential homes that have previously been debated in the Chamber, but the removal of the post office from their locality is making that even more difficult. They will no longer have the superb network of local post offices where the staff know and remember their customers' names, where they will notice if wee Mrs Jones has not collected her pension and check that she is OK.

The already busy staff in the main post offices do not have the time to register who has or has not been in. That, along with the added costs of travelling by bus or having to make unnecessary car journeys, will not only adversely affect the financial part of pensioners' lives — which is already a delicate balance in many cases — but will add to their vulnerability. They face an arduous bus journey, feel less safe in a town where no one knows them, and, understandably, they will feel more alone and vulnerable in the sea of bodies that they meet.

Jack McCullough of the National Pensioners' Association has spoken of the detrimental effect that post office closures will have on the confidence of the community's elderly sector. Age Concern has said that more than 95% of elderly people consider the post office to be their lifeline into the community — and as the previous debate was about the elderly, that is particularly pertinent. If it becomes the case that their nearest post office is 10 miles away — or further — that lifeline is stretched to the limit.

It is not only elderly people who will be affected by the post office closures; so will the disabled and restricted. The closures will mean that those people will have to travel in special kneeling buses or costly private taxis to collect their benefits, or they will have to, unwillingly, give up more of their independence and assign power of attorney to someone else to collect their pensions when they have always been able to do so themselves.

The Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB) said that the post office closures will affect the blind and partially sighted particularly badly, and that it will

leave them even more financially and socially excluded. The closures will also affect those whose ability to get into the main towns is restricted by our often unreliable and, sometimes, restrictive public transport system, which is not helped by the poor state of our country roads.

Members could carry on if their wages were late, but that is not the case for most of the elderly or the disabled people who live from pension day to pension day and from benefit day to benefit day.

3.45 pm

Mr Donaldson: Will the Member join me in commending the National Federation of SubPostmasters (NFSP) — in particular, its Northern Ireland branch — on its excellent work to promote the benefits of post offices? The NFSP campaigns not only for the retention of its service and businesses but for the retention of a service that is an inherent part of the whole community — especially for the elderly, as the Member has said.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Member for his intervention, and I agree with everything that he has said. The people whom we represent tell us the same story.

For an elderly person, a two-day delay in collecting a pension can lead to a choice between heating the house and buying food, or even living that wee bit longer. Isolation is also a problem for young mothers with small children. Access to the village shop and other amenities is important, as it provides them with a chance to pop into the village to collect their child benefit, or simply to interact with adults instead of children. Those issues must be grasped.

People who want to pop in to lift an extra tenner to put on their electricity card now must pay an extra £1.25 for doing so, because cash machines that charge users are becoming more common in our villages. That cost must be levied, but, nonetheless, it is an extra cost. Only 4% of villages have a bank, whereas 60% have a post office. A large number of closures will mean that reliance on those types of cash machines will be greater, and those who cannot afford to shoulder a greater financial burden will acutely feel the financial ramifications.

More than 4.3 million people have a Post Office card account (POCA), but that will no longer be so handy for lifting money. Subsequently, use of that account will become more limited, and thereby less attractive, so the Post Office will lose more business. From an environmental perspective, added journeys to another post office can never be a good thing. All those extra pressures will prove too much for many people.

My colleague Mr Donaldson has mentioned the National Federation of SubPostmasters' campaign. The Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) has stated that 86% of small firms send their mail through the Post Office. That includes 69% of their invoices. Those

firms will now have to factor in the financial cost of the journey to a main post office and the cost to their business in lost working hours. Those are clear problems.

First and foremost, we must be adamant in our refusal to phase out the use of POCA's for current Government transactions. Furthermore, the Post Office should once again have responsibility for social security payments, using modern chip-and-pin methods. That would enhance the Post Office service, while making the system more efficient — the current banking system is riddled with problems and inaccuracies.

Encouraging large numbers of people to use post offices again would show the modern and efficient systems available in local post offices to greater advantage. It would also encourage new business, as customers could avail themselves of services of which they were not previously aware. It is important that customers realise that they can tax their cars at a post office. Members should cast their minds back to a few years ago, when tax-renewal forms had to be sent to Coleraine.

I thought of another suggestion when in the Ards Borough Council building the other day. The secretary and the receptionist were both very busy. One was answering the phone, the other was dealing with dog licences, and, all the while, a queue of people was building up behind them. It struck me that some of that work could be shifted to local post offices. Why not let the post offices deal with dog licences? How much longer will those queues be when super-councils are introduced under the review of public administration (RPA)?

Members will undoubtedly highlight other ways in which the Office of First Minister and the Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) can help the post offices and how it has within its grasp the ability to change the future of post offices in Northern Ireland. The crux of the matter is that the imminent closure of some 200 post offices will adversely affect many in our Province. OFMDFM and the rest of the Assembly must step up to the mark and back a service that has the potential to flourish and to benefit all in the Province, should it be given the opportunity to do so. I urge Members to support the motion.

Mr D Bradley: I beg to move the following amendment: After "rural" insert "and urban"; and leave out all after the second "Minister" and insert

"to formulate an effective strategy on a cross-departmental basis to maximise the use of postal services by government departments."

Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá áthas orm an leasú seo ar an rún a mholadh.

The purpose of my amendment is to ensure the inclusion of urban post offices in the motion and to ensure that the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister consider the formulation of an

effective strategy to maximise the use of Post Office services by Government Departments.

When I last spoke in the House about the threat faced by post offices, I highlighted the need to retain Post Office card accounts to help ensure their continued viability. I welcome the news that the Government are to proceed with the successor to the card account and to extend the social network payment until 2010. However, it is essential that the successor to the card account remains a Post Office product with a full migration of current account holders over to the new version. The new card must be complemented by a comprehensive Post Office banking offer with full access to all major High Street banks at Post Office counters.

Unfortunately, the Government have not seen fit to extend their own use of the sub-post office network to deliver key services. Even Post Office Ltd itself has not chosen to deliver a full range of banking services and other products to the network.

Mr A Maginness: Members should know that the Minister for Social Development has sought advice on retaining and extending the Post Office card account so that it can be used for the delivery of benefits in the future. Furthermore, the use of the card account as a delivery mechanism does not interfere with the parity rule endorsed by this House. Benefits can therefore be obtained at full value even though the system of delivery is separate from that used in Great Britain.

Mr D Bradley: I thank Mr Maginness for his intervention. I recognise the commitment of the Minister for Social Development to facilitating benefit payments through the Post Office network in Northern Ireland.

The news of the closure of 2,500 post offices in the UK as a whole, with 200 of them in Northern Ireland, is a huge blow to the network, even though compensation will be made available to the people affected by those closures. Nevertheless, local communities will be left to pick up the pieces.

Earlier today the Assembly debated the rights of older people. A report published by Age Concern on the post office closures stated that 99% of older people in rural areas consider the local post office to be a lifeline. Many older rural dwellers feel isolated; the report showed that 56% of people over 60 living in the countryside fear that post office closures will leave them feeling even more isolated. Seventy three per cent of those older people surveyed believed that if Post Office services in their area were to be discontinued, they would be unable to access any similar services that might be provided.

These are hard facts; once again, they underline the value of our local post offices. The closure of post offices will create problems for disadvantaged residents who need cash for basic groceries — money that they previously had access to in the post office. Elderly and

disabled people and anyone with restricted mobility, such as mothers with young children, will face problems travelling to branches that are further away, especially those who have to depend on public transport, which can be unreliable in rural areas.

The closure of a local post office can cause the loss of independence and community spirit for residents with damaging repercussions for local shops and businesses. As I mentioned earlier, the amendment includes urban post offices because it is not only rural post offices that are threatened. The New Economics Foundation's report, 'The Last Post', states that there are significant knock-on effects for businesses, community groups and local people when an urban post office closes. One out of six urban post office closures took place in deprived areas where their role is particularly valuable and where a large number of people depend on them to access pensions and benefits through the Post Office card account.

The Westminster Government must review their proposals. What is needed is not further closures but adequate investment in a suite of banking services, improved business services, payment for the social and economic service that is provided by non-commercial offices, as well as investment grants for refurbishment and modernisation of offices.

The motion, as amended, demands more than just action from the Westminster Government, although that is important. It also calls on the Government of Northern Ireland to take resolute action to maximise the use of Post Office services by Government Departments. Before restoration, Members often called on direct rule Ministers to address particular issues. Now, the Assembly has its own Ministers who have the opportunity to take action on its behalf. I hope that they will do so.

I am sure that all Members in the Chamber will agree that a post office is a key element of a local community, whether it is urban or rural. To close a post office is to take away from the identity of the community and to rob it of vital services, from which it may never recover. I hope that the House will support the motion as amended and that the Executive will take appropriate action in support of the Post Office network. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Paul Maskey. I remind Members that this will be Mr Maskey's maiden speech in the Assembly. As Members are aware, it is the convention that such a speech be made without interruption.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. No pressure, then. I am glad that I have the opportunity to say a few words on the motion and want to thank the Members who brought it before the House.

The closure of 200 post offices does not only affect the rural community; it has an adverse effect on the urban community as well, although perhaps not to the same level. According to Advice NI's response to the Post Office network consultation, the number of Post Office branches in the North of Ireland is 540: 30% of them, around 160 offices, are in urban communities, and 70%, around 380 offices, are in rural communities. Therefore, almost a third of post offices are in an urban setting. The Government have yet to say where the closures will take place, so many could be in urban areas.

Local post offices are, and should always be, at the heart and soul of local communities, particularly those that are in rural and disadvantaged urban areas. The closure of those post offices will be the death knell for many villages and towns, when the magnet that draws people together will be no more. The Assembly can discuss neighbourhood renewal, building up communities and creating a strong infrastructure that will enable communities to modernise; however, the British Government want to pull the very heart out of those communities.

For many older people and, indeed, young parents who do not have access to a car a visit to the post office can be a major ordeal. In many cases, the service is being located further and further away from their doorsteps. Many people whom I represent in West Belfast simply cannot afford to pay to travel to the nearest post office and will be disadvantaged when they must cover the cost of public or private transport to get them there and back.

I am particularly concerned about what the adverse effect will be on communities when many pensioners lose their gathering place and that essential service is removed. Many senior citizens use the post office as a meeting place. For some, it is the sole reason that they have ventured outdoors.

4.00 pm

Therefore the removal of that service would be a great injustice. The Post Office network is in its current state because of deliberate British Government policy. If that essential community service is to survive, a U-turn in that policy is required.

When the payment of benefits moved from payment books to electronic accounts, post offices lost out dramatically as the Government encouraged recipients to have their benefits paid into bank accounts. The loss to convenience stores of NIE (Northern Ireland Electricity) power cards, saving stamps for TV licences and other pre-payment cards was another blow to the network. Therefore OFMDFM and the councils should adopt a proactive approach by advocating that Departments use post offices.

I support the motion and the amendment. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Members who tabled this important motion. I accept that the closure of post offices is probably a reserved matter and still the preserve of the Government at Westminster. However, even at this early stage of the debate, Members have heard about the importance of the issue and the strength of feeling that clearly exists about the retention of urban and rural post offices.

The wider argument about rural communities illustrates ongoing concern for their future. The Labour Administration appear to be intent on forcing people to live in towns and urbanised areas, effectively abandoning the countryside. I share the views of the Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU) and its president, Mr Kenneth Sharkey, on the reduction of services that are available to the rural community. Healthcare services are being centralised, and Members need only read the Bain Report to see the uncertain future that is being mapped out for rural schools.

There is a reduction in the provision of emergency services in rural areas, not least in my constituency of Newry and Armagh. There is a great need for ambulance services in south Armagh, but they are not provided. The planning process is in gridlock. The introduction of PPS 14 and new area plan proposals combine to wreak havoc in its administration. There is a reduced policing service in rural areas. Indeed, it appears that we live in a country in which criminals break into police stations and in which members of the Policing Board are known to the police in all kinds of ways.

All the above are hammer blows to the rural community, but one of the principal blows is the scaling down of local post offices. As Members heard earlier, the rural community generally has an ageing population. As older people are perhaps not as electronically minded as young people and may not have email, internet shopping or banking facilities close to hand, they rely heavily on post offices to provide banking facilities. Yet, increasingly, many services are being withdrawn, forcing people to have their benefits paid into newly opened bank accounts and to pay their electricity and phone bills by banking transfer.

One by one, services that are critical to the viability of post offices have been taken away, leaving the post offices in an almost impossible position. The Government's policy may have merit in other parts of the United Kingdom, but in Northern Ireland it creates conditions whereby the rural community is being hopelessly abandoned.

Just as people came to regret the criminal destruction of the local railway network in the 1960s, there will be regret if the killing-off of rural post offices is allowed. I support the motion.

Mr McQuillan: The motion concerns an issue that will impact on every constituency in Northern Ireland.

The potential closure of approximately 200 post offices across the Province will have alarming consequences for the whole community. Rural communities, in particular, are likely to be affected.

I hardly need to remind the House about the way in which our rural communities have been adversely affected by a wide range of damaging factors in recent times. Those factors include the general decline of agriculture that has resulted in many people leaving the farming industry for good; having to deal with the consequences of foot-and-mouth disease and BSE; and a planning system that pays scant regard to the need to preserve and populate the rural communities — something that has been exacerbated by the introduction of the famous PPS 14 by direct rule Ministers.

Lack of housing is driving more people away from their home communities, resulting in a fall in pupil numbers in rural schools and inevitably leading to school closures. Other factors include poor public transport and the commercial life of rural towns and villages being constantly challenged by large supermarkets and out-of-town shopping centres.

That is the backcloth to the latest Government proposals that could lead to the closure of 200 post offices, largely in rural communities. Therefore, it is little wonder that many people see the proposal as the final act in removing the heart from our towns and villages. Of course, we all recognise that the post office is a business and must operate in a commercial environment: no one denies that. Modernisation and change in the way of operating are essential to all businesses in the twenty-first century.

However, the post office means so much more to a community than the mere measurement of commercial value in pounds and pence. The social value that it brings to the community is much greater than that.

Earlier in the year, Postwatch Northern Ireland carried out a survey on people's attitudes in rural areas to a number of issues regarding local post offices. The findings were revealing. Seventy-three per cent of those surveyed used the local post office at least once a week — that figure rose to 88% among those aged 55 and over. More than one third got cash from the post office — that figure rose to 58% among those aged 55 and over. Ninety-four per cent regarded local post offices as important to their daily lives, and 73% lived within a mile of the post office that they used most often.

Those figures underline the vital role that local post offices play in the lives of those living in rural communities and emphasise the need to ensure their retention. Of course, the question is: how can that be achieved? Some way must be found to quantify the social value of post offices in commercial terms. Who will pay for the social element, and through what mechanism? I am convinced that central and local

government in Northern Ireland have a key role to play in helping to support the retention of post offices.

I support the call for an urgent and innovative programme of action to be drawn up by the Executive. That programme should identify ways in which local services could be contracted to post offices under service level agreements. For example, dog licences and other charges due to local councils could be paid at post offices. For a fee, post offices could be used as public-information points for tourism and other services. The Civil Service must be encouraged to think outside the box if the conditions are to be created whereby the retention of post offices can be justified.

I hope Members will send a strong message back to our rural constituencies that we recognise the immense difficulties that people face and that we are determined to begin the long haul back to revitalising our rural towns, villages and hamlets. The post office is vital to the aim of retaining the heart of each community. Innovative, proactive measures can be identified to achieve that.

I urge the Executive to put this urgently needed programme of action into place. Fine words are not enough. We need to show that further decline is not inevitable. Rather, the saving of the post office could kick-start the beginning of better days for our rural communities. I support the motion.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. For the record, I declare an interest as a former employee of the postal service. I welcome the motion and the amendment, and I thank the Members for moving them.

The loss of up to 200 post offices in the Six Counties will have a devastating effect on rural and urban communities and areas of social disadvantage. According to the published criteria for identifying closures, rural communities are the most vulnerable; the proposals by the British Government will hit them hardest. It is vital that the social importance of the Post Office network in rural communities is highlighted, and I welcome the opportunity that the motion presents us with to do that.

A rural post office is not just a central part of the community; it is an essential link, particularly for older people. Rural post offices provide a lifeline to thousands of older people who would otherwise be isolated. In many areas of social disadvantage, the post office provides a lifeline for people struggling on benefits.

The apparent determination of the British Government to undermine the future of the Post Office network is a disgrace. The decisions to withdraw services such as TV licence payments and the Post Office card accounts that people use to draw pensions and other benefit payments have had a devastating impact on the viability of the Post Office network.

In its previous incarnation, the Assembly made clear its support for the Post Office network. The proposal in the motion, namely the retention of post offices by advocating the use of their services for governmental and council business, is both feasible and practical. I believe that there is scope for the new Executive to respond imaginatively to the threat in a way that supports and enhances the Post Office network and supports rural and disadvantaged communities. The implementation of the proposal in the motion will be a positive start. Go raibh maith agat.

Mrs I Robinson: The Assembly has already heard that across the United Kingdom, the Post Office network has been losing millions of pounds over the last seven years. Even a Government subsidy of £150 million could not stop the rot.

Alistair Darling, the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, indicated that as part of the latest phase of rationalisation, up to 200 post offices across Northern Ireland face closure and that the Government subsidy would be withdrawn by 2008. That development places a considerable number of local post offices in a precarious position, given that of the 8,000 rural post offices across the UK, only 1,500 make any money.

Inevitably, the pressure of Government policy will now come to bear on rural post offices, which are less productive than their urban counterparts. Although value for taxpayers' money is important, the Government — in their haste to stem the losses that the Post Office is sustaining — have lost their objectivity and abandoned a fundamental commitment to provide maximum possible public access to Post Office services.

One trend that is profoundly unhelpful to the maintenance of the network is the removal of services from post offices. Revenue from the services that have been withdrawn has fallen by a whopping £168 million in the past year, which serves only to compound the problems faced by sub-postmasters across the country. One particular example is the plan to remove the Post Office card account. Across the UK, including Northern Ireland, 4.3 million people use their Post Office card accounts to access benefit payments, yet moves are already afoot to wind the system up. That completely disregards the wishes of customers to use the service and ignores the implications for local post offices.

As other Members have stressed, post offices are a lifeline for local communities, particularly in rural areas where closures will have shattering social and economic effects. The latest announcement of a further raft of closures is totally unacceptable. It is also economically short-sighted, as any finances saved by the closures will inevitably result in a dip in productivity by local small businesses, which will ultimately lead to a loss of revenue.

That view is supported by a survey that was carried out by the Federation of Small Businesses, which found that 82% of the owners of small firms were of the opinion that the closure of their local post offices would adversely affect their businesses.

Although the economic impact of widespread closures is undeniable, the repercussions are infinitely more serious for the future cohesion of local communities and the confidence that they require to survive.

4.15 pm

The independent monitoring organisation Postwatch commissioned research that was published in January 2007 and which paints a clear picture of how greatly local communities value Post Office services. Of those surveyed, 21% were retired, seven out of 10 used a post office at least once a week, and 82% were very or extremely satisfied with the service. The most important aspect of that survey may be the responses on the level of importance that people attach to their local post offices. Some 94% of people believe that the post office is important to them, and 78% stated that it is extremely or very important. Most pertinently, that figure rises to 92% of people aged 55 or over, and 83% of females who were surveyed believed their local post office to be extremely or very important. I could go on, ad infinitum, about the importance of those responses, but it is clear that post offices play a central role in the lives of rural communities. To date, the closure of rural post offices has had a profound impact on communities, and has hit the most vulnerable in society — elderly people, the disabled and those with mobility problems — particularly hard. I support the motion.

Mr McCallister: I, along with party colleagues, welcome the motion and thank Mr Shannon for raising this important matter in the Chamber.

As my colleague Mr Kennedy pointed out, the closure of post offices is another attack on rural communities by the Labour Government. Members have considered the problems of rural communities in various Assembly debates. I represent a large rural constituency, and I live and work in a rural community. Therefore, I know at first hand of the effects of those problems on rural areas. With the Assembly up and running, Members can move more speedily on a proper rural-proofing agenda in which there are in-built protections for rural schools, hospitals and transport, which are all linked effectively.

Mr D Bradley: I accept what the Member has said about rural communities, and how post office closures will impact on them, but does the Member not believe that urban communities and those who suffer the greatest deprivation will also be severely affected?

Mr McCallister: I have no difficulty or issue in accepting that, and I will speak shortly about the amendment that Mr Bradley has tabled.

There are difficulties with the distances that people must travel to access Post Office services, and earlier, in the debate on a commissioner for older people, Members heard that 80,000 people live on their own. That ties in with what Mr Bradley said about urban areas. There is an important social aspect to rural post offices and the services that they provide to local residents.

The Post Office must attract as much business and interest as possible, and other Members have spoken of the range of services that it must offer. There are additional actions that Government Departments can take. The full-time and part-time employment that post offices offer to hard-pressed rural communities is important.

I have no difficulty with the rural/urban context in which your amendment is set, Mr Bradley. Notwithstanding Mrs Robinson's valid point that the greatest threat is to rural post offices, we should not ignore the urban ones.

I urge caution on the second part of the amendment, which ties in Departments. Have you considered some of the cost implications of that? Bearing in mind that it is not a devolved matter, and there is no money set aside in the block grant, you must consider carefully before you bind Departments, including that of your colleague the Minister for Social Development —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind the Member to address the Chair, not an individual Member.

Mr McCallister: I apologise, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Notwithstanding that point about the risks of Departments being tied into financing things, and the cost implications of that for the Departments and for the Assembly, I have no issue with supporting this worthwhile motion. Post offices play a huge part in rural communities, so I support the motion.

Mr Dallat: I support the motion and the amendment. If the post office issue is not addressed, Postman Pat will be gone forever — and I do not mean the cartoon.

Useful debates took place in the previous Assembly. It is not new to suggest that Departments could play a vital role in sustaining post offices. Members may wish to know that a pilot scheme was envisaged for Coleraine, and officials from the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister addressed the borough council on that issue.

Unfortunately, other matters took precedence. The Assembly was suspended, and more and more post offices have closed in the meantime. Most closures have happened in rural areas, but there have been some in suburban areas also. That has inflicted some financial hazard on people, if we take into account the cost of taking taxis into city centres, and so on. We must not underestimate the loss to our friends in urban and suburban areas.

Long debates have taken place at Westminster, and so-called solutions have been found, all of which have failed to recognise the unique role that the post office plays in the lives of people in Northern Ireland — and in the Republic of Ireland. Sadly, because of partition, we do not have the level of discussion that could take place to come up with a shared solution for both North and South. The problems relating to the future of the post offices are exactly the same in the North and the South.

We are compelled to work to a model that was designed for large urban areas in Britain. For example, we must send our complaints to Glasgow. That may be fine for Celtic or Rangers supporters, but, for those of us who depend on the post office, it would be nice to have somewhere more convenient to lodge our complaints.

Post offices cannot survive as agents of Government services alone. There must be investment in new technology and an extension of the range of services provided. For example, in small towns where there is no police station, post offices could deal with routine police matters, such as reporting lost property or processing documents and other matters for follow-up later. It is only an idea; do not panic.

The post office could be a communications centre for Internet services. It could also extend its range of services in other commercial operations. Given political will and commitment, there is no reason why post offices should disappear.

In Northern Ireland there are unique opportunities to retain post offices for the payment of Government benefits to customers. Members have already mentioned that. Unfortunately, Government Departments have shown a remarkable lack of interest in the seriousness of losing our post offices. I would like to shout from the rooftops to our 11 Government Departments and other agencies to make a concerted effort to embrace the uniqueness of the Post Office and give it the oxygen of life, which it urgently needs.

We can stand idly by; we can choose to do nothing and allow the post offices to die a slow and painful death. Then it will be the turn of banks in rural areas, and some day, sooner rather than later, we will find that there are no shops in our rural towns and villages — no anything — and it will be too late. Is that what we want for the next generation? I think not. It should be remembered that 40% of small towns and villages in Britain now have no post office, bank, butcher or baker — no anything.

Out of this debate a plan or strategy should arise to enable action to speak louder than words. Let us talk to our neighbours in the South and share our concerns and our solutions. Let us put an end to the scandal whereby a letter from Derry takes a week to be delivered to Muff, three miles down the road. Let us find a common solution to a common problem: how to

save our post offices. Let the action begin. I support the motion, although I hope that it will be amended.

Mr Armstrong: The motion relates to the vital importance of our rural communities. I am sure that Members realise that rural communities have become increasingly threatened in recent years. As Mr Bradley has said, while urban post offices are also under threat, the main problem lies in rural communities.

The rural way of life has been under threat in various ways for some time. The farming industry is the backbone of the rural community, and I scarcely need to dwell on the difficulties that agriculture has faced in the last ten years. They include falling prices, BSE and foot-and-mouth disease. Farmers, and industries situated in rural areas, have faced all these pressures.

Soaring house prices also have a serious effect on rural communities. They make it almost impossible for people — particularly young people — to find accommodation in the villages where their families have lived for generations. Members should not forget that, in the midst of this already critical situation, our esteemed direct rule Ministers saw fit to impose Planning Policy Statement 14, which has had a serious effect on rural communities.

To add to these factors, and largely as a result of them, many rural communities have seen enrolments in local schools decline. Many rural schools are now threatened with closure, just as post offices are. Such schools are the bedrock of our communities.

I could go on, but I trust that I have shown that rural communities are already dealing with a range of problems and challenges. On top of all that, we now face the problem of losing almost 200 post offices in Northern Ireland, most of them situated in rural areas. That is not acceptable. Rural post offices are a vital part of the fabric of rural life and must remain open.

Last month the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) said that:

“Post Offices are a life line for local communities particularly in rural areas and their closure would have a devastating effect on local economies and their spending patterns. The loss of post offices will have an immeasurable impact throughout the effected communities ... This action is completely unacceptable and very short-sighted.”

The FSB points out that, in addition to the many individuals who will be greatly inconvenienced by these closures, 82% of small businesses reported that the closure of local post offices would have an adverse effect on them.

Like the rural community, post offices have been under threat for some time, as various functions have been gradually taken from them, making them even more difficult to operate. I have no hesitation in calling on the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to use their powers to support the retention of our post offices.

4.30 pm

The First Minister (Rev Dr Ian Paisley): Members are well aware that the Post Office is the primary responsibility of the Department of Trade and Industry. Decisions on the future of the Post Office network are not ones, unfortunately, that we can make. Perhaps it is fortunate that someone else will make those decisions, but we would like to be able to make them. If we were making the decisions, we would do our best to save the post office system, but that is beyond us. However, we must have a strategy to impress on the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry the very strong feelings of the people of Northern Ireland.

Today's debate has amply demonstrated the concerns our communities have about the future of the Post Office network. Many people, particularly the most vulnerable in our society, depend on the post offices and the service they deliver. They are part of their life and well-being. The Post Office is about more than delivering mail, although that is critical. It is about managing finances, paying bills, buying stationery and goods in a friendly local shop and accessing important forms for a wide range of Government services. Those services are important to the community, especially to the aged and those who need help filling in forms in a world that has gone wild for form filling.

In the House of Commons recently, the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, Alistair Darling, announced his proposals for the future of the network. I pay tribute to the fact that he approached the Northern Ireland Members of Parliament, and we put to him matters that gave us concern. We are concerned about the plan that he has for Northern Ireland post offices, and we must be given that plan in good time. However, we do not know what that plan is. I asked Mr Darling for the number of post offices, and he could not give me the number. I asked him where those post offices were, and he said that he did not know.

I told Mr Darling that he did not know where “A hog hill” is, but I know that it is called “Ahoghill”. That is the ignorance of the people who are handling some of the affairs of Northern Ireland.

Immediately the plan for the future of the Post Office network is available, Members of the House should study it carefully, list their objections and put them forcibly to the Government.

The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister played an important role in co-ordinating the views of all Departments on the Department of Trade and Industry's plans as they were being developed. Indeed, the Government's acknowledgement of the social role of post offices reflects the strong representations that have been made. Mr Darling said that he wants to give the devolved Administrations a greater say in shaping the network of the future, and

we certainly want to have a say, because we had no say in the past.

We note the amendment calling for cross-departmental strategies to maximise the use of post offices by Departments. We will certainly continue to work with the other Northern Ireland Departments, particularly with those with a direct interest in the Post Office, such as the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Department for Social Development. The potential of post offices to deliver public services can form part of that work.

In response to Mr Shannon, Mr Dominic Bradley and Mr Alban Maginness, I say that OFMDFM understands that the Social Security Agency remains committed to allowing people to access their pensions or benefits in cash at post offices if they choose to do so. However, OFMDFM has received legal advice that states that EU procurement law prevents the extension of the Post Office card account contract with Post Office Ltd. Instead, there must be a transparent procurement exercise allowing all contenders, including post offices, to express an interest. Those matters must be fully ventilated, and we must know what the answers are in law.

However, we must be realistic about what can be achieved. In the past, a number of exercises considered additional services that could be offered, including pensions and car tax. Those exercises demonstrated that the range of services capable of generating income was limited, particularly where post offices are located in sparsely populated areas. Furthermore, Departments cannot simply allocate major commercial undertakings to outside bodies, including the Post Office, without appropriate and transparent public procurement procedures, nor would it be possible for OFMDFM to direct them to do so.

However, there are other potential developments to which we can look forward. For example, the UK Government are now looking towards expanding the role of the Post Office as a provider of personal financial services. It must also be for post offices themselves to consider other services that they could offer in order to help their customers.

The aim of OFMDFM must be to help lay the foundations of a viable and stable network of post offices that will protect and support the well-being of those people most in need of the services that they offer. I assure the House that we will seek to play a full part in that work and that OFMDFM will work with everyone who has an interest. For that reason, I am happy to support the motion.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá an-áthas orm achoimriú a dhéanamh ar na hargóintí a rinneadh anseo inniu ar son an leasaithe. I am pleased to make the winding-up

speech on the amendment. Various arguments have been made in support of the amendment from both sides of the House. There were minor differences, but there is a general air of agreement with different emphases here and there. That is a good thing, as it indicates a degree of unity.

The Member for West Belfast Mr Maskey outlined the need for the protection of urban post offices. That is a crucial aspect of the amendment. He underlined the fact that the older population in urban areas depend on post offices and said that, in many cases, the post office was a lifeline for them, as it is for many people in rural areas.

Mr Boylan, a previous employee of the Post Office, has some experience of the issues on the ground. He highlighted the devastating effect that post office closures would have in rural areas. He said that the conditions governing closure indicate that rural areas would be hit the hardest, and I accept that point.

Mr Boylan also mentioned the fact that areas of social disadvantage will suffer the most, and I agree with him on that point. In fact, it will be the people who depend most on post offices and need them most, both in rural and urban communities, who will be hit hardest by closures.

My colleague Mr Dallat mentioned the previous OFMDFM strategy, when officers and staff from that office advocated, in various rural outreach settings, the use of post office services at local councils, etc. Mr Dallat also suggested that post offices could, in this modern age of communication, become centres for Internet use. He further suggested that certain aspects of policing services, such as clerical work, could be delegated to post offices. He called for Departments to make full use of postal services, and for the Assembly to work in close harmony with the Republic of Ireland to find common solutions to the problems that post offices are facing.

In my speech, I outlined some of the services that are needed to bolster up our post offices for future viability. These included a full suite of banking services to be available in post offices. I also mentioned the need for present Post Office card account holders to be transferred to the new accounts that are available.

There is also a dire need for much investment in the Post Office estate and for full training for sub-postmasters. Recently, I spoke to some rural sub-postmasters who emphasised the need for linkages between post offices and the high street banks.

I appreciate the commitment from the Minister for Social Development, who investigated the possibility of delivering benefits through the Northern Ireland postal network. I hope that her investigations meet with success.

I also appreciate the commitment from the First Minister to do all in his power to ensure that post offices survive. I realise that this is not a devolved matter, but there is much that can be done through OFMDFM to support the post offices.

My amendment is in no way aimed at negating the motion; rather, I sought to include the urban communities in the debate. They should be included because they will suffer too. The second part of my amendment was meant to strengthen the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member should draw his remarks to a close.

Lord Morrow: I welcome the debate and thank all those who have contributed — it has been positive and constructive.

The sad reality is that some 2,500 post offices, both urban and rural, are earmarked for closure across the United Kingdom. I listened carefully to the First Minister. He made it clear, and rightly so, that the responsibility on the future of post offices does not lie with OFMDFM. I suspect that if it did, a better outcome could be expected. However, the sad reality is that the responsibility lies elsewhere.

I hope that Mr Bradley, having listened to the debate, will now withdraw his amendment. I suspect that he will, as he is normally quite reasonable. I would not want him to change now, and I am sure that he does not want to change either. *[Laughter.]*

Therefore, I hope that the House will unite in favour of the motion that has been well debated and deliberated on. I hope that everyone will take cognisance of that.

I hope, too, that we will see maintained in Northern Ireland a network of post offices that serves both urban and rural communities. We have heard much today, and rightly so, about the elderly — we had a good debate on the commissioner for older people — but any closures in the Post Office network will affect the elderly most.

It is in rural communities that the impact of closures will be felt most severely. It has been said that a post office is the heartbeat of a rural community, and I believe that to be true. Many things are delivered through the local post office. In rural communities in particular, people look to their post office. Rural post offices deliver a superb service. They have become part of the infrastructure of rural Northern Ireland, but we are now on the verge — the very edge — of seeing all of that change.

I will not say much more lest I detract from what has already been said — I have five or six foolscap pages remaining in my speech, but much of it has already been delivered — so I say simply that the House should unite on maintaining our rural and urban

Post Office network. To those who would use this opportunity to score political points, I say that today is not the time and there will be plenty of other such opportunities in future. Today, Members should put their community first by uniting on the motion, which I commend to the House.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the grave threat to rural and urban communities with the closure of up to two hundred Post Offices in Northern Ireland, and calls upon the Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister to formulate an effective strategy on a cross-departmental basis to maximise the use of postal services by government departments.

Adjourned at 4.47 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 11 June 2007

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr P Ramsey: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Given the temperatures that we are experiencing today, is there any leeway in the convention of the Assembly that would enable you to relax the dress code to allow Members to take off their jackets?

Mr Speaker: I realise that it is very warm outside, and that it could get even warmer in the Chamber. Therefore, as the day progresses, I will monitor the situation.

Mr Paisley Jnr: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Are you in a position to report to Members on a security matter that I raised in the House about three weeks ago?

Mr Speaker: The police investigation into that matter is ongoing. As soon as that investigation is over, I shall make a further statement to the House.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Suspension of Standing Orders

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4), inclusive, be suspended for 11 June 2007. — [*The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr P Robinson).*]

MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

Mr Speaker: There will be three ministerial statements today: one from the Minister of Finance and Personnel; one from the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development; and one from the Minister for Regional Development. After each statement, in accordance with Standing Order 18(4), Members will be called to put questions on the statement to the Minister. I remind Members that that means questions on the statements. Members must not make statements.

I remind Members that we have a full day's business ahead of us. Therefore, I will have to judge the time that can be allowed for questions. I also remind Members that interventions and points of order should not be made during either the ministerial statements or the questions that follow them.

Terms of Reference for Review of Domestic Rating System

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr P Robinson): This statement refers to the further review of the domestic rating system, which I announced during a debate in the Assembly on Tuesday 15 May 2007. That debate considered the new system that was introduced by direct rule Ministers in April this year.

Today, I am publishing the review's terms of reference, which have been agreed by the Executive. I have provided Members with copies of the terms of reference and this statement, and a copy of the terms of reference has been placed in the Assembly Library. I have also written to the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel.

The terms of reference reflect my intention to examine a wide range of options for change in the short and longer terms and to do so in a focused and accelerated fashion, rather than engage in yet another process of prolonged analysis and review. Over the past few years, the domestic rating system has already been the subject of a lengthy review. In the first instance, we need a process that can deliver changes by next April.

I am also launching a 12-week consultation exercise, which will run until the end of August. The purpose of the consultation will be to seek views on what improvements can be made to the recently introduced system, within the terms of existing primary legislation, in time for next year's rates bills. That is my immediate priority.

Obviously, nothing we do will impact on ratepayers this year, but we would be failing in our responsibility as political leaders if we did not introduce changes that sought to make a real difference for householders next

year. That is why the consultation period must close at the end of August to allow us sufficient time to implement the necessary changes.

My officials will now begin to examine the options for change that could be delivered by next April — these are set out in the terms of reference. In the longer term, there may be other improvements that we can make beyond next year that would require new primary legislation. At this stage, nothing has been ruled in or out. I am genuinely open to considering all options and new ideas.

I want to focus on the evidence and hear the views of all interested parties, including ratepayers, about the impact that the new system is having and, critically, how we can ensure that help is provided in the best and most effective way possible. I, therefore, urge Members to encourage people to respond to the consultation, as it is only through engagement with, and listening to, those who are directly affected by the rating system that we will achieve a satisfactory outcome to the review.

As I said during the debate on 15 May 2007, there is no point in pretending that easy answers are queuing up to be adopted. Difficult choices will have to be made, particularly when it comes to the consideration of possible alternatives to the existing system. That is the second strand to the review that I have commissioned, which broadens its scope well beyond that of the review that led to the introduction of the capital value system in April 2007.

For example, a local income tax has been mentioned frequently as a possible alternative; it would produce a completely different set of winners and losers than those under the current system. Although the review is open to the examination of all options, I would be surprised if proposals such as a local income tax or a poll tax emerged as the favoured way forward.

Even the less radical option of providing new, or extending existing, reliefs to particular groups must be considered in the knowledge that they will shift the burden onto other ratepayers or reduce the amount available to fund public services. Finding a balance between the different interests, and reaching a consensus, will, therefore, be crucial. Any analysis or further insight that people can share with us on those issues, during the consultation process, will be very much welcomed.

I know that the Committee for Finance and Personnel will take a keen interest in the review, and my officials and I will facilitate the important role that the Committee will want to play in the process. When the consultation process has ended, I shall share the responses with the Committee, and I intend to report back to the Committee on my intentions before I finalise any proposals. I expect to be in a position to

bring the proposals to the Executive and to the Assembly in the early autumn of 2007.

None of us will want to consider the outcome of the review in isolation. The conclusions from the review of water charging, which the Minister for Regional Development will detail later, will be extremely relevant. I anticipate that ratepayers' anxiety will have some correlation with the magnitude of their overall household bills.

My Executive colleagues and I are fully aware that the review of the rating system is a key challenge facing us in what are still early days for the Assembly. Each of our parties made commitments to the people of Northern Ireland on these matters, and each of us will want to make good our promises. The public will be watching and expecting action from us, and rightly so.

The terms of reference set out how we plan to progress the matter. Now the hard work begins, and I am confident that the approach that we have published today will help us to achieve our overall objective of securing a fairer deal for householders in Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr McLaughlin): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for Finance and Personnel for his statement and his acknowledgement that the first strand of the review must be taken forward quickly to ensure that the changes are in place for April 2008. I also welcome the Minister's assurance in a letter to me, as the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, that:

“as a point of principle nothing has been ruled out, or in”.

The Minister has put on record his desire to work closely with the Committee for Finance and Personnel. That work will happen immediately on the range of issues under consideration as part of the review, and later when he provides the Committee with the consultation report as soon as possible after the consultation period has ended. The timetable set out in the terms of reference, on pages 8 and 9 specifically, indicates that the consultation will run to the end of August 2007, with a target date for the development and presentation of the first- and second-strand recommendations in mid-September. That does not give the Committee much time for input after the summer recess.

Can the Minister assure the Committee that it will be given an adequate opportunity for input after the consultation concludes and before the recommendations on the first strand and the second strand are finalised? Go raibh maith agat.

Mr P Robinson: I know that the Committee shares my objective of completing the review as quickly as

possible, and I can understand Committee members' concerns, and the concerns of the wider public, at the 12-week consultation period. The choice is not easy for any of us. Some people may be concerned about the brevity of the consultation period, but I suspect that those people would be even more concerned if changes were not made in time for the issuing of new bills. We are somewhat constrained by having to get the changes through in sufficient time for them to be implemented in the new bills.

I will, however, be happy to speak to the Chairperson about how we might be more flexible about the Committee's deliberations on the issue. There are some elements of the Department's further work and the Committee's continued work that can be done in parallel.

12.15 pm

Mr Wells: The Minister's decision to hold a review is very welcome, and I am sure that members of the public will be very keen to have an input.

The Minister will be aware that in some constituencies, particularly those with coastal communities, there is huge concern about the number of second homes, apartments and holiday homes that are springing up all over the place and depriving local communities of an opportunity to have adequate housing. Will the review enable the Minister to have another look at how second homes and holiday homes are rated? Is it possible that the rates on such properties could be increased?

Mr P Robinson: The review is capable of considering any proposals put forward by members of the public or, indeed, by Members of the Assembly, so the points made by the Member for South Down can genuinely be submitted and considered as part of the review process. I am aware of the concerns and the problem that exists, not just in his constituency but elsewhere, and it is one of the issues that we can look at.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Fred Cobain.

Moving on, I call Mr Burnside.

Mr Burnside: I thank the Minister for his statement. One of the options that he referred to was a local income tax, although I appreciate that he said that he would be surprised if a proposal such as that for a local income tax or poll tax, with all the connotations that that has, were to be the way forward. Will the Minister clarify, at this early stage of his career, whether it is as a matter of principle or of pragmatic politics that he is not in favour of a local income tax to deal with the particular problem of charging for water? Is he ruling it out generally as Minister of Finance in the new Administration, or does he see the Executive proposing that we might have wide-ranging tax-raising powers? Scotland appears to be moving along that road.

Mr P Robinson: The Member for South Antrim refers to Scotland: the Scots, of course, have those powers but have declined to use them. That might say something about the popularity of such a course. My belief is that we would have to increase income tax by about seven pence in order to fund a system that is currently funded by the rates. I have heard views expressed, principally by the Alliance Party and the Member from the Green Party, in favour of it, but I have not heard a lot of support for it elsewhere. It would require changes to the legislation at Westminster, of course, so it goes beyond anything that can be done immediately. I suspect that, if the debate that we had a week or more ago is anything to go by, it is unlikely that that idea will get much support from the bulk of Members in this Assembly.

Mr O'Loan: I welcome the Minister's statement and, in general terms, commend the content of it. However, I want to ask how the strands are to be dealt with in parallel.

The first strand relates to the options for change in April 2008, and I am glad that the Minister will be considering the equitable distribution of the rate burden and the issues of transparency and the public acceptability of the system. It is quite right that the issue of how we pay for water be included there as well.

The second strand relates to longer-term options for more fundamental review, ranging from more substantive changes to the present system, possibly requiring legislation, to the consideration of a local income tax — a poll tax — and blue-sky thinking on anything at all. Nothing has been ruled in, and nothing has been ruled out.

My question is whether two such different strands can be pursued simultaneously. Can strand two be completed in the narrow time frame that has been indicated? Indeed, can it be done at all in a review that is described as not being a full-blown consultation? I am concerned about confusion among members of the public about this consultation with the two strands running in parallel. Might not the two strands be conducted in sequence, rather than in parallel, and strand two —

Mr Speaker: Do I detect a question?

Mr O'Loan: I fully respect the House; I thought that I was clearly asking the Minister whether the details of second strand might be reconsidered.

Mr P Robinson: It is not rocket science. We will allow people to submit their views as to how change should be made. We will then consider those suggestions and decide whether any changes can be made under existing primary legislation. We will also examine those proposals in the timescale that is required to allow us to be able to introduce change by April 2008.

The consultation may reveal that it is worth following through on some issues. If so, we will have more consultation time, and the Committee for Finance and Personnel may want to spend more time considering those matters. However, we should not do anything that restricts the types of proposals that people suggest. We will identify what can be done under existing primary legislation, and we will move more speedily on the issues that can be altered without the need to change that legislation.

Mr Hamilton: Will the Minister tell the House how much ratepayers in Northern Ireland contributed to the funding of water and sewerage services before the link between water and rates was broken?

Mr P Robinson: I will be careful with my answer: the Member was part of my party's headquarters policy team that worked on identifying the figure that he requests.

I believe that, in 1998, ratepayers each contributed £127 to water services. Depending on which indices Members choose to use, that amount can be upgraded to approximately £160 at today's prices. However, it must be stated that contributions to water services were not precisely hypothecated in 1998; therefore the figure of £160 is a virtual hypothecation. In order that people should not be asked to pay twice, several parties in the Chamber proposed ways in which to identify the amount that has already been paid. We can consider those proposals.

Mr Speaker: I call Ms Jennifer McCann to ask a question.

Ms J McCann: The Minister has already answered my question.

Dr Farry: I thank the Minister for introducing this comprehensive review. It is good to see that the Executive are now making major announcements in the Chamber.

Will the review consider different options for replacing the district rate and the regional rate, given that one funds local government and the other funds central government?

The Minister also stated that new analysis is not necessary. However, does he recognise that the previous Assembly's review of the matter was flawed and that we must take into account the Lyons Review in England, the Burt Review in Scotland and the systems that some European Union countries, the United States and Canada, for example, have in place?

Mr P Robinson: The Executive have taken a conscious decision to respect the Assembly's role by bringing issues to it in the first instance. Although that has grated a little with the press, it is the right thing to do in order to give the Assembly the respect that it is due.

I know that the Member favours the introduction of a local income tax. However, that can be designed to either include or exclude the district rate. Speaking as one who, until now at least, has been a district councillor, I think that the fact that councillors must stand over their expenditure makes them consciously accountable to the ratepayer. If that link is broken, there are real dangers that people will spend without having to consider from where their money will come. That concerns me.

Mr Shannon: My question concerns capital rates on farmhouses, and particularly the unfair legislation on the rating of such properties. Is the Minister aware that an agricultural occupancy clause can halve the value on the open market of a farmhouse property that might otherwise be worth £300,000? Various estate agents have confirmed those market prices; it is not something that has come all of a sudden. In light of that, will the Minister consider increasing the level of reduction in capital value that applies to homes that are subject to agricultural occupancy clauses and restrictions?

Mr P Robinson: I am aware of that issue. Clearly, occupancy clauses have some impact on one's ability to sell a house and, therefore, on the value of that house. All of those matters can be considered during the period of consultation and thereafter. I am happy to discuss that matter with my colleague if he wishes to make further representations.

Mr Beggs: Does the Minister accept that any proposal to introduce a local income tax would create huge dangers? In particular, there would be a disincentive to work and a disincentive for those who are economically inactive to go back to work. That could adversely affect the Northern Ireland economy. Will the Minister ensure that his Department examines such considerations?

Mr P Robinson: I will. It is clear that if one were to substantially increase income tax, there would be employment consequences. We are aware of that, and I suspect that it is one of the reasons why not everyone in the Assembly favours such a way forward.

Mr Durkan: I join other Members in welcoming the Minister's statement and his commitment to a well-focused review. I share some of the concerns about possible confusion during the autumn between the outworkings of this review and the Budget, which we will then be considering. We must do what we can to minimise confusion during that period.

The Minister indicated that there are options that the review must consider that he does not necessarily favour. That is in the nature of review exercises; we will not choose to misrepresent that in the way that other parties misrepresented some of us in the past when, as part of reviews, we had to consider options that we did not favour.

I note that both the Minister and the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel see the rating review and the issue of water charges as inter-linked. That is an acknowledgement that some of us have been attacked for making in the past.

I turn to some of the specific options for the review. Will the Minister consider an affordability tariff, such as was proposed for water charges, as one of the ways of safeguarding pensioners from having any more than a small fixed percentage of their income taken in rates? Will he also consider the appointment of an independent revenue regulator to oversee all of these matters in the future?

Mr P Robinson: The ratepayers do have a regulator: I am the regulator in this matter. The Member is really talking about circuit-breakers, which ensure that no more than a certain percentage of the disposable income of a household can be taken in rates. That matter can rightly be considered as part of the consultation. However, as I understand it, such measures would probably require new primary legislation and, therefore, might fall within the second phase of the review, rather than the first phase. However, that does not mean that there are not steps that can be taken to reduce the impact of rates, particularly on senior citizens. The bottom line is as we have always stated it: we wish to ensure some correlation with the ability of people to pay rates. That is a key issue for us.

I am certainly not one of those who would have attacked the Member for drawing a relationship between rates and water charging. My party's manifesto recognised the relationship between the two and the need to reduce one so as to allow people to cope with the other.

12.30 pm

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. Will he assure the House that the review will consider all options — particularly local taxation, which has been a Sinn Féin policy for a number of years — because many people feel that the present rates system is an unfair way of collecting taxes, and it does not deal with affordability and people's ability to pay. Rural disparity is another important issue. Will the Minister ensure that there is consultation with the rural community on whatever rating system is introduced?

Mr P Robinson: Regardless of what system is introduced, some people will feel that it is unfair on them, and they will consider that another system would have been more suited to their circumstances. The Department is seeking to ensure that the current capital value system is fair and reflective of people's ability to pay. I understand the Member's view on income tax, but it has the consequences that have been mentioned by the two representatives of the Ulster Unionist Party

who have spoken — David Burnside and Roy Beggs. It would have an impact on employment issues, and one must recognise that it would mean a significant increase of roughly seven pence in the pound. I am not sure that that is something for which the electorate would thank us, and the Scottish Executive have not been prepared to implement it. If the Executive decided to introduce a local income tax, I suspect that some people would resist the recommended increase, and we would find ourselves without the resources needed to fund important elements of services. The Executive have a hard decision to make.

We will do whatever is required to achieve additional funding. I will exclude nothing from the review, and I have made it clear that we will look at all proposals that are put before us. Ultimately, the Executive want a system that will fairly distribute the amount of funding achieved and, particularly, take into account people's ability to pay.

Mr Neeson: I thank the Minister for his statement. However, does he recognise that the Lyons Review in England and the Burt Review in Scotland found considerable support for a local income tax? Can he further assure the House that whatever formula he comes up with, it will be much more transparent than that which exists?

Mr P Robinson: I endorse the latter part of the Member's contribution. The system must be transparent, and I know that the Minister for Regional Development wants the same for water charging. People need to understand what they are paying for and why they are paying for it. The Lyons Review may have found that the payment of a local income tax was a good idea, but it did not recommend its implementation.

Mr S Wilson: Given the housing shortage in Northern Ireland and considering that speculators — due to rapidly increasing capital house values — are buying houses to hold rather than to let, will the Minister assure the House that the review will consider the imposition of rates or, at least, part rates on empty homes?

Mr P Robinson: The Committee for Social Development may want to make representation on that, because it has a relationship to the housing problem, and the Minister for Social Development has spoken publicly about that over the past weeks. My Department's review will look at rating, and it will look at the issue that Sammy Wilson has raised. I am willing to listen to his views, to those of the Committee for Social Development and, particularly, to any views that the Minister for Social Development would like to express.

Mr B Wilson: I welcome the review, and I am particularly happy that nothing has been excluded — as requested in the motion that was tabled in my name on 15 May 2007. The most sensible approach

would be the 12 weeks' review. In the longer term, however, will the Minister consider appointing an independent person outside of the Department to look at funding and conduct a review along the lines of the Lyons Review or the Burt Review? People may have preconceived ideas about the results of an internal review.

Mr P Robinson: I cannot give that assurance. The domestic rating system has been reviewed to death. The issues are well known to us, and we have many reports on them to consider, including the Lyons Review. There has been plenty of analysis, and we have come to the stage where we must take decisions. That is why I have decided on a more focused consultation period, and a more focused review.

Of course, we could reconsider all the issues. However, we have enough data available to us to be able to take decisions, and, ultimately, it will not be a review team that will have to face the electorate, it will be the people in this Chamber. We must take decisions, ensure that they are right, and that they are decisions that we can stand before the electorate and recommend.

There are hundreds and hundreds of pages of data and recommendations available to us. I would not exclude the submission of any consultation response that included copious notes from the Lyons Review and others to argue the case. There is nothing to be gained by having a further review, which will simply retrace already well-trodden ground.

Mr A Maskey: I thank the Minister for conducting the review, which I welcome. The terms of reference include the hope that the review will be concluded by early autumn. Given that we are moving into the holiday season, the fact that the consultation process will take place between now and August may present difficulties. That puts an onus on all of us to ensure that people get the opportunity for full consultation.

In many cases, the relief for students has been controversial. Could the Minister allay the fears that tax relief for students, which is designed to allow more people to go to university, will not be able to be manipulated by landlords for their own interests?

Mr P Robinson: The Department will consider any evidence that can be established for this year to examine whether, in the first instance, relief for students has been taken up or whether landlords have siphoned off that money from students. We will want to learn lessons as a result of that.

I recognise that 12 weeks is a short period of time, but few people have 12-week holidays. The Committees have, perhaps, the most difficult task because their work coincides with the Assembly recess, rather than holidays, and Assembly Members will be doing other work during that period. That is why I told the Chairman of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, Mr

Mitchel McLaughlin, that I wanted to find a way for the Department of Finance and Personnel to be flexible with the Committee and allow some of our work to proceed in parallel.

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his timely statement. Will he ensure that the cost of administering a new tax is examined and discussed carefully to ensure that we are not overburdened by taxes and the cost of implementing new proposals?

Mr P Robinson: Yes, that will be an issue. A short time ago, I had a stakeholders gathering, and we considered the possibilities of having either means-tested or non-means-tested systems. There is an argument that, when determining who should get the benefit of the relief, there would be fewer administration costs for a non-means-tested system. We will consider all those issues because, ultimately, we want a system that is transparent, easily understood, and as efficient as possible.

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Minister guarantee that the review includes new and imaginative measures to ensure that those who have adapted their homes to accommodate a disability get rate relief?

Will the Minister also ensure that people have easy access to whatever relief is put in place? Many people who have adapted their homes for disabled family members are not aware of the form of relief that is currently available, and those who are aware of it find it difficult to access.

Mr P Robinson: The Member for Upper Bann makes a very strong point, and not only about the number of people accessing the available reliefs for homes that have been adapted for disabled occupants. Right across the board, people who should be claiming reliefs are not doing so. We have, if one likes, a marketing job to do to ensure that people who are entitled to relief do take it up.

It would be outrageous if account were not taken of the fact that adaptations to homes with disabled occupants had to be made. They should not be penalised for being disabled and for having to make changes to their homes. We want to ensure that they are not penalised.

Mr Speaker: That concludes questions to the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

Voluntary Modulation

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement on the use of voluntary modulation to part-fund the 2007-13 rural development programme. As some Members are aware, on taking office I committed to undertaking a review of voluntary modulation and the rates that the then Minister with responsibility for agriculture and rural development, David Cairns, announced in March this year.

I will announce the outcome of that review today. However, before I do so, let me provide Members with a little background. Modulation — the redirection of a proportion of farmers' direct single farm payments towards the funding of rural development measures — is not new. It has been around for many years now and is seen by Europe as a crucial part of funding for rural development.

Modulation will contribute to the funding of our new rural development programme, which has been developed with stakeholders over the past year and was submitted formally to the European Commission for approval in January 2007. The programme, which is an integral part of the Department's rural strategy, will put more than £500 million into the agriculture industry and wider rural development over the next seven years. It will improve the competitiveness of the farming sector, improve the land, environment and countryside and improve diversification and quality of life in rural areas.

A substantial part of the programme will be delivered locally through local action groups, and a significant proportion of its funding will go directly to the farming sector — much more than just the modulated funds. That money will be used to improve training, to disseminate best practice, to modernise farms, to support those in less-favoured areas, to increase forestry potential and to support environmental improvements and land management. More than 75% of the total programme funding will go directly to support the farming sector. I emphasise that that is three quarters of the entire programme funding.

Importantly, the programme will also support the rest of the rural community through a suite of measures designed to improve the quality of life in rural areas. The programme contains measures to create business, to increase tourism potential, to regenerate villages and towns, to provide basic services for the rural community and to maintain and enhance our cultural and natural heritage. Those measures will help bring much-needed investment to rural areas and strengthen the very fabric of rural life. As promised, I have carried out a thorough review of the modulation rates that David Cairns announced. I have looked closely at the figures that

underpin his decision, at where the funding is being targeted and at how that fits into my Department's broader rural development agenda.

I have held meetings with representatives of all rural stakeholders to hear at first hand their views on modulation and their rural development priorities. Those meetings have been extremely helpful to me in arriving at my decision. I have also sought the views of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, and I am grateful to colleagues for providing their views quickly.

12.45 pm

Following those consultations and my review, I am announcing today that I intend to reduce the 7% to 10% rates of voluntary modulation announced by David Cairns. The following rates of voluntary modulation will therefore apply — in 2007 it will be 4.5%; in 2008 it will be 6%; in 2009 it will be 7%; in 2010 it will be 8%; in 2011 it will be 9%; and in 2012 it will also be 9%.

I promised that I would use the flexibility in the legislation to set our own rates. I have done that, and I stress that these rates of voluntary modulation compare favourably to the rates that were recently set for Scotland and England.

In addition, I am today announcing that I will be increasing, for the period, the level of funding that is available for the wider rural regeneration measures in the programme from £85 million to £100 million. Additional support for those measures is vital if vibrant and thriving rural communities are to continue to be built throughout this region. I am also keen that the farming community and farming families actively avail of those measures — they are open to all rural dwellers. All parts of the rural community need to pull together to maximise the benefits of the programme. The rest of the programme — both the measures and targets — will remain unchanged.

Owing to the ongoing comprehensive spending review, I am not in a position today to confirm the amount of Government funding that will be available for the programme. However, I am hopeful that the amount of Government funds in the programme will be at least equal to the level of EU and modulation funds. Over the coming months, I will be working with the Minister of Finance and Personnel to finalise the amount of national funds that will be available.

Those changes have been possible because the spending plans for the programme have been closely re-examined to ensure that the figures are as close as possible to the expected actual cost of each measure. Account has also been taken of the strict EU "use it or lose it" rules for spending modulated funds and the likely spending pattern of measures that are project-based or demand-driven. I am happier now that the revised financial plan for the programme more closely

resembles that which is likely to be spent over the period. This review has therefore given me some additional flexibility to make the changes that I have announced without significantly affecting the shape or scope of the programme.

The changes that I have announced will have a positive impact for all rural stakeholders. Members of the farming sector will benefit from lower rates of voluntary modulation than those proposed by David Cairns — and they will, of course, directly receive the bulk of funding from the programme. Environmental stakeholders will be reassured that plans for the same level of expansion of agri-environment programmes will continue. The wider rural community will witness much-needed additional funds allocated to those measures that benefit all rural dwellers.

I conclude by thanking all of those who have contributed to my review. I am very grateful to stakeholders and the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development for their willingness to engage at short notice and for their important contributions. I am sure that a sound basis now exists on which to move forward with our rural-development programme. Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Dr W McCrea): The Minister wrote to my Committee on 22 May 2007. The Committee urgently made it known that it was its view that the rate should not rise above the current level of 4.5%. When the result of her review is considered, my Committee will be very disappointed with the Minister's statement.

It is easy for others to speak about — and even spend — the money that is coming from someone else's pocket. Can the Minister confirm that her statement lacks any financial facts and figures? Given that neither she nor anyone else in the Department knows the final level of national funding available to support rural development, do the figures have any real justification?

Will the Minister explain why farmers should remain confident in the financial competence of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development given that, just a couple of months ago, it appears to have overestimated the required funding for the rural development programme? Furthermore, will the Minister state that the rural development programme contains measures to create business, increase tourist potential, regenerate villages and towns, provide basic services for rural communities and maintain and enhance cultural and natural heritage?

Will the Minister also explain why farmers must pay for measures that are clearly the responsibility of Invest Northern Ireland, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, the Department for Social

Development, the Department of the Environment and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure? Why should farmers have to pay for investment when that funding should come from those Departments?

The Minister said that she had Mariann Fischer Boel's ear. I wonder whether she used that ear to access additional funds to reduce the already significant burden on farmers.

Ms Gildernew: There was quite a lot in that for one question. I first met with the Committee on 5 June. I reiterate that I had hoped to meet with its members before then, and I have attempted to meet with Dr McCrea so that we could discuss the issue earlier. However, that was not possible.

By 12 June, the European Commission must be notified of the voluntary modulation rates that are to be applied here. Therefore, I did not have time for an in-depth consultation process and, regretfully, had to seek the Committee's views early. I am grateful to the Committee for responding so promptly, and, as I said, I discussed the issue with its members on 5 June. Dr McCrea is correct to say that the Department has been unable to give the full detail that he has requested. However, that information will be forthcoming when the figures become available.

As an overview, I can tell Members that axis 1: improving the competitiveness of the agricultural and forestry sector will receive £44.7 million; axis 2: improving the environment and the countryside will receive £389.5 million; and axis 3: the quality of life in rural areas and diversification of the rural economy will receive £100 million and a technical assistance grant to a maximum of £8.7 million. That comes to a total projected spend of £542.9 million. Those seeking further detail will find it on the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's website.

Dr McCrea referred to the Department for Social Development, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and others. I agree with him that it is not just up to the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development to spend in these areas, and I welcome the Committee's support and help to encourage other Departments to work with us to improve the lot of rural communities. I concur fully with the Chairman of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development. I would love to see the Department for Social Development, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the other Departments taking more of an interest. I am sure that we will create a productive relationship in ensuring that that happens.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement on such an important issue for the rural community. The statement refers to many measures that have the

potential to benefit that community. One of those is the provision of childcare in the rural community, which would allow farmers and farmers' wives to attain jobs in their local areas, which is not the case at the minute. That is a very big issue, and I am glad that the potential exists to redress it.

Does the Minister agree that the wise use of voluntary modulation and other funds could generate off-farm jobs for farming families and address the vital issue of that money going back into farming families? Diversification is key. Previous moneys have been used to fund diversification on farms, but, in future, diversification should be encouraged on a larger scale, rather than the produce going, as it sometimes does, to local big businesses.

Ms Gildernew: During the consultation process, departmental officials listened to many agricultural stakeholders, particularly the bigger unions, such as the Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU), the Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers' Association and others. I am minded that the rural development programme brings tangible benefits for the farming sector.

Much of the rural development programme is targeted at farmers. It includes a farm modernisation measure; training for the farming sector; marketing and processing grants; farm diversification grants; less-favoured area payments; and, importantly, expanded agrienvironment and forestry schemes.

I was trying to factor into the consultation what I was hearing from the farming community and to access money that could be used by that community specifically.

During the past few weeks, I have been lobbied by various agencies for money for other programmes. I have been clear on the issue: to receive £20,000 through the rural development programme means much to small businesses. Larger businesses or sectors would view the same amount as chicken feed. The Department wants to target those people who would receive maximum benefit from the programme. I am minded to consider smaller rural communities and smaller diversification projects, and to ensure that the money is best spent by distributing it widely, thereby making a difference to the lives of more people.

I thank the Member for the question. I am mindful that much of this money will go back to farmers and farming families.

Mr Elliott: I declare an interest: I am a farmer and receive the single farm payment. I wish I could welcome the Minister's announcement, but I cannot do so at this stage. That will also be the case with many in the farming industry.

Does the Minister believe that her announcement will be broadly welcomed by the agriculture and farming industry? I do not believe that that will be the

case. Following on from Dr McCrea's point, has the Minister held any discussions with other Departments about funding the rural development programme so that the farming industry will not have to meet the entire cost of the programme? The Minister may say that she has not had time to hold discussions; however, if she does have time to do so in the future and receives money from other Departments, will she give a commitment today to reduce voluntary modulation in the farming industry?

Ms Gildernew: I cannot pre-empt what people, including the farmers' unions, will say. However, when the farming sector reads my announcement, it will see that, rather than sticking to the rates set by David Cairns, which would have been the easiest thing to do, I have reviewed voluntary modulation — as I said I would — and have tried to reduce the impact on farmers.

More than £500 million will go into the rural development programme, and not all that money will come from farmers. A reduced amount of money will be taken, rather than the level already decided, and the Department will be able to draw down other funding measures to bulk up the amount required. The Department wishes to give farmers money through agrienvironment schemes, which will have an impact.

Unfortunately, the European Commission requires a decision tomorrow. The rates are set, at least until the common agricultural policy health check. It would have been great if there had been a bottomless pit of money so that I could have avoided going down this route. I would have loved that to be the case. However, I have tried to take away some of the pain involved.

A diverse range of people told me that I should not go down the voluntary modulation route, or that I should stick to the rate set by David Cairns, because it was not only the farming sector with which I had to consult but the agrienvironment and rural development sectors. Much was involved.

I tried to make the issue as painless as possible. I tried to ensure that this year's rate remains at 4.5% and that the overall rate does not move into double figures, which I was asked to do during the consultation.

I am not in a position to avoid going down this route. However, I have tried to make it as painless as possible for the farming sector. Farmers can bid for the money, and three quarters of the entire programme funds will go back to farmers.

Mr P J Bradley: Like the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, I am disappointed that confiscation of money from the farming community will almost double — from 4.5% to 9% — over the next five years. That is not acceptable.

Such an increase was not expected by the farmers of Northern Ireland and is, I would go so far as to say, even more surprising for having been announced by a local Minister. We had thought that the era had passed when direct rule Ministers would impose such penalties on the farming community.

The Minister's statement claimed that:

"the farming sector will benefit from reduced rates of voluntary modulation".

Will the Minister explain how doubling the rate of voluntary modulation from 4.5% to 9% can be described as a benefit for the farming community? That baffles me.

1.00 pm

Ms Gildernew: My script contained the word "reduced", but I changed that because it was incorrect. What I actually said — and I will repeat my position for Mr Bradley's benefit if he was not listening the first time — was that:

"the farming sector will benefit from lower rates of voluntary modulation than those proposed by David Cairns — and they will ... directly receive the bulk of funding from the programme."

The Member said that it is unfortunate that a local Minister has gone down this route; if we had stuck with direct rule, the rates would have been higher. I have done my best to try to lower the rates that were set by my predecessor. I have already said — and I do not want to keep repeating myself — that I wish that I had not had to do this, but we need to introduce some level of voluntary modulation to enable us to bring in other funding that will directly benefit the farming sector.

The rural development programme is very important, as any rural MLA will assert, and we cannot allow any slippage in spending on that programme. The measures that I have announced are the only way in which I could lever in additional funding. I did not have many options on the issue, but I took the option that was most favourable both to farmers in the rural development community and to the agrienvironment community.

Mr Ford: I thank the Minister for her statement. It is clear that, in the early years of the programme, farmers will benefit from the significant reduction in the rate of voluntary modulation by comparison with that which David Cairns had intended to set. However, it is also clear that farmers will be very little better off at the end of the programme, when the rate of modulation will be 9% rather than 10%. Given the needs of the agriculture sector, and given the need for the environmental protection that is available through the agrienvironment schemes, what guarantee can the Minister give that the funds — she said that only 75% of the total would be returned to farmers — will be spent to the maximum benefit of the incomes of farmers, who provide the environmental goods that we need? Will she guarantee that none of the money will

be siphoned off, as has happened before, for other things, such as the Forest Service?

Ms Gildernew: I will certainly be working on that. I am very anxious that — as I said in my statement, which is now a matter of public record — the vast majority of that money will go directly to farmers. I am sure that Mr Ford and others will hold me to account on that. It is important to me that we improve the lot of farmers.

One thing that I wanted to do right away was to improve farmers' confidence by making them feel that they had a voice in the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development; someone who will not only listen to them but act on what they say. When farmers examine and re-examine what I have said, I think that they will feel that I have done my best on this. Obviously, there are many demands on budgets, but I have worked with officials to ensure that the money goes into the farming side as well as into agrienvironment schemes and diversification. As I said earlier — and will repeat if necessary — I want to see farm modernisation, and I want to see farming become more profitable. I certainly feel that there is scope within the programme to enable that to happen.

Mr Irwin: I declare an interest, as I am a farmer myself.

I believe that the Minister has failed Northern Ireland's farmers in cutting the modulation rate to a mere one percentage point less than that proposed by the previous Minister, David Cairns. The announcement will be a shock to the local industry, which had expected support from the local Minister. Does the Minister accept that our farmers will now be at a disadvantage compared to other farmers throughout Europe?

Ms Gildernew: I am disappointed that William Irwin feels that way, although I can understand how a first reading could lead to that conclusion.

I have lessened the impact of the rates from this year, so instead of rising to 6%, they are now set at 4.5%, a reduction from the rate set by David Cairns. The scale increases less radically than he had intended; it was 10% for the last two years of the programme. I have reduced the rate as much as I can, while still giving the Department the spending power to do what needs to be done on modernisation, and so forth.

On the question of competitiveness with the rest of Europe, only the UK and Portugal have gone down this route. Unfortunately, that is partly for the historical reason that Britain traditionally did not draw down the money that could have benefited the rural sector, and we are now left picking up the pieces left by that policy. Portugal is the only other country that has gone down the route of voluntary modulation, and I accept that farmers here are greatly aggrieved that, for example, farmers across the border do not have to go down this route. Competitiveness is an issue. Unfortunately, much

of this is down to what the Department has inherited from previous Administrations and from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. I have no further flexibility on the matter.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat. Will the Minister tell us how the moneys raised through voluntary modulation will be used in rural development programmes?

Ms Gildernew: The total amount of voluntary modulation receipts represents just over 20% of total funding for the programme. There is an EU requirement that voluntary modulation funding is used across all the axes of the programme, but the bulk of the receipts will be spent on axis 1 and axis 2. As I said earlier, three quarters of total programme funding will go directly to support the farming sector. My announcement today will ensure that the rural development programme is of greater benefit to the broad rural community. Programme funding will increase from £85 million to £100 million, so an extra £15 million has been put in. All areas of the agriculture and rural development sectors will benefit.

Mr Shannon: There is a recurrent theme in all the questions: how will the Minister ensure that working farmers and landowners are the first to receive regeneration funding through voluntary modulation? Will the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development conduct monitoring to ensure that if there is a shortfall of working farmers, they can come into the system and be helped?

What steps will the Minister take to ensure that moneys are equally spread between the west of the Province, where I suspect that most of it will go, and the east, where that might not be the case?

Ms Gildernew: I am travelling to Brussels on Thursday to hold meetings with the Commission, and one of the first things that I will do is to look for early approval of the rural development programme, so that it can start to have an impact on farmers and farming families as soon as possible and to get the money back out to them.

It is ironic that Mr Shannon tells me that we should not be targeting money to the west of the Bann, given that in the Chamber, we have listened many times to speeches about the need for funding for the west of the Bann and for other areas that have been discriminated against in the past and have not received an adequate share of funding. I have spoken on that issue.

I am the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development across the Six Counties, and I will ensure that money is spent where it is needed. I have been all over the place, and I have seen great examples of rural development programmes and some of the work that has been done by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. It is ironic that

the only county that I have not yet visited officially is County Fermanagh.

Mr Shannon: The Minister lives there.

Ms Gildernew: That is true, which is why I said “officially”.

There is need across the Six Counties, and I want to ensure that funding goes where it is needed. Geographically, axis 1 and axis 2 are open to all, and axis 3 will be delivered locally, in the east and the west. Axis 3 will be delivered by local action groups, which will tie in with councils, so each of those areas will have a say in how that money is spent.

Mr Savage: I declare an interest.

With regard to the announcement of the increase in funding from £85 million to £100 million, will the Minister give a commitment that she will work with her Executive colleague the Minister of the Environment to ensure that any regeneration measures accepted under that funding will be fast-tracked through the local planning system?

Will the Minister not consider the possibility of keeping this modulation at 4.5%, with other Departments making up the shortfall? We have, after all, come through a very difficult 25 years of — shall we call it — misrule.

The Minister told us what has been happening in Scotland. However, Northern Ireland is different. This is an opportunity for her Department to do something to enhance and maintain it. Earlier, a “living countryside” was mentioned, and that is the only way forward.

Ms Gildernew: I thank the Member for his contribution. Concerning his first point, I guarantee that I will work with all of my Executive colleagues to increase, and better, the lot of farmers and rural dwellers. As Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, it is part of my remit to ensure that I work with all Departments to try to improve matters in rural areas. There is an immediate commitment on that.

The timings concerning voluntary modulation were unfortunate. The Assembly was up and running on 8 May, and the decision had to be taken on 12 June. There was no flexibility on that; the rates had been set and were announced on 20 March by David Cairns. All of us on the Subgroup on the Economic Challenges facing Northern Ireland last year worked on the matter of a substantial peace dividend. If such a dividend arrives, I shall fight for a share for agriculture and rural development; at the moment, however, that money is not in place, and there is no choice. I had no option.

However, I was keen to lower the rates set by David Cairns, to take some of the sting from today’s announcement and to show that an attempt is being made to retain enough money to do something tangible

and of benefit to the farming community and to the wider rural community.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement. The Minister has had discussions with Mariann Fischer Boel, the Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development. What are her views on compulsory modulation?

Ms Gildernew: The Commissioner was here for the recent UFU open forum — I think it was in April — and said, publicly, on several occasions that she wanted an increase in compulsory modulation, perhaps raising it from 5% to 10%. We must see what proposals the Commissioner brings forward as part of her health check, and it is fully expected that modulation will feature in that. It is too early to say how much the rates will increase and from what date; however, I hope that we will, by then, be in a position to review our rates of voluntary modulation on the basis of what Commissioner Fischer Boel does.

Mr Molloy: I thank the Minister for her statement and for her assurances that this money will be given to the farming community. Does she accept that, in the past, instead of going to the farming community, much of the money was put into other more wealthy sectors?

Will the Minister work with the Executive, the Minister for Regional Development and the Minister of the Environment to ensure that farmers are given planning permission for diversification?

Ms Gildernew: I am reminded that that was not in my response to George Savage's questions, which had so much in them that I could not keep track of it all.

In relation to planning permission, farm diversification and what must happen in the broader rural community, I am keen to meet the Planning Service and to work with the Minister of the Environment to ensure that the need for planning permission does not hold up those who take the route of diversification and spending some of the money that might be available.

1.15 pm

I am anxious that the money should go where it can be best used. Often, a reasonably small amount of money can make a big difference. For farmers who have a huge turnover or a large amount of land or stock, or who receive a large single farm payment, the impact will not be the same. I am keen that the impact should be felt right across the farming community and that many people should feel the benefit of these measures.

I will look at all the issues and at whatever proposals are put to the Department, but I imagine that the local action groups, using the LEADER+ methodology, particularly in axis 3, will be spending that money wisely and getting the best value for money.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Does the Minister agree that the needs of the rural community are best served by the Executive's working collectively? The Chairperson of the Agriculture Committee made the point that the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, Edwin Poots, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Nigel Dodds, and the Minister of the Environment, Mrs Foster, all have a role to play in this. With reference to Mr Bradley's question, the Minister for Social Development, Margaret Ritchie, also has a role to play. Does the Minister agree that all those Ministers' working collectively will ensure a bright future for the rural economy and rural communities?

Ms Gildernew: Yes. That is worth pointing out. It is important that rural issues should be at the heart of the Executive and that all my ministerial colleagues should deal with them, because they cannot be dealt with in isolation. I would add the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to the list, because I know that rural health is something that is close to the Member's heart. Everyone must work towards the betterment of services and goods in rural areas.

I should like, in due course, to bring to the Assembly the consideration of a rural White Paper that would tie in all our responsibilities on how we best serve the needs of rural communities and how those cross-cutting and overlapping measures are best tackled. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development should not have all the responsibility. The other Departments will have a say, and we must consider how we manage that, how we get the best value for money, and what we can do to best improve the lives of people in rural communities. I thank the Member for that question.

Mr McCallister: I thank the Minister for her statement. I should also declare an interest, as the recipient of a single farm payment —

Mr Wells: A big one?

Mr McCallister: Not as big as I would like, but perhaps the Minister can do something about that.

Mr Elliott: Not today, I think.

Mr McCallister: She will not give me any help today.

The Minister said that over 75% of the total programme funding would go directly to the farming sector. If the Minister is including in that sector the entire agrifood and processing industry, what percentage will actually go to farmers and farming families?

Ms Gildernew: I thank the Member for the question.

The outworking of this has not been fully completed, so I am unable to give the Member the full details that he has asked for. I am aware that money needs to be put into all sorts of farm schemes, and I have mentioned farm diversification, modernisation and the agrienvironment

sector. Great work is being done in countryside management to create a better environment, both for biodiversity and for the appearance of rural areas so that everyone can enjoy them. I will come back in writing with a fuller answer to the Member's question. The details have still to be fully worked out, so I am not in a position to answer him today.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's speech. Although some farmers might be disappointed that the rate of modulation is not lower, she has managed to keep it lower than expected and lower than that previously announced by the British direct rule Minister, David Cairns. How was that achieved?

Ms Gildernew: We considered how money was allocated throughout the last programme to identify where savings could be made and how modulation might be reduced. We investigated underspends in previous programmes and diverted those savings to try to reduce the rates of voluntary modulation while maintaining the spending level with a small increase in the rural development programme budget. Money was identified within the Department.

Review of Charging for Water and Sewerage

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I will make a statement on the review of future arrangements for water and sewerage services.

The Executive's decision on 10 May 2007 to suspend the introduction of water charges for 2007-08 included a commitment to undertake a longer-term review of the future of water and sewerage services. It was agreed that an Executive subcommittee, comprising representatives from the four parties in the Executive, should be established to consider the terms of reference for that review. The subcommittee, comprising the Minister of Finance and Personnel, the Minister for Social Development, the Minister for Employment and Learning and myself, agreed draft terms of reference and put them to the Executive at its meeting on 7 June 2007. The Executive endorsed those terms of reference, which have now been made available to Members.

Turning to the substance of the review, the agreed terms of reference propose a comprehensive review of existing arrangements for the delivery of water and sewerage services to be led by an independent panel. That panel will be served by an independent secretariat and will report to me so that I can provide regular updates to the Executive subcommittee, the full Executive when appropriate and the Committee for Regional Development.

The proposed review will have two strands. The first will focus on the fundamental issues of financing water and sewerage services and should report by autumn 2007. That will enable budgetary arrangements to be agreed. The second strand will concentrate on wider aspects of arrangements for water and sewerage and should report by December 2007. That strand will allow a longer perspective to be taken and may recommend changes that require new legislation or structural arrangements. Any recommendations will be subject to consultation.

Changes of that nature will take time to implement. In the meantime, my Department must work within existing structures to deliver water and sewerage services and do its best to make sure that those essential services are delivered as efficiently and effectively as possible.

On the scope of the review, the panel will be tasked to identify the required level of funding and set out options for examining the most appropriate way of managing, governing and delivering water and sewerage services in a situation of full public ownership. Recommendations will be made on the way forward, including governance and statutory arrangements, investment, business models and strategic plans. That is a wide-ranging remit, and it will be a challenge to meet

the set timescales. However, it is important that the Executive take those key decisions as soon as possible.

There will naturally be a focus on who is appointed to conduct the review. At this stage, I can only say that I will work with my colleagues on the Executive subcommittee to agree a review panel that meets the criteria set out in the terms of reference, which are independence, expertise and knowledge of utility operations, regulation, administration and economic matters, both locally and more widely.

It is of paramount importance that the public has confidence in the conduct of the review and that the reasons for any decisions are clearly set out. The terms of reference that have been agreed by the Executive provide the best way forward to achieve that. I thank all those people who have made suggestions on the review and my colleagues on the subcommittee for their input. Go raibh maith agat.

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

Mr Wells: The Minister has indicated the extent of the review. Will he assure Members that he, the Executive and the Committee for Regional Development will have access to all relevant material? I refer in particular to the documents that relate to the decisions made by a previous Administration. I understand that normal protocol is that this Administration would not have access to that material, but that the previous Administration can voluntarily release that material for consideration. Will the Minister assure Members that that will happen and that the Committee for Regional Development will also have a chance to view that material?

Mr Murphy: I thank Mr Wells for his question. It has been stated quite clearly that the panel should have access to all the papers that it requires to do its job. There is information, as the Member quite rightly suggested, that is held by others, and it is up to them to release that voluntarily — I cannot force them to do so. However, it is our intention that the review panel will have access to all necessary information, which would also ensure that the Committee for Regional Development has the information that it requires to allow it to interact with the review panel.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom fáilte a chur roimh an ráiteas agus a rá go bhfuil obair mhaith déanta ag an Aire.

I welcome the Minister's statement, and I am delighted that the terms of reference are as comprehensive and wide-ranging as they are. Most citizens in the North — and I declare an interest as a water consumer — will be pleased with the statement of intent.

Will the Minister use this opportunity to reassure the Committee for Regional Development that, if there were anything in its letter, dated 6 June 2007, that

would have impacted on the terms of reference, he would have included it?

Mr Murphy: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Member for his question. There has been a public airing of the circumstances concerning the late submission of the Committee's contribution. For the record, I wish to state that I had a meeting with the Regional Development Committee on 16 May 2007 at which I outlined the time frame within which we were working and invited the Committee, if it wished to have an input, to forward any relevant material by the end of May. The time constraint was necessary in order to have the terms of reference agreed by the Executive subcommittee for agreement by the Executive on 7 June 2007. If that deadline had been missed, the business would have been delayed by a fortnight. The review must be completed in just a few months. A delay of half a month would have shortened the time available, and time is of the essence. I was disappointed not to receive any material from the Committee by the deadline.

Nonetheless, I received a letter from the Committee on the evening of 6 June 2007, which I considered, and I responded to the Chairperson. It is my belief that the terms of reference that we have outlined are sufficiently comprehensive to incorporate any concerns that the Committee raised. The paper that was brought to the Executive was a recommendation from the subcommittee. The Executive discussed and considered that paper, and if any issue raised by the Committee for Regional Development had not already been addressed, I would have brought it to the attention of the Executive. However, I felt that the terms of reference were sufficiently broad to cover any concerns raised in the Committee's letter, which I received on the eve of the Executive meeting.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development (Mr Cobain): I welcome the Minister's statement and the information about the review that he has brought before the Assembly. I am sure that the Committee looks forward to working with the Minister on the review. Will the Minister assure the House, given that a large part of the review will be conducted over the summer, that the Committee for Regional Development will be consulted fully, and can he explain precisely how the Committee will be kept in touch with the review?

Mr Murphy: I thank Mr Cobain for his question. I also thank him for his commitment to working constructively with us on the review. He will be aware that this is one of the first and most serious challenges that the Executive and the Assembly face. All of the parties elected to the Assembly made manifesto commitments to try to deal with the issue. The purpose of the review, as agreed by all the parties represented on the Executive, is to try to live up to our manifesto commitments.

I noted some of the Member's public commentary on the subject, and I can assure him that it is a genuine and serious review. As Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development, he has a key influence on all of that. I hope that he will play his part in bringing his influence to bear, so that we can all achieve the objective, which is an open and honest assessment of what is required, a clear laying out of the options in front of us and a clear and rational debate about how we proceed. I can assure him that the Committee will be consulted. As I said, I attended the Committee on 16 May 2007 and outlined to it the decision that had been taken by the Executive, which was to appoint a subcommittee to agree the terms of reference. I offered the Committee the opportunity to have an input into that.

1.30 pm

I took note of the Committee's letter when I received it on 6 June 2007. The terms of reference — if the Member reads them — specifically set out an ongoing role for the Executive subcommittee and an ongoing role in the review for the Committee for Regional Development, as a key stakeholder. The Committee is mentioned as a key stakeholder in those terms of reference. Other stakeholders include the utility regulator, the Consumer Council, the water company itself, and others who have an interest. I do not doubt that they will also wish to have an input to the review.

I have made it clear that the purpose of the review is to ensure public confidence. We face very serious issues regarding sewerage and water services. We must decide what needs to be invested and how we will find the finances to meet that investment. I reiterate that public confidence is a very serious issue. That is why it is incumbent on all of us who have an interest to act constructively and to try to have a rational debate on what action is required, what the way forward is, and how we will meet that challenge.

It is also important for public confidence that the Executive have stated in their agreed terms of reference that any action is taken under the terms of full public ownership. Privatisation is not on our agenda. That is important in maintaining public confidence in the way forward.

Mr Dallat: As a member of the Committee for Regional Development, I can assure the Minister that he will have our full co-operation — given the opportunity. Will the Minister give an assurance to the Assembly that the interests of the consumer — and of those on low and fixed incomes, which are disproportionate to the runaway prices of their houses — will be represented and protected in the forthcoming review? Will he explain how that will be done?

Mr Murphy: I thank Mr Dallat for his comments. I know that he is a member of the Regional Development

Committee and that he has alleged that there were spies of mine on that Committee to keep me updated on matters. That was his public commentary — spies at the heart of regional development. *[Laughter.]*

There must be a public debate. The previous public debate on this issue was contaminated by what could be considered as a lack of openness and suspicions about the intentions behind the water reform agenda. We want an open and honest discussion. We want those who represent consumers and the more vulnerable people in our society to have an input to the review. That will be the case.

The review's terms of reference are quite broad. A chairperson and other panel members will be appointed. I expect — although a range of opinions is readily available from the previous debate on the matter — that those who wish to have an input and to make their voice heard will be facilitated. That way, we can guarantee that the debate will be one that the Assembly is in charge of, and one in which the Assembly has a say. Through the Assembly, the public will have a say. The public will receive an open explanation of the issues that we face, the choices that we must make, how we propose to proceed, and how we will do so while ensuring that the most vulnerable people in our society are protected.

Mrs Long: My question specifically concerns the sustainability and financing of water and sewerage services. The Minister will be aware that one of the major criticisms of the previous scheme, both from Alliance and from other respondents, including the Consumer Council for Northern Ireland, was that although the fundamental tenet of the EU Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive, on which water charging was predicated, was to encourage conservation of a resource, that principle was not embedded in the payment structures.

Will the Minister comment on why water conservation is not specifically mentioned in his statement or in the terms of reference for the review, and will he reassure the House that that matter will be fully considered within the remit of the review?

Mr Murphy: I assure the Member that water conservation is an important part of the future consideration of this matter. One of the difficulties with the previous debate, which caused public hostility and suspicion, was that the issue of metering was tied up with that of charging households. Water conservation is extremely important to the immediate funding and financing of the services. Conservation is vital to the plan that was rolled out under the direct rule Administration, to an assessment of that plan, to an assessment on the way in which we proceed, and to the decisions on how we proceed.

The water company must get its own house in order on conservation, as it is quite an issue for it to tackle.

Targets for reducing waste have been set, and we will want to assess whether those are sufficient. The review has been given as broad a scope as possible to allow all those issues to be considered.

As the Member correctly pointed out, some specific references may not be included, but, in our view, the review is broad enough to cover all the issues about which people have concerns.

Mr Moutray: Will the Minister outline what steps he has taken to bring about greater efficiencies in his Department so that in-house savings can be made?

Mr Murphy: The Member's question moves into the realm of the comprehensive spending review and the efficiencies that the Department is required to come up with, which is not specifically part of the review of water and sewerage services. However, the Department of Finance and Personnel has set targets for all Departments, and my Department is working with that Department to meet efficiency targets with regard to water and sewerage services.

Those targets pose serious challenges, not just for my Department, but for all Departments. We know what the Department of Finance and Personnel requires of us, and we will certainly strive to meet those challenges.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister has touched on this issue, and he will be aware of the deep concerns among the general public, workers in the Water Service and the wider trade union movement that the Water Service will be privatised. Will he confirm that the terms of reference that were published today rule out the future privatisation of the Go-co? Will he confirm also that there is nothing to stop the Committee for Regional Development sitting over the summer months to monitor the review?

Mr Murphy: The business of the Committee for Regional Development is a matter for its Chairperson — I would not presume to tell the Committee how to do its business.

It was important to make a public statement on the review. In many ways, its scope is very broad, and the only directive that the Executive decided to put to the review panel is that the review should be carried out with the understanding that the service will remain in full public ownership. Any arrangements arising from the outcome of the review will ensure that the water and sewerage services remain in full public ownership. The privatisation of water and sewerage services is not part of our agenda. For that to happen, even in the current circumstances, my agreement and that of the Assembly and the Executive would be required.

As I have said, the purpose of the review is to enable us to have a clear and honest public debate on the issues, and to remove some of the suspicions that contaminated the previous debate. The Executive subcommittee, the

Executive and I felt that it was important to state clearly that privatisation is not part of the agenda.

Mr G Robinson: In the event of water charges, what plans does the Minister have to minimise charges for pensioners and families on low incomes?

Mr Murphy: The affordability tariffs were built into the previous structures. To say "in the event of water charges" is almost to presume the outcome of the review. We must re-examine all the issues. The first part of the review will be a consideration of the investment requirement, and how it can be met. That is one of the big questions that must be answered by the autumn so that the budgetary arrangements that will be brought in by the Department of Finance and Personnel can be met. In many ways, that will tell us what structure we will have.

Affordability mechanisms were built into the previous arrangements. If that route is taken, there will have to be an investigation to see whether those measures are sufficient. However, at the heart of the matter is the need to decide what kind of investment is required, and how it can be financed.

The Member is almost presuming the outcome of the review, and I do not want to do that. The review's remit is open enough to allow for the consideration of all the options, and the Executive and the Assembly will consider those options in due course.

Mr McCallister: I welcome the independence of the review panel. Will the Minister set out the process by which the members of the panel will be appointed and explain how the Committee for Regional Development will be consulted on those appointments?

Mr Murphy: At their first meeting in May, the Executive decided to appoint a subcommittee to agree the terms of reference of the review. Through the Executive subcommittee, I put it to the Executive that my Department wants to appoint a chairperson of the review panel and probably two, but possibly three, independent panel members. The Department has outlined the range of expertise that the chairperson and panel members will be required to have.

The situation very much depends on who the chairperson is. It is intended that the chairperson will be appointed first, and I propose to do that in consultation with colleagues on the Executive subcommittee. Following the appointment being agreed, the Department and I intend to work with the chairperson of the review panel to appoint other panel members, depending on the expertise that will be required.

There is no requirement to consult the Committee for Regional Development. As I stated at the Committee's first meeting, I welcome any views. However, I have not received any suggested names for panel members from the Committee. Time is of the essence; it is hoped

that the chairperson of the review panel will be appointed within 24 to 48 hours, after which the process to appoint panel members will begin. If members of the Committee wish to have an input into the appointments, rather than sitting on the Back Benches and laughing, they could perhaps drop me a note sometime.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's commitment that privatisation of the water and sewerage services is not an option. Does he agree that where such services, including the de-sludging of private septic tanks, have been privatised in other areas it has not really been a good experience? People who have requested that tanks be de-slugged have experienced lengthy delays, in spite of numerous interventions to NI Water and its customer services department.

Has the Minister any comment on proposed reductions in rates of pay, annual leave and public-holiday entitlement to Water Service employees in circumstances in which commitments were given that employees would be treated under The Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 2006 in respect of conditions of employment? Would the Minister care to clarify that?

Mr Murphy: Thank you, go raibh maith agat. The Member will know that, under current arrangements, operational matters are the responsibility of the water company. The Department wishes to review all operational, funding and finance matters, the strategic plan and the business plan — indeed, the entire operation of the water company. That will include the matters that the Member raised.

The review will be wide in scope, and all the issues to do with how the company conducts its business will be part of it. The Member should leave it there. The questions that he raised can be asked as part of the review.

Mr McGlone: There are pressing concerns about employees' terms and conditions that need to be addressed.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind the Member that such an intervention is not in order. However, as it was relevant, I shall permit it.

Mr Murphy: I repeat my earlier reply to the Member. Employee conditions were agreed by a previous Administration, and the water company currently operates under those conditions. My Department and I want to review all that. If, in December, the Executive decide to change those structures, that will be a longer-term process that will require legislative change through the Assembly.

I have outlined the structures under which the company currently operates. If there are difficulties in the working arrangements of those conditions, my Department will be happy to hear about them. I shall be meeting the relevant unions to discuss the future of workers under the

current arrangements. However, I assure the Member that all those issues are a matter for the review. If change is required, and it is the will of the Executive and the Assembly, legislation will be introduced to alter how the company conducts its business — if, indeed, there is a company at all.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the review and thank the Minister for his statement.

What steps is the Department taking to improve the quality of the water service from the Altmore reservoir? Is the Minister aware that many areas of County Tyrone were without water over the weekend?

Mr Murphy: I suspect that that is one of your issues, Mr Deputy Speaker. Whoever said that "All politics is local"?

I have not been made aware of problems at that reservoir. The water company is responsible for operational matters. Nonetheless, as the issue has been raised in the House, I shall ensure that it is raised with the company and that the Member receives a response in writing as soon as possible.

1.45 pm

Dr W McCrea: As an open and honest discussion is taking place, will the Minister identify clearly the amount of money that has already been paid by Northern Ireland ratepayers towards the provision of water? Will the review establish the right, if ratepayers desire it, to be charged by water metering?

Mr Murphy: The review's terms of reference apply to some specific concerns that have been flagged up, one of which is the perceived injustice of double paying. The debate was contaminated by a number of factors, one being a suspicion of privatisation and another that people considered that they had already paid for their water through the regional rate. Those people were not aware that that money from rates had not been put into water services for some time. A broad spectrum of the general public considered it unjust, as they felt that they were being asked to pay again for water services. Many of the parties that stood for election to this institution highlighted that as a major concern among the public. The review recognises that concern, and it aims to identify what people have already paid to ensure that that sense of injustice is dealt with. It also seeks to identify spending requirements.

Under the policy operated by the direct rule Ministers, which set up the water company, there was to have been a long-term transition to widespread domestic metering; that entailed metering being available to pensioner households and metering being installed in new properties and first-time connections. Metering of water supplies in the non-domestic sectors is already common, and that practice was to have been extended.

NIW (Northern Ireland Water) entered into a contract with the suppliers and were unable to implement the entire water-metering policy. The deferral of charges has implications for that, but I will raise the issue of metering with the board of NIW, and it can be considered by the review.

Mr Savage: Private developers carry out a lot of work for the Department for Regional Development (DRD), so why has privatisation of the Water Service been ruled out? I would like to see more of that.

Mr Murphy: I am not sure that the Ulster Unionist Party advocates privatisation of water services. It was important that the debate on privatisation got off to the right start. There was some suspicion that the purpose behind the water reform agenda and the establishment of the water company was to invest substantial amounts of public money into a company that would eventually be privatised. That prospect rightly excited significant concern across a broad range of political views. It is important to address those concerns: whatever the investment required, water and sewerage services would be retained in public ownership. Those terms were made clear to those conducting the review.

The range of people employed for contracting in the water services is part of the ongoing arrangements, which were put in place under direct rule. All those arrangements will be considered by the review. The money was invested for the sake of the public, and the benefits that will derive from that investment will be for the public.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for his statement and for his firm commitment that the Water Service will remain a public service. In the future, revenue for that service must be adequate, reliable and transparent, and that can be achieved in the rates system. Members have asked questions about the independence of the panel, and the Minister has answered those questions. His statement also refers to the panel being supported by an independent secretariat. From where will that independent secretariat will be sourced, and what will be its scale and role? Will this review engage consultants?

Mr Murphy: It is important to have independent panel members and to state that the review is not about privatisation.

It was also considered important to have a secretariat that was outside of the Department. Under the previous Administration, the Department for Regional Development carried out some work on the matter.

We are currently seeking from the pool of recently retired civil servants a secretary for the secretariat. The secretariat will be provided from the centre, not by DRD, and it will be resourced for as much as will be required of it. A chairperson and two other panel members will be appointed, and we will work closely with them early on to see what resources they will

require and whether outside agencies will be needed occasionally to work for them. A great deal has been put in place so far; some arrangements are ready, and other options may require outside intervention.

Many stakeholders' views have been made clear; in fact, no debate has been more clear or stark in its terms than the discussion of the financing of water and sewerage services. Therefore although many of the necessary structures are in place, it is important for public confidence that an independent secretariat be set up. My departmental officials have been working with those in the centre to achieve the degree of independence and separation from DRD that will reassure the public that the same team is not working on the matter. However, that is not to reflect poorly on the team that worked to the previous agenda: it acted on the instructions of direct rule Ministers. However, the arrangement will give an element of detachment when the debate and all that flow from it are being reviewed.

Mr B Wilson: As a member of the Committee for Regional Development, I welcome the Minister's assurance that he will work closely with the Committee. I look forward to regular consultation.

The review's terms of reference refer to a consideration of the Scottish and Welsh business models. That seems to limit discussion. Will international models of best practice that exist outside these islands also be considered?

Mr Murphy: I assure the Member that that reference was given as an example. Certainly, there is no limitation to the options for consideration. I expect that the review will engage with the Committee for Regional Development, and the Member will have an opportunity to propose from around the world any model that he feels may give us better solutions.

Mr Neeson: I welcome the Minister's assurances on water privatisation. I also hope that there will be no back-door deals. Does the Minister accept that although the European Union Water Framework Directive requires each person to make a direct, identifiable contribution to the cost of delivering water and sewerage services, it does not require water services to be self-financing? Will the Minister confirm whether the review is based on the premise of having a self-financing water service?

Mr Murphy: The review is broad in scope. The Member is correct that people considered that, until recently, they had always paid for water. The review must examine how much finance is required, the rate at which it needs to be spent, and the entire scope of how water and sewerage will be financed. European Union directives are integral in driving that agenda forward and imposing any requirements that the system must meet. All of the issues that the Member outlined are up for discussion in the review process.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Forced Marriage (Civil Protection) Bill

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

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

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension of the provisions of the Forced Marriage (Civil Protection) Bill to Northern Ireland.

I tabled the motion in order to seek the agreement of the Assembly to the inclusion of Northern Ireland in the Forced Marriage (Civil Protection) Bill, which is currently before the House of Lords. The Bill contains provisions that relate to transferred matters under the Northern Ireland Act 1998; those matters are therefore within the competence of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

The Forced Marriage (Civil Protection) Bill is a private Member's Bill, which was introduced to House of Lords in November 2006 by Lord Lester of Herne Hill. The Bill received a great deal of support from a number of eminent peers at its Second Reading on 25 January 2007.

In March 2007, the Minister for the Department of Constitutional Affairs in England and Wales — now the Ministry of Justice — decided that the Government would support the Bill, albeit with substantial amendments.

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland sought the inclusion of Northern Ireland in the Bill. Amendments to have this jurisdiction included in the scope of the Bill were duly tabled on 19 April 2007 and were moved at Grand Committee Stage in the House of Lords on 10 May 2007.

A forced marriage is one in which one or both parties are coerced into marriage against their will and under duress. Duress can include both physical and emotional pressure. A forced marriage is different from an arranged marriage, to which both parties have given their full and free consent. A forced marriage is often perceived as a south Asian issue but it can occur in many cultures and contexts. For example, consent to marriage is a prerequisite in Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh and Hindu religions. If consent is absent, the marriage can be said to be forced.

The Bill allows for a civil remedy to be sought by the person being forced into a marriage. The remedy is called a forced marriage protection order, which is a type of court order intended to prevent someone from carrying out certain types of behaviour, such as making

threats, or putting in place arrangements to take another person out of the country to be married.

The Bill seeks to allow a person being forced into a marriage to apply to a County Court, or the High Court, for a forced marriage protection order. In an emergency, it will be possible for a person to obtain an order without the respondent being given notice of the court hearing. The Bill also contains a provision to allow a relevant third party to make an application to the court on behalf of a person who is being forced into a marriage.

The Bill also contains enforcement provisions. It will be a criminal offence to disobey a forced marriage protection order without reasonable excuse.

The remedies I have described are civil family law matters, and, therefore, fall into the area of transferred matters under the provisions of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. As those matters are within the competence of the Northern Ireland Assembly, it is necessary to adhere to paragraphs 13 and 14 of the Memorandum of Understanding and supplementary agreements between the United Kingdom Government, Scottish Ministers, the Cabinet of the National Assembly for Wales and the Northern Ireland Executive Committee dated June 2000. That convention states:

“that the UK Parliament would not normally legislate with regard to devolved matters except with the agreement of the devolved legislature.”

Therefore, approval for the inclusion of Northern Ireland in the Bill has been sought from the Executive Committee, the Committee for Finance and Personnel and the Northern Ireland Assembly.

As the Westminster timetabling for the Bill is extremely tight, it did not prove possible to seek and obtain the necessary approvals prior to the inclusion of Northern Ireland in the Bill. The Executive Committee and the Committee for Finance and Personnel have considered the matter and have provided retrospective approval on 24 May 2007 and 30 May 2007 respectively.

The Assembly must now consider the principle of the extension of the provisions of the Bill to Northern Ireland. As yet there is no direct evidence of forced marriage being an issue in Northern Ireland, although some Members may want to bring some personal experiences to light in the Chamber.

There is some anecdotal evidence from the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) and the Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland that an incident in Londonderry may have involved behaviour associated with a forced marriage.

Forced marriage, like domestic violence, is often a hidden issue. I do not expect that many people will seek to use the protections contained in the Bill in the near future. However, I consider that the people of Northern Ireland should, as a matter of principle, be

afforded the same protections as their counterparts in England and Wales. The protections contained in the Bill are sensible and proportionate.

It is important that Northern Ireland is proactive in affording those protections to its community. The extension of the Forced Marriage (Civil Protection) Bill is a most expedient way to offer those valuable protections to any person who faces being forced into marriage in this jurisdiction. I hope that Members will concur with me and support the motion.

2.00 pm

Ms J McCann: I welcome the opportunity to support the motion to extend the Forced Marriage (Civil Protection) Bill to the North of Ireland. Forced marriage is a human-rights abuse and is prohibited by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. At present, there are around 300 reported cases of forced marriage each year, the majority of which involve young girls. That figure is probably the tip of the iceberg.

Forced marriage occurs in many communities. It is part of a continuum of violence and abuse that is mostly experienced by women but can also affect men. Many are too afraid to report forced marriage for fear of repercussions and because of cultural and familial pressures. Forced marriage devastates the lives of many young people because it cuts short their education and career aspirations and prevents them from making a meaningful contribution to society. In extreme cases, people have been killed in so-called honour killings. The Bill seeks to protect those who are being forced into marriage under duress and without their consent. It will enable them to apply to the courts for an injunction that will prevent others from forcing them into marriage or taking them out of the country to be married abroad.

Several weeks ago, the Assembly debated domestic violence. Forced marriages should be perceived and treated as a form of domestic violence. The most effective way to deal with forced marriage and to increase victims' protection is through better use of existing legislation, civil remedies and family courts. The Forced Marriage (Civil Protection) Bill is innovative because it introduces a new civil law that will enable victims to obtain protection orders against those who force them into marriage through harassment and coercion. The Bill explicitly states that a forced marriage is any marriage to which there is absence of full and free consent. It enables relatives and friends to appeal to the courts for protection for the victims of forced marriage. Under the Bill, courts could make orders to protect the victims and remove them from forced marriages even after they had taken place.

As victims of forced marriages are often unable to protect themselves, the Bill will enable third parties to apply to the courts on their behalf. A third party could be a concerned person, local authority or other public body. The entire process is victim led — controlled by

the victim — and the victim decides whether to seek an injunction.

The Bill also contains provision for compensation or damages to be awarded for psychological or physical harm that occurs as a result of a forced marriage. Compensation will not automatically be available in all circumstances. However, in appropriate cases, the courts may award damages for anxiety, distress, injury to feeling and any other loss sustained, such as financial loss caused by the conduct of the perpetrators.

Victims will be able to apply a local County Court to obtain an injunction that will restrain parents, relatives, community members or any other party from forcing them into marriage. As the Minister mentioned, force is defined broadly to cover physical as well as psychological coercion. The Bill will also enable County Courts to hear cases of forced marriage, which, at present, can be heard only by a High Court. That would increase awareness of forced marriage throughout the legal system and the wider community.

I support the motion to extend the Bill to the North of Ireland. It will enhance victims' access to justice because all remedies will be in one place under a specific law that makes clear that forced marriage is unlawful and a gross and unacceptable violation of human rights.

Mr Beggs: I support the proposed arrangements for the protection of people who have been forced into marriage. The legislation received widespread support in the House of Commons and the House of Lords, and Assembly Members have also demonstrated their support. It is important that the introduction of the legislation is not delayed, even by weeks or months.

We do not know who may get caught up in a forced marriage in the near future, so any delay in the introduction of the legislation could have consequences.

I support the principle of the motion. It is helpful for the same protections against forced marriage to apply in each region of the country, so it makes sense to introduce those protections here. The question is whether we wish to indicate retrospective approval. The legislation's introduction may be delayed until after the summer if we do not approve it. Therefore I hope that a clear majority of Members will indicate their approval.

The Northern Ireland legislators, when considering how the Bill would be applied here, recommended that a higher level of protection could be afforded by applying our domestic violence legislation. If anything, Northern Ireland will have enhanced protections against forced marriage. I hope that no one will need the protection that the Bill offers, but, if that protection is required, strong measures should be in place.

Mr O'Loan: The Committee for Finance and Personnel received a briefing on the Forced Marriage

(Civil Protection) Bill on 30 May from a principal legal officer in the Department of Finance and Personnel solicitor's office. She answered questions, and Committee members were satisfied with the legislation's propriety.

It has been said that forced marriage is not a major problem here. However, my party leader wants to enquire as to whether the forced marriage of the DUP and Sinn Féin will fall under this legislation.

Mr Weir: At least we will not get divorced as quickly.

Mr O'Loan: One or two people in the community would probably be willing to seek the injunction.

To include Northern Ireland in the legislation is prudent. The context has been explained about particular ethnic groups, but it is important to stress that consent to marriage is a prerequisite in all the major world faiths. Forced marriage is a deviation from the norm.

The principal remedy is to have recourse to civil law. An injunction can be obtained to protect any person who is forced into marriage. That is bolstered by the fact that it is a criminal offence to disobey an injunction, so the legislation has teeth.

Basically, we are reading Northern Ireland into the Bill. Some small alterations are being made to local legislation, which differs from legislation — particularly domestic violence legislation — in England and Wales.

The Assembly must broaden the issue to include support for people who may be subjected to forced marriage and other forms of domestic abuse — practices that are thought to occur in particular ethnic backgrounds. If people from those backgrounds encounter such problems, they may face serious cultural pressures. On top of those pressures, ignorance of the legal system and language problems may make it difficult for them to avail themselves of the remedies that exist. In those circumstances, it is important for legislators and policymakers to consider the need for more structured support for organisations that deal with matters in that field, such as Women's Aid.

Dr Farry: The Alliance Party supports the motion and is grateful to the Minister for tabling it. We are keen to see the provisions of the Forced Marriage (Civil Protection) Bill extended to Northern Ireland.

Devolution is primarily about policy innovation and about reflecting local preferences and priorities when it comes to the allocation of resources. However, when it comes to matters that reflect rights, equality and civil law, it is important to strive as far as possible to ensure that a common, consistent regime applies right across the United Kingdom.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Although the Assembly is empowered to pass its own legislation, I doubt that any such legislation would

differ significantly from the Bill that is going through Westminster. The amount of work that the Assembly would have to do to repeat that exercise would be disproportionate and produce the same outcome.

The only adjustment that the Westminster Bill requires in order for it to apply to Northern Ireland is the addition of a schedule to reflect minor technical differences in criminal penalties for breaches of civil orders. Therefore, it makes sense for Northern Ireland to be governed by the same legislation as applies in England and Wales. I hope that the Scottish Parliament will legislate along similar lines.

The Bill is a private Member's Bill that was introduced in the House of Lords by Lord Lester of Herne Hill, a member of our sister party, the Liberal Democrats.

Forced marriage is not a major issue in Northern Ireland, but there may be a problem of which we are not aware. We must be vigilant against the potential for it to become a major issue. This measure gives the Assembly a rare opportunity to be proactive in the legislative process, rather than reactive.

The Bill is aimed at combating and remedying the serious social problem whereby children and young people are forced to marry against their will. Forced marriage constitutes a serious abuse of human rights and is a form of domestic violence. The issue of domestic violence was debated in the Chamber only a few weeks ago, and a clear message was dispatched that it should be given zero tolerance. In many circumstances, forced marriage involves inhuman and degrading treatment, with punishment, coercion and even murder meted out to those who resist. A direct link exists between forced marriages and so-called honour killings.

Forced marriage is a contradiction. It is a form of sexual enslavement that sometimes amounts even to domestic slavery. As we mark the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade, we should ensure that effective measures are in place to tackle this gross abuse.

As the Minister said, forced marriage is rightly condemned across and within all the affected communities. It is important to stress that the problem occurs not solely in certain British Asian communities, but in a wide range of different settings. Many of the loudest voices calling for reform are Asian. In the 1920s, Mahatma Gandhi successfully campaigned in India for a law against the marriage of children.

The Bill provides for protection orders to prevent forced marriages from occurring. As Mr O'Loan said, other remedies are required to allow victims to vacate marriages made under duress and to provide support for them. It is important that the burden of seeking protection should not rest solely with the victims, who are often deterred from seeking help, either through fear that the criminal justice system might be applied

against family members or through a lack of the capacity to take out a protection order. Those points are addressed in the Bill.

Legal remedies alone will not solve the problem, but legislation is required. Extending the Westminster legislation to cover Northern Ireland is the most effective and simplest way to provide that protection. The Alliance Party supports the motion.

Mr Weir: Mr O’Loan touched on the marriage of political parties in this Chamber. The two previous marriages, those of Mr Trimble and Mr Mallon and of Mr Trimble and Mr Durkan, show that second marriages do not always work. The degree of disagreement within those marriages might have necessitated the creation of another branch of Relate. *[Laughter.]*

I support the motion. It is common for Members to declare an interest; I declare a lack of interest, for I am one of the few Members who are not married. I cannot, therefore, speak on the Bill from first-hand experience. However, I have promised Mr Shannon that I will indicate how much his wife welcomes the Bill.

Members may agree that taking the opportunity to speak in the Assembly on a subject of which one has no first-hand experience is not unique. I welcome the motion. We hope that the provisions of the Bill will not be used often in practice. As the Minister and other Members have said, the problem of forced marriage is not, to the best of our knowledge, widespread in Northern Ireland. It has been rare, although one case may have occurred in Londonderry.

It is to be hoped that the problems associated with forced marriages will not be imported into Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, it is important that we establish our position on those matters at an early stage.

2.15 pm

The issues of process and content have already been mentioned. The Executive could have taken a doctrinaire view and said that they wanted fresh legislation because the issue fell within the competence of the Assembly. That would not have been a common-sense point of view, nor would it have been one that provided the best protection.

Given the timescale in which the Forced Marriage (Civil Protection) Bill proceeded through the House of Lords, I believe that the Assembly will take the most expedient and most common-sense approach by extending the legislation to Northern Ireland. To simply hold a doctrinaire view and to say that we need our own legislation on the subject would have the potential to leave vulnerable people without protection.

The Assembly has the competence to extend the provisions of the Bill to Northern Ireland; it would also have the opportunity, if it so wished, to amend the Bill, make additional provisions, or, indeed, to declare it

ineffective. It is important that Northern Ireland citizens are given the fullest protection from day one.

The content of the Bill has been well covered. In particular, I welcome the provision that allows a relevant third party, by way of an ex-parte application, to apply to the courts to prevent a forced marriage. I appreciate the intent of the original legislation, but it is important, when the Department of Finance and Personnel examines the matter in greater detail, that it gives a broader definition of a relevant third party. It has already been said that social services representatives are the most appropriate people to act on behalf of children, but it may also be that the definition of a relevant third party should be drafted in a permissive manner so that the legislation does not exclude a family member, for example, from acting as a third party.

Against that, we must ensure that the application of the legislation is backed up by the appropriate evidential burden. If, for example, a family member makes an ex-parte application in order to prevent a forced marriage, we must be certain that the application is not abused by a family that opposes a marriage or that the application is not being used to frustrate the marriage of willing partners. Those issues must be examined in the medium term.

The Bill is a sensible piece of legislation, and the route that we have taken will provide the necessary protection. It is to be hoped that Northern Ireland can avoid the scourge of forced marriage. I support the motion.

Mr Hamilton: I support giving legislative consent to our sovereign Parliament at Westminster to introduce this Bill and include Northern Ireland in it. The Bill is a good piece of legislation because it will put in place protection in a proactive, rather than a reactionary, manner. All too often in this country, we legislate after something has become a problem. For example, with antisocial behaviour orders (ASBOs) or acceptable behaviour contracts, which have not always been successful.

There is no doubt, as several Members have said, that although the issue of forced marriage is relevant in parts of Great Britain, there is little or no evidence that people are being forced to marry against their will in Northern Ireland. However, just because it is not a particularly live issue in this part of the world, it does not mean that people from Northern Ireland should not be afforded the protections in the Bill. Therefore, I welcome the inclusion of Northern Ireland in the Forced Marriages (Civil Protection) Bill.

The circumstances surrounding forced marriages are, understandably, neither simple nor straightforward. Despite the protection that the Bill provides, it is never going to be easy for someone who has been forced into a marriage to come forward and apply to a court.

Mr Shannon: Does the Member agree that not only is it important that the partners in a marriage be

protected but that the rights of children are protected? There have been some high-profile cases in the Province in which young children were kidnapped and smuggled away to different countries such as Pakistan or Morocco.

Does the Member agree that it is important that any children who are involved in such situations are also protected?

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for that relevant point. That is why I welcome — as I am sure the entire House welcomes — those clauses that allow for relevant third parties, albeit that they are not exactly defined, to apply for *ex parte* protection orders.

I congratulate the Minister for tabling the motion, and I ask him to co-ordinate with his Executive colleagues to ensure that all Government agencies, such as social services, the Social Security Agency and the Housing Executive, are made fully aware of the Bill, the protection orders, and the responsibilities that those agencies may have in a post-protection-order period. Even if a person is brave enough to apply for an order to protect them from a forced marriage, many, if not a majority, will find it impossible to remain in their home.

Given that forced marriages can often occur with parental approval and, as Mr Shannon said, frequently involve very young children, if a protection order is granted, it is hard to see how that individual can easily, if ever, return home. They may be unwelcome, or they may run the risk of being forced into a marriage, irrespective of a court's ruling. In such scenarios, it is essential that assistance be afforded after the protection order has been granted in the form of, for example, a new home, benefits, counselling or support.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: I am concluding my speech, but I will give way.

Mr Storey: Does the Member agree that it is somewhat ironic that this Bill — which I welcome — is supported by the same Members who supported the legislation that introduced civil partnerships? That legislation gravely undermined the principles behind, and biblical foundations of, marriage.

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his intervention. It was a good point, well made. I agree with him that the Bill is a good piece of legislation. I warmly support it, and I hope that the House does likewise.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr McLaughlin): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. As the Minister of Finance and Personnel has explained, the Forced Marriage (Civil Protection) Bill is proceeding through Westminster. Although its provisions will primarily cover England and Wales, we are discussing the entirely pragmatic matter of extending the Bill's powers on the grounds of expediency. As family law is a transferred matter, the

Assembly's consent is required to proceed. It has already been pointed out that the Executive have indicated their support for the extension.

Mr O'Loan pointed out that the Committee for Finance and Personnel received a briefing from the principal legal officer in the departmental solicitor's office, and the Department also provided the Committee with copies of the Bill. Committee members were keenly interested in several aspects of the Bill, including how it will act as a proper deterrent to people who force others into marriage; how juveniles will be adequately protected; the application for protection orders by third parties acting on behalf of a person who is being forced into a marriage; guidance to fully explain the Bill's definitions and clauses; and how the public will be adequately informed of the legislation.

The Committee noted that, as part of the consultation on extending the Bill to the North, groups such as the Human Rights Commission and the Commissioner for Children and Young People indicated their support. Consequently, on 30 May 2007, the Committee agreed unanimously to support the Department of Finance and Personnel in seeking the Assembly's endorsement of the extension of the provisions of the Forced Marriage (Civil Protection) Bill.

The legislative effect will be the same as if the Assembly had introduced its own Bill. Of course, the Assembly can, on its own initiative, introduce any amendment that political experience or application may demonstrate is necessary. On behalf of the Committee, I indicate its support for the motion.

Mr Speaker: I am conscious that the Minister has only five minutes in which to make his winding-up speech. The Minister may wish to wait until after Question Time or he may want to make it now.

Mr P Robinson: If you are agreeable, Mr Speaker, I will make a fist of finishing in five minutes, but, if necessary, I can continue after Question Time.

Mr Speaker: I appreciate that, Minister.

Mr P Robinson: I seriously underestimated the Assembly in judging that there might not be many contributions during the debate; I had not taken account of Members' enthusiasm for the matter. I am pleased that we had a useful — albeit short — debate on the principle of the extension of the provisions of the Forced Marriage (Civil Protection) Bill.

I welcome the support of the Chairman of the Committee for Finance and Personnel and his colleagues. He was right to state that although the motion endorses the extension of United Kingdom legislation and the protections that the Bill affords, we are entitled to make whatever amendments we wish, in the light of experience. We will continue to monitor how the Bill operates after it is enacted.

The Member for West Belfast Jennifer McCann indicated that forced marriage was a violation of human rights — I agree entirely. She mentioned the fear that is associated with reporting problems that are connected to some such marriages. She is right, and that is one reason that third parties will be able to raise matters and have them dealt with. Third parties can be family members, social services, or whoever. Their role will be further defined in the legislation as it proceeds through the House of Lords. I agree with Ms McCann about the definition of forced marriage in the Tackling Violence at Home strategy. I hope that forced marriage can be a key issue in that strategy.

The Member for East Antrim Roy Beggs rightly pointed out the consequences of delay if we were to take a different course than that which I have advocated. Any delay in providing the protections that the Bill affords would be inexcusable.

The Member for North Antrim Declan O’Loan indicated that officials had satisfied the Committee. I am glad that they did — that takes a great deal of pressure off me. He referred to the marriage of the DUP and Sinn Féin, but he seems to have forgotten that the Ulster Unionist Party and the SDLP were also involved in that wedding. Therefore whether he likes it or not, there are four in the bed. *[Laughter.]*

Mr O’Loan was referring to the domination of the DUP and Sinn Féin, which came about as a result of the free will of the people. Mr O’Loan also indicated that there must be support for persons who are subjected to the type of abuse that the legislation was intended to desist. The Member for Strangford Simon Hamilton and other Members have asked me to speak to my Executive colleagues to ensure that support.

The Member for North Down Dr Farry pointed out the benefits of having a consistent regime throughout the United Kingdom. Although I do not recommend parity in all instances, we should have no lesser standards than the rest of the United Kingdom. Dr Farry referred to forced marriages as sexual slavery, and he indicated that the legislation does not, of itself, solve that problem. I agree, but the Bill provides essential protections.

The Member for North Down Mr Weir was very brave to speak in the debate and to cut down his own options. *[Laughter.]*

He thought that the legislation was unlikely to be used much. However, the existence of the Bill will dissuade perpetrators and make the need for further measures less likely. The Bill is, in itself, a deterrent.

The extension of the Bill provides beneficial protection for people in our community. I therefore encourage Members to support the motion.

Mr Speaker: We shall shortly proceed to what I hope will be a painless exercise for Ministers and

Members — Question Time. I would have preferred to have put the Question on the motion, but Standing Orders are clear that Question Time begins at 2.30 pm and ends at 4.00 pm. We shall return to the debate as soon as Question Time is finished.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister

Mr Speaker: Perhaps it would be useful to recap the procedure for Question Time. First to answer questions is the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister.

Mr Gregory Campbell is first on the list. It is not necessary to remind Members who are Members of another House of the procedure, as I am sure it is unnecessary to remind Mr Campbell, but as he is first on the list it is a good opportunity to remind all Members of the procedure.

I will call Mr Campbell, and he will rise to his feet and say, “question one”. The First Minister will respond, and I will go back to Mr Campbell for a supplementary question. I will then possibly take another two supplementary questions. Please note that there will be no points of order or interventions taken during Question Time.

East-West Linkages

1. **Mr Campbell** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister what steps are being taken to ensure that east-west linkages between Northern Ireland and the other parts of the United Kingdom are built upon and enhanced. (AQO 62/07)

The First Minister (Rev Dr Ian Paisley): I congratulate my friend Gregory Campbell on asking me the first question. He has asked me many questions in his day, and I am sure that he will ask me many more. Today is an historic day for him and for me.

The Northern Ireland Administration already have very strong links with other regions in the United Kingdom. Against that background, the British-Irish Council (BIC) is playing a unique and important role in furthering, promoting and developing those links through positive, practical relationships and in providing a forum for consultation and co-operation on east-west issues.

Since it was established, the BIC has undertaken an extensive programme of work, and there have been over 190 meetings under its auspices, including eight at summit level and 17 at ministerial level.

The Deputy First Minister and I look forward to hosting the next British-Irish Council summit shortly.

It will be held in Northern Ireland for the first time, which will help to give further impetus to the work of the BIC and enhance east-west relationships.

Officials are currently seeking dates for both the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) and BIC meetings — and that does not stand for biscuit!

Mr Campbell: I thank the First Minister for his reply. It is symbolically significant, as he has said, that the first question on the first day should be on improving links within the United Kingdom. Will he ensure that the confidence of people throughout Northern Ireland will be enhanced by taking the process we are embarked on in an east-west direction, as opposed to a North/South direction, which has taken precedence in the perceptions of many people in the past?

The First Minister: I give that assurance to my Friend. We must emphasise the importance of Northern Ireland in the east-west relationship. Mr Campbell can rest quietly in his bed at night knowing that the future of the Province is in good hands.

Mr Burnside: All Members would be in favour of good relationships between the United Kingdom institutions, but the First Minister’s statement runs contrary to the sentiment that he expressed when Alex Salmond became First Minister of Scotland. I am sure that we all like Mr Salmond as a person, but he is the most Machiavellian of politicians, and has said that he will move towards a referendum to end the Act of Union. I ask the First Minister not to fall into the trap of being part of a devolved —

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to get to the point of his question.

The First Minister: I endorse what Mr Salmond said, when he said that the Queen is the Queen of Scotland. If that brings the heckles up in the Member who has just spoken, let his heckles get up. I helped to invite Mr Salmond here, and he will be here next Monday: he will be well able to speak for himself.

Unlike the Member’s former leader who bowed the knee, we will not be bowing the knee in meetings. Those present will hear unionism at its best — something that they have not heard in the past.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Durkan: I welcome the First Minister’s announcement that he and the Deputy First Minister will soon host a meeting of the British-Irish Council here. It is important that the Council establishes its own secretariat. Not only would it support the meetings that bring together people from eight Administrations throughout these islands, it would encourage and monitor bilateral and multi-lateral contact between all the member bodies, because it is a tall order to bring the eight Administrations together. If such a secretariat were established, people would see how the British-

Irish Council traffic compares with the North/South Ministerial Council traffic.

The First Minister: I am sorry that the Member did not read the DUP election manifesto, because we have already said what he has just said.

A Member: Did we convince him?

The First Minister: We did not convince him, because I am aware of a poster that the Member had made to put on the wall, which stated that my son and I were Ulster's worst enemies. The people did not think that; they said goodbye to him and said yes to me. However, we intend to see that Ulster has its full place in any of these councils and that its voice will be heard loud and clear. I would welcome his support, and I hope that the voices of the people he represents will be as clearly heard.

Legislation

2. **Mr Kennedy** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister what legislative work has been scheduled, or is due to be scheduled, by the Executive and Ministers for submission to the Assembly before the summer recess. (AQO 55/07)

The First Minister: The Executive have given priority to considering and bringing forward legislative proposals to the Assembly. We anticipate that in the eight weeks between 8 May 2007 and the summer recess, Ministers of the Executive will have introduced five Bills in the House. That is far, far, far more legislation than the people whom he supported in the previous Executives set before the House in all their terms.

There will be legislation on welfare reform, health, libraries, the budget, and even taxis. The Finance and Personnel Minister has also sought and will obtain, in a few minutes' time, the Assembly's endorsement of the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the United Kingdom's Forced Marriage (Civil Protection) Bill. I am sure that the House will agree that that represents a positive start to the legislative programme.

Mr Kennedy: I thank the First Minister for his answer, and I congratulate him and wish him well. I have no doubt that Lord Trimble wishes him well also. [Laughter.]

Will the First Minister confirm that all answers to questions to the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister are joint responses agreed with Martin McGuinness, who is a self-confessed IRA commander?

The First Minister: A man in a glass house should not throw stones. In this House, we are in a process to give the people a fair Government, and we will put as much weight as possible behind ensuring that that is done.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle and fáilte romhat to the First Minister on this, the first occasion on which he has answered questions on behalf of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. He may have covered this in his answer to the previous question, but how does this Executive's legislative programme, in the eight weeks to the summer recess, compare to that of the previous Executive?

The First Minister: I would simply say that we are up six, while the previous Executive are still at nil.

Mr Simpson: As a senior citizen, the First Minister is in the enviable position of being able to continue to do the job that he loves. As part of the legislative plans for the Northern Ireland Assembly, will he introduce proposals to do away with the default retirement age so that people can continue to work in jobs that they love and at which that they are good?

The First Minister: We will certainly look at that issue, and I will write to my Friend about it.

Junior Ministers

3. **Mr Burns** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to make a statement on the appointment of junior Ministers. (AQO 37/07)

9. **Mr McGlone** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to make a statement on the role of junior Ministers in the Executive. (AQO 34/07)

The First Minister: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I shall answer question 3 and question 9 together. The Deputy First Minister and I appointed junior Ministers to OFMDFM on 8 May, under the authority of a determination made in December 1999, which, as it did in the previous Assembly, provided for two junior Ministers, whose functions would be to assist the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister in the exercise of their functions in OFMDFM.

The junior Ministers are assisting the Deputy First Minister and me in dealing with the enormous workload associated with all those functions. In addition, they have particular responsibility for liaising with the Assembly on Executive business, for co-ordination of policy for young people and children's issues, and for older people's issues. In order to discharge those responsibilities, they need to attend Executive meetings and to participate in them as appropriate. They are not members of the Executive, so they cannot vote on any issue for which a vote is required in Executive meetings.

The Deputy First Minister and I consider junior Ministers essential to improving relationships and communication with the House, to facilitating the business of the House and the Executive, and to taking forward the work areas that have been assigned to them.

Mr Burns: Does the First Minister agree with the assessment of Ian Paisley Jnr on 14 December 1999 that:

“The reason for appointing the two junior Ministers — Ministers literally without portfolio who can stick their noses into any business the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister decide — is to prevent proper Assembly scrutiny of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister”? — *[Official Report, Bound Volume 4, p41, col 2]*.

The First Minister: The Deputy First Minister and I have made it clear that the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister is totally committed to promoting equality and human rights. The First Minister and the Deputy First Minister are completely opposed to any form of discrimination and harassment against any citizen. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

The First Minister: I do not know whether the Member was in the House last Monday, but I remind him of what I said:

“I shall preface those responses by saying that the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) is totally committed to promoting equality and human rights. The First Minister and the Deputy First Minister are completely opposed to any form of discrimination or harassment against any citizen, and so are all in their Office and under them.” — *[Official Report, Bound Volume 22, p295, col 1]*.

2.45 pm

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. To ask the question in a different way: Ian Paisley Jnr, when referring to the appointment of junior Ministers, stated on 14 December 1999:

“It is wrong and obnoxious to have this increase in largesse for the sole purpose of feathering the nests of the First Minister’s and Deputy First Minister’s parties.” — *[Official Report, Bound Volume 4, p42, col 1]*.

Does the First Minister agree with that assessment?

[Laughter.]

The First Minister: The hon Member said that he is asking the same question in another way. My answer is not in another way; it is straightforward and plain.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat. Does the First Minister agree that the comments made by Ian Paisley Jnr, as reported in ‘Hot Press’ magazine, would have been indefensible if they had been made in his capacity as a junior Minister?

The First Minister: My answer is the same.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Miss McIlveen: Will the First Minister undertake to examine the importance of older people in society and ensure that junior Ministers consider the case for an older person’s commissioner?

The First Minister: I say to my Friend that we hope to do so. The Executive, the Deputy First Minister and I hope to report to the House on that matter in the near future.

Single Equality Bill

4. **Ms Purvis** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister what is the current position on bringing forward a single equality Bill; and what is the proposed timetable for the introduction of such a Bill to the Assembly. (AQO 6/07)

The First Minister: As the Member is aware, the matter of a single equality Bill, and some of the many complex issues associated with it, was aired in the Chamber on 22 May 2007. The timetabling of any possible legislative proposals cannot be definitively commented on until we have considered the policy issues.

Ms Purvis: Does the First Minister agree that legislative protection is absolutely vital in order to outlaw discrimination, in all its forms, of the most vulnerable people in our society? Furthermore, will the First Minister give a commitment to the House that such legislation will be introduced as soon as possible to protect the most vulnerable in our society?

The First Minister: A full regularity impact assessment is an integral part of the process of developing and introducing a Bill of that sort. As we proceed, all the issues will have to be given total and careful consideration.

Mr McCarthy: Does the First Minister agree that the implementation of a single equality Bill is vital to everyone in Northern Ireland and that the sooner that it is introduced, the sooner that any form of discrimination will be avoided?

The First Minister: That is a matter for a future Assembly; it is not in order for the hon Member to say what the Assembly wants. The Assembly is entitled to have a debate on the issue, and the views of Members have a right to be heard. The Member knows what happened when a vote was recently taken in the House on that very issue.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the First Minister give an assurance to all communities in Northern Ireland that a single equality Bill will suffer no further delay and that the legislation introduced will be of the highest standards of equality? Will the First Minister also give an assurance that, further to the offensive comments made in recent weeks by junior Minister Paisley, that Mr Paisley Jnr will have no role in equality legislation in relation to the gay and lesbian community?

The First Minister: I am not in the position to give those assurances. The House is sovereign; the House is Pope. *[Laughter.]*

Shared Future

5. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what action it intended to take to implement the document entitled 'A Shared Future'. (AQO 48/07)

11. **Mr Ford** asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to give an update on the implementation of 'A Shared Future: First Triennial Action Plan 2006-2009'. (AQO 12/07)

The First Minister: I will answer question 5 and question 11 together. 'A Shared Future' was published on 21 March 2005, and the first triennial action plan setting out how it would be implemented was published on 21 April 2006. Our officials are currently collating details on the progress that has been achieved during the first year. We will wish to consider how best to take forward this important agenda in the light of the progress report and the clear view of the House on 4 June, when Members unanimously agreed the amendment proposed by my hon Friend Mr Spratt the Member for Belfast South. The clearest and most tangible sign of the Executive's commitment to 'A Shared Future' will be the way in which we conduct business in the House to obtain a better future for all of the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the First Minister for his answer and wish him and the Deputy First Minister well in their shared future together over the next four years.

Sectarianism is a cancer that eats into the very heart of our community. An anti-sectarian policy such as that outlined in 'A Shared Future' should be at the very heart of Government, and I hope that the First Minister can reassure the House that that will be so, and that there will be a cross-departmental approach in dealing with the scourge of sectarianism in our society.

The First Minister: I would like to say to the hon Member that we do not wish to exclude; he should be included. Mr Maginness said that I am included with the leader opposite. Why then will he not participate, take the same view on these matters, and come and help us? We might even do him some good, although that might be a far stretch on some of our imaginations. However, the DUP will do its best, so I invite him to come and pin his faith on an Assembly that was elected by the free votes of the people of Northern Ireland of all religions, colours and professions. The House is the place where these matters must be debated, where the 'i's must be dotted, the 't's stroked, and we get the sort of legislation that we need.

Mr Ford: I welcome the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to an office that is, sadly, less joined than has been the case in the past. One of the key issues in the action plan is to conduct detailed research into the cost of segregation. Will the First Minister make

a statement on the Deloitte research that his Department has had carried out? In the spirit of optimism rather than realism, perhaps, might I ask when the research will be published on behalf of his Department?

The First Minister: The research undertaken by Deloitte is extremely important, but how to deal with the issues in the report is even more important. The Minister of Finance cautioned against plucking a figure out of the air. The issue is much more complex than simply reducing the research to a figure, whatever that might be.

We are starting a long journey, and it will take time for us to overcome all our problems and consign them to history. Let me be clear: division is costly. It has cost us all dearly in social, economic and physical terms. The Executive, together with the House and the Committee of the Centre, will consider the cost of division and report carefully and fully. We will publish the research shortly.

Mr Shannon: Does the First Minister agree that as a result of legislative change that he helped put in place, for the first time Northern Ireland has the stable, democratic and devolved Assembly that it deserves and that can tackle very important issues such as those in the document 'A Shared Future'?

The First Minister: I thank my hon Friend for what he has said, and I trust that we will take it to our hearts and dedicate ourselves to the task that has been laid upon our shoulders.

North/South Ministerial Council

6. **Mr McElduff** asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to make a statement about the date, location and items for discussion at the next meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council. (AQO 41/07)

Mr McElduff: Ceist uimhir a sé.

The First Minister: It is hard to answer a question when one does not know what it is. *[Laughter.]* I will try to do the miracle.

We are working towards the objective of holding the fifth plenary session of the North/South Ministerial Council in Armagh shortly. Officials are currently seeking dates for the meeting. Once the details have been agreed, we will inform the Executive and the Assembly.

Mr McElduff: I thank the First Minister for his answer, but I am disappointed that the word "shortly" features in his answer rather than a specific date, time and location. Further to that, will the First Minister confirm that Members can look forward to an early convening of the agreed North/South parliamentary forum involving Members of the Assembly and those of the Oireachtas — both the Dáil and the Seanad —

so that crucial areas of North/South co-operation in education and health can be taken forward?

The First Minister: I wonder where the hon Gentleman has been living, because there has been an election in the Irish Republic, and his party did not do too well.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

The First Minister: We will have to wait until the Irish Republic gets a new Government, because we cannot have a Council meeting until that happens. Perhaps the Member could use his influence to hurry them up. If he does so, we will say thank you, and we will be at the Council meeting.

Mr Hamilton: The First Minister will well remember how, under previous arrangements, North/South structures were unaccountable to the Assembly. Will he confirm that as a consequence of the many hard-fought gains that he secured, the North/South Ministerial Council and the implementation bodies will be fully accountable to the Assembly?

Some Members: Hear, hear.

The First Minister: I am delighted to say from the Dispatch Box today that that is the way things stand, thanks to the Democratic Unionist Party. The North/South Ministerial Council is responsible to this House, and we will see that it will be responsible.

Racial Equality Strategy

7. **Ms Lo** asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to give an update on the development of the second year action plan under the racial equality strategy. (AQO 10/07)

The First Minister: I begin by welcoming the Member for South Belfast to her first Question Time. It is a considerable honour for the Northern Ireland Assembly and its Members to have among their number the first ethnic Chinese person to be elected to any national Government or Assembly in Europe. In that matter, Ulster again leads the way.

I would also like to highlight the fact that we very deliberately and consciously decided that our first event after devolution was to be a reception for people from minority ethnic groups and migrant workers. It was held in this Building on 9 May 2007 and was a clear signal from the Deputy First Minister and myself of our intention, and that of the Executive, to achieve racial equality and an inclusive society for our increasingly diverse community.

Mr Speaker, as you will be aware, the first year's implementation action plan was published in late April 2006.

3.00 pm

Work is well advanced on the second year's implementation action plan. At the request of the Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities and other minority ethnic representatives, we are allowing additional time before publication for discussions to take place between minority ethnic representatives and Departments about departmental contributions to the plan. We are convinced that those discussions will lead to a more strategic, focused and long-term action plan for racial equality across all Departments —

Mr Speaker: I must advise the First Minister that Question Time for the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister is up. I remind Members that questions on the list that have not been reached will receive a written reply as soon as possible.

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

Mr Speaker: I indicated at the start that I would take no points of order during Question Time. I am happy to take points of order afterwards.

Agriculture and Rural Development

Single Farm Payment

1. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she will detail (a) how many farmers have not received their Single Farm Payment in total for 2005/2006, due to the duplication of fields; (b) the total amount of money outstanding; and (c) what course of action she proposes to resolve this matter, to ensure that farmers receive their outstanding payments. (AQO 20/07)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. As many will know, the duplication of fields issue occurs when more than one farmer claims the same piece of land for the same subsidy scheme. In 2005, that proved to be a problem mainly because farmers and landowners did not agree who should claim the land before they submitted their single farm payment applications. In 2005, there were nearly 3,500 duplicate field cases. The number reduced significantly in 2006, to around 500 cases. At this stage, 183 farmers have not received their single farm payment for scheme years 2005 and 2006 due to the duplication of fields. As those farmers have not responded to letters from my Department, we have been unable to process their claims and make payment. It is not possible for me to give the total amount of money involved as that depends on the outcome of any agreement on who has the right to use the land concerned to establish and activate single farm payment entitlements and on whether any penalties are involved.

Although I recognise the difficulties that such farmers face, I cannot intervene in such matters as it is up to the parties concerned to agree who has the right to use the land to claim the single farm payment. I encourage those involved to come to an agreement so that the Department can finalise the claims and release payment.

Mr Irwin: In several recent cases when the independent appeals panel that was set up to adjudicate between farmers and the Department has ruled in favour of the farmer, the Department has overruled the panel. That begs the question why we have an independent appeals panel whose decisions can be overturned by the Minister's Department. Will she assure the House that any appeals panel decision in favour of the farmer will not be overturned by her or her Department?

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Ms Gildernew: The appeals procedure is designed to provide farmers with a second opinion in cases in which they feel that the Department has reached a wrong decision. After considering the facts of the case and the relevant European Community legislation, the panel comes to a view as to whether the Department has acted in accordance with that legislation and makes a recommendation to me. I make the final decision. I will generally accept the panel's recommendation, but I cannot accept a recommendation that would result in a payment of European money outside the scheme rules, as that would lead the Department open to disallowance by the Commission.

Mr Elliott: European Commission guidance given to me by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development — if the Minister does not have it, I am happy to provide her with a copy — states that the “competent authority”, which in this case is her Department:

“takes the decision whether or not an error is ‘obvious’, and whether or not it should lead to any reductions or exclusions”.

In the light of that guidance, will the Minister give the House a commitment that she will review whether all those duplicate fields cases can be considered under the obvious error criteria?

Ms Gildernew: As I explained at the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee, I will look at the legislation and the restrictions on the Department again. I will certainly try to find a way around the problem but I cannot give the Member a definitive answer on what the outcome is likely to be.

Commercial Forests

2. **Dr McDonnell** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what assessment she has made of her department's commercial forests, their profitability,

and what plans there are for expanding the commercial forests of Northern Ireland. (AQO 31/07)

Ms Gildernew: I met recently with senior Forest Service officials and discussed a number of forestry issues, and I visited Belvoir Park in the Member's constituency. My Department has undertaken an extensive review of forestry policy resulting in the publication of ‘Northern Ireland Forestry: A Strategy for Sustainability and Growth’ in March 2006. A key theme of that strategy was sustainable forest management, which requires a balance to be achieved between economic, environmental and social objectives. In developing the policy, an economic appraisal provided objective evidence of the costs and benefits arising from the management of the public forest estate. It concluded that forests should contribute to the development of the rural economy, through timber production and by contributing to the quality of the environment and provision of public access.

The net operational cost of the forestry programme is about £15 million. That covers the full costs associated with sustainable forest management including commercial operations, social and recreational provision and the delivery of a wide range of environmental benefits. The forest service generates receipts of around £6 million per annum, mainly from timber sales. However, the largest monetary benefit from the forestry programme is an £18 million contribution to the economy through the value added by the wood-processing industry here. Approximately 1,000 rural jobs depend on the continued success of the forestry and timber-pressing sector.

The forestry strategy also includes a long-term aim to double forest cover over the next 50 years. The Department's rural development plan is the primary vehicle through which funds will be made available to support forestry expansion. I will encourage the creation of a wide range of forest types, for example, traditional coniferous and broadleaf plantations capable of producing timber, new native woodlands in support of the biodiversity strategy and short-rotation coppice for conversion into woodchips, and I will encourage the use of wood in the production of renewable energy. The increase in forest cover and the substitution of wood for fossil fuel will contribute to Government policy on alleviating the problems of climate change.

Dr McDonnell: I congratulate the Minister on that answer, which was much more extensive than I had expected, and for getting to grips with this particular issue, because I think it is important. However, has the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, in the light of the report, explored the possibility of exploiting EU set-aside land for agricultural purposes in order to expand the forestry programme perhaps more quickly, let us say in 25 years?

Ms Gildernew: We already have about 1,000 people involved in forestry management. I accept what Dr McDonnell says about set-aside land; obviously, the Department and the industry are working to find ways to best use the land. However, the challenge for the Department is to find ways to ensure that there is some recompense for land that is put into forestry, and it will be seeking to identify land that could be used for forestry and that could increase our forestry cover.

I do not know where I will be in 50 years, but I would like to effect those changes in a lot less than 50 years. The Department will do everything it can to increase the forest cover.

Mr Shannon: I also thank the Minister for her reply. Forests have been called the “lungs of the world”. As the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development is responsible for the trees in Northern Ireland, how effective has the replanting scheme been, and what is the Department doing to generate more interest in the scheme?

Ms Gildernew: With regard to replanting, there are a number of points that need to be covered. The forest programme, which includes afforestation and improvements in the overall performance of the industry, will assist in securing many benefits. For example, a recent investment of £30 million in a new wood-processing plant in County Fermanagh has put us ahead of our competitors. The investment provides increased efficiency in producing sawdust and timber, coupled with local generation of heat and electricity using timber residues to power the plant and produce wood pellets for commercial and domestic use. The Department’s work in managing the timber supplied from forests has been important in creating the confidence in the private sector to make that investment.

Replanting is also needed for reasons of recreation and biodiversity. The Department is considering such species as the hen harrier and the red squirrel, and is attempting to ensure that all elements of the forestry programme are covered, resulting in maximum benefit for everyone.

Objective 1 Status

3. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans her Department, as “rural champion”, has to fill the gap made by the impending withdrawal of Objective 1 status; and how rural community development opportunities will be maximised, both in her own budget and in EU funding. (AQO 43/07)

Ms Gildernew: Negotiations are taking place with the European Commission for a substantial rural development programme, to be implemented over the next 6 years, with over £500 million of spend. That

programme has four important priorities, the first of which concerns improving the competitiveness of agriculture and forestry. Our proposed measures will specifically target farmers by improving training and business practices, modernising farms and supporting those in less favoured areas.

The second priority is to improve the environment and the countryside by supporting land management through organic farming and woodland grant. Those measures will deliver real benefit to the countryside environment and will go a long way to helping us meet our European environmental and sustainable development obligations.

The third priority concerns improving the quality of life in rural areas and encouraging diversification of economic activity. There will be a suite of measures that will significantly support the whole of the rural community. Rural businesses and jobs will be created, tourism potential increased, and villages and towns regenerated. Basic services will be provided for the rural community, and our cultural heritage will be maintained and enhanced.

In addition to those significant opportunities for social and economic enhancement, there is provision for rural community development to be maximised, both through this programme and by way of the new Peace III and cross-border INTERREG programmes. Moreover, I have bid for funds to put in place a national rural community development programme that will provide further opportunities for capacity building and leadership skills in the rural community, including in particular the networks required to support the EU programme.

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome the Minister’s comments and commitment to rural communities. However, will she assure the House that she will sharpen up the practices in her Department? Under N+2, millions of euros had to be distilled through other Departments in order to meet the spending commitment, and her Department, as “rural champion”, has an obligation to assist potential applicants and to ensure that the money is spent where it was intended.

Ms Gildernew: It is something of which I am mindful. I want to see money spent, spent well and spent on time. There is no need to go on at length now; it is a priority, and I hope that we shall be successful in that objective.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Barry McElduff for a supplementary question.

Mr McElduff: I am not nominated for a supplementary in this instance.

Administrative Burden and Better Regulation

4. **Mr Burns** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans she has to reduce the bureaucratic and administrative burden on members of the farming community in their dealings with the department. (AQO 36/07)

7. **Mr McHugh** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what work has been progressed on better regulation and simplification. (AQO 49/07)

Ms Gildernew: Better regulation and simplification are among my top priorities. I am aware of the concern and frustration, felt especially by farmers, about the extent of the regulatory burden on the agrifood sector, and I have taken action to begin improvement. However, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development is not alone in imposing such a burden on farmers. The Environment and Heritage Service of the Department of the Environment is a key player.

Therefore, I have agreed with the Minister of the Environment, Arlene Foster, the terms of reference for an independent review to improve the way in which the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Department of the Environment operate to meet regulatory policy objectives and EU obligations, such that compliance by the agrifood sector is facilitated and the cost of doing so reduced. I have arranged for a copy of the terms of reference to be sent to the Agriculture Committee, and it can be made available to anyone who wishes to see it.

The review will cover the full extent of the regulatory controls applied by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Department of the Environment that impact on the agrifood sector. It will quantify the administrative burden that these regulations place on the sector and will embrace administrative processes, inspections and sanctions, and all associated documentation and interaction with agrifood businesses.

3.15 pm

When I met the Ulster Farmers' Union's representatives last week, I discussed better regulation with them, and I invited them to assist the review panel by identifying the main areas of regulation that need to be reduced and simplified. Following on from that, the review panel should have meetings with farming — and other interested — stakeholders, as necessary, to hear, at first hand, their concerns and suggestions for improvements.

I expect the conclusions and recommendations of the review to be set out in a simplification plan, with a clear plan of action to reduce and simplify regulation wherever possible and sensible. I must be assured that the level of regulation and bureaucracy imposed on farmers is no more than absolutely necessary and that

it is delivered in a way that best allows the farming industry to get on with the business of farming.

An independent review panel will carry out the review, supported by a project team and a project management board, and I anticipate that it will take approximately six months to complete.

Mr Burns: In a reply to a written question from my colleague P J Bradley regarding the single farm payments, dated 24 May 2007, the Minister explained that 2,456 applications had not been finalised. That was approximately two weeks ago: what is the figure now?

As many of the outstanding claims relate to unintentional errors, will the Minister outline what plans are in place to differentiate between unintentional errors — however large or small — and proven fraudulent claims?

Ms Gildernew: I do not have the exact figure in front of me. The Department is working on improving the regulation, and, as I outlined today and in the Assembly last week, we need more information about many of those claims, and we have asked the farmers concerned to contact us. We want people to help us to help them, and we need more information to finalise the outstanding claims.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for elaborating on the various issues in her answers. Probably the biggest difficulties that farmers face are farm inspections and resolving problems — intentional or otherwise — when they occur. In the future, I hope that the Department will not simply create jobs in policing and inspecting farms just for the sake of it. Can the Minister tell us when the review will actually start?

Ms Gildernew: The review will start as soon as possible, and the Department is keen to put the panel in place. The review panel will be independent of both the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Department of the Environment. We hope that it will complete its recommendations in about six months.

Farmers should expect to be able to see benefits next year, and I will not stand over any official who wants to carry out inspections for the sake of it. To comply with EU regulations, any inspection that is carried out must be fit for purpose and must be necessary. There will be no further inspections than are absolutely necessary.

Dr W McCrea: Does the Minister not realise that there is tremendous frustration in the farming community because people do not see any progress, and Departments seem to be more concerned with satisfying and processing EU audits than in assisting farmers?

In light of the Ulster Farmers' Union's imaginative initiative on reducing agricultural bureaucracy, will the Minister first acknowledge that it is a major problem? Secondly, what steps is she taking to alleviate that

problem, and when will the farmers see that the bureaucratic red tape has been removed to allow them to do what they do best, which is farming?

Ms Gildernew: The Chairperson of the Agriculture Committee knows that I concur fully with what he has said. He knows also that I have a great deal of sympathy for the farmers' plight.

My father is a farmer, and I regularly hear of farmers' frustrations from many people with whom I am in contact. Of course I will do all that I can to ensure that there is no more regulation than is absolutely necessary. The target is 25%, and, if I can, I will ensure that that target is met and passed, because I wish to do away with as much regulation as possible to simplify matters and free farmers to do what they do best.

Alpha-nortestosterone

5. **Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans she has to reduce the hardship for those farmers who lost cattle due to on-farm emergency slaughtered animals testing positive for alpha-nortestosterone. (AQO 56/07)

6. **Mr P J Bradley** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what she intends to do to resolve the range of problems associated with wrong conclusions reached following positive evidence of alpha-nortestosterone being found in casualty male animals presented for slaughter during 2006. (AQO 25/07)

Ms Gildernew: The Department is required by law to remove any male bovine from the food chain that tests positive for alpha-nortestosterone, regardless of whether evidence of illegal administration has been found, and it is permitted to do so without incurring legal liability to pay compensation. However, in recognition of the fact that farmers have lost animals without any evidence of wrongdoing on their part, I have decided that all farmers who have had on-farm emergency slaughter (OFES) male animals condemned as a result of a positive alpha-nortestosterone test will receive a goodwill payment equal to the market value of the animal at the time of slaughter.

Hormone testing has reverted to normal arrangements since 28 March 2007. That means that only animals suspected by the official vet at the abattoir of having been administered an illegal substance will be subject to the full range of hormone tests required by EU law. Any male OFES animal that tests positive for alpha-nortestosterone will be removed from the food chain, and the owner will receive payment from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, provided that no evidence of illegal administration is uncovered.

I have also met with farmers who have been affected, and I have apologised for any disturbance or indignation that might have been caused by on-farm searches, particularly at the outset when the level of follow-up action was greater before the emergent evidence prompted a progressively reduced approach. Furthermore, I have undertaken to initiate a review of the handling of the alpha-nortestosterone issue, and to consider what lessons can be learned. The outcome of that review will be made public.

Mr McKay: Why did herd restrictions last so long? Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

Ms Gildernew: Unfortunately, movement restrictions are an integral part of the action that is necessary when a positive result is found to allow a standstill period for follow-up testing to be completed.

Although the Department aims to remove herd restrictions as quickly as possible, when this issue first surfaced, the upsurge in new cases meant that the testing facilities at the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute were stretched, and priority was accorded to testing samples from on-farm emergency slaughter animals at abattoirs.

Mr P J Bradley: I thank the Minister for her answers, and I welcome the planned review of the 2006 debacle.

Nevertheless, I am disappointed that the Minister appears to be supportive of the official line on the matter, and I do not accept the word "goodwill" in relation to what should be termed rightful payments. I note the Minister's apology, but does she agree that that is not a full apology without full payment for actual and consequential losses and compensation for the stress inflicted on many families, and that the so called ex-gratia payment could be viewed as an effort to save on the real cost of rectifying the legacy of the errors made by her Department?

Ms Gildernew: The goodwill payment will be made in respect of the condemned animals, and will reflect the market value at the time of slaughter. However, it is a mistake for the Member to say that I am giving the official line. The official line would have been that the Department was fully within its rights under EU law to not pay out. I have asked the Department to follow the route of giving money to farmers who have suffered a loss to cover an ex-gratia — or goodwill — payment.

The short answer on compensation for consequential loss is that it will not be forthcoming. The Department has done more than it is legally required to do, and most farmers will be happy to receive an apology, a goodwill payment and a review into the matter. I want to ensure that lessons have been learned, and that farmers' situations have been considered.

Mr McCallister: Although I welcome the compensation and the apology, I must take issue with the Minister on this matter. I met one of my constituents at church yesterday, and he was not doing cartwheels of enthusiasm about the compensation on offer. Through no fault of his own, and through the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's incompetence, he has lost thousands of pounds and had his name blackened because his herd has been restricted. He has incurred additional feed costs through having to keep his animals in housing until June, having to let them out, losing condition on them and then having to accept the worst price. The Minister must re-examine this.

Mr Speaker: Does the Member have a question?

Mr McCallister: The Minister must do something about this matter.

Mr Speaker: That is not a question.

Mr McCallister: Will the Minister do something about this?

Ms Gildernew: Perhaps the Member should not be talking in church.

At the open forum of the Ulster Farmers' Union, I was asked whether the Department would apologise. It has done that, and has gone a step further by giving a goodwill payment, which is just under £80,000. There will be a review to ensure that the Department learns from this. That is as far as I am able to go.

Business Rates

8. **Mr Burnside** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she will undertake to oppose any extension of business rates to farm buildings, which are currently exempt from this charge. (AQO 1/07)

Ms Gildernew: I am not aware that there are proposals to extend business rates to farm buildings.

Mr Burnside: I thank the Minister for that clear statement that she is not aware of any such proposals. Is the Minister aware, however, that HM Treasury is about to introduce business rates in England and Wales for farm buildings and agricultural holdings under the provision of council tax? Will she give a commitment to the House that there is no one in her Department negotiating or considering the extension of business rates to farm buildings or agricultural holdings in the Province?

Ms Gildernew: If such a proposal were to be put forward, I would, of course, consider it very carefully, taking into account the views of stakeholders. I would wish to ensure that any such proposal were subject to rigorous rural proofing. I would also want there to be careful consideration of the impact of such a proposal on farm businesses and to take account of the need to encourage diversification in the use of farm buildings.

I can tell the Member that officials are not engaged in any review. Not for the first time, I am glad that we do not live in England or Wales.

Sea Anglers

9. **Mr Cree** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what effect the Marine Bill White Paper, 'A Sea Change', may have on sea anglers in Northern Ireland. (AQO 52/07)

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat. The Marine Bill will have no effect on sea anglers here, as the proposals to establish a chargeable licensing scheme and introduce powers to impose bag limits apply — again — to England and Wales only.

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister for her reply. As she will be aware, the consultation ended on Friday 8 June 2007. I would like to know whether her Department has had any communication with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) on the issue.

Ms Gildernew: I have no plans to introduce chargeable licensing for sea anglers here. The stakeholder proposals for sea angling focus on the commissioning of a study to investigate the value of sea angling to the local community as well as the effective promotion of sea angling as a valuable and sustainable way of using marine resources. Stakeholders also wish to see improved angling infrastructure and the protection of sea-angling stocks. I have been talking to the industry, and there is no desire to introduce chargeable licensing here.

Planning Policy Statement 14

Mr Speaker: Mr Willie Clarke is not in his place, so I call Mr McElduff.

11. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what assessment she has made of the impact of 'Planning Policy Statement 14: Sustainable Development in the Countryside' on the rural community; and what discussions she has had with her colleagues on the Executive regarding this issue. (AQO 38/07)

Ms Gildernew: The Member will be aware that Policy Planning Statement 14 (PPS 14), 'Sustainable Development in the Countryside' is the responsibility of the Department for Regional Development (DRD). As Minister designate, I met with a broad range of rural stakeholders in order to hear their views on PPS 14. It was clear to me at that meeting that there is a strong level of public feeling on that subject and that the planning restrictions are having a significant effect on many rural dwellers. For many people in rural areas the policy has been extremely restrictive and has had an adverse effect on their quality of life: I share that view.

Although the objectives of PPS 14 may be understandable, the strength of public opposition to the mechanisms that are currently in place is very clear. I am aware that Conor Murphy considers rural planning to be an important priority and that he is giving due consideration to the full range of views expressed during the public consultation on the draft policy. PPS 14 is a complex and topical issue that is also the subject of judicial challenge. Resolution of those issues will be important.

3.30 pm

Culture, Arts And Leisure

Football Offences Act

1. **Mr B Wilson** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans he has to commence a consultation on legislation equivalent to the Football (Offences) Act 1991 in Great Britain, as promised in 'A Shared Future: First Triennial Action Plan 2006-2009' (AQO 26/07)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Poots): Primary responsibility for leading consultation on legislation equivalent to the Football (Offences) Act 1991 in Great Britain rests with the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) under the Northern Ireland Act 2000. I can confirm that Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) officials have been working closely with NIO officials on the development of proposals on the introduction of new public order offences in Northern Ireland similar to those in the Football (Offences) Act 1991. I will shortly be considering those proposals and plan to discuss them with the NIO Minister responsible for that area.

Mr B Wilson: I welcome the Minister's response, and as a regular spectator at international matches at Windsor Park, I welcome the improvements that have been made by the Irish Football Association (IFA) in recent years to eliminate sectarianism and hooliganism. However, there is still a problem that must be tackled, particularly as the Union of European Football Associations is getting much more strict about that sort of conduct. The Criminal Justice (Scotland) Act 2003 identifies an offence of crimes aggravated by religious prejudice. That should be considered as a basis for new legislation. Will the Minister discuss that with the Northern Ireland Office?

Mr Poots: The proposed legislation deals with pitch invasion, the throwing of missiles, offensive chanting — which has already been mentioned — the control of alcohol, ticket touting and the need for banning orders similar to those that exist in Great Britain.

Mr Hilditch: Some tremendous work has been carried out by the IFA recently, through the Football

for All programmes such as Give Sectarianism the Boot and Give Racism the Boot. Does the Minister believe that the Northern Ireland Office has been obstructive towards introducing legislation?

Mr Poots: I, too, acknowledge the work that the IFA has done on that. We should also acknowledge the work that has been done by the amalgamation of the official Northern Ireland supporters' clubs, which was awarded the Brussels International Supporters' Award in September 2006 for its efforts to stamp out sectarianism in the game. This is not exclusively a matter for legislation. It is a matter that can also be dealt with by other means. I would not go as far as to say that the NIO has been obstructive in where we are at present. However, DCAL is very willing to work with all bodies, including the NIO, for the introduction of the legislation.

National Stadium

2. **Mr Burnside** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps he is taking to distance himself from all decisions relating to the location of a national stadium on the Maze site. (AQO 2/07)

Mr Poots: None.

Mr Burnside: I thank the Minister for a short answer. That is excellent. The Minister will have learned by now that the location of the Maze stadium is contentious, not least because of the proposal by some to have a commemoration of terrorism and criminality enshrined in the stadium. Does the Minister agree that, with the different views from the GAA and the football associations, soccer and rugby union, there is a need for a truly independent financial feasibility study before it is finally decided, once and for all, where the national stadium should be? Given that the Minister has a vested interest in his own constituency, will he not be seen to be partially involved in the decision-making process if he does not set up an independent inquiry?

Mr Poots: I am not sure where the Member has been. The independent feasibility study took place and was completed in March 2005, when Angela Smith announced that the stadium would be sited at the Maze. After the independent feasibility study — I understand that the Member perhaps had other things happening in 2005 that may have clouded his knowledge of current issues — the decision was made by others, and we will examine the issue as a full business case. If the figures stack up, the matter will proceed.

Mr P Ramsey: The Minister is clearly aware of the current level of interest in the Maze project and that the project was discussed at the previous three meetings of the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee. Will he give a commitment to retain the Maze

consultation panel to enable it to give a presentation and an appraisal of its findings and to answer questions on how the decision on the site was reached?

Mr Poots: The panel is not the responsibility of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure; it is the responsibility of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. I understand that that office has stood down the panel.

Maze Prison

3. **Mr S Wilson** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how much his Department has spent on the Maze Prison to date. (AQO 42/2007)

National Stadium

5. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether his Department is in possession of a comprehensive business plan in relation to the proposed national stadium at the Maze. (AQO 61/07)

Mr Poots: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 3 and 5 together.

Given that the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure does not have responsibility for the Maze/Long Kesh prison, to date it has spent no money on it. Up to the end of the previous financial year, the Department had spent a total of £879,392 on the development of proposals for a multi-sports stadium at the site of the former prison.

In response to Mr Beggs's question, my Department, in conjunction with the Strategic Investment Board, is in the process of finalising a business plan for the proposed multi-sports stadium at the Maze/Long Kesh site. That plan is being developed with the support of the governing bodies of the three sports that have agreed, in principle, to participate in the project.

Mr S Wilson: I thank the Minister for the assurance that his Department has spent no money on the promotion of what many people see as a shrine to those who committed suicide in the Maze Prison in the 1980s. Will he also give an assurance that no money will be made available for that project in future and that his Department will not lobby the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister for money for any such project that most people in Northern Ireland would consider obnoxious?

Mr Poots: The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure will deal exclusively with proposals involving the stadium. Any other issues will fall within the remit of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. I have every confidence that that office would not wish to establish a shrine at the Maze site or support any proposal that would be offensive to victims of the

Troubles or would rub their noses in it. I will leave that matter with the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister.

Mr Beggs: I have listened carefully to the Minister's remarks. The full cost of the stadium ought to be disclosed because each part of the project will have implications for the other parts. Will the Minister ensure that the Maze business plan will be fully transparent and that a cost breakdown will be provided? What is the latest cost of the stadium, the H-block shrine, the motorway slip roads and the potential railway spur? What is the full cost of the project, not only to his Department, but to other Departments? Who will be responsible for any cost overrun and the annual running costs? Other stadiums, such as the Millennium Stadium in Cardiff, have faced those costs.

Mr Poots: We are working on a full business case for the overall plan and site. That business case will be completed in the autumn. I will therefore not be able to answer questions such as those that the Member asked until then. I assure the House that when that information becomes available to me, and after the Departments have had an opportunity to analyse it, it will be made available to Members and the public for their perusal.

Attendance at Sporting and Cultural Events

4. **Dr McDonnell** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what sporting and other cultural events he plans to attend over the next four weeks. (AQO 33/07)

Mr Poots: Since taking up the portfolio of Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, I have attended nine sports events and 22 cultural and arts events. Those events have taken place in 12 constituencies. I intend to continue that commitment, and I plan to attend three sports and 14 cultural and arts events over the next four weeks.

In addition, I intend to represent the Department and Northern Ireland at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington.

Dr McDonnell: I congratulate the Minister on his first Question Time and wish him well in his post. I also congratulate him on his intention to attend the Smithsonian festival.

Mr Kennedy: Is he going to the Twelfth?

Mr S Wilson: Are you, Danny? *[Laughter.]*

Dr McDonnell: I shall leave that to the Minister's discretion. I presume that that may be one of the cultural events that he has listed to attend.

Is the Minister aware that all sporting bodies are delighted that he is in post as a devolved Minister of

Culture, Arts and Leisure? Will he endeavour to attend as many events as possible and meet the hopes and expectations of as many people as possible? There is a big expectation — for people have high hopes that devolution will result in much more energy and investment in sporting and cultural events here.

Mr Poots: It is useful to recognise the contribution that sport makes to our community's well-being. As the Minister with responsibility for sport, I want to support those people who are engaged in sport. I shall exclude nothing and will deal with each invitation as it comes into my office.

Mr Moutray: Does the Minister have any plans to meet his counterparts in other elected jurisdictions?

Mr Poots: Yes. I hope to meet Tessa Jowell in the not-too-distant future. As yet, no other meetings with other Ministers have been arranged.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Does the Minister value the contribution made to sports development, and wider society, by the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA)? Is he aware that this coming weekend will see the biggest single cultural or sporting event in the province of Ulster with the match between Tyrone and Donegal in Clones? If he were so inclined, would the Minister welcome an invite to the game?

Mr Poots: As I have already said, all sports make a significant contribution to the well-being of society. I do not seek to be exclusive; nor should others seek to be exclusive by saying that only one sport is doing a good job. All sports are doing a good job. I have not received an invitation to the game, but I will deal with each invitation as it comes. I have, however, made it clear that I do not intend to attend any events held on a Sunday, as that is a day that I spend with my family.

Funding for Arts and Sport

6. **Mrs M Bradley** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the approach he will take to mitigate the reduction in funding available for the arts and sport, resulting from the prioritisation of lottery spending on the London Olympics. (AQO 58/07)

Funding Applications from Voluntary and Community Projects

12. **Mr Armstrong** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what assessment has been made of the possible impact of increased Big Lottery funding for the 2012 Olympics on potential funding applications from voluntary and community projects. (AQO 57/07)

Mr Poots: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I shall take question 6 and question 12 together.

The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure is making bids for funding as part of the comprehensive spending review 2008-11 in order to support the development of sport and the arts. Those bids will take account of reductions in funding that have resulted from the prioritisation of National Lottery spending on the London Olympics.

The Department is also making bids for funding for sport and the arts under the investment strategy for Northern Ireland 2008-18. Lottery funding is additional to Exchequer funding. Although the Department will seek to address the shortfalls in lottery funding for arts and sports, it is necessary to bear in mind that other competing priorities exist.

The Big Lottery Fund has made a public commitment that provides forecasts of lottery income. Those forecasts are maintained. Current programmes will not be materially affected by the diversion of funds to the Olympics. The fund has advised that its undertaking to provide 60% to 70% of its funding to the voluntary and community sector will be unaffected.

In Northern Ireland, the 60% to 70% commitment to the voluntary and community sector will mean that the Big Lottery Fund will invest a minimum of £60 million in the voluntary and community sector between 2006 and 2009. Furthermore, the Big Lottery Fund has committed to extending that undertaking to the period 2009-13 and will protect, in cash terms, the amount that would have been paid to the voluntary and community sector in that period at the levels of funding that the fund expected to deliver before the diversion in funding to the Olympics.

Mrs M Bradley: Will the Minister outline the infrastructure and geographical spread of centres of excellence and new provision?

Mr Poots: Absolutely. One of the first events that I attended as Minister was in Strabane in West Tyrone. I also attended two events in the Member's constituency of Foyle. The most recent amount of money that was awarded was more than £2 million, and further money will be going to that constituency.

Perhaps the Member wishes some other constituencies to have a bite of the cake, with not as much going to Foyle. We will have to see how that pans out.

3.45pm

Mr Storey: What steps has the Minister taken to ensure that Northern Ireland hosts its fair share of Olympic events in 2012? Is he aware of the centenary of the famous gold-medal win by Mr Kennedy Kane McArthur from Ballymoney, which coincides with the 2012 Olympic Games? Will the Minister ensure that his Department does everything to celebrate that centenary?

Mr Poots: I hope that the Department can give support for that centenary.

The Department secured £53 million from the first investment strategy for Northern Ireland (ISNI 1) for the Olympic Games, and that funding is up for distribution. One of the first elements of that distribution will be the announcement of the location of the 50-metre pool in Northern Ireland. There is a significant number of applications for that funding. The funding will provide a tremendous boost for sport in Northern Ireland. It will enhance sporting venues in Northern Ireland and, in conjunction with the sports strategy for Northern Ireland, it will significantly improve the opportunity for sport to move forward and for top-class sportspeople from Northern Ireland to compete at the highest level.

Ulster-Scots Learning Site

7. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to make a statement on the Ulster-Scots learning site commissioned by the Ulster-Scots Agency; and on whether this represents value for public money and highest academic standards.

(AQO 17/07)

Mr Poots: The Ulster-Scots learning site was commissioned by the Ulster-Scots Agency from Stranmillis University College to develop curriculum and teaching materials for primary and secondary schools and adult learners. The Education and Training Inspectorate conducted an inspection of the unit in 2006 and concluded that the quality of the work is good and that it fulfils the terms of its remit well.

Mr McCarthy: I am disappointed in the Minister's response in that it did not inform the House of the cost of the site. I understand that the cost — and he can deny it if it is not true — was £1 million for a website that has been a single idle page for over a year. Does the Minister regard that as good value for money?

Mr Poots: I cannot confirm Mr McCarthy's figure of £1 million for a single-page website. I will look into the matter, but I very much doubt that it is an accurate figure.

Mr McCausland: The Minister's answer on the involvement of Ulster Scots in the curriculum illustrates the progress that is being made in relation to Ulster-Scots language and culture. Can the Minister tell the House when the current proposals from the Ulster-Scots Academy Implementation Group, which were submitted to the Department in August 2006, will be put out to consultation?

Mr Poots: It is my intention that the consultation will be launched before the summer recess.

Ulster Orchestra

8. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to state what resources have been made available to the Ulster Orchestra to organise workshops in schools and colleges.

(AQO 45/07)

Mr Poots: The Arts Council of Northern Ireland provided the Ulster Orchestra with revenue funding of £1.925 million in 2007-08. That funding is towards core costs and includes the salary of an education officer, whose work includes organising workshops, concerts and master classes in schools and colleges and major education events.

Mr Dallat: Will the Minister undertake to ensure that adequate resources are made available so that the Ulster Orchestra has the funding to organise workshops in schools? Will he accept that an appreciation of music is the right of everyone and that there is a chill factor when it comes to classical and orchestral music? Will the Minister further ensure that children from different social backgrounds have an opportunity to appreciate the music of the Ulster Orchestra?

Mr Poots: It would be impossible for me to assure the Member that every child will have the opportunity to participate in workshops and performances by the Ulster Orchestra. However, I am confident that as much as possible is being done, within the limitations of available resources, to encourage and support closer association between young people and the Ulster Orchestra. It is a question of educational resources, for which my ministerial colleagues in the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning are responsible.

With the impending roll-out of the revised statutory curriculum, it is a matter for individual schools to decide which programmes and resources they should use.

Mr Ross: Does the Minister agree that access to Ulster Orchestra workshops should be available to all schools?

Mr Poots: Ultimately, the Ulster Orchestra provides a superb outlook for Northern Ireland. The quality of the music is second to none. The opportunity for educational purposes should be used as much as possible. I encourage my departmental colleagues to examine that issue.

Mr Speaker: Question 9 has been withdrawn and will receive a written answer.

Ulster Grand Prix

10. **Mr Craig** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether he would consider additional funding for the Ulster Grand Prix, given the additional £150,000 allocated to the North West 200 by the Secretary of State.

(AQO 3/07)

Mr Poots: Decisions about funding for motorsports events, including the Ulster Grand Prix and the North West 200, are, in the first instance, a matter for the governing bodies for motorsport, as represented by the 2&4 Wheel Motorsport Steering Group Limited (2&4 Wheel MSG). I understand that, to date, the 2&4 Wheel MSG has received no formal application for additional funding — similar to that received from the organisers of the North West 200 — from the organisers of the Ulster Grand Prix.

I should point out that the £150,000 allocated by 2&4 Wheel MSG this year was not exclusively for the North West 200. Approximately £50,000 was spent on venue improvements, and £100,000 was used to purchase safety equipment, which is currently held by 2&4 Wheel MSG and is available for use at other motorsports events including the Ulster Grand Prix.

Mr Craig: What measures does the Minister intend to put in place to ensure the long-term future of this event, which is one of the most prestigious in the Province?

Mr Poots: This is first and foremost the responsibility of the organisers of the Ulster Grand Prix. However, I can confirm that DCAL, Lisburn City Council, 2&4 Wheel MSG and the organisers of the Ulster Grand Prix are discussing securing the long-term future of the event.

Waterways Ireland

11. **Mr Gallagher** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure when he expected work on the new headquarters for Waterways Ireland to commence; and to indicate the number of staff expected to be employed there in the future. (AQO 28/07)

Mr Poots: Work commenced on the site of Waterways Ireland in April 2007. The building is designed to accommodate 81 members of staff.

Mr Gallagher: I am grateful to the Minister for taking Question Time so smoothly and moving it on so quickly to this point. Many of us thought that we would not reach question 11 today.

The investment that the Minister mentions, as well as the work that is under way, is a very significant development — particularly for the jobs and the economy of the border area. Furthermore, it represents a big step forward for all-Ireland co-operation. Does the Minister plan to build on the extension of the North/South waterways?

Mr Poots: A paper was tabled at the Executive meeting of 7 June on the subject of restoration of the south-western section — namely, Upper Lough Erne to Clones — of the Ulster Canal, and possible funding sources. We are very well aware of the significance attached to this cross-border project, and we are currently considering the available options.

Lord Morrow: What is the Minister doing about the difference in pay of those employed in Waterways Ireland?

Mr Poots: Differences in pay between some staff members in the North and their counterparts in the South have arisen for several reasons. The chief executives of the North/South bodies have raised concerns about the pay and conditions of service of their staff. Those are complex issues, and the North/South Ministerial Council joint secretariat, in consultation with its sponsor and finance departments in both the Northern Ireland jurisdiction and in the Republic of Ireland, is considering them with a view to agreeing a possible response.

Non-indigenous Languages

13. **Dr Farry** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans he had to expand the consultation relating to the Irish language to deal with the needs of users of the principal non-indigenous languages in Northern Ireland. (AQO 15/07)

Mr Poots: The consultation on draft clauses for Irish language legislation arose from a commitment by the British Government in the St Andrews Agreement to introduce an Irish language Act.

My Department's current remit with regard to considering language legislation in Northern Ireland is, therefore, specifically in relation to Irish.

The policy regarding non-indigenous languages in Northern Ireland is being taken forward by the race forum, led by the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. My Department is chairing the race forum's thematic group on language. That group is currently preparing a report on how to reduce the inequalities faced by the users of minority ethnic languages in Northern Ireland when accessing public services.

Dr Farry: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he recognise that the users of the Irish and Ulster-Scots languages are essentially seeking to have their cultural aspirations protected through legislation? Will he also recognise that there are a large number of people in Northern Ireland who are speaking non-indigenous languages and have difficulty in accessing services through limited language skills, and who would benefit from having legislation in place to ensure that all public bodies, including those that do have good practice and those who do not, have a consistent approach to ensure that all sections of the community can access services, and that they are not denied them because of limited language skills?

Mr Poots: Legislation does not have to be introduced to identify priorities and difficulties. In that respect, my

Department has spent over £1.1 million on language translation in 2005-06. Of that £1.1 million, around £70,000 was spent on Ulster Scots and Irish, and the rest was spent on minority ethnic languages. There is a strong indication that there is a far greater demand for translation from the ethnic communities than there is from the indigenous languages.

Mrs I Robinson: Does the Minister have any evidence from his Department's consultation on the Irish language legislation to show that there is cross-community support?

Mr Poots: My officials are currently analysing the responses to that consultation. I understand that there is a strong diversity in the responses, and it may be difficult to establish cross-community support.

Mr Speaker: Ms Anna Lo and Mr Thomas Burns are not in the Chamber. I call Mr Francie Brolly.

Irish Language Legislation

16. **Mr Brolly** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if, following the consultation on the Irish language legislation, he will enact it without delay, as referred to in the St Andrews Agreement. (AQO 7/07)

Mr Poots: The consultation on draft clauses for Irish language legislation closed on 5 June 2007, and my officials are analysing the responses received.

There were a high number of responses — somewhere in the region of 11,000 individual written responses. The Member will appreciate that in the circumstances it will take some time to process those.

Mr Brolly: How much need was there for a consultation in the first place? The question of the Irish language is about a right. This is the only part of these islands that does not have legal protection for the indigenous language. Surely what is good enough for the Scottish Gaels and the Welsh is good enough for us here in the Six Counties?

Mr Poots: According to the Member's Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, who was speaking a few minutes ago, that is not the case. Northern Ireland has its own issues and has its own way of doing things. The consultation process is now closed. However, there is a history of Ministers not abiding by the responses of consultations as the sole means of taking an issue forward — academic selection is a case in point.

I will look at all the issues involved. Along with rights go responsibilities, and those include financial and fiscal responsibilities. All of the issues will be investigated, and I will report back to the House, probably in the autumn, with a decision on the matter.

Mr Speaker: That concludes this afternoon's Question Time. We will now return to the item of business that was interrupted at 2.30 pm.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr McElduff: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I apologise for revisiting the issue, but the temperature is very high outside.

Can a ruling be made on the matter of wearing a jacket in the House? It is simply a matter of custom and practice, which does not appear in Standing Orders. Where does the protocol come from? I would appreciate it if you were to investigate that matter further and report back to the Assembly. I have asked my colleague Gerry McHugh to raise this matter in the Committee on Standards and Privileges. There is strong feeling among some Members that when the temperature is high, not just in the Chamber but outside as well, that it should not be an absolute requirement to don a jacket in the House.

4.00 pm

Mr K Robinson: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker, earlier, I observed that Mr McElduff was improperly dressed in the Chamber. This afternoon, his sartorial elegance enhances the case for Members to wear jackets in the Chamber.

Mr McCarthy: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Can there be clarification on the length of time that a Member or Minister has to speak during Question Time? Lengthy questions and answers eat into the time that is available. Are there any restrictions?

Mr Speaker: The first matter has been raised in the House on a few occasions. I intend to discuss it further with the Business Committee and bring an answer to the Assembly.

On the second point of order, it is not for the House to decide how a Minister answers a question: that is up to Ministers themselves.

Mr P Ramsey: Further to Mr McElduff's point of order, Mr Speaker, you will recall that I raised the same question earlier. In the absence of flexibility on the convention, a proper air-conditioning system should be installed in the Chamber.

Mr Speaker: That suggestion has already been made in the House. It is hoped that, during the summer recess, the problems with heating and acoustics in the Chamber will be dealt with.

Mrs Long: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The code on Members' dress states what men should wear in the Chamber but makes no reference to women at all. Perhaps that is because of the great confidence that there is in women's ability to dress correctly. If the code is to be reviewed, however, perhaps that matter should also be examined.

Mr Speaker: I am sure that when it considers appropriate male dress, the Business Committee will also consider appropriate female dress in the House. That is also important.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Forced Marriage (Civil Protection) Bill

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension of the provisions of the Forced Marriage (Civil Protection) Bill to Northern Ireland. — [*The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr P Robinson).*]

Mr Speaker: We must return to the business that was suspended at 2.30 pm.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension of the provisions of the Forced Marriage (Civil Protection) Bill to Northern Ireland.

Supply Resolution for the 2007-08 Main Estimates

Mr Speaker: The next item on the Order Paper is the motion on the Supply resolution for the 2007-2008 Main Estimates. The Business Committee has placed no time limit on the debate. However, the Committee has agreed that the proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to speak. All other Members will have five minutes.

Mr Donaldson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Can you clarify for the benefit of the House your guidance on the time limits for speaking in the debate? Is it the case that the Minister will be curtailed to 10 minutes, but that other Members will not have a limit placed on them?

It would be regrettable if the Minister were curtailed in his remarks, when other Members were not.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee deliberated on that for quite a while. It was agreed that the Minister would get 10 minutes to move the motion, all other Members would get five minutes, and there is to be no restriction on the Minister when winding up.

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

That this Assembly approves that a sum not exceeding £7,079,776,000 be granted out of the Consolidated Fund, for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Foods Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the year ending 31 March 2008; and that resources not exceeding 7,922,535,000 be authorised for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Foods Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the year ending 31 March 2008.

I seek the Assembly's approval for the spending plans for 2007-08 as set out in the Main Estimates volume that was laid before the Assembly on 31 May.

The resolution is proposed under section 63 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which provides for the Minister of Finance and Personnel to make proposals to the Assembly leading to cash appropriations from the Northern Ireland Consolidated Fund. In doing so, I act on behalf of the Executive, which has adopted the financial allocations for 2007-08 as set out by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland before the restoration of devolution.

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

Although not ideal, it is the most pragmatic and sensible way of ensuring the continued and uninterrupted provision of public services. The underlying financial allocations have been known to all relevant organisations for some considerable time and have been used in preparing the operating plans of those organisations and the deployment of staff and other resources.

Although the spending plans do not necessarily reflect where I would like us to be at this stage, and although members of the Executive, individually and collectively, will wish to review the plans against their own priorities, it is important that we acknowledge the financial allocations that we have inherited for this financial year.

The key point is that the budgetary allocations to Departments have been in place since January and have been used to further allocate budgets for this year to health trusts, education and library boards, agencies and other public bodies and to support other logistical issues associated with the planning and delivery of public services.

Changing those plans or simply creating uncertainty in them at this stage would have material and possibly detrimental implications for underlying core services. Departments have temporary statutory authority to spend money on public services based on the Vote on Account that was authorised at Westminster in February 2007, but that will begin to run out from the end of July. Therefore the Assembly needs to pass a Budget Bill before the summer recess to ensure that money can continue to flow into public services for the rest of this financial year.

The Committee for Finance and Personnel has confirmed that since there has been appropriate consultation on the spending plans in the motion, the Budget Bill may be given accelerated passage.

The Executive will have an opportunity to review spending plans during this financial year, particularly taking into account any emerging flexibility through the normal in-year monitoring process. Any reallocations of funding will be made in accordance with the

Executive's emerging priorities rather than those used by the previous direct rule ministerial team.

The main purpose of today's motion, therefore, is to seek the Assembly's approval for the use of resources by Northern Ireland Departments and certain other bodies for the year ending 31 March 2008. The resources sought are summarised in the Main Estimates volume that was placed before the Assembly on 31 May 2007.

The motion also seeks the Assembly's approval for the issue of cash from the Northern Ireland Consolidated Fund for the 2007-08 financial year as detailed in the Main Estimates. The amounts of cash and resources covered by today's resolution are additional to the Vote on Account that was passed at Westminster last February. That Vote on Account amounted to approximately 45% of the total provision for the previous financial year.

It has enabled funds to continue to flow to public services during the early months of this year, until the Main Estimates, which are before Members today, could be considered and approved.

Once the amounts set out in today's resolution are added to the Vote on Account, the total cash and resources for which approval is sought will amount to some £12.1 billion and £14.1 billion respectively. In considering the issue, I remind Members of the significance of the Supply resolution for which approval is sought. The resolution is the basis upon which the Assembly authorises the expenditure of Departments and other bodies in carrying out their functions.

One of the Assembly's fundamental responsibilities is to authorise expenditure and hold Departments and other funded bodies to account for the use of that money. The Supply resolution, once approved, is a precursor to the Budget Bill (Northern Ireland) 2007, which I will introduce later today. Subject to the approval of the Assembly and the Bill's achieving Royal Assent, which will enable it to become law, the Supply resolution will provide the formal legal authority for Departments to incur expenditure for the remainder of this financial year.

The Supply resolution is based upon the following plans for expenditure. Allocations for the 2007-08 year were first set in the course of the 2004 Priorities and Budget process. At that time, proposed allocations for 2007-08 represented the third year of a three-year Budget, which covered the period 2005-06 to 2007-08. Allocations for the two latter years were subject to reconsideration and revision by direct rule Ministers in the course of the 2005 Priorities and Budget process.

That process involved the publication of draft proposals in October 2005, followed by a period of public consultation. Those plans were due to be reconsidered in 2006 as part of the planned 2006 Priorities and Budget process. However, following the UK Government's decision to postpone the 2006 spending review and, instead, initiate the 2007

comprehensive spending review, the local process was similarly postponed. That was on the basis that the 2007-08 year had already been reviewed twice, and in the absence of a national spending review, no additional resources would have been made available for the year in question. Hence, any review would have been extremely limited in scope. Instead, the plans, as published in 2005, were subject to marginal changes by the Secretary of State in January of this year.

Although I have highlighted that a consultation process on the spending plans in question took place, Members will agree that such future consultation will be materially enhanced by the presence of devolved Ministers in all Departments, supported by the Assembly and its Committees in developing, scrutinising and prioritising future spending proposals.

In that regard, I draw Members' attention to the distinction between today's process, which reflects spending plans for this year, and the work, which has already started, on developing spending plans for the next three financial years.

A key component of that work will be the consideration and development of a Programme for Government, the vehicle by which the Executive will determine their strategic priorities over the coming three years. Financial allocations for 2008-09 and beyond will underpin those priorities as the Executive seek to address the key challenges facing Northern Ireland.

The Programme for Government will be an important document that will set frameworks, both for the Budget allocations to Departments, and the plans contained in the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland. The Executive plan to publish draft versions of the Programme for Government, the Budget and the Investment Strategy for full consultation in September.

The detail of departmental spending plans is set out in the Main Estimates, of which Members have copies. I do not, therefore, propose to go through that material in any detail, although I will endeavour to answer questions that Members may have. Members will appreciate that I will be unable to respond in detail to specific queries. In such cases, where appropriate, I will ask the relevant Minister to issue a written response.

I wish to clarify one issue: the Executive's decision not to proceed with the introduction of charges for water and sewerage services in this financial year will, as Members are aware, have a cost of up to £75 million.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has made provision for that cost in the context of our ongoing engagement on the composition of a financial package for the Executive. At this stage, however, that provision has not been built into the Main Estimates and associated Budget Bill, which reflect the opening position for the financial year. Provision for the cost of that issue will be contained in the Supplementary Estimates and

related Budget Bill to be brought to the Assembly later in this financial year.

4.15 pm

In summary, it should be noted that the Estimates and associated Budget Bill set the framework for departmental spending in 2007-08 and reflect spending plans initially determined by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. Looking ahead, the Executive are to commence work on the development of a Programme for Government and associated spending allocations for 2008-09 and beyond. The Executive and the Assembly will be able to reflect better their own priorities in the context of that process.

I recognise that the process for seeking Assembly approval is not ideal and, in particular, that the underlying spending plans have not previously been considered by Members. However, that is a consequence of the fact that the devolved Government was restored after the start of the current financial year and several months after budgetary allocations to Departments and public services were announced and put in place by direct rule Ministers.

The restoration of the Assembly has presented us with an enormous opportunity to deliver a better future for everyone and to provide the excellent public services that the people of Northern Ireland expect and rightly deserve. For the longer term, we have the opportunity to establish our own priorities through a new Programme for Government, underpinned by detailed spending plans and a longer-term investment strategy. In the future, that will enable us to take forward a strategy to strengthen the local economy, encourage investment by making Government more responsive and alert, and improve and enhance our infrastructure.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr McLaughlin): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Senior Department of Finance and Personnel officials briefed the Committee for Finance and Personnel on 16 May 2007 and 23 May 2007 on the subject of the Main Estimates and the associated Budget Bill that gives legislative approval to the Estimates to be introduced by the Minister later today.

The Main Estimates and the Budget Bill represent part of the culmination of the annual Budget process, which would normally have involved the Assembly and its statutory Committees in several consultative stages. The Executive have already adopted those financial allocations, which were originally set out by the direct rule Administration. As the Minister of Finance and Personnel has said, that is not ideal, but it is a sensible and pragmatic approach for dealing with that reality.

The timing of restoration presented an unusual situation in that the devolved Administration inherited a direct rule Budget in which Departments had already

committed resources allocated for this financial year. At this juncture, there is no scope for the Assembly to effect changes to the departmental spending plans for the current financial year, as the Budget for 2007-08 has already been agreed.

Previously, and during the first functioning Assembly mandate, the underlying spending plans were brought forward in the Main Estimates and reflected the position established during the budgetary process, which would then have been subject to Assembly consideration and approval. During the first mandate's annual Budget process, statutory Committees had the opportunity to consider departmental position reports on the following year's Budget and on the subsequent Executive's position paper that followed. A draft Budget would normally be presented to the Assembly in the month of September and put out for public consultation. That would have provided an additional opportunity for further input from the statutory Committees. The Assembly would then consider the finalised Budget in December of that year.

We are some way down the line already in respect of the 2008-09 Budget, for which this Assembly is responsible. Although departmental position reports will not be published this year, the process of budgetary preparation is taking place in the Departments, and I encourage the Assembly's statutory Committees to engage with their respective Departments on that matter. A draft Budget will be presented to the Assembly in the early autumn. I also encourage the statutory Committees to consider their Departments' contributions to the draft Budget as a high priority after the summer recess.

We also need to return as soon as possible to an annual financial process that gives the Assembly and its Committees maximum opportunity to scrutinise and contribute to the Budget preparations. That will greatly enhance the consultation process, and, I believe, the buy-in. I thank the Minister for his commitment to that.

Members should also be aware that the Assembly and its Statutory Committees can have some limited input to the reprioritisation of resources in the current year via the in-year quarterly monitoring rounds and that supplementary estimates will have to come back to the Assembly after the in-year monitoring round process has been completed. That is not ideal, but it is an outcome of the timing of the return of the devolved Administration. The Finance and Personnel Committee will constantly engage with departmental officials and the Minister to maximise the opportunities for full and meaningful consultation in the future. I support the motion.

Mr Beggs: I appreciate that the Executive and the Assembly have inherited the expenditure proposals from the previous direct rule Administration and that there is limited room for manoeuvre or for increasing the proportions of the Budget to different Departments. Departments and other public bodies received their

initial allocations long before now and have made their plans accordingly. To change proposals at this stage would cause significant problems.

Financial decisions are being taken against the background of the Chancellor's comprehensive spending review, and indications are already emerging that future departmental expenditure in the rest of the United Kingdom will be tight. That will follow into Northern Ireland by way of its future block grant allocations through the Barnett formula. Therefore there will be an increasing need to prioritise and to make what will sometimes be difficult choices.

I was hoping to see some additional new moneys and financial announcements alongside the Consolidated Fund following the Chancellor's so-called package. The following quotation is from the Finance Minister's election manifesto:

"it is essential that an incoming Executive has the necessary resources to make a difference to people's lives. This will require a financial package for Northern Ireland.

We have made it clear that resolution of this issue is a precondition for establishing devolution. Northern Ireland will never have a better opportunity to make up for the decades of underinvestment during the Troubles or to help us compete economically with the Republic of Ireland.

Without such a package, Northern Ireland will face the prospect of massive local taxes, being economically uncompetitive and lacking the funding for essential infrastructure."

He presented that to the people, but I am questioning what has been delivered. I was expecting additional financial announcements following the discussions with the Chancellor.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: No. I have got a lot to get through, and I wish to make my points uninterrupted, please. I will take questions when I come to the end.

Following the election, and prior to devolution, the First Minister designate even threatened to prevent devolution if the package was not of sufficient value, and he was seeking £1 billion. He made it clear that that was what he wanted. What were the details of the package? Why are Members not hearing about how £1 billion — or at least a significant portion of it — can be spent in this financial year?

On 22 May, I tabled a question for written answer to the Finance Minister asking him for details of the value of the Chancellor's package. I was disappointed that he merely directed me to the Library where he had placed a copy of the speech that the Chancellor had made in the House of Commons. I was aware of the contents of that speech, but I was hoping to learn something more from the Finance Minister. However, no light was shed on the subject.

Everyone in Northern Ireland accepts that the Chancellor was applying smoke and mirrors with his

statement, and no one could ascertain the exact worth of the package or its value.

Michael Smyth, who is a respected economist in Northern Ireland, recently wrote an interesting article in the 'First Trust Bank Economic Outlook and Business Review' magazine. In it, he stated that:

"Closer scrutiny of the UK Government's 'peace dividend' package of £1bn shows that it contains £400mn pledged by the Republic of Ireland (RoI) Government".

Therefore, of that total, there was no new money from the British Exchequer. Michael Smyth went on to write about:

"£200mn of accelerated public asset disposals".

When public assets are sold off, it is possible to reinvest those treasures in other useful capital projects. Therefore, that is essentially a slight acceleration of the sale and return of moneys that Northern Ireland would always have been entitled to.

The article refers to "£200mn of end-year flexibility". When capital projects are entered into and contracts are made, it is normal practice that, provided the project is committed to in one financial year, they are allowed to be passed on.

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

Mr Beggs: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I thought that mention had been made that there were no time limitations during this debate. Could that be clarified?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Each Member has five minutes to speak.

Mr O'Loan: It is a fact that there will be very little room for manoeuvre in this year's Budget. Ministers will feel a sense of frustration, as they will want to deliver new thinking during this financial year, but they are going to be subject to significant constraints.

Members are aware that we are inheriting a Budget from direct rule Ministers. We are also aware that it has been largely committed to Departments and to agencies. Furthermore, because of underspending in the past, the practice now is to over-budget by approximately £150 million. Therefore, that amount of money will have to drop out of the spending plans to make the Budget balance. More work is required to make Budgets that work and are deliverable in the time indicated.

As the Minister said, this is the final year of a three-year spending round, and a big effort is required to deliver on targets to which commitments have been given. That is another factor that is creating pressure this year. The Assembly and all of its Committees should be considering that issue and demanding that commitments are met. Many Government reforms that will deliver savings in the long run need to have money spent on them now — it is important to spend in order to save. However, it will be hard to stick to that, as a

lot of pressure exists. Nonetheless, in order to get public sector efficiency enhanced in the longer run, that should be treated as a priority.

The public should be made aware that there is a big programme for delivery this year, but that it will be largely along the lines that have already been drawn. Like others, I was struck at election time by the number of complaints that I received from people who were disappointed by aspects of the front-line delivery of the Health Service. Those complaints did not come only from users of the Health Service, but from front-line health professionals. The most basic areas, such as respite care, are inadequate, and that is placing an intolerable burden on families and on carers.

The condition of our rural roads is appalling — many of them can rightly be described as Third World. Indeed, “Third World” was the term that was used by my colleague, John Dallat, to describe the railway line near Cullybackey that buckled in the heat last weekend. Translink openly admitted that the cause was underinvestment and that there was a need to upgrade. That basic lack of quality in our infrastructure is unacceptable.

The community and voluntary sector plays a vital role in our communities — it is crying out for structured support, clarity and the ability to plan. We have an education system that has high achievements but also has unacceptable weaknesses. Those issues must be addressed, as must the skills deficit in the economy.

The issue of affordable housing has been highlighted in the Assembly, and the Minister for Social Development has made that her first priority. Social housing is in need of a large building programme, and the Minister has said:

“give me the money and I will build the houses.” — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 22, p134, col 2*].

The public rightly has high expectations of the Assembly and expects serious planning to take place during this year for initiatives that will be rolled out in the next few years. The focus is already shifting to the next three years and the UK-wide comprehensive spending review. That will be the first time in 10 years that such an exercise has taken place. Due to efficiency exercises coming on-stream, there should be some flexibility in that process, and we look forward to that.

Along with the programme for 2007, let us show that we plan to tackle people’s concerns.

4.30 pm

Lord Morrow: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. In an attempt to keep the House breathing, is it possible that someone could attend to the air conditioning? If not, I may start to agree with Mr McElduff.

Mr Deputy Speaker: We have asked that the air conditioning be checked. May I request that the door

behind us be left open, even though it is not customary for it to be? It is warm in the Chamber.

Dr Farry: There is acceptance on these Benches that this Budget is entirely the legacy of direct rule Ministers. Indeed, 45% of the Budget has already been approved in the Vote on Account. Therefore the Alliance Party will support the motion in line with its responsibility to ensure that services can continue in Northern Ireland.

That said, for the sake of future public-expenditure plans, we should take the opportunity to consider several critical economic and financial issues that arise out of the Budget. First, Northern Ireland is in an unsustainable financial position. The Main Estimates rely on a subvention approaching £7 billion from the British Exchequer. That equates to almost half the public expenditure in the Budget. Although it is right and proper for the wealthier regions in any nation to subsidise the poorer ones, the scale of the subvention to Northern Ireland is at the extreme end of the scale.

That points to the relatively small nature of our local tax base. Another way in which to look at the problem is to examine the public-sector share of gross domestic product (GDP). The Department of Finance and Personnel’s draft regional economic strategy puts Northern Ireland’s public share of GDP at over 70%. That figure is well out of line with most Western European social democracies and, historically, with some communist states, never mind with the rest of the world. The situation has worsened rather than improved since devolution in 1999. A better understanding is needed of the interaction between public expenditure and the potential for our private sector, particularly on the problem of “crowding out”. Some radical thinking is required on how to finance Northern Ireland better than has been done in the past.

To date, conventional wisdom has been that the Executive’s role has been to wrest as much money from the Treasury as possible, or, at the very least, to maintain an iron grip on current allocations. That approach has continued throughout the current efforts to secure a financial package for Northern Ireland. The Alliance Party strongly supports the concept of a financial package for Northern Ireland. It is important to give a new devolved Administration the chance to deliver. However, there are dangers in trying to garner more and more funds, only to apply them in the way in which we currently provide public services.

It is critical that any injection of additional funds be linked to a series of reforms. A financial package must be based on the concept of “invest to save”. Investment in the right areas can make Northern Ireland more sustainable. There are many inefficiencies in Northern Ireland’s public finances. The Minister has already accepted the need to reach 3% efficiency savings right across the public sector. Last week, the Committee for

Finance and Personnel discovered that 12% of last year's finance budget went unspent and now forms part of an end-of-year finalisation. That is a figure in excess of what should be the norm for any Department.

The Alliance Party has already highlighted the annual cost of about £1 billion that is involved in managing a divided society. That is not a flight of fancy from the Alliance Party but a serious issue. OFMDFM has regarded the matter seriously enough to spend tens of thousands of pounds of public funds on commissioning detailed research into the problem. Society has a choice: to continue to manage a divided society and incur the opportunity costs that go with it; or, over time, to redirect those resources into shared and better public services for all.

Some Members have been quick to pour cold water on our suggestions. Others have been sceptical about how quickly such funds could be released. The problem is real and creates a major distortion in our economy — it needs to be addressed. The Alliance Party has never said that it is not a major challenge to release those funds, nor that they can be released over a short period. Indeed, some additional investment in the short term, perhaps as part of a genuine financial package, may be required to change the pattern of service delivery that will unlock those greater resources. It is critical that those considerations be taken on board in the forthcoming comprehensive spending review. To put it bluntly, I have heard little appreciation from Ministers about the urgency of doing that.

I am also concerned that Workplace 2010 is proceeding on the basis of continuing the existing spatial provision of services without considering the opportunities for building a shared future.

The Alliance Party believes that it is important that the Executive set targets for making Northern Ireland more financially sustainable. We cannot just take a simplistic approach and focus solely on economic reforms ahead of social reforms; we also need to make fresh investments in public services such as free personal care for the elderly. Both processes must take place in parallel. Our proposals on free personal care were placed within the context of the comprehensive spending review. Budgets cannot be fixed in any society; as circumstances and demographics change, there will be a need to reprioritise within public expenditure. Some budgets will rise and others will need to be reduced.

The Chairperson of the Audit Committee (Mr Newton): I advise the House that, as required under section 66 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, the Audit Committee has approved the Estimate of the expenses for the Northern Ireland Audit Office for the year 2007-08. The Estimate — for £8.8 million — has also been scrutinised by the Department of Finance and Personnel, as required by the Act, and by the Public Accounts

Committee. Furthermore, during the period of suspension, the Estimate was also examined and approved by the Public Accounts Committee at Westminster.

The Audit Committee examined the Estimates at its meeting on 7 June, to which the Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland was invited. Before the Committee approved the Estimates, it examined a number of key points, including the increase in the Estimate since last year; the capital costs associated with office refurbishment; and the growing demands on the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO), such as increased demand for information technology systems audits. After being questioned in some detail on the Estimates, the Comptroller and Auditor General and his staff were able to convince the Committee that the amount requested was prudent and would enable the auditors to deliver their key services and outputs.

In the autumn, the Audit Committee will meet the Comptroller and Auditor General to examine the NIAO's corporate and business plans. The Committee will also undertake a review of the expenditure and pressures on expenditure early in 2008. That will enable us to be fully prepared to undertake a thorough scrutiny of the Estimate for 2008-09.

I take this opportunity to thank the Deputy Chairperson and members of the Audit Committee for their help in the scrutiny of the Estimate.

Ms Anderson: Ba mhaith liom labhairt maidir leis an mholadh seo. To meet the provisions of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and the objective needs requirements of the St Andrews Agreement, a key objective of public expenditure must be to contribute to changing the patterns of disadvantage and to tackling inequality. Such patterns have been comprehensively documented in Government statistics and reports.

The criterion required to discipline the expenditure of the respective Departments and the overall expenditure of the Executive, all Departments, public bodies and agencies is as follows: they must show due regard to the potential impact that their policies, programmes and projects may have on changing existing patterns of disadvantage and tackling inequality. Unless such a systematic approach to public expenditure is taken, the current patterns of exclusion and inequality will deepen. Not only would that be against the agreed policy and legal commitments of the Executive and the Assembly, but it would be inefficient and counterproductive, given the necessary linkage between building prosperity and tackling exclusion.

Responsibility for measuring expenditure on policy options against such requirements and in the context of data provided by the Government's own reports should already be the daily practice of Departments, but that is clearly not the case. It is not enough to add aspirational but tokenistic anti-poverty language and commitments to

existing spending patterns. Do the existing expenditure patterns effectively tackle the problem? That is the question that needs to be answered.

If we are serious about what we are doing, it is insufficient and incompetent not to know the answer. New Deal is the cornerstone of the current anti-poverty strategy, and current figures show that only 13% of Catholics and 18% of Protestants got a job after being on the New Deal programme.

Moreover, the programme is specifically not working in areas with higher levels of unemployment and disadvantage such as Derry, Strabane and north Belfast. Why are we spending money on a programme that is not working where it needs to be working and that is not producing results in the areas of greatest disadvantage?

The answer given last week was that New Deal is a national programme — I am sure that the British Minister Gordon Brown would not be pleased by that very poor excuse. He wants the money to be spent well, and so do we. We should be looking at how all public-procurement expenditure can integrate economic and social requirements. It is perfectly possible to work out how that can be done in practice because it is about effectiveness, efficiency, and using existing money to best effect.

Each policy, programme or project must have specific, measurable, realistic and time-bounded objectives that will address disadvantage and tackle inequality. There needs to be a public, transparent process of recording impact and change, including the honest recognition of failure, combined with the identification of corrective action. There should be a full interdepartmental perspective and the removal of any silo culture in delivering results.

The assessment of impacts and future actions should be published annually, at least, with a requirement to report the widest participation, particularly of marginalized groups, in setting objectives, future actions, and timetables.

Addressing current patterns of economic and social disadvantage is the essential connection between building economic prosperity and tackling social inclusion. Unless policies and expenditure are required to make that connection primary and measured, existing patterns will continue to replicate, and the gap between the prosperous and the poor will continue to widen.

The Budget affords the Minister and the Executive the opportunity to ensure that expenditure plans should operate in that way. Members should not be asked to agree Budgets simply to extend current patterns: we must understand how public expenditure is going to be restructured to change existing patterns of disadvantage and tackling inequality. I ask the Minister to explain how he intends to promote the necessary restructuring.

That is not difficult to do, and it should have been done already.

Of course, it is always the case that additional moneys are required to effect changes, but my point is that unless the core spending of Government is restructured according to these requirements, rather than simply adding aspirational words to existing ways of doing business, the patterns of disadvantage and inequality will continue to worsen. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before I call the next Member, I wish to advise Members that although I have asked the staff to look at the heating, the temperature is still rising and it is still very hot in the Chamber. Members may remove their jackets if that is more comfortable and I will still call them to speak.

Mr Weir: I will endeavour not to raise the temperature in the Chamber any further.

The debate has been constructive. Although all parties acknowledge that this Budget is essentially following on from direct rule, I have yet to hear any party indicating that it will oppose the Budget, and I think that is a responsible position.

Members who have been in the Assembly since 1998 will know that it is important that, through the budgetary process and during the lifetime of this Assembly, we learn from the mistakes of the past. Over the next few years, the budget process will be vital to the success of the Assembly. Many Members who sat through various suspensions — when Stormont was effectively put on ice — were greatly struck by the fact that there was no great public outcry or demonstrations on the streets when the Assembly was suspended in 2002. For the most part, people did not see it as being sufficiently beneficial to their lives.

One can point to several exceptions to that, notably free public transport for the elderly and the warm homes scheme that DUP Ministers implemented. However, for the most part, people did not see enough positive benefits to their lives.

4.45 pm

If we, as an Assembly, are to bring benefits to people's lives, we cannot simply replicate what was put in place by direct rule Ministers. The key challenge will be to change budgets in order to provide —

Mr Beggs: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is it right that a Member should repeat an incorrect assertion? The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister allocated the money for the introduction of free transport?

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order. The Member will resume his seat.

Mr Weir: The electorate is well aware of where the impetus for that measure came from and has shown time and again its views on the DUP.

If we are to make a difference to people's lives and justify the Assembly's existence, we cannot simply repeat what has gone before. However, it is important that the Assembly takes a responsible attitude towards doing that. I, along with others in the Chamber, could point to many worthy projects that need support. For example, I could point to the lack of social housing in North Down, or the lack of funding in the South Eastern Education and Library Board, which, because of the draconian cuts imposed by the previous Minister, has left many people feeling vulnerable. I could point to the need to progress the Queen's Parade project in Bangor, which may be familiar to Members and which needs the Department for Social Development's support.

We could all point to examples, and, as can be seen from some of the motions that have been proposed, it would be easy to spend the entire block grant two or three times over on good projects. Most of them, if individually applied, would meet with no objection in the House. However, that would not be responsible Government.

The electorate will not thank us, in the long run, for heaping up a mountain of unfulfilled spending promises. Consequently, it is important that we do not respond with the knee-jerk reaction of trying to create adjustments to the Estimates of the previous Budget.

The Minister and the Executive have taken a responsible course of action to ensure that we can carry forward the established Budget. If we simply make wild adjustments, we will not fulfil our mandate to the people.

This is clearly a direct rule Budget, as the Minister said, and the adjustments that will need to be made — either as a result of negotiations with the Chancellor or because of some of the Executive decisions that have already been taken, for example the postponement of water rates for this year — are not contained in these Estimates, because to start tinkering with them at this stage would be extremely foolhardy.

I look forward to the Executive and the Assembly having the opportunity to make a real difference to people's lives through future Budgets. We are constrained at present, and we have acted sensibly in proposing these Estimates and, therefore, I support the motion.

Mr Cree: I understand that this debate is a matter of procedure, and the Minister referred to that. We are already well into the current financial year, and the Departments are using the Budget.

We could all rehearse arguments to further our favourite interests, but that would be a waste of time today. However, the Minister also mentioned the forthcoming comprehensive spending review, which

will apply for the next three years, and it is useful to set this Budget in that context. We already know that the review will be tight for the UK as a whole and for Northern Ireland in particular.

The background was very different during the first Assembly. Annual rates of growth in public spending were in the region of 3% in real terms, allowing for inflation. We may now face significantly lower rates than that, perhaps 1%, in real terms at best.

Spending for each person in Northern Ireland is 28% above the UK average. Public spending a head as a percentage of regional GDP in 2004-05 was 66% in Northern Ireland, 51% in Scotland, 49% in Wales, and the UK average was 41%. Public sector employment as a percentage of total employment in 2005 was 30% in Northern Ireland, 24% in Scotland, 23% in Wales, with an average of 20% in the UK. Therefore we have a great deal of catching up to do.

Hopefully, there will be more scope to change our Budget next year. However, Members can today only accept the figures that were set under direct rule. At the end of the summer, we will begin the Budget preparations for 2008-09. That Budget should emerge from the Programme for Government. It will have a limited number of overarching priorities that will guide departmental spending plans. Members must ensure, through the various Committees, that the process that is adopted allows for accountability. The establishment of priorities is crucial, given that financial resources are limited.

Members must be realistic and allow for investment to promote growth for the future. Innovation and human capital should be priorities. It is not acceptable that the regional economic strategy will change from only 80% of the UK average to 80.5% by 2015. Real growth must be created. Some people, including the Secretary of State, have pointed to the fact that Northern Ireland requires £5 billion to £6 billion of subsidies from Her Majesty's Treasury. Surely, it is normal for richer regions in a national fiscal and monetary union to transfer money to poorer parts of the kingdom. Wales, in which Mr Hain's constituency of Neath is situated, and Scotland also receive considerable subsidies.

It is curious and unimaginative for the Treasury to propose that the way to cut the subsidy is to raise taxation here by, for example, reforming rates. Surely, the way forward is to reduce the burden of taxation on businesses through rating, corporation tax and fuel duty, thus increasing economic activity and, hence, revenue.

Finally, I wish to refer to the economic package — the empty economic package. Other Members have made much play of their negotiating skills. In this test case they have failed miserably. There is little real growth in the level of spending in the package. In detail, the Executive are being allowed to do what they would have

been able to do anyway — create efficiency savings, sell assets and have year-end flexibility. There must be an adequate economic package to allow the Assembly to take Northern Ireland forward on a sustainable basis and to not be handicapped from the outset.

Mr P Ramsey: My contribution will not be too long.

Will the Minister make the decentralisation of Government jobs across the regions through Workplace 2010 as high a priority and give it the same encouragement as the previous Minister of Finance and Personnel? Will he do so to ensure the better distribution of employment opportunities?

I will refer to the funding crisis in the arts, culture and sports. The Minister may ask why, but I am discussing it because there is a need for a cross-departmental strategy to deal with those matters. In Northern Ireland, £866 a head is spent on those who are in receipt of sickness benefit. Yet, only £1 for each person is spent to encourage participation in sport. Those figures indicate that the Assembly is not doing enough to encourage such participation. One can imagine, particularly if there were greater participation in sport, that the health problems that people experience in their later years would be reduced. Presently, only 30% of the Chief Medical Officer's targets are being met. That is a particularly low figure, and it is damning that the Assembly does not adopt a more holistic approach by targeting social need across the board. A key element of such a strategy should be that women, young children and adults have access to facilities. For example, a creative way to achieve that would be to introduce free swimming for older people and primary-school children.

We have to examine the issue in a wider context. The Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee has already agreed a joint motion, to be proposed by Paul Maskey and me, that will look at the underfunding of sport and the arts. It is clear and obvious to everyone that there is a significant problem there. In Northern Ireland, we spend £6 per head of population on art and culture. Wales and Scotland spend twice as much, and the Republic of Ireland nearly £14 per head. We spend only £4 per head on sport — that is awful. Some of the other regions are spending two or three times that amount. How can we expect to achieve the higher targets recommended by the Chief Medical Officer if we do not allocate enough money?

It is obvious that in the areas of art, culture, sport, delivering social development programmes, economic regeneration, a vibrant tourism industry, increased participation — even though the figures are down — and, particularly, the creative industries that are attached to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, Northern Ireland is advancing at a much faster rate than England. Why, therefore, if we are using culture as a means of employment, can we not put more money into it? I

encourage the Minister of Finance and Personnel to bring in creative approaches. We are talking about something that is long term; we are talking about obesity; we are talking about encouraging greater participation in sport.

The overwhelming view of the people is how well art, culture and sport are placed in every community across Northern Ireland. Therefore, we have to find a better way so that the disparity of funding between those sectors is removed. In order to achieve that, we need all the Ministers — Health; Education; and Enterprise, Trade and Investment — to put in place a strategy that is fit for purpose and that will enable the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee to accelerate the plans that are ahead. That is only right and fitting for a modern society.

I appeal to the Minister, along with his colleagues, to give the matter careful consideration. Even though there is going to be an inquiry into underfunding, it is more important that we take the lead, pulling together all the Departments, to decide on a holistic approach to make Northern Ireland a better place.

Mrs I Robinson: I, too, recognise that the Executive are already committed to pursuing the spending allocations agreed by the direct rule Administration for the incoming year. However, I want to raise two points that I hope the Minister and the Executive will take on board in their considerations for the future. One of those is in the area of mental health. There is a lot of work to be done to lift mental health higher up the Northern Ireland political agenda. Statistics show that the prevalence of mental-health problems in Northern Ireland is 25% higher than in England. However, the share of the health and personal social services budget that is spent on mental health in England is 11·8%, compared to 9·3% in Northern Ireland. To match the English share, spending on mental health in Northern Ireland would have to be increased by 26% or £60 million, based on the 2003 figures.

It is now possible to estimate the cost of not promoting mental health. The Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health, in conjunction with the Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health, estimated that the total cost of mental illness to the Northern Ireland economy was £3 billion in 2002-03. According to the World Health Organization, more than 19% of the total burden of disease in western European countries is attributable to mental illness, compared with 17% for cardiovascular disease and 16% for cancer. It found no other health condition responsible for more than 8% of disease.

The other issue that is very close to my heart is free personal care for the elderly, which the Assembly had the opportunity to discuss only a couple of weeks ago. Unfortunately, the Alliance Party seemed to be trying

to imply that it was the only one rooting for free personal care.

The truth of the matter is that we all wanted to introduce free personal care, but we knew that there were constraints in the Budget. In old Assembly, we had to take the difficult decision to proceed with free nursing care alone.

5.00 pm

Many, if not all, elderly people in the Province paid taxes and National Insurance in the belief that when they were old and in need, perhaps due to disease or disability, the state would readily assist them. Like the 1999 Royal Commission report on long-term care for the elderly, we recognise that people can reasonably be expected to meet certain costs.

The Royal Commission divided the care issue into a number of categories, with living and accommodation costs identified as the type of costs to which people could reasonably be expected to contribute. However, the commission said that nursing and personal care costs should be met out of general taxation.

Our senior citizens deserve the right to retain their independence, pride and self-esteem, and the right to be able to continue living in the area that they have made their home. However, we must pay careful attention to the costs involved, and I say that as someone who is determined that free personal care be introduced in Northern Ireland at the earliest possible opportunity.

The Scottish Executive have introduced free personal care for the elderly, and we can learn much from the Scottish experience. An economic analysis of the introduction of free personal care in Scotland shows that the policy has cost more than expected. For example, in 2002-03, it cost £127 million rather than the anticipated £107 million. Similarly, in 2003-04, £143 million was spent rather than the expected £125 million. Furthermore, a report of the Scottish Parliament's Health Committee anticipates that a major increase in the number of people aged 85 and over may lead to a tripling of the public cost of personal care by 2053.

There are numerous important matters for which there are strong cases for increased investment from the Executive, but I wanted to highlight the two areas that I feel need particular consideration. Money for those areas would have to be ring-fenced, when the Minister gets round to being able to identify additional moneys in the short to long term.

Mr Hamilton: Whether the Estimates came from this Assembly or whether they were inherited from the direct rule period, when I look at them, I am reminded of the financial limitations within which Northern Ireland operates. Looking through the weighty 350-page Main Estimates document, I am sure that we can all agree that we would love to see a bit more money spent here and there.

The comparison between the Estimates and our experience on the ground shows that there is a need for more targeted resources in certain areas, coupled with public-sector reform. That is only natural, but shifting around public funds has consequences — a fact that seems to have been lost on some Members. Indeed, to listen to some Members, one would be forgiven for thinking that there is an endless pot of gold somewhere in Stormont into which Ministers can delve when they like. Sadly, that is one of the many legacies of decades of direct rule.

For far too many years, public representatives in Northern Ireland have enjoyed the luxury of being able to criticise any and all direct rule decisions that they did not like without having to do anything about it themselves. That inevitably that led to a laziness, which — if the debates in the Chamber over the last few weeks are anything to go by — will take a lot longer to shift in some Members than in others. When asked for alternatives, all too often the response, if any was given, was simply to spend more money.

We cannot, as some would have it, simply wish away problems with a vote in this Chamber — if only. There is a legacy of underinvestment in public services that we have been tasked to overcome, and there is a temptation to immediately undo the damage of direct rule. However, no one's interests are best served by the politics of the blank cheque when what is required is a reality check. We must exhibit more fiscal responsibility than has heretofore been the case. In fact, I have been struck by the absolute lack of it in certain corners of the Assembly since devolution day.

The Assembly must start to learn the fiscal equivalent of Newton's law: for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. In somewhat simplistic terms, for each additional item of expenditure in one area of public policy, there must be an equal reduction in expenditure elsewhere in the Budget.

That harsh reality of public finances in Northern Ireland means that those who advocate willy-nilly commitments of expenditure on a whole raft of items must say where they would make cuts.

Northern Ireland operates within a fairly rigid revenue-raising system. It receives a block grant, the amount of which is set elsewhere. The only real revenue-raising mechanism available is a rise in the regional rate. In the past, public representatives have rightly opposed raising the regional rate by nearly 20% under direct rule, yet a fortnight ago, a majority of Members voted for a provision that would have resulted in a 25% increase in the regional rate.

However, other options are available that are perhaps less politically painful, more palatable and potentially more fruitful. One particularly important option is to address the efficiencies in the Government. The

Minister of Finance and Personnel spoke in the House some weeks ago about how the proposed efficiency targets of 3% per annum for each Department over the comprehensive spending review period will free up £790 million of additional spending power by 2010-11. He also said that a modest increase, of around half a percentage point, in those efficiency targets could result in an additional £120 million being raised each year. In comparison, it would take approximately a 60% increase in the regional rate to raise the same amount. There is a compelling argument for increasing the efficiency targets and making more money available for the Executive to spend on the issues that the Assembly prioritises.

I have not yet mentioned the potential millions of pounds worth of savings that could be made from trimming back on the sheer size of government in Northern Ireland. That is a job that I hope that the new Assembly and Executive Review Committee will tackle with gusto as there are benefits from introducing more effective and efficient government to Northern Ireland, and extra resources could be realised for front-line services. Through the responsible management of our public finances rather than populist publicity grabbing, we can build for the long term in this country. I am heartened by the attitude and approach adopted by the Minister in his first few weeks in office, as many people outside Stormont also are, because the sustainable system of government that everyone longs for is achievable only through sound and strong fiscal stewardship.

The Chairperson of the Committee of the Centre (Mr Kennedy): This will be the last time that I will address the Assembly as Chairperson of the Committee of the Centre. By popular support, the Committee will change its name tomorrow. *[Interruption.]*

One lives in faith; one dies in expectation.

The motion is an important sign that devolution is finally in operation with the Executive producing what is effectively their first Budget, albeit that it bears a distinct similarity to the one inherited from direct rule Ministers. In the normal course of events, much of this debate would have taken place when the Assembly was considering and agreeing the Executive's Budget last December, but it is well known what the position was then.

Assembly Committees are well aware that they had a limited opportunity before the motion to get to grips with the functions, priorities and budgets in the Departments that they are expected to scrutinise. That limited opportunity has therefore made it difficult for the Committees to make a considered evaluation or judgement of how the Estimates provide for the Northern Ireland Departments, their agencies and sponsored bodies. However, from a constituency point of view, all Members are aware of public expectations of what this and future Budgets will deliver.

Although I am reluctant to accept the Budget, it is a done deal. I understand that the Executive have had limited opportunity to shape and provide their own Programme for Government and Budget, and therefore I must accept that. In its first meetings, the Committee of the Centre has focused on examining the functions, priorities and budgets of the main policy directorates of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM). That has been a useful exercise for the Committee and has highlighted the wide range of priorities for which OFMDFM is responsible. Many of the Committee members have expressed concern about allocations in the new Budget to parts of OFMDFM and its sponsored bodies, and the Committee raised a number of questions with the Department on the Estimates for this year.

Those included concerns with the planning appeals system in particular. Other members of the Committee, who have spoken earlier or who have yet to speak, may wish to highlight matters at a later stage.

Assembly Committees must recognise, as the Executive do, that not all strategic priorities are within the Departments that they scrutinise. Committees must avoid the potential for the silo mentality — an accusation that we, as politicians, have made of various Departments in the past. It is therefore important that Assembly Committees co-operate and share information when examining priorities and Budgets in future years.

The Committee of the Centre will carefully monitor how cross-cutting policies for which it has responsibility, such as the Government's Lifetime Opportunities strategy on tackling poverty and social exclusion, are being resourced and supported by OFMDFM and the major spending Departments. In the longer term, my Committee will seek an early consultation on the OFMDFM priorities and Budget for 2008-09 onwards. The Committee will also undertake targeted scrutiny of departmental business areas and sponsored bodies. We will be keeping a close eye on how successful OFMDFM is at managing its own budget.

The First Minister and the Deputy First Minister will attend the Committee of the Centre on 20 June 2007. The Committee hopes to hear more from them about the emerging priorities for the Executive that will be included in the next Programme for Government and Budget. It is critical that we start now to examine the draft Programme for Government and draft Budget for 2008-09. There will also be a restricted period in which to consult the public and get their views on the revenues to be raised through the regional rate and water charges, if they are to be introduced.

Lord Browne: I congratulate my right hon Friend the Minister of Finance and Personnel on the way in which he has taken to his portfolio and the way in which

he has conducted business in the Chamber today, and elsewhere, over the past few weeks.

I support the motion. However, I will touch briefly on the need for caution and prudence when almost £8 billion is spread around the various statutory agencies, including the Food Standards Agency Northern Ireland, Ordnance Survey of Northern Ireland and others.

Every Member could cite, and many already have, areas and projects in and around their constituencies that could benefit greatly from an increase in the Budget allocation — not to mention the various departmental Committees on which they now sit. No matter the issue, it seems natural that Members should seek more than the funds allocated. However, we do not have a bottomless pit of resources — far from it. With legislative restrictions on what can be taken from the Consolidated Fund under The Budget (Northern Ireland) Order 2007, and limited ability to raise further moneys, with all the difficulties that that may cause, every Member has a responsibility to act maturely and logically when considering the first Budget of the new Assembly.

I welcome the Minister's public warning to respective Executive Members and others that the Assembly needs to be wary of supporting high-costed proposals without considering the financial implications. If constituents are dreading any further increase in the current rate levels, and if they are already feeling the pinch of interest rate rises and so on, the last thing that the Assembly should consider is supporting proposals that could inevitably lead to a 25% to 30% rise in the regional rate.

I conclude in the hope that financial Bills, and their outworking, are met with a level of mature realism that should ensure that the Assembly is not embarrassingly committed to huge overspends and unrealistic expectations.

5.15 pm

Mr Ford: The Assembly is in an interesting position. All parties in the Chamber have highlighted that. Everyone says that change is needed but that it is impossible in 2007. The Minister has been given the most extraordinarily easy ride. I suspect that during debates on the comprehensive spending review (CSR) and future Budgets he will have a more difficult task to deal with. Even DUP Back-Benchers may not be so well behaved.

That surprising unanimity is inevitable in the peculiar circumstances in which the Assembly finds itself — with no choice but to accept the direct rule Budget for 2007. However, all parties are looking towards the CSR in the autumn and future needs. There has been a lovely mixture of thoughts such as, "Will we need to be careful and not increase taxation?" alongside, "Here is the pet scheme for my constituency that will get me a good headline in my local paper this week". The

Assembly must ensure that it identifies potential savings as well as future expenditure. Although the debate is on the Supply resolution for 2007-08, the issue being discussed is actually the CSR. The Assembly is already looking ahead.

In that context, I want to clarify for certain Members of the DUP that when the Alliance Party referred to free personal care in a recent debate, it specified that the topic should be dealt with in the CSR and not immediately. Indeed, when my party proposed an amendment to the Health and Personal Social Services Bill in 2002, it made clear that that was an enabling proposal intended for when the money became available. The Assembly needs to be realistic and acknowledge that the £50 million cost of personal care, compared to £750 million on the regional rate, is somewhat less than 25%. If the money were taken in that way, the cost would amount to just 6% or 7%.

It is critical that the Assembly begins to invest to save and to invest for the future. The Minister highlighted that he seeks to make efficiency savings of 3%. That is crucial. However, if progress is to be made, those efficiency savings cannot be made in the traditional way — by making changes of 3% to the way that every Department operates. That is why the enormous cost of segregation must be dealt with. It is the elephant in the room that many Members are reluctant to acknowledge and that the Ulster Unionist Party seems to believe does not exist at all.

The direct costs of segregation must be dealt with. Policing is not part of the Assembly's Budget at present. However, there are other direct costs.

Mr Campbell: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ford: Taking into account the time that I have left and the record of the party to which the Member belongs, I am afraid not.

The Assembly must examine the serious issue of duplication of services: for example, despite more money being spent per capita on education, less is getting through to classrooms than in any other region of the UK. If such issues are not dealt with, there is no point in tinkering around with efficiency savings of 2% or 3%. Changes must be made to the way that services are delivered that will ensure that there is value for money throughout Departments and that that 30% overspend on education will be eliminated.

The huge costs of lost opportunities that arise from segregation must also be recognised; for example, the loss of tourism, foreign direct investment and other major problems that have occurred because of the difficulties in our society. If there is to be serious engagement with efficiency, those costs must be eradicated. The issue is not about where efficiency savings of 3% can be made but of the vast amount of money that is wasted on the cost of segregation.

Members are aware that there is to be yet another round of regional rate increases that are above the rate of inflation. If the Minister can ensure that those increases can achieve value for money, he must also ensure that the excessive costs that must be treated as a priority in 2007 are not left for the future. So far, there has been relatively limited value for money from the Chancellor's economic package. If progress is to be made, more must be done to reduce the waste and excessive spending of our own resources. Perhaps then the Assembly can go to the Chancellor and ask for the additional money that is needed to invest in and build the shared future that will benefit society and the economy.

Mr Shannon: I congratulate the Minister on a definitive report on the amount of money that is available for spending, and where that money will go. Those funds will be spent in a very positive way.

I wish to highlight a couple of issues of particular relevance to my constituency, but also to many others. The Minister of Education indicated last week that some £30 million would be set aside for the classroom assistants' wage settlement, which we hope will be finalised in the near future.

The Finance Minister has set aside some money for education, which in turn has been set aside by the Minister of Education. I urge the Education Minister, Caitríona Ruane, despite her absence, to settle the dispute with the classroom assistants so that they can get on with the job that they are good at. They play an invaluable part in educating students every day. That dispute must be settled. It is not enough to pay lip service to a deal, which could lead to wage reductions or loss of pay protection, according to the classroom assistants. I ask the Minister to ensure that that settlement happens.

I also wish to draw attention to the Education Department's underfunding of some schools on the Ards Peninsula. I welcome the promise of new builds, in particular for Ballywalter Primary School and for Glastry College, in which I declare an interest as a member of the board of governors. Glastry College has a remit for education in mid-Ards and it throws its net wide in the number of pupils that it draws from Ards and further afield. Although money has been requested and designated for those schools, I hope that the new builds take place very quickly, unlike the case of Regent House, which took 10 years.

The Ards Peninsula is experiencing a boom in the number of people who move there, and it is not necessarily only elderly people who come to enjoy its tranquil coasts — young people come as well. Therefore, there is a demand for education, and that is why I raised the cases of Glastry College and Ballywalter Primary School.

There is no pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, and the trees lining the road on the approach to Parliament Buildings are not money trees, but the Minister has provided us with a very clear idea of the amount of money that is available. For that, we should be grateful.

Sometimes, it is necessary to speculate in order to accumulate. That is true in relation to tourism, particularly in the Strangford area and the borough of Ards. Tourism in those areas could be exploited more, as could the advantage that we already have with Exploris in Portaferry and the Mount Stewart gardens and stately home. Also coming to the fore is the Battletown Gallery just outside Newtownards. Those are attractions that tourism could be used to exploit, deliver on, and ensure that more money comes into the Ards and Strangford areas.

I ask that we take advantage of the peace dividend by using the available funding and by ensuring that it is spread across the whole of Northern Ireland. The Minister has given an indication that that can and will happen, and the DUP welcomes that and supports the motion.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I have only two points, so I will be brief. The first relates to housing. I know that the Executive have inherited this situation, but there is a very high number of homeless people, and waiting lists are growing. That has financial knock-on effects in both education and health. However, the Budget contains the lowest provision for new-build social housing for a long time. It is ridiculous that the Executive should be forced to inherit such a situation, but it is not irretrievable. I ask the Minister to consider that situation, and especially the knock-on effects that it has on the health and education budgets.

My second point relates to transport, and it is a particular issue of mine. Can provision be made for free public transport for those with severe disabilities? Aside from the fact that it would help people with restricted mobility to get around and to and from hospital, that also would have major knock-on effects. Travel is therapeutic for people with profound mental disabilities, and it could be cost-effective if looked at in terms of the health budget. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr A Maginness: As my colleague has said, the Minister should reflect carefully on the crisis in housing and, in particular, in the provision of social housing. In my constituency, housing pressures are enormous. The waiting lists are substantial, and the number of people suffering housing stress has at least doubled in the last couple of years. It is an enormous challenge.

The provision in the Budget is inadequate to deal with the need, not just in North Belfast but across

Northern Ireland. Some 611 houses have been budgeted for. That is crazy — the need is for at least 1,500 houses. The Semple Report sets a target of 2,000 houses; the Housing Executive's estimate is in the region of 2,500 houses. Therefore, the Budget comes nowhere near making even a minimal contribution to the relief of housing pressures in Northern Ireland. That situation is totally unacceptable.

I understand that the Minister has inherited the Budget from the direct rule regime. Nonetheless, priorities must be identified, and housing must be one of the highest priorities. Every week people come into my office looking for homes. I cannot ask them to hold on while we go through a period of budgetary readjustment. We must have that money this year. Officials of the Department for Social Development say that they can start to build houses, even at this late stage. Planning processes have been completed, all the necessary logistical conditions have been met, and transforming the situation is a matter of getting the money.

It is unacceptable for people to continue to suffer as a result of the inherited budgetary situation. We must act to lessen the pressures on people, rather than increase them.

5.30 pm

That situation has a particular effect on families in my constituency, as well as older single men who, for a variety of reasons, live on their own and for whom there is a dearth of suitable accommodation. We must address the difficulties that marriage break-ups, mental-health problems and many other issues create for that sector of society.

I appeal to the Minister of Finance and Personnel to find the ways and means in the machinery of Government to release the necessary funding. It is important that the Minister make that a top Budget priority not only for the constituency of North Belfast but for the whole region.

Mr B Wilson: In his introductory remarks, the Minister of Finance and Personnel highlighted what he believed to be the key challenges facing Northern Ireland, but there was no mention of the major challenge of climate change. Indeed, Tony Blair has said that climate change is the most important issue facing the planet. Climate change affects the whole planet, not just Northern Ireland.

I approach the Estimates from a green perspective, but when I examine the details, there is absolutely nothing green about them at all. My party would argue for additional expenditure on the railways and, in particular, the development of the railway line to Derry — but there is nothing there. A light rail system for Belfast was promised 10 or 15 years ago, but there is no mention of it, which is very disappointing.

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland tried to promote renewable energy, and there was support for the concept of micro-generation. However, the take-up has been poor because the grant aid currently available for such projects does not even cover the cost of building control and planning fees. Those ideas have not taken off, and more money must be targeted in that direction.

We should support the research and development of renewable energy and consider alternative crops such as willow biomass and rapeseed. I use biodiesel in my car; the chap who produces that fuel made an approach about a business grant but could not get one. There is an opportunity to develop alternative fuel in Northern Ireland, and there are potential benefits for the rural community. Farmers could produce energy crops rather than simply availing of the benefits of EU set-aside land regulations.

The Budget proposals do not address the improvement of the environment, and although I appreciate that there is little that can be done about that now, I will put down a marker for the next Budget and comprehensive spending review, because those are the issues of the future. I do not ask for extra money; as an economist, I am aware that resources are limited. We must examine ways in which to use those resources more efficiently by channelling them into green areas, thereby creating a sustainable Northern Ireland.

Mr P Robinson: The debate has been useful, although it has not been as wide-ranging as I had expected. However, it reflects the responsible attitude shown by Members, who, instead of listing their pet projects, recognised the constraints under which we operate. I shall do my best to respond, as far as is possible, to the many issues that have been raised. If I pass over some of them, we will check the Official Report tomorrow and I — or the relevant Ministers — will write to the Members concerned.

The Chairman of the Finance and Personnel Committee outlined the consultation process underpinning the position, and we both agree that that process was far from ideal. I am grateful to him and to the Committee for agreeing to grant the Bill accelerated passage. I welcome the engagement of the Committee in the forthcoming Budget process and in ensuring that the Executive can, and will, make a difference with future Budget allocations.

The Member for East Antrim Mr Roy Beggs mentioned the comprehensive spending review. I agree that the funding envelope for 2008-09 to 2010-11 is likely to be tight, so we must ensure that the resources are allocated as efficiently and effectively as possible. Northern Ireland is slightly better placed than other Administrations as the Chancellor has given us a guaranteed minimum in the comprehensive spending review.

One key issue that arose from our engagement with the Chancellor is that there is a need to introduce a range of fiscal measures that can bring about a step change in economic activity and growth. I agree with Roy Beggs that smoke and mirrors will not deliver real growth. However, I point out to him that, apart from being given a minimum amount in the comprehensive spending review, Northern Ireland has been promised a minimum on capital spend to which an additional £2 billion will be added in later years.

We also succeeded in breaking the link between the reinvestment and reform initiative and the necessity to narrow the gap with local taxation in Great Britain. We will therefore not be forced to put inordinate burdens on our regional rate for reasons outside our control. End-year flexibility funding is not automatic, but we have received a commitment from the Chancellor on capital end-year flexibility and resource end-year flexibility. The Assembly will also be aware that the use of resources from asset sales was not automatic in the past. However, we have received commitments on the use of those resources, and we will be able to schedule sales of our assets in order to meet the limits laid down by the Chancellor.

Of equal importance is the Chancellor's agreement to a review on a number of issues that will be conducted by Sir David Varney. Among other things, the review will examine the competitive disadvantage that Northern Ireland has vis-à-vis the Irish Republic and its rate of corporation tax. I have already had a useful meeting with Sir David, and I understand that the Committee and some of my ministerial colleagues have met with him, as have several key stakeholders in the private sector. That has been important, because it is crucial that Sir David hears the views of the people of Northern Ireland and that he is encouraged to make recommendations to introduce fiscal measures that can make the step change that I mentioned.

The Member for East Antrim's party leader has said that now is not an important time as far as financial decisions are concerned. On 16 February 2007, he claimed that September — when the comprehensive spending review and budgetary constraints will be finalised — will be the important time to discuss such issues. He has obviously not convinced the Member for East Antrim of his sentiments.

We must be a little careful when debating whether we have a satisfactory package. As part of the United Kingdom, we are entitled to enjoy the United Kingdom's prosperity.

This part of the United Kingdom enjoys a total managed expenditure in excess of £17 billion a year. Many people might think that that is reasonably satisfactory. It may not be as much as any of us would like, and there is no doubt that everyone will encourage

the Chancellor to consider Northern Ireland's special circumstances in order to get more. However, it is still a considerable chunk of money, and it should be recognised that we receive a significant slice from the UK Exchequer.

It is the purpose of the Executive to reduce the amount that we get in many areas by returning more to the Exchequer through building growth into our economy. That will enable us to make a greater contribution to the overall financial cake.

Declan O'Loan, Patsy McGlone and Alban Maginness of the SDLP all referred to the housing budget — I wonder why that might be? I notice that they have brought the Minister along as a cheerleader. Just in case she is not aware of it, in her absence, Declan O'Loan quoted her as stating, "give me the money".

Lord Morrow: Typical woman. *[Laughter.]*

Mrs Foster: I heard that. *[Laughter.]*

Mr P Robinson: I will ignore the sexist remark.

It should be clear that the Executive will set their priorities. The Minister for Social Development knows that when she sought support from her Executive colleagues for an affordability review, she received that support to move forward with Sir John Semple's recommendations. That will be very significant.

The easy answer, and the first answer that comes to many people is: give me more money. However, that is not necessarily the only way to deal with such issues. I do not want to tell the Minister how to do her job, as I am sure that she knows how to do her job. However, in Sir John Semple's report, there is a clear indication that there are significant portions of land held in the public sector that should be released.

There is nothing to stop the Minister taking a proposal to her colleagues that would include a significant number of those parcels of ground, and a package that includes a partnership with the private sector. That would enable her to get the private sector to build public-sector houses. The deal would obviously be that a section of the land would be for private-sector housing. However, it would fulfil two very useful outcomes — it would increase the housing stock overall, and it would create good quality accommodation for housing associations that would be part of such a partnership as well.

As far as the housing associations are concerned — if they are getting the land for free, and the houses for free — the Minister will want to do something with the share of the rental that she would get in response to that. That would reduce her budget requirements elsewhere. Therefore, instead of her shouting, "Give me the money", there are proposals that she could consider that would have me shouting, "Give me the money" at her because she could generate more income.

I recognise, as does the Minister, that there are significant problems with homelessness and the affordability of housing and that there is a requirement for more houses to be built in the public sector. However, rather than cry on my shoulder and ask for more money, I hope that a bit more innovation and ingenuity will be used in an attempt to solve the problem.

Dr Farry rightly referred to the fiscal deficit. That is a reflection of our pressing needs, which are significantly greater than other UK regions. A growing and vibrant economy will raise the tax base and reduce the fiscal deficit.

5.45 pm

The regional economic strategy highlights the large influence of the public sector, but the key issue is to develop the private sector. It is not that the public sector is too large, but that the private sector is too small. I agree with Dr Farry about the need to examine spending, identify efficiency, and maximise the use of all available funding.

Unquestionably, that will be a key element of the Budget process. With other Members, Dr Farry referred to efficiencies. He must take account of the fact that although he stated that a high percentage was underspent in the last financial year — none of us can be blamed for that — there is an overcommitment of £150 million in the Budget in this financial year. Therefore, before we underspend even one penny, we must save £150 million.

I accept, however, that the 3% efficiency, which is set under the existing criteria, is a relatively blunt instrument, scything off 3% from the budgets of the Departments when they determine their efficiencies. One Department could begin to bleed after achieving 2% efficiency, whereas another may be able to make 5% efficiency without cutting into the bone. Therefore, we must gauge how to refine the system. Unless we have those kinds of efficiencies, we will be unable to deal with the pressures that can come elsewhere in the system — pressures such as free personal care for the elderly, which was debated in the Assembly on 29 May.

The leader of the Alliance Party seems to be in denial on that issue. Therefore, I have a copy of the Official Report for 29 May 2007 to remind him what the vote was on, and that his party's amendment required the provision of free personal care for the elderly from 2008-09 onwards. Therefore, there was a specific requirement in the amendment that set the provision from a particular year. In other words, the funding could be considered as part of the comprehensive spending review, but the Assembly requires that the provision be available from 2008-09 onwards.

That amendment was agreed in spite of the fact that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety pointed out, very rightly, that although the Assembly

could pass the motion, it could not come to pass, as there are other steps that must be taken, quite aside from the issue of where the money would be found.

Members must face up to some realities. With a finite Budget from the block grant, and the only mechanism to generate resources being a regional rate, unless savings and efficiencies are found in the existing block grant, we will need to increase substantially the regional rate. Those are the realities that Members must consider.

Unquestionably, free personal care for the elderly is high on each party's agenda. During the course of the election, each party committed to pushing forward with that matter. That does not mean that free personal care for the elderly should have been approved on the first day that Members came through the door of Parliament Buildings. Parties must work out pragmatically how to fulfil their election commitments within the Assembly's mandate. I am glad that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is working on that project, and, as he takes it forward, he will receive full co-operation from colleagues in my Department.

Dr Farry and Mr Ford mentioned the cost of division. There is no question that a divided society generates additional costs. However, the Alliance Party should not behave as though its members have somehow found a new truth that no one else was aware of, and that they alone want to save money. Reversing the divided society is not something that can be achieved overnight — we will not change the education system in a day, a week, a month, or even a year.

I take the point that we need to recognise that such changes are necessary, not just for financial savings but to change the society in which we live. However, I suspect that many of those changes will need to be made over a longer time frame than that suggested by the two Alliance Party Members who spoke today.

The Alliance Party leader suggested that I had been given an easy ride because I was introducing a direct rule Budget. I can assure him that I would far rather be introducing my own Budget — supported by my Executive colleagues — that provided the allocations that met the aspirations of all the Ministers, even if that meant that I got a rougher ride in the Assembly. As the Member for North Down Peter Weir pointed out, if the desires of all Assembly Members were to be met, the block grant would need to be multiplied two or three times. That is the reality. Ultimately, we will need to prioritise, and in that process some people will inevitably think that a particular budget item should have had a lesser priority than something that they wanted to be included. We will no doubt have that rough ride at a later stage when we introduce our own plans for the three-year period. However, it is much healthier to be dealing with such problems rather than simply issuing statements to the 'Belfast Telegraph',

the 'News Letter' and 'The Irish News' to complain about the actions that other Ministers have taken. It is far better that we take such actions ourselves.

The Member for Foyle Ms Anderson referred to the issue of disadvantage in the Province. All the spending proposals put forward under the 2007 budget process will be subject to a high-level impact assessment. On the issue of addressing social disadvantage, New Deal has had a significant impact on unemployment, as shown by the 73% fall in the number of unemployed claimants in the New Deal 18- to 24-year-old target group. On the issue of changing existing patterns of disadvantage, only by building a shared and equal society can we hope to build a Northern Ireland where we all live together and work together in peace, being equal under the law and equally subject to it. However, I agree entirely with the Member that tackling disadvantage and growing our economy are not mutually exclusive but must go forward hand in hand. That will be the aim of the Executive.

Peter Weir referred to the motion on free personal care for the elderly that the Assembly passed recently. I think that I have probably dealt with the issue as much as Members require, but I agree with him that we must give serious thought to the implications of any proposals that are made. Rather than deal with issues on an ad hoc or one-by-one basis, it is far better that the Executive fits them into their strategic proposals in the Programme for Government. Set beside the Programme for Government, the CSR for the three years will ensure that we can implement our proposals. Mr Weir was right to say that Departments such as the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety have significant requirements for additional funding. That is one reason that we want to look at the priorities of all Departments beside each other rather than deal with individual Departments in an isolated manner.

I concur with the Member for North Down Leslie Cree that the private sector needs to grow to reduce our reliance on the public sector, and that facilitating such growth should be a priority. Although we need to ensure that Northern Ireland firms are not disadvantaged by disproportionate costs, we need to take a responsible approach rather than to introduce subsidies for their own sake. When we were all in opposition there was a tendency simply to call for some form of subvention, but we must now set out our priorities.

Mr Cree also highlighted the need to do something significant to cause an uplifting in economic performance. An economic package that included a cut in corporation tax would indeed be desirable. However, as the Ulster Unionist Party leader indicated, the Treasury would not readily give us a dispensation to the detriment of Scotland and Wales.

We have argued, both with the Varney team and with President Barroso, and — more recently — with the commissioner appointed by President Barroso to advance the European project in Northern Ireland, that there are special circumstances which set Northern Ireland aside from Scotland, Wales and other regions of the United Kingdom. We are coming out of a prolonged period of conflict; our economy needs to be stimulated, and we have a land frontier with a country that has a much lower rate of corporation tax.

Whether it is by corporation tax reduction or by some other mechanism, we must face up to the challenge to investors, who look at the island of Ireland as a whole. We must have a package of measures to attract them to Northern Ireland, rather than leave the field open for them to go to the Irish Republic.

The Member for Foyle Mr Pat Ramsey touched on sport, a subject that is close to me. I believe that, when I left it, I was one of the longest-serving members of the Sports Council of Northern Ireland. Mr Ramsey rightly drew attention to the role that sport can play in our society, not only in its value in bringing people together, but in its health benefits and its many other advantages for the economy as a whole. However, the advantages of sport are difficult to assess, and it is perhaps that difficulty that prevents sport from being given the priority that he and I might wish. However, I assure him that, even if I were not sympathetic to it, my colleague the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure will certainly draw the need for sport to our attention when we look at our overall priorities. I trust that other colleagues will be — if not as generous as he would like — more generous than they have been in those areas.

Now to the comments of my colleague the Member for Strangford Mrs Iris Robinson. I thought that I had walked into an episode of 'Folks on the Hill', as she outlined the needs of the Health Service. She is right to draw attention, in particular, to the issue of mental health. She will know better than I do that there is a need to reform and modernise mental health services, and that the Bamford Review of Mental Health and Learning Disability (Northern Ireland) has set a very challenging agenda for reform. It is expected that all the elements of the review will be in the public domain by July 2007. The review sets a wide agenda for reform and modernisation, and its recommendations impact on health and social services and on all Northern Ireland Departments. I trust that I will get my tea when I go home tonight, having said that to her.

We have touched on most of the matters concerning free personal care. Mrs Robinson kept referring to a matter that was close to her heart, and I thought my name was going to come up. It did not; it was expenditure for health that she was pushing for.

I now move to the comments made by the two other Members for Strangford. By way of information, before Mr Jim Shannon scolds the Minister of Education too much on the issue of pay policy — and in his case referred to pay policy as it relates to the Department of Education — we must recognise that the Chancellor of the Exchequer regards pay policy as a macroeconomic variable. In those circumstances, the Treasury has not simply taken the lead, but almost taken possession of the issue of pay policy.

It means that if any of the Administrations bring forward proposals that have repercussive effects, the Treasury will have something to say, or perhaps do, about that.

6.00 pm

When examining pay policy issues, one must remember that there will be implications not only for Northern Ireland but for the rest of the United Kingdom. If workers here move out of sync with those in Scotland, Wales or elsewhere, one could imagine what the unions in those areas would say. No doubt, it is for that reason that Gordon Brown considers pay policy to be a macroeconomic variable and wants to have control of it. Therefore, the Assembly must work within the limits of pay policy and must seek permission from the Treasury to move outside it. As the Minister for Employment and Learning can tell Members, our experience is that even special cases have not received a sympathetic hearing.

However, I agree fully with Mr Shannon on the value of expanding the tourism industry, which has grown significantly recently and still has massive potential — nowhere more so than the Ards Peninsula. He mentioned Mount Stewart, and anyone who has not visited it should do so and experience the pleasures it offers.

Mrs Foster: What about Fermanagh and South Tyrone?

Mr P Robinson: I am getting all sorts of bids from other parts of the Province. *[Laughter.]*

I would like to take Mr Shannon's colleague Mr Simon Hamilton everywhere with me, because he made a much better job than I did of working out what fiscal responsibilities Members should have, and the limitations and parameters in which we must work. People should listen to him seriously, because he talks sound common sense.

He also referred to the savings that can be made by having more efficient government. My party raised that point during the last Executive, and the fact that the DUP is now the largest party has not changed its view. The Assembly must examine seriously issues such as — and I suspect that this will not be the most popular passage of my speech — the number of Members and Departments.

Significant savings can be made. I listened to comments that reducing the number of Departments would make no real saving — real savings can be made from reducing the number of Departments. If it will ease Members' views on the matter, reducing the number of Departments does not necessarily mean reducing the number of Ministers — so an escape hatch is being provided. Ministers do not cost much; the real expense is in having a whole Department.

Funds that could be going into front-line services are going into bureaucracy. If money is going to be tight, savings can be made by reducing bureaucracy rather than at the front desk where the public sector meets the consumer. We will need to return to that issue. My colleague the Member for Lagan Valley Jeffrey Donaldson has a particular role to play in the matter, as he is Chairperson of the Executive and Review Committee. That Committee will want to look at those items. Equally, the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister has an efficiency requirement, which was laid down in the St Andrews Agreement and legislated for thereafter — I got a nod from the officials. Therefore, that Department will have a role to play also.

It is in the interests of those whom we represent that we cut the red tape and bureaucrats out of the system and ensure that the money saved is used in the best possible way. I encourage my colleagues to examine those issues as they bring forward their own reports.

My East Belfast colleague Lord Browne was right to draw attention to ratepayers' concerns about significant rate hikes. In the past two years, there have been large rates increases of 19% and 6%. At this stage, I cannot indicate what increases there may be in the regional rate over the period of the CSR. However, with the threat of water charges looming, I can understand why people want to know what their overall household bills will be and how they are going to pay them.

Although every Member has good ideas, usually costing plenty of money, we must keep in mind the extent of the agenda that the Executive already have, having only existed for a month. We have an over-commitment of £150 million in the Budget. If Members wish to take action in line with promises to the electorate that they would not have to pay twice for their water, then there is a requirement for a further £160 million. Free personal care for the elderly means another £60 million, or thereabouts. The Minister for Social Development is looking for another £50 million for housing, and, based on what we know about likely increases, the wage bill to see us through to the end of the comprehensive spending review will cost us about £700 million. Those are significant pressures on any budget.

Of course, there will be supplementary amounts available to the Assembly by way of Barnett formula consequentials, but, if the demands cannot be met from

that source, Members will have to consider the regional rate. The Member for East Belfast Lord Browne is right to draw Members' attention to the concerns of ratepayers. Since each of us will have to face the ratepayers in the future, Members must have an overall priority that takes account of what we can do and when we can do it.

The Member for North Down Brian Wilson sought to encourage Members to follow his views on the green agenda. I have been provided with 'The Economics of Climate Change', the report of the Stern Review. Mr Wilson has laid down the marker, and I hope that I will have at least read that volume by the time he calls it in. I agree with him that more efficient use must be made of existing resources. Each Member bears a responsibility, much wider than our parochial concerns, to take account of the considerable issues relating to climate change and sustainability.

I wish to thank Members for their constructive contributions. The debate has been good, and many issues of real importance to the people of Northern Ireland have been discussed. It is an exciting time for all of us. The Executive have a unique opportunity to make a real difference in a way that has not been possible in the past. Although the spending plans that the Assembly is being asked to approve today have been inherited from the previous Administration, their acceptance will represent the first stage of government as Members look to the future. Approval will provide the Executive and the Assembly with the necessary lead-in time to establish priorities through a new Programme for Government, underpinned by detailed spending plans for the next three years and a longer-term investment strategy. In doing so, Members will face many challenges and make many difficult choices. There are no straight-forward answers to many of the issues that must be considered, and there will inevitably be trade-offs between differing priorities within a given set of financial constraints. Nevertheless, those decisions will be made by those Members who best understand the context and environment within which we live in Northern Ireland, taking account of the views of local people.

One of the main challenges that Members must rise to will be the strengthening of the Northern Ireland economy. Like many other regions, Northern Ireland faces a number of key global challenges — such as climate change and the depletion of energy reserves, as outlined by the Member for North Down Mr Brian Wilson.

Other challenges include the growth of emerging markets such as China and India; demographic changes that indicate a decline in the number of working-age people; technological innovation; and global political instability. Over the past 15 years, the Northern Ireland economy has experienced remarkable employment growth. For example, between 1990 and 2006, the

number of jobs in the region increased by 32%, compared to just 11% in the United Kingdom as a whole.

However, that figure masks the relative decline of the local manufacturing sector and the high growth in service-sector jobs. Between 1990 and 2006 manufacturing employment in Northern Ireland declined by approximately 20%, whereas employment in the services sector increased by almost 50%. Despite the strong employment growth, the local economy still lags behind the UK average.

Our productivity performance, relative to the UK as a whole, has been equally disappointing, with the gap widening since the late 1990s. Furthermore, the local economy is constrained by high levels of economic inactivity and is characterised by a dominant public sector. That is due mainly to a small, underdeveloped private sector.

The Northern Ireland economy can move forward only if the status quo is transformed into a high value-added, highly skilled, innovative and enterprising economy that can compete in the increasingly competitive global marketplace. We need to develop the local private sector in order to reduce our reliance on the public sector, and we need to create sustainable, high-value jobs. That is a task ahead for the Executive and for the Assembly. Our local knowledge and insight best fit us for that job. Our attachment to, and affection for, Northern Ireland will motivate us, and our enthusiasm to see devolution work will inspire and encourage us to bring innovation, direction and dedication to the task.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before I put the Question, I remind Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That this Assembly approves that a sum not exceeding £7,079,776,000 be granted out of the Consolidated Fund, for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the year ending 31 March 2008; and that resources not exceeding £7,922,535,000 be authorised for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the year ending 31 March 2008.

BUDGET BILL

First Stage

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr P Robinson): I beg leave to introduce to the Assembly a Bill [NIA 3/07] to authorise the issue out of the Consolidated Fund of certain sums for the service of the year ending 31st March 2008; to appropriate those sums for specified purposes; to authorise the Department of Finance and Personnel to borrow on the credit of the appropriated sums; to authorise the use for the public service of certain resources (including accruing resources) for the year ending 31st March 2008; and to repeal certain spent provisions.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I inform Members that I have received written notification from the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel confirming that the Committee is satisfied that in accordance with Standing Order 40(2) there is appropriate consultation with the Committee on the public expenditure proposals contained in the Bill, and it is therefore content that the Bill can proceed by accelerated passage. The Second Stage of the Bill will take place on Tuesday 12 June 2007.

TAXIS BILL

First Stage

The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster): I beg leave to introduce to the Assembly a Bill [NIA 4/07] to make provision regulating taxi operators, taxis and taxi drivers; and for related purposes.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Bill will be put on the list of future business until a date for its Second Stage is determined.

6.15 pm

LIBRARIES BILL

First Stage

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Poots): I beg leave to introduce to the Assembly a Bill [NIA 5/07] to provide for the establishment and functions of the Northern Ireland Library Authority; to enable the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure to make grants in connection with the provision of library services; and for connected purposes.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Bill will be put on the list of future business until a date for its Second Stage is determined.

Adjourned at 6.16 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 12 June 2007

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Welfare Reform Bill Second Stage

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie):
I beg to move

That the Second Stage of the Welfare Reform Bill [NIA 1/07] be agreed.

The Welfare Reform Bill makes provision corresponding to the Welfare Reform Act 2007 and is therefore a parity measure. Following the Bill's First Stage, I outlined the policy of parity and social security and the arguments for maintaining this long-standing policy, not least of which is financial reality. I trust that all Members accept the benefits of parity.

As a society, we cannot afford to be denied the skills and talents of many people who want to work but who, in the past, found themselves excluded from the workplace due to disability or incapacity. More importantly, we cannot deny such people the right to work if we can help them to do so. We are all too well aware of the corrosive effect of economic inactivity, not just for individuals but for entire communities.

The Bill aims to break, once and for all, the idea that people should be consigned to a life on benefit simply because of a health condition or a disability. Although the aim is to help everyone play an active role in society, there is no question of moving away from the firm foundation of a sound medical assessment of each person's individual capabilities and limitations. The Bill has, as its guiding principle, the development of a welfare system that tackles poverty and social exclusion and that matches rights and responsibilities.

Part 1 of the Bill provides for the employment and support allowance, which will replace incapacity benefit and income support on grounds of incapacity. The replacement benefit will incorporate the contributory allowance and an income-related allowance. It is estimated that eight out of 10 people who apply for

incapacity benefit want, and expect, to get back to work. However, the stark reality is that, if they are on incapacity benefit for more than two years, they are more likely to retire or die than to get another job.

Little is expected of claimants and, outside the Pathways to Work pilot schemes, almost no support is offered to them. The Bill seeks to change that. The new benefit is founded on the concept of measuring and building the capability of individuals rather than writing them off as incapable. It offers a radical extension of the support available, which will be underpinned by the roll-out of Pathways to Work by April 2008.

The new personal capability assessment will identify those who are capable of undertaking work-related activity, and the support and interventions that will be necessary to help them prepare to get back to work. As is the case with the current personal capability assessment, the scores from the physical assessment and the mental-health assessment will be combined. Following the assessment phase, the majority of claimants would become entitled to additional benefit in the form of the work-related activity component.

The personal capability assessment will identify separately people who are so limited by their illness or disability that it would be unreasonable to require them to undertake any form of work-related activity. Those people will be entitled to additional benefit in the form of a support component. They will, however, be able to volunteer to participate in work-related activity and access all the appropriate support available.

For the vast majority — those who are not in the support group — the new benefit will have a clear framework of rights and responsibilities. In return for the additional support provided by the roll-out of the Pathways to Work programme, claimants will be required to attend regular interviews and to complete action plans. There are no plans at present to introduce mandatory work-related activity. However, the Bill contains a provision that would allow the work-related activity component of the employment and support allowance to be reduced if a claimant fails, without good cause, to undertake such assessments, interviews or activity if required to do so.

All claimants will be treated sensitively. However, people with mental-health problems will be treated with particular sensitivity and sympathy. Additionally, there will be safeguards geared to people with mental-health problems. The current gateway to benefit, the personal capability assessment, is known to deal less well with mental-health conditions, not least because, in the years since the assessment was created, there have been many changes to the types of conditions being presented and the available treatment options.

The personal capability assessment is being transformed into a more positive assessment that focuses on what a person remains capable of doing and identifies the help that they need to overcome their problems and return to work. Specifically, the mental-health component of the assessment is being reviewed to ensure that it is up to date, evidence-based and deals effectively with the problems and needs of those with mental-health problems.

The revised assessment will ensure that people with mental-health conditions are better identified and that their problems, needs and the support that they require are correctly assessed. We do not want to write people off; we want to ensure that they get all the help that they need to fulfil their potential. The personal adviser is at the centre of the team, which also draws on the expertise in mental health and other disabilities in the Department for Employment and Learning's disablement advisory service and the healthcare professionals who deliver the condition-management programme.

Local experience of the Pathways to Work programme suggests that people with mental-health conditions welcome the support and opportunities offered to them and are usually very willing to commit wholeheartedly to the process.

Since 2006, some 260 people have volunteered for the support available, including those with mental ill-health and people with learning disabilities who heard about the Pathways to Work programme from organisations such as Action Mental Health and Mencap.

We believe that engagement with the community and some form of work-related activity will benefit most people. We do not expect that the power to reduce benefits for people who refuse to engage with the help and support on offer will need to be widely used. Experience of the current Pathways to Work areas in which extra conditions have been imposed shows that less than 0.5% of claimants have been sanctioned. Our aim is to encourage and to assist, but it is vital for the fallback position of this sanction to be available where it is absolutely necessary.

The Bill amends existing social security law to ensure that the rights of appeal to an independent appeals tribunal apply to the employment and support allowance. Over time, existing claimants will migrate to the new employment and support allowance. However, the current benefits of existing claimants will be fully protected.

I stress again that the Bill is not about forcing people off benefit and into work. It is about offering people help and support to get ready to return to work, and, in return, expecting claimants to engage with that help and support.

Part 2 of the Bill concerns housing benefit. In particular, it makes provision to simplify the existing housing benefit system; to improve work incentives

and encourage personal responsibility for housing choices; and for the introduction of a local housing allowance across the private-rented sector.

The local housing allowance is designed to ensure that the same amount of benefit is paid to tenants in similar circumstances residing in the same area. The intention is to provide a better, quicker service based on simpler rules, while ensuring that people on low incomes can afford a decent home that meets their needs.

The Bill provides a regulation-making power to allow payment to be made directly to the tenant. As I made clear to the Social Development Committee, and during the debate last week to grant the Bill accelerated passage, I will not seek to exercise that power until I have considered the matter further and fully discussed the issues with the Committee.

The Bill also provides for a reduction in housing benefit where someone has been evicted from their home on grounds of antisocial behaviour and who then refuses to co-operate with the support that is offered by the Housing Executive to help them improve their behaviour. Members are all aware of the problems caused by antisocial behaviour. No one wants people to moving from one property to another and continuing their antisocial behaviour. Equally, we need to ensure that our efforts to tackle antisocial behaviour get things right.

For that reason, I will consider bringing that provision of the Bill into force only once pilots in 10 local authority areas in England and Wales have been evaluated. The evaluation will cover all relevant areas, including effectiveness, the effect on antisocial behaviour and the impact on housing and homelessness. Furthermore, the provision will cease to have effect on 30 December 2010 unless a further Bill, which provides for it to continue after that date, is introduced.

Part 3 of the Bill contains several measures to improve the administration of social security, including powers to allow greater sharing of information to improve the take-up and delivery of benefits — something I particularly want to happen. For example, where pensioners are entitled to both pension credit and housing benefit, common information on personal and financial circumstances will need to be given only once.

Part 3 also provides more power to tackle benefit fraud by strengthening the rules in relation to the loss of benefit for commission of benefit offences by extending from three to five years the length of time over which previous benefit fraud offences can be taken into account. It will also provide the Housing Executive with clear powers to investigate and prosecute offences relating to other social security benefits where it already has powers to prosecute fraud against housing benefit.

10.45 am

Finally, Part 4 of the Bill contains a number of smaller, but important, measures to correct anomalies in the current benefits system. Those measures include ensuring that recipients of disability living allowance who are around 16 years old do not lose up to three months' benefit entitlement; and continuing the simplification of the budgeting loans scheme, which enables the social fund to play a crucial role in providing interest-free loans or grants to assist the most vulnerable people — those with no recourse to mainstream credit. Part 4 also contains technical measures on the payment of benefit for bereaved persons, and clarifies the law on payment of disability living allowance and attendance allowance to care-home residents.

The Bill also eases the relevant employer condition, making it simpler for a person who suffers from certain dust-related diseases, including mesothelioma and other asbestos-related conditions, to claim compensation.

The legislation will allow us to harness the power of modern advances in health and employment support, and to foster a society in which there are genuine equal rights and opportunities for all. The Bill is a parity measure, and an important step in the ongoing process of welfare reform. It encourages people into work, while supporting those who cannot work.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Campbell): I understand that it is the intention of the Welfare Reform Bill to break the link between welfare and dependency. That is to be welcomed. The Bill provides practical measures to support that aspiration as part of the ongoing process of welfare reform and modernisation of the benefits system.

The Minister and her officials have appeared before the Committee. They briefed us on the Bill's principles and details, for which the Committee is grateful. As the Minister has outlined, the Bill will introduce a new employment and support allowance to replace the current incapacity benefit. That new allowance will help to support individuals who wish to remain in, or return to, work. The Committee welcomes any efforts to help such individuals and encourages the Minister to consult with the Minister for Employment and Learning on the resources that may be required in order to provide that allowance.

The legislation will also introduce a local housing allowance across the private-rented sector. The Committee welcomes that local element and hopes that it will go some way to alleviating the current difficulties that those who must top up their housing benefit experience.

An associated change, however, will allow local housing allowance to be paid directly to tenants. The Committee is glad that the Minister agreed with its strong reservations on that issue. At our specific request,

she gave an unequivocal undertaking to consider the matter further and consult with the Committee before taking any action.

The Committee will pay close attention to how the Housing Executive uses its wider powers to investigate and prosecute benefit fraud. We hope that the introduction of those powers will increase the scope for effective joint working between the Housing Executive and the Department.

The Committee supports measures that will make it simpler for people who suffer from certain dust-related diseases to claim compensation, and indeed, it supports the other provisions in the Bill that clarify existing legislation, thus making it simpler and easier to understand.

Although the Committee will not be able to conduct a detailed examination of the Bill due to its receiving accelerated passage, it will consider the practical implications of welfare reform in the course of its scrutiny of the Department's work.

Mr Speaker: Before we continue, I remind Members that we are debating the Bill's principles, not its substance.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to participate in this debate. Although the Committee for Social Development agreed to its being given accelerated passage, the Bill by no means had the Committee's full support. In fact, accelerated passage was only ensured when Committee members were informed that people's benefits would cease should passage of the Bill be delayed, and after we received a commitment from the Minister that certain clauses would be brought back to the Committee for discussion.

It is my understanding that on 23 January 2007 the Minister voted against the Bill, in that she voted against the wording of a motion that was moved by my colleague from Upper Bann, John O'Dowd, and voted in support of an amendment that was proposed by her colleague from Upper Bann, Mrs Dolores Kelly. The wording of the motion, as amended, read:

"That this Assembly expresses deep concern about the implications of the Welfare Reform Bill, particularly the introduction of a new coercive regime into benefit administration, and its impact on a number of vulnerable groups, especially those people with mental ill health." — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 21, p421, col 2*].

We now have the strange situation where the Minister is putting her reputation on the line by supporting that same legislation, which has reached its Second Stage today.

Perhaps the Minister could explain to the House what has changed in the Bill to warrant her road to Damascus conversion. Although I welcome her commitment to come back to the Committee for Social Development to deal with the issue of housing benefit, I ask her if

the clauses relating to housing benefit in the Bill have changed. If the Bill were to be passed in its present form it could lead to many people falling into debt and finding themselves on the street for deciding to feed their families rather than pay their rent.

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

Has the Minister reviewed the clause on sanctions, which could have a detrimental impact on people's health and mental well-being if threats to reduce or take away benefits are followed through? Can she guarantee that personal advisers have been given the training needed to assess, and have the experience to evaluate, those suffering with mental-health problems? Will she stand over the opinions of a personal adviser or a GP in relation to a mental-health assessment? Have staff been trained to understand the needs and capabilities of disabled people?

Can the Minister guarantee that clients who attend work-focused interviews, if classed as fit for work, will move into employment, and into jobs that fit their requirements and capabilities? Has she seen recent statistics, which state that fewer than 40% of employers would employ a person with a mental illness? In addition, 75% of employers stated that employing someone with schizophrenia would be very difficult or impossible. Can the Minister say if there would be any way that she could guarantee that those who most need our protection from discrimination and prejudice would be better off were some clauses in the Bill to be passed? Alternatively, is the House setting people up for a fall?

The information that the Minister is relying on in relation to housing benefit was collated through surveys carried out in 18 or 19 towns and cities in England that are completely different from those here. People here are on lower pay, and the cost of living here is greater. Some years ago, it was the norm, in this state, that housing benefit was paid directly to people. The situation was changed to one in which direct payments were made to landlords because people were getting into debt. They found it difficult to control their finances, especially people who were paid at the poverty level, such as those on income support or low earners who struggled to pay their bills.

Rushing to pass all clauses in the Bill would be a mistake. The Department's insistence that people will lose benefits if the Assembly does not complete the passage of the Bill quickly is an attempt to get it through without any real debate. Members have the power to ensure that people's benefits are not delayed. However, we also have a responsibility to ensure that, in the rush to get the Bill through, we do not trample over the rights of people who expect us to do right by them — those with disabilities, those who suffer from mental illness and those who live in poverty.

Will the Minister say whether there will be jobs available for all those who attend work-focused interviews? Many people believe that the Bill has little to do with benefits and more to do with forcing thousands of individuals off benefits completely. Let us not be hasty. Let us make sure that we get the Bill right. Too much depends on this, especially as regards the vulnerable groups who rely on Members to make things right for them. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr B McCrea: This is a very sensitive issue. Welfare reform is something that one can get badly wrong; therefore, it is important to strike a balance in matters such as this.

I understand why the Bill is being taken forward under the accelerated passage provisions. However, that rings a few alarm bells with me. I start from the position that there seem to be many more economically inactive people in Northern Ireland than in the rest of the United Kingdom — roughly 30% as compared with 20%.

We must ask ourselves why the difference exists. A very informative report by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation concluded that there are two significant issues.

The first factor is that elected representatives in Northern Ireland are much more aware of the situation and are therefore able to provide the necessary support to people who deserve to receive disability living allowance (DLA). Indeed, many people in other parts of the UK who deserve DLA do not claim it. The issue is therefore not simply one of people in Northern Ireland claiming more than they are due.

The second, and more interesting, point comes from the report's examination of the various subsections that make up DLA. The report concluded that in every single quota bar one, Northern Ireland is identical to the rest of the United Kingdom as regards perception. The one area where Northern Ireland is different is that of mental illness. The report explored why that was the case. As might be expected, 30 to 40 years of civil war has had an effect. The report found that it is not unreasonable that our society as a whole should suffer considerable mental stress and that a way must be found to deal with that.

I was interested in the Minister's point about encouraging those with mental illness into the workplace. Prejudice is undoubtedly a problem. Many employers must be encouraged to take on people with a mental illness. Members should note that in New Zealand, for example, 25 times more per capita is paid to tackle such prejudice. However, we must also be careful that people are not pressurised into work for which they are not capable. The reality is that people with a mental illness or a mental disadvantage have different issues than those of us who are more fortunate.

I am pleased to report that the Pathways to Work initiative has been piloted in 14 out of the 35 jobs and benefit offices across Northern Ireland. The Department for Employment and Learning has an interest in that scheme. The initial response in Northern Ireland has been relatively positive. However, there is always a danger of getting excited. In reviewing the work of the Department for Work and Pensions, Rethink, a major mental-illness charity in the UK, recognised that, as yet, no statistical evidence exists to show that the Pathways to Work initiative supports those with a mental illness in returning to work. The situation must be tackled and kept under review. How we treat those with mental illness is a very important part of a civilised society.

There are a number of issues to consider. I shall say what everyone is thinking: many people think that DLA and housing benefit are abused. That perception is not helpful to society, and I welcome the Bill's moves to address such issues, whether they concern antisocial behaviour or people with recurrent problems who live in Housing Executive homes. Evicting someone from a Housing Executive home can take years. That is absolutely unsatisfactory. It is not that we want to penalise anyone, but a way must be found to reduce the amount of overheads required to manage the systems, because all money must be focused on the front line.

The Ulster Unionist Party is very supportive of the Minister's proposed reforms in the Bill. We promise to keep the matter under review. In the years to come, we will, no doubt, return to this important issue.

Ms Lo: I welcome the overall objective of helping people into work and properly supporting those who are unable to work. The ethos of providing a more positive and individual approach to claimants is also to be welcomed.

11.00 am

People want to work, and the reforms have the potential to help many individuals, while also losing the stigma of being perceived as not wanting to work. The proviso is that people who are genuinely not able to work should not be forced into it. I also welcome any help for people currently moving from benefits into the job market, as there is inadequate support at present to help people move into employment.

However, Government needs to be cautious that the reform is not just a means to move people off benefits into work. It should be borne in mind that Northern Ireland has higher levels of poverty, health problems and unemployment than the rest of the UK.

Incapacity benefit is claimed by 15% of Northern Ireland's population. People who are on incapacity benefit are generally the most vulnerable in our society in terms of ill health, educational levels, housing status and employability. Quite often they are the people who

are least able to come off benefits to get into employment. Government needs to provide meaningful support to them to make the transition into employment a real incentive in economic and self-development terms. The aim should not be to merely remove them from our benefit statistics. To do this there is a need for joined-up services to be put in place right across the benefit, employment and health sectors.

The independent advice sector should be resourced and trained to give effective advice and information to enable recipients to make informed choices about moving from benefits to work. Measures should be put in place to protect people and encourage them to come off benefits rather than to penalise them. An adequate infrastructure needs to be established before a new system comes on stream to support people to move into employment. That infrastructure should include affordable childcare and meaningful job opportunities rather than mere token job placements.

It is fine to say that we need to get people off benefits in order to move them into work, but we must have a safety net to ensure that people have sufficient income to live on in order not to fall into poverty. It is essential that the new system and forms be simplified. Sometimes even elected representatives struggle to help constituents, due to the complexities of the process.

For claimants whose first language is not English, Members can imagine the difficulties in completing such forms. In addition to benefit simplification, the Social Security Agency (SSA) needs to address the issue of bureaucracy to ensure that the transition from benefits to employment runs smoothly, without causing hardship.

Mr Hilditch: I support the Bill at its Second Stage. The Bill has received accelerated passage, and I thank the Minister for Social Development, Ms Ritchie, for coming before the Committee for Social Development to seek support for that process, and to answer questions on the concerns raised by the Committee.

The majority of the Bill is concerned with maintaining parity with the rest of the United Kingdom, which I welcome. There are several broad areas of principle that deserve a mention. The employment and support allowance will replace incapacity benefit and income support on the grounds of incapacity benefit for work on disability. The underlying principle across the entire benefits system should be to target those who are in most need, and to ensure that those who should not be in receipt of benefits are removed from the system. Every Member finds that to be a sore point in their constituency.

The proposed 13-week assessment phase means that claimants will be required to provide medical evidence of their inability to work. Although that may concern some people, the majority of claimants have nothing to fear from any measures that are designed to reduce fraud. Those who cannot provide the required medical

evidence within the 13 weeks will have benefit back-paid on receipt of that evidence. I welcome that provision in principle.

Once those who cannot work have proven that incapability, the focus can move on to those who can be helped back to the world of work. That is what the benefit system should be designed to do: it must ensure, by showing people how they can move back towards employment, that they do not become stuck in the benefit trap.

I am glad that the Minister has recognised the Committee's concerns about housing benefit payment; indeed, several times she mentioned that she shared those concerns. I welcome her assurance that no moves will be made on housing benefit without full discussions taking place and evidence being produced to support any decision. I look forward to the Minister returning to the Committee to discuss the matter.

The proposed amendment to the regulations on certain dust-related diseases will benefit many people. The proposed provision will widen the group of dependants who may make a claim. I am particularly pleased with that proposal; some of my colleagues may remember that part of the campaign for sufferers of such diseases and their families began in my constituency several years ago. Many people suffer from diseases that were contracted as a result of their employment. As well as ensuring that not only can relatives make a claim, making it easier to make a claim against an employer or an insurance company will be a great relief to those who suffer as a result of those terrible conditions.

Although accelerated passage means that the Bill will not be subject to the scrutiny that Committee Stage affords, Members have highlighted several issues. I hope that there will be support across the House to ensure that, as well as parity being maintained, those aspects of the Bill that benefit the community across Northern Ireland will be implemented. I support the Bill.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Although the Welfare Reform Bill is an important piece of legislation, it is merely a rehash of what has been tried previously. It proposes to change housing benefit with the introduction of a local housing allowance rate. That is calculated according to the number and range of occupiers as well as the locality of the claimant.

Some Members — and the Committee for Social Development — were concerned about the proposal to introduce regulations to allow direct payment of housing benefit to claimants instead of to landlords. That raises an obvious problem in that more money may go into a weekly budget but may not necessarily be used to pay rent. However, the Minister has given

an undertaking that until that has been discussed further with the Committee for Social Development, she will not introduce any regulations that will change the current method of payment of housing benefit.

Mr McCarthy: Is the Member aware that the Housing Executive, as I understand, has already notified landlords and, possibly, tenants about a possible change in the payment method? Will the Member accept that if that is the case, the Minister's undertaking may not be realistic?

Mr Brady: That may be the case, although it is our understanding that the Committee for Social Development will consider that matter further. If the Minister decides not to implement that change, the Housing Executive will presumably be informed.

Tenants will have their housing benefit removed if a possession order has been made against them on the grounds of antisocial or criminal behaviour. Other sanctions can be applied. The Minister has said that those sanctions will not be imposed until pilot schemes have been studied and their results are in the public domain.

Benefit fraud was also mentioned, and it is a recurring theme in social security legislation. Out of £150 million that was lost by the Social Security Agency last year, less than £30 million was lost in fraud. Presumably, the other £120 million was lost through error.

It has been mentioned that the Bill proposes changes to the age conditions regarding entitlement to the care and mobility components of disability living allowance. The proposal is to alter the age conditions from those who are 16 years old to people who are around the age of 16. The Bill also makes welcome proposals to amend the Pneumoconiosis etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Northern Ireland) Order 1979, to ease the "relevant employer" condition and widen the group of dependants who could make a claim to include, in particular, civil partners.

The main principle behind the Bill is to support and encourage more people in receipt of incapacity benefit to move into employment when they are able to do so. Although some of the reforms are welcome, other provisions in the Bill may create particular problems for people with mental-health issues, who make up approximately 40% of all incapacity benefit claimants. One in six people here will suffer from a medically identified mental-health illness at some time in their life, and recent research has found that almost a tenth of our working population claim benefits for mental health. Those figures are worrying and raise major questions about how the area of mental health should be dealt with.

A large amount of responsibility is to be placed on personal advisers. The Bill obliges a claimant who fails to attend a work-related interview to provide a

good reason for that failure within five days. That timescale is too short and must allow for the unpredictable nature of some mental-health problems. Presumably, the Minister will reconsider the timescale.

When the personal-capability assessment was introduced in the 1990s, 50% of people were supposed to be taken off benefits — that simply did not happen. A more holistic approach to that assessment is required. Examining doctors must be fully trained and have a thorough understanding of mental-health issues to ensure that the test is applied fairly and effectively. It is essential that proper resources be allocated for that purpose.

Although the move to encourage and support more people to return to work is welcome, many on incapacity benefit will face practical issues. People with mental-health problems still face prejudice and discrimination in the workplace. Recent statistics confirm that less than 40% of employers would employ someone with a mental illness and 75% would not employ someone with schizophrenia. Urgent action must be taken to reduce the stigma and discrimination faced by people with mental-health problems.

Finally, a LeasCheann Comhairle, parts of the Bill are welcome, but many aspects must be properly resourced and dealt with in a humane and sensitive way. Go raibh maith agat.

Miss McIlveen: I shall welcome the passing of this important piece of legislation: it is imperative that there is parity between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom in such areas. As a member of the Committee for Social Development, I found it of great assistance that the Minister attended the Committee to brief us on the Bill.

Particular aspects of the Bill should be highlighted to the Assembly. The Housing Executive will be given clear powers beyond its current perceived remit to investigate and prosecute benefit fraud. That will provide an effective tool with which to tackle fraud and free up funds that can be distributed to their rightful recipients — the Province's needy. Fraudsters are a blight on society; they steal from the poorest and embezzle the taxpayer. Therefore, I welcome the provision in clause 45, which extends the period during which time someone convicted of benefit fraud will lose the right to benefit for five years as opposed to three years.

Furthermore, I note the provisions contained in the Bill at clause 31 and, although it is not intended that the measure will be introduced until the pilot scheme in England has been evaluated, it must be introduced without delay if such sanctions are shown to be successful. The public purse should not be used to facilitate thuggery, bullying and antisocial behaviour.

Recipients of housing benefit should be mindful that being part of a society that has at its heart the support

and protection of the vulnerable by the payments of benefits means that those receiving the benefits have been assessed as vulnerable. People who have been shown to be thugs and bullies are not vulnerable.

11.15 am

Along with the members of the Committee for Social Development, I happily note the provisions contained in clause 52, which makes important changes to the Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Northern Ireland) Order 1979. Any means of supporting those who are suffering from such horrific industrial diseases is to be wholeheartedly endorsed. The introduction of measures to simplify the means by which sufferers can be compensated is laudable.

I have reservations regarding the payment of a local housing allowance directly to the tenant rather than to private landlords, as outlined in the Bill. Like the Chairperson of the Committee, I welcome the Minister's undertaking to the Committee on that matter. The introduction of such a measure may have the effect opposite to its intention: instead of encouraging budget management and the paying of bills, it could place pressures on an individual who has fallen into debt and is tempted to pay off that debt rather than pay for his or her accommodation. The landlord will suffer, and there is the possibility that private landlords will be disinclined to offer accommodation to those eligible for local housing allowance.

The Bill is only the skeleton to which the flesh of ministerial regulations will be attached, and, as a member of the Committee, I look forward to scrutinising the practical effect of the legislation. However, I remind the Minister that some of the main concerns regarding the legislation in Great Britain have been about the impact on those suffering with mental-health problems and the willingness of employers to absorb them into their workforce. I welcome the Minister's earlier remarks on that.

We must be mindful that regulations will have to be sensitively drafted, so that the most vulnerable in society are not cast adrift from the benefits system. I am happy to support the general principles of the Bill.

Mr Burns: I support the Welfare Reform Bill. As Members of the Assembly, we have a responsibility to do our best for our constituents and for Northern Ireland. There is also a strong need to maintain parity. In relation to the employment and support allowance that will replace incapacity benefit, it is positive that there are work-related conditions that build on the Pathways to Work programme. Will the Minister outline how Pathways to Work has worked so far in Northern Ireland, and will she confirm that her Department is working with the Department for Employment and Learning on that programme?

The Minister has expressed concern about the proposal to pay the local housing allowance directly to tenants, and I share the Minister's concerns. Increasing the sense of responsibility of tenants might be a good idea, but we must ensure that any possible increase in debt or evictions does not happen.

My primary interest in the Bill is in the provision for dust-related diseases such as asbestosis. The Bill provides for an easement of the "relevant employer" condition, making it easier for people suffering from asbestosis and mesothelioma to claim compensation. We must ensure that people suffering from those diseases do not have any further delays in making their compensation claims. It is encouraging that the group of people eligible to claim compensation will be widened. Those who have found it difficult to identify their former employers will now find it easier to make claims.

There are many reasons to maintain parity. Social security is an area with a long-standing policy of parity, as provided for in the Northern Ireland Act 1998. I support the Bill.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Social Development Committee agreed to this Bill's receiving accelerated passage because it was told by officials, and by Minister Ritchie, that claimants would suffer if the Bill were delayed, and that there needed to be parity with England, where the counterpart Bill was passed in May. However, there was very strong resistance to the Bill in England.

The irony of that is that there was so much resistance precisely because of the suffering that the Westminster Welfare Reform Bill would cause if passed.

The Coalition Against the Welfare Reform Bill protested against that Bill at the Labour Party conference in September. It demanded that the British Government rethink their welfare reform policies and recognise that the poor, the vulnerable, the disabled and the genuinely unemployed would be seriously disadvantaged and punished if the Bill were passed. The Bill was variously described as unjust, draconian and unworkable.

I know that we are debating the general principles of the Assembly's Welfare Reform Bill, but clause 31 deals with the loss of housing benefit following eviction for antisocial behaviour. We all accept that antisocial behaviour is a scourge; therefore, Governments must tackle its root causes. However, instead of doing so, they rely on reactive punitive measures; indeed, Basil McCrea referred to penalties. I agree: every single case does not warrant penalty.

Clause 31 proposes that the Housing Executive be given the power to reduce housing benefit by 10% for the first four weeks, 20% for a further four weeks, and eventually by 100% for a period of up to five years from the repossession of the accommodation. Will that

encourage someone who has been evicted to behave positively? I do not think that it will. Where will the evicted person live?

Clause 31 proposes that the sanction be withdrawn or reduced depending on the Housing Executive's assessment of whether the evicted person has co-operated with rehabilitation, and I accept that that has been addressed. A lower rate of benefit reduction will apply if families are deemed to be in hardship. However, does that make the sanction all right? A household may experience hardship if, for example, someone is seriously ill, pregnant, has caring responsibilities or there are children. Despite the lower rate, however, a reduction would still apply.

The Housing Executive can act with flexibility: sanctions can be stopped or restarted. That must be a bureaucratic nightmare. I note that the removal of housing benefit for antisocial behaviour will not be introduced until the piloting of the sanction in England has been evaluated. Indeed, the Minister referred to that pilot.

I thank the Minister for giving the Committee for Social Development the commitment that there will be no changes to housing benefit or the method through which it is delivered. However, given Kieran McCarthy's contribution, I wonder whether that commitment still stands. I am sure that we will hear from the Minister about that at a later stage.

Accelerated passage has denied the Committee the opportunity to discuss fully the implications of the proposed changes. That is not good for democracy, and in this case, it would have helped if the Committee had been able to discuss the Bill.

We need a Minister who is not only a Minister for Social Development but who has a social conscience. The Minister gives the impression that she has a social conscience; however, parts of the Bill do not reflect a social conscience. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Craig: I welcome the Welfare Reform Bill. I note with great interest that there is more enthusiasm from some quarters of the House today than there was when the original Bill was debated in the Transitional Assembly. Perhaps some of those parties have managed to make a leap between grandstanding in opposition under direct rule and the realities of life under devolution.

I welcomed the Minister's attendance at the Committee for Social Development to provide more details on the issues that are contained in the Bill. Parity between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom is crucial. I welcome the fact that other Members seem to be thinking along the same lines. I support the fact that the Bill ensures that Northern Ireland is kept in line with Great Britain.

The issue that received most attention in the Committee was the possible introduction of a local housing allowance. Although the Minister gave a welcome assurance that it would not be introduced without further consultation with the Committee, it is worth a mention in the debate. There is great concern about a change in the direct payment of housing benefit away from the landlord to the tenant. Tenants can experience great pressure when deciding how best to spend their benefits, particularly when at their most vulnerable. The direct payment of housing benefit to tenants would put those people under further pressure. Recipients of housing benefit are among those with the lowest incomes, and there are many competing pressures on their limited budgets. Although there is the argument that people should be able to budget for and pay their rent when in work, the direct payment of housing benefit to tenants will only put increased pressure on those recipients, who may have to choose whether to use that money to pay their rent or to heat their homes in order to keep their children warm. At times, that may put them in an almost impossible position.

My hon Friend, the Chairman of the Committee for Social Development, stressed the importance of that issue to the Minister and ensured that the Committee was given her commitment that further consideration would be given to it. I hope that she will stand by that commitment.

Measures to reduce benefit fraud will be welcomed by the many honest benefit claimants in Northern Ireland. The Bill will encourage those who are in receipt of benefits to go back to work, which can only be good for the economy. Northern Ireland receives taxable income contributions of £2.3 billion. As a Committee member, I was shocked to learn that £2.25 billion of that money is spent on benefits. The long-term effects of that must be examined. Northern Ireland's economy cannot sustain itself under the present circumstances. To enable the economy to grow, the Assembly must assist people to get back to work while ensuring that those who cannot go back to work are looked after.

I caution the Minister against the introduction of direct payment of housing benefit to tenants without detailed examination of its effects. However, I support the broad thrust of the Bill, and I urge the rest of the House to do likewise.

Mr A Maginness: Northern Ireland is in the most curious situation of having one of the highest levels of people who are economically inactive throughout these islands: its level is certainly higher than that of any region of the UK and possibly of the Republic as well.

11.30 am

At the same time Northern Ireland has a serious skills shortage. The problem of economic dislocation in the workforce and the high numbers who are economically

inactive must be addressed thoroughly and seriously. Part of the Bill is intended to do that.

People have become economically inactive, are in a benefit trap, dependent on benefits and unlikely to get out of that situation. We cannot sit back and allow that to continue indefinitely. It is not good for those people, for society in general or for the local economy. All of us in the Assembly want to see the economy reshaped and reformed, so that it responds to the needs of the community at large.

The Welfare Reform Bill is part and parcel of an attempt to address that situation. Others have pointed out that it is a parity measure, and it is important that the Assembly supports it.

Most of us in the Chamber would prefer to legislate for social welfare ourselves, and we might make a better job of it, going by the interesting ideas that have been introduced this morning. However, that is not possible because the need for parity has been accepted, and that will continue indefinitely.

The SDLP accepts the financial realities. A figure of £2.5 billion was quoted as being spent on benefits in Northern Ireland. That is a huge amount of money; however, as we must maintain parity, we have little option but to accept the legislation.

As with most legislation, there are good things and bad; however, the main thrust is good. If we are going to make economically active those who are inactive — and not all of them are benefit recipients, though they are a goodly number — then we have to employ new means of encouraging people to work. The main vehicle for that is similar to the Pathways to Work approach, which is a good thing.

My colleague Fra McCann, who spoke this morning, and I sit on the Employment Services Board (ESB) in Belfast. That is a community-based organisation, financed partly by the Department for Social Development — and I am grateful to the Minister for continuing that finance. I am sure that Mr McCann agrees with me. Essentially, what the ESB does is precisely what Pathways to Work does, but on a community level. People who are disconnected from the statutory agencies are brought into to a community context where, by talking to them, advising them and interviewing them, they are encouraged back to work. In fact, I used the wrong phrase — some of those people have never been in work in the first place. The ESB aims to encourage them to think differently, about working instead of being on welfare benefits, and about getting out of that culture of dependency. Mr McCann would agree with me that that approach is working in West Belfast.

Mr F McCann: I agree with Mr Maginness, with whom I sit on the West Belfast Employment Services Board, which is trying to make a difference. However, the difference between the ESB and Pathways to Work

is that the board's work has been done in a stronger community setting and in a more community-friendly manner. For many people, the barriers that have been mentioned exist in the benefits offices, which seem intimidatory. That dissuades people from going to benefits offices and leaves them on the back foot.

Mr A Maginness: Those arguments will continue after the passage of the Bill. Many will say that they want a more innovative and friendly way of dealing with people who are out of work. I am sure that the Department for Social Development will take those points on board, deal with that matter and become much more friendly in dealing with people in that situation.

The differences among Members are not about the substance of what is intended by the Bill, but the methods by which some of the delivery will take place. We must be constructive in debating the ways and means of proceeding. Unfortunately, we cannot have an Employment Services Board in every part of Northern Ireland. We all would love that to be the case, which would lead to a much friendlier, more community-based approach. However, the realities of life are such that that measure cannot be translated to a wider scale.

Mr McCann and others have said that the Department must be sensitive to people's needs, including those who have real — particularly mental — disabilities. I accept the Minister's assurance that a sensitive approach will be taken when dealing with people with those difficulties. It is important that DSD works out ways and means to engage with people, over and above the normal, more bureaucratic methods. I would welcome that, and I hope that the Minister will offer assurance on that.

We have had the experience of the Pathways to Work programme, which was offered by 14 benefits offices. The outcome of those experiments and that experience will be important in informing this debate, and I look forward to that.

I do not wish to get into the detail of clause 31, but I understand why people say that they object to punitive measures and do not wish to see people, effectively, left without any support in the community. However, antisocial behaviour is an appalling problem in many housing estates and neighbourhoods throughout Northern Ireland. It may be only one family that is causing the problem, but that has a ripple effect. It is not just the immediate neighbours who suffer; it is the whole neighbourhood. If we do not hold some type of sanction on people, over and beyond what exists at the moment, how are we going to control effectively such situations?

Such measures as sanctions are possible with the Bill; however, the Minister has assured us that she will examine the pilot schemes that have taken place in Britain. That should inform our debate and it would be useful to see exactly what happens in Britain. If there

is no threat of sanction, will people listen? Will behaviour improve? We are all human beings and there must be some sanctions at the stage when behaviour is completely out of hand.

That provision is not intended to deal with people who are simply negligent; rather, it is to cope with a hard core of completely antisocial people who defy the normal rules of society.

I hope that the Department will seriously consider the provisions relating to the mentally ill, and that the Minister will assure the House that that issue will be dealt with in a sensitive manner.

I welcome the provisions relating to those suffering from asbestosis and other diseases. I know, from professional experience, that those will assist people to bring claims for compensation by helping to overcome the evidential difficulties in establishing claims related to events of 20, 30 or, in some cases, 40 years ago.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I have two brief points. I ask the Minister to clarify her position on the increasing tendency for the Department, in establishing the personal-capability assessment and eligibility for disability living allowance, to require proof of professional psychiatric intervention in order to establish that a person suffers mental ill health. That appears to be a growing issue — and I am concerned at that trend. I am anxious that provision of that proof should not become a prerequisite. In many cases, a social worker or a general practitioner is the person who is best apprised of the mental-health difficulties that an individual suffers.

It is a misnomer to call the programme a pathway to work, since, for many, it does not lead to work. People want to know whether it will be financially disadvantageous for them to return to work, even under the present inadequate benefit system. We must grapple with that issue, which impinges on education, job skills acquisition, further education and benefit entitlements. We must take a longer-term view on that matter. For many, the economic calculation does not stack up. In the longer term, a cross-departmental approach must be taken to develop a better means of bringing people back to work, rather than tackling social security aspects in isolation. Members have no wish to rubber-stamp policies that will, in practice, exacerbate poverty, rather than tackle its root causes.

Ms Ritchie: I have listened carefully to all the points made by Members during the debate. I will address their concerns. At the outset, however, I stress that the Bill, and its accelerated passage, was supported by all members of the Executive.

I must also address the issue of parity with the rest of United Kingdom. I acknowledge that that principle is, to some extent, frustrating to an Assembly that is keen to pass its own laws and form its own policies.

Both as a Minister and as a Member of the Assembly, I would like to be able to do that.

11.45 am

However, I caution Members that Northern Ireland's social security system is not self-financing. The cost of paying benefits in Northern Ireland is heavily subsidised by Great Britain. During the debate on accelerated passage for the Welfare Reform Bill on Monday 4 June, I said:

"For example, in 2005-06, to meet its benefit obligations, the Northern Ireland National Insurance fund needed a transfer of £185 million from the Great Britain National Insurance fund. In the same period, expenditure on non-contributory benefits, which are demand led and financed from taxation revenue, was more than £2.26 billion. The funding depends on parity. Therefore, when Members ask what reason we have for maintaining parity, the answer is that there is approximately £2.4 billion worth of reasons." — *[Official Report, Bound Volume 22, p261, col 2]*.

Those points must be made. Some Members have used their misconceptions about the Welfare Reform Bill for party political coat-trailing purposes.

I have a social conscience, and I firmly believe in the principles of social justice. I come from a family that worked extensively with people who suffered from mental illness, so I have always been aware of the principle that people come first.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Ms Ritchie: I now move on to the concerns that Members expressed. I am grateful to the members of the Committee for Social Development and its Chairperson, Mr Campbell, for their support of the Welfare Reform Bill, and I look forward to working with them over the coming months.

Fra McCann mentioned my "Damascene conversion", but it appears that the road to Damascus is very crowded now. *[Laughter.]* However, having explored the issues thoroughly with my officials, I am reassured about the implementation of the Bill's provisions. My Department's aim is to support and encourage people with mental-health conditions, and to treat them sensitively, not to impose sanctions on them.

Full account of the fluctuating nature of certain mental-health conditions will be taken, because we must respect the fact that people may be well at certain times and less well at others. We must be particularly sensitive to that. I fully empathise and sympathise with people in that situation. For example, more than 20% of interviews with people suffering from a mental-health difficulty are deferred due to the fluctuating nature of their illnesses. Personal advisers will be fully trained to assist and support people with mental-health problems.

I have already assured the members of the Committee for Social Development that I will discuss the issues associated with direct payment with them before we move ahead. I thought that I had made my position

clear, but some people may have chosen — again for party political reasons — not to listen.

The Executive Committee, including Fra McCann's colleagues, endorsed the Bill. I did not hear any dissent on that day. Likewise, the members of the Committee for Social Development, including Fra McCann, unanimously supported accelerated passage for the Bill. Furthermore, since the introduction of the Pathways to Work programme —

Mr F McCann: May I make a point of information in order to clarify the position?

Ms Ritchie: I wish to continue.

Mr F McCann: The Committee for Social Development was told —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Please address your remarks through the Chair.

Mr F McCann: I apologise, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Committee for Social Development was told — *[Laughter.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr F McCann: The Committee for Social Development was told that accelerated passage was required; otherwise the payment of benefits would be affected. That was why I, and my colleagues on the Committee, went along with it.

Ms Ritchie: I thank Mr McCann for his intervention. However, I had already explained the principle of parity and the financial reasons for driving the Bill through by way of accelerated passage. As the Minister for Social Development, I want to ensure that nobody will be worse off financially as a result of the Bill. That was the point that the members of the Committee for Social Development wanted me to take on board.

Mr Campbell: Will the Minister confirm that, when she spoke to the Committee for Social Development, the circumstances and rationale for seeking accelerated passage for the Welfare Reform Bill were exactly the same as the circumstances and rationale in the Assembly today?

Ms Ritchie: I thank the Member for making that point. I agree fully with him. The conditions remain the same. Therefore granting accelerated passage was vital, as is the Bill's content. That is why, because of the principle of parity, we must move forward.

Since the introduction of the Pathways to Work programme in October 2005, more than 790 employers have recruited those in receipt of incapacity benefit.

Mr B McCrea referred to mental health. I am well aware of the mental-health issues. Indeed, they happen to be one of the legacies of the Troubles. There is no intention to force people, particularly those with mental-health problems, into work if they are not ready to do

so. I agree fully that we must focus our energies on front-line services.

Anna Lo referred to language difficulties. My Department is aware of such difficulties and will take them into account as we implement the employment-support allowance and the work-related activity requirements. I can also assure Ms Lo and the Assembly that the Bill is not about benefit statistics but about genuinely wanting to help people to realise their potential.

Mr Brady referred to mental-health problems and the role of personal advisers. I emphasise once more that, since the Pathways to Work programme was launched, more than 790 employers have provided work to those on incapacity benefit. Departmental disablement-employment advisers and Health Service professionals support my personal advisers in assessing needs. GP advice is sought if necessary. Personal advisers are trained in how to recognise the impact of mental-health conditions. I assure the Assembly that they receive a high level of training.

I thank David Hilditch and Michelle McIlveen for their broad support of the Bill's principles. Once again, I have noted the concerns expressed about the proposal to pay housing benefit directly to tenants, and I hope that my reassurances during this Second Stage debate will go some way towards allaying those concerns. I have made it clear that, until I have discussed the issue with the Committee, I will not invoke regulations or introduce commencement Orders. To do so, I must be absolutely satisfied, and, at present, I have grave reservations and concerns.

Mr McCarthy: This point returns to my earlier intervention. Over the weekend, I had in my hand a letter from the Housing Executive that advised landlords that, come 1 April 2008, housing benefit would be paid directly to tenants. Will the Minister confirm or deny what is going on?

Ms Ritchie: I will make the position clear again. I sought advice from the Housing Executive on direct payments. In its advice to me, the Housing Executive said that it wanted housing benefit to be paid directly to landlords.

Mr McCarthy: Hear, hear.

Ms Ritchie: In light of Mr McCarthy's intervention and other related comments, I will raise those issues with the Housing Executive. As Minister, I will not invoke the regulations for direct payments or introduce commencement Orders until I have gone back to the Committee. Like members of the Committee, I must be satisfied that such a system would be a success. At present, I have no reason to believe that it would be a success.

Thomas Burns referred to the Pathways to Work programme. I hope that I have reassured him of its success.

Claire McGill referred to anti-social behaviour orders. Her concerns about tenants' being evicted for antisocial behaviour encapsulate my reasons for wanting to study the outcome of the pilots being run in England. Those have to take place first. Nor will the sanctions be introduced until a further Bill is brought before the Assembly. I thought that I had made that clear this morning.

I am grateful for the support of Mr Craig, and I hope that my reassurances on housing benefit have allayed his concerns.

Alban Maginness gave some statistics and supporting arguments. I can also provide some statistics: in Northern Ireland, 10.7% of the working-age population is economically inactive due to ill health and disability, compared with the UK average of 7%. Everyone must move forward to help people reach their potential. We cannot consign so many people to a life of benefit dependency. The Department is asking people to engage in some work-related activity, but it is not forcing them into work, because I am mindful of people with severe disabilities and mental ill health, and of the periodic impact that that poor mental health can have on their lives and situations.

I guarantee Patsy McGlone that no one who moves from incapacity benefit to employment support allowance will be worse off. There will be provision for any individual who tries to go out to work but is prevented from so doing due to disability or illness — which can happen, as Members know — to return to the higher benefit rate, rather than having to start again. All evidence will be taken into account, but the personal-capability assessment is an objective assessment that is carried out by specially trained healthcare professionals. Mr McGlone asked about disability living allowance; I will have that investigated and respond to him in writing.

I am sure that there are also concerns about people leaving care and the need for a joined-up response across different sectors to facilitate their successful reintegration into society. I will draw to the attention of the Health Minister the comments that were made today. Gregory Campbell, the Chairman of the Committee for Social Development, and other Members mentioned the need for discussions with the Minister for Employment and Learning about the requirement for resources to be invested in employment and training. I am fully aware of that, and I will be having discussions with the Minister. I have informed him of my concerns on that matter; we have talked about them and hope to make progress.

I hope that I have addressed all the points raised today. I will read Hansard carefully, and if any Member

has raised a matter that I have failed to address or that needs to be dealt with in more detail, I will respond to him or her in writing. I commend the Bill to the Assembly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Welfare Reform Bill [NIA 1/07] be agreed.

Budget Bill Second Stage

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members, though reluctantly, that there is no time limit on speeches.

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

That the Second Stage of the Budget Bill [NIA 3/07] be agreed.

This debate follows the Bill's First Stage, which took place yesterday, and the Supply resolution for the 2007-08 Main Estimates, which was also considered and approved yesterday.

12.00 noon

The Bill can be given accelerated passage because the Committee for Finance and Personnel has confirmed that, in line with Standing Order 40(2), it is satisfied that there has been appropriate consultation on the public expenditure proposals contained in the Bill. That condition has been met, and confirmation was given in a letter, dated 23 May 2007, from the Chairman of the Committee for Finance and Personnel to the Speaker. I welcome the Committee's assistance in this matter.

The purpose of the Bill is to give legislative effect to the resource Estimates approved through the Supply resolution passed yesterday. Copies of the Main Estimates volume, the Budget Bill and the explanatory and financial memorandum have been made available to Members. However, for the benefit of Members, I wish to summarise briefly the main features of the Bill in accordance with the nature of the Second Stage debate envisaged under Standing Order 30. The principle of the Bill is to authorise the use of resources totalling £7,922,535,000 by Departments and certain other bodies and the issue of £7,079,776,000 from the Northern Ireland Consolidated Fund in respect of the Main Estimates for 2007-08. Those amounts are additional to the Vote on Account passed at Westminster in February 2007.

I emphasise again that the Executive have adopted the financial allocations for 2007-08, as originally set by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland prior to the restoration of devolution. As I said yesterday, although this is not ideal, and the Executive will wish to review the plans in the longer term in the context of their own priorities, it represents the most pragmatic and sensible way of ensuring the continued and uninterrupted provision of public services.

The Executive will also have an opportunity to review spending plans, particularly in the context of any emerging flexibility, through the normal in-year monitoring process. Any and all reallocations of funding will be made in accordance with the Executive's own priorities, rather than those used by the previous direct rule ministerial team.

The Assembly has important responsibilities in this area, and I was most interested to hear the views of Members during yesterday's useful debate. The nature of those debates means that they are wide-ranging — that is important because financial provision is fundamental to each of our public services. I welcome the interest that was demonstrated by Members on those issues yesterday. I recognise that, as Members had a full opportunity to speak on those matters yesterday, there is unlikely to be a long debate today. However, I will be happy to deal with any of the points of principle that may arise.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr McLaughlin): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. In writing to the Speaker on 23 May 2007 to confirm the Committee for Finance and Personnel's decision to support accelerated passage, I also addressed the context in which the Committee made this decision. At its meetings on 16 May 2007 and 23 May 2007, the Committee was briefed by senior officials from the Department of Finance and Personnel on the Budget Bill and on the related Main Estimates, which contain the Department's detailed spending plans for the financial year 2007-08.

The Committee was informed that, because of the timing of restoration, the Assembly and the Executive are, in effect, inheriting a direct rule Budget, which requires Assembly approval. This approval provides the legal authority for the balance of resources and associated cash requirements, as detailed in the Main Estimates, which were debated and voted on yesterday.

The Bill would normally mark the end of a process, lasting approximately 18 months, during which the Assembly — and especially its Statutory Committees — would be extensively consulted by Departments and the Executive on the preparation of the annual spending plans.

Although the opportunities for the levels of consultation that would normally have occurred in the annual Budget cycle did not exist under direct rule, the Committee received clarification on a range of issues in respect of the 2007-08 Budget and on the arrangements for consultation with the Assembly Committees to be included in the annual Budget process in the future.

The Committee is aware of the consequences for departmental spending and the potential effect on front-line services should the Bill not reach its Final Stage by 3 July 2007. It was in that context that the Committee declared that it was satisfied that there had been appropriate consultation on the public expenditure proposals in the Bill, in accordance with Standing Order 40(2). At its meeting on 23 May, the Committee agreed that the Bill should proceed with accelerated passage. I support the motion. Go raibh mile maith agat.

Mr McNarry: I look to my left at the crew of the DUP's starship Enterprise — and a fine-looking bunch they are too. Surely even the DUP's most travelled voyagers will admit that going where no unionist has gone before takes a lot of fuel. Indeed, the DUP leader was quoted in the 'Belfast Telegraph' on 14 March this year as saying:

"There is no use putting a beautiful engine on the road and saying, 'Here is devolution, here is a wonderful form of Government' if there is not the money to pay for the fuel, the fuel to run that engine."

That was only a few months ago, and the cost of fuel has fluctuated, as have the DUP's promises and pledges.

Here we are, debating the Second Stage of the Budget Bill. To put that in context, let us return to 2004 when Ensign Storey and Chief Engineer McCrea were just getting used to party statements that moved along at warp three. How they will greet the Budget Bill remains to be seen. No doubt, we will hear.

However, in September 2004, the now Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Mr Dodds, told the 'News Letter' — and this is good stuff:

"To underpin stability we are proposing an economic package, a peace dividend, to give Northern Ireland a good start to any return of devolution."

Mr Dodds was soon followed in the 'Belfast Telegraph' in December 2004 by the now Minister of Finance and Personnel, who was speaking after a party delegation had met the then Secretary of State, Paul Murphy. Mr Robinson said:

"The whole idea of a financial package for Northern Ireland in the event of a comprehensive settlement was initiated by the Democratic Unionist Party and first publicly mooted by myself in a speech to the Small Business Association in Dublin back in September."

What he said in Dublin, he failed to say when presenting his Budget Bill to this House in Belfast.

Way back, the DUP's party policy compass was set in the direction of going where unionists had never gone before and taking the crew of the DUP starship Enterprise on a journey that it might never get over, let alone recover from. By 2006, the great negotiators — the strong men whom members of the party could trust with their money — had moved from warp three and were hurtling along at a roller-coaster speed of warp six.

"We are star trekking across the Province," was the DUP cry. "There are Klingons in the east wing now, Ian. Yes, they are Klingons, Ian, but not as we know them. They are republican Klingons, and they are everywhere. Commander Worf McGuinness is on the bridge with his hands on the controls, Ian. Our own Mr Spock has taken over the ship's arts and culture activities, and Lieutenant Uhura, God bless her, is in charge of the environment. The fellow we need to build new roads is a right trekker. He is not sure whether he is here or there, and the rest of us are not sure either, Ian."

Let us hold fast at warp six — let us not get ahead of ourselves. Let us stop for a while in 2006, when the DUP declared that it would take the finance portfolio. The DUP declared that it would prepare for a Budget Bill in June 2007 and that it had over a year to show London who the bosses were in Ulster. Who would have thought, after what the DUP said about financial and fiscal imperatives throughout 2006 — indeed, right up to only a few weeks ago — that we would be witnessing a DUP Minister of Finance and Personnel delivering the Second Stage of a direct rule Budget Bill today?

Direct rule is still laying down the terms and conditions. That is no inheritance. That is how Gordon rolled over Peter — not once, not twice, but three times.

Who encouraged the bravado behind crowd-pleasing spending? Who delivered such rashly arrogant assurances that only served to raise the expectations of the people; and who disappointed them and retreated from stargazing election promises? The DUP junior Minister — one of the “I am no pushover” financial negotiators — in September 2006, when he was speaking at a meeting of the Subgroup on the Economic Challenges facing Northern Ireland, said:

“Before the rubber hits the road, we need to get a signed-up deal on finance with the Government. What would be on the blank page of that deal? We must identify the critical issues so that, when we do put our foot on the pedal, the car goes in the direction that we want it to go”. — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 20, pSG125, col 1*].

If one attempts to factor that statement into the Budget Bill, it simply will not go.

On 30 October 2006, Mr P Robinson, when speaking to the Preparation for Government Committee about the financial package, said:

“If the package is zero, there will not be a deal. The package is an essential ingredient as far as we are concerned. We are not going to the Chancellor to give us something to keep us happy. If we do not have a decent package, we are not going forward.” — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 20, pCPG494, col 1*].

Where are we going with this Budget Bill?

On 1 November, speaking before the political parties met with the Chancellor at Downing Street, Mr Robinson said very publicly that the financial package was:

“a necessary precondition for any restoration of devolution. Unless the financial package is satisfactory, then there is little benefit in any return of devolution.”

Where is the benefit in this Budget Bill?

On 15 February 2007, while we were still at warp six, the ‘News Letter’ told its readers that DUP sources said that the financial package was a “deal-breaker”, and that if the money for devolution was not enough, there would be no Government. They also said that there was no point in setting up a Government to fail because the Government need the tools and resources

to succeed. Which deal did it break — are we not in a devolution situation now?

What is this Budget wizardry about? How did the DUP go into Government when it is clear that its members have even broken promises that they made to themselves? How can they present this Bill today when they said in their manifesto:

“If a satisfactory financial package is not secured now, it is unlikely to be obtained after devolution returns when the pressure is off the Government?”

When did you take the foot off the pedal, Ian Junior? When did the pressure stop?

The DUP stated:

“If a satisfactory package is not secured now”.

My oh my — are we to believe that a satisfactory package has been secured? Does the DUP believe it, or is it unable to admit that it has been knocked over, and that there is no package, satisfactory or otherwise, to be delivered?

The DUP’s own words in its own manifesto — in its commitment to the electorate — stated that without a package before devolution:

“it is unlikely to be obtained after devolution”.

Does the DUP stand by that statement, and will its Members tell the House that that is their view?

Devolution has returned, and yet there is no sign of a satisfactory financial package in this Budget. Indeed, judging by this Bill there is little prospect of it, and as far as Gordon Brown is concerned, he will move into 10 Downing Street in two weeks time, giving these great negotiators nothing.

12.15 pm

Do not get me wrong, the UUP knows all about roller coasters. Whereas Klingon ships have cloaking devices, I am afraid to say that the Klingons that we met did not know when to remove their cloaks of deceit and sleight-of-hand tactics. As for broken or shattered promises, we have experiences of Government that say little for those whom we encountered. It is not enough of an explanation for Dr Paisley to say, as he was reported to have done, on 6 May, that:

“he was disappointed with the negotiations and that Mr Brown should not take the local parties for granted.”

The script was added to on 7 May — as Members might recall — when the ‘News Letter’ quoted Dr Paisley taunting democrats by saying:

“All we have to say is, ‘all right have your little pantomime on Tuesday but we’ll not be there’.”

Well, he was there. The very next day, on that Tuesday, the pantomime curtain was rolled up and the pantomime performed, with both Mr Paisley and his deputy playing leading roles in that “Come into the

parlour” scene, in which Tony, Bertie and Martin were treated to tea and cakes.

This House is no pantomime set, nor should we ever allow the impression to be given that we do not mean business; so let us be businesslike. Let us be open and transparent by admitting — more than people have been prepared to admit — that, in 2007-08, all Departments will struggle to live up to expectations; cuts will be made; water charges will not be resolved; many improvements will not be made; and expectations will be lowered. That is what the Budget will deliver.

Much has been made of some people’s superior negotiating skills — the point was rammed down our throats — but they have been found out. Those who claimed that a financial package was an imperative and a deal-breaking condition for going into or staying out of Government have singularly failed to deliver. That has been exposed today. However, we need to tell the people not about the failures, but how we intend to make headway despite those failures. That is what we expect to hear today about the foundations that we hope will be laid in the Budget Bill. The next time that a devolved Minister of Finance presents Budget proposals to the House, he or she should also come with their position on the line.

Last October, like all my colleagues on the economic challenges subgroup, I agreed with Mitchel McLaughlin when he stated:

“A clear demand is emerging for the Government to put their money where their mouth is and create a level playing field for us, the upcoming Assembly, and a future Executive. They should give us a chance to deliver a Programme for Government and not destroy us before we start.” — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 20, pSG172, col 1*].

That was the challenge that was laid down for any Minister introducing a Budget Bill.

In October, Edwin Poots — who is now Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure — made sense when he rebuked a member of the Preparation for Government Committee by saying that the Member in question

“seems to have a defeatist attitude before we go to the Chancellor. I am quite hopeful that we will get a package. If we get zero, all the parties should withdraw, including those who were sent forward to negotiate in the appropriate manner.” — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 20, pCPG494, col 1*].

However, we got zero, and some parties were withdrawn. That was another way of excluding people to make way for Peter Robinson alone, or for Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness together, to conclude the negotiations. The truth is that not once or twice but three times they failed to negotiate successfully a financial package, without which this Budget Bill has little relevance to our people.

Having begun with a comment from Nigel Dodds from September 2004, let me finish with another of his comments — taken from the DUP website — from no

later than 23 May this year, when reality was perhaps finally dawning. He said:

“It is absolutely essential that the right economic and financial package, which was promised to the people of NI, is put in place so as stability can be achieved in Northern Ireland.”

I agree. That is Mr Dodds’s most realistic statement for a long time. That statement means that his colleagues surely need no longer be in denial and can move on from the blame game that they want to continue playing. This situation is not Gordon’s fault; this is the devolved Minister of Finance and Personnel’s first Budget Bill. A financial package was indeed promised, but it was not promised by the “giver”. The package was promised by the “askers”, who became the “demanders”, then the “negotiators”. Ultimately, however, they have become the losers, and we have all lost as a result.

Mr O’Loan: Members will be glad to hear that the duration of my speech will not emulate that of Mr McNarry. Its content may also differ somewhat. As the Minister of Finance and Personnel said, most of the issues were thrashed out yesterday.

I want to take this opportunity to wish Ministers well. I know that they will all approach the task of discharging important public functions seriously. Everyone will benefit from that.

The Department for Social Development’s budget will be over £1·8 billion, and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety’s budget will be £1·9 billion. Those are large sums of money.

I do not want to pre-empt this afternoon’s debate on industrial rating, but I wish to comment briefly on the issue. This year has seen a lower income from industrial rating than had been planned, and I have no doubt that provisions have been made to allow for that. All parties will have to consider the effects of the future controlling of industrial rates.

The budget for the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation is £272,000. I was struck by that figure. That office is crucial, and we could all learn a lesson from its relatively small budget. Consumers and citizens are seriously under-represented in the public process. That situation ought to be redressed, and the Minister and Members should think hard about the development of that issue. Recently, the Consumer Council has made huge achievements, which, in the context of the Budget, were done at a very small cost.

The important health, education and social security sectors need more, rather than less, consumer and citizen representation. An independent person to deal with complaints should also be factored in; elected representatives should not see that as an arrogation of their democratic prerogative — quite the opposite, in fact. Such a position would benefit citizens and assist Members as we make policy, legislate and allocate resources.

During yesterday's debate on the Main Estimates, my party leader referred to a revenue regulator. The Minister responded, if not lightly then briefly, that he exercises the role of a revenue regulator. However, there is more to it than that. Independent bodies, as well as elected representatives, play a significant role in representing the consumer.

They are not a threat to our position, but rather an assistance. Considering the myriad measures that have financial implications for the public, it would benefit us for an independent body to consider the issue. That small cost would be of benefit to us. I urge Members and parties not to dismiss that idea but to consider it further.

Dr Farry: Yesterday, the Alliance Party supported the Supply resolution, albeit with a heavy heart; we will do so again today with the Second Stage of the Budget Bill. There is a need to ensure the continuation of services in Northern Ireland, but my party accepts that it is an inherited Budget from direct rule Ministers. That said, however, it is also a flawed Budget. No Member in this Chamber should be under any illusions about that.

In line with the general principles of the Bill and the amount that is being drawn down from the Consolidated Fund, we must be conscious of the interaction between the size of our Budget and the Northern Ireland economy. The subvention from the UK Exchequer is almost £7 billion. That is almost half the Budget, which highlights the relatively small size of the tax base and the very large public sector share of GDP.

I was pleased that the Minister acknowledged yesterday that that issue must be addressed, and that the answer is to grow the private sector as rapidly as possible to ensure that local resources are in place to deal with the demands for public services that the people of Northern Ireland are rightly putting before us.

Although, in many respects, our economy may be converging with that of the Republic of Ireland, and there is much more scope for North/South co-operation, in fiscal terms we are not converging with the Republic of Ireland. Judging by the long-term aspirations of some Members, that issue will have to be considered. Although it is relatively easy for a population of 60 million people across the United Kingdom to maintain that level of subsidy for Northern Ireland, sustaining such a subsidy would be a much bigger challenge for the Republic of Ireland's population of four million. That factor must be taken into account.

The Alliance Party and I are here to raise issues in a constructive manner. As the opposition in the Assembly, we are here to hold the Executive to account, to scrutinise, to challenge and to put issues on the agenda. However, we are not here to engage in "yah-boo" politics about who did what or who promised what and has not delivered it. The people of Northern Ireland

expect a proper discussion on the serious issues that they face.

Although Mr McNarry is not in the Chamber at the moment, it is worth pointing out that if the Assembly had addressed the issue of a financial package in 1999, or even as part of the Good Friday Agreement, perhaps so many opportunities would not have been wasted over the past number of years. The issue is on the agenda at the moment, and the Alliance Party wishes the Executive well in trying to reach a positive result.

That said, we on these Benches take a different perspective on what a financial package for Northern Ireland should be. We should not simply try to get more money out of the Chancellor solely in order to distribute those funds to public services in the existing way. Frankly, that would be a huge missed opportunity. Short-term relief would be gained from taking tough decisions for two or three years, but, two or three years after that, the same problems would remain.

Any financial package must be linked to a serious package of reforms. The Alliance Party has stressed time after time that any financial package must be linked to the concept of investment to save. We should ask the Chancellor for additional funds because we need to spend money in the short term in order to change the way in which we conduct business in Northern Ireland. In the long run, we will be able to generate more local taxes in order to sustain our own economy rather than having to depend on the British people to the extent that we have done over the past 35 years.

That message would find much more favour with the UK Treasury. As part of that, we need to be realistic about setting targets for how the Assembly will seek to address the financial and economic challenges facing Northern Ireland.

We should be held to account for our ability to achieve those targets, or not, as the case may be.

12.30 pm

One of the key demands from the local business sector is for the differential rate of corporation tax to be part of any financial package. The Alliance Party is very keen on that, as are many other Members. Under the Azores ruling, we must be conscious that we need to address the issue of lost revenue as a result of those financial arrangements. That cost may run into several hundreds of millions of pounds. That should not be a reason not to pursue that measure, but we need to be aware of the fiscal implications. According to the economic model, it might be 2013 before the revenues raised from a larger economy through lower corporation tax would allow us to break even, and that is a major challenge.

The Budget is flawed because it contains many inefficiencies and distortions, and it does not address

certain challenges. The Alliance Party has focused on the cost of segregation. Approximately £1 billion is wasted every year in Northern Ireland by trying to manage a divided society. That is a huge missed-opportunity cost. By investing in division we forgo the opportunity to reinvest in quality shared public services for the entire community. It was welcome that yesterday the First Minister and the Minister of Finance recognised that at least it was a genuine issue. The Institute of Directors, and others, such as Mitchell Reiss the former US special envoy to Northern Ireland, have also recognised the issue and reflected on it. Division presents the Assembly with a serious challenge, which it must recognise and try to address. The Alliance Party is under no illusion that it can be addressed in one, two, three or five years; it requires a long-term programme of radical reform of the way that we do business. It is important that the Assembly starts now, during the comprehensive spending review. Even in the short term, we should be able to realise some funds for reinvestment elsewhere in the system.

I also want to focus on education. One of the major challenges we face is the segregated system we are currently running. Yesterday, my party leader referred to the fact that more is spent on education per capita in Northern Ireland than in any other part of the United Kingdom, but, bizarrely, we spend less per pupil. A lot of money is wasted and diverted elsewhere in the system. No one should run away from the challenge of 50,000 empty school places. There must be rationalisation, and we must be straight with people that the education system will have to change. The Bain Report provides a structure for change, and I look forward to the Assembly debating it soon.

The Alliance Party will advocate integrated education as being the most viable model not only academically and socially but economically and financially. We are concerned that the Department of Education sees integrated education as a further break-up of an already fragmented system rather than a solution. If schools come together or transform, they can create a more sustainable model for preserving education in local communities.

Education will need to change and schools must be considered as part of the overall framework. Tough decisions will have to be taken. We are not essentially talking about moving to an integrated model for all of Northern Ireland's schools, but it is important that we look for opportunities to promote integrated education whenever and wherever they arise. Other systems will, inevitably, survive alongside that, but all sectors are aware of the need for sharing and collaboration. I welcome that as another approach to addressing the issue.

As regards transport, the Assembly must be aware that not enough is spent on public transport relative to our competitors elsewhere in these islands. About 65% of the local transport budget is spent on roads, and only

35% on public transport. That is almost the mirror image of the spending pattern in Great Britain, where there are also large rural areas. There is scope for changing the balance of the transport budget over time. That does not necessarily mean that it requires additional funds; it means that we must prioritise our resources as best as possible.

The Budget Bill is essentially a precursor to the big discussion that must follow on the comprehensive spending review for the next three financial years. That is the opportunity for the Executive and the Assembly to re-examine everything in the detail of our expenditure plans in order to see where we can make additional investments to meet the demands of the people of Northern Ireland for, for example, free personal care. However, we also need to revise budgets, and that will mean cutting budgets in some areas in order to reinvest elsewhere. Our Budget process must be a constant process of change. Sometimes budgets will go up; sometimes they will go down. Circumstances change. Circumstances are never fixed, so budgets can never be fixed either. In the meantime, my party supports the Bill.

Mr Hamilton: Before I come to the thrust of what I want to say, I cannot allow the spaced-out contribution of the sole Ulster Unionist representative from Strangford to pass without comment. I notice that he is not in his place; perhaps he has been beamed back up to his mother ship along with Elvis and the former Ulster Unionist representatives who have vanished without trace in recent times. Elvis is more likely to be spotted than some of those characters.

It ill behoves any Ulster Unionist to belittle the attempts to obtain a financial package for Northern Ireland — attempts in which the Ulster Unionist Party has been intimately involved. Mr McNarry himself attended several key meetings, both here and across the water, on the issue. His rather infantile contribution in the Chamber today exhibited his complete lack of knowledge of what is happening. He said that “zero” has been achieved. Anyone who looks at what actually has been achieved will see that it is far from zero.

We have had reform of the reinvestment and reform initiative, undoing the damage that was done by the Ulster Unionist Party, whereby we could only borrow in so far as we closed the gap on expenditure-raising with the mainland — something that led to huge rises in the regional rate, and for which the Ulster Unionist Party was responsible. To date, we have had an additional £2 billion of capital expenditure; at least £100 million in guarantees for the CSR period; a review of tax policy in this part of the kingdom; and guarantees on end-year flexibility and on where the proceeds from asset sales will go. Compared to UUP standards, that is certainly a sizeable package for Northern Ireland.

Mr McNarry's contribution also raises the question of what the Ulster Unionist Party did in 1998. The answer to that is "zero". His party did absolutely nothing and allowed the issue to go without mention.

Mr Weir: Does the Member not agree that that is a little bit unfair on the Ulster Unionists? After all, although they did not achieve a single penny for the Northern Ireland exchequer, they did manage to negotiate a couple of knighthoods. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Hamilton: I welcome that contribution, which shows where the UUP's priorities lay at that time. The party was feathering its own nest rather than assisting Northern Ireland to develop a better economy.

What would the UUP have done in 2007? Having read its election manifesto, everyone knows that it would again have done nothing. The Ulster Unionists would have entered Government on 26 March irrespective of the addressing of any issue. That analysis was roundly rejected by the electorate. Were he here, I would remind the Member for Strangford of the result in his own constituency, where he is now the only representative of the Ulster Unionist Party, compared with four from my own party.

He talked frequently about Klingons — *[Interruption.]*

I am sorry; I will acknowledge the Member from the Alliance Party who was also elected in Strangford.

Lord Morrow: How could you forget him?

Mr Hamilton: Indeed, how could I forget him? In many boxes that we saw being emptied, he was beating the Ulster Unionist Party.

Mr McCarthy: Absolutely.

Mr Hamilton: I am sure that he is glad to hear that.

There were plenty of references to Klingons. The Ulster Unionist Party has been clinging on to my party's coat-tails. There was talk of pantomimes taking place in this Building. If any pantomime is taking place, the Ulster Unionist Party is certainly participating in it, and that must mean that the Minister of Health and the Minister for Employment and Learning are the ugly sisters.

Mr Storey: Does the Member agree that it is ironic that we have sustained a tirade of criticism from the Ulster Unionists this morning? Having had the opportunity to stay outside the tent, the Ulster Unionists decided to take their places in the Executive. Therefore it ill becomes them to attack the Minister of Finance and the proposals before the House today.

Mr Hamilton: The Member makes a valid point. I am not sure what the Ulster Unionist Party's position is on that matter. I hear one thing from some Members and something else from others — surely not a divided Ulster Unionist Party?

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: Unlike the Member for Strangford David McNarry, I will give way.

Mr Beggs: I am fascinated by the Member's comments about the Ulster Unionist Party's deciding to take its places on the Executive. Is that not exactly what the Member's party did in the previous Executive? Why is he criticising the UUP for doing the same?

Mr Hamilton: The Member knows well that DUP Ministers did not take their seats around the Executive table. His party leader and others lambasted the DUP and said that Members of my party were outside the Executive. The Member cannot have it all ways.

Now that I have got that off my chest, I turn to the issues that I want to raise. With the exception perhaps of Mr McNarry, Members are aware that this Budget has been inherited by the Minister of Finance and Personnel. It is not to every Member's satisfaction, but, sadly, we do not start with a blank piece of paper. However, this debate provides a good opportunity to look forward to future Budgets.

Members have used, and will use, today's debate to make a special case for increased expenditure in particular Departments or on pet projects in which they are interested. I wish to make the case for a greater concentration in future Budgets on the economy. That is an area of public policy that has been sidelined and ignored for far too long in Northern Ireland. Many public services have been so underfunded in the decades of direct rule that it is understandable that the issues of hospitals, schools and housing dominate political debate. I fully sympathise with, and support, those views. However, I believe that the new Executive's principal focus should be on economic development, and I sincerely hope that, when published, the new Programme for Government will centre upon that matter.

In recent times, Members have grown accustomed to good news stories about the local economy — high employment, high manufacturing output relative to other UK regions and a growing tourism sector. Unfortunately, Members are also well aware of the many structural weaknesses that the economy suffers from: the highest proportion of economically inactive people in the UK; an over-dependence on the public sector for growth and jobs; a small private sector; the decline of the manufacturing base, which, I am sure, will be touched upon in the debate later today; an over-representation of the service sector; low levels of research and development; and the difficulties inherent in evolving from some 30 years of civil strife, during which time the economy was often a target and bore the brunt of terrorist violence.

The challenges that must be overcome were summed up in a report in 'The Economist' from June 2006. It found that, in Northern Ireland, the public sector accounts for 61% of GDP, only 65 private sector firms employ

more than 500 people and 10 firms account for half of all exports.

I do not ask that the Executive prioritise local economic growth simply to put more pounds into people's pockets — although that would be nice. All Members wish citizens to be prosperous and working in well-paid jobs and for Northern Ireland to be the best that it can be. The main focus of the Assembly, its Executive and its expenditure ought to be the enhancement of the economy because a transformed economy, through sustainable wealth creation, can be the key to unlocking better public services.

Earlier, Members took part in the debate on the Welfare Reform Bill, and we all want to see as many people as possible ceasing to be economically inactive, coming off welfare and getting into work. The transformation of the economy can assist in the achievement of that noble aim.

I do not argue simply for increased budgetary allocations for the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI), although I am sure that my hon Friend the Minister would not mind if I did. What I am suggesting is a genuinely cross-departmental approach to economic development. Members have heard that all policy should be rural proofed, or equality and human rights tested. It is time, however, for the Executive to insist that economic development is the primary emphasis of Departments, legislation and spending.

There is an assumption that economic development is the domain of DETI. That assumption is wrong. DETI has a co-ordinating role, and I welcome the Minister's comments on how he intends to perform that role.

12.45 pm

Hardly any Government Department is without an important part to play in rebuilding our economy, whether it is the Department for Regional Development in improving our infrastructure; the Department for Education and Learning in retooling our workforce; the Department of the Environment in reform of our planning process; the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development in overseeing our number one industry; or even the Department of Education in laying the foundations for an educationally-equipped workforce. Every aspect of the work of Government is paramount in rebuilding our economy.

The Department of Finance and Personnel has an important overseeing role in respect of our economy. I welcome the comments of the Minister who, on his first day in office, stated that helping to create a competitive economy for Northern Ireland was a priority of his tenure. Furthermore, I welcome the work that the Minister has already engaged in with the European Commission, which will help the Executive and the local business community to identify opportunities in Brussels to develop our economy and create jobs. That

is a much better use of the EU than we have made in the past. We have watched other European regions use the benefits of Brussels to develop their economies, while we have wasted millions on abstract and woolly notions.

It is a gross understatement to say that the economy and its development have been a secondary matter during the decades of direct rule. To pick up on a theme, discussed by Dr Farry yesterday, government policy has made us, at times, and in many respects, nothing better than a Soviet-style satellite state, dependent on central handouts to survive. We must end that dependency culture at every level and begin to stand on our own two feet. The best way to do this is to grow our own economy.

We have a proud economic history in this part of the world. Reclaiming it for a new generation, and those that will follow, should be at the top of the Assembly's agenda.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I support the Bill — which may surprise Members, coming from my party's position. However, we are where we are. The Finance Minister and the Executive have inherited the Budget from direct rule Ministers and the British Government. It is a British Labour Party Budget. In the Transitional Assembly, I brought my single transferable speech to every debate and stated that we needed to be in power and to make decisions. Thankfully, we have reached the stage where we are in power, and we continue to work through a process in which we make the decisions.

Undoubtedly, if I speak in a Budget debate this time next year, I may have to — and if I need to, I will — attack the Department of Finance and Personnel on its Budget. At this stage, that would not be a worthwhile use of energy or time in this place.

It will come as no surprise that, as republicans, we want to develop an all-Ireland economy. We want an all-Ireland economic development plan, and we want the amalgamation of Invest Northern Ireland and the Industrial Development Agency, Ireland (IDA), with a remit to support indigenous industries. However, we do not want that out of some ideological stance because we are who we are. Rather, we believe that it is a practical way forward in developing the economy in all parts of the island of Ireland.

Mr Storey: Given the fact that the Member advocates an all-Ireland economic plan, how much of a disappointment and a setback was the Republic of Ireland's rejection of that economic plan? Effectively, the people of the Republic of Ireland have said that the reason that Sinn Féin was not fit for Government there was because its economic policies were not fit for purpose.

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Member for his intervention, and his interest in all-Ireland politics: that is welcome. Before the elections we were told that we were economically illiterate, and Fianna Fáil told the electorate that the economy was doing well. However,

the day after the election results were announced the Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, told the electorate that the economy was going to slow down and that they may be in for a difficult ride. So, who is economically illiterate — Sinn Féin or Bertie Ahern? Perhaps he was not as truthful as Sinn Féin was about the economic situation. I do not wish to digress too much. Sinn Féin had a bad day at the elections, but it was not rejected and it will return. The party will dust itself down and it will be back again — something of which I am sure Members are well aware.

The all-Ireland economy — something that was discussed in the Programme for Government Committee during the Transitional Assembly — is a benefit to all of society. Unionism says that it will get involved in any all-Ireland activity only if it is practical, and not if it is political. Members will get no arguments from Sinn Féin on that matter.

Mr Beggs: The Member indicates that he wants only things that are practical. Does he accept that the rest of the United Kingdom is, by far, the biggest region to which Northern Ireland exports? The last figures that I saw showed 45%, whereas only approximately 15% of our exports go to the Republic of Ireland. It is surely not practical to be linked to an economy to which most of our exports do not go.

Northern Ireland, being within the United Kingdom, is part of the sterling currency regime. It would not be practical to move into the euro zone as that would add huge costs to our exporters and lead to a whole host of other complications. Does the Member accept that his proposal is not practical?

Mr O'Dowd: No one in Sinn Féin seeks an isolationist policy, where an all-Ireland economy is formed and we sit out in the Atlantic on our own. The party wants to work with all its neighbours, and it would be crazy not to develop stronger economic links with Britain as a whole. Sinn Féin is not about isolationism; rather it is about creating a vibrant new beginning — part of that involves an all-Ireland economy, but we can also work towards it in a transitional period, too.

I certainly do not wish to turn this debate into a question-and-answer session on Sinn Féin party policy. I am more than happy to hold one-to-one sessions or to participate in party sessions on the matter.

There are a number of issues, some of which have already been raised today. The Department of Finance and Personnel and the Executive must deal with the Budget and the financial package before them. I commend all the political parties for strongly lobbying Gordon Brown and Tony Blair to increase the financial package to the North. In very difficult circumstances, they did what they could do. Those negotiations must continue. There is no need for the Ulster Unionist Party's short-termism, or for it to attack any political

party in this Chamber or to break away from that work at this point. We must remain united and focused on continuing the negotiations.

The Barnett formula is also part of the problem; it is not beneficial to the people of the North. We must continue negotiations with the Exchequer on that issue. Sinn Féin wants the Executive to have a borrowing facility, as opposed to the reinvestment and reform initiative, and for the Assembly to have tax-varying powers. If the DUP gave the UUP a bit of stick about its involvement in that initiative, I may give the SDLP a bit of stick about its involvement too. We must secure a financial contribution towards the peace dividend from not only the British Government but the Irish Government as well.

Any Budget from this Administration must have at its core a commitment to tackling disadvantage and discrimination and creating a new beginning for people. In the previous debate, on the Welfare Reform Bill, several Members pointed out that many people are economically inactive. We must ask why that is the case, and why there are pockets of high unemployment and deprivation across the North. There are clearly historical reasons for that, and the Executive have a duty to tackle those issues in this Budget and particularly in the next Budget, which will be their own.

We must create investment incentives in areas of high unemployment. This week, the Committee for Public Accounts will consider the Springvale project in north and west Belfast — an imaginative Government intervention in an area of high unemployment and deprivation. We must, of course, examine why that project went wrong. However, the Executive must also be imaginative and must consider how they can implement such schemes in other areas of high unemployment and deprivation.

We must press on with the decentralisation of Government Departments. There is no need for the Government to be centred within a one-mile radius of this Building. Areas such as west of the Bann could benefit from the decentralisation of public-sector jobs.

There has understandably been much talk of the large number of people employed by the public sector and the role of the public sector in our economy. I will focus on the health sector. The power of procurement in that sector alone is massive. Ensuring that that procurement is used to tackle unemployment and deprivation would be a productive use of public moneys. Many hospitals and health units are situated in areas of high deprivation. Therefore, why not use that budget to ensure that the services that are provided to hospitals are situated in the localities of those hospitals?

Fermanagh and South Tyrone, for example, comprises rural areas. Why should the new rural hospital in Fermanagh not be used as an economic as well as a

health unit in order that its spending power can be used locally? That would be an imaginative use of resources and would help to eliminate poverty.

We have a responsibility to ring-fence a meaningful proportion of the Budget in order to tackle poverty and to ensure that resources are targeted on the basis of objective need. We also need to tackle ongoing employment discrimination and enhance the rights of workers, because, after all, they create wealth. Not only are all our successful enterprises a credit to the business sector, they are a credit to the people who work in them. We need to do more for the rights of migrant workers, without whom our economy could not survive. If our economy is to grow, we will need more migrant workers. If we are to encourage migrant workers to come here, we must ensure that their rights are protected.

I shall touch on several issues that the Minister of Finance and Personnel discussed yesterday. I noted with interest his comments on social housing and his challenge to the Minister for Social Development to make him shout “Give me the money” at her. Although I agree that that is a good catchphrase that will no doubt get headlines for a while, the Department for Social Development has a large land bank that should and could be used to tackle the difficulties with social housing.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development made a statement yesterday on rural regeneration. That is the responsibility of several Departments; therefore, the Executive need to think in a more joined-up way about how public moneys should be used in rural areas.

Challenges ahead of us include the comprehensive spending review, and we must ensure that that is not a mechanism to cut front-line community services. Education and health will always be high priorities. I noted the Minister of Finance and Personnel’s comments on what the Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety said about the need for investment in the Health Service. I hope that the Minister got his tea last night and that there will be investment in the Health Service. I was previously Sinn Féin’s health spokesperson, so I support any such investment.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel said that we need to examine our own structures and that we have too many Departments and too many MLAs. I hoped that at that stage he would have touched on the fact that we also have too many local councils.

Mr Kennedy: He meant eight too many.

Mr O’Dowd: Perhaps that is what he meant. I hope that he realises that the present 26-council structure cannot continue and that increasing the number of councils from the proposed seven to 11 or 15 is not a financial option.

The Committee of the Centre, which may soon have its new name, the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, agreed by the Assembly, was told that 11 or 15 councils — instead of seven — would cost an extra £35 million. Are the Members on the opposite Benches, who support having 11 to 15 councils, prepared to stand over that figure when other services in the comprehensive spending review will face difficulties?

My party agrees that the number of MLAs and Departments needs to be reviewed. In particular, we believe that it is not financially viable to continue with councils’ current format. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Members will know that the Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately upon lunchtime suspension. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 12.59 pm.

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

Budget Bill Second Stage

2.00 pm

Mr Ross: I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. I will endeavour to avoid the pitfall of presenting a wish list for my constituents in East Antrim, although I will highlight some important issues that I hope will be kept in mind for future spending decisions. I am quite glad — and proud — that I do not follow ‘Star Trek’. I will therefore avoid any anecdotes about that programme in my speech, which will be based in reality rather than the fantasy world of some Members who spoke earlier.

As we have heard, the Budget is not perhaps to the liking of all Members. However, we should realise that we cannot get everything that we want. It may be a catchy sound bite to call on the Minister to throw millions of pounds at a particular project, but Members must recognise that we cannot start spending huge sums of money that we simply do not have. Our task is to spend the Budget wisely to ensure that Northern Ireland can grow economically and that the people living in this part of the United Kingdom can enjoy a better standard of life.

With that in mind, I hope that the next part of my speech does not subject me to the wrath of the Minister, as I recall his comments yesterday about individual Members presenting a number of pet projects. I do not have a metaphorical begging bowl; rather, I wish to highlight a few areas in East Antrim where investment in the future would see a return for the Northern Ireland economy as a whole.

The first issue that I wish to raise is more of a pet hate than a pet project, particularly among my constituents in East Antrim. It would be remiss of me not to mention it while I have the opportunity. East Antrim is plagued by a second-rate train service and, from my experience of working in Larne over the last number of years, I know of the frustration and anger with the train services that exists among my constituents. I will meet the Larne Line Passenger Group tomorrow evening, and I hope that the new trains that they are lobbying for can be procured for the Larne line to replace the dilapidated trains that are currently used to enable the people of East Antrim to be finally able to enjoy more comfortable and frequent journeys to Belfast.

As the Member for North Down Mr Farry mentioned, improved public transport throughout Northern Ireland would encourage more people to leave their cars behind and use what some refer to as environmentally friendly forms of travel. I am sure that that would please other Members. It would also reduce the number of cars on

the road. On a recent visit to Carrickfergus train station, I witnessed first hand the success of the park-and-ride scheme that operates there. Such schemes should be extended and given every encouragement. That can only happen when people are confident in the level of service that they will receive from bus and rail services.

The promotion of tourism is another issue. Tourism is the fourth largest private-sector employer in Northern Ireland. Although most of the focus will inevitably be on Belfast, East Antrim, as a constituency that borders Belfast, is well placed to avail itself of the tourism opportunities that exist. Sound investment in tourism can see huge returns in the number of visitors who come to Northern Ireland and the number of jobs created in the tourism sector, all of which can boost the Northern Ireland economy.

The area that I represent has been called the gateway to the glens. As such, it is ideally placed to catch many of the tourists as they make their way to the north coast. The entire region of the Antrim coast and glens attracts many walkers, cyclists and those who enjoy the splendid natural beauty of the area or the impressive built environment — none of which is more impressive than Carrickfergus Castle. It is paramount that funding be made available to assist the tourism sector in Northern Ireland, specifically in East Antrim. It is also important that smaller tourist ventures, such as bed and breakfast establishments, are given every chance to promote their business.

Some 865,000 visitors came to Northern Ireland via the port of Larne in 2006, a considerable number of whom are tourists or work in the freight industry. I therefore draw attention to the importance of the port of Larne and to the A8 road, which runs through my constituency. Small-scale improvements on the A8 have already shortened journey times significantly and improved road safety. However, investment per mile is still dramatically lower than the investment per mile on the stretch of road towards the Irish border. I hope that that disparity can be addressed in the future.

There is a 10-mile stretch of single carriageway on the A8 that carries a significant amount of rural machinery, which can in turn result in long tailbacks. There are two negative effects from that. First, drivers frustrated at hold-ups in traffic often attempt dangerous overtaking manoeuvres. Secondly, the queues can act as a disincentive for roll-on roll-off ferry commuters to use the Larne port, as they feel that it is too slow.

We must recognise that it is not only the economy of East Antrim and Larne that will suffer unless we recognise the importance of upgrading the A8, but the economy of Northern Ireland. A sound transport network is essential, given that Larne is the favoured route of much freight from Scotland. We must ensure that that cultural, historical and business route between

Northern Ireland and Scotland is strengthened. My East Antrim colleague Sammy Wilson has previously spoken to the former Scottish First Minister Jack McConnell about the issue. That is perhaps an issue that our Executive and the Scottish Executive could examine further.

I am conscious that time is limited and I do not want to restrict the opportunities for other Members to speak. I could go on to highlight the need for social housing in Newtownabbey and put forward the case for keeping Inver House in Larne open, but those issues have been addressed in the past and will be returned to in the House.

As the Finance Minister said, many of the issues raised during the debates of the past two days require imaginative thinking. It is not simply a case of throwing money at a problem; it is more a case of using the available money wisely.

I congratulate the Minister for the realistic and responsible attitude that he has adopted to spending in Northern Ireland during his first weeks in office. I support the Second Stage of the Budget Bill.

Mr Beggs: As I indicated during the consolidation debate, I accept that a new Administration, which takes office mid-year, has little choice but to accept the Budget plans of the previous Administration. However, when examining the detailed Budget proposals and Estimates, I could not identify any new money allocated by the Chancellor. When I questioned departmental officials at the Finance and Personnel Committee, they advised that the Chancellor's package had not been included in the Budget proposals.

Where are the additional financial announcements to reveal how that money will be spent? The DFP officials also advised that subsequent changes would be incorporated into additional announcements to allocate the £100 million. It is interesting that the figure of £100 million was used and not £1 billion. It appears that £100 million has been allocated by the Chancellor.

In the current financial year, £75 million of that £100 million has been allocated to the deferment of water charges. That leaves approximately £25 million to be allocated. Interestingly, that concurs with the views expressed by Nigel Smith in the First Trust Bank's 'Economic Outlook and Business Review', when he stated:

"Closer scrutiny of the UK Government's 'peace dividend' package of £1bn shows that it contains £400mn pledged by the Republic of Ireland (RoI) Government, £200mn of accelerated public asset disposals, £200mn of end-year flexibility (NI gets to roll over its own spending from one fiscal year to the next!), some monies to defer the introduction of water charges (which will be clawed back under the CSR). This leaves just £20mn of additional resources — hardly an ample dowry for the new administration."

Therefore, according to people who should know, £100 million will be used for the deferment of water

charges and the review process and £20 million - £25 million will be left over.

I have closely examined references to the review of public administration (RPA) in the Bill. RPA expenditure is listed under several headings: Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure; Department of the Environment; Department for Regional Development; and Department for Social Development. There are concerns that costs associated with reorganisation are often underestimated, meaning that there could be a black hole in the expenditure plans. It remains to be seen when that difficulty will be faced. When I questioned the departmental officials, they indicated that unforeseen RPA costs would be dealt with in end-year monitoring.

RPA is an opportunity to reduce administrative costs and to give a greater level of accountability in many areas. It is disappointing that no significant new money is available to kick-start and front-load the RPA to get over the initial cost burdens. That would have been a useful area had significant moneys been available in the Chancellor's package. It appears that RPA reorganisation is largely being financed from the block grant allocations.

As the Finance Minister has indicated, the Budget will be tight this year. Given that unforeseen RPA costs will be funded by end-year monitoring, we should expect reduced opportunities at the Supplementary Estimate stage to allocate moneys that may not have been allocated to other useful purposes during the year. No pot of gold has been acquired by the incoming Executive, or by the Minister of Finance and Personnel, who was leading the charge.

It has been mentioned that the borrowing arrangements have changed. I understand that borrowing is still maintained at the Bank of England base rate, and, as such, it does not matter what amount is borrowed, because a similar amount of interest will have to be paid. I am interested to know what is the great benefit of changing the borrowing arrangements.

The previous levels of the regional rate were mentioned. It is important that everyone acknowledge that the highest regional rate in memory — certainly in my memory — occurred in Northern Ireland while the Democratic Unionist Party was the lead unionist party. The DUP cannot blame the Ulster Unionist Party for high regional rates that happened under DUP leadership of the unionist community, and it must be held to account for that.

Mention was made that the Budget represented a better package. It has been omitted that, under the previous Administration, several valuable properties were transferred to the devolved Administration, including the Maze site, which is much in vogue at present. The military base at Ebrington in County Londonderry had substantial land assets transferred to the responsibility of the Northern Ireland Executive. I

am interested to know the valuation of those sites. It is also interesting to note that the Mahon Road base in Portadown has been sold to the private sector. How much of that sale has passed into the hands of the Northern Ireland Executive? It is important that a balanced view is reached on those matters.

I shall comment on a few issues relating to my own constituency. Transport has been a theme that I have revisited on a number of occasions since joining the Northern Ireland Assembly. As other Members have said, East Antrim alone retains a third-rate rail service. New trains have been allocated to other areas of Northern Ireland, but the east Antrim line retains the old class-450 vehicles and carriages. They have been upgraded and are better than they were, but they are still a poor second to what is available in other parts of Northern Ireland. It is important that the rail users of East Antrim have equality.

There is a dense urban area along the Larne line, and there is a huge potential to significantly increase the number of rail users in that area. There are a large number of stations along that line, and people could take the opportunity of switching to rail travel, and, therefore, minimise traffic congestion.

Road bottlenecks, particularly on the A2, should be removed. That has been highlighted as a priority in the Belfast metropolitan area plan, and should be considered. I appreciate that that project is still in the planning stage, but I hope that it will soon be on the starting block for receipt of significant moneys to enable that blockage to be removed.

There is a four-lane route on the Jordanstown side of Greenisland, and a four-lane route on the Carrickfergus side of Greenisland, with a two-mile stretch of a two-lane road in between, and anyone with common sense can imagine what happens.

2.15 pm

In addition, the A8 from Belfast to Larne, with its connecting road at Ballynure to the north-west of the Province, is a key transport link. Plans for the development of that road have not received the priority that they should have. I responded to consultation on that issue, and I hope that that key transport link to Scotland, which carries most of Northern Ireland's exports, will be prioritised. The congestion that is caused in Larne when ferries offload a large number of vehicles at one time would be alleviated if an appropriate road to accommodate them existed. Such a road would enable the safe and efficient distribution of imports throughout Northern Ireland and the transport of exports that are bound for the United Kingdom and Europe.

Indeed, that road is also an important route for tourism. I hope that the recent Scottish exhibition at the Smithsonian Institution will result in a significant increase in the number of tourists to Northern Ireland

and to the East Antrim constituency area in particular. Visitors to Northern Ireland frequently comment on Antrim's coast road. If a range of facilities were provided, visitors would be encouraged to come, not just for a one-day visit to the Giant's Causeway but for a visit of several days or a week. They could then enjoy our wonderful environment and scenery and the hospitality for which we are renowned.

I hope that the Minister will take those comments into account when he considers the current Budget and future expenditure.

Mr Gallagher: Members, myself included, will approve the Minister's plans. Several Members have commented that the Budget is inherited, which, indeed, it is. However, the public expects Departments and the Executive to be able to respond to future events, some of which are unforeseen. My remarks, therefore, will be largely about the Assembly's capacity to use this Budget to respond to certain events.

Private finance initiatives (PFI) for acute hospital services are under way throughout Northern Ireland in Enniskillen, Omagh, Antrim, Belfast and Dundonald. As those projects progress, the public is becoming concerned about peculiar aspects of them. For example, frozen food will be flown in to be served to patients in a hospital in Enniskillen. That aspect of that project is complete nonsense. It is bad for nutrition and health, and it certainly does not make economic sense. Is the Department aware of any other peculiar aspects of PFI contracts for acute hospitals? The Assembly needs to know about those immediately.

Another concern is the so-called affordability gap, meaning that the figures that have been agreed in a PFI contract to deliver the full range of hospital services fall short of current costs. In the Enniskillen and Omagh hospitals projects, it is envisaged that there will be an affordability gap of £20 million.

Members know that the trusts are strapped for cash and that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety does not have sufficient resources; so where will the money come from? Can money be drawn down from the Department of Finance and Personnel? If that is not the case, the Health Service is going to become a complete shambles under its PFI projects.

A couple of points have come up in the course of the debate. First, there is the reorganisation of councils under the review of public administration. Decisions taken at Executive level mean that the initial model envisaged, or at least that which was agreed by Sinn Féin when the British Government proposed that Northern Ireland should have seven councils, is unlikely to happen.

Soon, we will have to carry out further consultation on what the best model should be — and it will certainly not be the 26-council model. That work is going to

cost more money. We have already had the Boundary Commission, and its work may well be set aside. Has the Department of Finance and Personnel made allowances in the Budget for further work to be done on selecting the model of local government that will be adopted?

The Department of the Environment is currently in possession of a report, which will be put into the public domain next week, on whether Northern Ireland will have an environment protection agency. If we are to have such an agency, it will not be enough for it to be independent — it will need to be resourced in a much better way than the Environment and Heritage Service, the body currently accountable for the care and protection of the environment.

Finally, if Northern Ireland ends up with an independent environment protection agency, which the vast majority of people would like to see happen, will we be able to resource it properly?

Mr McQuillan: I support the Bill. Finance is a key building block of the Assembly, and although the accelerated-passage provision is not the best way to deal with business, the DUP fully recognises the reasons for using it. I welcome the assurance given by the Minister yesterday that consultation will be materially enhanced in the future. The Programme for Government will be a vitally important document. It is hoped that the document will have a priority-driven agenda and not a political wish list that would have more to do with enhancing the egos of the political parties than delivering real and effective service for Northern Ireland.

Will the Minister also assure the House that lessons from PFI deals that have been highlighted in Public Accounts Committee reports will be learned and will be reflected in the Workplace 2010 contracts soon to be awarded?

Mr Weir: I support the Bill.

I was glad to hear the Member for Strangford Mr McNarry who spoke earlier but who is not in the Chamber. I congratulate him, because when he spoke on a previous occasion — on the issue of fisheries — his speech borrowed heavily from the Member of Parliament for Strangford. Today, one assumes that Mr McNarry's speech was his own work, for I am sure that no one else would own up and take responsibility for it.

Mr McNarry seemed to get very enthused with 'Star Trek' analogies. In case there is any doubt on the subject, I should point out that 'Star Trek', like the content of Mr McNarry's speech, is a work of fiction. Mr McNarry accused those of us on these Benches as being like the crew in 'Star Trek', but I suspect that those on the Benches alongside him would be more appropriately likened to the crew of the Titanic, sinking below the waves, or perhaps to the Mary Celeste, the ghost ship that was deserted and left lurching from side to side.

Mr McNarry today presented Members with a great deal of rhetoric. He was critical of the Budget Bill, and of the efforts of the DUP in negotiations with the Government. All parties, including the UUP and Mr McNarry's party colleagues in the Executive, supported yesterday's appropriation motion. Therefore, I am keen to see whether the Member for Strangford will put his money where his mouth is. If he has such strongly held objections to the Budget Bill, will he vote against it? We will take that as the acid test.

As to the complaints of Mr McNarry and Mr Beggs — a Member for East Antrim — that no new money is allocated in the Budget, it was made clear yesterday that it reflects what was available after direct rule. My hon colleague the Minister of Finance and Personnel will refer to changes that have arisen out of the recent negotiations with the Chancellor of the Exchequer. It would have been impractical to include those in the Bill. Mr McNarry and others are keen for those adjustments to be made to the Bill; perhaps they will tell us what front-line services they will starve of funds during the consequent delay. The Department of Finance and Personnel would require additional time to incorporate those changes into the Bill.

Mr Beggs: I asked when we might expect the announcement of additional money. I am content that this was the Budget as determined by the previous direct rule Administration. I simply ask how the additional money will be spent.

Mr Weir: I commend the Member for remaining in the House after his speech, unlike his colleague the Member for Strangford. If the Member is sufficiently patient to wait until the end of the debate, he will hear the detail of some of the changes.

We must move away from instant-fix solutions. Some of the changes to be announced will help the economy and assist in controlling public spending in the long run. *[Interruption.]*

Those details will be referred to in the Minister's speech; you will not have to wait long. However, I appreciate that waiting for that may be beyond the patience of some Members.

I am glad that most of the Members' contributions yesterday and today have been responsible and constructive. The Committee for Finance and Personnel, of which I am a member, accepted accelerated passage for the Budget Bill; and it is important that those resources are delivered to the front line as soon as possible.

We require increased appreciation of financial realities. Irrespective of how generous or tight a Budget is, there will never be enough money to satisfy every potential desire. Sooner or later, whatever the financial circumstances —

Mr B McCrea: Does the Member accept that the general public expects a substantial peace dividend, and that it is as yet unclear to what extent that has been achieved?

Mr Weir: The UUP berated my party, saying that it had not produced a pot of gold. Since that party did not even produce a pot, I take no lectures from it. Also, the UUP ran on the manifesto commitment that, no matter what happened in negotiations with the Chancellor of the Exchequer, it would be in there from day one: so neither do I accept its lessons in negotiating strategy.

Sooner or later — and this will be uncomfortable for many Members — we will face the challenge of deciding between spending priorities. Any Member who believes otherwise is fooling himself. As indicated yesterday and today, the key challenge in rebalancing the economy is to create circumstances in which we can boost the private sector. I welcome a debate on whether that is more important than reducing the size of the public sector. As a society we are keen to obtain our rights, but we must also accept that there are certain financial responsibilities and realities.

2.30 pm

The Budget Bill poses challenges to the Departments and opportunities that must be examined. The Department of Education must look closely at the unfair treatment that was meted out to centres of education in the South Eastern Education and Library Board area due to the financial constraints that were placed upon the board. The high level of special-needs statementing of young people in the South Eastern Board area, which was clinically driven, required levels of expenditure that outstripped those of the other board areas, but the South Eastern Board was not recompensed to the same level.

As a result, draconian cuts were forced on the South Eastern Board by the direct rule Minister with responsibility for education. I am glad to say that all parties were united in opposition to those cuts. However, that situation ultimately led to the imposition of commissioners. Situations such as that must be addressed, and we must examine the disparity of funding between the South Eastern Board area and its Belfast counterpart. Falling demographics mean that pupils who live in the South Eastern Board area but attend schools in Belfast create a net loss in the South Eastern Board area, which has to pick up the tab for transport. Meanwhile, the Belfast Board receives funding for the places taken up by pupils travelling to schools from the South Eastern Board area. The Department of Education must examine that situation and also the extent to which primary schools in Northern Ireland suffer a disparity in funding compared to other sectors.

Although that scenario is particularly true of the Department of Education, it applies equally to other Government Departments. We must ensure that capital

funding is spent swiftly and appropriately. At times, that has been sadly lacking and has perhaps been a token of the disregard shown by direct rule Ministers. At times, in large capital projects, particularly in the education sector, the expectation of swift action is built up, only for schools to be left hanging for years, waiting for action to be taken.

I note, for example, the effect on schools in my constituency: the proposed move of Priory Integrated College seems to have been held back on numerous occasions, and that has had a knock-on effect on the proposed merger of Holywood Primary School and Redburn Primary School. It is important, therefore, that when capital expenditure commitments are made by the Department of Education — at times it has been the worst example — the money is actually spent.

When the time comes to re-examine the Budget we must give greater priority to waste management, which is of great concern to my hon Friend the Minister of the Environment, Mrs Foster. Waste management has been underfunded for years, which does not help the Northern Ireland economy in the long run. Unless swift action on waste management is taken in the next few years, it will not simply be a question of the opportunity missed: if we do not get this right, the Province will face potentially large fines from Europe.

Several Members made points about transport infrastructure and funding for the road networks and the railways. If the Department for Regional Development is providing that funding — and commitments were made to deliver it — we must ensure that those moneys are well spent. The Public Accounts Committee highlighted the problems associated with the investment in the Belfast to Bangor railway line, which led to the squandering of a great deal of money.

Those are some of the challenges that we face.

I welcome the Budget because, given the available timescales, it is the appropriate way forward. In the months and years ahead, the great challenge for the Executive and the Assembly will be to ensure that we use the budgetary process to add value to this society. I look forward to the Minister's response and to further action being taken. I support the motion.

Mr Cree: During yesterday's lengthy debate on resource allocation, I outlined my views on the economy and on the way forward.

Many Members have said, and it is a matter of record, that this Budget was prepared by the direct rule Administration and is already in operation. Therefore it would be pointless, at this stage, to discuss wish lists or pet subjects. However, many Members have indulged in speeches of that nature. Wish lists and pet subjects are really matters for discussion in the autumn, when we will prepare the Budget for 2008-09. That Budget

will fall within the comprehensive spending review and will be the real test for the Executive and the Assembly.

Yesterday, I ended my contribution by emphasising the importance of having adequate resources to meet the challenges in Northern Ireland. That remains the main issue that is yet to be resolved between the Assembly and HM Treasury.

I am happy and satisfied that we approve the Budget Bill.

Mr P Robinson: The debate has been useful, and, for the most part, Members have taken it seriously and have made valuable contributions. There have, however, been exceptions, with which I will deal in some detail. First, however, I should deal with the more informed and intelligent comments, and —

Mr Campbell: It will be a short speech, in that case. *[Laughter.]*

Mr P Robinson: I agree entirely with the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel that the legal necessity to pass the Bill is one of the encouraging factors for us to accept it as the route forward. Unless we pass the Bill, we will run out of money in early July. Clearly, that would have devastating consequences. However, some people who lectured us about taking on the direct rule Budget do not seem to understand those consequences.

Mr O'Loan referred to the importance of representation for citizens and consumers. In particular, he mentioned the Utility Regulator and the General Consumer Council. I am happy to join with Mr O'Loan in his warm appreciation of their contributions. They provide a valuable service and perform a positive role in our society.

However, I must point out that, contrary to Mr O'Loan's comments, and given that we are the representatives of citizens and consumers in Northern Ireland, it can hardly be said that they are under-represented. In fact, compared to those in any other part of the United Kingdom, perhaps citizens and consumers here are over-represented, particularly in this Chamber. However, where there is a requirement for a regulator, a voice, or a commissioner for a particular sector, we must consider each case on its own merits. My colleagues and I supported the case for a children's commissioner; we have argued for a commissioner for older people; and we argued — and got — a commissioner for victims. Therefore I accept very much Mr O'Loan's argument. It is important that someone who can focus on particular issues and help our consumers and citizens be appointed.

Dr Farry raised several issues. He said that the Budget is flawed. As this is not my Budget, I am, perhaps, in the strange position where, in moving it, I can, to some extent, agree with him. However, I must

fulfil the requirement to proceed with the Budget of the direct rule Ministers.

Dr Farry mentioned the significant subvention that Northern Ireland receives, but, as I said yesterday, we are an integral part of the United Kingdom and we are entitled to enjoy its prosperity. We have an expenditure of more than £17 billion, comprising a resource departmental expenditure limit of approximately £8.5 billion, an annually managed expenditure of slightly more than £7 billion, and a capital departmental expenditure limit of almost £1.5 billion. That is a significant budget for the Province, and, as I said yesterday, there are several ways of building on that — if that is what we want to do.

I have already mentioned my meetings with the European Commissioner, the ongoing process with the Chancellor, the discussions with Sir David Varney, and the need to look at the regional rate. However, I agree with Dr Farry that if one is requesting more money from the Treasury, that request is more convincing if one can show that one is dealing with issues of reform in the public service and looking to new thinking. That will show that one is serious, and it will make a favourable response more likely. We must demonstrate that type of seriousness in facing the challenges ahead.

Dr Farry also mentioned corporation tax. I will not go into that in too much detail at this stage, but suffice it to say that in our meeting with President Barroso, he argued that it would be up to the European Commission to decide what to do, but that a case for special circumstances for Northern Ireland had not been presented to it by the United Kingdom Government. There are associated legal complications, but in our discussions with those who show some expertise in those matters, the complications are not insurmountable, if the political will exists. We will wait for the outcome of the Varney review before addressing corporation tax in any detail, but it is an important issue with which the Executive must deal.

The Member for North Down Dr Farry also mentioned roads funding. The Roads Service has been allocated almost £200 million to deliver on its regional transportation strategy, but I will return to the transportation strategy later. The Roads Service has been given a considerable amount of money, and a proper planning process is required to ensure that that is spent wisely. One must remember that we can pick out any figure for capital spend from the air, but it must be integrated with the ability of the construction industry to construct within the same period. Therefore, there is a need for consultation.

The Member for Strangford Mr Simon Hamilton mentioned the European package. I met President Barroso, along with the First Minister, the Deputy First Minister and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment. I was impressed by President Barroso's enthusiasm to assist Northern Ireland. He said that he wanted to set up a task force to look at the issues relating to Northern Ireland. He wants to look at such things as how best Northern Ireland will compete for European funds since it has lost its Objective 1 status, and he wishes to explore how expertise might be brought in from elsewhere in Europe to help us achieve funding. He also expressed willingness for a study on the Northern Ireland economy to be undertaken. He has asked his colleague, Commissioner Danuta Hübner, to take forward that project, and we are discussing with him how best to conduct a study that will not simply duplicate the many studies that have gone before on the Northern Ireland economy. We want the new study to have some added value, and the Commissioner agrees that that is the best way forward.

Therefore, there is benefit in further engagement with the European Union. The First Minister and the Deputy First Minister intend to visit Europe in the near future, and hopefully there will be further discussions between officials from the Department of Finance and Personnel and those involved in the task force that is to be set up by President Barroso.

The Member for Upper Bann Mr O'Dowd raised a number of points; it is unfortunate that he is not present to hear my response. He indicated that, although he was supporting the Budget this year, he would not be reluctant to attack next year's Budget. The Member should be aware — so that he gets that notion out of his head — that next year's Budget will not be the Department of Finance and Personnel's Budget; it will not be Peter Robinson's Budget; it will, however, be an Executive Budget, as it will have to be agreed by the Executive. I am sure that he will want to give faithful support to his colleagues on the Executive, rather than attacking their Budget and the Budget of the other Ministers in the Executive.

I was concerned to hear Mr O'Dowd refer to the opening up of the Barnett formula. That issue has been dangled in front of Finance Ministers and discussed in Finance Committees and in a wide variety of forums. There are considerable dangers involved, and I am nervous about that prospect. If it were the responsibility of the Assembly to evaluate the formula, then by all means, we could consider it.

2.45 pm

Unfortunately, there will be competing interests when the time comes to reconsider the Barnett formula. I fear that the political interests of a new Prime Minister, with his mind on an election, might skew the Barnett formula in a way that would not be favourable to Northern Ireland. Therefore, on some issues, we might from time to time look for Barnett-plus. We will certainly be requiring Barnett consequentials when a

Chancellor gives a particular emphasis to an area of expenditure. It is important to consider long and hard before we encourage the Chancellor or the Treasury to open up the Barnett formula.

Mr O'Dowd also mentioned the subject of the dispersal of public sector jobs. However, as that matter will be debated this afternoon, I am prepared to hold fire on that issue until then.

He referred to the review of public administration and asked if I had deliberately left it out of the list of savings that I mentioned yesterday as a means of reducing bureaucracy. Had I thought of the issue yesterday, I would not have been reluctant to mention it. It is necessary to reduce from 26 the number of councils in Northern Ireland. There are political issues that will determine what number is settled on, as there is a balance to be gained between the economies involved and having a local Government. The larger the areas are, the less local they become, so there is a need to balance that equation. However, Mr O'Dowd rightly stated that the more councils that exist, the less savings will be made — that is obvious.

On the other side of the equation, there are areas of activity, which are presently based on a unitary system, that are considered suitable for transfer to the councils. If those areas were transferred to even seven councils, they would cost more, yet I did not hear the Member suggest that we should not give responsibility to local government for roads, planning and so forth. Perhaps a balance can be struck on the number of additional councils that should exist in Northern Ireland.

Perhaps the councils should not be given responsibility for roads. I am sure that by now, the Member will have heard from his colleague the Minister for Regional Development that there are considerable advantages in having the Roads Service continue in its present form — a unitary roads authority. At various places around the world, I have been commended by people on the set-up in Northern Ireland and told how they envied it. Now we have proposals, albeit from direct rule Ministers, that indicate that we should ruin a system that is the envy of the rest of the world.

If there are seven, 11 or 15 councils, that will add very considerably to the cost of road functions and will lead to a considerable rise in the rates, particularly west of the Bann. Members need to draw that to the attention of their constituents.

Mr O'Dowd also made some comments about procurement. I agree that the primary focus must remain on efficient, effective purchasing. I am chairman of the Procurement Board, where all of the elements of the Civil Service, including the permanent secretaries, meet. It shows that real, considerable savings are being made by our procurement policies. We have not yet reached Utopia, but considerable progress has been made.

My colleague Mr Alastair Ross from East Antrim — not unexpectedly — raised the matter of trains and, in particular, the Larne line. I have reasonably clean hands, given that I signed the cheque for 28 new trains when I was Minister for Regional Development. He cannot blame me if they were dispersed in a way that did not suit. However, the one lesson that I did learn in the Department for Regional Development (DRD) is that if we want to take people off the roads and onto public transport — and, given the massive congestion on our roads and its expected increase, that should be our aim — we must have a public-transport system that is attractive to consumers. It was for that reason that the regional transportation plan set out a programme that included an upgrading of both railway lines and buses. It is essential that we have a public-transport system that can be relied upon, one that is dependable, comfortable and that comes at an acceptable cost.

The Member for East Antrim also told us of the tourist delights in his constituency and of Larne port's great advantage as the gateway to Northern Ireland. This is very important to both business and tourism. The port of Larne has an important role to play in DRD. I approved some schemes to improve the A8. I believe that there are other proposals, but I will draw those matters to the attention of the present Minister for Regional Development, who will, in time, bring forward his own proposals.

Mr Tommy Gallagher referred to PFI. I do not find myself ideologically wedded to PFI. I am, however, wedded to value for money, and any scheme must be tested for affordability and value for money, as well as by how it delivers. The Executive and the scrutiny Committees will want to examine those matters. However, just as I do not take an ideological position in favour of it, neither do I do take one against it. We need to look at whatever instruments are available, and see how best they can be used to the advantage of the community that we all represent.

Tommy Gallagher also referred to the RPA, and made some comments on its funding. That is interesting, and I should like to remind people of something that seems to have been forgotten: the genesis of the RPA was an Ulster Unionist Party conference, where the then Minister Mr Sam Foster argued that it would bring us savings. Yet it is very clear that, in several areas, it will not bring us savings and that, in the areas where savings can be made, those will not be made in the short term.

Clearly the Executive will also have to look at the rolling out of the RPA programme in relation to budgetary issues.

As far as the environmental protection agency is concerned, Mr Gallagher is aware that the decision to remove it from the Budget was made by the direct rule ministers. The Minister of the Environment is looking

into that, and if she is to bring forward a proposal recommending an environmental protection agency, or any derivation of that, she will also bring forward proposals for the accompanying funding.

Mr Peter Weir, a Member for North Down, referred to capital funding issues and particularly the gap that occurs between an announcement being made and construction actually taking place. The European tendency is to announce things repeatedly, but that builds an expectation, and years pass without anything happening. We need to look at the lead-in times for a number of capital projects.

As a former Minister for Regional Development, I recognised that there was a very long lead-in time, and the Member for East Londonderry, who was also a Minister for Regional Development, will know that it often takes much longer than two years from the decision to proceed with a road to the point at which it can begin. We built up a roads pool and started to prioritise issues so that as soon as the money was available, most of the statutory work had been completed, and we could continue to the tendering process and complete the job without having to wait for the legalities to be finalised. Other Departments should follow that example and start looking at the lead-in times to ensure that we can deliver.

I will return to the Chancellor's package in more detail in a moment. The Chancellor repeatedly questioned us on our ability to spend the money. He was not convinced, presumably on the basis of the direct rule Ministers who had preceded us, that we were capable of spending the over £1 billion to £2 billion in a year. We did our utmost to convince him of our ability to spend money wisely, but we will look at that in more detail shortly.

The Member for North Down also referred to the regional transportation plan. I suggest that the Minister for Regional Development lodge a progress report on the regional transportation plan so that he is not blamed for the dragging of feet in the period up until devolution commenced again. The plan was laid out and approved unanimously by the Assembly; it had a programme linked to spend, a programme that would have considerably improved our roads and public transportation system. The plan is still sound, although from time to time I am sure that the Regional Development Minister and the Regional Development Committee will wish to examine aspects of it. A progress report would be useful to see how far off course we have gone over the period of direct rule.

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

The Member for Strangford Mr David McNarry demonstrated in this afternoon's contribution why it would be better if we did not allow him to speak on financial matters. He demonstrated, at great length, a

painfully shallow appreciation of the budgetary issues we face and revealed his own ignorance for all to see.

Before he spoke, many of us suspected how little of the subject he understood; after he sat down, we knew how little he did. Perhaps it is not surprising, given his own background and experience in business, and with a track record like his, I doubt that anyone would wish to entrust him with a credit card, let alone the public finances.

Mind you, Mr McNarry's political record is no better than his economic one — he has helped to transform Strangford, previously one of the Ulster Unionist Party's strongest constituencies, into one that is reduced to a solitary seat.

Mr McNarry: Is that your best defence?

Mr Peter Robinson: He was elected on the tenth count. *[Interruption.]*

I hear a sedentary intervention from “tenth-count” McNarry. *[Laughter.]* He might be better to find out why the electorate continues to reject the Ulster Unionist Party. If he would wait until I have finished dealing with the issues, instead of interrupting, he would find out exactly what the answers are to the issues that he raised.

3.00 pm

Mr McNarry: Go to the people of East Belfast and see what their response is.

Mr P Robinson: I have been to the electorate of East Belfast 22 times, and on each occasion I have been elected. I am also delighted to say that, in the same period when support for the Ulster Unionist Party in Strangford has fallen, the Democratic Unionist Party has become the largest party and has returned four Assembly Members and the Member of Parliament for that constituency. Before making unsubstantiated comments, Mr McNarry would do well to compare the record of the Ulster Unionist Party with that of the DUP.

Mr McNarry: The DUP's record is on trial, not ours.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. It would be in the interest of all Assembly Members if we could confine the debate to the subject under discussion, and leave the party politics for elsewhere.

Mr P Robinson: I am absolutely sure that you are right, Mr Deputy Speaker; it is unfortunate that you were not in the Chair during Mr McNarry's speech. I think that, in winding up the debate, I am entitled to respond to the issues that Mr McNarry raised during it.

The record of the Ulster Unionist Party is that it allowed Sinn Féin into an Executive without decommissioning and while that organisation continued with paramilitary and criminal activity, gave no support to the police, did not recognise our courts and would not accept the rule of law. That is the record of the Ulster

Unionist Party. On all those issues, the Democratic Unionist Party was able to reverse the bad record of the Ulster Unionist Party and do a good deal for unionism. More than that, we transformed this Assembly from being one in which there was no accountability —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Even the Minister must address his remarks through the Chair.

Mr P Robinson: The Assembly previously had no accountability, either for the decisions of Ministers or on North/South issues. The decisions taken by the Democratic Unionist Party negotiators have ensured that there is accountability and collectivity in the Executive. That is distinctly to the advantage not just of the people of Northern Ireland but of democracy itself.

Ulster Unionist Party Members have some cheek to talk to anyone about their ability to negotiate. Mr McNarry made some retorts about the financial package, so let us consider the financial package issues —

Mr Kennedy: It was a deal-breaker.

Mrs Foster: Is there a Speaker in the House?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mrs Foster has asked a good question, which I now put to the people who are causing the disturbance and ignoring the Speaker.

Mr P Robinson: The one thing that the Member did do accurately was to quote our position that, if there were a zero financial package, there would be no deal. His lack of knowledge about the financial package — and, indeed, of finances in general — is what leads him to the view that there is a zero package. Nobody believes that it is a zero package, except the dull heads in the Ulster Unionist Party.

Mr Kennedy: Tell us about the deal.

Mr P Robinson: I will tell the Assembly about the financial package. First, the Chancellor of the Exchequer has agreed to increase our capital spend allocation by £2 billion. We have an extra £100 million in our annual resource budget for this year, with further increases in the following three years guaranteed. Revenue from asset sales can now be retained for spending in Northern Ireland, rather than being reclaimed by the Treasury, as was the case for certain large projects in the past. We have guarantees on the use of end-of-year flexibility on both the resource and the capital sides. A review of tax policy in Northern Ireland is being carried out by Sir David Varney. Instead of attempting to undermine that review, it would be better if the Ulster Unionist Party — an Executive party — would attempt to convince Sir David to make some helpful recommendations. We have also been guaranteed an investment conference for Northern Ireland, which has received support from, and will be led by, the Chancellor, who will be the new Prime Minister.

We have also managed to retrieve something from the disastrous consequences of the 2002 reinvestment and reform initiative negotiations, for which the Ulster Unionist Party was responsible. The Member for East Antrim Mr Beggs had the audacity to suggest that the 19% rise in rates was somehow the fault of the Democratic Unionist Party because it was the largest unionist party at the time. The only reason why the rates rose by 19% was that, under the poor deal negotiated by the Ulster Unionist Party, there was a requirement that there be a reduction in the difference between the amount of tax raised locally in Northern Ireland and that raised in Great Britain.

In order to have access to the reinvestment and reform initiative, it was necessary to reduce the gap between Northern Ireland taxation and that on the mainland. The Democratic Unionist Party successfully renegotiated the bad Ulster Unionist Party deal, and that link has been broken. In the past — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Mrs Foster, you complained recently.

Mrs Foster: Yes I did.

Mr Deputy Speaker: You are now one of the problems. Please address your remarks through the Chair.

Mr P Robinson: As my colleague Mr Peter Weir indicated, in the past, the Democratic Unionist Party has been critical of Mr McNarry, who was involved in plagiarism. All Members will be aware of the fact that —

Mr McNarry: You get your lawyers ready for this one, Peter. Your remarks will be in Hansard. You just keep going.

Mr P Robinson: I will continue, and I will do so in the clearest possible terms. Indeed, can I challenge the Member to take any legal action that he wants? If he does not take legal action — sit down there — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, order.

We cannot have two Members speaking at the same time.

Mr Campbell: Especially one with high blood pressure.

Mr Deputy Speaker: We now have three people speaking at the same time. Please allow the Minister to continue.

Mr P Robinson: The charge of plagiarism is easy to prove: the Member copied the Member of Parliament for Strangford's speech, which was made at Westminster, and read it in the Assembly, almost word for word. He copied the speech to such an extent that although he delivered it after new statistics had been published, he used the statistics that the Member of Parliament for Strangford had used at Westminster, which were out of

date by the time of the Assembly speech. That is how bad a plagiarist he is.

Mr McNarry: When has the Member of Parliament for Strangford ever written a speech, never mind given me one to copy?

Mr P Robinson: I cannot hear what the Member is shouting at me.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that it is raining outside. I am sure that they do not want to go there. Please allow the Minister to continue.

Mr P Robinson: The claim has been made clearly, and it is on the record. The challenge has been issued, and we will all await the legal case that the Member does not bring. He will, of course, skulk off and hope that Members will forget all about it. I shall place the two speeches in the Library so that everybody can read them and be the judges of the Member for Strangford's plagiarism.

Mr McNarry: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. What has this got to do with the Budget Bill?

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Kennedy: Answer!

Mr P Robinson: I will answer the Member for Strangford.

Mr McNarry: You are rabble. Sit down!

Mr P Robinson: The Member asked for an answer, and then he asked me to sit down. Clearly, he does not want the answer. I made the remarks; the Deputy Speaker did not make the remarks.

Mr McNarry: You speak through the Speaker in here.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, order.

I invite the Minister to return to the subject under debate. I am sure that the public would want to hear about the Budget Bill.

Mr P Robinson: My comment is relevant. Although the DUP has been critical of the Member for Strangford's plagiarism, it would have been much better if he had plagiarised DUP speeches, rather than coming out with the tripe that he spoke during the debate earlier today. Rather than my criticising him, he would be better off copying the speeches of his colleague the Member of Parliament for Strangford.

The Member for Strangford also had the audacity to criticise me for introducing a direct rule Budget. His colleagues in the Executive supported the process in which we are now engaged. His colleagues — the leader of his party and the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety — supported this Budget as the way forward. His Assembly colleagues voted for it yesterday. Indeed, he voted for it yesterday — he did not say a word in opposition. Therefore, what he criticises today,

he voted for yesterday — such is the consistency of the Member for Strangford. If Mr McNarry had even the slightest understanding of the Budget process, he would know why it was not possible to make significant adjustments during the year. This is the month of June, Mr McNarry; the financial year begins in April.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have an important announcement to make. There has been severe flooding on the roof of the Building due to the heavy rainfall. There is some leakage onto the fourth and third floors — obviously a storm of a different type. This may have an impact on the fire alarms. There are two-minute delays built into the fire alarm system. If a fire alarm is triggered, I will not ask Members to leave. I am sorry for that interruption; I thought that the House should hear about that.

Mr Kennedy: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is it your advice that we stay, in order to get less wet than if we go outside, where we will get really wet?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Go ahead, Minister.

Mr P Robinson: It is abundantly clear that the course that has been adopted and recommended to this House by all the members of the Executive, including the Ulster Unionist members, is a pragmatic and sensible way forward. I thank the Members who genuinely wanted to be constructive in this debate for their contributions. In spite of the efforts of the Ulster Unionist Party, it has been a good debate, and we have discussed many issues of real importance to the people of Northern Ireland.

The restoration of the Assembly has presented us with an opportunity to deliver a better future for the people of Northern Ireland and to improve public services for the benefit of everyone. This approach brings challenges, and the Executive will have many difficult decisions to make. However, the programme that we adopt will enable us in future years to take forward a strategy to strengthen the local economy; encourage investment by making Government more responsible and agile; improve and enhance our infrastructure; tackle poverty and deprivation; and upgrade the core front-line services.

Devolution is only of value if we use it to improve the lives of our people, especially those in greatest need. Devolution will be seen to have worked when we grow our economy and bring greater prosperity to Northern Ireland and its people. This Government intends to make a difference and deliver improvements.

In commending this Bill to the Assembly, I rejoice that it is Northern Ireland's elected representatives who are making these decisions in a devolved Assembly. Let us take, and make the most of, this opportunity.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before we proceed to the Question, I remind Members that this is a Budget Bill

and that, therefore, the motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That the Second Stage of the Budget Bill [NIA 3/07] be agreed.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Committee for the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister

Resolved:

That this Assembly approves the change of name of the Statutory Committee called the Committee of the Centre to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister. — [*The Chairperson of the Committee of the Centre (Mr Kennedy).*]

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Industrial Rates

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for this debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to wind up; all other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes. Two amendments have been received and are published on the Marshalled List. The Member who proposed the motion has also tabled one of those amendments.

3.15 pm

Mr Cree: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to honour the resolution made by the 'Hain' Assembly, on 6 June 2006, to cap industrial rates at 25 per cent.

I beg to move amendment No 2: At end insert

“; and for the Minister of Finance and Personnel to make a statement to the Assembly, following publication of the ERINI report.”

Last summer, the House debated industrial rating. The Member for East Londonderry, who is now in the Chair, proposed the motion that industrial rates should be capped at 25%, which was agreed by all Members. We need to move on and deliver that which we agreed.

The Northern Ireland Manufacturing Focus Group (NIMFG) has made, and continues to make, cogent arguments for this assistance to what is left of the manufacturing base. Today's economic climate is very different to that of even five or six years ago. Manufacturing jobs have been reduced to a fraction of what they once were. Industry is competing in a global environment against very low labour and material costs. Our near neighbour, the Republic of Ireland, has a much more beneficial tax regime. This is the only part of the United Kingdom that has a land border with a country that operates a different fiscal regime and is within the euro zone.

The decision to phase out industrial derating is seriously flawed. Instead, we must develop a wealth-creating economy that retains as much of its manufacturing base as possible. Indeed, we need to add to that manufacturing base.

In the past, we were often reminded that the economy relied too heavily on the public sector. The increasing application of industrial rates will do nothing to change that balance; it will have the opposite effect. Increasing rates will threaten the profitability and viability of businesses. Several thousand jobs will be put at risk, and we must not allow that to happen.

When Mr Pearson was in office, he promised to assist the industry by reducing the higher electricity costs. Those higher electricity costs remain. Although some £30 million was set aside to deal with them, the

plan was turned down by our European friends. The financial aid has not been made available to the industry.

When DTZ Pida Consulting presented its report to the Government at that time, it forecasted that the impact from full industrial rates would be only 2.7% of profits. Invest Northern Ireland and others have produced revised figures that are considerably higher.

Rates may represent only a small proportion of business turnover, but they represent a higher proportion of profits. Companies that experience low profits can have their viability altered dramatically by a change in overhead costs, which can lead to closure. It makes sense to assist such businesses to stay in business and create employment.

Manufacturing represents a small percentage of the economy for gross domestic product and employment — it may be as low as 15% — but it generates the vast majority of our exports. We are told that 90,000 people are employed in manufacturing and we could lose one third of those jobs. We cannot take that risk. Jobs will also be put at risk in service industries.

We could rehearse many more arguments, but I trust that the House will again unite in opposing the implementation of industrial rates beyond the 25% level. I agree fully with the First Minister, who, in the debate on 6 June 2006, said that we must:

“ensure that industrial rate liability is kept at 25%.” — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 19, p62, col 2*].

We ought to keep our promises.

Mr Storey: I beg to move amendment No 1: Leave out all after “calls” and insert

“upon the Executive to consider the resolution made by the ‘Hain’ Assembly on 6 June 2006, concerning industrial rates, in light of the impact of rating on manufacturing in Northern Ireland and in the context of other priorities in the Comprehensive Spending Review, having considered the independent assessment presently being carried out into the matter by the Economic Research Institute of Northern Ireland (ERINI).”

Despite the attempts by the Member for Strangford Mr McNarry to have the Assembly in orbit, considering what is beyond the stars, it is more important that Members keep their feet on the ground and face certain realities.

I hoped that the fact that the Assembly has got down to what could be described as “real business” would ensure that Members have learned the lessons from the previous Private Members Business in the House. Hopefully, Members will have realised the need to consider the issues in a mature manner and to work within the reality of fiscal constraints that simply cannot be wished away. I welcome the comments made by the Minister for Social Development this morning about financial realities.

Industrial derating has been debated several times in the House. The views of Members and parties have

been voiced on many occasions, both inside and outside the Chamber.

My amendment refers to the debate that took place on 6 June 2006 — the proposer of the motion has also referred to it. The case was well put on that occasion. The economy of Northern Ireland is a key issue for us all, and the drive to improve our private sector is an aim that everyone shares. Businesspeople in Northern Ireland realise that a return to zero rating is unlikely; they recognise and support the principle of ensuring that they make their contribution.

It is important that we look at the impact of rating on manufacturing businesses across Northern Ireland so that we can decide on the most suitable and sustainable level. The service sector is increasing in size, so it is important for us to ensure that our manufacturing sector is maintained and enhanced. Manufacturing accounts for the vast majority of our exports. Although manufacturing has endured some difficult times, it is important — indeed, vital — to ensure that manufacturing businesses in this part of the United Kingdom have a future.

Therefore it is important that industrial rating should receive the full benefit of the independent assessment being carried out by the Economic Research Institute of Northern Ireland (ERINI). When that assessment has been made, it will be prudent for the Assembly and the Executive to make full use of all the available information, so that an informed, correct decision can be made.

It is also important that the issue be looked at alongside the full range of priorities that the Executive have identified. It has been said in the House recently that if every issue were made the number one priority, nothing would receive attention. That would do an injustice to the many other issues that we consider. It is essential that we choose the correct economic policies in order to ensure economic stability and progress.

It is incumbent on us as a party to ensure that the economy is, and will be, a priority for us. Despite the assertions of the Member for Strangford Mr McNarry earlier, we have given that commitment. I have no doubt that the Minister, as he has already adequately shown, is more than capable of producing the circumstances, principles and policies that will deliver that economic stability.

I hope that Members will support my amendment. To do so would show our support for manufacturing businesses in Northern Ireland, and it would also send to the Executive the desired message that they should consider the views that have been put forward in the House today, and in the past, and ensure that the most comprehensive information is available to them so that not only the most informed, but the most appropriate and suitable, decisions can be made. I hope that Members

will share the aim of the amendment and join us in supporting it.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank Mr Beggs and Mr Cree for tabling a motion on an important matter that must be addressed. I am aware that my party colleagues Mitchel McLaughlin and Alex Maskey met the Northern Ireland Manufacturing Focus Group on a number of occasions in order to discuss the issue and bring it to the fore. I congratulate the NIMFG on keeping the issue of industrial rating high on the agenda.

The sentiment of the motion is good, but, in my view, it has been brought before the Assembly too soon. ERINI's review of industrial derating is ongoing; it has not yet reported, and we need to wait for the completion of the report to see what it advises. There is a need to recognise that business rating is only one aspect of a much wider problem that requires general reforms, including democratic control of fiscal policy and the development of an all-Ireland taxation and rating system.

Following the review of public administration, it is important that the new functions for councils should include a system of local-government accountability for the spending of commercial rates, as there currently is in the Twenty-six Counties.

The capacity of local councils to deliver business development, secure and develop new jobs through enterprise units is weak. Therefore, it is vital that business rates are ring-fenced for economic development, allowing new and existing businesses to move forward and grow stronger, with an even greater support mechanism to assist their development and enable them to be the industrial leaders of the future.

The sentiment of the motion is good, but Members must explore all of the options, both now and in the future. I represent West Belfast. Government Departments have deliberately neglected my constituency and other socially deprived areas. When attempting to secure industries for the North of Ireland, the Government are obliged to encourage their location in TSN areas. In my opinion, they have done the opposite.

Recently, as part of a delegation from the West Belfast and Greater Shankill Enterprise Council on a trade mission to Lawrence, near Boston, in the United States, I met with people from both areas for the first time. Delegates met with businesspeople and US state officials who had been on trips organised by Invest NI to the North of Ireland, including many parts of Belfast, yet they were never shown west Belfast or the Shankill. Is Invest NI ashamed of us? That is indicative of how British direct rule Government Ministers treated the area that I represent. Members must not allow devolved Ministers to treat communities in the same way.

There should be specific rate relief measures for businesses that locate in TSN areas, to draw in new investors and assist existing businesses that have already shown great courage and leadership in helping communities to overcome their difficulties. It must be a priority to give TSN areas assistance to allow them to catch up with the rest of the island.

A review is ongoing, and Members should wait for the recommendations. A blanket approach may not be the best way forward, and Members must reserve judgement until all the evidence is before us. A report from the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment in 2002 stated:

"The blanket approach currently in practice meant that benefits to the manufacturing industry were spread too thinly and did not allow the Executive to focus resources where they were most needed. Other sectors of the ... economy did not benefit from this concession meaning that the policy of Industrial De-Rating was not fair in its application."

That is an important statement from a Committee of the previous Assembly. However, the new Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment may have a different view.

To vote for the motion would be to neglect our responsibility, as elected representatives, to hear the evidence from the review of industrial derating by ERINI. Therefore, I will be opposing the motion but supporting amendment No 1. However, I welcome the fact that Members have debated the issue, and I hope that the manufacturing community will take some reassurance from the Assembly. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr O'Loan: I wish to speak in favour of the motion. At the outset, I can do no better than quote from Hansard on an almost identical motion on 6 June 2006. The leader of the Democratic Unionist Party Dr Paisley said:

"I am delighted to speak in support of this motion ... The Government's proposals will have a terrible impact on industry. To say, as certain Ministers from elsewhere have told us, that people are crying "Wolf, wolf!" where there is no wolf — well, there are hounds and wolves in abundance, and they are all sniping at the industries of Northern Ireland. We should be here to protect those industries and do everything in our power to see that they are safeguarded." — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 19, p61, col 2*].

I could also quote from the Democratic Unionist Party manifesto, which supported a cap on industrial rates. The fact is that the manufacturing base in Northern Ireland has been in steady decline, and the number of jobs is now down to something like 90,000 or 100,000. Manufacturing must still be at the core of business activity.

In debate yesterday, Members spoke of the need to grow the business sector. This morning, when debating the Welfare Reform Bill, contributors spoke of the need to get more people economically active. We live in an intensely competitive, global environment. Low-wage economies, including the new Indian and

Chinese tiger economies, put intense pressure on the industrial sector to compete. The SDLP is gravely concerned that an increase in industrial rates of over 25% will threaten the narrow manufacturing base in the North.

3.30 pm

Concerns about job losses are not fanciful. The Government have reported that the best-case scenario for job losses, after full industrial rates are imposed, would be 10,000. The worst-case scenario would be 45,000 job losses, with 20,000 accepted as being a realistic figure. However, the NIMFG has projected a job-loss figure of 30,000.

Government have recognised the problem and have stalled the planned phasing-in of industrial rating, which was set to reach 100% rate liability by 2011. That is convincing evidence that the issue of industrial rating is increasingly being accepted as a real problem. Manufacturers will be forced to relocate, downsize, or even close. All companies are vulnerable to closure if additional pressure is exerted to extract more money from an already narrow profit margin of little more than 5%. The costs involved are huge. The total income at 100% rating has been estimated at £75 million — approximately £750 for each worker. For small businesses, or even large ones, that is a large sum to withdraw from the business.

Our industrial policy rightly stresses innovation, to which research and development is critical. For many companies, money extracted through industrial rates is the same money that they could use for R&D. Northern Ireland industry exists in a difficult economic climate. High energy costs are one major factor in that. One major manufacturer, to whom I have spoken, has said that that was the single biggest problem for him, and one that he wanted the Assembly to address.

High insurance costs are also a feature of business life here. Business can flow very easily from North to South. In the South, there is a relatively favourable climate for manufacturing, including lower fuel duties. We need to protect our industry. Through the Varney review of tax policy in Northern Ireland, we are arguing strongly for the equalisation of corporation-tax rates with the South. How could we be taken seriously if, at the same time, we got rid of lower industrial rates, which is one of the few competitive advantages that we have?

In 2005, the SDLP called on the Government to delay the initiative and develop instead a menu of reliefs and exemptions to support business development as follows: first, measures to support vulnerable sectors and encourage developing ones; secondly, assistance for businesses — services or industrial — in areas of high unemployment and/or social deprivation; thirdly, tailoring the rating system to take account of the differing

levels of energy consumption, spatial requirements, and so on, that are necessary for various manufacturing processes; and fourthly, change must be phased in on an affordable and sustainable basis. A flexible rate relief and exemption scheme could contribute greatly to addressing coherently the needs of our economy.

There has been much talk recently that all property taxes are a crude weapon that does not relate to ability to pay. The Minister of Finance and Personnel is responding to concerns on domestic rating by initiating a further review that will include the issue of rates relief. Exactly the same applies to industrial rating. Spatial requirements and profitability have no correlation. At present, different sectors of industry are being shown no consideration.

As I said at the outset, I strongly support the original motion and would neither welcome nor support amendment No 1.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members yet again that mobile phones are not to be switched on or used in any way in the Chamber.

Mr Neeson: I welcome the opportunity to debate this very important issue again. I applaud the efforts of the NIMFG. Its work over the past year in keeping such an important issue at the top of the agenda must be highly commended. I am delighted to say that the NIMFG has been invited to address the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment next week. I look forward to hearing it.

Hundreds of people attended last year's event, at the Waterfront Hall, in support of the focus group's efforts. The important fact that emerged from that event and the subsequent debate in the Chamber was that they both had cross-party support. The commitment that was given then still stands, and that is important.

I am also aware of the ongoing work of ERINI. However, I remind Members that the original reason for introducing industrial derating in Northern Ireland was to allow industry here to compete with the low corporation tax rate that had already been introduced in the Republic of Ireland. That problem still exists today.

I recognise that Northern Ireland has a narrow manufacturing base. One of the positive aspects of industrial derating was that it could attract new inward investment to Northern Ireland. Although the Department of Finance and Personnel will take the decision on industrial rates, there is an economic aspect to the issue. For that reason, I wrote recently to the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Mr Nigel Dodds, and I was delighted to receive a response today. He states that:

"The Department of Finance and Personnel has engaged the Economic Research Institute (ERINI) to assess the effects of

removing industrial derating from manufacturing businesses. This work is expected to be completed in September 2007.

My Department, through Invest NI, continues to help Northern Ireland manufacturing companies to improve their competitiveness through a broad portfolio of programmes aimed at improving productivity, encouraging more innovation and R&D and encouraging businesses to seek out opportunities in export markets."

At least we now know that ERINI is expected to report in September.

Last year, the economic subgroup dealt with the industrial rates issue. The important point to emerge was the recognition of a need for an overall package to assist industry in Northern Ireland. In many ways, the extended guidelines of the Varney review team reflect that as well. We must bear in mind that not just one issue needs to be addressed, but a package of issues.

It is also important to remember that the main beneficiaries of industrial derating are the large companies in Northern Ireland. We must recognise that if we are to have political stability in Northern Ireland, we also have to have a strong economy. The Assembly will be judged on how it deals with economic issues.

It is vital that we encourage growth in all sectors of the economy, particularly indigenous small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Northern Ireland. Although I understand the sensitivities that some Members have about the DUP's amendment, the Alliance Party will support it.

Mr McQuillan: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate. Over the next few years, the economy should be the Assembly's number one priority. We must create the kind of environment that will allow business to prosper and generate a greater opportunity for all in our society.

Although the nature of our economy will change, I have no doubt that the manufacturing sector will have an important role to play in the years ahead. We must, therefore, find the best way to encourage manufacturers to come to Northern Ireland, and to stay here.

There are factors that businesses will take into account when deciding where to set up and where to stay, and taxation is one such factor. As we all know, corporation tax is an important consideration, but so too is the question of rates. It is essential that we have the clearest possible picture of the impact of rating on manufacturing in Northern Ireland, and I welcome the research that ERINI is currently carrying out. That work will be essential in making long-term decisions on industrial rates policy.

As someone who believes that a strong economy is fundamental to a stable political environment, I am committed to ensuring that future resources are targeted where they are most needed. It is unfortunate that, because of EU state aid law, we are limited in what we can do. I hope that the Executive will reflect on today's

debate when they make their decisions in the autumn. I am sure that whatever decision is taken will be in the best interests of Northern Ireland manufacturers.

Mr Shannon: As tha oul proaverb saes, frae mickle sterfs cum muckle things.

We er stertin fae tha beginnin – aa' fresh slaet efter tha years o' neglect fae oor direct rool Givermunt en yeers o' heertacke an bluidshed fae wi-in.

It micht seem aa' moanumentil erdael – tae tak Northern Ireland tae tha place whor it shid be, tae study it baith socially an economically, tae paint aa' new warl pictur o' Northern Ireland. Moving it fae aa' war-torn state, tae tha real pictur o' aa' bonnie kintry, rich wi cultur, fu' o' warem foulk an ready tae step oot untae tha warl stage – aa' moanumentil erdael indeed – but this sterfs wi' mickle things aa' beleev that yin major-er muckle step tae be takkin is that o' studing oor economy by encouraging growth fae wi in.

As the old proverb says, from small beginnings come great things. Northern Ireland is starting from the beginning, with a fresh slate, after years of neglect from our direct rule Government and years of heartache and bloodshed from within. It may seem a monumental task to take Northern Ireland from a war-torn state to where it should be: to stabilise it socially and economically and to paint a new, realistic world image of Northern Ireland as a beautiful country, rich with culture, filled with warm people and ready to step out onto the world stage. It is a monumental task indeed, but it begins with the small things. One major step is to stabilise our economy by encouraging growth from within. I support the DUP amendment.

A short walk from the Chamber across the Great Hall to the Senate Chamber is an elegant portrayal of the three realms that Northern Ireland used to rely on to keep it afloat — linen, ships and agriculture. Once known as a giant in the manufacturing world, renowned for quality, Northern Ireland is now floundering and losing out to Third World nations that had the foresight to encourage big business to invest. Those nations then reaped the benefits through increased labour and higher task dividends as businesses eventually produce more. We must learn a hard lesson from those who once looked to us for inspiration.

However, it does not have to be like that. In Northern Ireland, we still have the ability and desire to work for ourselves, to thrive economically and to support our small nation. It is up to the Assembly to facilitate that. It can be achieved by taking the necessary steps to foster growth, not hamper it with the lure of quick or easy money. Manufacturing accounts for around 90,000 jobs in the Province, in addition to 45,000 supplementary jobs. That level must not only be sustained but it must be increased. That can be achieved by a cap on industrial rates. That would help

to sustain the 6,000 small businesses in Northern Ireland that currently do not enjoy the rates relief that is experienced by their counterparts on the mainland. It is our job to promote the growth and to cap the rates.

For too long we have been reading newspaper articles about closures in, or downsizing of, our industries. As our nation wakes up in a time of accountability and prosperity, it is time that we read articles about more jobs, such as the 100,000 jobs needed over the next 10 years to sustain us, or about international firms using our businesses and products due to their competitive prices and superior quality. The Republic of Ireland has consistently offered taxation, insurance and rates at a much lower level than in Northern Ireland. That country has been rewarded with a burgeoning business world and the benefits that that invariably brings.

If a company is seeking a base where is it likely to go? What side of the border will offer greater value for money? We must consider those questions. There could be a loss of some 18,000 jobs if businesses will have to pay industrial rates. That would be a blow that Northern Ireland could not take.

In Northern Ireland, we have become hardened to terrorism by the gun. That has held us back and hampered prosperity. However, we cannot allow ourselves to be laden by terrorism through taxation, a tactic of which the Labour Party is so fond. In the UK, just under 15% of jobs are in the manufacturing sector, as opposed to other EU countries that have double that proportion. Why is that? The Government have taxed local businesses out of existence yet they have not replaced it with anything substantial.

3.45 pm

That trend cannot be allowed to continue in Northern Ireland. We must support the Federation of Small Businesses and the Northern Ireland Manufacturing Focus Group. Those bodies have stated that the Northern Ireland economy and their own businesses must be able to afford the rate. From small beginnings come great things. If businesses get a shot at a good beginning, everyone would reap the benefits of lower unemployment levels, more funds being available through regular income taxes, less money being paid out in benefits and greater cash flow and prosperity throughout the Province.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The current policy of industrial derating was introduced mainly as a response to growing competition in markets for manufactured goods from foreign countries. In 2001, the Executive commissioned a study into the economic impact of industrial derating, and the public consultation that followed revealed broad support for the removal of the industrial derating policy.

Along with other parties, the Committee for Finance and Personnel and the Committee for Enterprise, Trade

and Investment, Sinn Féin supported the ending of industrial derating because measures were required that would best support local businesses and their vital role in the economy. The Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) expressed a view that the revenues raised by the abolition of industrial derating could help to fund Government borrowing to deal with the capital funding deficit of £6 billion. The ICTU pointed out that the current industrial derating policy was inconsistent with the Programme for Government's aim to promote a knowledge-based economy, given that the businesses benefiting from derating were largely manual-labour-oriented.

Businesses must contribute to the cost of local government services and the infrastructure in general, because they are often the primary beneficiaries of such spending. Therefore, businesses should pay local taxes such as rates. However, the system must be applied fairly to ensure that other industries that make a significant contribution to the economy are treated equally.

There is a huge responsibility on enterprise units at local government level to ensure competitiveness, business development, the securing of existing jobs and the development of new ones. New council functions after the review of public administration should include a system of local government accountability for the spending of commercial rates, as is currently the case in the South of Ireland. Business rates should be ring-fenced for economic development.

A crucial aspect of strengthening enterprise is the nurturing of new businesses, and part of that should involve lightening the financial burden of those businesses during their start-up period. The financial benefits to businesses on their own will not contribute significantly to development unless the benefits gained are used strategically by the businesses concerned. Therefore, a system of rates relief should replace the current industrial derating system. Rates relief for new businesses, and businesses located in new TSN areas, should be based on compulsory, agreed and accountable action plans for those businesses.

The issue of industrial rates cannot be isolated from the significant infrastructure deficit in the North of Ireland, the higher costs for businesses here and the progressive squeezing of resources by the British Treasury. Industrial rating is only one aspect of a much wider problem that requires general reforms, including democratic control of fiscal policy and the development of an all-Ireland taxation system. The independent review currently being carried out by the Economic Research Institute of Northern Ireland is the best way forward. Therefore, I support amendment No 1, which considers all the options.

Mr Beggs: Before I was elected as an MLA, I worked in various small businesses in Northern Ireland as a

production manager in the manufacturing sector, and I assure the House that that is a difficult environment in which to work. There are huge pressures for survival, and small businesses struggle against international competition from former eastern bloc or Far Eastern countries. In an enlarged European Community, an additional low-cost economy can compete directly with Northern Ireland. There are huge pressures in the small-business sector, particularly in the manufacturing sector, which is open to global competition.

Geographically, Northern Ireland has several disadvantages, or challenges, to overcome. It is situated on the periphery of Europe and has a relatively small domestic market, which means that additional transport costs are incurred and goods must be exported. Most of our exports go to the rest of the United Kingdom, and that means paying for goods to travel across the Irish Sea. We must ensure that we do not over-burden local manufacturers to such an extent that they cannot survive, and we must appreciate that there are huge challenges, both locally and internationally.

The Northern Ireland Office has justified its proposal to end industrial derating by reference to the infamous DTZ Pida report, which estimated that industrial rates would be only around 2.7% of profits — and that is clearly unrealistic. Other Members have said that professionals in that area have said that that figure is unrealistic. I welcome the fact that a detailed review is under way. It is hoped that it will come up with more realistic figures and demonstrate how they could ultimately adversely affect local manufacturers.

Manufacturing in Northern Ireland is not just about the industrial heartland of East Belfast. Recent figures for manufacturing jobs in each constituency covering the period to September 2005 showed that Upper Bann had the highest quotient, with 9,514 jobs, followed by Fermanagh in the west of the Province with 7,658 and then North Antrim. East Belfast came in fourth. We are not talking about some Belfast-based, old-fashioned heavy industry that has been around for some time: we are talking about a very wide geographical spread, with the bulk of the jobs being located outside Belfast.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he acknowledge that as Upper Bann has a high number of manufacturing jobs compared to other areas across the North and is also close to the border, it is one of those constituencies most at risk of losing those jobs? If we do not resolve this matter, many businesses, particularly in the Banbridge area, will transfer across to the Republic of Ireland.

Mr Beggs: The Member makes a valid point. If I were in that constituency I would be particularly concerned.

Northern Ireland has a higher prevalence of small businesses than does the rest of the United Kingdom, and that in turn creates difficulties. It is widely recognised

that in smaller enterprises a higher proportion of the turnover is spent on rates, and, ultimately, a higher proportion of the profit is spent on rates. Those businesses are not running two or three shifts in a confined area with the equipment and buildings being used continually. They are probably only operating on an eight-hour daily shift. Northern Ireland has difficulties associated with the nature of the employment and the size of the companies.

It is also widely recognised that Northern Ireland's public sector is too large and its private sector too small. Action must be taken to encourage the private sector. It should not be burdened by taxes that put money into the public sector; however, that is exactly what happens when rates are raised in the industrial manufacturing sector.

Sir David Varney is conducting a major review of corporation tax, but the outcome of that is not yet available. Those Members who have met Sir David will appreciate that we have an uphill task, as he is taking the view of the central Exchequer. However, we must try to win.

We must use what mechanisms are under our control until something better comes along. Industrial rating is under the control of the devolved Assembly. We must keep those rates as low as possible; they would be increased at our peril. We must reflect the needs of local manufacturers, and ensure that we do not create additional burdens for them. I support the motion.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá an-áthas orm deis a bheith agam labhairt ar an rún tábhachtach seo. I am glad to have the opportunity to speak in support of the motion and of the second amendment. I thank Mr Beggs and Mr Cree for bringing it to the Floor of the House.

Manufacturing in Northern Ireland needs all the incentives that it can get to enable it to engage in an increasingly competitive market, in which emerging economies exert more and more pressure and in which margins are squeezed, leaving manufacturers with less and less money for wages and investment.

The best-case scenario under higher industrial rates is job losses of 10,000. The worst-case scenario is job losses of 45,000, although it has been accepted that 20,000 is a realistic figure. However, the potential ramifications of a higher rate are further job losses in the service industries. Taking that into account, a more realistic projection of job losses is about 30,000. Manufacturers would be forced to relocate, downsize or even close. All companies are vulnerable to closure under additional pressure to extract more money from an already narrow profit margin of little more than 5%. Under those circumstances, companies have little incentive to plan for the future through investment, research and development. That greatly hinders wider economic growth and competition.

Support for manufacturing has fallen from £150 million each year in the late 1990s to just £50 million: £100 million has been taken away from industry. That support used to be shared by over 1,000 companies; however, it is now focused on a handful of large companies, and the majority of manufacturers now receive no support. At present, manufacturers pay £20 million each year in rates. Five years ago, when the policy was planned, a typical manufacturing firm received money from the Government; now it must pay them. The situation has changed drastically, and policy changes to reflect that make sense.

Global competition is intense. It may, therefore, be cheaper in the long term for companies that are faced with higher rates to relocate to other areas, particularly eastern Europe. Moreover, they have the option to consolidate and streamline. For example, food and drink manufacturers have already set up plants in the South of Ireland, where, in addition to the other incentives available there, corporation tax is only 12.5%.

Communities that have worked to help themselves by establishing co-operatives and developing enterprise agencies will see their efforts wasted if tenants are forced out of business by higher rates. Those businesses will either fold or move to low-tax areas, leaving behind empty factories that will be of little benefit to owners, workers or the Government. Instead of driving manufacturing out of Northern Ireland, the Assembly must do everything possible to ensure that it stays and must give it every possible encouragement to develop in the future.

Rather than create increased revenue for Government, the danger is that increased industrial rates will lead to diminishing returns through factory closures and unemployment. Make no mistake about it — increasing industrial rates will cost jobs. That is certain. Unemployment increases the demand for other Government services, including health, benefits and housing. If more must be spent on those areas than is raised through rates, where is the gain?

Northern Ireland's peripheral location in Europe means that manufacturers here must have extra storage facilities to help mitigate the impact of transport costs and possible delivery delays. They should not be penalised with higher rates bills for their efforts to overcome the effects of peripherality. On the contrary, they must be given every support to overcome those difficulties and others, such as high energy and insurance costs.

I support the motion and the second amendment.

4.00 pm

Mr Armstrong: I support the campaign to cap industrial rates in Northern Ireland. Last June the Assembly voted to freeze rates at 25%, but a lot has changed for many parties since then. Indeed, although some parties are almost unrecognisable from this time

last year, surely they are prepared to speak up for our manufacturing sector.

No less a person than Dr Ian Paisley himself said in last June's debate that we must ensure that industrial rates are kept at 25%. Mind you, he said a month later that no unionist who is a unionist would go into Government with Sinn Féin. He also said that Sinn Féin was not fit to be in Government in Northern Ireland and that it would get there over the dead bodies of unionists. Therefore he has a track record of changing his mind.

The Assembly should be aware of the tremendous difficulties with which Northern Ireland manufacturers have had to deal in the past number of decades. Political stability and lasting peace mean that we now have an opportunity to build Northern Ireland and create new jobs and prosperity for all our people.

Those in the manufacturing industry are telling us that they need the Assembly's help to ensure that industrial rates are kept at a level that they can bear. The Northern Ireland Manufacturing Focus Group is telling us that the introduction of a full industrial rate would cost thousands of jobs and devastate our economy. In many cases, those people have kept businesses going throughout the most difficult circumstances in our darkest days. Now is certainly not the time to place obstacles in their way. They need our support and help, and they are entitled to expect it. They have asked that the strong positive signal be sent that the manufacturing sector has the support of the new Government. Today presents us with an opportunity to send that signal.

The House supported the measure a year ago. At that time that support was easy to give because we did not have the responsibility to deliver on our promises. That has all changed, and today we must prove that we deserve to be here by seizing the opportunity to make a real difference to the lives and well-being of our people by taking action to help Northern Ireland businesses to thrive.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Dr Farry: The Alliance Party leans towards supporting the DUP amendment because it captures the issue in a slightly more balanced and realistic way.

Industrial derating needs to be seen as a means to an end rather than as an end in itself. That end is about putting in place a robust and effective package to support our local economy and to encourage economic growth. I understand why the manufacturing sector wants to retain industrial derating, and, in the absence of any other mechanism, that retention is particularly important. In the absence of any wider package, it is important that the Assembly lobbies for some form of industrial derating to address the problems that the manufacturing sector is encountering.

However, it is important to appreciate that there are limitations to industrial derating as an industrial policy.

It is in effect a blunt instrument in two main respects. First, it helps those businesses that have larger premises, but it is of more marginal benefit to small- and medium-sized enterprises and those working in the service sector, particularly those companies that focus on information technology — biotech and nanotech and all the different knowledge enterprises for which Northern Ireland is trying to create a greater foothold. Those enterprises are the core industries of the new global economy and the future.

Secondly, industrial derating does not focus assistance on those areas of the economy in which there is the greatest potential for growth and increased profit. It spreads the benefits evenly and does not make any distinction between the different sectors.

Industrial derating is also a defensive industrial policy that tries to protect Northern Ireland's assets. That is understandable, given the decline of manufacturing over recent years and the increased competition from emerging economies, especially those in the Far East.

We need to go on the offensive to achieve the economy that we want to see in Northern Ireland. We have seen how the Celtic tiger approach has transformed the economy of the Republic of Ireland over the past 20 years. We are not in a position to repeat what has been achieved there, because it was the product of a unique set of circumstances and a particular time. However, the Assembly should aspire to achieve similarly rapid economic growth and societal transformation. We should consider how we might reach that.

The Assembly should focus on putting in place a package of economic reforms to assist industry and the manufacturing base. We must attract new inward investment, encourage entrepreneurship and appeal to the new growth sectors, especially in information technology. The Assembly should consider tax-varying powers and whether we should have fiscal autonomy. Corporation tax is a major concern for all parties. The Assembly should consider R&D credits; levels of investment in research and development in Northern Ireland are well below those of our competitors, and that should be addressed.

The complaint that I hear most often from the business sector is the need to address the skills deficit. Young people emerging from schools and colleges are not meeting the demands of the industrial sector. That gap needs to be addressed quickly. We also need to invest in our infrastructure.

The motion proposes something that is not covered in the existing Budget. Funds will have to be found; I note that the proposers of the motion have not addressed where they intend to find those resources. That said, the proposal is worthy of consideration, but it needs to be addressed in the comprehensive spending review as part of an overall package. We need to be quite blunt:

choices may have to be made between one type of industrial support and other options that might arise, either as part of a financial package or as a result of the Varney review. We may not have the resources or the ability to fund all of those, and we need to ensure that what we choose is the most effective means of addressing economic growth in the shortest possible time.

We must have open minds on this. It is important that we not let the issue of industrial derating fall off the table. It is currently the only relief available to manufacturers. However, there are other means that might be more effective in addressing their needs and those of other sectors of the economy.

I support the amendment.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr P Robinson): I understand that it is pretty wet in a number of places. The Connswater shopping centre in east Belfast has had to be closed. There are problems in the Dundonald leisure park, and also in this Building. I suspect that we will have to get our wellies on tonight.

I congratulate the Members from East Antrim and North Down for securing this debate. For the third time in the month that this Assembly has been up and running, I am on my feet addressing Members on the issue of rates. Members' interest in the issue demonstrates the importance of local taxes to both businesses and householders.

Although we would all prefer to see local taxes at a low level, I hope that, after yesterday's debate and today's discussions, Members recognise that there are no easy answers and that there are consequences to all decisions. It is my role, as Minister of Finance and Personnel, to spell out what those are, so that, when they decide on the motion and the amendment, Members are armed with information.

Either we reduce the amount of money that is raised to fund public services, or we shift the rate burden onto other businesses or householders. Every penny raised from rates stays here in Northern Ireland and is invested in public services. Decisions cannot be taken lightly. There are consequences to all reliefs and exemptions. Either money — and therefore programmes — is forgone, or ratepayers pay more.

It is important that this issue be seen in the proper context. Let me set out the financial implications of the decisions that the Assembly and Executive will have to take when addressing the issue in the autumn. The cumulative cost of keeping this form of relief at its current rate of 30% liability — compared to the phasing schedule set out in the legislation — is estimated to be £144 million between now and 2011-12. Thereafter, it will be around £50 million a year.

If we estimate the cost of restoring rate liability to 25% and keeping it at that percentage, the cumulative figure

is just under £160 million: £19.1 million in 2008-09; £39.1 million in 2009-10; £40.1 million in 2010-11; and £61.5 million in 2011-12.

We face a dilemma, because the future of manufacturing in Northern Ireland is, or should be, important to us all. We have a proud industrial heritage, which is based on a world-class manufacturing sector that has been the main wealth creator for generations. However, we are also moving with the times by encouraging all business sectors to grow and create an economy fit for the twenty-first century.

Yesterday, I outlined statistically how our manufacturing base had declined over the years. We must assess what further impact the direct rule Minister's proposals might have on that sector. The motion asks that the resolution made by the Hain Assembly on 6 June 2006, calling on the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland — pending the restoration of devolution — to cap industrial rates at 25%, be honoured. Even though the circumstances have changed and rate liability has increased to 30%, we must deal with the figure stated in the motion, because many of us made manifesto pledges on the issue, albeit perhaps not in the precise terms laid down in today's motion.

The direct rule Ministers undertook a preliminary review. Following approaches from the Northern Ireland Manufacturing Focus Group and Amicus, officials in my Department worked with those bodies on the preliminary review. That exercise proved to be inconclusive, but it resulted in a reduction in the planned rate of increase for 2007-08. Instead of 35%, the Government conceded 30%, pending a full review of the policy this year. Jeff Rooker agreed to that review after intense lobbying from local manufacturers, and I know that my parliamentary colleague David Simpson was closely involved in securing that commitment.

We are now in control of the destiny of this policy, and I am glad to tell Members that the review has already begun. The Department of Finance and Personnel has engaged the Economic Research Institute of Northern Ireland (ERINI) to undertake a rigorous study of the effectiveness and impact of the policy, and it has already begun to talk to business organisations. The review in itself will not fully answer the question, but it will allow us to take more informed decisions.

To put it starkly, the issue is about whether rates bills are likely to be the last straw that will force our good firms across the border, or, worse still, out of business. At a time when we are seeking to attract business to the Province, it is critical that we provide the best environment possible for industry.

ERINI will also undertake a full and impartial economic assessment, looking at the broader issue of whether the money needs to be left in the pockets of the private sector to enable it to compete, or whether

there is a better way in which to ensure Northern Ireland's future economic success by using that money for investment in public services. It is important that we make our judgements on the basis of the evidence.

I am hopeful that the study's findings will help us make the right decision about the appropriate level of rates for manufacturing businesses. The Assembly would look foolish if it took a decision without considering such an evidence-based report. ERINI will conclude the exercise in the autumn, and I will report its findings, and my Department's assessment, to the Assembly, taking into account all the relevant available evidence.

Although it is timely to have a debate on industrial rating, it would not be timely to make a final decision in advance of the outcome of the independent analysis. Moreover, there is a growing understanding that the only sensible way in which these matters can ultimately be judged is to set each issue alongside competing priorities as part of the Executive's Programme for Government, and alongside the decisions that the Executive will take on the comprehensive spending review for the next three years. Therefore I hope that Members will support the reasoned amendment that sets out that course of action.

As I listened to the debate, I found myself agreeing with many of the points that were made. I will not assess all the points about the impact of the reintroduction of rating to the manufacturing sector, because, pending the outcome of the analysis, I am not satisfied that we have all the answers yet.

We all want what is fair and reasonable to ensure that our vital manufacturing industry remains competitive and vibrant. I want to see increased foreign investment and, with Executive colleagues, I am urgently looking at areas where we might be able to make an impact. Indeed, Members will be aware of the work that Sir David Varney has undertaken in this area.

4.15 pm

Every Member is aware of the major financing issues facing the Assembly and the hard decisions that we will have to take shortly on health provision, care for the elderly, the education of our children, public transport and a host of other priorities. Therefore a careful balance must be struck. Furthermore, even if we were to continue with the phasing out of derating — and no decision has yet been taken on that matter — we may need to consider other ways of supporting our manufacturing base outside the rating system. Until a more detailed analysis of the impact on manufacturing is available, I cannot reach any conclusion on that matter. However, there are other positions between industrial derating and charging the full rate.

Ensuring economic growth must be the number one priority of the Executive and the Assembly, and our policies must be shaped to deliver that outcome. The

Assembly must address how best to achieve that goal. I am grateful for Members' contributions today, and I will come back to the Assembly when the review has been completed.

Mr Hamilton: Every Member is sympathetic to the plight of those in the manufacturing sector, and that has been the tone of the debate. The DUP's amendment — more so than the substantive motion — represents a sound footing for the Assembly and the Executive on which to proceed with regard to industrial rates, especially in relation to the pending ERINI report on this important subject. I do not wish to pre-empt the report, but the amendment puts the matter into a proper legislative and governmental context.

I look forward to seeing the proposer of the motion, Mr Cree, in the Lobby supporting amendment No 1. He will certainly be there if he wants to remain true to what he said yesterday during the debate on the Supply resolution:

"At the end of the summer, we will begin the Budget preparations for 2008-09. That Budget should emerge from the Programme for Government. It will have a limited number of overarching priorities that will guide departmental spending plans. Members must ensure, through the various Committees, that the process that is adopted allows for accountability. The establishment of priorities is crucial, given that financial resources are limited." — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 22, p396, col 2*].

If the proposer is true to his word, I look forward to seeing him support the DUP amendment.

The Minister and Mr Shannon spoke about our proud manufacturing tradition, and when one thinks of industry in Northern Ireland, images of massive manufacturing enterprises such as Harland and Wolf, and Shorts are instantly conjured up. Members on all sides lamented the decline in the manufacturing sector. The decline in traditional manufacturing jobs in the Strangford constituency has been startling in its speed. Gone are the once huge and significant employers such as Saintfield Yarns Ltd and the linen mills in Comber and Killyleagh. The most recent figures that I have show a decline in employment in the manufacturing sector from 4,624 in 2001 to 4,200 in 2003. Those figures are historic, so I am sure that they are much worse today.

That situation is replicated across the country, and for that reason there is sometimes a false belief that the manufacturing sector is lost forever. That is certainly not true.

Mr Cree: I thank the Member for quoting so well from the speech that I made yesterday, but does he agree that industrial derating is a priority?

Mr Hamilton: If the debates that have taken place in the Chamber over the past few weeks are anything to go by, Members have many priorities. Today's Budget Bill debate and the Finance Minister's response

show that the economy is one of the Assembly's highest priorities, and I support that.

The number of employees in the manufacturing sector is well down, but it is still about 80,000. That is not an insignificant number, especially when one factors in how many family members and dependents rely on those jobs. The manufacturing sector represents approximately one quarter of Northern Ireland's private sector employment.

Although there is rightly much focus on generating new, high-value-added jobs in the technology, information and communication technology or financial services and banking sectors, we cannot afford to lose our manufacturing base. Mr O'Loan spoke of how we must retain a manufacturing sector. He is right. Not just because of some sort of snobbery that says that a job that results in an end product — that produces a widget — is better than a service-sector job, but because if any more jobs in that sector are lost, they might prove near impossible to replace. There is much evidence that some of those service-sector jobs depend on jobs in the manufacturing sector.

Mr Neeson spoke of the circumstances that brought about the retention of industrial derating. That poses the question: have those circumstances been completely resolved? The main reasons for industrial derating being introduced in Northern Ireland were the deteriorating competitive positioning of manufacturing in the 1980s, the erosion of our manufacturing base, and difficulties in attracting foreign direct investment. Those are very much the same problems that the Northern Ireland economy faces today. Many unique, or certainly peculiar, problems also exist that are overemphasised in Northern Ireland. These include high costs for energy, transportation, insurance, waste, property and tax.

The need to enhance our competitive position has been a common theme during the debate. Northern Ireland suffers from several key disadvantages compared to economic competitors such as the Republic of Ireland. Corporation tax was mentioned, as was the skills deficit. Infrastructural problems should also be considered. A question that must be answered is: can we afford to do away with the one advantage that we enjoy?

Considerable success has been achieved since the motion was passed in the House, and many congratulations are owed to those industrialists who fought hard to cap the level of industrial rating at 30%. I suspect that the prospect of having full industrial rates is extremely unlikely now. Mr Beggs, Mr Cree, Mr O'Loan and others spoke of job losses and other impacts.

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

Mr Hamilton: I certainly will.

It is important that we wait for the conclusions of the report from ERINI, from which we should learn the full impact of industrial rates. Members can then, and not before, decide the best way forward.

Mr B McCrea: Before commencing my speech, I declare an interest as a former employee of the Northern Ireland Manufacturing Focus Group. That fact has been entered in the Register of Members' Interests.

Many Members will know of my involvement with this issue in the past. In fact, many of those present will have attended the Waterfront Hall, where they witnessed the strength of feeling on the issue. Others will have participated in the debate during the so-called Hain Assembly. I have talked to quite a few people during council meetings, and, more recently, during the hustings in the run-up to the election, many Members will have met with representatives of the industrial sector.

I recall the First Minister, along with several other colleagues, visiting a factory in my constituency, where he gave some warm words of encouragement to the workers. As has already been mentioned, the First Minister's emphatic commitment to ensure that industrial rating is kept at 25% is appreciated.

The issues are broadly known, and I do not intend to regurgitate the arguments. As the Minister of Finance and Personnel has mentioned, he is aware of many of the arguments. I do want to discuss the reasons for the motion's having been tabled today, and, to a certain extent, the issue of financial responsibility, which has been mentioned.

Although many companies in Northern Ireland are struggling with the burden of industrial rates, manufacturing is not on its knees. This country has some great companies that are competing daily in a global economy. Every day, the prices of fuel and electricity increase, workers need more pay and more machinery is required. Due to that, companies have to invest continually to continue competing. The problem that companies face in this global economy is that they cannot increase their prices. Therefore, there is a squeeze on their return. That impacts on training and research and development, and all the measures that we have implored our people to undertake.

The problem is that investment decisions are being made daily, and the impact of that is not felt immediately. Just because a decision is taken that a factory will be built in Hungary, or across the border, it does not automatically follow that the home-based factory will immediately close.

Businesses are disappearing on a daily basis. There cannot be a constituency in Northern Ireland that has not had a major employer close down, and the sad thing is that that does not have to be the case. Members representing border constituencies will know about the number of businesses that are growing on the other

side of the border. Mid Ulster has been identified as an area most at risk, spreading to Dungannon and Upper Bann. Each month of delay means that another factory closes and people lose their jobs, and they end up working part time in retail and tourism rather than in the highly paid jobs that they previously held. Stacking shelves may be better than nothing, but it is not the way to give people the skills they want to learn.

Time is of the essence, and Mr Storey, one of the proposers of the motion, said that, in the past, that he felt that there had been great reluctance and dragging of feet on the issue. That should not be the case. Urgency is needed. Let us put our money where our mouth is.

There is the issue of financial responsibility, and the proposers of the amendment want to introduce a degree of financial responsibility, which is to be commended. My experience during the campaign was that no one adopted anything less than a responsible attitude. When the Northern Ireland Manufacturing Focus Group came to the Committee to argue for a level of 25%, it did not argue for 0%, although it appreciated the comments of Mr Paisley Jnr, who thought that it should. In addition, the group did not refuse to participate in skilling and reskilling the workforce. It is a responsible group.

I wish to clarify that industrial rating is different from other issues being discussed, such as personal care. Increasing the level of industrial rating will decrease revenue, because businesses will take steps to ensure that that is the case. Companies with three or more factories will merge them; others will relocate, downsize, or automate.

It must also be appreciated that much of Northern Ireland's manufacturing sector resides in rural constituencies, and there would be a huge knock-on effect for the whole of the rural economy if such factories were to be lost — something that the Assembly would want to deal with.

Then there is the ultimate sanction. In my constituency there is a company called Sanmina-SCI. In two weeks time it will close down its operation, and there will be a loss of 300 jobs to the economy — £500,000 in wages alone. The company is closing down here because the ten acres it occupies are worth £27 million, and it can make its products elsewhere. That is why Members need to deal with this matter. The manufacturing industry is not dead — it makes a huge contribution to our economy — but it wants to see a positive message coming from the Assembly.

Earlier, Mr Cree made a point about the land border. It is true — Northern Ireland is the only part of the United Kingdom to have a land border. Mr Paul Maskey said that he sympathised with the situation but was unsure about what we were going to do about it. Mr O'Loan put forward an eloquent proposition explaining things, and Mr Neeson, who is no longer here, spoke well and

was complimentary about the Waterfront Hall — it seems that the party of opposition appears not to be in opposition on this particular issue.

Mr McQuillan mentioned research and the state-aid rule. One of the great advantages of industrial rating is that it does not fall foul of state aid rules. Mr Shannon spoke of monumental encouragement and getting off our knees. Members also talked about productivity.

Mr Shannon also said, in a debate last year, that he and his party had been to the Secretary of State on this issue eight or nine months earlier — yet, here we are, one year on, still talking about the same matter.

I should also mention that Stephen Moutray — although he did not speak in today's debate — has acknowledged the dire consequences that might arise.

4.30 pm

To resolve those issues, we must consider what is best for our manufacturing sector. I was a little disappointed that Stephen Farry described the policy as a blunt instrument. It is not a blunt instrument, but something that works. Without the big factories that employ lots of people, the subcontractors go and the whole thing falls down. If we take away the subcontractors, we take away the retailers. A £30 million fund was made available for electricity, but we have dipped into it to the tune of only £6 million this year, so there is money in the budget.

We also need to find a way to increase Northern Ireland's productivity. We are at full employment, but the Minister of Finance and Personnel confirmed yesterday that we have been losing our productivity stance since 1998. That is because we are surrendering well-paid manufacturing jobs with an average gross value added of £50,000 and replacing them with part-time employment in retailing and leisure with a GVA of £8,000 to £12,000. We must invest in manufacturing, which is the one area in which we can increase our productivity.

Despite Simon Hamilton's quotes from Hansard — he also seemed quite keen on quoting people when I saw him on television earlier — I can tell him that there is a wide range of support for our point of view. Mervyn Storey talked about reluctance and foot dragging. Ian Paisley Jnr said that the issue has been picked over, so we should simply ensure that the rates are capped at a low level as early as possible, and get on with it. David Simpson talked about his personal experience of the rates going from nought to 25%. I remind Members that, if we return to the accelerator, the rates will rise from 30% to 50%. That is a huge hike.

We do not expect a particular answer now, but we want to send a message. Therefore, we ask Members to support the motion. We will not support amendment No 1, not because we have not heard what people say, but because we want to send a message. However, we

ask Members to support amendment No 2 because we think that there should be cross-party support on this very important issue.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that if amendment No 1 is made, I will still put the Question on amendment No 2.

Question put, That amendment No 1 be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 53; Noes 27.

AYES

Ms Anderson, Mr Bresland, Mr Brolly, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr T Clarke, Mr W Clarke, Mr Craig, Dr Deeny, Mr Dodds, Mr Easton, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Ms Lo, Mrs Long, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Ms J McCann, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Mr McElduff, Mrs McGill, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McHugh, Miss McIlveen, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Murphy, Mr Neeson, Mr Newton, Mr O'Dowd, Mr Paisley Jnr, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mrs I Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr B Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr McQuillan and Mr Shannon.

NOES

Mr Armstrong, Mr Attwood, Mr Beggs, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Burns, Mr Cobain, Mr Cree, Mr Durkan, Mr Elliott, Mr Gallagher, Mr Gardiner, Mrs Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Mr A Maginness, Mr McCallister, Mr B McCrea, Dr McDonnell, Mr McFarland, Mr McGlone, Mr McNarry, Mr O'Loan, Mr P Ramsey, Mr K Robinson, Mr Savage.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Armstrong and Mr McCallister.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Question, That amendment No 2 be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls upon the Executive to consider the resolution made by the 'Hain' Assembly on 6 June 2006, concerning industrial rates, in light of the impact of rating on manufacturing in Northern Ireland and in the context of other priorities in the Comprehensive Spending Review, having considered the independent assessment presently being carried out into the matter by the Economic Research Institute of Northern Ireland (ERINI); and for the Minister of Finance and Personnel to make a statement to the Assembly, following publication of the ERINI report.

Motion made:

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

4.45 pm

ADJOURNMENT

The Case for the Location of Public Sector Jobs in West Tyrone

Mr K Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. As Mr McElduff rises to propose his motion, I see that he is properly dressed. On a serious matter, yesterday I noticed that a female Member appeared to be carrying not only a handbag, which one can accept as an accessory, but another piece of luggage as well. I was under the impression that Members, and I do not stress gender, are not to carry items into the Chamber. Will you give a ruling on that matter, Mr Deputy Speaker?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Robinson is correct. Members should not carry large bags into the Chamber. The matter will be referred to the Speaker.

Mr K Robinson: On a further point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. That was my concern about the departure from the dress rules in the Chamber. If Members deviate from what has been accepted, such as dress in the Chamber, we must be careful not to open the door to other practices that might creep in and embarrass the safety of Members.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The matter will be referred to the Speaker. The Member's party Whip will probably inform him that this matter was discussed today in the Business Committee, and no doubt there will be further discussion.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh an díospóireacht seo inniu. I welcome the selection of this topic for the Adjournment debate.

I am calling for a proactive approach by the Department of Finance and Personnel in particular, as well as the wider Executive and other Belfast-based Government Departments, towards decentralisation and the relocation of public-sector jobs to West Tyrone and its principal towns, Omagh and Strabane. I could easily broaden the scope of the debate to include any areas beyond greater Belfast — for example, west of the Bann is another recognisable geographical area where there is a deficit in this matter. I recently tabled a question for written answer to the Minister of Finance and Personnel, which was answered on 21 May 2007. The question was:

“to ask the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he will make a statement detailing a proactive approach regarding decentralisation

and the location of public sector jobs, and to make a specific commitment that areas west of the River Bann will receive equality in this matter.”

The Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Peter Robinson, replied:

“The consultation on ‘The Guiding Principles for the Location of Public Sector Jobs in Northern Ireland’ which closed on 30 April 2007 is the first step in developing a framework which would facilitate future decision-making on the location of public sector jobs. Responses to the consultation are currently being analysed. Once this work is complete I would wish to discuss the matter further with the Executive Committee.” — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 22, pWA12, col 2*].

The “first step” has been mentioned; what are the next steps?

What prompted my question in the first instance? Obviously, there are benefits to the economy of an area if public-sector jobs are located there. It increases spending power and provides employment. In the Twenty-six Counties, and in Scotland, it has been found that the relocation of Government offices served to regenerate the areas concerned; brought secure employment with attractive salaries; encouraged people originally from the areas to return to live and work there; and boosted the commercial life of the towns.

A lot is said in the regional development strategy, *Shaping Our Future*, about the importance of sustainable communities. Opportunities are presented by the review of public administration. It has been said that the increase in population — the result of relocating public-sector jobs to various places — strengthened by the security of employment, ensures critical mass for the maintenance and expansion of local schools and local businesses. That is the business of sustainable communities.

In the regional development strategy there is a quote that I want to draw to the attention of the House:

“In the context of achieving the optimal balance between Belfast and the rest of the Region, the Strategy promotes the decentralisation of public sector employment to Londonderry and the main towns thereby augmenting their range of service functions. Even on a modest scale this could bring significant local economic benefits, support town centre revitalisation, underpin and encourage private sector investment.”

Another reason for asking this question and raising this issue today is that my constituents in West Tyrone are fed up travelling to work that is considerably far away when they should have options a lot closer to home. In 2002, I asked the then Minister of Finance and Personnel, Seán Farren, to detail the number and location of public-sector employees, by Department, who live, for example, in the Omagh district but travel to work outside it. There were significant numbers of people employed by the Civil Service, or in public-sector jobs, and who lived in the Omagh and Strabane districts, travelling to Belfast, Derry, or elsewhere to their jobs in the Civil Service.

Many of those people are on waiting lists, seeking transfer to a post closer to home. There are real human stories about, for example, women who are pregnant and who are on a waiting list, and who are scored in a welfare-type system for suitability for transfer to a post nearer home. The M1 and M2 motorways are full of cars in the mornings. People feel as if they know each other because they see one another in the early hours of the morning, every day of the week.

I also raise this question because of the recent, incomplete consultation exercise on ‘Guiding Principles for the Location of Public Sector Jobs’. Armagh and Templepatrick were the two venues for public consultations. Limavady was also chosen, but that event was cancelled in unsatisfactory circumstances regarding its scheduling, advertisement and promotion — or lack of promotion. I made a strong case at the time for Omagh to be the location for a consultation exercise of that nature where people could come along and make their case for the location of public-sector jobs in West Tyrone.

I appreciate that other Members will feel equally strongly. The generality of the issue is relevant. I was pleased that, in a subsequent letter to the chief executive of the Western Education and Library Board, the corporate services director of the Department of Finance and Personnel acknowledged that, in light of feedback, he recognised that holding one of the workshops in a central location in the west, such as Omagh, would have been helpful.

I was pleased to get that acknowledgement in that letter, which was dated 23 April.

Mr Kennedy: Will the Member give way?

Mr McElduff: I cannot. I have only 10 minutes, and I have a significant statement to make.

Omagh is a suitable place for the relocation of public-sector jobs, as is Strabane. In the immediate future, Omagh should have the benefit of a consultation exercise. I would like the Minister and his senior colleagues to understand the strength of feeling on this matter.

A public-sector ethos already exists in Omagh. Organisations such as the Western Education and Library Board, the Department for Regional Development, a Roads Service division and the Department of the Environment Planning Service have offices there, as did the former health trust for the area. The associated expertise helps to provide a critical mass of public-sector employees who can supply essential support in the event of any planned relocation initiative. There is also a range of available office space and potential development sites; a large pool of potential employees with complementary competencies; and a first-class education and training infrastructure.

Omagh and Strabane, therefore, both offer value-for-money options. Furthermore, they are both designated New TSN areas. I refer the Minister to submissions from the former president of the Chamber of Commerce in Omagh, Kevin Martin. I also refer him to a report by academic Cormac Duffy about Belfast centrism in the location of public-sector jobs.

I can equally make the case for Strabane, and I certainly intend to keep in touch with the Department on that issue. I believe that the recent establishment by the two Governments of the North-West Gateway initiative should help to shine a spotlight on the needs of Strabane. Strabane is ever mindful of the experience in the Twenty-six Counties whereby selected counties have benefited from the relocation of public-sector jobs. I commend the Strabane Employment Task Force on the good work that it has carried out, in association with Strabane District Council, to bring this matter to public attention.

In conclusion, I call on the Government, the Executive and the Department of Finance and Personnel to adopt a more serious and proactive approach to the relocation of public-sector jobs to areas west of the Bann, not least the West Tyrone constituency. I would welcome any initiative in the short term — indeed, in the immediate term, I hope — that is aimed at listening to the views of local government, civic representatives, and business and community representatives in Omagh and Strabane. I invite the Minister and his senior officials to take the opportunity to listen to those views, and I would be very happy to host an event to facilitate that.

Mr Armstrong: The debate focuses on the constituency of West Tyrone, but it has relevance for east Tyrone and further afield, too.

All too often in Northern Ireland, there is a perception of a Belfast bias. There is a mistaken belief that life begins and ends on arrival at Lisburn or Glengormley. That is clearly not correct, but as a resident of Stewartstown in County Tyrone and a representative for Mid Ulster, I would say that, would I not? Given the large population of the greater Belfast area, it is obvious that many jobs will be located there. However, the Government have a role to play to ensure that, where possible, other areas of Northern Ireland, particularly west of the Bann, receive their fair share of public-sector jobs.

The rural economy has suffered greatly in recent years. The agriculture industry has faced falling revenues and has had to deal with the impact of BSE and the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease. We have also witnessed a staggering growth in house prices, placing homes beyond the reach of first-time buyers, and the threat of closure hanging over many schools due to falling rolls.

It is therefore more vital than ever that people are encouraged to stay in the west of the Province, and the availability of public-sector jobs is a major factor in achieving that.

5.00 pm

Mr K Robinson: Does the Member agree that the emphasis on the west of the Bann masks the impact of the under-representation of Civil Service jobs in the eastern areas of the Province? For example, recent figures from an academic suggest that there is an under-representation of 3,000 public-sector jobs in East Antrim. Furthermore, there is not one mile of motorway in my constituency. There is nothing in the north-east comparable to the north-west tourism initiative. Does the Member agree that an unfair distribution of jobs exists and that it has an impact on the east of the Province?

Mr Armstrong: Yes, in my opening remarks I said that the issue affects areas other than the west of the Bann. There is too much emphasis on the Belfast area. It is as if everything starts and stops in Belfast.

It makes more sense for Government to ensure that public-sector jobs are spread throughout Northern Ireland. That is not only to ensure a fair distribution — which is a worthy end in itself — but to support the rural economy and remove some of the pressure from the infrastructure in Belfast. There is life beyond the city limits of Belfast, and it must be sustained and supported. The existence of a vibrant economy in the west of the Province — and the east — will benefit not only those of us who are fortunate enough to live there.

Mr O'Loan: Barry McElduff will not have been surprised that Members have mentioned other areas to his entirely proper defence of the interests of west Tyrone. Indeed, he broadened the issue in his remarks. It is important to be aware at the outset that no policy exists on the dispersal of Government jobs. There is a policy on how to assess a proposal if one arises, but there is an absence of a policy on the central issue. That gap must be filled. I, and my party, want decentralisation to happen.

Two current initiatives bear on this issue. However, as I have said, they are inadequate. The first is Workplace 2010, and the second is the Department of Finance and Personnel's consultation on 'Guiding Principles for the Location of Public Sector Jobs in Northern Ireland', which closed in April 2007.

Workplace 2010 is a major part of the Civil Service reform programme. Its objective is to modernise the Government estate; its method is to sell off around three quarters of the estate and lease it back, with a contract to upgrade and service the buildings. A term in the contract provides a cost for office dispersal, if that is required. However, the term contains no imperative to decentralise. Most importantly, Workplace 2010 points to a rationalisation of the estate towards a smaller

number of larger buildings and the disposal of surplus buildings.

The consultation document, 'Guiding Principles for the Location of Public Sector Jobs in Northern Ireland', gives me some cause for concern. The document is set in the context of the review of public administration. Although it states that its principles may be adopted more widely, the document does not address the central issue of the location of the entire Civil Service establishment. Usefully, the document mentions the regional development strategy and spells out the benefits of decentralisation: local economic benefits; supporting town-centre revitalisation; underpinning private-sector investment; and a fairer sharing of resources.

The consultation document also mentions the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's guide to rural proofing — a guide that the current policy fragrantly ignores. I have no doubt that the many principles for a framework for public-sector jobs location that are proposed in the document form a useful basis for consideration, and I recognise that they include supporting development in areas of deprivation.

This is not an easy debate. It is wise to recognise that there are real arguments for centralisation. Service delivery must be local when it cannot be done electronically or by mail. However, bringing centres of administration — rather than service-delivery points — close to each other, brings economies of scale and a degree of connectedness that may be very important. Capital cities develop for good reasons. For example, how many political parties in the Assembly have their Northern Ireland headquarters outside Belfast?

Members cannot ignore the importance of connectedness between the Administration and the political system at the Assembly. In arguing for decentralisation, I am arguing against powerful forces, but I argue nonetheless. Essential areas of discussion will include an appraisal of the relative costs of different solutions. That includes the cost of change, which will not be negligible.

The efficiency of any proposed solution must be tested against others, including any loss in connectedness and any potential time wasted by certain officers in travelling. The gain in local economic development must be considered, as well as the reduction in miles travelled and congestion. How does the trend towards fewer large buildings fit in with decentralisation? The approach down South seems to have been quite different, where small units have been decentralised. How will proper opportunities be offered for career progression? How will the critical issue of staff be dealt with in relocation proposals? Are some departmental sections easier to hive off from the centre? The transfer of the teachers' pension branch to Derry seems like a model example. Equality issues must be addressed.

I have one practical suggestion, but it is not offered with any certainty. Although Derry cannot be ignored in this discussion, it cannot be all about Derry. The guidelines refer to hubs with over 20,000 people and give the examples of Ballymena to the north, Newry to the south and Omagh to the west. Places such as those might be a good way to move forward. That is not a definitive position on my part or on the part of the SDLP. Barry McElduff and I may or may not agree on that list. Those places have an advantage, in that if people employed there wanted to seek promotion in Belfast, it would be possible for them to commute.

It will not be easy to find a perfect solution to this problem. However, it is time to progress the issue of decentralisation. I ask the Minister to do that.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that the debate is about West Tyrone.

Dr Deeny: I am an MLA for West Tyrone, and I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on this important issue on my area, my community and my patients. I was born and reared on the east coast — although some people say that I have never been reared — and am now living in the west, so perhaps I can consider the issue from both angles. I thank my colleague Barry McElduff for raising the issue. I read an article that he wrote in a local paper some years ago, in which he said that almost 300 cars leave the Omagh and district area every day to come to the greater Belfast area. I was not political at all then, and it was the first time that I realised that there was something wrong with that.

I am aware that the decentralisation of public sector jobs has brought political support, but there may be a reduction in Civil Service jobs and balancing may be seen in that context. I am also aware that unions and senior officials oppose any decentralisation and would consider legal action against it.

I will not go through the litany of jobs that have been lost in the Omagh area, but 229 jobs were lost at Desmond and Sons' shirt factory in 2003. In April 2005, there were 85 job losses at Rixell Ltd. It is estimated that 5% of Omagh's economically active people are currently unemployed; that compares badly to the Northern Ireland average of 2.5%.

Over the past couple of years, I have taken an interest in Sion Mills because it lost its health centre. In 2004, that exemplary community lost 270 jobs from Herdman's linen mill; it also lost its police station. Those closures happened because it was thought that people should work in larger towns and cities and move away from rural areas. I have lived in a rural area for 21 years, and I think that that is wrong. In Strabane, 565 jobs were lost between 2003 and 2005, and as recently as January 2007, estimates of unemployment in the Strabane area show that 1,116 people claim unemployment-related benefits.

In January 2007, 26,900 people throughout the whole of Northern Ireland claimed unemployment-related benefits, and 4% of those, or one in 25, can be found in Strabane.

I accept that we cannot neglect and look away from the central areas when we focus on rural areas. Over the years, I have become a major opponent of complete centralisation, and I have said so publicly. Some months ago, one of our daily newspapers officially declared County Tyrone as the most disadvantaged of the Six Counties, with people there suffering the greatest amount of deprivation. However, there are different reasons why complete centralisation is wrong, and why we must have some degree of decentralisation.

One reason is the family. Many people in my area drive to Belfast, and some of my constituents work here in Stormont. They do not see their families and homes at all in the winter, as it is dark when they leave and dark when they return.

Moreover, there are health concerns, with the additional stress of a journey of up to two-and-a-half hours — depending on the traffic — resulting in a five-hour round trip each day. Those people have young families and they have to work. It does not just apply to men; women too travel distances to work. They want to be with their children and bring them up, but they cannot do so because of the amount of time spent travelling.

There are environmental reasons. If I drive down the motorway at the wrong time, it is packed full of cars. We are becoming more and more environmentally green and aware, and we must consider the volume of traffic that packs our motorways.

Then there is the social aspect. People do not work near their homes, and, therefore, they cannot get on with their business in the evening. They cannot attend meetings or do the things that they would otherwise do.

On a human and personal level, there are many reasons to consider decentralisation. I have become aware of the problem, not only through my political involvement, but because of my job as a GP. GPs are asked to write letters for all sorts of reasons. Doctors have to confirm everything in writing nowadays. I have written letters on many occasions to try to bring people nearer home where they can do exactly the same job. In this technologically modern era, in which people are more aware of computers, jobs can be done equally well close to home, and that should happen. People should not have to travel down the motorway to Belfast.

No one says that work should be removed from our cities and urban areas. However, in the 21 years that I have lived out west, it has been loss, loss, and further loss. More and more people are disadvantaged and unhappy, and their health suffers because they spend most of their working day travelling.

I thank my colleague in West Tyrone for tabling the motion, which I support. I am delighted to see that the Minister is still in the Chamber, and I am interested to hear his comments.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister for Regional Development, Mr Peter Robinson.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr P Robinson): Mr Deputy Speaker, you and I have had a long day today. This must be the ninth or tenth speech that I have made in the Assembly in the last two days.

I congratulate Mr McElduff on securing the Adjournment debate. I admire his generosity in seeking to have public-sector jobs fairly and equitably allocated across Northern Ireland. I refer to his generosity because, if one looks at the figures that officials have gathered on the location of public-sector jobs, the Omagh travel-to-work area is ahead of the pack. In fact, by travel-to-work area, Omagh has the highest ratio of public-sector posts for each 100 economically active people, which is more than any other travel-to-work area in the Province.

5.15 pm

It might be useful if I outline some of those figures, although I may be seen as trying to wind up the Member for West Tyrone. Another part of his constituency, the Strabane travel-to-work area, is the worst in Northern Ireland.

The Ballymena travel-to-work area, which is presumably where the Member wants to share some of the jobs to have a more equitable dispersion with the Omagh travel-to-work area, has 19.5 posts per 100 economically active people, Belfast has 32.5, Coleraine 22.7, Craigavon 27, Londonderry 31.1, Dungannon 23.1, Enniskillen 22.2, mid-Ulster 18.7, Newry 24.3, Omagh 38.1; but Strabane has 17. The Member might want to join Omagh and Strabane together.

Mr McElduff: What about Belfast?

Mr P Robinson: The figure for Belfast is 32.5; it comes second just after the Omagh travel-to-work area.

The combined figures for Omagh and Strabane come fairly close to the Northern Ireland average of 24.4, which shows that, statistically, the issue can be looked at in many different ways. It is not simply a matter of spreading jobs evenly across Northern Ireland, and in his contribution Dr Deeny rightly drew attention to some of the difficulties in doing that, as did Mr Declan O'Loan.

The fact is that, on a location basis, the picture is fairly complex. I have asked staff in my Department to provide me with more data, which I will be happy to share — at least with the Committee for Finance and Personnel — when it has been compiled. One moment the talk is about public-sector jobs, and the next about Civil Service ones: Civil Service jobs are public-sector

jobs, but there are public-sector jobs that are not Civil Service jobs.

The decisions on the future location of public sector jobs could have important implications for communities throughout Northern Ireland. Ultimately, decisions will have to be taken about the location of any new bodies that might be created as a result of the review of public administration, and that was mentioned in an earlier contribution. The Department of Finance and Personnel also needs to think longer term and beyond the RPA.

Therefore I regard the work being led by my Department in developing a framework to support future decision-making as vital. The draft guiding principles that would underpin those decisions were the subject of a public consultation that closed at the end of April. The consultation attracted strong interest, with 39 written responses in total, including one from Mr McElduff — who is not a johnny-come-lately to this subject — which he followed up with an Assembly question, which he has already referred to. Mr McElduff commented on the choice of venues for the consultation; however, I do not have to defend that decision as it was taken before my time in the Department.

However, I believe that the Department of Finance and Personnel was keen to reach as wide an audience as possible and to give people the opportunity to discuss the matter face to face. As part of the consultation it held two open workshops in Armagh and Templepatrick, which attracted more than 70 delegates, including several from Omagh. Unfortunately, DFP officials had to cancel the workshop scheduled for Limavady on 12 April due to a low take-up.

The locations of the workshop were selected with the aim of offering a range of options to delegates from across Northern Ireland. Obviously, it was not possible to hold a workshop in every key town; as you know, Mr Deputy Speaker, when you attempt to call a party meeting somewhere in the Province, 17 constituencies are unhappy with the choice of location you make.

Officials are currently analysing responses, and I expect the work of consultation to be completed shortly. However, as one might expect, one of the key themes that has emerged so far is that of dispersal. Not surprisingly, a significant number of respondents, mostly from west of the Bann, argued that a proactive policy of dispersing public-sector jobs from Belfast should be adopted by the Executive. Equally unsurprising is the fact that other respondents, mostly from the greater Belfast area, acknowledge that while a well-managed relocation policy could bring a more even spread of benefits of public-sector employment opportunities across Northern Ireland, they also emphasise the critical relationship between the long-term success of Belfast and that of

Northern Ireland plc, and they point specifically to areas of continued deprivation in Belfast.

The full analysis and summary of the consultation responses will be completed shortly. Thereafter, I intend to take a paper to the Executive to be considered in July. Since the findings of the consultation process on the guiding principles for the location of public-sector jobs in Northern Ireland are not yet finalised, I am restricted in what I can say at this moment and in this Place. However, there are advantages in providing work in areas outside Belfast, rather than requiring staff who live in those areas to travel to Belfast to work. I recognise the strong point that Dr Deeny made in drawing attention to the environmental and road congestion issues. I have been looking at such data as has been compiled in order to study trends and identify the areas from which public-sector workers travel.

Let me be clear: I am not unsympathetic to having more public-sector jobs located outside the greater Belfast area, but we should not ignore the capital city as a key location. I thank Mr McElduff for initiating the debate, and I await the outcome of the Executive's discussions with interest.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I thank the Minister, and I hope that he will continue to be Minister of Finance and Personnel for a long time to come. No doubt Hansard will correct my earlier mistake.

Adjourned at 5.23 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 18 June 2007

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Recent Flooding Incidents

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister for Regional Development that he wishes to make a statement on the recent flooding incidents. I remind Members that points of order are not taken during ministerial statements or during any questions that follow.

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. With your permission, I wish to make a statement on the flooding caused by a period of severe weather between 12 June and 15 June 2007.

I propose to provide a brief overview of the situation, including the prevailing weather conditions and warnings, the impacts of flooding across the North, and the roles and responses of the many Departments and agencies involved. I also want to comment on some of the big issues that emerged and to set out how we plan to learn from the experience.

At 11.19 am on Tuesday 12 June 2007, the Met Office issued a flash warning of heavy rain for the whole of the North, valid from 1.20 pm until 9.00 pm. The forecast was for scattered, slow-moving, heavy and prolonged showers, some of them thundery, leading to localised torrential downpours during the afternoon and evening, with 15 mm to 20 mm of rain possible in just a few hours.

Further flash warnings were issued on Wednesday 13 June and Thursday 14 June. Those warned of heavy and thundery outbreaks of rain with some torrential downpours, with up to 30 mm to 40 mm of rain expected in areas where the ground was already saturated.

All Departments and agencies have contingency plans to help them prepare for, and respond to, emergencies. Once the first severe weather warning was received, those plans were activated immediately.

Early in the afternoon of 12 June, parts of the North, particularly east Belfast and Omagh, experienced extremely heavy rainfall: some 50 mm in two to four hours. In those places, the quantity of rain overwhelmed the drainage systems and waterways, leading to the flooding of roads and properties. In the Derry City Council, Cookstown District Council and Magherafelt District Council areas, a small number of domestic properties were flooded. Overall, it is estimated that hundreds of properties were affected.

The volume of rain on 12 June represented a storm-return period of between 94 and 240 years. That means that we do not expect to suffer from such a downpour more than once in every 100 to 200 years. Current drainage design criteria are sufficient for a once-in-30-years storm.

A large number of emergency calls were received that day. The Fire and Rescue Service received over 400 calls in a three-hour period, representing the busiest period in the service's history. Northern Ireland Water received 1,800 calls, and Roads Service received over 300 calls. Staff from a wide range of Departments and agencies were quickly on the ground, working together to secure the safety of those at risk and minimising damage to property and disruption to the community. I will highlight some of their work and pay tribute to the front-line staff who worked so hard.

Roads Service and Northern Ireland Water were in the front line. A major incident response regime had been initiated within Northern Ireland Water by 3.00 pm. Teams were established in Belfast, Derry and Omagh, and, in line with the inter-agency flood liaison protocol, contacts were established with Roads Service and the Rivers Agency.

At the peak of the flooding, over 100 Northern Ireland Water staff and contractors were at the various flooded locations across the North, checking pumping stations, placing sandbags, replacing manhole covers and assisting in clean-up operations.

At least 15 roads in Belfast and Omagh were closed, with many others affected but passable with care. Approximately 350 calls were received as a result of the Belfast incident, with 100 calls received in the Omagh area. In total, 50 Roads Service workers and private contractor staff were on the ground minimising damage to property and assisting in the recovery process. Over 1,700 sandbags were supplied during the operation.

The Rivers Agency also made a major contribution, deploying staff within 45 minutes of the incident. Over 60 industrial, engineering and administrative staff were involved, using mini-diggers and diesel pumps to assist in operations. Over 1,000 sandbags were put to use. Rivers Agency staff have been involved in the removal of debris obstructing watercourses and grills. Contaminated sandbags are being collected and

disposed of. Prompt action has prevented the flooding of school property in Ballygawley and dwellings in the Bogside.

Belfast City Council activated its emergency plan at 3.30 pm. It set up a major incident room and co-ordinated a rescue and clean-up operation in conjunction with the Fire and Rescue Service, the Police Service, Northern Ireland Water, the Rivers Agency, Roads Service, the Social Services Agency, the Department for Regional Development's central claims unit, Northern Ireland Electricity, British Telecom, the Housing Executive, the Met Office, the Salvation Army and the Red Cross. Some five conference calls, involving many of those organisations, took place on 12 June to ensure that all were aware of the developing situation and to co-ordinate the response across Belfast.

Emergency reception and advice centres were opened at Avoniel leisure centre by Belfast City Council and on the Cregagh Road by the Salvation Army. On Tuesday 12 June, an initial social fund of £100,000 was made available to assist those in immediate need. That was followed by a further £5 million that the Executive made available on Thursday 14 June.

Castlereagh Borough Council and Omagh District Council were similarly active in deploying staff to aid recovery and co-ordination, including assistance with the evacuation of people whose homes had been flooded. In these and the other areas that suffered flooding, meetings were arranged to bring together those organisations involved in dealing with the flooding incidents.

By late afternoon on 12 June, the Housing Executive emergency plan was fully operational and remained in operation due to the continued heavy rain. Approximately 150 Housing Executive homes were affected. In total, six people needed temporary accommodation.

The Social Security Agency responded to flooding in east Belfast by making staff available at the emergency unit in Avoniel leisure centre. Staff have remained at Avoniel leisure centre and have also distributed social fund claim forms to residents of Clara Way and the Clarawood estate.

On Tuesday 12 June, the Fire and Rescue Service received over 400 calls in a three-hour period. Fire-fighters attended 200 of those calls, rescuing 32 people in Belfast and 15 in Omagh. Appliances were dispatched from stations outside the affected area, and high-volume pumps were used to clear the affected buildings.

Representatives from the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust attended the multi-agency advice centre at Avoniel leisure centre. Social services responded in order to ensure that services to children, families and elderly people, such as home helps, continued to be provided.

In addition to the problems caused by flooding, a number of lightning strikes caused customers to lose their electricity supplies. Northern Ireland Electricity mobilised nine of its 12 incident centres, and by 4.30 pm had dispatched a senior manager to the community assistance centre at Avoniel leisure centre to co-ordinate its activities in east Belfast. Around 7,000 customers were affected during the day, with all but two customers being reconnected within 12 hours.

Those high levels of resources were maintained by the agencies throughout Tuesday and Wednesday as the focus of activity moved to the clean-up operation. At the same time, all the agencies remained on the alert and made preparations for the further heavy rain that had been forecast, clearing obstructions and delivering and restocking sandbags. All roads were reported as being clear the following morning.

Northern Ireland Water is dealing with 142 requests to assist householders with clean-up operations and the distribution of sandbags. The Housing Executive has been engaged in repairs and clean-ups in the affected areas. Environmental health officers from Belfast City Council have provided advice and assistance at more than 26 streets affected by flooding. The council has also offered support for the internal disinfection of owner-occupied homes, and a private company is on standby for that purpose.

In Belfast, 21 crisis loan applications have been received by the Social Security Agency, and 17 have been paid. Ten applications for community grants have been received and paid. All claims in connection with the flooding have been processed, and any subsequent claims will be given the highest priority. By 5.00 pm on Friday 15 June, only one claim had been received and cleared in Omagh; any further claims received will be given the highest priority. My Department's central claims unit has registered 66 compensation claims for investigation.

The multi-agency advice centre at Avoniel leisure centre remained open, but by Thursday 14 June, there were few callers. The Belfast Health and Social Care Trust continued to ensure that vulnerable people were supported, including at Towell House, an old persons' home that had been flooded.

On Tuesday evening, when the full scale of the flooding became clear, the Executive decided to hold an emergency meeting to review the response of the various agencies and identify what more needed to be done. The Executive met at 9.00 am on Wednesday — a visible demonstration of the difference that devolution can make when a crisis of this nature arises.

It will take some time to assess fully the effectiveness of the overall response. What I can say now is that vehicles, materials and staff were deployed to the worst-hit locations within a short time of the

initial severe weather warnings being received. Communications systems were able to deal with the exceptionally high number of calls.

In Belfast, inter-agency communication on the ground was excellent. The early assumption of a lead role by Belfast City Council was useful. Regular conference calls were held to co-ordinate responses, and the multi-agency advice centre proved an invaluable focus for those affected and for the responding agencies. The media was briefed in order to keep the public informed about what was happening on the ground and how to access help and assistance.

On Thursday 14 June, the Minister of Finance and Personnel, Peter Robinson, announced that £5 million had been made available to the Department of the Environment. That money is being used to support the work of district councils in responding to the needs of householders who have been affected by the floods. On Friday 15 June, the Minister of the Environment, Mrs Arlene Foster, announced that her Department would establish a scheme under article 26 of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) (Northern Ireland) Order 1992 to address the recent emergency. Minister Foster also announced that, from Monday 18 June, an immediate payment of £1,000 would be made available to each seriously affected household. She is monitoring the severe weather situation and will consider whether any further action may be needed.

The Executive are determined to review the handling of the emergency thoroughly in order to identify the areas in which we can do better next time. I have no doubt that exceptional weather events will occur in the future, and we need to be prepared to deal with them. By way of example, widespread flooding occurred again on Friday 15 June in many locations, particularly Belfast, Newtownards, Bangor, Comber, Lurgan, Crossgar, Ballynahinch and Downpatrick. We are pleased to note that emergency procedures were swiftly implemented, and front-line staff, customer-service staff and contractors were mobilised by the Rivers Agency, Roads Service and Northern Ireland Water. Across the three organisations, around 450 staff provided assistance on the ground. Thousands of sandbags were distributed, and pumps and gully-emptyers were deployed. Around 2,000 calls for assistance were received from the public. Emergency services and district councils also assisted.

12.15 pm

The multi-agency learning and linkages developed in the past year by the Belfast Resilience Network are proving to be invaluable in ensuring that each agency knows its role and responsibilities during the response to, and recovery from, an incident.

I pay tribute to, and thank, the many individuals and voluntary agencies that came forward during the

emergency to help people and to offer their assistance by, for example, providing furniture. I am thinking particularly of bodies such as the Salvation Army and others. Many individuals also came forward, and I place on record our thanks to them.

In the longer term, the Belfast sewer project, which is costing over £120 million, will reduce the risk of flooding in the city centre. However, no sewerage system can be guaranteed to prevent all possible flooding.

Before we can be satisfied that our approach to any further flooding incident will be the best that we can deliver, we have much more work to do. We must also consider what must be done in the longer term to ensure that our infrastructure can cope with climate change and foreseeable weather conditions.

I express the sympathies of the Executive — and, I am sure, of everyone in the House — to everybody who was affected by the flooding. I hope that people will be reassured that the Executive and all the relevant agencies will continue to work together to keep their homes and businesses as safe and secure as possible. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that they are to ask questions relating to the ministerial statement.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development (Mr Cobain): I also thank all the statutory agencies and the emergency services for their work last week.

I notice that 32 claims have been made for community care and crisis loans. I am sure that that number has risen dramatically over the past few days. Can the Minister assure the House that sufficient funds are available to meet that need and that making these claims will not affect genuine claimants who may need to claim other grants later in the financial year?

Mr Murphy: May I first ask for the indulgence of Members? I will be answering questions on behalf of several Departments and on a range of subjects that are not necessarily under the remit of the Department for Regional Development. This morning, I spoke to officials from all the Departments involved and asked them to read the Hansard report of my statement and the questions put on it. If Members feel that questions are not answered fully, or if I do not have the answers to hand, the relevant Departments will pick up on that and respond to Members in writing.

The emergency funds will be available to the Department of the Environment to help councils to alleviate any hardship experienced by householders across the North as a result of the flooding on 12 June. Payments of £1,000 will be made to householders to prevent suffering or severe inconvenience. In addition, councils may incur expenditure on the following

activities to help people to make their homes habitable: completion of the clean-up exercise; external clean up of streets and other public areas; collection, retention and disposal of household contents damaged by the flooding; assistance to private householders to clean up their homes and gardens; advice on health and safety issues; provision of dehumidifiers to dry out homes; and advice to householders about what help might be available from other agencies.

The councils are compiling a database of households where there is evidence of significant flooding, including underfloor damage in living areas, garages or utility areas where household utilities are installed, but excluding motor vehicles. For apartments, the database will record evidence of flooding in basements that contain storage rooms. Only those households in which councils can confirm suffering and severe inconvenience will qualify for the payment. This is not compensation: it is a one-off payment.

I will ask officials from the Department for Social Development to respond to the Member's question about those people who may need to claim other grants. This one-off payment is not designed to cut across other payments that may be available. It is intended to give assistance quickly to those households that need it most. I am referring, for example, to those people whose cookers, fridges and kitchen units were damaged, and to people who, even after the clean-up exercise, cannot live in, or use the facilities in, their homes. Helping those people is the purpose of the payment that was agreed by the Department of Finance and Personnel and will be administered by the Department of the Environment and the councils.

I say to people who wish to submit claims, or raise concerns, through the Department for Social Development or another claims process, that the agencies involved are committed to ensuring that all claims will be treated as matters of high priority. I am sure that those claims and concerns will be acted on. If the Chairperson has a specific question on how making those claims will affect other claims made through the Department for Social Development, someone from that Department will give him an answer.

Mr Newton: I join the Minister in paying tribute to all the emergency services and the manner of their response. I pay particular tribute to the PSNI for the effective action that it took in rescuing an 85-year-old housebound lady in my constituency. Had the PSNI not taken such action, she would have remained in a flooded house, unable to move.

Is the Minister satisfied that the maintenance and cleaning of drains and gratings is being satisfactorily carried out? What action will he take to alleviate flooding in areas where it is occurring regularly?

Mr Murphy: I agree with the Member's comments about all the emergency services and agencies. I also paid tribute to those ordinary citizens who offered their help and to voluntary agencies. Everyone involved played a valuable role in helping to alleviate people's hardship and suffering.

The extreme flooding that occurred on the afternoon of 12 June was not caused by a failure to maintain the operational effectiveness of the storm gullies or road drains. The deluge that fell in two hours overwhelmed the gullies, road drains and watercourses. The Met Office has reported that the rainfall frequency represented a storm-return period of between 90 and 240 years. That means that we do not expect a reoccurrence more than once every 100 to 200 years.

Department for Transport design standards typically require new road-drain systems to be designed to cope with a one-in-six-years storm. Those design standards include an allowance for climate change. Any system that was designed to meet current standards could not have coped with the severity of last Tuesday's storm.

The Department for Regional Development's Roads Service aims to inspect and clean, where necessary, all gullies in urban areas twice a year. Gullies in rural areas are inspected and cleaned, where necessary, once a year. That policy, taking into account the Department's finite funding and staffing levels, ensures that a reasonable level of drain maintenance is carried out.

In Belfast, there are some 136,000 storm-water road gullies, so a considerable resource is needed if there is to be ongoing inspection and cleaning of the entire network of gullies and road drains. Local Roads Service officials keep records of each inspection. Those records note the time and date of inspection and whether the gullies and drains are running or not running. Those not running are identified for further jetting and investigation.

Details of recent inspections in those areas affected by flooding in east and south Belfast are as follows: on the Ormeau Road, gullies were inspected and cleaned as necessary in January 2007; on the Stranmillis Road, the Newtownards Road and Ladas Drive, they were inspected and cleaned in February 2007; and in Orangefield and Clarawood, they were cleaned and inspected in December 2006. The Roads Service has also diverted a considerable resource to cleaning gullies in those areas over the past few days and to removing an accumulation of debris that had been swept into the drainage systems by the storm water. Moreover, sandbags were provided to those affected areas after the heavy-rain-forecast alert for Friday 15 June 2007.

Preventative measures were discussed at the Ministers' meeting last Wednesday, and I have further discussed the matter with officials. The heavy rain that

was forecast for Tuesday 12 June was for the entire Belfast area. It was not forecast that it would be localised or that it would affect east Belfast specifically. As I have said, there are 136,000 storm gullies in Belfast. Nonetheless, Roads Service and other agencies, in the light of what happened, will look at whether a greater degree of co-ordination can be achieved after a Met Office severe-weather warning has been issued and examine their ability to get people on the ground in the areas affected. I reiterate that the severe-weather warning was for Belfast in its entirety, not only for those areas of east and south Belfast that were affected.

Resources must be applied to those areas that experience continual flooding, and all agencies that have a responsibility for occurrences of flooding have a duty to make the necessary improvements.

Some £120 million is invested in the Belfast sewer project. It will take some time to complete work on that project, but it will improve the system's capacity. However, no system that has been designed or built could have coped with the amount of rain that fell in such a short period in Belfast last Tuesday.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. Have the most vulnerable people been identified, and are the statutory and voluntary sectors helping them? Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Murphy: Councils' involvement was important, because local government provides people with their closest contact to elected representatives. Councils are often the first port of call for people facing difficulties. For the purposes of deciding who should receive share of the funding that the Executive have made available, councils have been tasked with identifying the properties and families that are most at risk.

Various other agencies took a range of calls — some of which I detailed in my statement — from people who required assistance, and they provided that assistance where possible. For example, the elderly people who were affected by the flooding in the basement of Towell House have been reinstated. There was, therefore, a clear priority to address the needs of society's most vulnerable. That is why the Executive acted promptly to make funding available through the bodies that were at the forefront in dealing with a particular incident — local councils, such as Belfast City Council and Omagh District Council. The councils will identify those people who require most assistance, and that assistance will be provided through the Executive and the other agencies involved.

Dr McDonnell: I congratulate those workers who turned out and gave sterling service during the floods. I was impressed with what I saw. I also compliment the Housing Executive in South Belfast, and, in particular, its district manager Liam Kinney.

Does the Minister share my concerns that Northern Ireland Water's decision to award a contract worth £70 million to Crystal Alliance to handle customer relations has not been a good idea? Is he aware that many victims feel that they have been kicked around in a public-relations exercise? I can only comment on experiences of my constituents. The home of one young family — Ciaran McCreanor, his wife and infant, who live in Florenceville Drive on the Ormeau Road — was flooded, and not from the water on the street, but from reflux from the toilet. He was told, however, that that was an act of God. It did not strike him as so, and he feels that those comments added insult to injury.

Furthermore, people from Sunwich Street off Ravenhill Avenue contacted call centres in England only to find that the operators did not have any idea what was going on here. They had not read about it, and they were not aware of the events that were taking place here. Perhaps the Minister will consider that. Will the Minister also tell the House whether our rainwater drainage system could be separated from the sewerage system? Such a separation would mean that the rainwater would flow into, for instance, a river in the event of there being similar flooding, or even flooding that was less heavy.

Mr Murphy: Dr McDonnell and other Members will know from last Monday's statement that matters relating to Northern Ireland Water's contract are being reviewed. The members of the review panel have been appointed, and the review process will start almost immediately. Following that review, Members will be able to have a fuller discussion on the viability of the contracts awarded by Northern Ireland Water.

Northern Ireland Water received more calls during the crisis than any other organisation. It received 2,000 calls last week, and it has reported that all but a small minority of those calls have been well handled. Last Wednesday, I visited some of the households that were affected by the floods, and I appreciate their frustration. No matter how many resources are deployed, people often feel as if they are not being deployed directly to them, or quickly enough.

12.30 pm

That is understandable. Everyone will agree that the people on the ground did their best to cope with very difficult circumstances. As part of their overall review, it is the job of the Executive to investigate why resources that could, perhaps, have been deployed were not.

With regard to the infrastructure, the Department will struggle to provide the type of infrastructure that has already been earmarked for investment. In response to the Member's question, separating the storm drainage from the sewerage would entail a much greater project, and I wish that we had the money to do all such things,

but otherwise they are not feasible. We are investing substantially in the water and sewerage services and that will alleviate some of the problems. However, in the case of such an intense downpour, in a localised area, over a very short time, it is difficult for any infrastructure to cope.

Mrs Long: I thank the Minister for his statement, and I support his comments on the work of the emergency services and other voluntary sector agencies, who have been busy in the constituency over recent days, and who continue to provide valuable support to those affected.

In his statement, the Minister commented on the wide range of Departments and agencies that were involved in the response. During last week's flooding, there was extensive damage to schools in the South Eastern and the Belfast Education and Library Board areas. Both boards — and indeed the schools — have responded admirably to the challenges that the damage has caused them to face. Can the Minister assure us that his Executive colleague the Minister of Education is now fully involved in the response to the flooding, to ensure that the already stretched budgets of schools and education and library boards are not placed under further pressure, because of the actions necessary to reopen schools as quickly as possible? I understand that the Minister was not invited to the original emergency Executive meeting; however, I hope that, by this stage, she is involved in the ongoing discussions on how to take this forward and on the financial implications.

Mr Murphy: I thank the Member for her question; however, we should resist the temptation to swipe at people in the middle of a general crisis. The Minister of Education has been involved; she was not invited to attend the special meeting of the Executive because only those Ministers directly involved in the clean-up were needed.

With regard to the schools in Belfast, the Minister was in contact with the chief executive of the Belfast Education and Library Board, who assured her that the emergency plan had kicked in inside one hour. Board officials and officials from the Department of Education were in regular contact throughout the day to assess the damage and to organise repairs. The Department will consider any bids for exceptional funding to cover the damage caused by the flood. The Minister wishes me to pay tribute to school principals and to all those involved in the clean-up at schools across the North. Their hard work ensured minimum disruption to pupils, particularly at the start of their examinations. All schools are now open and fully functioning, and the Education Minister has spoken to principals at some schools that were affected, and they are content with the boards' emergency response.

Lord Browne: I appreciate that last week's weather conditions which led to extensive flooding — particularly in my constituency of East Belfast — were rather unusual. I welcome the Minister's statement that all of the agencies are to work together in a co-ordinated fashion.

Has the Minister considered that flooding also took place in the United Kingdom and that it may be useful to engage with those authorities in the UK that had emergency plans? To prevent such an unfortunate situation arising again in Northern Ireland, we could learn from the plans that other organisations put into operation.

Mr Murphy: The Member is correct. If there are lessons to be learned from other areas, then I am sure that the agencies and the Executive will be happy to learn those lessons, from wherever they come. There was severe flooding in England as that same storm system moved over from here to Britain, and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), which is responsible for the co-ordination over there, was severely criticised for not doing enough — just as some of the agencies over here were criticised.

The agencies here do liaise with agencies in Britain and elsewhere, and, where lessons can be learned, they will be learned. It is worth bearing in mind that similar occurrences have happened in England. People will remember the flooding incidents last year, in such places as Cornwall, and how the agencies there were criticised.

All the answers do not lie in one place, but liaison is ongoing, and where experiences can be shared and lessons can be learned, we are happy to take those on board.

Mr Buchanan: I join in congratulating the emergency services, the agencies, the voluntary organisations and others who did an excellent job during the difficult days of the flooding. For several years, the sewerage and rainwater network infrastructure in Omagh has caused difficulties because of extra pressure from large new housing developments that have rendered the network inadequate.

Omagh District Council has lobbied the Department for Regional Development on that issue on several occasions. When does the Minister for Regional Development propose to have plans in place to upgrade the network to help avoid a reoccurrence of flooding in that area?

Mr Murphy: The Member is correct: the infrastructure struggles to cope. It is no secret to any MLA that the necessary investment in water and sewerage services has not been made by direct rule Administrations over the past 20 years. Therefore, the current Administration is faced with a serious financial

consequence. A substantial investment plan has been rolled out in Belfast for the sewerage works, and there are also plans for substantial investment in the sewerage and water infrastructure across the North. Finance will be required, and that will cause difficulties for all of us.

The infrastructure is not up to the required standard — that should not come as any surprise. There are plans to make the necessary investment that has not been made in the past, and that will present a challenge. Nevertheless, it is generally accepted by Members that building a system that could cope with the rainfall experienced in Omagh and Belfast last week would probably be beyond our capacity. It can only be expected that systems are built to cope with storm levels that may come along once every six, seven — or even 30 — years. Last week's rainfall levels were far above those that normally occur within those expectations.

Mr McCallister: I concur with the remarks made about the emergency services, which, along with volunteers, have done tremendous work.

Three of the eight towns that the Minister for Regional Development mentioned in his statement are in the South Down constituency, and he accepted that this was the second time that they had been flooded. Does the Minister have a longer-term strategy? He may not be able to give me the strategy or the timescale today, but will he write to me about the Crossgar, Ballynahinch and Downpatrick areas?

Mr Murphy: The Member is correct: those areas were seriously affected. I do not have a specific plan for those areas with me today. Northern Ireland Water is progressing a programme of over 100 drainage area studies for the larger population areas across the North, and those will determine the improvements required to sewerage networks in order to reduce the risk of flooding and to meet environmental objectives. It is estimated that a capital injection of over £300 million will be required for improvements and schemes. The capital-works programme is currently focused on waste-water treatment compliance, water quality improvements and reductions in interruptions to supply.

The majority of the work required for the implementation of the drainage area study programme is scheduled for 2010 and beyond. If there are specific plans for the areas that Mr McCallister mentioned, I will ask Northern Ireland Water to respond to the Department for Regional Development.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Omagh town was particularly affected by last week's rain. There was substantial damage to property, and people were hugely inconvenienced. The people of Omagh welcome the establishment of the emergency fund but would also like affected businesses,

and those whose vehicles were submerged in public car parks, to be compensated appropriately.

I also wish to commend the General Consumer Council, which, together with Omagh Independent Advice Services, intervened to offer advice and guidance to those local people who had suffered the most.

Will the Minister give an assessment of how effective the inter-agency co-operation and communication was on the ground in Omagh and in the other towns and cities affected? Will the Minister agree to come to Omagh to meet representatives of the local council and the divisional roads manager to discuss lessons learned and preventative measures that might be put in place? I know that his visit to Omagh would be a very welcome development. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Member for his question and his invitation to Omagh — I would probably be the first Armagh man to be welcomed in Tyrone. Nonetheless, he makes a serious point. The immediate need, as far as the Executive were concerned, was to help those whose homes were uninhabitable, and especially those who lost essential household utilities and who had no electricity supply or facilities for cooking.

I agree with the Member's point, and it is a serious one, that businesses were damaged, and property, such as vehicles and belongings. Consideration is being given to the additional action required. Some of the assessments that he asks for are for the longer term. The Executive's priority was to ensure that our response was as good as possible. Our assessment at the time was that inter-agency communication was good. However, there is no scheme that cannot be improved, and the Executive will want to consider, in the longer term, the lessons to be learned from the event, and how the emergency plans could be tweaked and improved.

I have no doubt, and I am sure that Members will agree, that we will face further incidences of severe weather similar to that experienced last week. The Executive want to reassure the public that this is a new Administration, more responsive to the needs of the public — the people who elected Members and put us here — and that we want to improve the responsiveness of all agencies and take preventative measures whenever possible.

Mr Shannon: First, on behalf of the people who phoned me on Friday in relation to the flooding, I put on record their thanks to the staff of the Department of the Environment, the Department for Regional Development, the councils and the other bodies who were there to help.

The Minister's statement has been made, obviously, in respect of the Belfast and Omagh council areas.

However, it is important that it be clarified for the people of Newtownards and Comber, whom the Minister mentioned in his statement. I would add Saintfield and Killyleagh, where houses were also damaged. It is important that the scheme be open to them.

Secondly, the Minister may have seen the picture in today's newspaper of Killyleagh football ground, which is beneath 4 ft of water. A ladies' match is supposed to be taking place on Thursday, but that will be impossible. There will be no football on that ground for about six weeks. At a meeting two years ago, the Rivers Agency said that it could not put a larger pipe under the road to alleviate the water problem in what is a water catchment area. I encourage the Minister to respond positively to Killyleagh FC and ensure that a larger drain is inserted to ensure that flooding will be alleviated. The current situation is unacceptable.

Mr Murphy: I thank the Member for his question. The particular problem in Killyleagh is the responsibility of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, and I am sure that officials from the Rivers Agency will respond in due course.

As regards the other council areas affected, there was further flooding, as the Member quite rightly said, and I mentioned parts of County Down in my statement. It is a matter for the councils; all councils were written to and emailed on Friday afternoon about the availability of the new scheme. Councils should get in touch with the Department of the Environment where there is need in their areas and submit an application to be included in the scheme.

As the flooding only occurred on Friday, I expect that that is something that councils — whether Ards Borough Council or Down District Council — will communicate with the Department of the Environment about to ensure that residents in those council areas receive assistance if they require it. The scheme is open to councils, but it is up to them to apply. All the councils have been informed — by email or letter — about the scheme, how it works and how they can get involved if they deem that people in their areas require assistance.

12.45 pm

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. I warmly endorse his comments about the response of the emergency services, the community and voluntary sectors and, indeed, the community itself. I also recognise, as the Minister stated, the exceptional nature of the downpour last week.

Does the Minister agree that in the context of climate change the data that the Met Office and the Department rely on may already be out of date and that it therefore may not be another 90 years before we experience a similar event? Will the Minister indicate

what short-term measures have been taken and lessons learnt from the events last week?

Mr Murphy: That is a valid point. The Department needs to see if the statistics and the analysis for the gully-cleaning exercise — one aspect of what Roads Service is involved in — are up to date with weather predictions. There are also resource implications for that. As I mentioned, there are 136,000 gullies in Belfast alone, and if a more regular service is required, there will be resource implications.

There was a departmental discussion this morning, which I expect to continue, about the ability of the Met Office to predict the location of severe weather earlier and more accurately. The Chamber will be aware that the weather warning last Tuesday was for the Belfast region as a whole; it was not specific to east or south Belfast.

There is scope to look again, for instance, at how regularly services are provided and whether a greater degree of co-ordination is possible with the Met Office to ensure an earlier weather warning — that would help the agencies to respond more rapidly. All of those are lessons in a changing climate. We must look at the implications of the events of last week and at how the Executive and the agencies can respond better in such circumstances.

Mr Weir: I thank the Minister for his assurance that all council areas that were affected by the flooding are able to apply for the scheme — including North Down, which at least got a passing reference in the statement. There were, I am reliably informed, parts of the Province, particularly around Cookstown, where flooding began on the evening of 11 June. Will the Minister assure the Chamber that those areas will also be included in the scheme?

Will the Minister clarify the position on compensation where there has been damage to property outside a house — for example, where cars were parked outside and had to be written off? Will there be compensation to households for damage to property outside their houses?

Mr Murphy: I apologise for not referring to North Down Borough Council, but perhaps that is an argument for reform of local government as there are so many councils in County Down. Fewer councils would make my geographical job a bit easier.

Regarding compensation for property, the answer is the same as the one I gave Barry McElduff; the priority was to get a payment to people in households who had lost utilities, electricity, cooking and refrigeration facilities, so that they could return to a normal standard of living immediately. That does not close the door on any consideration of other properties that were damaged as a result of the flooding, but it is not to open the door unduly either.

We had this discussion with officials from the Department of the Environment and the Department of Finance and Personnel. That was where the priority was, and if people want to make an argument for further consideration to be given to that, the Executive will give it due consideration.

Mr Armstrong: I must congratulate the emergency services and voluntary services for their actions. Will the Minister for Regional Development and his Department be more proactive in looking at the impact that new development is likely to have on existing areas where the infrastructure is already struggling to cope with the results of the flooding and at those at risk? Will the Minister pay particular attention to the impact of Planning Policy Statement 14 (PPS 14) and global warming?

PPS 14 seems to concentrate on developments in towns, villages and rural areas, but little thought is given to the surface water in those areas and parts that are prone to flooding. The Minister for Regional Development said at the end of his statement that he would take a look at what needs to be done on a long-term basis, and it is important that he is very proactive.

Mr Murphy: It is a valid point that we need to look at housing-development planning and at how replacing green fields with a housing development creates a hard surface that may contribute to flooding. We also need to look at whether the existing services — and I know that that has been a difficulty for planning — can cope with what may have come from additional housing. That is the reason for the substantial investment in water and sewerage services and the reason that over 100 drainage schemes are being looked at across the whole region.

Those are the long-term implications that we have to grapple with, because it is not simply a matter of building houses; we must also look at the long-term implications of those houses. Mr Armstrong will know that the court case in relation to PPS 14 begins this morning, and that constrains what we can say about it. Certainly, the impact of PPS 14 is one that the Assembly and I as the Minister responsible for that planning policy will want to look at again. We will see what the implications are from the outcome of the court case, but we certainly want to look not only at rural planning and people's ability to live in the countryside but also at the strain that a build-up of development puts on the sewerage system and the water and drainage infrastructure.

Mr Wells: The House will support the praise that has been heaped on the shoulders of all the statutory services that carried out such excellent work last week. I also think that the House accepts that the events of 12 June were exceptional — I witnessed the rainfall, and

it was something that I had never seen in my, unfortunately, 50 years on this planet. *[Laughter.]*

I am more concerned that the devastating impact of global climate change may be starting, even in this part of the world. That is worrying. I am also concerned that although 15 June was a more normal day for rainfall, in my constituency of South Down areas such as Crossgar, Ballynahinch and Saintfield were very badly affected. Is the Minister absolutely convinced that the drainage system in those towns and villages is capable of meeting normal rainfall patterns, because my impression on Friday was that it certainly is not?

Mr Murphy: I share the Member's concerns about the general change in climate that we seem to be experiencing and the implications that that has for all of us. The rainfall of 15 June was not of the severity, for instance, that we had in east and south Belfast, Omagh and other places on 12 June. Nonetheless, there was substantially severe rainfall over a more protracted period. We will be asking questions about whether the systems that were in place were able to cope with that rainfall. We have not had a report on whether the rainfall was measured against the storm expectations, which were above and beyond what a fully functioning water and sewerage system and drainage system would be able to cope with. Of course the Member is aware that our system is not up to the standard that we want it to be. There is investment planning to try to improve that standard, but whether that would have coped with Friday's rainfall is another question that we want further analysis on. I cannot give the Member that assurance at the moment.

We had to deal with many issues that arose from the events of Tuesday and Wednesday. Less analysis has come forth on the events of Friday, including the level of rainfall and whether systems were fully up to scratch. We shall be asking those questions, and if there are lessons to be learned, we will learn them. If any further information can be made available, we will provide it to the Member.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Minister has largely covered the issue that I wished to raise. I was seeking answers about future sewerage infrastructure improvements. That matter has been addressed. Go raibh maith agat.

Ms Lo: In his statement, the Minister mentioned longer-term planning to improve the sewerage system in Belfast. Will the Department for Regional Development examine mandatory sustainable urban drainage systems for all new developments? That could reduce peak flows in sewers and road drainage by attenuation.

Mr Murphy: Investment in sewerage in Belfast is well under way, particularly in areas of south Belfast, in which the Member obviously has an interest. In the

longer term, flood risk mitigation will be provided for in the central city area through the Belfast sewer project, which has been included in Northern Ireland Water's capital-works programme for completion in 2009. That is a £120 million capital-works scheme, which includes the proposed Belfast sewer tunnel.

The tunnel is designed to divert storm water to a terminal pumping station near the Belfast waste-water treatment works at Duncrue Street. When completed, the existing pumping stations that currently pump storm water into the River Lagan — including the River Terrace pumping station — will be decommissioned.

The proposed Belfast sewer project is designed to reduce the risk of flooding significantly, although no sewerage system can be guaranteed to prevent all further flooding. Further investment is required in the Belfast area — in addition to the Belfast sewer project — associated with the implementation of drainage area studies, particularly in the east Belfast area.

As I said in response to another question, those studies do not have the same priority as the waste-water treatment works or the interruption-of-supply works. The drainage area studies are scheduled to be implemented after 2010. However, the substantial investment in Belfast's main sewer project is due for completion in 2009. That will result in a significant improvement in the situation in the city centre area.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. First, I thank the Minister for his reassurance that the compensation is payable across various council areas. That was not clear on Friday.

I repeat Peter Weir's question about compensation in respect of the events of Monday night, when Cookstown was badly flooded. Will the compensation cover the events of Monday night, when the first of the storms occurred?

It is important that commercial buildings are covered in the same way as domestic ones. The situation for some domestic properties is OK, but commercial properties sustained much damage, and facilities inside some of them had to be closed down.

Mr Murphy: I repeat my previous answer: all councils were contacted in writing on Friday. Any council that considers itself eligible for the scheme is entitled to apply for compensation. That includes Cookstown District Council, if it has a particular case to make.

Priority was given to domestic households and to getting people back to some acceptable degree of living standard. That does not necessarily close the door on any other request for assistance in respect of damage to property. People who have such cases to make should pursue them. We will see where that

brings us in relation to the resources that are available from the Executive.

Of course, £5 million, as a headline figure, seems like quite a substantial amount of money, but that will be spread across the areas of damage, and the Member will know that quite a number of areas and properties were damaged by the storms. The door is not closed to further consideration for other properties and other people who were affected by the flooding.

Mr McCarthy: I sympathise with all those who have lost their homes and who have been traumatised over the last week due to the severe flooding.

I congratulate the Minister on his efforts to learn lessons from what has happened to ensure that such severe flooding does not reoccur.

1.00 pm

The Minister will remember that, a couple of weeks ago, I stood in the Chamber and appealed to him for sufficient funding to properly maintain the roads in my constituency. Last Friday, the A20 — the main road between Portaferry and Newtownards — was blocked by flooding. Many of my constituents were affected by that flooding. Will the Minister ensure that his officials are given whatever means are necessary to keep this main road open at all times? As most of the road runs alongside Strangford Lough, there was no excuse for not being able to get rid of the water quickly.

Will the Minister advise what compensation will be made available to motorists whose cars were written off as a result of getting caught in the flood waters?

Finally, despite the over-abundance of water throughout the country over the past week, Kiltonga industrial estate in Newtownards had its water cut off last Friday and is getting a temporary supply back only this morning. Will the Minister comment on that situation?

Mr Murphy: I thank the Member for his questions. The priority for Roads Service is, of course, to try to keep roads open. Roads were reopened fairly quickly after the events had taken place. If investment is required, a case can be made for that and it will be given consideration. The Member will know that there are competing requirements for investment — across all areas of the Executive's responsibility, not just for Roads Service. Therefore, priorities must be agreed and investment must be made on the basis of those priorities. If a lack of resources is identified in any area, a strong case for investment could be made.

Compensation has been mentioned for damaged properties. Members should be clear that these payments are not compensation: they are one-off payments to enable people to get their properties back to an acceptable living standard, allowing them to cook and use the facilities in their own homes. However, as I

have said, consideration can be given to further requests for support. Any requests should be made through the process that has been agreed with the councils.

A note will be taken of the specific case that the Member mentioned in his constituency, and I will ask Northern Ireland Water to respond to him.

Mr S Wilson: I welcome the Minister's statement and the work of the emergency services over the past week. The Minister has indicated that the events of last week were exceptional circumstances. However, in the past eight years, it is about the eighth time that I have heard — from various Ministers, not just from the current Minister — that those are one in every 100 or 150 years events. It seems that we have had 1,000 years of disaster all wrapped up in the past eight years.

As such events are not now considered to be exceptional circumstances, will the Minister give an assurance that emergency planning is being strengthened so that the Department is aware of where floods are likely to occur? They seem to happen in the same places time and time again. Will the Minister also give an assurance that data on the locations of floods will be collected and that the Department will liaise closely with the weather forecasters so that early intervention, such as the distribution of sandbags, can occur before the flooding even starts?

Despite the ongoing investment programme and the strategic investment programme, will the Minister confirm that where areas that flood regularly are identified and where individual actions could be taken to alleviate that problem, some money will be spent and some research will be carried out to ascertain how that issue could be resolved?

Finally, will the Minister assure Members that, given the record of the councils — and especially Belfast City Council — in distributing money within two days of it having been received, that there will be a role for councils if there are emergencies in the future?

Mr Murphy: I thank the Member for his questions. I am happy to provide him with reassurance on all the issues that he raised.

My response to the first point raised is similar to that given to Mitchel McLaughlin earlier. The descriptions of how often in 100 years such events might happen are provided by people in the Met Office — that is their job. They are professionals; they measure those occurrences, and they provide the frequency of such events.

There is a perception among some Members of the House, and also among some members of the public, that there is a greater frequency in such occurrences. If that is the case, there needs to be a more accurate description and a greater degree of co-ordination before an event happens. That is something that could usefully be investigated.

It must be borne in mind, however, that the warning for Tuesday 12 June covered the greater Belfast area, not east Belfast or south Belfast in particular. It is difficult to be that specific. If factors such as the amount of resources available, the number of gullies and rivers, the area of sewerage and water infrastructure that must be checked and the distribution of sandbags are taken into account, there is some restriction on what can be done in advance. It is the Executive's job to examine the emergency response and to consider what else could be done in advance and where procedures could be tightened up. The issue of advanced warning and the ability to get rapid response out before an event is something that could usefully be examined.

The councils played an important role, and the Executive commended them and continue to commend them. It is clear that, in such circumstances, the councils are the first port of call for many members of the public, regardless of where responsibility lies. Over those days, the councils, particularly Belfast City Council, Omagh District Council and some others, proved that they could initiate a very quick and localised response to the people on the ground by means of projects such as the Belfast Resilience Forum and by use of their own staff and resources. I assure the Member that the role played by the councils has not been lost and that it will be factored into any review of procedures or the emergency response.

Mr Easton: Will the Minister reassure the House that the Belfast to Bangor railway line, which was closed because of last week's flooding, has been checked for health and safety? Will he also give an assurance, after the flooding in the Gransha Road and Bloomfield Road areas of Bangor, which appears to have been caused by blockages in the drainage system, that all gullies and drains will be checked?

Mr Murphy: The Belfast to Bangor railway line was closed for one and a half hours on Friday 15 June 2007. At 8.30 am, a signaller reported flooding in the vicinity of Craigavad. The line was subsequently closed between Cultra and Seahill. A landslip further along the line was also reported. Infrastructure personnel were duly alerted and, having assessed both problems, they were able to reopen the line. Train services were resumed, albeit with an operating speed restriction in place as a precautionary measure.

I do not have specific details about the roads that the Member mentioned. However, I will ask Roads Service officials to respond to him in writing.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Welfare Reform Bill

Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: Members will have a copy of the Marshalled List, which details the order for consideration of amendments. The amendments have been grouped for debate in the provisional grouping of amendments selected list. There are three groups of amendments, and we will debate the amendments in each group in turn. The first debate will be on amendments No 1, No 2 and No 5, which deal with the manner in which a person with a mental-health condition is dealt with by the Department for Social Development. The second debate will be on Mr Brady's and other Members' opposition to clause 16, which deals with the question of whether the Department should have the power to contract out some of its functions. The third debate will be on amendments No 3 and No 4, which deal with the payment of housing benefit and debt counselling.

I remind Members intending to speak that, during the debates on each of the three groups of amendments, they should address all the amendments in that group on which they wish to comment. Once the initial debate on each group is completed, any subsequent amendments in the group will be moved formally as we go through the Bill, and the Question on each will be put without further debate.

The Questions on clause stand part will be taken at the appropriate points in the Bill.

If that is clear to Members — and I am sure that it is — we shall proceed. No amendments have been tabled for clauses 1 to 10.

Clauses 1 to 10 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 11 (Work-focused health-related assessments)

Mr Speaker: We now come to the first group of amendments for debate. Along with amendment No 1, it will be convenient to debate amendments No 2 and No 5. These amendments deal with the manner in which the Department deals with persons with mental-health conditions. As amendment No 5 is consequential to amendment No 1, I will call amendment No 5 only if amendment No 1 is made.

Mr Brady: I beg to move amendment No 1: In clause 11, page 10, line 6, at end insert

“, or

(e) a psychiatrist, a psychologist, a psychiatric nurse or a psychiatric social worker where the assessment is in relation to a person in connection with a mental health condition.”

The following amendments stood on the Marshalled List:

No 2: In clause 12, page 10, line 23, at end insert

“(e) for securing that in the case of a person who has a mental health condition, the interview is conducted in a manner that takes into account the specific needs of the person being interviewed;”

— [Mr Brady.]

No 5: In clause 55, page 41, line 27, at end insert

“(e) a psychiatrist, a psychologist, a psychiatric nurse or a psychiatric social worker where the medical examination is in relation to a person in connection with a mental health condition.”

— [Mr Brady.]

Go raibh maith agat. All of these amendments are designed to alleviate the impact of the Welfare Reform Bill on those vulnerable groups that it will affect the most. Historically, benefit legislation has been formulated by people who have no specific knowledge or experience of those in receipt of benefit. These changes are being introduced without consultation and are designed to save money, not necessarily to enhance people's lives.

Those people who have particular types and degrees of mental illness, and who find it very difficult to articulate how they are affected, will be one of the groups most affected by the changes proposed in the Welfare Reform Bill. The purpose of amendment No 1 is to ensure that people with mental-health problems are examined by medically qualified practitioners who have particular insight into those problems. The legislation, as it stands, mentions:

“(a) a registered medical practitioner,

(b) a registered nurse,

(c) an occupational therapist ... or

(d) a member of such other profession”.

There is no mention of people with specific qualifications in mental health.

As someone who has represented people on incapacity benefit with mental-health problems over the past 26 years, and who has dealt with people on benefits for over 30 years, I feel that I am in a position to comment on these issues. Inevitably, a person with mental-health problems, appearing before an appeal tribunal, will be asked if they have seen a psychiatrist, psychologist, psychiatric nurse or psychiatric social worker. Often, the tribunal will adjourn to request a report from one of those practitioners. Obviously, this means a further delay; something that adds to the stress on the client and the cost to the public purse. Therefore, it does not seem unreasonable that practitioners in the particular professions mentioned in the amendment are the most appropriate people to examine those with mental-health problems and to comment on their competence or otherwise. The amendment can only be of benefit to those people with mental-health issues. I ask the Assembly to support the amendment.

In relation to amendment No 2, client interviews for the purpose of social security are carried out in the jobs and benefits office — usually in the public office.

By definition, people who are being interviewed feel some degree of intimidation and enter into the interviews with a degree of trepidation. The public offices are noisy, busy and usually full of people waiting to be seen.

When an interviewee has a mental-health problem, it is important that the Social Security Agency should be aware of the person's condition. The interview should be carried out in a manner and location that is conducive to dealing with that particular problem. It is of paramount importance that such people should be interviewed in a sensitive and humane manner and allowed to dictate the course of the interview at their own pace. If necessary, the interview should be carried out in the person's home, because that is where they feel most comfortable.

It is also incumbent on the Social Security Agency to ensure that interviews are carried out by people who have received extensive training in dealing with clients who have mental-health problems, and that the interviewee is comfortable with the location and pace of the interview. The client must also be reassured that the interview is being carried out in the strictest confidence and that confidentiality is being strictly adhered to.

I ask that the Assembly support the amendment.

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

1.15 pm

Miss McIlveen: The amendments may be tabled with the best of intentions for people with mental-health conditions, but their acceptance would not benefit those people or anyone else who is in receipt of benefits in Northern Ireland. Members from all sides of the House share the concerns that surround the treatment of people who suffer from mental-health conditions. The Minister made specific mention of that in her comments to the House last week, and I welcome the specific commitment she gave that people with mental-health problems would be treated with particular sensitivity and sympathy.

I will speak against the proposed amendments to clauses 11, 12 and 55 of the Bill. The Members who tabled the amendments appear intent on introducing change for change's sake. Clause 55(2) will insert a definition of "health care professional" into The Social Security (Northern Ireland) Order 1998, and that definition will reflect "health care professional" as defined in clause 11(8) of the Bill. After listing three categories of healthcare professionals, the Bill states a fourth at subsection (8)(d):

"a member of such other profession regulated by a body mentioned in section 25(3) of the National Health Service Reform and Health Care Professions Act 2002 (c. 17) as the Department may prescribe."

The Members who tabled the amendments do not intend to change that paragraph, so I presume that they are happy with it. I wonder whether they have read

section 25 of the National Health Service Reform and Health Care Professions Act 2002. It is readily apparent, for those who have chosen to read it, that all recognised and regulated healthcare workers are catered for in section 25. It naturally follows that the Bill in its unamended form caters for the appropriate healthcare professional to assess each individual depending on his or her particular circumstances. Aside from the ineffectuality and superfluousness of the attempt to insert the proposed paragraph (e) into the legislation after such a catch-all paragraph (d), it is poor and clumsy drafting.

I will now deal with the proposed insertion of new paragraph (e) into clause 12. Clause 12 governs regulations that the Department can introduce under the Welfare Reform Bill, and matters that may be taken into account when issuing those regulations. The guidelines set out in clause 12 — they are merely guidelines — are to assist in general terms the matters that the regulations may address. Although several matters are particularised, the list in clause 12 is not exhaustive. The specifics of providing the appropriate environment for the interview of people suffering from a mental-health condition are more suited to the detail of the regulations. As the Members who have proposed the amendments are members of the Committee for Social Development, they will have an opportunity to discuss the issue when the regulations are being drafted. The Minister was clear and unequivocal when she met the Committee on 24 May 2007 and said:

"I want to make it quite clear that I will be coming back to the Committee before anything happens as regards the regulations. I want to get the views, advice and guidance of Committee members before proceeding. I am quite clear about that."

The Sinn Féin members of the Committee for Social Development are dressing the amendments up as additional protection for those who suffer from mental-health problems. The amendments do nothing of the kind. They contribute nothing constructive.

One of the primary reasons for seeking accelerated passage of the Bill was to maintain parity with the rest of the United Kingdom. It is recorded in the Hansard report that, on 24 May 2007, the Committee for Social Development:

"agreed unanimously to the accelerated passage of the Welfare Reform Bill".

Mr F McCann: Will the Member give way?

Miss McIlveen: Sorry, no. Thank you.

Not only that, but during that meeting the Sinn Féin Committee members did not raise one single dissatisfaction about how people who suffer from mental-health disorders may be treated under the Bill. Perhaps at that stage they had not been told what to think.

Nevertheless, no matter how well intentioned the amendments are for the treatment of people with

mental-health conditions, they will not be in anyone's interest if the principle of parity is broken because of their being accepted.

The DUP will not support the amendments; it is important that the Bill passes through the House.

Mr A Maginness: I oppose the amendments in this group. I agree with the comprehensive analysis that Miss McIlveen has put forward. She has critically examined each individual amendment and has succinctly presented the arguments collectively and individually.

Mr Brady raised a general point about mental illness and people who suffer from mental ill health. It is clear that all Members are sympathetic to the notion of assisting people who suffer from mental ill health. Indeed, it is clear that the Minister, in addressing the House and the Committee for Social Development, is exceptionally sympathetic.

However, the proposals in amendments No 1, No 2 and No 5 in no way augment the process of assisting those people. The Bill, as it stands, is clearly intended to give people who suffer from mental ill health the greatest possible assistance with work-related interviews, and so on. In fact, it could be said that the proposed amendments are superfluous.

I wish to raise one specific issue in amendment No 1, which is the introduction of psychologists into the definition of a "health care professional". To permit a psychologist to make assessments would introduce into the legislation someone who is not necessarily — I emphasise "necessarily" — medically trained to deal with a patient.

Some psychologists may have some medical experience or qualification. However, in most circumstances, psychologists are not medically trained. It would therefore be inappropriate for a psychologist to be involved in assessments. For that reason — although not for that reason alone — amendment No 1 is flawed, because people who are medically trained are required to deal with people who suffer from a medical condition.

Mr S Wilson: Even the wording of the amendment is flawed. The amendment proposes that psychiatrists, psychologists, psychiatric nurses or psychiatric social workers be involved in the assessment of people with a mental-health condition. The terms are so wide that almost anyone could fall within the remit of clause 11 were amendment No 1 accepted.

Mr A Maginness: Exactly. I agree with what the Member has said.

In many situations, people do not have a specific mental condition, problem or form of mental ill health alone; often, there is a mixture of physical and mental conditions. In such cases, it is difficult to extract the predominant element that affects a person and to identify the specific issue that must be addressed. A

person could have a mental-health condition — for example, periodic depression — yet also suffer from some physical problem, illness or disability. In those circumstances, it is an entirely different situation that needs to be addressed. Amendment No 1 does not really consider the complexity of situations in which, in many cases, the mental-health condition may be very minor compared to the person's physical incapacity.

The Bill is broad enough to catch all needs and to capture a mixture of physical and mental needs, where they exist together or separately. Therefore, in dealing with the circumstances that have been mentioned, the clauses as they stand should be acceptable.

My remarks apply equally to amendment No 1 and amendment No 2. It is important that the Assembly is mindful of the Minister's commitment to deal sympathetically and understandingly with the problems that Mr Brady raised. I am not saying that Mr Brady should not have raised those issues: if he simply wanted to highlight them, that is fine and one respects that. However, if he wanted to move an amendment that would efficiently and correctly deal with those problems, I am afraid that he has not done so. The amendments are flawed and do not deal with the situation properly. Therefore the Member has done a disservice.

Mr Ford: The amendments recognise concerns — which have existed across the UK since the implementation of the Welfare Reform Act 2007 — about the effects that some of the requirements may have on people who suffer from psychiatric illness or who have a learning disability. However, it is not clear that the amendments deal with those problems. Certain issues are beyond what can reasonably be included in primary legislation.

Amendment No 2 refers to job-related interviews and has considerable merit in its specification that such interviews should be carried out in a reasonable manner and in accordance with the needs of the individual. However, there is already a host of provisions for regulations. Some Members referred to the Minister's comments in last week's debate on the Second Stage of the Bill. The question must be asked whether the amendment, which would require the provision of further regulations, is appropriate. The Assembly must ensure that people who face work-focused interviews are treated in a way that will encourage them into work and not in a way that increases anxiety or creates difficulty for those who suffer from depression or who have a learning disability. That is a key issue on which there is no disagreement. The question is whether the relevant clauses should be amended. My colleagues and I will listen carefully to the Minister's response.

As a social worker by profession — indeed, an approved social worker under the Mental Health (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 until my registration lapsed because of the time that I spent in this place,

where a qualification in mental-health social work is, apparently, not relevant — I must declare an interest. All the appropriate professionals are covered in the Bill. To suggest that a particular group of professionals is required to deal with a particular case — such as that of someone who has had orthopaedic surgery, for example — implies that there should be a list of those who are suitable to deal with each case. As one who made his living as a social worker, I certainly would not have felt qualified to submit a professional report on the ability to work of someone who had had orthopaedic surgery.

Professionals are sought to provide professional reports, and part of their professionalism is to determine whether they are capable of providing a report. To suggest that certain professionals would deal with certain conditions is to suggest that a raft of amendments should go through in order to encompass all kinds of other people who would be suitable. That goes against the spirit in which professional regulations were laid down and those that are referred to in the Bill. Registered social workers, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, nurses or doctors are capable of dealing with their area of expertise. We should not divide them into further subsections.

Like Mr Maginness, I agree with Ms McIlveen, who spoke against the necessity of such divisions. However, I want to put on record my disagreement with her reference to the principle of parity. The Assembly has yet to tackle the issue of where parity is essential in social security matters and where variation may be an option.

The basic structures, financial benefits and key conditions of the legislation must be treated on the basis of parity. However, it is wrong to suggest that the Assembly cannot amend minor details in a Bill such as this because of parity considerations. Had I received the necessary assurances from the Minister about the concerns that I raised, I would not be supporting what I regard as a flawed amendment.

1.30 pm

However, that is not to say that Members should accept automatically that no amendment is possible in such cases. There may be circumstances in which the Assembly could make marginal variations to conditions, which would have no effect on their role within the UK national framework for social security but would make conditions easier for some people here. Let us be careful not to get too hung up on parity even in relation to social security legislation.

The key issue is to ensure that the Bill goes through as fast as possible and in the best possible form. If the Minister repeats the assurances that she made about the way in which people with psychiatric illnesses or learning disabilities will be treated, and addresses concerns that appropriate professionals will be involved, there will be no need for any of the amendments to be made.

Mr Shannon: I support the Bill. The subject was debated at length in the Chamber on 23 January 2007, and concerns were expressed about some of the Bill's implications, specifically the prospect of negative repercussions for those with neurological and mental-health problems.

I pointed out the problems associated with topping up benefits for people who attended interviews and the impact that could have on people who were genuinely unable to work due to mental-health problems. The Bill begins to address the issue, and that is welcome. However, to what extent are the mental-health professionals satisfied with the clause, in particular the Northern Ireland Neurological Charities Alliance — the umbrella organisation for charities dealing with multiple sclerosis, Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease, epilepsy, muscular dystrophy and other conditions — which expressed concern to me and, I suspect, others about the Bill?

I reiterate that I agree with the concept of getting people back into work placements, but not to the detriment of their mental health or that of their families. Will the Minister assure the House that above-mentioned concerned parties can be satisfied as to the power and remit of the Bill and the effect that it will have on those it is aimed at? In other words, will help be getting to the people who need it?

If the answer is that there has been wide consultation and that the various bodies are satisfied, then Members must support the Bill and encourage those on the periphery of society back into satisfactory working lives.

Mr F McCann: A Cheann Comhairle. I would like to clarify two points, especially given the comments made by Miss McIlveen. First, the Committee for Social Development supported accelerated passage for the Bill only after being informed by the Minister that benefits would be stopped in mid-June — that was the only reason why accelerated passage was agreed to. If the Committee had had an opportunity to debate the Bill further, many more amendments might have been proposed today.

Secondly, Alban Maginness raised the point that a psychologist is better placed to speak for claimants than a physiotherapist. Physiotherapists are mentioned in the Bill while psychologists and psychiatrists are not.

I support the amendment of my colleague from Newry and Armagh Mickey Brady because it makes sense. It sets out in black and white what is required of the Department when it embarks on interviewing a person who suffers from a mental illness. It would mean that those who would adjudicate and assess people who have been informed that they must attend a job-focused interview would have the medical experience to judge the ability of that person to take part in such an interview.

The amendment states:

“a psychiatrist, a psychologist, a psychiatric nurse or a psychiatric social worker where the assessment is in relation to a person in connection with a mental health condition.”

That is clear, whereas the Bill, as it stands, is not.

There is no mention in the Bill of the professions listed in the amendment; nor does the Bill state that a person must be qualified in psychiatry to examine, or judge, people with mental illnesses who are to be interviewed.

Nowhere in the Bill does it say that those being asked to adjudicate in cases where the person suffers from a mental-health disorder must be qualified to do so. In fact, clause 55(2) states that:

“‘health care professional’ means —

- (a) a registered medical practitioner;
- (b) a registered nurse;
- (c) an occupational therapist or physiotherapist registered with a regulatory body established by an Order in Council under section 60 of the Health Act 1999 (c. 8); or
- (d) a member of such other profession regulated by a body mentioned in section 25(3) of the National Health Service Reform and Health Care Professions Act 2002 (c. 17) as the Department may prescribe;”.

It continues, but the meaning is the same: it mentions every possible practitioner to cover other illnesses, but it does not state who should examine or assess those who suffer from mental illnesses. I find that rather strange.

Mr S Wilson: I appreciate the Member’s giving way. Although I can appreciate the Member’s point, I am not so sure that those professionals are not covered by clause 55(2)(d). Is the Member saying, as a Member for South Antrim Mr Ford did earlier, that if someone has a heart condition, he or she would be best examined by a heart specialist, or that if someone has a limb condition, he or she would be best examined by an orthopaedic surgeon? If that is the case, why does Mr McCann not suggest that there be specified professionals for all kinds of ailments?

Mr F McCann: The point is well made. However, when it came down to it, Sinn Féin and some other Committee members believed that those people suffering from mental illnesses would lose out and be the hardest hit by the proposed interviews. If other people suffer from other ailments, they too should be catered for. The Bill names a wide spectrum of professionals to cover a range of conditions, but it makes no specific mention of mental health.

My point is that many people who claim incapacity or related benefits suffer from mental illnesses. People may argue that GPs are qualified to examine anyone who is ill. That is not the case. Very few GPs are trained to deal with mental illnesses; they are even less capable of assessing or advising a person with a mental illness.

Mr McGlone: Will the Member not also accept that, in many instances, people attend their GPs to receive counselling for mental illnesses?

Mr F McCann: For some considerable time now, I have attended meetings with the families of people who have taken their own lives. They say that GPs are so overworked and overloaded that it is impossible for them to identify some of the problems suffered by their patients, some of which are mental-health conditions.

That is why Sinn Féin specifically argued that the Bill must include references to professionals with psychiatric training. Such professionals could deal with sufferers of mental illnesses and give the necessary professional advice on when people with mental-health difficulties could be interviewed; how the interviews should be conducted; the degree or severity of the illnesses; and whether the people should be accompanied during the interview process.

Amendment No 2 deals with the circumstances and surroundings in which the interviews should be conducted. Those very simple precautions should be supported by everyone in the House. These issues should already be provided for in the Bill. Let us ensure that we afford those with mental illnesses the expertise that they need to cope with the changes in the Bill.

I am pleased to support amendment No 5 from my friend from Newry and Armagh. Mickey Brady has over 30 years’ experience working for the then Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS) and later in an advice centre, dealing with appeals and many other problems. He knows what he is talking about.

He has conducted incapacity-benefit interviews in DHSS offices. Professionally, he has seen the results of dealing with people with mental-health problems and has tried to adjudicate on decisions — an activity that is not easy on the people who work in those offices. They are not equipped to deal with, or adjudicate on, those types of cases, and many would attest to that.

The surroundings in which interviews take place are as important as the interviews. I am still not convinced that the interviews, as they are laid out, are the right step forward. They could prove to be a major setback for people who suffer from mental illnesses. Members must get this right —

Mr S Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr F McCann: Sammy, you will end up saying more than me during my contribution.

Mr S Wilson: I appreciate that the Member has given way on a second point. Clause 12(2), which Members will have more opportunity to debate in detail, makes it clear that:

“(2) Regulations under this section may, in particular, make provision —

- (a) prescribing circumstances in which such a person is subject to a requirement to take part in one or more work-focused interviews;
- (b) for notifying such a person of any such requirement;”.

The application of those regulations will allow far more flexibility than would the inclusion of a paragraph, which simply says that:

“...the interview ... takes into account the specific needs of the person being interviewed;”.

Does the proposed legislation not offer a better safeguard?

Mr F McCann: The intention was to include an amendment to deal with that issue. The problem is that the longer the process goes on, the less likelihood there is that anything will be included to deal with the specific needs of claimants.

In 1995, when the last major changes to the incapacity-benefit system took place, I took part in several meetings with senior DHSS officials and visited local offices. The people in those offices who conducted interviews with claimants found the interviews difficult to deal with because, through no fault of their own, they were not trained to the necessary standards. The level of training that is required to deal with the interviews is far more advanced than that that is currently provided. In practice, regardless of what is contained in the legislation, the theory may not be applied in practice in social security offices. Therein lies the difficulty.

Members must get this right — and if I could read this speech properly, we might get it right. *[Laughter.]* We must consider best practice in various countries, and take advice from professionals who deal with mental illness.

In some situations, I have observed that surroundings and a friendly atmosphere can be half the battle in making a person feel at ease. That is what amendment No 1 is about. Although the Bill stipulates where an interview can take place, it misses one vital point, which is taking advice and opinions from those who know — professionals in the field of psychiatry and mental health.

I have serious difficulties with certain aspects of the Bill. If I were dealing with it at Committee Stage now, I would not be in a rush to recommend accelerated passage. Too much depends on getting it right.

Not least among my concerns is that life should be made as comfortable as possible for those whose illnesses warrant a completely different approach than is normally taken during interviews of that nature. How many Members have experience of people who, for an apparently trivial matter, have been called for an interview at a social security office and have fallen apart because they think that they have done something wrong? How many Members are aware of people who have become physically ill and refused to go to interviews

because they could not handle the stress of walking into local offices?

Members should consider that a consequence of the Bill would be that when people are asked why they have not attended an interview and they explain that they could not mentally handle walking into the office, more than likely, those people would receive reduced benefits. A genuine fear of authority has always been prevalent among older people, but it also exists among younger people — and Members can only guess how the Bill will impact on those with mental-health problems.

Given that, I hope that Members can put political considerations aside and recognise amendment No 1 as taking precautions to deliver those interviews in places that are conducive to those with such illnesses.

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I support amendment No 1.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I had not planned to speak on the Bill because my colleagues have adequately covered my concerns. However, in January 2007, I proposed a motion in the Transitional Assembly, and listening to the comments today, I feel that many of the Members who are opposing the Sinn Féin amendments appear to have forgotten what that debate was about.

1.45 pm

The DUP has made much about holding Ministers to account: it now has an opportunity to do so. There is nothing to stop the Minister for Social Development progressing the Bill in its entirety without going near the Committee again. I do not suggest that she will do so: however, if departmental officials are prepared to walk into a Committee room and tell the members of the Committee for Social Development that benefits will be stopped if they do not agree to accelerated passage, then what is to stop them from doing anything? It now appears, with the benefit of hindsight, that that may not be the case, and that the Assembly has the power to ensure that benefits can continue to be paid. If departmental officials are capable of telling such a whopper to the members of the Committee for Social Department, what else are they prepared to do to ensure the progress of the Bill?

I wonder, as did Mr Ford, whether Ms McIlveen is more worried about parity between here and Britain than she is about the rights of people suffering mental illness. There may be an argument regarding the financial implications of paying benefits but the Assembly has the power to ensure that any legislation made in this Chamber will provide basic rights for the people under its jurisdiction.

I am concerned, but not surprised, by the SDLP's stance on the matter. On 23 January 2007 I proposed the motion in the debate on the Welfare Reform Bill, which

specifically mentioned neurological patients. The SDLP was, apparently, so concerned about people with mental-health difficulties that its amendment excluded neurological patients and included a reference to people with mental ill-health. It is worth quoting again —

Mr McGlone: Will the Member define the word “neurological”?

Mr O’Dowd: The word was specifically chosen to include people with multiple sclerosis. I will supply the Member with a more detailed definition if he so wishes. The motion as amended stated:

“That this Assembly expresses deep concern about the implications of the Welfare Reform Bill, particularly the introduction of a new coercive regime into benefit administration, and its impact on a number of vulnerable groups, especially those people with mental ill health.” — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 21, p405, col 1*].

Nothing in this Bill has changed since it came from Westminster. It has been posted here and is sitting in front of us awaiting adoption by the Assembly. Margaret Ritchie voted in favour of the motion, as amended, on 23 January. Does that mean, therefore, that the coercive regime mentioned in that motion has been done away with? Welfare rights groups in England do not think so. Those groups are very concerned about the nature of the Bill — they have had experience of its impact.

Alban Maginness won our argument for us when he said that psychologists were not properly trained to deal with people suffering from mental-health problems. Does Mr Maginness honestly believe that client advisers working in social security offices are properly trained to deal with people with those same difficulties? I seriously doubt that. Those staff members would readily admit that they are not properly trained to carry out those functions.

Lobby organisations and advocate groups share deep concerns about the Welfare Reform Bill and the effect that it will have on vulnerable people in society. Briefing papers supplied by Assembly researchers, the Law Centre and groups representing the field of neurology for the debate on 23 January, highlighted several cases. One case, which stuck in my mind, was of a young mother with severe alcohol and mental-health problems who attended a work-focused interview accompanied by her children. She failed the interview; failed to find employment; left the family home and lived on the streets; and ended up taking her own life.

On a day when newspapers and radio stations are reporting that three young people in a small geographical area have taken their own lives, and when the subject of suicide once again comes to the fore, are Members saying through this Bill that they are not going to take the opportunity to protect the rights of people with mental-health difficulties?

Some Members say that the Bill does not have to be so restrictive; but if we are serious about protecting the

rights of people with mental-health problems, this Bill is our opportunity to do so — it will send a clear message that a line has been drawn in the sand.

All the fine words about the Bamford Review and the need for investment in mental-health services are not worth diddly-squat, unless they are in legislation. The Assembly has the chance to act on that today.

With the deepest respect to general practitioners, who do a fantastic job in very difficult circumstances, they are not qualified to deal with mental-health issues at that level. Indeed, the suicide-prevention strategy launched by the direct rule Health Minister, Shaun Woodward, identified —

Dr McDonnell: What qualification does the Member have to dictate to the Chamber that GPs are not qualified to deal with mental-health issues? I worked for 28 years in the Health Service, and 50% of what I dealt with in those years was mental health; now Mr O’Dowd tells me that I am not qualified and that, retrospectively, I have been a failure.

Mr O’Dowd: The Member is being somewhat dramatic in his representation of what I said. I did say that GPs were not qualified to deal with that matter.

Mr Molloy: Address the Chair.

Mr O’Dowd: Sorry Mr Speaker. I am being told off here. [*Laughter.*]

If my colleague refers to the suicide-prevention strategy and the consultation around it, he will find that it was GPs who lobbied the hardest for more assistance, more training and more resources to deal with mental-health issues, because mental health is a specialist issue.

I am not degrading GPs. I opened my speech by saying that they do an excellent job in very difficult circumstances, but a 10-minute, sometimes five-minute, appointment does not make a GP a specialist in mental health.

Mental health incorporates two separate subjects. One is counselling, and sometimes someone to talk to is as good a counselling as any, and often that will be done by the local GP. However, the Assembly is being asked to agree that people with mental-health issues present themselves at a tribunal, a hearing and an adjudication, which may result in the loss of benefits and their being forced into unsuitable employment, which may have a detrimental effect on their health. A doctor, who is not a specialist in this subject, is asked to decide in half an hour if a patient is mentally competent. I do not believe that any GP should be put in that position. Mental-health professionals should carry out that assessment. Go raibh maith agat.

I support the amendments set before the House at this stage of the Bill.

Mr Speaker: I remind Members to address their remarks through the Chair.

Mr S Wilson: I will address my remarks through the Chair, and I will not require a reminder from the Deputy Speaker on the opposite Bench.

Sinn Féin is making a belated attempt to wash its hands of a decision that it, collectively, supported in this House. *[Interruption.]*

The hon Member says — from a sedentary position — that he was blackmailed. If Sinn Féin is so easily blackmailed by a Minister's saying that, if one thing is not done, the other will be done, perhaps it should not represent people here. If it felt strongly and sorely about that, it should have opposed accelerated passage. However, collectively, it supported the accelerated passage of the Bill through the House, after the reasons for that were given, both to the Committee and to the Assembly, by the Minister.

Mr F McCann: Will the Member give way?

Mr S Wilson: I am obliged to give way. *[Laughter]*

Mr F McCann: I have you now.

Accelerated passage has been mentioned from the outset of the debate, and certainly during Miss McIlveen's speech, she talked about getting accelerated passage through the Committee. In the Committee, I tried to explain that, if accelerated passage were not granted, people's benefits would cease in mid-June. Under those circumstances — and under no others — there was an obligation to allow accelerated passage. If Sinn Féin had its way, there would be several other amendments before the House today.

Mr S Wilson: As I am not a member of the Committee for Social Development, I do not know what was said at the Committee meeting. However, having been present in the Assembly when the Minister for Social Development asked for accelerated passage for the Bill, I am sure that her request was not made on those terms. We are now in mid-June and still debating the Bill.

Had it been the case that, without accelerated passage, people's benefits would have ceased in mid-June, I would have at least expected the Members opposite to have said that they agreed to accelerated passage for the Bill only under duress or under protest. However, we did not hear even that; there was general assent in the House that the Bill should be given accelerated passage.

Perhaps Sinn Féin Members, like all of us, have been lobbied by the various groups that are concerned about the issue, but it is not good enough — and it is not responsible politics either — that, after having agreed to accelerated passage, they now find that they should have thought more deeply about the matter, give in to the lobby groups and try to blame everyone else, including the Minister.

Mr O'Dowd: Does the Member agree that the granting of accelerated passage does not mean that we must agree with the Bill throughout its entire process but, rather, that we forgo the Committee Stage of the Bill? The amendments that we are discussing today are perfectly within the rules of the Assembly.

Mr S Wilson: I appreciate that intervention, as it brings me to my second point. Part of the argument today has been about accelerated passage. Why do the Members opposite complain about accelerated passage when, as the Member has quite rightly pointed out, Members have every chance to make amendments now on the Floor of the House? The Members opposite cannot have it both ways. They cannot complain about accelerated passage and then tell us that the fact that the Bill has been given accelerated passage does not really matter because amendments can legitimately be made on the Floor of the House, although we have not had the same opportunity to consider amendments in detail in the Committee.

Sinn Féin Members have argued that holding the Minister to account is what the Assembly is all about. Of course we want to hold the Minister to account. That is the job of every one of us here. As she is a member of another party and I enjoy having a go at members of other parties — indeed, as people know, I occasionally enjoy having a go at my own party's Ministers — I would have been more than happy to join Sinn Féin in having a go at the Minister for Social Development if I thought that she was trying to pull a fly one on the Assembly, but I do not believe that that is the case. Indeed, the proposed amendments would hardly hold the Minister to account. If anything, the amendments would arguably do a disservice to the very people whom Sinn Féin claims to want to protect, as I will explain in a moment or two.

I listened to the reasons that the Member gave for disagreeing with the Bill. He pilloried my colleague from Strangford Miss McIlveen for being happy simply to adopt parity legislation and to follow blindly whatever legislation comes through Westminster, as if that was the job of unionists. It is not the job of unionists to blindly follow bad legislation that comes through Westminster and is introduced into the Assembly. If such legislation can be amended so that its provisions are tailored to local situations, we will of course do that. However, given that the Member stated that not one line of the Bill had changed since it came from Westminster, it seems that Sinn Féin Members are interested in ensuring only that we do not mimic legislation that comes from Westminster. Sinn Féin Members should not, on the one hand, blame the DUP for blindly following parity legislation while criticising such legislation simply because it originated at Westminster.

The basis on which I say that is that I am not so sure that the proposed amendments show that the Members

opposite even have an understanding of what the Bill is all about. For example, the Member argued that client advisers are not qualified to make some of these complex judgements; that is quite true. However, the assumption behind that view is that client advisers will be making such judgements by themselves, but they will not. They will have a plethora of available information, whether it be written or oral. People will also have the right to make representations. It is wrong to say that some client adviser in a Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety office will have to adjudicate on those matters. The basis on which the amendments have been tabled is wrong.

2.00 pm

Mr O'Dowd used emotional rhetoric in his second argument. He quoted the sad example of a mother who had been turned down for benefits and who killed herself. I do not know about those circumstances, and the Member did not outline the details of the case, but there is no guarantee that a professional might not have come to exactly the same conclusion. There is no guarantee that, had a professional made that judgement, that mother would not have behaved in the same way. It is wrong to suppose that professionals hold the key to ensuring that such instances do not occur. The use of such emotional rhetoric shows that the Member knew that the amendments were weak. He had, therefore, to make such an appeal.

Would the amendments help individuals? Great play has been made of specifying that:

“a psychiatrist, a psychologist, a psychiatric nurse or a psychiatric social worker”

— and we are not told which would be the most appropriate — should be involved in assessing cases:

“in relation to a person in connection with a mental health condition.”

I pointed out in an earlier intervention that there is no definition of “a mental health condition”, or the degree of severity of “a mental health condition”. In some cases, it might well be that, when someone has a complex mental-health condition, one of those professionals would be the best person to become involved. However, the Bill does not rule that out. The Bill allows for all such professionals. I would imagine that if people who assess cases feel that there is a need for a psychiatrist, a neurologist, a heart surgeon, or whatever, they would seek that help, and the Bill allows for that to happen.

The proposers of amendment No 2 believe that inserting:

“the interview is conducted in a manner that takes into account the specific needs of the person being interviewed;”

is a safeguard for someone who needs to be interviewed in his or her own home, or needs to be accompanied to interview. Anything so vague could not be regarded as a safeguard. The Minister is offering that regulations

be made about notifying people of the place and the manner of the interview, and that those regulations will be presented to the Committee, which will have an opportunity to amend them. The Minister can correct me if I am wrong.

Mrs D Kelly: Regardless of the Westminster legislation, there is ample flexibility to allow the Minister to issue good-practice guidelines, and each manager would then be held accountable for the delivery of those guidelines.

Mr S Wilson: My mind must be easily read — I hope that it is not. *[Laughter.]* I was about to come to that point. The regulations allow the Minister to be far more specific than the amendment would enable her to be. The amendment could offer only general guidance to some poor caseworker who is left to exercise discretion in regard to a vague statement. That could be as dangerous — or more so — than a good set of regulations that are well thought out, tailored to the specific situation, and that take on board all of the representations that are made. As safeguards, the proposed amendments are less effective than those offered by the Minister.

I was provoked to speak because the Member indicated that the DUP had no interest in holding the Minister to account and that my party blindly follows Westminster legislation to maintain parity with Great Britain. I hope that I have made it clear that that is not the case.

Mr Ford: From what the Member said, I assume that he would be happy to break parity if doing so ensured that the regulations would provide better services to our people than those regulations that are likely to be introduced in GB.

Mr S Wilson: I do not know whether the Member was in the Chamber when I discussed the issue of parity. I would not be happy to break parity if it would result in consequences that were detrimental either to the benefits that people receive or to the size of the Northern Ireland block grant allocation. On occasions, it might be desirable to break parity, but, because of the consequences, it may be decided not to. Issues of parity with Great Britain should be judged along those lines, not from a doctrinaire approach that because legislation originates in Westminster it must be sound. Bad legislation sometimes goes through Westminster. I oppose the amendments for the reasons that I have given. I support the terms of the Bill.

Mr Molloy: Like Mr Wilson, I have been provoked into speaking in this debate. It does not matter whether it was right or wrong to give the Bill accelerated passage or how the Committee granted accelerated passage. The Committee Stage of a Bill's passage is important, and accelerated passage should never be granted easily.

Belatedly or otherwise, Members want to discuss the issues at stake in the Bill, rather than the principle of accelerated passage or how the Committee operated. Miss McIlveen's suggestion, that my colleagues had been told

what to do after the Committee had assented to accelerated passage, is most derogatory. Committee members responded as the Minister asked. However, Members have to ask questions during this stage of the Bill.

There is no suggestion that my colleagues have been told how to speak or instructed to ask specific questions. It is important that Members should consider all requests for accelerated passage carefully and that they should question whether any Minister, from any party, should have a free run.

Mr Wilson raised the issue about holding the Minister to account. If the amendments are so minor and unimportant that they will not result in major change, why will the Minister not accept them? Most Members have represented people who have had an unfair hearing at a tribunal or a medical examination. In particular, Members will have received complaints from individuals that, although they had a thorough physical examination, their mental illness was not sufficiently taken into account.

I refer Members to Dr McDonnell's comments about GPs. In every other aspect of healthcare, medical experts state that professional knowledge is needed to deal with certain illnesses and that consultants are required. We are told that a small local hospital is inadequate; only a big hospital will have all the required professional staff to cope with a wide spectrum of illnesses.

However, in the Bill, it seems anyone coming off the street with experience of any aspect of life can examine a person and give a verdict that can affect that person's entire future. Indeed, some people have taken their own lives as a result of those decisions.

Mrs Long: The debate is not about whether specialist knowledge or facilities are needed. It is about whether it is necessary to specify a particular group of specialists in the Bill in order to allow them to conduct assessments in cases involving mental health, or whether the subsequent regulations are the appropriate vehicle for that.

Mr Molloy: I thank the Member for her remark. However, it serves to emphasise further the fact that the Bill deals with some issues and qualifications but not others. The purpose of the amendments is to include in the Bill provisions to deal with particular mental-health issues. All Members, including the Minister, want to get the legislation right, regardless of which party they belong to, so that patients will be protected in future. It is not a matter of parties debating among themselves but about getting the legislation right.

I remember hearing a comment made by a predecessor of the Minister, John Hume, when he was elected to the old Stormont. He told some colleagues that his argument was no longer about fighting tribunals but about changing and correcting legislation to ensure that patients could be protected in future. We must take example from that. We want to get the legislation right

so that patients will be dealt with fairly in examinations and can feel that they have been dealt with fairly. People can find medical examinations daunting enough, without the added stress of feeling that they did not get a proper hearing.

Mr McLaughlin: Does the Member agree that to decry the opportunity to introduce amendments at Consideration Stage, or to vote against amendments, is, in effect, to vote for the legislation on the basis that it is fault-free and cannot be improved by the Assembly?

Mr Molloy: That is an important point. There is no legislation that has not been amended at a different time. We may find that, as this legislation progresses, further amendments to it will be tabled. Had the Bill received a Committee Stage, there would probably have been more amendments.

Patients at medical tribunals are mostly examined by retired or overworked GPs who spend a short time examining them. However, their verdict may have long-term repercussions for those patients. It is important to consider that.

I am sure that the Minister would be sympathetic to patients and be concerned about how the legislation affects them. She would want to ensure that tribunal boards deal fairly, openly and sympathetically with people with mental illness. However, that is the Minister. Unfortunately, the person who carries the message in the ministerial guidelines down through the system is often not as sympathetic, and, time and again, we have found that examination boards are not always as sympathetic as the legislation or the Minister.

I have attended many tribunals, as I am sure other Members have. In many cases, the GP has told the patient that if the medical tribunal wants any further information, it can contact the GP. However, no tribunal board will ring the GP to obtain additional information or to find out what he or she thinks of the patient. In practice, that does not happen. We must therefore ensure that the legislation is correct. Medical examiners must be aware of all the issues involved, particularly mental-illness issues, so that patients can be protected and given a sympathetic hearing.

This is a matter of getting the content of the Bill right. If we can do that today, we will have done a good day's work. I ask Members not to oppose the amendments simply because their party has decided to oppose them, or because the Minister has said that she will be sympathetic in future. If a provision is not needed in the Bill, do not insert it. However, if changes to the Bill are necessary, include them in order to ensure that patients are dealt with properly in future. It is to be hoped that the end product will be legislation that protects the patients' interests, particularly those who suffer from mental illness. Given that every political party has said that more resources should be

directed at tackling mental illness, we must ensure that the legislation covers all those issues.

Mr Speaker: Before the Minister responds, I remind Members that Question Time will begin at 2.30 pm. I may therefore have to interrupt the Minister; however, I will certainly allow her to continue after Question Time.

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie):

At the outset, I wish to extend my sincere condolences to the Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development on the recent death of his mother. My thoughts and prayers are with him at this sad time.

First, I want to make it perfectly clear that this Bill was cleared by the Executive. There seems to some amnesia about that. Secondly, I am a person of integrity and dedication, so I will not be blackmailed by anybody. I want to put that on record.

The amendments seek to make special provision for persons suffering from mental-health conditions. I care passionately about, and am sympathetic to, people who suffer from mental illness, but the amendments are flawed and unnecessary, and I hope to convince Members of that.

2.15 pm

Amendments No 1 and No 5 are closely linked. Amendment No 1 allows health-related assessments to be carried out by non-medically qualified persons where there is a mental-health condition. The purpose of the health-related assessment is to identify the help and support a person might need to manage their condition and to overcome barriers that might prevent a return to the workplace. In many cases, a person's mental-health condition might be minor compared to his or her physical-health problems — we do not know. Amendment No 1 allows for the assessment to be carried out by a person who has experience of mental-health conditions, but who does not necessarily have a medical qualification, even though serious physical-health conditions may be involved.

Amendment No 5 seeks to amend clause 55, which deals with medical examinations and reports that are used to assist the Department, or an appeal tribunal, in relation to decisions on benefit entitlement. The effect of amendment No 5 will be, for example, to allow a medical examination to be carried out by a psychiatric social worker. Considering the types of examinations and qualifications involved, that is unsuitable. We also need to consider most carefully how the diverting of psychiatrists and psychiatric nurses from treating people who have serious mental-health conditions to assessing people with what might be relatively minor mental-health problems will impact on the Health Service.

As well as being flawed, the amendments are unnecessary. Clauses 11 and 55 already provide safeguards to ensure that those carrying out the assessments

and medical examinations are suitably qualified and appropriately trained. The definition of healthcare professional is, as it stands, sufficiently wide to allow flexibility in the future if evidence identifies a skills gap. The provision contains a regulation-making power that can be used to include other types of healthcare professionals, as and when appropriate. Sammy Wilson and Dolores Kelly mentioned that. All healthcare professionals will receive training in assessing people with mental-health conditions, and the Department for Social Development will ensure that that remains up to date and effective. Members will agree that only properly trained healthcare professionals with appropriate skills should be used to carry out medical examinations and assessments. The Welfare Reform Bill has the added security and safeguard that all healthcare professionals must be approved by the Department for Social Development before they can undertake medical examinations and assessments. Furthermore, access to specialist advice will be available when necessary.

Amendment No 2 provides that a work-focused interview involving a person who has a mental-health condition must take account of the claimant's needs. I heard what the proposers of the amendment said about that. I want to ensure that my officials and I are particularly sensitive about such matters. However, I must remind Members that if amendment No 2 were made, the legislation could be interpreted as imposing a duty to consider the specific needs of those with a mental-health condition. Therefore, by implication, consideration of the needs of those who have a physical-health condition would not be required.

Mr F McCann: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Ritchie: No, I wish to continue. A person with a relatively minor mental-health condition will receive special provision under the legislation, but someone with severe physical disability will not, and that cannot be right.

I hope to deal with the various issues that Mr McCann raised in his submission.

Amendment No 2 is unnecessary. All work-focused interviews will take account of an individual's specific needs; I can assure the Chamber of that. There will be a system of safeguards particularly geared to claimants with mental-health problems — personal advisers will receive specialist training to give them the skills, knowledge, techniques and confidence to deal with people with a range of disabilities or illnesses, including those with mental-health conditions.

I appreciate that many people are suicidal or have taken their lives; there are also many people with mental-health conditions ranging from depression to schizophrenia, and there are those who suffer from periodic mental-health conditions. All people with those conditions must be taken into account, and we

must deal with them in a very sensitive, sympathetic manner. Those with the most severe mental-health conditions will already be in the support group, and advisers have the ability to defer interviews where a claimant is clearly not able to attend or effectively take part. Sensitivity is the prime issue here. We want to be sensitive to everybody.

This will be particularly useful for people with conditions where mental health fluctuates, as so often happens with such illnesses. Such cases will be approached with sensitivity, applying a range of safeguards, such as home visits, which were mentioned earlier in the debate. We will be encouraging a support worker to be present and ensure that there is pre-interview contact with the claimant when personal advisers can explain their purpose.

I thank the Members for the support from across the Chamber in opposing these amendments and showing that they are unnecessary.

Mr Brady referred to the changes introduced without consultation. I want to assure the House that the proposals for employment and support allowance were the subject of consultation in January 2006. Three hundred and twenty copies were issued in Northern Ireland to a wide range of interest groups and potential partners.

Mr Ford referred to general concerns. I am happy to assure Mr Ford that the existing provisions in the Bill are sufficiently broad to ensure that people with mental health conditions will have their needs taken into account and addressed — as will people with physical health conditions — without the need for such amendments. Mr Ford also referred to parity. I, as a Minister, and Members in general want very much to bring our own social security legislation forward, but as various Members have already said, we are restricted because all of these issues are predicated on financial considerations. I do not want to place anybody's entitlement to benefit in jeopardy — and I am sure nobody in the House wants that to happen — but the social security system, is, as most Members know, extremely complex.

We need to approach any divergence from parity with extreme caution, as what appears a minor issue can have considerable knock-on effects given the common systems and computer infrastructure needed in Great Britain and in Northern Ireland.

Mr Ford also mentioned the support that personal advisers receive from healthcare professionals among others, and personal advisers will continue to ensure that they are sensitive to all the health-related problems that people face. Personal advisers will be supported in their assessments and will offer advice and support based on reports from healthcare professionals. Those reports will set out what work-related activity a person

may or may not be able to undertake, given his condition or disability at that time.

Mr McCann referred to benefits that would stop in mid-June. That is not the case. Employment Support Allowance (ESA) does not come into effect until 2008. For example, asbestos-related conditions —

Mr F McCann: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The impression is being given here that I was misleading the House.

The Committee for Social Development was told that, unless the Welfare Reform Bill was given accelerated passage, benefits would cease. I would like the Minister for Social Development to clarify that position.

Mr Speaker: The Member has made his point clear.

Ms Ritchie: I am not sure of the point of order, but I will continue.

Employment Support Allowance does not come into effect until 2008. One group that will be affected if the legislation does not go through according to the accelerated passage timetable will be those who suffer from asbestos-related conditions, and their relatives. Proposals later in the year will help people to claim. We do not want to stop benefits in any way.

On another issue that Mr McCann raised, the legislation does not cover specific illnesses but deals with broad categories. Mr Wilson has already referred to that.

Mr McCann said that the environment for interviews was not friendly to people with mental-health conditions. I reiterate that all those who suffer from mental-health conditions will be treated sympathetically and sensitively. In relation to work-focused interviews, the Department for Employment and Learning will send workers to visit people with mental-health conditions in their homes, if that helps them with the process. We are all aware that some of the disabilities from which people suffer may mean that they do not wish to leave their homes, as they have an attachment to them and feel frightened.

My officials and I are sensitive to those issues, as are the Minister for Employment and Learning and his officials. We want to ensure that everything is done in the proper and correct order, with the greatest level of sensitivity and sympathy. We are determined to have a conducive, friendly and supportive environment in order to help and support those with mental-health conditions. That is our aim and our objective. Mr O'Dowd referred to benefit payment —

Mr Speaker: I apologise for interrupting the Minister, but I am conscious that we are moving towards Question Time. Members may take their ease for a few minutes. The Minister will be allowed to speak again after Question Time.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

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

ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Construction Industry

1. **Mr Brolly** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what steps have been taken to reduce accidents, injuries and fatalities in the construction industry. (AQO 81/07)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Dodds): Although considerable steps have been taken to reduce incidents, the prospect for further action is kept under constant review. For example, the Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland (HSENI) has placed a quarter of its professional staff in a compliance team, resulting in more enforcement. More than 70,000 construction workers have been trained under the Buildsafe-NI initiative, and incidents in public-sector contracts are falling.

The HSENI is also working in partnership with the Construction Employers Federation to ensure that those in the boardroom accept their prime responsibility for managing health and safety.

Mr Brolly: In the case of criminal negligence by a construction company, should the individual, or individuals, immediately responsible be allowed to escape sanctions under the cover of corporate guilt?

Mr Dodds: This is an important area of public policy. With regard to accidents and fatalities, employment in the construction industry in Northern Ireland is one of the most dangerous activities that can be engaged in, and it is important that the matter is addressed urgently.

The particular issue raised by the Member falls outside the remit of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, but it is an important issue, and I will ensure that it is relayed to those with authority in that area.

Mr Gardiner: Does the Minister agree that the introduction of a corporate manslaughter Bill for Northern Ireland, with the added offence of secondary liability for corporate manslaughter, when justice matters are devolved to the Assembly would contribute to a major improvement in attitudes to what constitutes adequate safety standards on construction sites?

Mr Dodds: The Member raises an issue that is outside the remit of my Department. He referred to the

devolution of justice powers, although I note that other members of his party and those on this side of the House have made it clear that they do not foresee any early devolution of justice powers to the Assembly. If the Member is depending on that for the way forward, he may be looking in vain.

However, his point about corporate manslaughter and criminal liability is important, and it has been the subject of debate in the House and elsewhere. As I said in my previous reply, I will make sure that the Member's comments are relayed to the appropriate authority.

Mr Shannon: I am sure that the Minister is aware of the useful training that is carried out under the Buildsafe-NI initiative. However, I understand that the initiative applies only to public-sector contracts. Does the Minister feel that it should be applied to the private sector to improve safety there also?

Mr Dodds: The Member is correct in saying that the initiative applies to public-sector contracts, and it shows the power that clients can wield in contract negotiations in the public sector. The Government can ensure that health and safety considerations are built into the tendering process and the contractual arrangements.

Many leading companies in Northern Ireland have adopted the Buildsafe-NI methodology. Also, there are underlying legislative provisions, which will be improved shortly with new regulations that clarify the role of a client by making existing health and safety duties more explicit.

Since coming into this post, I have had a meeting with HSENI officials about the matter and about what more can be done. My colleague Mr S Wilson from East Antrim joined me at a recent meeting with a member of the construction industry. More needs to be done, and more should be done, in this area in legislation and on a voluntary basis. The construction industry needs to be encouraged to take the issues seriously.

At the end of the day, it cannot be legislated for entirely. Compliance cannot be inspected; we must educate and enforce at the same time.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 2, in the name of Dr Kieran Deeny, has been withdrawn. Mr McFarland is not in his place for question 3, so we will move on to question 4.

Newry: Economic Development

4. **Mr Brady** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to meet business and community leaders in Newry to develop further the strategy for economic development for the city. (AQO 98/07)

Mr Dodds: We are getting through the questions at a fair rate.

I recently accepted an invitation from Newry Chamber of Commerce and Trade to speak at one of its events later this year. That will give me an opportunity to engage with local community and business leaders and to discuss how my Department can work with people in Newry to drive forward an economic agenda in the area.

Mr Irwin: Does the Minister think that Invest Northern Ireland is doing all that it can to attract investment to the Newry area?

Mr Dodds: Every Member has a view about what additional things could be done for their local area, not only by Invest Northern Ireland but by many other agencies. I have considered the issue in advance of my meeting in Newry. Examples of current partnership activities include: an active involvement in the Newry greater vision group; a close working relationship with Newry Chamber of Commerce and Trade; board membership of the local strategy partnership; board membership of the Newry and Mourne local action group; and support for the implementation of initiatives by South Eastern Economic Development (SEED), which is a grouping of a number of councils in that part of Northern Ireland.

Invest Northern Ireland's contribution towards the economic prosperity and future of Newry and the surrounding area is well known, and the initiatives that the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is engaged in for that area are testament to its commitment and dedication to driving forward economic prosperity.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Does the Minister agree that Newry city would be a suitable location for financial services work? Will the Minister actively pursue the possibility of firms from the International Financial Services Centre in Dublin locating employment north of the border in places such as Newry while continuing to pay corporation tax in the Republic?

Mr Dodds: The Department of Finance and Personnel takes the lead on various tax incentives to attract foreign direct investment, but it is an issue in which the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is keenly interested. I hope that all Members will do everything that they can to support the Executive's initiative to put the fiscal regime on a proper standing in order to attract the type of foreign direct investment that Northern Ireland needs. I hope that nobody will undermine that effort and give Sir David Varney or anyone else an excuse to say that if people are not committed, why should anyone be committed to them. Politicians should not take a defeatist attitude.

Invest Northern Ireland is in the global marketplace, trying to attract as much investment and employment as possible to Northern Ireland, including Newry. Northern Ireland is a relatively small place in the global economy, and it is not a matter for Invest Northern

Ireland as to where companies locate. That is a matter for the potential investor, and it depends on the type of investment, the clients and the work being undertaken.

I can assure the hon Member that I see my role, and that of colleagues, as gaining the maximum amount of possible investment for Northern Ireland in high-quality and high-value-added sectors. Everybody should share in that prosperity throughout Northern Ireland — rural and urban, east and west, North and South.

Bureaucracy faced by Businesses

5. **Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what plans he has for addressing the bureaucracy faced by businesses in Northern Ireland. (AQO 92/07)

Mr Dodds: My Department co-ordinates the Northern Ireland better regulation strategy introduced by the Executive in 2001. After a recent review, an action plan was agreed by all Departments. Under the action plan, Departments will, among other things, commit to better regulation in their corporate and operating plans and review and simplify regulations and forms where appropriate.

Mr Hamilton: The Minister will be aware of initiatives to cut bureaucracy operating in the rest of the UK. What steps will he take to ensure that Northern Ireland businesses also benefit from those initiatives?

Mr Dodds: The Member has referred to initiatives that are taking place elsewhere in the country. Several plans have been drawn up by Whitehall to deal with bureaucracy and to streamline best practice. The plans cover some 500 actions, including the removal, consolidation and rationalisation of regulations, measures to simplify forms, and so on. The Northern Ireland action plan, which flows from the review of the better regulation strategy, includes involving Northern Ireland Departments and ensuring that they adopt and consider, where relevant, what happens in Whitehall Departments.

I assure the Member that I will do everything in my power to advance the agenda of deregulation, streamlining bureaucracy, simplifying form filling, reducing information requests to businesses and removing similar burdens.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: Will the Minister undertake to review the business strategies of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI), Invest Northern Ireland (INI), the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) and all the various manifestations of Government intervention with a view to their being led by private enterprise rather than being driven by former quangoists and civil servants?

Mr Dodds: I have a great deal of sympathy with the Member's point. I wish to make clear that, in each of the last three years for which figures are available, DETI's efficiencies in administration and streamlining of red tape have exceeded targets. I am determined that everything possible should be done to ensure that that trend continues because we want, not only in this Department but across all levels of Government, to ensure that as much money and resources go to front-line services and delivery for all our people. I understand where the hon Member is coming from, and, as far as I am concerned, he will find a receptive ear.

Joint Trade Missions

6. **Mr K Robinson** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what have been the outcomes for Northern Ireland from joint trade missions with the Republic of Ireland to date. (AQO 64/07)

Mr Dodds: Three trade missions involving 40 Northern Ireland companies have been undertaken in collaboration with Enterprise Ireland. The missions visited India in 2006, Canada in October 2006 and the Gulf region in January 2007. Companies reported that the visits were of significant benefit in furthering their interests, generating new business of up to £6 million.

It is important to note that the visits are not joint trade missions. They are organised either by Invest Northern Ireland or Enterprise Ireland, and companies throughout the island of Ireland can join them as they see fit. I also advise the House that Invest Northern Ireland has planned 42 trade missions for 2007, while Enterprise Ireland has planned 103 for the same period.

Mr K Robinson: Does the Minister accept that any joint trade mission can only result in the Irish Republic gaining the majority of business from such missions as its corporation tax sits at 12.5% while the rate in Northern Ireland is approaching 28%? What exactly will the Minister do to ensure that that joint scheme can ultimately benefit Northern Ireland business to the maximum?

Mr Dodds: I am grateful for the Member's question because it allows me to clarify that he is labouring under a misunderstanding. As I indicated in my previous answer, those are not joint missions. If one removes that premise, the rest of the Member's concerns are stripped away. I note that the Member has accepted that point by nodding his head.

2.45 pm

The trade missions are organised by Invest Northern Ireland or by Enterprise Ireland. People are free to join those missions as they see fit. That is a matter for companies, depending on whether they see any benefit. However, those are not joint trade missions. That is the type of sensible co-operation with which people are

content. That type of co-operation is useful if it leads to any benefit. If that is done for any other reason than mutual benefit, it is likely that people will have questions to ask.

I hope that I have reassured the hon Member with my response.

Mr Storey: I welcome the Minister to his first Question Time. Will the Minister assure the House that he is satisfied that continued collaboration with Enterprise Ireland will result in real and tangible benefits for Northern Ireland companies?

Mr Dodds: I thank my hon Friend for his kind remarks. Companies and private business are best placed to make such decisions. They will make the decision to participate or otherwise, depending on whether they believe that doing so represents good value for money and is in their interests. That is the way that it should be. Co-operation must be driven by private companies and private business deciding what is in their best interests.

As I said earlier, the feedback that we have received from those companies that participated in a limited number of missions was that there were potential orders to the tune of some £6 million. Moreover, networking initiatives were established to help to gain new contacts, develop existing relationships and explore strategic alliances. In that context, the companies that have participated in those trade missions obviously found some benefit.

Dr McDonnell: I welcome the Minister's comments on the trade missions. Does the Minister fully acknowledge the goodwill that is afforded to us and to our companies by our Southern colleagues on those missions, whether they be joint, parallel, or semi-detached? "Conjoined" is perhaps a better word to describe those missions. There is a fair amount of goodwill and exchange.

Does the Minister share my view that, as two small regions — one of four million people and one of less than two million people — on the borders of the European Union, it is much better for us to compete together — by that, I mean work together — on the world stage, rather than competing with, and neutralising, each other?

Mr Dodds: I know from our years of collaboration in another place that the Member has a keen interest in this matter. He asked whether I acknowledge the goodwill: yes, of course I do. When such goodwill has been evident — and it has been — I readily acknowledge that. In the same way, companies in the Irish Republic would also recognise the goodwill of Invest Northern Ireland in the reciprocal arrangement whereby Southern companies can take part in trade missions that are organised by INI. It is a two-way process.

As to competition, and the size of the two respective economies, there may be some instances where there is

benefit in collaboration. Let us consider one such instance — the single electricity market — where there are clear economies to be made through benefits to industry, to consumers and to security of supply. That is sensible co-operation.

However, there will be many other instances when, in certain sectors and in certain areas, it will not necessarily be to our advantage to collaborate not only with the Irish Republic but with other areas, regions and countries, because they will be in direct competition with us. Our job is to ensure that we position Northern Ireland, whether in collaboration in certain instances or not, as best we can to attract the type of investment that we need to boost economic prosperity for all our people.

Corporation Tax

7. Mr Cree asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what discussions his Department has had with officials from regional Governments in Wales and Scotland in relation to proposals for lowering corporation tax in Northern Ireland. (AQO 69/07)

Mr Dodds: My Department has had no formal contact with officials from the regional Governments in Wales or Scotland on proposals for lowering the rate of corporation tax. Any such engagement is a matter for the Department of Finance and Personnel, which would be acting on behalf of the Executive.

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister for that. Does a platform exist for similar discussions with the English regions, whether conducted by himself or his colleagues, with a view to having lower corporation tax for the UK as a whole?

Mr Dodds: I again thank the Member for raising that important issue. My Department will always try to work with colleagues in any other part of the United Kingdom — whether it is England, Scotland or Wales — to try to advance something that we believe would be in the best interests of the economy of Northern Ireland.

As the Member is aware, the Scottish First Minister is visiting the Assembly today, something that has rightly been recognised in most sensible quarters as an opportunity to build relationships to advance the economic cause of Northern Ireland and other regions. Therefore, I welcome the hon Member's indication that it is actually beneficial to be in collaboration with other regions of the United Kingdom. To insult representatives of Governments of other parts of the United Kingdom is not a sensible or productive way forward. As the 'News Letter' editorial rightly pointed out, the devolved Administrations should work together on those important issues and gain the best for Northern Ireland.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Durkan): As Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, I welcome the Minister to his first Assembly Question Time.

The Minister emphasised earlier the need for people to concentrate on the Varney review of corporation tax. Does the Minister agree that, in that context, if parties and Committees in the Assembly are going to marshal their efforts in the direction of that review, which has been given specifically to the Northern Ireland Assembly, it might be a bit premature to engage too heavily in canvassing other options — which we might have to consider in the medium term — with other parts of the United Kingdom?

Mr Dodds: I thank the hon Member for his words of welcome, and I look forward to working with him in his capacity as Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment. I welcome his contribution thus far, and that of his Committee, on many of the serious issues that we have to grapple with.

The Member makes a good point. All of our efforts should be concentrated on trying to win the main argument, which is for a reduction in corporation tax to a level that would make a significant difference in a relatively short time.

There are other areas that need investment — whether or not we get a corporation tax reduction — including stimulating enterprise, stimulating innovation, building up our infrastructure and improving our skills and education. All of that has to happen. People should not say that it is not going to happen as that is obviously an open invitation for Sir David Varney to report that not even the Northern Ireland Assembly, or certain parties in the Northern Ireland Assembly, are seriously in support of that happening. Alternatively, the view could be taken that we are now going to concentrate on a range of other measures, falling short of the main target. It may be that that will be the case, but at this juncture, we need to be pressing strongly for what all of us have recognised, or certainly what most of us recognise — there may be other parties present or other spokesmen who do not recognise that — would be a major boost for the Northern Ireland economy.

Miss McIlveen: Does the Minister have any plans to meet with his Scottish and Welsh counterparts to discuss matters of mutual interest?

Mr Dodds: Yes, I certainly do intend to meet with my Scottish and Welsh counterparts, and I have already been in touch with them to seek early meetings. I have done so despite the advice given to me by members of the Ulster Unionist Party, who seem to take the view that we should no longer meet with the Scottish Executive, that somehow we should insult our friends, that we should go down the road of insulting the Scottish people, and all the rest of it — *[Interruption.]*

I hear sedentary comments being made to my right. The approach suggested by the Ulster Unionist Party is not the approach that should be taken — that is not the way to win friends, and it is not the way to promote Northern Ireland. It is strange that a unionist party is saying that Members should not meet their Scottish colleagues. I would have thought that we would want to promote an Ulster-Scots connection. There was a time when that party heavily promoted North/South Ministerial Council meetings at the expense of east-west relations.

Invest Northern Ireland

8. **Mrs Long** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline three key “unique selling points” that Invest Northern Ireland should use to promote Northern Ireland as an investment location. (AQO 121/07)

Mr Dodds: Generally, Invest Northern Ireland’s sales message is based on skills, quality and availability, competitive costs and excellent infrastructure, including property, transport and telecoms. Specifically, Northern Ireland’s unique selling points will depend on the potential investor and on the other locations competing for investment. Since 2002, Invest Northern Ireland has secured 169 international investment projects, leveraging over £1 billion of investment and, in that time, it has promoted 23,720 new and safeguarded jobs.

Mrs Long: I thank the Minister for his response, particularly the emphasis on skills and their availability in Northern Ireland. Will the Minister recognise that there are disincentives to inward investment, not only from the fiscal initiatives that were mentioned earlier but through the visible signs of division and segregation in our community? Has he considered any impetus or contribution that his Department could provide to start addressing some of those disincentives in order to benefit the entire community?

Mr Dodds: The cost of segregation is a recurring theme for the Alliance Party. No doubt, during virtually every Question Time and every ministerial statement, the contributions from its Members will mention the need to do more with resources and will be along the lines that the Member has outlined. Of course, we all know that that does not provide straightforward or immediate answers to any of those matters. Instead, we must ensure that, within current resources and within resources emanating from the forthcoming comprehensive spending review, Northern Ireland is best positioned to attract the required investment and to build up our indigenous companies and firms to make them more export-led and -driven.

I hope that the Alliance Party will join those of us who are seeking to create more efficiencies and streamlining within the Assembly. The Member speaks of the waste of resources due to segregation. However, I am

conscious that her party was one of the main drivers behind the Belfast Agreement arrangements, which resulted in a plethora of quangos and institutional bodies that drain millions of pounds from front-line services. When my party raised that issue in the previous Assembly and tried to amend it, her party voted against it on every occasion.

Lord Morrow: What is Invest Northern Ireland doing to improve the quality and availability of a skilled workforce in Northern Ireland? Will the Minister assure the House that he and Invest Northern Ireland are doing everything possible to attract some of that investment to the west of the Province? I am thinking, unsurprisingly, of Fermanagh and South Tyrone.

Mr Dodds: I am not in the least surprised that the hon Member should highlight the needs of Fermanagh and South Tyrone. He works assiduously, along with his colleague Mrs Foster, on behalf of his constituents.

The Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) has the lead role in skills development — indeed, the Member will have an opportunity shortly to quiz the Minister for that Department — although my Department and Invest Northern Ireland work closely with DEL to ensure that skills are built up and that they are in place to meet the business needs and challenges of the future.

I give a commitment to the Member, as I have to other Members, that in raising the economic prosperity of Northern Ireland, I want all areas to benefit. I am glad that some of my first visits as Minister to see companies at first hand were to businesses in the west of the Province. Indeed, Fujitsu’s recent announcement of the creation of 328 new jobs in the north-west and an investment of £18 million in very high-value, high-tech jobs, along with another 80 jobs in Belfast, is excellent news.

3.00 pm

Mr McHugh: Will the Minister work with INI and others to resolve planning difficulties for new businesses along the border areas? In those areas, two out of three local businesses have been lost to the Twenty-six Counties because of planning difficulties and the difficult matter of red tape.

Mr Dodds: I will do what I can. I have already held meetings with the Minister of the Environment on some of those matters, and I will continue to do so.

Employment and Learning

Undergraduate Places

1. **Mr Elliott** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what has been the number of undergraduate student places available in Northern Ireland higher education institutions over the last five years.

(AQO 87/07)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): The number of available full-time undergraduate student places in Northern Ireland universities during the past five academic years are as follows: in 2002-03, there were 22,802 places; in 2003-04, there were 22,928 places; in 2004-05, there were 23,284 places; in 2005-06, there were 23,530 places; and in 2006-07, there were 23,755 places. There are also an additional 3,658 places that have been made available in further education colleges, and approximately 1,510 initial teacher education places. Please note that those figures represent full-time, funded undergraduate places only. There are also significant part-time enrolments at our institutions.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for his reply. It is good to see him on the Floor of the House at his first Question Time. I wish him well in his post. Given those increasing numbers, does the Minister have any plans to increase the number of undergraduate student places at Northern Ireland's higher education institutions in the near future?

Sir Reg Empey: That is a question that I am asked frequently. My predecessor, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Northern Ireland Office Maria Eagle, reviewed the situation earlier this year and decided not to increase the maximum student number (MaSN), which places a limit on the number of students in each university. However, I am looking closely at the possibility of some limited — but targeted — increases. Therefore, while we will not necessarily have a general increase, there could be circumstances in which we would decide to increase student places for certain disciplines.

I point out to the Member that it costs approximately £10 million a year for every 1,000 students, plus whatever estate costs would be associated with that in the institution. It is the case — and perhaps this is what the Member is getting at — that a significant number of our student-age applicants have to avail of places in universities elsewhere in the British Isles. That is a matter of regret, and that is the position at this stage.

Mr Durkan: I join Mr Elliott in welcoming the Minister to his first Question Time in this Assembly. As the Minister examines options for relaxing the MaSN cap in various ways, and in various specialisms, will he pay particular attention to the University of Ulster's Magee campus, which has been particularly restricted, and suffers from the MaSN cap more harshly than others?

The University of Ulster has produced plans that would indicate a capacity of 10,000 students places at the Magee campus. Land is now available due to Foyle and Londonderry College's relocation to Clooney. As the Minister looks for targeted adjustments, will he particularly bear in mind the situation at Magee campus?

Sir Reg Empey: I thank the hon Member for his comments. I am immensely surprised that he has asked me that question. I have already talked to the University of Ulster's vice chancellor, and I know that the university is anxious to move forward. I am prepared to consider the Member's request. However, I must tell the Member that targeted adjustments would be only for specific disciplines.

I do not believe that, at this stage, and with scarce resources, one can allow a generalised increase in student places across the board. The resources to do that are not there. Moreover, one must remember the outcomes that one wishes to achieve, particularly with a view to ensuring that there is a very strong link between our economy and our institutions of higher education.

I will look at that specific point for the Member.

Tuition Fees

2. **Mr Attwood** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if there is evidence that tuition fees are contributing to a reduction in third-level education applicant numbers. (AQO 89/07)

Sir Reg Empey: It is too early to gauge the impact of variable tuition fees as we are still in the first academic year of the new arrangements. A recently published University and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) analysis of accepted applicants indicates a decrease between 2005-06 and 2006-07, but that is a likely consequence of the increase in applicants experienced in 2005-06, which was the last academic year before the introduction of variable fees.

Mr Attwood: It is difficult to analyse the evidence at this early stage, but does the Minister agree that the Department should be vigilant with tuition fees, given that over the last four years there was a decrease in applicant numbers each year? Although the evidence is yet to emerge fully, there are indications, unlike the situation in Britain, of a further decrease in applicants to universities in the North.

Sir Reg Empey: I am aware of the hon Member's concern. We had a discussion a couple of weeks ago about it. He is correct to say that the early indications point to a slight decrease in university applicants, but the Department does not feel that there is sufficient evidence at its disposal to come to a judgement. However, the Department's objective is to encourage as many people as possible into further and higher education, and I do not wish to see unnecessary obstacles placed in the way. It must be remembered that the decision to introduce tuition fees was a controversial one at the outset and that virtually every party in the Chamber expressed reservations. The Department will review the situation, but it must have solid information, and I hope that the

information will become available by September or October. I undertake to keep the Member informed.

Mr K Robinson: Does the Minister accept that any fee reduction that may be contemplated by his Department should relate to economically-relevant subject areas rather than to higher education courses in general?

Sir Reg Empey: I note the hon Member's use of the phrase "fee reduction", which indicates how he feels about the subject. There is much pressure, because of the growing economic linkages between further and higher education and business, to have further and higher education more targeted. The hon Member will hear more from me later in the year, as we must cut our coat according to our cloth. A general education for our students is something to be welcomed, but the economic consequences must be remembered in the face of global competition. It is important that Northern Ireland has the maximum skill base in the subject matters that are likely to be of economic relevance. I hope to return later this year with further elaboration on that point.

PhD Courses

3. **Mr Kennedy** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans he has to increase the number of places available on PhD courses. (AQO 77/07)

Sir Reg Empey: The Department received a proposal from the two Northern Ireland universities, via the Economic Development Forum, for an increase in PhD places and has bid for additional places from the Chancellor's fund for innovation.

The bid also may be considered as part of the comprehensive spending review. In addition, my Department is preparing for a review of the wider policy and funding of postgraduate places.

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Minister for his reply. I also join other Members in welcoming him to his first Question Time in this Assembly. I wish him well.

What are the implications of the Chancellor's innovation fund, proposed in November 2006, for the numbers of postgraduate students?

Sir Reg Empey: At the Chancellor's conference in Downing Street in November 2006, and again in March this year, it was known that the Chancellor himself suggested the idea of an innovation fund. The Chancellor has a particular interest in funding research and science-based subjects. Indeed, he has provided significant tax relief to businesses that operate in those areas.

Along with other Departments, the Department for Employment and Learning has bids ready to avail of the benefit of the innovation fund. However, it is becoming apparent that all that glitters is not gold. The Department is struggling to ascertain whether the fund can be turned into a usable instrument, as there are

difficulties with its current structure. That is why, in answer to Mr Kennedy's first question, I mentioned bidding through the usual comprehensive spending review process.

The message from the Economic Development Forum — as the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment will know — is that the universities, supported by business, trades unions and others represented on the forum, are firmly recommending more postgraduate places. Ultimately, the business world is telling us that particular disciplines are short of people with PhDs.

In the Far East, for example, almost 1·2 million PhDs a year are awarded in China and India. Northern Ireland is up against huge competition. I can only say to the Member that the Department will do everything in its power to maximise the number of postgraduate places in order to pursue the wider objective, which is widely supported throughout the business and academic communities.

Mr Weir: In the light of the high cost of postgraduate education, especially the often prohibitive fees for postgraduate courses, what steps does the Minister intend to take to widen access to postgraduate education, particularly for students from working-class or less affluent backgrounds?

Sir Reg Empey: That is an important point, as the cost of postgraduate education is considerable. Bidding through the comprehensive spending review and the innovation fund for extra postgraduate places will help the Department in financing those places. However, there is a separate issue with the fees that students would have accumulated before they get to the point of applying for a PhD. We want to encourage more students to come forward. I am specifically considering proposals on how to alleviate risks and how to deal with the very point that the Member made.

It is obvious that there is a shortage of postgraduates. The Republic's national development plan is already concentrating on a strategy for a fourth level of education. Indeed, the Government of the Republic have put €1·2 billion aside for research and development and to spend in that academic area. It is absolutely necessary to ensure that we are able to compete. I am looking closely at the issue.

Dr McDonnell: Like other Members, I welcome the Minister to his first Question Time.

Does the Minister agree that a significant increase in R&D capacity, through increased numbers of PhD graduates, is desirable for an expansion of industry? Does he further agree that there is a particular need to focus on science subjects, especially the commercialisation of the considerable biotech, life science and healthcare facilities?

3.15 pm

Sir Reg Empey: I agree entirely with the Member; he has hit the nail on the head. At present, the Department funds about 150 new awards each year and about 500 at any one time. It is clear that there is greater demand, which is focused on the areas of study to which the Member referred. Ultimately, however, it is for the universities to decide which applicants to take. That appertains also to the question that was asked by the Member for North Down: those two matters must be brought together. The Department is seized of the urgency of that. It has put forward bids with the Department of Finance and Personnel for the comprehensive spending review and the higher education innovation fund. In the past few weeks, I have had meetings with the vice chancellors of both universities. I have met the Economic Development Forum and, last week, met the Northern Ireland Business Alliance. Everyone is pushing in the same direction; it is a critical part of the Department's agenda. I assure the Member that it will do all that it possibly can to achieve the goal to which he referred.

Funding

4. **Mrs Long** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what proposals exist to ensure that the funding changes in further education do not prevent people from engaging in recreational learning.

(AQO 113/07)

Sir Reg Empey: Although the Department sets the strategic direction for the further-education sector in Northern Ireland and channels its funding accordingly, each college is responsible for its curriculum. The new funding model that is used to distribute the further-education recurrent grant to colleges does not prevent people from engaging in recreational learning. Under the new arrangements, there is only a marginal difference in the average funding that is available to colleges for students on recreational courses. In addition, under their own fees policies, colleges can choose to charge fees for some recreational courses.

Mrs Long: I thank the Minister for his welcome response, which reflects the importance of recreational learning as well as study for economically relevant qualifications. The Minister's portfolio encompasses both employment and learning. Does he agree that in order to create an educational environment where there is a culture of lifelong learning, it is important that people engage with education at all levels, not just to provide them with the skills that are crucial for economic growth but to enhance their quality of life and their engagement in society and to engender the discipline for and the enjoyment of learning throughout their lifetime?

Sir Reg Empey: I find little, if anything, to disagree with in the Member's comments; in the past couple of

weeks, I have received questions from several Members on that issue. I asked to be shown the amount of money that the Department is putting into those areas of education. During the past few years, the variation has been marginal. However, I must emphasise that, ultimately, the colleges choose which courses they offer. They can decide to charge fees to cover all or part of the costs of a course.

The Member raised the additional issue of lifelong learning for recreational purposes. Further to that is learning that, for certain individuals, has therapeutic benefits, and which provides an opportunity for those who have suffered trauma to get back to work. They may choose to embark on a course that is somewhat less challenging as a starting point from which to return to education. I realise that the issue is not simply about whether people should enrol on flower-arranging courses, for example, but about the wider benefits that lifelong learning can bring them. Many Members take that issue seriously.

Resources have not been removed on a large scale. However — and this also appertains to previous questions on higher education — the allocation of money for further education has had to become more targeted. Although I accept entirely the Member's comments on lifelong learning, the Assembly needs to understand that, inevitably, colleges have to prioritise resources. If the Member has any concerns, I hope that she will, by all means, let me know what they are, so that we can deal with them individually.

Mrs M Bradley: Will the Minister ensure that retired people do not feel excluded and will be able to participate in recreational learning without concern over excessive fees that they cannot afford?

Sir Reg Empey: I assure the Member that retired people are very active in learning. Appertaining to Mrs Long's question, I recently visited the Holywood Arches library in my constituency to see the "silver surfers" in action. I can tell the Member for Foyle that the room was jam-packed with senior citizens who were learning computer skills with the help of volunteers from Business in the Community. They were not learning for commercial reasons but in order to keep in touch with others and to access information. People there can also engage in remote learning. It was terrific to see those people enjoying what they were doing and benefiting from it.

It is obvious that, given the way in which society is going, the contribution that more senior members of our community are being required to make to the economy is growing all the time. It would be a foolish mistake to throw away that resource. Those of us in the Chamber may have to work until we are in our eighties. I do not know whether that is a good message to send out or not.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 5, standing in the name of Dr Deeny, has been withdrawn.

Campus Plans

6. **Dr Farry** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans exist to link the new-build North Down and Ards campus in Bangor with the North Down Business Park at Rathgael. (AQO 116/07)

Sir Reg Empey: The new technology innovation centre at the North Down and Ards Institute's Bangor campus will provide training facilities for industry and a number of pre-incubation units to support student business start-ups. That will complement the institute's links with the North Down Development Organisation (NDDO) and North Down Borough Council, and that, in turn, will help to create new business opportunities.

Dr Farry: As a member of North Down Borough Council, I declare an interest. I welcome the Minister to his first Question Time as Minister for Employment and Learning.

Does the Minister recognise that it was a lost opportunity for part of the campus not to be co-located with the business park? Moreover, what plans does he have to try to encourage links between further education colleges and business to ensure the best match between the skills that people are being taught and the needs of employers?

Sir Reg Empey: I had the pleasure of attending the opening of the new South Eastern Regional College a couple of weeks ago, the headquarters of which is in the Member's constituency. I was encouraged by what I saw and heard there. It has an extremely active board of governors, and high-quality staff who are clearly determined to succeed.

In recent discussions between Invest Northern Ireland, the Department and local colleges, and at the college's launch in Bangor a couple of weeks ago, the message that came across strongly was the need to link education and business. The chairman of the board of governors of the new college is leading from the front.

I understand the Member's point about the physical arrangements, but I am confident that the college is determined to overcome any difficulties through the student business start-up scheme with incubation units and working with the business village. The will and expertise to succeed exists. The Member will know that his local authority has established the SIGNAL Centre of Business Excellence, which is one of the leading economic development organisations in Northern Ireland. The Member will also know of one of Northern Ireland's leading entrepreneurs, Mr Ian Pennick, who is also involved with that. I am confident that the

determination and skills of the staff at the South Eastern Regional College should alleviate any concerns that he may have.

Mrs I Robinson: What plans does the Minister have to ensure that students who go down the vocational route can be assured that they will have an apprenticeship placement in what seems to be a shrinking base for would-be plumbers and joiners?

Sir Reg Empey: The Member touches on something that is extremely important to our community. We loosely describe such courses as vocational. Instead, we want to describe them as professional and technical, because, sadly, there is an implication that vocational activities are somehow of less value than academic subjects. That could not be further from the truth. The House may have to return to that issue.

The Member has hit the nail on the head with regard to where more effort must be concentrated. I am satisfied that the colleges are seized of the issue. As the Member will know, there is an excellent group of people in her constituency. Indeed, rebuilding is to take place in Newtownards.

A few years ago, we threw away apprenticeships. Now, we must bring them back. I can assure the Member that the Department is determined to work, and is increasingly working, with employers and trade unions. People are now getting contracts before they commence their training.

Members will recall that the parliamentary report on the Jobskills programme was highly critical of the way things were going. We are trying a new method; we will just have to see whether it works. However, I assure the Member that the Department is seized of the importance of her point.

Mr Cree: I welcome the Minister to his first Question Time.

As a member of North Down Borough Council, I am interested in this matter. Initially, it was envisaged that an incubation-innovation unit would be established at the North Down Business Park. The Minister mentioned the innovation unit. Will he confirm that an incubation unit will be included in the building currently under construction at the extended campus site in Bangor's Castle Park?

Sir Reg Empey: I acknowledge the Member's comments. I know that he has had personal involvement in economic development in north Down for many years. In April 2006, ministerial approval was given for a £15 million capital project at the North Down and Ards Institute of Further and Higher Education, which comprises a technology and innovation centre and a performing arts centre at the Bangor campus, and a construction centre at the Newtownards campus.

Included in the technology and innovation centre will be a number of pre-incubation units to support student business start-ups. The project is at the design stage, with a target completion date of December 2009 for the Bangor campus. It will address the shortfall in accommodation provision in each of the faculties and target those areas of accommodation that are no longer fit for purpose. I hope that that answer will assure the Member that action is being taken; it should also refer to Dr Farry's point.

I am confident that the people of north Down understand fully the urgency of, and the need for, the project. The set of pre-incubation units is slightly more innovative than providing accommodation for existing businesses; rather, it provides accommodation to encourage young people to get a sense of what it means to be in business. I am confident that the model in that college will be successful.

Fermanagh College

7. **Mr McHugh** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps he will take to address the failure of Fermanagh College to facilitate the third year of higher level courses. (AQO 100/07)

Sir Reg Empey: My Department's policy is that further education colleges, including Fermanagh College, can offer only the first and second years of a degree programme. The university that validates the degree should provide the final year of tuition.

Mr McHugh: Is it fair that, at the end of a very expensive course, students — particularly young mothers with expenses and childcare difficulties — do not obtain their certificates because they have to travel to Ballymena, Magherafelt or elsewhere from, for example, Fermanagh, to finish the third years of their courses?

Sir Reg Empey: I understand the Member's point — that could be a barrier to employment for that type of individual. However, the universities can, in certain circumstances —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have to interrupt you, Minister.

Sir Reg Empey: I will write to the Member about that.

3.30 pm

Education

Staff Protection

1. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Education what consideration has been given to adopting similar protocols in schools as those now operational in hospitals, to protect staff from assault. (AQO 106/07)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Assaults on school staff are unacceptable, and I condemn all such attacks. School boards of governors have a duty to encourage good behaviour and discipline, and my Department will continue to work with employers to ensure that discipline policies are effective and that staff receive the support that they need and deserve.

Schools should be a safe haven, not only for pupils but also for teachers and support staff. My Department is currently reviewing the available guidance on security and personal safety in schools and the support available to staff. I have asked that that review should include consideration of protocols in other organisations, such as those used in the Health Service.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for her answer, and I welcome her to the House on her first opportunity to answer questions as the Minister of Education.

The purpose of my question is to highlight the safety of everyone in school compounds. Will the Minister agree that, although appropriate training and advice is given to everyone involved in education, the prevention of assaults of any kind is paramount and children should not be disturbed by any such activity?

Ms Ruane: Absolutely: prevention is paramount. That is why it is important that a culture of democracy be created in schools, where everyone is respected — pupils and teachers — and why the complex and wide-ranging issue of bullying must be considered. My Department is currently working on an anti-bullying strategy, is part of the anti-bullying forum, and will soon publish a report on that issue. Schools must be open and democratic, and prevention is the best cure.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: With the number of teacher assaults rising at an alarming rate, will the Minister have talks with her colleague the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to ensure that teachers are included in a measure similar to the emergency workers' protection legislation that was voted for in the Assembly on 22 May?

Ms Ruane: Would the Member mind repeating the question? I missed a bit of it.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: My pleasure. With the number of teacher assaults rising at an alarming rate, will the Minister have talks with her colleague the Health Minister to ensure that teachers are included in a measure similar to the emergency workers' protection legislation that was voted for by the Assembly on 22 May?

Ms Ruane: As I have said, assaults on school staff are unacceptable, and I condemn all such attacks. If the Health Minister is open to a meeting — which I am sure he is because I have already met him on a range of issues — we will discuss this matter. My Department is currently reviewing the available guidance on security

and personal safety in schools and the support available to staff, and I have asked that the review should include consideration of protocols, particularly in the Health Service, but also in other organisations.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I finally have a question to ask. Schools are quick to suspend teachers. Will schools be given adequate powers to suspend pupils in cases of attacks on teachers? Go raibh maith agat.

Ms Ruane: Sorry, I was upsetting the protocols. I thank the Member for his question. Schools already have those powers. School principals have the authority to suspend pupils for up to five days for any breach of the school discipline policy, and, with the approval of the board of governors, can extend that to 45 days. With regard to the suspension of teachers, only the principal or the chairperson of the board of governors may suspend a member of school staff. The employing authority must be consulted before a suspension is imposed, or as soon as possible thereafter.

Precautionary suspension should not be automatic, and some preliminary investigation by social services representatives and/or the PSNI may be necessary before a decision to suspend can be taken properly, even as a precautionary measure. However, as I said to Kieran McCarthy, we must try to create a situation in which preventive measures are preferred to disciplinary interventions in schools — although disciplinary measures are sometimes necessary. Early intervention is the key to the problem.

Special Needs Children

2. **Mrs Long** asked the Minister of Education what provision she is making to ensure that special needs children displaced by school closures, such as that of Lisnasharragh High School, have access to alternative places in schools of their choice. (AQO 105/07)

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat. Statements for children with special educational needs are maintained by education and library boards and are subject to annual in-school review. When an education and library board is aware that a school is closing, or a change of placement is required for other reasons, the annual review process enables future placement options to be discussed with the child's parents so that planning can commence for the next academic year.

If the child's parents are dissatisfied with the proposed alternatives, they have a choice of two routes — informal or formal — to raise their concerns. The informal route is a cross-board dispute avoidance and resolution service, which provides opportunities to resolve areas of disagreement between parents and schools and/or boards. Participation in that process is voluntary. The formal route, which is set in special education legislation,

gives parents the right to appeal to the special educational needs and disability tribunal.

An agreement has been reached with the parents of six of the eight pupils who currently attend Lisnasharragh High School, and who hold statements of special educational needs maintained by the South Eastern Education and Library Board, to transfer to another secondary school in the area. In consultation with the parents of the remaining two pupils, a decision will be made for suitable placement as a result of their annual review process. The Belfast Education and Library Board (BELB) currently maintains a statement of special educational needs for one additional pupil at Lisnasharragh High School; the BELB will work with that child's parents to secure a suitable alternative before the school is closed.

Mrs Long: I thank the Minister for her detailed response; in the light of that, I wish to raise an additional related matter. Recent studies have shown that more than 80% of children with special educational needs experience bullying in the classroom. Indeed, several pupils transferred to Lisnasharragh High School because of bullying in other schools in the area. Will the Minister reassure the House that, in the event of school closures in the future, special provision will be made to ensure that factors such as bullying are taken into account when children are relocated?

Ms Ruane: I will reassure the Member. Bullying must be dealt with at every level of society. The Department of Education is a member of the anti-bullying forum, which has counterparts in the South of Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales, and comprises the education and library boards and various children's rights organisations, with which the Department works closely. The forum has produced a report that will be launched by the Department of Education in the near future.

We must ensure that the most vulnerable children are protected. Many changes are required in education and throughout society. We must determine the causes of bullying; children with special needs are just as likely to be bullied as other pupils. As Minister of Education, I take those matters very seriously and will continue to do so.

On the other hand, I have visited so-called "mainstream" schools with units in which children with moderate and severe learning disabilities, as well as pupils with some physical disabilities, are accommodated. Those units have a hugely positive impact on the school and help to create a culture of respect for children with special educational needs. I attended a sporting event in Kilkeel at the weekend, at which children with special needs were integrated into a competitive event in a beautiful way. That is an example of the way in which we can combat bullying against children with

special needs, children from ethnic minorities or children belonging to any sector of the community.

Mr Spratt: As a member of the board of governors at Lisnasharragh High School, I know that the principal, Mrs Thompson, has done an excellent job assisting parents of special needs children to place them in other schools.

Will the Minister ensure that officials of the South Eastern Education and Library Board fully assist in that task, as promised during the consultation process on the closure?

Ms Ruane: The board is working with Lisnasharragh High School, as I said in a previous answer. The South Eastern Education and Library Board works very closely with the children and the school to find alternative placements. Change of any kind can be difficult, and it is important that the board and the Department ensure that the transition is as seamless and easy as possible for those children, their parents and the school.

School Starting Age

3. **Mr B McCrea** asked the Minister of Education if she is in favour of delaying the age at which children first attend primary school, and if so, what is the rationale for this. (AQO 95/07)

Ms Ruane: The question is a very important one, and I thank the Member for it.

I have no plans to change the starting age for compulsory education; however, I recognise that we have the youngest starting age in Europe, and that worries me.

The revised curriculum will start in September, and I welcome that, because our children start very young. The transition from pre-school to primary school needs to be as happy and stress-free as possible, because, as I said earlier, change can be difficult for children.

There are many stress points for children in our education system, and entering school is one of them. The Department really should examine how children transfer from pre-school to primary school. One reason that I like the revised curriculum is that it gives back to our primary, secondary and post-primary teachers the power that was taken away.

Teachers know our children. They know when a child feels a bit down or vulnerable, and they are the first to pick up the phone and say “Mary hasn’t been her best today. Is something wrong, or any way we can help?”

That is why the revised curriculum needs to be as open, child-friendly and stimulating as possible. That is the rationale of the new foundation state curriculum, which aims to ensure that children are introduced to education in a way, and at a pace, that takes account of their age, gender and level of maturity.

Mr B McCrea: I thank the Minister for her comments, and I am grateful that she does not plan to raise the age of admission.

Is the Minister aware that, by the age of four, a child can be more than two years behind in his or her educational development? Does she accept that research produced by her Department shows that high-quality pre-schooling, particularly when delivered in nursery school, is related to better intellectual and behavioural development in children?

Furthermore, is the Minister aware that in Finland — which, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) claims, has the best educational system in the world, and where the starting age for compulsory education is seven — over 60% of the population attends education-orientated day care centres by the age of three, the majority of those full time? Will the Minister agree that early, rather than late, formal intervention is required to tackle the tragedy of poor literacy and numeracy, which can blight successive generations?

Ms Ruane: The Member has made some important points.

Pre-school provision is of key importance, be it through the medium of English or Irish. I accept the Member’s point that all the studies show that children who go to a pre-school at three and four have a much better chance in life.

I have discussed early intervention in the education and health of our young children with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Michael McGimpsey.

We need a nought-to-seven strategy in order to deal with the triggers of disadvantage at an early age rather than having to deal with them when children are 14 or 16 years old.

I agree that we should have high-quality day-care centres right across the North of Ireland for all our children, but there is a big difference between the education that children receive in pre-school centres and that which they receive in primary schools. What happens — I saw this when my own child went from pre-school into primary school — is that there is a shock to the system if the primary curriculum is not developed suitably so that a seamless change is created between the two. I am happy to say that I believe that the revised curriculum will make a difference. Children can learn in many different ways, and we need to create ways that stimulate their learning.

Tackling poor literacy and numeracy is a high priority for us. Very early on — from six or eight months of age — children should be introduced to books so that they have the feel of them and understand what books are. Reading a story, or having a story read to

them, should be part of their bedtime. All the studies show that, where that happens, children gain better numeracy and literacy skills. It is important that we tackle all the different aspects of poor numeracy and literacy.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister explain why Northern Ireland continues to have the lowest school starting age not only in Europe but in the world when countries such as Moldova, where the school starting age is seven, outperform us in tests such as the third international mathematics and science study?

3.45 pm

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat. The question is relevant. If I were starting from scratch with our education system, I would say that children should start at a later age. That said, there would be huge implications for schools if the compulsory school starting age were to change at this point. Such a change would affect primary school enrolments and would have an impact on the size of school budgets, which are largely determined on the basis of pupil numbers. It would also have a knock-on effect on the number of staffing posts in primary schools and initial teacher training institutions and on the number of pre-school places available. It could also further call into question the viability of an increasing number of primary schools, which would fail to be addressed in the wider context of the current policy issues relating to the school estate.

As I said — I will repeat myself because this is important — I believe, and I hope that Members will agree, that the revised curriculum will go some way towards addressing the concerns about the very early age at which our children start.

As a teacher, Dominic Bradley will remember that the original intention behind the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 was that primary 1 would be equivalent to a nursery year. However, in many schools, children in primary 1 were quickly introduced to the formal curriculum. Sometimes, in their desire to see results, adults push children beyond the point that they should be pushed, and that was a case in point. However, this is a debate that we need to have. It is about money and costs, but I welcome further discussion on the issue in all different forums.

Mr Shannon: Will the Minister accept that, for many people in business, the fact that Northern Ireland's secondary schools have the highest-achieving students is a particularly strong selling point for the Province? The repercussions of fundamentally altering education provision would place that in jeopardy. Twiddling with the system now could change that for the future.

Ms Ruane: The fact that so many children do well academically is a strong selling point, but there is a band of children who do not do well. We have one of the greatest disparities between the top-achieving children

and the children at the bottom end. My worry, which was shared by the business community in a meeting that I attended along with Reg Empey, is how to make the curriculum relevant to young people who are not academically inclined and want a broad range of subjects.

One reason for having the revised curriculum and the entitlement framework is to provide our young people with the widest range of choice. We must ensure that once they reach the 14 to 16 age group and the 16 to 19 age group, they leave our school system as flexible, confident, articulate and creative adults, and that is what the revised curriculum intends to do.

We can all see that it is a changing world. Today, we have heard the tragic circumstances of young people taking their own lives. We must ensure that we do not put extra stress on our children. All learning should be relevant, and it should stimulate children.

Teacher Training

4. **Dr Farry** asked the Minister of Education what discussions she has had with the Minister for Employment and Learning concerning teacher training.

(AQO 108/07)

Ms Ruane: I met the Minister for Employment and Learning on 5 June 2007 to discuss matters of common interest relating to our Departments. Teacher training was on our long agenda, and we did not get to it in the time available. I will have a follow-up meeting with Reg Empey to discuss various aspects of teacher education, which will be part of our future bilateral meeting.

Dr Farry: I welcome the Minister to her first Question Time. Given the decline in pupil numbers, and that there are over 50,000 empty places in our schools, how will she ensure that the supply of teachers is consistent with demand? In that light, and given the broad thrust of the Bain Report, what are her views on duplicate teacher-training colleges catering for different sections of the education system? Is that situation sustainable?

Ms Ruane: My Department recognises that pupil numbers are on the decline. However, it does not necessarily follow that a reduction in pupil numbers automatically results in a reduction in the number of teachers. There are several reasons for that, such as the introduction of new policies that require additional teaching posts. My Department and the Department for Employment and Learning must work together to create opportunities for teachers. Teachers are on the front line, and they understand how a school works and what children need, as they deal with such matters every day. The Department needs the skills of those teachers on every level, and our society needs their skills on different levels.

In some cases there is an oversupply of teachers and in other cases there is a scarcity. For example, there are not enough teachers in the Irish-medium sector, and I need to discuss that with my counterpart in the South of Ireland. I will also discuss the matter with officials and the different teacher-training colleges.

To take account of the projected demographic decline and to avoid oversupply, the number of students admitted to teacher education courses was reduced by 34 in 2005-06, by 60 in 2006-07, and by a further 87 for the forthcoming academic year.

Reg Empey and I had a long discussion about careers. We must direct our children into areas where they are needed most, such as educational psychology and speech therapy. We do not have enough speech therapists and educational psychologists to enable us to deal with early intervention in the most effective way even though the number of posts has been increased.

I will be discussing duplication in teacher training and other issues with my colleagues, particularly Reg Empey. Those issues must be looked at in the context of the Bain Report, and there must be collaboration between schools and between the different sectors.

Mr Burnside: The Minister will recognise that most of our local teaching talent, although not all of it, comes from the two teacher-training colleges and the two universities. Is she saying that she will allow the issue of duplication in teacher training to be put on her agenda? Has she any plans for a radical review of the duplication that exists, and could that include looking at the four teacher-training establishments in Northern Ireland and moving them towards a more unitary-controlled state teacher-training establishment?

Ms Ruane: That is one area that my Department will examine. As I have said, there is oversupply of teachers in some areas and an under-supply in others. The Bain Report encourages all educational sectors to work together. However, my Department will examine that issue only in consultation with all educational sectors, including the Queen's University of Belfast, the University of Ulster, Stranmillis University College and St Mary's University College.

That is but one of many educational issues. Nothing has been decided, and we will examine all options.

Mr Attwood: I welcome the Minister to her first Question Time. I would like to probe the Minister about a matter, which is not about teacher numbers or the number of teacher-training facilities in the North. My question is about the Bain Report's recommendation for a common set of standards for qualified teacher status across all sectors in teaching 14- to 19-year-olds. Does she endorse that recommendation?

Furthermore, in her forthcoming meeting with the Minister for Employment and Learning, what will she

be saying with respect to a common set of standards for qualified teacher status for that age group?

Ms Ruane: I am currently examining the different pathways for 14- to 19-year-olds, and I have worked with the Minister for Employment and Learning to make those pathways more flexible. I met a school principal, Mr Uel McCrea, who prefers to use the word "lattice" rather than "ladder" with respect to those pathways. I also prefer to look at the education system as a lattice because the word "ladder" implies regimentation.

My Department can examine that issue; however, it has not been discussed to date. Whatever is decided must be as flexible as possible so that pathways can exist for all young people in that age group. There should not be only one way.

Achieving greater collaboration between schools must also be explored. I visited the Limavady area, among others, and it was good to see that three or four schools there had come together: some offered art and music, others Irish and history. Students from different schools had come together, and when I spoke to them, they thought that the arrangement was great. For the first time in their lives they were not walking past school buildings that they had never entered. I thought it a sign of great hope. Young people are up for it, which is good to see.

Citizenship

5. **Mr Ford** asked the Minister of Education what proposals exist to develop the teaching of citizenship in schools. (AQO 104/07)

Ms Ruane: I welcome the Member's question, which touches on a subject close to my own heart. Citizenship education aims to develop the capacity of young people: to participate positively and effectively in society; to influence democratic processes; and to make informed and responsible decisions throughout life. It is part of the revised curriculum from primary school onwards and is covered through personal development and mutual understanding. It then progresses into local and global citizenship at post-primary level.

Citizenship education has already been piloted in the vast majority of post-primary schools and commenced in 2002-03. It will become a statutory requirement when the revised curriculum is implemented on a phased basis from September 2007. An evaluation carried out last year by the Education and Training Inspectorate was positive.

Since training for citizenship education began in 2002-03, my Department has provided around £1.5 million to ensure that all necessary training is provided. To date, over 1,100 teachers in 276 post-primary schools

have received in-service training, and training of the remaining teachers will be completed by the end of this school year.

Mr Ford: I thank the Minister for her reply, and I welcome her to her first Question Time. I remind her that a survey of children's attitudes, reported by the BBC this morning, shows how much remains to be done.

Will the Minister ensure that in her work on teacher training to deal with that issue — and allowing for the plethora of other responsibilities that schools have — she continues to put great emphasis on citizenship education given the important role that schools could play in altering cultural attitudes among children?

4.00 pm

Ms Ruane: The Member can be sure that I will place a big emphasis on citizenship education. We are citizens of the world, and it is important that our children and young people be confident, articulate and flexible in their thinking. That is what is needed. The world is changing, and our children must be able to keep up with the changes. In some ways, they are leading the change — they are the ones who know how to use the mobile phones and the new technology.

In relation to training —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am sorry to interrupt the Minister, but time is up. As Members are aware, the Scottish First Minister, Alex Salmond, is due to address Members in the Senate Chamber at 4.00 pm. I propose therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 5.00 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 4.00 pm.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Welfare Reform Bill

Consideration Stage

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

5.00 pm

Debate resumed:

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie):

At 2.00 pm, I was addressing points raised by Members during the debate on the Consideration Stage of the Welfare Reform Bill, and I will now continue to do so. At the point when the debate was suspended, I was dealing with points raised by Mr O'Dowd on benefit payments. I want to point out that the Social Development Committee was told that benefits would not stop. The provisions in the Bill are needed to ensure that Employment Support Allowance (ESA) can be introduced in 2008, and I mentioned earlier that this Bill relates specifically to those who suffer from asbestosis-related conditions, and their relatives. The provisions in the Bill are needed to help them make claims, and we are introducing them at the same time as they are being introduced in GB.

Mr O'Dowd also referred to examinations — I can assure him that only healthcare professionals will undertake examinations. He also mentioned the change of opinion since the Transitional Assembly, and parity. As I made clear at the Second Stage of the Bill, I have considered the provisions of the Bill very closely with my officials, and I will ensure that it is implemented fairly, sensitively and sympathetically. Mr O'Dowd will well know the realities of parity, not least those relating to financial imperatives. I, as Minister for Social Development, like all Members of the Assembly, would like to debate legislation that related solely to Northern Ireland, but, as I said earlier today, we are very much predicated on financial considerations, and I do not want to place anybody's entitlement or future entitlement to benefit in jeopardy.

Mr Molloy asked why, if amendments are so inconsequential, Members will not accept them. I, as a Minister, cannot accept flawed and unnecessary amendments, although I do feel in many instances such amendments may be probing. He also referred to the issue of tribunals. Those of us who have experienced the tribunal process in the past know that tribunals can adjourn to seek further evidence if they wish. They can adjourn for a few minutes, or they can adjourn for several days or weeks, and we all have personal experience of representing constituents on tribunals.

Mr McCann raised issues about the operation of the Committee. I reiterate that the Committee was told that benefits would not stop; the Committee was told that

the easements to assist people claiming compensation for dust-related diseases should apply in Northern Ireland and that those easements and that benefit entitlement will equally apply to many of their relatives who live in close proximity to them.

I firmly believe that sufferers of dust-related diseases should apply for benefits in Northern Ireland with a minimum of delay, because I do not wish to see anybody who is suffering such a terminal disease suffer any more and be without benefit entitlement. Anyone who believes in the principles of social justice will think likewise.

I have listened very carefully today to the arguments put forward by Members across the Assembly.

Mr S Wilson: Before the Minister concludes her remarks on this, I want to say that Sinn Féin has tried to give the impression that its members alone are the defenders of those who suffer from mental-health problems and that the rest of the House does not care, because it opposes the Sinn Féin amendments. Does the Minister agree that generally Members of the Assembly want to see the best legislation? The amendments that are being proposed are not necessarily in the interests of the people whom they are supposed to be serving, and Sinn Féin has a cheek to claim to be defending those who suffer from mental-health problems, when over the last 30 years it has been responsible for giving many people those very problems.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Ms Ritchie: I thank Mr Wilson for his intervention. Every Member has sympathy with — and wants to defend — those who suffer from mental-health conditions. We are dealing with the legacy of the past. That legacy placed many people in conflict and may have undermined their personal positions, leaving them in a state of distress and trauma. We can attribute blame, but anyone who engaged in hatred, violence, or terrorism has made a contribution to the mental ill health that is suffered by many people. We cannot apportion blame to one section of the community, because others were responsible too.

We are trying to move on, and I hope that the new political dispensation will afford us the opportunity to do that. No one alone can act as the defender of those who suffer from mental ill health. Every Member has spoken unanimously in wanting to defend the needs, requirements and aspirations of those who suffer from mental ill health. Members spoke as one when they said that they wanted to deal with those people sensitively, and with compassion and dignity. I hope that the Assembly can proceed in that manner with the Welfare Reform Bill, and the provisions and clauses contained therein.

I have listened carefully to Members' points, and with particular care and attention to those points that were raised by Members in support of the

amendments. However, the amendments are flawed and unnecessary, albeit probing. If the amendments were accepted, they would allow for people without medical qualifications to carry out medical examinations. The amendment to clause 55, for example, would allow a psychiatric social worker to carry out medical examinations, for which they would be medically unqualified, and that is not appropriate.

The amendments mean that someone who has a severe physical disability, and a relatively minor mental-health condition, would be assessed by someone with experience of mental-health conditions, who may have no medical qualifications, despite the fact that serious physical-health conditions are involved.

The amendments would mean that a person who has a relatively minor mental-health condition would receive special provision under the legislation, but a severely physically disabled person would not, which is not right. The amendments are unnecessary because the legislation provides safeguards to ensure that those who carry out the assessments and medical examinations are suitably trained. The definition of a healthcare professional is sufficiently broad in the legislation to allow us to include other healthcare professionals, as and when appropriate. Clause 11 makes provision for that.

Moreover, there will be access to specialist advice, where necessary. The work-focused interviews will take account of individuals' needs, and there will be a system of safeguards for people with mental-health problems. We do not wish to force anyone to comply with requirements when they are not fit to do so due to health conditions. We are aiming to provide help and support, not to put pressure on people who suffer from mental-health conditions. At the same time, we do not want to disregard them. We want to ensure that they get all the help and encouragement that they need to fulfil their potential. We want to support and endorse those who suffer from mental-health conditions at every possible opportunity.

In light of my reassurances, I hope that the proposers will be able to withdraw their amendments. If that is not the case, I urge Members to reject the amendments, which are, no doubt, well intentioned. My reassurances, and the provisions and clauses in the Bill, including those in respect of clause 11, demonstrate that the amendments are flawed and unnecessary.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Michelle McIlveen referred to the amendments as change for change's sake. That is not the intention. The purpose of those amendments is to ensure that benefit claimants get the best deal possible.

Alban Maginness referred to the amendments as superfluous; I do not think that they are superfluous to those who suffer from mental-health problems. He talked of psychologists who may not be fully trained

and how it might be inappropriate to have such people performing examinations. As someone who has been involved in that area for a long time, I can assure Mr Maginness that appeal tribunals in particular welcome evidence from psychologists, who — and this is accepted — are trained in the area of mental health.

Much has been made of the difficulties for people with physical and mental-health problems. The purpose of the personal capability assessment is to find out which descriptor is most appropriate for a person. I wish I had the same unwavering faith in the social security system that Mr Maginness appears to have.

Mr Ford talked about the real concerns that exist and how the amendments did not necessarily deal with them. He also talked of a raft of amendments to specify particular health professionals. If a raft of amendments is essential to promote the Welfare Reform Bill, then so be it.

Mr Shannon supports the Bill and talked about negative repercussions for people with mental-health issues. Most people welcome the idea of getting those on benefits back to work, but they have to be individuals whose health problems will not be made worse by their doing so.

In one of his interventions, Mr S Wilson talked about specialists: for instance, if someone has a heart condition, a specialist should be involved. That is the case in many situations: appeal tribunals have the wherewithal to request specialist medical evidence, because a doctor, for example, cannot detect angina unless there is a treadmill in the room. That sort of thing needs to be resolved.

Mr O'Dowd supported the motion, and Dr McDonnell referred in his intervention to his 28 years as a GP and to how as many as 50% of his patients may have presented with mental-health problems. How many of those patients did he refer to specialists if specialists were more capable of dealing with them?

Mr S Wilson has talked about belated attempts by Sinn Féin to introduce amendments after the accelerated passage was agreed. The Minister said today that the Sinn Féin amendments would interfere with, and possibly hold back, benefits from people who suffer from asbestos-related conditions. Mr S Wilson said that although he agreed in general with parity, he would disagree with it if it had an impact on a person's right to benefit. It is not possible to have it both ways.

I accept that the Minister is committed to getting the best possible legislation through. The legislation is flawed. In my experience of dealing with social security legislation over the last 30-odd years, I have never seen a piece of legislation specifically designed to enhance and increase the value of the lives of those on benefits.

In relation to the help and support that people need, there was talk about medical exams and reports. Other health professions are mentioned in the legislation, so why not psychiatric social workers, psychiatrists, psychologists and community psychiatric nurses? Those are the questions that people are asked at tribunals. Also, there can be an inference that, if a person has not attended one of these particular experts in relation to their condition, then it minimises the condition in the eyes of those people who are dealing with them — tribunals, in particular.

The Minister said that the employment support allowance would be introduced in 2008. I think that that is accepted.

5.15 pm

Mr Wilson talked about "best legislation" in his intervention. I am wondering whether he can give some examples of best legislation for people on benefit from the past 30 years, because I certainly cannot.

The Minister talked about contributing factors, particularly the Troubles. She mentioned terrorism and related problems. I think that the Minister would be wise to look at the impact that changes in social security legislation have had on people, as well.

I finish by saying that people talk about minor mental-health problems — surely the role of a specialist is to discover whether it is a minor problem. If so, people can be made aware of that, and that can go into the system.

I ask the Assembly once again to support these amendments. Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

Question put, That amendment No 1 be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 19; Noes 65.

AYES

Mr Adams, Ms Anderson, Mr Boylan, Mr Brady, Mr Brolly, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McElduff, Mrs McGill, Mr McHugh, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr Molloy, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Brady and Mr F McCann.

NOES

Mr Armstrong, Mr Attwood, Mr Beggs, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr Burns, Mr Burnside, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dallat, Mr Donaldson, Mr Durkan, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Sir Reg Empey, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Gallagher, Mr Hamilton, Mrs Hanna, Mr Hilditch, Mrs D Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Ms Lo, Mrs Long, Mr A Maginness, Mr McCallister,

Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr McClarty, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Dr McDonnell, Mr McFarland, Mr McGlone, Miss McIlveen, Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr O'Loan, Mr Paisley Jnr, Mr Poots, Mr P Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Mr G Robinson, Mrs I Robinson, Mr K Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr B Wilson, Mr S Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr D Bradley and Mr Burns.

Question accordingly negatived.

Clause 11 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

5.30 pm

Clause 12 (Work-focused interviews)

Amendment No 2 negatived.

Clause 12 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 13 to 15 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 16 (Contracting out)

Mr Speaker: We now debate Mr Brady's and other Members' opposition to clause 16, which deals with the question of whether the Department should have the power to contract out some of its functions.

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The heading of clause 16 in the Welfare Reform Bill is "Contracting out". The reason for the proposed deletion of that clause is to ensure that the tasks of interviewing and dealing with clients are not contracted out to the private sector. It is essential that the importance of the role of personal advisers be recognised. Those people must be trained to a high degree, particularly in dealing with people with mental-health problems. If the private sector were to deal with that, issues of confidentiality, sensitivity and accountability would be brought into question. Those matters should be kept in-house, where implementation in areas such as training would be carefully monitored. The farming out of those tasks would inevitably lead to job losses in the Civil Service and in the public sector in general. Jobs must be created locally, not cut back so that faceless private companies can prosper.

Training for people carrying out such interviews must be genuine, must have clear objectives, and must be of the highest standard to meet the needs of people with physical and mental-health disabilities. Constant monitoring must also be put in place. There is no place for private companies in the administration or assessment of benefits — that should never arise. The welfare and well-being of claimants should be paramount. I ask the Assembly's support for the deletion of clause 16. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Craig: Sinn Féin's arguments in opposition to clause 16 turn everything that has come before on its head.

A Member: What is new?

Mr Craig: Exactly: what is new?

Concerns have been raised about how people with mental-health conditions are treated, and the argument has been made that they must receive the best and most suitable help for their condition. Clause 16 contains provision to allow contracted providers in the private and voluntary sectors to carry out functions related to work-focused interviews. That does not mean that the work is contracted out; it involves bringing in the expertise of the voluntary sector to help individuals with mental and learning disabilities and disorders. Opposing clause 16 of the Bill will prevent the possibility of bringing that expertise into the system. I cannot see how its removal would improve the Bill.

Sinn Féin supported the accelerated passage of the Bill. The party may not want to be reminded of that fact, but it is true. What has caused the difference in attitude between the Committee meeting and what has occurred in the Chamber today? Where has that party's opposition come from?

Members are aware that accelerated passage was sought in order to ensure parity with the rest of the United Kingdom. Any Member who tables an amendment that might breach that principle would need to provide extremely strong evidence for doing so. The issue is more about Sinn Féin's attempts to score points against other parties, and it is prepared to let the ordinary people of Northern Ireland suffer to do so.

Since the Bill was introduced, our attitude has been that it must ensure that people who are in receipt of benefits across Northern Ireland are treated equally to people in the rest of the United Kingdom. For that reason, I will not support the amendment.

Mr A Maginness: I oppose the amendment to clause 16. It is important to emphasise that clause 16 is a permissive power; it is not mandatory nor is it intended to be so. The intention is to provide a power that the Minister or the Department may wish to exercise in the future.

Mr Brady mentioned the fact that the power enables the Department to contract out to private bodies. That is true. Equally, however, clause 16 enables the Department to contract out to voluntary organisations that have the expertise to deal with particular situations, such as introducing tailor-made interview processes, which would be of great assistance to claimants. In the earlier debate on the Bill, Members highlighted many other situations that could be altered to help claimants.

There is an element of selectivity from Mr Brady and his colleagues in their opposition to clause 16. On the one hand, they say that they want special

consideration to exist. However, if the Department decides —

Mr F McCann: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: Just hear me out.

However, clause 16 enables the Department to decide sometime in the future to contract out particular services to expert voluntary organisations, if it would be necessary or helpful to do so. Mr Brady seeks to exclude that power from the Bill. I shall give way to Mr McCann now.

Mr F McCann: I understand the Member's point. However, during the earlier debate, I specifically mentioned the number of people with psychiatric training. Those people could provide that expertise individually. Contracting out means putting a contract out to tender among different groups and organisations, any of which could apply. The group that offers the lowest tender will probably be chosen to provide the types of services that have been mentioned.

Mr A Maginness: The Member does not understand my point. It is not simply a tendering exercise, but one that will bring in the best possible expertise, particularly from voluntary organisations, in order to assist the Department. Opposing clause 16 will prevent the Department from being able to deal with claimants in a more customised fashion. Therefore, Sinn Féin has taken a retrograde step by bringing forward this amendment.

Furthermore, in order to implement clause 16, regulations would have to be made. Mr Brady's points in relation to problems in implementing the legislation can all be met by a rigorous series of regulations that deal with the weaknesses and points of contention that he, rightly, raised. The Assembly, or the Social Development Committee, can address that in the future. Therein lies a series of safeguards in relation to clause 16.

Let me emphasise that this power is permissive; it is not mandatory. The Department does not have to contract out services, but it can consider doing so in the future. If it considers that there is good practice elsewhere, and evidence-based experience that can inform our decisions, why should it not bring that to the Assembly for further discussion?

Clause 16 allows not only the Department for Social Development, but also the Department for Employment and Learning, to deal with this process. That is important, because there is obvious cross-referencing between the two Departments when dealing with the social issues that they have in common. If the Assembly rejects clause 16, it is rejecting potential flexibility for the Department to deal with this situation. Therefore, I ask the House to reject this amendment.

Mr Speaker: Before I call the next Member, I remind Members that this is not a debate on an amendment to this clause. Rather, Mr Brady and other Members have

declared their intention to vote against the clause remaining part of the Bill. It is important to state that, and I hope that it will be clear when the Question is put.

Dr Farry: I am in favour of retaining clause 16. We must be careful not to fall into the trap of saying, "public sector good, private sector bad". Similarly, we must avoid the trap of saying that all PPP or PFI projects are bad and that all public-sector procurement is good.

There are circumstances in which contracting out to the private sector makes sense. It can be a more efficient way of providing services, and so provide a better public service for the entire community. The same logic applies to other projects where the private sector can be brought in. There are good and bad examples. We need the flexibility to enter into good examples of contracting out or other private-sector initiatives and the discipline to avoid bad ones.

It is important that Members avoid hanging themselves on ideological hooks. The Assembly has a wide agenda of questions to answer and challenges to meet in the coming months and years. It must be flexible in its approach. I too recognise that this clause describes a permissive power. It does not say that the Department must go down a certain route; it merely gives the Department the option of contracting out services to the private or voluntary sectors if, at some point, it proves wise to do so.

I am satisfied that regulations can be put in place to provide safeguards, if the Department chooses to use this power. The House should recognise that the private sector in Northern Ireland needs to grow. The public sector is too large in relation to the private sector. The strengths in the voluntary and community sector must also be recognised.

Northern Ireland has one of the most sophisticated community and voluntary sectors in the entire world, and Members should not underestimate the abilities of organisations in that sector to deliver services. Along these Benches, Members are happy that the clause should stand part of the Bill.

Mr F McCann: Privatisation or contracting out will ensure that those who work for Departments in Government buildings will be considered surplus to requirements. Members should consider the Bill as it is currently worded, so that they are under no illusions as to what I am talking about:

"Contracting out

16.—(1) The following functions of the Department may be exercised by, or by employees of, such person (if any) as it may authorise for the purpose, namely—

- (a) conducting interviews under section 12;
- (b) providing documents under section 14;
- (c) giving, varying or revoking directions under section 15."

That clause continues for another page and a half. Under the Welfare Reform Bill as introduced, people from the private sector will do a large proportion of that work.

Consider the vote for one minute. Are Members here to provide the most up-to-date, professional service possible, and to ensure through Civil Service employment a high level of expertise that is backed up by years of experience? Alternatively, are Members in the process of throwing away all of that by contracting out services to private companies? Those groups and organisations pay minimum wage and offer little training in most cases. Are we about to give them access to private documentation and authorise them to conduct interviews with claimants? Will the directors of a private company put profit before care for their workforce? Can the loyalty of those companies be bought?

Over the years, I have had many arguments with civil servants from different levels — and I intend to have many more. When they start their careers, civil servants pledge to maintain standards of service and privacy. Consider the information that the public are encouraged to give to the Social Security Agency when applying for benefits: personal and medical information; private financial details; information that gets to the core of who a person is.

5.45 pm

In the course of my constituency work, I have built relationships with those people from the other end of the counter, so to speak, and I have confidence in the professionalism of their work. Members have all had moments of disagreement with some of their decisions. However, could the current standard of professional relationship be maintained if the Bill were to be passed? That relationship works both ways. Regardless of organisation or political party, advice centres working at the coalface rely on professionalism and strong working relationships to assist and help those in most need in the community.

Sinn Féin believes that this Bill is about getting as many people as possible off incapacity benefit. Again, consider specific sections. In the explanatory and financial memorandum of the Bill as introduced, guidance on work-focused interviews under clause 12 states that:

“If the claimant fails to participate fully in a work-focused interview and cannot show good cause for that failure within the permitted time, the amount of employment and support allowance he is entitled to would be reduced. Regulations under *subsection (4)* will set out the amounts of the reductions.”

It is obvious that the Bill was not gender-proofed. It continually talks of “he”, not “they”. Sinn Féin is concerned that Members may pass the Bill without a full understanding of its consequences: namely that somewhere down the line, outside providers will carry

out all services. Are Members in danger of subcontracting welfare benefits? What will happen if it all goes wrong and standards collapse? Will the Assembly be in a position to reverse those decisions? I fear not. By that stage, in another efficiency drive, the Government will have shed those people who delivered the welfare state. Do Members want to go down that road and to hand over those activities to the highest bidder? That is the decision we face. For everyone’s sake, I hope we make the right one. Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

Ms Ritchie: It may be tempting to pursue purely local solutions to local problems in social security provision, as in other areas of our responsibility. However, as I said earlier in the debate on the previous amendments, we are constrained by the realities of parity, not the least of those being the huge financial resources that are dependent on the maintenance of parity. It might be helpful if I explain the purpose of clause 16.

Clause 16 will allow the Department for Social Development and the Department for Employment and Learning to draw upon the skills of others, such as the voluntary sector, to deliver some of their departmental functions — under part 1 of the Bill — to claimants of employment and support allowance. It will also have an effect on the conduct of work-focused interviews, drawing up action plans and issuing directions.

I must stress that there are no plans at this time to use those powers. As Mr A Maginness and Dr Farry pointed out, clause 16 is permissive not mandatory. Clause 16(1) states that:

“The following functions of the Department may be exercised”.

Clause 16(2) states that:

“Regulations may provide for any of the following functions”.

It is accepted that some private organisations and voluntary agencies have a wealth of experience in delivering specialist employment support and advice. My Department and the Department for Employment and Learning recognise and value that experience. However, in Northern Ireland, such organisations tend to be small and localised, and they do not have the capacity to manage successfully the full range of support and advice that is required to deliver the employment and support allowance to claimants.

The Pathways to Work programme will roll out in Northern Ireland between October 2007 and April 2008 under the current public-sector model, which is led by the Department for Employment and Learning. Initially, the current Pathways to Work conditionality regime and delivery model will apply when employment and support allowance is introduced. Allowing other bodies to deliver those functions would only be considered in the light of firm evidence that alternative approaches are effective, efficient and value for money. If and

when any functions are contracted out, the same rules, review and appeal processes will be in place for all organisations that carry out conditionality functions. That will ensure a consistency of applications for all claimants. In addition, the delivery of contracted-out functions will be carefully monitored.

I appreciate the concerns expressed by some Members that external providers might not possess the ethos of public service that underpins the public sector and may be motivated by profit rather than the interests of the claimant. However, my Department and the Department for Employment and Learning will remain responsible for all functions carried out on their behalf. Contractors would be liable for prosecution for any criminal activity resulting from their actions — or lack of action. As I have already made clear, the respective Departments will closely monitor the delivery of functions by an external provider.

Although there are currently no plans to use the powers described in clause 16, it would be wrong to deny ourselves the use of that option in the future. For example, those powers could be used to draw on the specific expertise of mental-health organisations to assist in dealing with people with mental-health problems. It is important to note, however, that before either Department could seek to exercise those powers, it would, of course, consult with its respective Committee. I want to put that on the record.

Mr Brady raised the issue of confidentiality of information. The unlawful disclosure of Social Security Agency information, by either civil servants or anyone who provides a service to Departments, is an offence. I assure Members that I would not tolerate unscrupulous contractors found to be acting improperly while working on behalf of my Department. I want to put that on the public record, too.

Mr McCann asked whether organisations would act professionally if the Department decided to contract out to providers at a later stage. I say to him that the delivery of functions by external providers will be very carefully monitored.

The other issue that Mr McCann raised was that the Bill has not been gender-proofed. The Bill is drafted in accordance with standard drafting practice. The Interpretation Act 1954 provides for the word “he” to mean “she” also. By way of information, the Office of the Legislative Counsel is moving towards gender-neutral drafting.

I have said that I intend to return to the Committee and that the Minister for Employment and Learning will return to the Committee for Employment and Learning before proceeding down the route of contracting out to providers. Having given those assurances, I hope that Members who oppose clause 16 will realise that it

could be a useful tool for the future and that they might reconsider their opposition to the clause.

I understand the sensitive issues involved and that information must be dealt with sensitively, because confidential, personal and private information on claimants is being dealt with, and that information must remain in the private domain.

Given those reassurances, I hope that Members will be able to reconsider their opposition to the clause. I trust that Members will agree that it would be wrong to deny ourselves the flexibility for the future that clause 16 offers.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

Mr Craig talked about available help in the system. I resent his remark that I am attempting to score political points — or to score points on political issues — on the back of vulnerable people, particularly those who suffer from mental-health problems.

Mr Alban Maginness opposed the deletion of clause 16. He said that it was a permissive, mandatory power. If that is the case, why include clause 16 in the Bill?

Ms Ritchie: It is not mandatory.

Mr A Maginness: I am sorry, Mr Speaker, but I beg to differ.

Mr Brady: Sorry. The Member said that it was non-mandatory. My mistake.

Why include the clause in the Bill? There has been a great deal of talk about voluntary organisations having the wherewithal and expertise to help. As someone who has worked in the voluntary sector for the past 26 years, I wonder from where the funding will come, because it has been my experience that the voluntary sector is lacking in funding, and, indeed, support, from the Department.

Dr Farry talked about “public sector good, private sector bad”. When that logic is applied to social security legislation, it is obvious that to have people in the private sector dealing with social security issues is not the best option. Mr McCann made that point well.

Mr P Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Why is the Member being permitted to speak twice? *[Interruption]*. I am making a point of order, Mr Speaker, if the Member would like to resume his seat. He is not speaking to an amendment, so he does not have the right of reply.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Member for his point of order.

This is a very substantive issue. We thought that the Member should be allowed to wind up.

Mr P Robinson: On a further point of order, Mr Speaker.

Does that mean that if there is a substantive issue for debate, any Member can get up to speak more than once?

Mr Speaker: On that further point of order, it might be useful if I come back to the House on that issue.

Mr Brady: With respect, in reply to the Member opposite's point of order, I was simply acceding to the Speaker's request. That is probably the best way to explain the matter. I am sure that the Member is much better versed in these matters than I am, but, as a matter of courtesy, I was acceding to the Speaker's request.

6.00 pm

Mr Speaker: I interrupt the Member for a moment — I will allow him to finish afterwards — to deal with a procedural issue. Obviously, the business will not be disposed of by 6.00 pm. In accordance with Standing Order 10(3), I will allow the business to continue until 7.00 pm or until the business has been completed. I now ask the Member to finish.

Mr Brady: In response to the Member opposite's concern, I will try to be as brief as possible.

The Minister said that there are no plans to use the powers in clause 16, but she then talked about what would happen if she decided to contract out. I think that she meant to refer to what may happen if she were to decide to contract out.

Finally, I seek clarification from the Minister on the consultation. She said that 320 copies of the consultation document on the Bill were issued. I am interested to find out — this may not be the time or the place — the results of that consultation and whether there was a consensus on the Bill. Go raibh maith agat.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 16 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 17 to 34 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 35 (Payment of housing benefit)

Mr Speaker: We now debate amendment No 3, with which it will be convenient to debate amendment No 4. The amendments deal with the payment of housing benefit and with debt counselling. As amendment No 4 is consequential to amendment No 3, I will call amendment No 4 only if amendment No 3 is made.

Mr F McCann: I beg to move amendment No 3: In page 28, line 22, leave out paragraph (a) and insert

- “(a) a payment or payments by the Housing Executive or the Department of Finance and Personnel, as the case may be—
- (i) to a person on E's behalf or in respect of a liability which E has (where E is the person entitled to the payment); or
- (ii) directly to E only where E requests it to be so paid,”

The following amendment stood on the Marshalled List:

No 4: In page 28, line 34, at end insert

“(2C) Regulations may provide that the Housing Executive or the Department of Finance and Personnel, as the case may be, shall provide debt counselling to vulnerable persons who in requesting payment of Housing Benefit in accordance with subsection (2)(a) (ii) may experience financial difficulties.” — [Mr F McCann.]

It gives me great pleasure to move amendment No 3, which, if passed, will save many vulnerable people from falling into difficulties with arrears because they choose to buy food for their families or essentials for their home before they pay the rent. All Members of the Social Development Committee had serious reservations about aspects of the Bill, especially the provision to allow payment of housing benefit directly to the applicant, thus bypassing the landlord or owner of the property.

I do not intend to speak too long in the debate because the choice is clear. Members can either support amendment No 3 and thereby build in protection to ensure that the most vulnerable in our community are protected from possible eviction for arrears, or they can leave things to chance so that we end up picking up the pieces for a catalogue of families or individuals in severe debt who choose to put food on the table rather than pay the rent. I have been told that the payment is a matter of choice and that it should be left for the individual to choose whether they want their housing benefit to be paid directly to them or to the owner of the property. Amendment No 3 takes on board that concern by providing that those who wish to avail of the opportunity to have their housing benefit paid directly to them may do so.

The Minister gave a commitment to come back to the Committee and discuss Part 2 of the Bill, which relates to housing benefit. She said that she was sympathetic to many points that were raised. However, there is no guarantee that changes will be made or that protections, which Sinn Féin believes are essential to protect people, will be taken on board and inserted in the Bill.

It is not often that I quote from the Residential Landlords Association, but the association has said that a lot of landlords in Leeds will withdraw from the market. The association also said that a strong immigrant market is replacing the benefit market. There are similar quotes right across the board. People receiving their benefits directly could find that it has an adverse affect.

The Sinn Féin group on the Committee believes that the best way to ensure that the issue is dealt with is through a debate on the Floor of the House. It would give Members an opportunity to say whether they are in favour of including the necessary protection to help those who may fall foul of the legislation as it is currently worded.

In a briefing for the Second Reading of Part 2 of the Welfare Reform Bill, which relates to housing benefit, Shelter Scotland said:

“Shelter believes that amendments should be made to the Bill, introducing better safeguards for tenants who might experience difficulty managing the LHA payments,”

— the LHA is the local housing allowance, which is the same as housing benefit —

“and fall into rent arrears and face eviction and homelessness as a result.”

Why leave matters to chance when they can be dealt with now? In a year's time it may be too late. If amendment No 3 is agreed to, and we can stop one person from being a victim of rent-arrears eviction, it will have been worth it.

Amendment No 4 states:

“(2C) Regulations may provide that the Housing Executive or the Department of Finance and Personnel, as the case may be, shall provide debt counselling to vulnerable persons who in requesting payment of Housing Benefit in accordance with subsection (2)(a) (ii) may experience financial difficulties.”

The House should support the amendment, as it goes straight to the heart of the Bill. The lack of thought in the Bill for people who may fall into difficulties, or into arrears, is obvious. We have talked about the problems that may arise if the Bill is implemented, and the impact that it may have on those most vulnerable in our community.

I do not believe that there is one Member in the Chamber who has not, in the course of his or her constituency work, come across people who have been depressed to the point of suicide because they have a secret that they felt that they could not share with others. That secret is debt. How many people have kept that secret because they were frightened that their partner or husband would find out? How many people have Members spoken to who were ashamed that anyone would know that they were deeply in debt and who felt that they had nowhere to turn?

How many people have broken down because they have been under so much pressure that they felt that they could not go on with life? How many people have Members spoken to who, when they eventually approached someone with experience or were pointed in the right direction to a debt counsellor, recognised that there was light at the end of the tunnel after all?

There is an old saying that a problem shared is a problem halved. Imagine a partner or spouse trying to work out the weekly or monthly income and realising that there is not enough money to pay the rent or mortgage, feed the children, pay for clothing or bus fares for school. It is not a difficult choice for a parent to make.

Agreeing to amendment No 4 would introduce a procedure to allow those people who choose to have

their benefit paid directly to avail themselves of first-rate counselling to assist them when they fall into arrears. To say no to the amendment would be to turn our backs on those people who are most in need of our help. It would send out the wrong signal and show that we do not care.

Have any Members in the Chamber seen an eviction or ever dealt with the aftermath of an eviction? There were a number of evictions in West Belfast some months ago. The majority of people involved were women and children; their crime was rent arrears. Sometimes the evictions happened when people were out of their properties, their doors were forced and their belongings taken away for storage.

At the time, Sinn Féin met senior Housing Executive officials who had initiated the evictions through the Enforcement of Judgments Office. Sinn Féin argued that there had to be a better way of dealing with evictions and asked that Housing Executive officials should make arrangements to sit down with those people who were in arrears and advise them to seek debt counselling. Sinn Féin also asked the Housing Executive to produce educational leaflets to explain the dangers of falling into debt, and to contact family members or anyone close — for example, a doctor, a local councillor, a priest or community worker — who might be in a position to help persons in debt and could impress upon them the necessity of paying their rent arrears.

In many instances the debtors are low earners whose incomes fall just outside the housing benefit level. They feel that they have only enough money to feed and clothe their children. Members have an opportunity to put the horse before the cart —

Mr S Wilson: I thank the Member for giving way, as he always does.

What the Member describes is what already happens in all Housing Executive offices. There, people — sometimes with huge arrears of debt — receive advice and sympathetic consideration from housing managers, to the point where minimal payments are often accepted. The Housing Executive also puts debtors in touch with organisations that can help them to manage their finances.

Mr F McCann: Some of that help has been introduced only recently. Several political parties have voiced concerns about the number of evictions. On many occasions, eviction is the first solution resorted to.

At a meeting of the Committee for Social Development on 17 May, several members voiced concern about the payment of housing benefit to claimants rather than to property owners or landlords. Where tenants are in receipt of housing benefit, there is no procedure by which debt counselling is offered as soon as tenants fall into arrears of rent. People wait until they have £6,000 —

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to take his seat for a moment. Although there is no time limit on contributions to the debate, it would be useful if Members kept their comments extremely brief. There is a great deal of business to get through.

Mr F McCann: I have allowed Mr Wilson to intervene 11 times today, so he has taken up most of my time.

My point is that the Housing Executive waits until people are thousands of pounds in debt before it acts. The amendment is intended to introduce a process by which tenants falling four, eight or 12 weeks in arrears are identified and appropriate action is triggered. People in debt should have explained to them the various ways of dealing with debt. There should be no automatic recourse to the Enforcement of Judgements Office and to eviction. No Member likes to see evictions.

Everyone who applies for housing benefit should be advised that debt counselling is available. Those falling into arrears should be identified at an early stage and dealt with proactively before they present problems.

Last Thursday, several groups gave evidence to the Committee for Social Development on the problem of homelessness. Those groups provide excellent advice and, if they were better resourced, they would fulfil the need.

Go raibh maith agat.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Hilditch): On 24 May, the Minister attended a meeting of the Committee to explain her reasons for requesting accelerated passage for the Welfare Reform Bill.

The Committee agreed to support the Minister's request only after she had given an explicit undertaking that she would not bring forward regulations to change the current method of paying housing benefit until she had considered the matter further and fully discussed the matter with the Committee. The Committee did not discuss the detail of the regulations that could be brought forward by the Minister under clause 35, and therefore I cannot give the Committee's view on the proposed amendment.

I want to comment now on the amendments in a personal capacity, not as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee. My colleague the Chairman of the Committee, and all the DUP members of the Committee, were most sceptical of the proposals to pay housing benefit directly to tenants.

However, we have had assurances from the Minister, during Committee meetings, and in the House during the Second Stage of the Bill, that there will be no movement on this matter without evidence being provided and without full consultation with the Committee. Those remarks are recorded in Hansard, and I again welcome the Minister's assurance on the matter.

6.15 pm

The amendment is therefore unnecessary, and the proposers have moved it in the full knowledge that it will be defeated in the House. They are allowing Members to posture in opposition despite the fact that they supported accelerated passage in Committee and that their more senior party colleagues supported the Bill in the Executive.

Last week in the House, the Minister said that certain Members seemed to refuse assurances given on any matter relating to the Bill for purely party political reasons. Those words are quite fitting in light of today's debate.

However, Sinn Féin Members might not be quite so comfortable if there were a real possibility that their amendments would be passed because that would mean that parity would be broken, and their constituents could possibly lose out on benefit payments — which, of course, would not make for such nice headlines in the local papers.

If the issue returns to the Assembly, we will have a real chance to look at the matter in detail at that stage, with the benefit of evidence to back up our view. As a party, we have always supported the Bill, and we fully support its progress through the House. Therefore, we will not be supporting the amendments.

Mr A Maginness: I reiterate what Mr Hilditch has said. I do not want to go through the detail of his remarks, but it is quite clear that the Minister has given a firm public undertaking to the Social Development Committee and to the Assembly. It therefore comes as a major surprise that some Members, including members of the Social Development Committee, have tabled an amendment that is clearly unnecessary. I am not one to accuse people of playing politics —

Some Members: Go on.

[Laughter.]

Mr A Maginness: However, the tabling of this amendment verges towards playing politics with claimants and vulnerable people. The mover of the amendment and his party purport to be defenders of vulnerable people. That is a risky exercise. However, he does come to the House with the full confidence that parties, apart from Sinn Féin, will oppose his amendment. Therefore, the risk to parity, with all of the associated implications, is avoided. Thus, the Member is proposing an amendment in order to have it rejected, not to have it passed. It is not very good politics to do that.

Mr O'Dowd: The debate seems to have returned to the subject of parity. If the amendment were to be passed, parity would not be broken. The Minister has already stated that she is prepared to look at the matter in another way. Sinn Féin believes that the provisions outlined in the amendments should be included in the

legislation. Should any of the amendments proposed by my party be passed, parity would not be broken.

Mr A Maginness: I hear what the Member has said. However, the Minister made it quite clear in Committee meetings that if the Welfare Reform Bill is not passed, or, indeed, if the House rejects any provision in the Bill, parity will be imperilled. As the amendment involves a delivery mechanism, it may well be that if it were to be carried, parity would remain. Nonetheless, the principle of parity is being threatened. This amendment has been tabled to score a political point rather than strengthen the legislation or protect parity or the interests of vulnerable people. It is therefore important that the House rejects the amendment.

Members are skating on thin ice when they bring spurious amendments of this type, not for genuine reasons, but for party-political ones; it does not help the process in the House and does not help anybody outside either.

My final point is to do with the fourth amendment. Mr S Wilson has made the point that the Housing Executive has a thorough debt-counselling procedure for dealing with the problems of people who get into debt through rent arrears and so forth; to ignore that is to ignore facts on the ground. The procedures are there and will remain. If in the future, the Department deems it necessary to extend this to include people outside this catchment area, in the private sector, for example, that can also be done by way of regulation, and there is no reason for it not to be done.

The Minister has given an assurance that she will come back to the Social Development Committee and revisit many of the issues that have been raised in the House today. The Minister is not a person to duck issues, nor a person without compassion; she is sensitive to the needs of the most vulnerable in our community, and I can assure the House that if necessary the Minister will come back and deal with this problem. I ask the House to reject the second amendment.

Ms Lo: I rise to oppose both amendments. Of course there are concerns about direct payments for housing benefit, and there is the potential for people to fall into debt over rent arrears. It is essential that there is appropriate advice to help claimants to manage their finances, but currently, as other Members have said, there is a range of such advice on offer from both the statutory and the voluntary sectors. I totally disagree that debt counselling should be enshrined in law as mandatory for all claimants who want to have housing benefit paid directly.

I understand too that the issue of payment and advice will be dealt with by secondary legislation that will prescribe the circumstances for making payments directly to people. The amendments should therefore

not be the concerns of this Bill and are unhelpful at this moment.

I would like to secure at this stage the Minister's reassurance that careful consideration will be given to exercising direct payments and that claimants will be given proper advice and support when opting for such a format if they so wish in the future.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat. After all Mr Maginness's years in politics I am interested that he is surprised by anything. Because of the amendments, I have learnt two new words from him today: "spurious" and "superfluous". So it was worth coming here after all.

The proposal in the Welfare Reform Bill is that housing benefit should be paid directly to the claimant rather than the landlord, and I accept that the Minister has stated that she will defer any decision on this until after further discussion with the Committee for Social Development. However, the amendment is to ensure that housing benefit is paid directly only to those clients who request it and may be able to manage their budgets adequately. The obvious problem is that although more money may go into a weekly budget, it will not necessarily be used to pay rent, and inevitably that person will get deeper into debt. It therefore makes sense to pay housing benefit directly to the landlord to avoid these problems and support those people in receipt of benefit. I ask the Assembly to support this amendment.

Amendment No 4 is designed to ensure that if people do get into debt as a result of the changes to the payment of housing benefit, it should be incumbent upon the Housing Executive or the Department of Finance and Personnel to provide debt counselling to help those people through.

Unfortunately, for people in receipt of benefits, debt is part and parcel of their daily lives, and can be difficult to resolve. Debt counselling can be effective in giving people an insight into how to deal with their problems. Therefore, it does not seem unreasonable that those statutory agencies that administer benefits should get involved in helping claimants to resolve their problems. I ask the Assembly to support the amendment. Go raibh maith agat.

Ms Ritchie: I come to the House as someone who defends the rights of the vulnerable and the less well off, and I want to put on record that the Executive supported the Welfare Reform Bill.

Clause 35 amends section 126(2) of the Social Security Administration (Northern Ireland) Act 1992 to provide a regulation-making power that would require payment to be made directly to the tenant, rather than to the landlord, as is normally the case at present. The Department for Work and Pensions proposes to bring forward regulations in Great Britain to allow the new local housing allowance to be paid directly to the tenant

in the private rented sector. There are no plans to use that power for the social housing sector.

Lest anyone is suffering from amnesia, or selective retention of facts today, I have already made my position clear on several occasions. I have reservations about the proposal. I have voiced concerns at a meeting with the Committee for Social Development on 24 May 2007, and again during the debates on accelerated passage on 4 June 2007, and at Second Stage on 12 June 2007. I know that the Chairperson, Mr Gregory Campbell, the Deputy Chairperson, Mr David Hilditch, and members of the Committee share my concerns. I have given firm assurances that I will not introduce regulations until I am absolutely satisfied that direct payments to tenants would work. That remains my position. I will go back to the Committee if I choose to follow the other path.

Mr McCarthy: The Housing Executive has already issued instructions to landlords that the new payment will come into effect on 1 April 2008. Is the Minister for Social Development saying that that will not happen?

Ms Ritchie: I have made my position clear. I am aware of the leaflet that was issued by the Housing Executive in advance of my conveying information to the Committee for Social Development. I have told the Housing Executive that I will not bring forward a commencement order or regulations until I am satisfied that direct payments to tenants would work. In that case, I will return to the Committee for Social Development and show it due courtesy before choosing that direction.

Mr S Wilson: Will the Minister for Social Development outline to the Assembly the steps that she intends to take in order to give herself the assurance that she has talked about?

Ms Ritchie: I thank Mr Wilson for that point of information. The direction that I choose will be based on evidence, which I have not got yet. I want to see the impact that direct payments to tenants may have. I am aware of the impact that evictions can have, and I do not want to see anyone on the streets, having been evicted from their own properties. A basic principle of social justice is that all people should have a roof over their head and their safety assured. I believe that every Member of the House aspires to that principle and wants to offer that protection.

My concern about the provision is that it could lead to an increase in debt for tenants. On the other hand, the social inclusion agenda includes a proposal to encourage people to manage their own finances, just as people in work have to do.

However, I fully accept that it is totally wrong to suggest that because a person is on benefit they are unable to manage their own finances or cannot be trusted to do so. I will return to the Committee with due courtesy before I proceed with anything. I conveyed

that to the chief executive of the Housing Executive as recently as last week.

6.30 pm

I firmly believe that the way ahead should be evidence-based and not a knee-jerk reaction. I have therefore agreed with the Social Development Committee that we shall work together on the issue. The amendments seek to fetter the Committee and I in our work and impose conditions without any evidence-based deliberations.

Amendment No 3 provides that housing benefit would be payable directly to the tenant only when the tenant requests it. The obvious danger is that landlords could coerce tenants — who want to manage their own affairs and who are perfectly capable of doing so — into having their housing benefit paid directly to them. Those are precisely the types of issues that I wish to consider in detail with the Committee. If, following further discussions with the Committee, I were to proceed on the basis outlined in amendment No 3, clause 35 as drafted is sufficiently broad to allow us to do so.

My agreement with the Committee must be honoured, and we must move forward on an evidence-based approach. Amendment No 4, which is dependent on amendment No 3, has resource implications. I would need more time to consider that amendment in conjunction with the Minister of Finance and Personnel. However, debt counselling is one issue to be considered with the Social Development Committee in deciding the way ahead. Like Mr Wilson and Mr Maginness, I am fully aware that the Housing Executive —

Mr McGlone: Much emphasis has been rightly placed on the role of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, and particularly its debt-counselling function. Has the Minister consulted the Housing Executive on its position on amendment No 3?

Ms Ritchie: As I said to Mr McCarthy, I have sought information from the Housing Executive on the matter. The Housing Executive stated that it would prefer that the payment be made directly to the landlord.

As Mr Wilson and Mr Maginness said, the Housing Executive already provides debt-counselling advice. Citizens advice bureaux, as well as other organisations in the voluntary sector, also provide that advice. For the reasons that I have outlined, and in the light of the assurances I have provided, I hope that Members withdraw the amendments.

Mr McCann highlighted the issue of people having to choose between paying rent and feeding their families. I recognise the pressures upon people on benefits; they sometimes must choose between bread on the table, paying rent, or buying other commodities for the household. However, people on benefit must not be categorised as being unable or unfit to manage

their own affairs. We cannot be prescriptive or suggest what people should, or should not, have. We must be very careful because we are dealing with very sensitive, personal, private issues.

Mr O'Dowd raised the issue of parity not being broken. Payment to tenants is a much wider issue as it touches on the social financial inclusion agenda, which Members must bear in mind.

On the issue Mr McCarthy raised, that leaflet was prepared prior to devolution, and I am in the course of responding to him in writing on the matter.

Mr McCarthy: Will the Housing Executive withdraw the leaflet in view of what has just been said?

Ms Ritchie: I have told the Housing Executive that it is for the Minister, the Assembly and the Executive to deal with legislation. The Housing Executive will not be proceeding with that course of action.

I would like to thank the Member for drawing that to my attention; I was able to speak directly to the chief executive about it last Tuesday night.

Finally, to respond to Mr McCann's claim that landlords will withdraw from the market, experience in the pathfinder areas in GB was that more landlords were in the market and can move in and out of it. It is simply subject to market conditions.

Mr Speaker and Members, I am grateful for your indulgence. I hope that, because of the reassurances that I have provided the House, the tablers will withdraw the amendments. If they feel unable to do so, I urge Members to reject the amendments and to allow the Social Development Committee and me to proceed as we agreed to in taking forward this important and sensitive issue that impacts on many people in the North of Ireland.

Mr Speaker: I ask Mr McCann to make a winding-up speech on the amendment, and to be as brief as possible.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I will be as brief as I was last time, when I only spoke for an hour.

I have a number of points to make regarding the amendments. Many people in the House and especially in the Committee said that they had serious concerns about this amendment. The reaction tonight is surprising; I thought that everyone here could have supported these simple, and simplifying, amendments. I appreciate that the Minister told the Committee that she would return to it, but there is no guarantee that this will be taken on board when she does.

In fact, there was some confusion in the Committee when the Minister was giving the commitment that nothing would change. One of her advisers contradicted her and said that anyone new coming onto benefits, or

anyone moving house would not be included in the commitment she gave. Mr McCarthy tells me that he has tried to clarify things a second time. There seems to be some confusion between the DSD, the Minister, and the Housing Executive. The problem with these contradictions is that Ministers come and go, but Bills stay. We are trying to insert amendments that protect the most vulnerable people in society. I propose the amendment, go raibh maith agat.

Amendment No 3 negatived.

Mr Speaker: As amendment No 3 has not been made, amendment No 4 falls.

Clause 35 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 36 to 54 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 55 (Medical Examinations)

Mr Speaker: Amendment No 5 has already been debated. As amendment No 5 is dependent on amendment No 1, which was not made, I will not call amendment No 5.

Clause 55 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 56 to 61 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedules 1 to 8 agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the Consideration Stage of the Welfare Reform Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Budget Bill

Consideration Stage

Clauses 1 to 7 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedules 1 to 3 agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the Consideration Stage of the Budget Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

PRIVATE NOTICE QUESTION

Craigavon Senior High School: Deaths of Young People

Mr Speaker: I have received a private notice question, in accordance with Standing Order 20, for the Minister of Education. The question has been circulated to Members and is available in their pigeonholes.

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister of Education what assistance she is providing to the staff and pupils of Craigavon Senior High School, and to students in the Tandragee and Laurelvale areas, following the recent tragic deaths of young people from that school; and to detail any measures of co-operation that her Department is undertaking with other Departments and agencies.

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): I thank Danny Kennedy for his timely question, which provides me with the opportunity to publicly express my deepest sympathies to the families and friends of the young men at the heart of this tragedy. I also extend my sympathies to all of the families, friends and communities, throughout Ireland, who have suffered as a result of suicide.

I spoke today with the principal of the school, and with the school counsellor. I pay tribute to them for the wonderful work that they are doing. I have also spoken to principals of schools in other parts of the North about this issue. Two weeks ago, I hosted a private meeting in an area of my constituency with school principals, counsellors, health professionals, sporting organisations and local clergy. That meeting was held to try to understand, from their perspective, why suicides were taking place, what measures could be put in place to prevent them, and what support is needed, right across the North. I was struck by the compassion and the commitment of the school principals and their teams, and also by what a huge responsibility they presently bear.

On the issue of the latest suicides, I confirm that the critical incident response team from the Southern Education and Library Board (SELB) have been working in the school to provide support for individual pupils, groups of pupils, staff and parents. That includes giving advice to office staff who are answering telephone calls.

Today, a fresh support strategy has been agreed with the school authorities, which will focus on the immediate, medium- and long-term support needs of pupils and staff. A helpline has been set up in the school for parents, and a leaflet with contact information about support is to be issued to all pupils and parents.

Mr Kennedy asked about the wider measures of co-operation that I am undertaking — I feel that that is the more appropriate focus at this time. People who

have been caught up in this tragedy need space, time and privacy to grieve and to try to come to terms with what has happened.

I urge the media — in fact, I make a plea to the media — to respect that need and to treat all discussion on the issue responsibly and sensitively.

6.45 pm

I acknowledge that the immediate crisis focuses on school-age children. However, those who have left education, up to the age of 25, are an equally vulnerable group. Weekends are a particularly vulnerable time, and I want to look at — with all my colleagues — the totality of the education response.

The Youth Service runs initiatives, such as the well-being programme, which encourage young people to build confidence, improve their self-esteem and develop coping skills. Samaritans are considering offering text-messaging support at exam times. We need to engage with other organisations as well. These include children's rights organisations, such as the Commissioner for Children and Young People.

Mr F McCann: Mr Speaker, may I ask for order while the Minister is speaking. It is a very important speech.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister is speaking.

Ms Ruane: The children's rights organisations also include Save the Children. The Children's Commissioner and her team have played a leading role in suicide prevention. I pay tribute to them all.

Suicide concerns me greatly. It is an issue that confronts all schools and communities across the North. No area, no class and no creed has been spared. It is a blight on our society that affects young and old — but particularly the young — and one that we must begin to discuss in a constructive way and work together to find a way forward.

Education in schools must be part of the solution. However, the response needs to be much wider than that of only one Department. The Department of Education has a big part to play, but we cannot do it on our own. From September, all post-primary schools that wish to will have a minimum amount of counselling time allocated to them to support pupils. Following public-tender action, Contact Youth will provide that service. That organisation has operated in the North for over 20 years and has extensive experience of meeting the support needs of young people. The Department of Education will provide advice and guidance on the stressors faced by young people and the issues around suicide and its triggers. Departmental guidance on suicide and self-harm is being updated.

Recently, I met my colleague the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Mr Michael

McGimpsey. We talked about the issue of suicide and how we might work together more closely and more effectively to support the work of the suicide strategy implementation body.

For a number of years, I have worked very closely with the Public Initiative for the Prevention of Suicide and Self-harm (PIPS) and, last week, in my role as Minister, I formally met with its representatives. PIPS is a voluntary organisation dedicated to preventing suicide and to supporting those who have been affected by suicide and self-harm. I learned from them, and from my visits to schools, about work that is going on in schools across the North to raise awareness among teachers about stress and action that can be taken to develop and improve pupil self-esteem.

I am aware of other locally based initiatives, all with similar aims. I pay a very special tribute to those families who have been very brave in speaking publicly about the issue of suicide. It is important that we destigmatise the issue of suicide and that we create safe spaces to talk about it. I welcome the new centre in north Belfast, and the pack that PIPS has produced that also contains a DVD about suicide prevention.

Since I took up office, I have not shied away from talking about the problem. On my visits to schools, I have learned about the experiences of school staff and their concerns about the stresses on young people and the impact that they can have on their general well-being.

As a society, we need to give our young people a sense of hope. We need to be more effective in giving our young people the emotional skills to cope with difficulties. We need to actively encourage them to tell us what is amiss. We need to listen to them, to value what they have to say and to respond to them. We need to give them a future that they will believe in and that they can shape.

Today, I urge directly any young person whose friend has confided that he or she plans to take his or her life to tell a trusted adult. It is not breaking a friend's confidence if you tell a trusted adult. It is not your responsibility, as a friend, to deal with that on your own. Young people could save lives by contacting a trusted adult, Childline, Samaritans or the suicide prevention helpline.

I repeat to any young person watching these proceedings: you can save a life.

I assure the Assembly that all the resources available to my Department to support young people will be used. The Department of Education will work with all other Departments, agencies and organisations with expertise and experience in the areas of suicide and self-harm to make our response to this tragedy the best that it can be. Lessons can be learned from the South of Ireland and Scotland, both of which have a high instance of suicide. Earlier this evening, the

Scottish First Minister, Alex Salmond, addressed us. In response to a question from Gerry Adams, he said that Scotland was willing to share with us in the North the strategies that it uses. We must learn how to deal with the problem from other countries across Europe; that is our challenge in the weeks and months ahead. Immediate support must continue to be in place for the children who are affected.

In one of the schools that I visited I had what will remain a private discussion, as such matters must be handled carefully. The principals said that they had to deal with the suicide, the aftermath and with the brothers and sisters in the classroom. All Departments must get together and work on the issue. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Kennedy: Mr Speaker, I thank you for accepting the private notice question. I also thank the Minister for making herself available to give a detailed statement to the Assembly in answer to my question.

This is a critical and distressing situation that is of concern to all of us, whether as Members or parents. I am sure that the House will join me in expressing our profound sympathy to all the families and friends of the pupils involved and also to the staff at their schools. I pay tribute to the work of the staff of those schools. I am sure that Members will join me in paying tribute to the valuable work of education and health professionals such as the critical illness response team and voluntary organisations such as PIPS and, not least, local clergy who are involved in church groups. The help offered by friends and neighbours to the families that are affected has been considerable and has been appreciated by the families involved.

The Minister gave a detailed reply on her responsibilities as Minister of Education. However, can she outline any additional measures that are being taken by her Department to provide assistance to any individual who is affected or influenced by those tragic events, particularly in the coming days and weeks, which is a critical period leading to the school summer holidays? Will the Minister outline what assistance is available after normal business hours, especially at weekends or in the early hours of the morning, when young people are perhaps at their most vulnerable? Are the necessary helplines available and will the Minister assure the House and the wider community that every support and assistance will be given to anyone affected or influenced by thoughts of suicide?

Mr Speaker: I hope that the Minister will be brief because time is running out.

Ms Ruane: I will be brief. In the shorter term, the helplines are available at weekends, which is one of the key times for vulnerable people. The Samaritans, Childline and Suicide Helpline work around the clock.

The Department is also examining the advice and guidance that is given to young people on how to use

the Internet safely, which is a concern. Schools provide advice and guidance to pupils on appropriate use of the Internet. Departmental policies, which are updated regularly, have been issued to school staff, pupils and parents. In all grant-aided schools, Internet access is provided through the Classroom 2000 system, which is filtered in order to ban access to sites that have inappropriate content.

However, the issue is much bigger than Internet access in schools. School is probably the safest place where children can use the Internet. The debate must be focused on how to support parents at all levels of society in the responsible use of the Internet in their own homes. As a parent, I understand that that is difficult.

Prior to my becoming the Minister of Education, my party leader and I met the previous direct rule Minister to discuss helplines. I am not aware of whether the matter has since been worked out. Many young people have mobile phones. However, because teenagers are constantly telling their parents that they have run out of credit, we sought to ensure that helplines, like the 999 emergency line, would be free. That must be considered right across the board, and I will provide details.

Short-term measures can be introduced. However, short-, medium- and long-term strategies — especially long-term strategies — must be developed if the situation is to be dealt with effectively. Otherwise, the same issues will simply continue to be discussed in the Assembly. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Speaker: Time has run out. Unfortunately, there is none available for further questions on that particular item of business. I apologise to the three Members who wished to speak in the debate. Time will not allow it.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Committee Membership

Mr Speaker: The next item on the Order Paper is the motion to change the membership of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure. As with other similar motions, it will be treated as a business motion. Therefore, there will be no debate.

Mr McNarry: I beg to move

That Mr Ken Robinson replace Mr David Burnside as a member of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure.

Mr McCausland: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. There have been five meetings of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, which has had to deal with such contentious issues as the Irish language Bill. David Burnside has not attended a single one of those meetings. Following his replacement on that Committee, he will not be a member of any Committee at all.

Is it in order for a Member who is not a Minister not to sit on any Committee? I do not know the answer to that. However, I do know that it says something about Mr Burnside's commitment to the cause of unionism in his constituency.

Mr Speaker: That is not a point of order. The Member must resume his seat.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That Mr Ken Robinson replace Mr David Burnside as a member of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure.

Mr Speaker: There is no time available for the debate on pay parity for further education lecturers. I will ask the Business Committee to reschedule that item of business.

Adjourned at 6.58 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 19 June 2007

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Libraries Bill

Second Stage

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Poots): I beg to move

That the Second Stage of the Libraries Bill [NIA 05/07] be agreed.

The proposals behind this legislation will advance the process of developing and modernising the public library service. The process began last year, with the publication of 'Delivering Tomorrow's Libraries', which sets out the policy direction for the library service, identifying its core business and its major contribution. The document specifies targeted action to enhance the value of the service and sets out a series of standards against which to measure performance.

Most of us have experience of libraries, whether as children or adults or when we take our own children to visit them. The public library is a freely available and enormously significant source of enjoyment, inspiration and independent learning. There is no doubt that libraries have the capacity to empower people and communities. The use of libraries is voluntary, and there are no entry or eligibility requirements.

As a business that is concerned not with doing things for people but helping people to do things for themselves, libraries are in a position to combat social exclusion and provide equality of opportunity. Libraries have a particular role in facilitating lifelong learning for those who have missed out on education, and their welcoming and flexible environment provides opportunity for those who are uncomfortable in formal learning situations.

However, the role of libraries is not solely concerned with education. They also cater for recreational, cultural and community aspects in meeting modern-day needs. Libraries support social, educational, artistic

and economic endeavour and contribute to thriving communities. As such, they are a significant element in the achievement of a range of Government policies and priorities.

The Library Service has a good record of reacting to change and responding to new needs. For example, many senior citizens gain their first experience of IT, emailing and the Internet at their local libraries, which accommodate more than 1,000 computer terminals across Northern Ireland. Furthermore, the Library Service has reacted quickly to the needs of recent immigrants by providing books and other materials in their languages.

Libraries provide community spaces, learning spaces, locations for cultural events and meeting places. One has only to visit some of the new libraries in Ballymena, Lisburn, Strabane or Cookstown to see examples of modern, accessible public spaces that are visually attractive, functional and efficient. Those libraries have transformed their local communities by providing traditional library services and by introducing space for new activities.

I wish to acknowledge the work of library staff in delivering public services over the past three decades. Their contribution increases the effectiveness of libraries through their offering structured advice and guidance. The joint working of those staff across the education and library boards in recent years has demonstrated the value of a single unified service.

The Bill will establish a single library service for the whole of Northern Ireland and will streamline the five existing library services, providing a unified seamless service that can ensure equity in delivery and transmission of best practice. The Bill will establish a non-departmental public body (NDPB) at a regional level to deliver that service — a library authority that will be led by a board comprising people who will be selected specifically for their ability to oversee a library service that meets modern needs.

We expect efficiencies in the long term due to reductions in management and administration. The protection of staff who transfer from existing bodies to the library authority has been negotiated centrally with the trade unions. All staff will be protected by the provisions of The Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 2006. Pension entitlements will also be protected. Those important matters are addressed in schedule 2 to the Bill.

During public consultation on the draft legislation, there was strong support in principle for a single library service that would be led by a library authority. Comments were also submitted on certain aspects of the draft legislation. Following that consultation, changes were made to the draft legislation in two areas to reflect the concerns that were raised. The first

change related to maintaining public access to core library services that are free at the point of use. That commitment has been made clear in the text of the Bill. The second change was to increase the maximum size of the board to reflect concerns about achieving a quorum and reflecting diversity.

Our main objective is to improve the quality of service to the public. Libraries have the potential to make a greater contribution to quality of life and to meeting Government priorities. Ensuring the establishment of the right structure to deliver that potential is crucial. A library service that is delivered by a single body will better reflect the multifaceted role of libraries and their wide potential customer base. The library authority will provide a clear central focus for the development and promotion of the new service and will be a better vehicle to establish partnerships for new service delivery at regional and local levels.

The Bill represents an innovative proposal that is unique in the United Kingdom and has generated considerable interest beyond Northern Ireland. I am firmly of the view that the Bill represents the best way to provide the most effective public library service most efficiently.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McElduff): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh an díospóireacht ar an Bhille. I welcome this opportunity to address the Assembly. The Committee wishes to place on record its formal concern at the process that was used by the Minister to introduce the Bill to the Assembly. The absence of appropriate notification to the Committee is not acceptable practice and spells out the need for improved communication among the Minister, the Executive and the Assembly on legislation matters.

An example of that failure of communication, at best — and perhaps disregard, at worst — was the Minister's introduction of the Bill at First Stage on Monday 11 June 2007.

It was the last item of business and did not appear on the Order Paper. I ask the Minister to explain why he introduced the Bill to the Assembly in that fashion and why the Committee was not consulted about changes to the Bill's legislative timetable, particularly as those matters have a direct bearing on the Committee's future work plan.

The Committee commented on the Minister's announcement of the appointment of a chief executive designate to the single library authority, which will be created by the passage of this Bill. The Committee seeks an explanation from the Minister as to the rationale behind the early announcement of an appointment to a body that, as yet, has no legislative base. The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for

Culture, Arts and Leisure, Mr David McNarry, will develop that point in his contribution.

Mr S Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr McElduff: I will not give way. Thanks all the same, Sammy.

The Bill's key purpose is to provide for the establishment of a library authority to deliver a single public library service for all libraries here. This is an inheritance from the review of public administration (RPA) conducted under direct rule, and it is now the responsibility of this Assembly to decide if that is the most appropriate form of management for our libraries.

Three management options have been considered by the Department following the RPA proposal that a new education support body replace the five education and library boards. The first option was that libraries should be the responsibility of local government on the basis of no more than seven local authorities. That was rejected because it was felt that it would fragment the service by increasing five bodies to seven and break up an increasingly unified system in which joint working at regional level has brought benefits. The second option was that the libraries should remain institutionally linked to education delivery. That too was rejected on the basis that libraries have cultural, recreational and community roles as well as an educational one and that the service would benefit from a separate, dedicated managing body. A third option called for a single management body, which, it is said, will promote operational efficiencies in the longer term. I seek an assurance from the Minister that he has not opted for a single library authority solely on the basis of cost and financial efficiencies.

The Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure will consider carefully the legislation and examine in detail each clause of the Bill. It is committed to conducting a detailed scrutiny and intends to consult widely and to take evidence from interested parties. Libraries have vital cultural, recreational and community roles and belong to everyone in our society. They are there for everyone to use, irrespective of age, cultural background, or address.

The Department has indicated to the Committee that it has no plans to change the current Government policy of providing core library services free of charge. However, there is concern that that commitment is not fully reflected in the Bill, and I seek reassurance from the Minister that he has no plans to introduce charging for core library services. He may also wish to consider making that commitment more explicit in the legislation. Core library services elsewhere are provided free of charge, and legislation should not be introduced in the North that could potentially include a loophole that would allow for charging at some date in the future.

The Committee expects that any change in the management of libraries will be for the purpose of providing a service that accommodates everyone in society — children, the elderly, families, the visually impaired, speakers of indigenous languages and people newly arrived from other countries. It must be recognised that different groups have different needs and requirements of libraries — for example, in relation to opening hours, library stock and other resources and facilities. Libraries must be accessible if their full potential is to be maximised.

10.45 am

The creation of a single management body to replace the current five education and library boards requires a geographical spread in the composition of the board. The constitution of the new body should reflect the entire population; urban and rural, and east and west of the Bann. It should also represent people from different cultural backgrounds.

Crucially, the body should also include elected representatives to address the democratic deficit. It should also have trade union input. Those with expertise in the management of library services should also be consulted. That will be essential if the new authority is to reflect the aspirations and needs of all of the people.

As I understand it, one reason for creating a single library authority is to make the management structures more streamlined. I hope that that streamlining will result in more resources being made available for front-line library services. However, I did not hear such a commitment in the Minister's opening remarks.

Members of the public are concerned about potential library closures, particularly in rural areas. I hope that the new library authority will be able to reassure people that there will be no such closures. Libraries are important tools in targeting social need in rural and urban areas. There are genuine concerns about possible library closures, and the resulting job losses, as has happened with post offices.

Libraries, including the mobile library service, are a key connection to the outside world for many people, particularly older people. I therefore seek the Minister's reassurance that the new legislation will not endanger library services in rural areas. Similarly, people living in other disadvantaged areas may not have access to computers or places for study or homework. Libraries are a vital facility in that regard. They also have a key role to play in literacy and lifelong learning, as the Minister has acknowledged. They provide a place for people outside the mainstream education system to access information and assistance.

The new library authority will be a non-departmental public body that will be directly answerable to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. I expect that

the Department will closely monitor the new body to ensure that the current standards of service are maintained and improved. I hope that the Minister will reassure the House that that will be case and that the Department will monitor the performance and service standards of the new library authority.

The creation of the new authority will result in changes for library staff, who are currently employed by the education and library boards. It is vital that the Department ensure that the experience and skills of the current staff are fully utilised in the new authority and that the transfer is made as smooth as possible for them.

In particular, I am seeking a commitment from the Minister that jobs will be safeguarded and that staff will maintain their current terms and conditions in the new authority. The Department must also ensure that the current stock and archives — a crucial part of our cultural wealth — are protected during the transfer. Those assets should be passed on to generations to come.

Every organisation can benefit from independent advice, and libraries are no different. There is concern that the legislation does not contain any provision for the authority to obtain expert, independent advice, which is available to libraries elsewhere. We should not be treated any differently. I ask that that aspect be incorporated into the legislation. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Nelson McCausland.

Mr Weir: Hear, hear.

Mr Hamilton: Take his temperature.

Mr McCausland: The Member's enthusiasm knows no bounds. *[Laughter.]*

I wish to reflect on a number of aspects of the proposed legislation. It is vital that the membership of the new library authority reflect, and be representative of, Northern Ireland society geographically, culturally and in every way, so that the different sectors in the community are all represented.

The make-up of the Equality Commission, the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission and the Parades Commission are intended, legislatively, to be representative. However, that is not the case with the current education and library boards, for example. That should be incorporated into the legislation.

As the Minister rightly said this morning, the Library Service in Northern Ireland plays a wide range of social, cultural and educational roles, and contributes to the well-being of society in many ways. Therefore, it is particularly important that the Assembly gets this legislation right and ensures the best possible service for the people of Northern Ireland.

One argument for introducing the legislation, which was referred to this morning, is that the Library Service would be streamlined and that savings in administration

could be reinvested in books. In many ways, that is a plausible and good argument, because there has been an underinvestment in books by library services across Northern Ireland. However, as the Bill proceeds over the coming months, I ask that Members be provided with clear figures on the savings and economies that could be made. There is a definite need for clarity on that issue, because when the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure considered that matter a few weeks ago, no figures were available.

Many people will suspect that there will be additional costs in the initial stages. Members will already be aware that the single education authority will have not only a chief executive, but eight deputies. We are therefore moving from a situation in which there are five boards and five chief executives to one in which there will be one chief executive and eight deputies. Therefore, there must be clarity on what savings might be made, and Members need to see those figures. I am confident that the Department will carry out that work over the coming weeks.

Although it is necessary to have a governance structure in place when the education and library boards are removed, we may have to re-examine the situation in the longer term, as part of the review of public administration.

There have been cases in which good integration of health, council and library services can bring benefits to a community. For example, in my constituency of North Belfast, leisure services — the swimming pool, etc — health services and library services are being brought together in the Grove Wellbeing Centre. That centre will provide integrated services and will bring benefits to the whole community through the synergy that it will create. The Assembly should examine similar such opportunities in the longer term. Library services could also be provided in community or leisure facilities.

As for the longer-term vision for library services, we will have to revisit that issue through the review of public administration, in particular with respect to local authorities. Community planning will also come into that debate.

One aspect of the legislation that concerns me is that, unlike the other countries in the United Kingdom, Northern Ireland does not have a national library. It could be argued that Northern Ireland is not large enough to merit a national library. However, there should be some reference in the legislation to the need to provide a regional service. That is important to Northern Ireland, particularly when one considers the archived material in Belfast Central Library, the Linen Hall Library and other libraries.

I would like to see a greater focus on that matter and some consideration being given to how information in

a readily accessible medium, in book form, could be made available to the public, particularly on the history of Northern Ireland and the history of Ulster. Much of that material is not readily accessible, and it would be good to see legislation that provides for a regional library service.

‘Delivering Tomorrow’s Libraries’ set out a vision for libraries in Northern Ireland. Libraries play an important role in society. As the legislation is taken forward over the coming months, I hope that the matters that have been mentioned, such as the size of the board and clarity about the economies to be made, will be given serious consideration.

Mr McNarry: As I do not follow the speeches made by the Minister of Finance’s wife, and in light of the demonstration of personal abuse focused on me by her husband last week, it is important that I declare — in case she has said something recently about the Bill — that some of my contribution on the Libraries Bill includes information taken from a research brief. On a previous occasion, when I spoke on a fisheries issue, I used research that, unknown to me at the time, was also used by another Member in another place. Some people have chosen to call that plagiarism. Having put research in its proper perspective, I shall address this Bill.

Clear concerns arise from the manner in which the Department has handled the Bill. The Chairman eloquently expressed the wider view of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure on those concerns, and I share his request that the Minister take note of, and address, those concerns.

I am sure that I will not live to regret this, but, as this is my first opportunity to address the Minister in the House, I wish him well for his time in office. I compliment him on the freshness that he brings, not only by knowing his brief, but by approaching matters in a cool, calm, collected and constructive listening mode. That said, I strongly encourage many of his more senior colleagues to copy — or plagiarise — his manner of dealing with his brief.

However, I am concerned about the Department’s apparent desire to rush this legislation through the House. The Committee Chairman has dealt with the major points arising from that. However, the rush appeared all the more obvious and aroused suspicions — perhaps where none may justifiably exist — when, before the new Minister even had his feet under the table, the Department advertised, then interviewed and shortlisted applicants for, the position of chief executive of the new library authority.

The Minister has been in position for only a few weeks. When the Chairperson and I met him, shortly after he had taken up office, he was unaware that the fast-tracking had taken place, and I appreciated his

honesty on that. However, in just a few weeks, the Department has moved further, and in some haste, by appointing a chief executive designate. That move was completed before the legislation for a new single authority had passed successfully through the Assembly.

Is the Department's appointment of a chief executive in that manner more evidence of control freakery, or is it presumption? If the latter is the case, it is dangerous to presume that the legislation will pass through the house unopposed and that its passage through the Committee will be a mere formality. Will the Minister clarify that matter for us?

I seek a commitment from the Minister that jobs will be safeguarded and staff will maintain their current terms and conditions under the legislation for the new management of libraries, and that library closures will not be used to negate any undertakings that he may give to the House on the safeguards that I am requesting.

In conclusion, the legislation requires the authority to provide a public library service; it does not say how — or to what standard — that will be done, other than in clause 2(2)(a), which cites:

“library materials sufficient in number, range and quality to meet general requirements of adults and children”.

There is no mention of it being either comprehensive or efficient. The Minister must give assurances that library service provision will be comprehensive and efficient and will meet the requirements of adults and children.

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

11.00 am

Mr P Ramsey: I wish to raise concerns about a number of matters. First, like the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson of the Committee, I ask the Minister to clarify how the First Stage of the Bill came to be on the agenda without the approval of the Business Committee. The Committee was taken aback when the Libraries Bill appeared on the Order Paper on Monday 11 June and had no time to prepare for it.

The SDLP welcomes the shift of responsibility for the Library Service from the Department of Education to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. Such a move is logical and will enable the service to develop a range of complimentary activities.

The SDLP wishes to ensure that, following the establishment of a new library authority, libraries will target their activities at all sections of the community, which should include visitors to Northern Ireland. My party is concerned that such visitors are not being specified as a group to be provided for. Also, we are concerned that ethnic-minority language groups are not mentioned in the Bill. Both groups should be included in the legislation as core groups.

The Library Service must be developed and broadened. The existing service is under pressure from cut-price books offered by retailers, and, as the Chairperson of the Committee said, that has led to a serious reduction in borrowing and visits to libraries.

I reiterate some points that I made to the Committee about rural proofing. It is important that rural-proofing measures be applied to the Library Service, as they are to any other public service. Social inclusion is an urgent and ongoing concern in many rural areas, and the problem is being exacerbated by the threats to post offices and small rural schools. The SDLP is concerned that library closures in recent years have taken their toll on rural communities, and it is clear that the libraries most at risk are in rural areas. Library services in those areas must be valued as community hubs, and their closure would be contrary to acute social needs. The contribution of rural libraries to local literacy and skills development must be as valued as it is in urban areas, and any future library strategy must include a commitment to protect that provision.

Some instances of rural library provision should be valued as examples of good practice. Rural libraries are addressing questions about their viability by targeting local schools. To increase their footfall, they are specifically focusing on child literacy provision. Creativity and best practice such as this should be nurtured, encouraged and rewarded.

The SDLP considers the Library Service to be vital. Therefore, the service must be changed and repositioned to reconnect with more people. That repositioning will require new ways of delivering existing services and the addition of new services. That will involve a process of change, which will require leadership.

The SDLP wishes libraries, under the new library authority, to improve their traditional roles as centres for the enjoyment of books and borrowing and become centres of excellence for education, providing complementary ranges of services in which literacy and numeracy are promoted and facilitated in informal and pleasant environments, and where learning is fun. The SDLP wishes libraries to be centres of lifelong learning for adults of all ages and to actively explore possibilities for the greater inclusion of other forms of art and cultural activities.

The new library authority must have the freedom to carry out its work, but within the democratic accountability and control that is required. For example, when the new authority drafts its standing orders, it will be important for them to be presented to the Minister and the Committee for approval.

It is important that the Assembly sends a positive message to existing staff. Staff face changes in their employer and in their work practices, and their morale is currently quite poor. They are concerned about the

impact on their terms and conditions. It is important that terms and conditions are protected and that new employees are offered the same terms and conditions as existing employees. I urge the Minister to work closely with the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA) on the transfer of undertakings to ensure a smooth transition for employees. The Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure intends to invite NIPSA officials to a meeting to discuss their concerns.

In order to provide a modern, vibrant and expanded Library Service, working practices will have to change. Old working practices will be conducted in different ways, and there will be new working practices, which may or may not turn out well; that is the nature of change. It is important that the Assembly values staff and urges them to continue to provide a professional service for everyone. Members want to work with library staff and retain their expertise. We also want to lead, promote and improve the Library Service so that by the end of this process, we will have a better service. Members, and the public whom we serve, value the contribution of Library Service staff, and we thank them.

I ask the Minister to consider carefully the location of the new library authority. I am sure that he will consider all regions in Northern Ireland, including the north-west.

Mr McCarthy: Much of what I intended to say has already been rehearsed by the Chairperson and members of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure.

Mr Kennedy: No need to say it again, then.

Mr McCarthy: No, absolutely not.

However, I want to ask the Minister a question. Is the public library service intended for all citizens, or is it only for people who can use library premises? For instance, what provision is there for hospitals, prisons, residential homes, and so forth? Staff in those institutions do not have specialist library knowledge and will be unaware of the range of available materials. Library provision for such institutions should be a statutory obligation on the service.

The schools library service will become the responsibility of the Department of Education. As Members have already said, the centralisation and relocation of that service will have implications for rural primary schools, in that it will cut them off from book and information specialists. Previously, teachers in rural schools, who do not live near bookshops, had access to those specialists. However, they and their pupils will be disadvantaged because they will now not be able to consult specialist library staff whose advice is based on their constant use of information resources.

Consideration must be given to the needs of blind or partially sighted people. A framework for their needs should not depend on commercial organisations.

Most of the Alliance Party's concerns have already been voiced during the debate. I await the Minister's response to those contributions.

Lord Browne: I have spent the majority of my working life in the education service, so I am acutely aware of the tangible benefits that libraries provide to education. The local education and library boards are being subsumed into one streamlined authority, so it is natural and, indeed, sensible that the provision of library services should enjoy the same efficiency savings and rationalisation that will ultimately benefit those people who use the facilities and the many others who expect Members to administer public finances in a mature fashion on their behalf.

Although I intend to support the Second Stage of the Bill to that end, as a member of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure I have yet to be totally convinced of the need for a separate autonomous authority specifically for the provision of library services.

The Libraries Bill was, of course, introduced by the direct rule Ministers and inherited by my hon Friend the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, Mr Poots. However, there will be time in the weeks following the Second Stage of the Bill to deliberate on its contents and effects, and, if necessary, to consider local alternatives and other options that would enhance the effect of the legislation.

As it stands, paragraph (2)(1)(b) of schedule 1 to the Bill states that the authority should consist of:

“not fewer than 7 or more than 14 other members”

— that is, alongside the chairman. Although that number may be correct, unwieldy and cumbersome bodies tend to operate at a much slower pace, as my personal athletic record would attest. *[Laughter.]* There is no provision in the Bill for a specified number of interested stakeholders or local representatives.

Local representatives have built up years of experience serving on education and library boards, which would be of infinite benefit to any such authority and maintain a local dimension to a dramatically centralised body. In addition, as we have heard, the trade unions, focused interested bodies and other stakeholders could potentially make a great contribution; however, the legislation does not guarantee a place for those agencies.

Neither am I convinced by the argument for separating library services from the provision of education. As some Members pointed out, adults and others with learning difficulties are often sidelined or ignored by education and library boards, which, perhaps, focus more on primary and post-primary

provision. That situation highlights the need for greater harmonisation, or, if necessary, an amalgamation of the relevant functions of the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning, rather than a separate library authority.

The views in the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure range from support for the new authority as outlined in the Bill, to input or even control by local government, or to removing altogether the idea of a separate authority and simply administering libraries through the new education body. In supporting the Second Stage, the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure knows that it must thrash out those issues in the weeks ahead. It is to be hoped that with the agreement of the Minister, the Bill will proceed either intact or amended, having achieved a consensus among Members of the House.

Mr Brolly: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I will be brief, because my hon colleague Mr McElduff, speaking as Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, made a comprehensive presentation. It would be remiss of me, and Mr McElduff would be disappointed, if I did not also mention that he played corner-forward for the Tyrone minor Gaelic football team.

Some years ago, a very clever gentleman cynically said:

“People who read books do so because they are too lazy to think for themselves.”

I disagree; reading encourages people to think. There is no point in reinventing the wheel, so I will simply reinforce the need for libraries and access to books.

When William Ewart introduced his Public Libraries Bill to the House of Commons in 1849, he encountered a great deal of opposition from the Conservatives, who argued that the rate-paying middle and upper classes would be paying for a service that would be mainly used by people like us — the working classes. One Member of Parliament argued that:

“People have too much knowledge already: it was much easier to manage them twenty years ago; the more education people get, the more difficult they are to manage.”

There is no better argument to be made for promoting libraries and for having the very best library authority.

11.15 am

Mr McCausland mentioned the obvious necessity that the board in charge of libraries be representative. Before the appointment of that board, which will be made up of a chief executive and eight deputies, it is important that we ascertain that it is totally competent to do the job that it has been employed to do. Prospective board members must display to the interview panel that they know all about the job.

It would be a pity if the proposed savings of £0.6 million in 2009-10, which are set to double in 2010-11, were to be gobbled up by a chief executive who thought it necessary to employ a consultant as soon as the first difficult question arose.

Schedule 2 to the Bill has important implications for education and library boards' current employees. Contracts are to be transferred from those bodies to the library authority. Dealing with unions and ensuring fair treatment for employees, who have done a very good job up until now, will take up a great deal of time at Committee Stage. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Shannon: After 25 years o' gye bad unner fundin' an no bein' leuked aboot, hit's lang past the tim' at this Semmelie saen hoo important hit bes tae hae a library system at hes eneuch staff an catter in onie forrit an' richt thinkin' society. Tae knaw quhar ye ir heided a boadie furst hes tae ken quhar yin hes bein an this bes sae in Norlin Airlan es we see at the library isnae onie a place fer learnin' bit bes aboot the celebration o' heirskeip an' history forebye. The Libraries Bill – quhar yin authority – at hes the input o' members o' the Depairtment o' Cultur' Airts an by tim' wul bae accountable an airted onie aa the bes' provision o' services tae ivryboadie in the community.

After 25 years of severe underfunding and neglect, it is high time that the Assembly recognised how important it is that any forward-thinking, right-thinking society has a fully staffed, fully financed and fully operational library system.

To know where one is going, one must first know where one has been. That is applicable in Northern Ireland, because we recognise the library not only as a place of education but as a place that celebrates culture and history.

The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure will have input in the library authority, which will be accountable to all members of the community, and dedicated solely to providing the community with superior services.

I congratulate the chief executive of the South Eastern Education and Library Board, Irene Knox, on being appointed chief executive designate of the library authority. She is a lady of tremendous experience and ability who will provide the necessary drive and the focus for the new authority.

It is of the utmost importance to retain high-quality services at least cost to the public. Understandably, a charge must be levied for certain services, but I stress how important it is that all age groups should have free access to books, and to information through the Internet. Our young people are trained in school, but it should be libraries' priority to train and help the older generation, who can benefit as much — if not more — as our children from the Internet. Training and

enhancement of skills for all should be a priority for the new library authority.

The library authority must also honour the promises of the previous library-service provider. People from Newtownards and the Ards Peninsula are still trying to squeeze into a tiny building, which has insufficient books and inadequate computer access, even though Newtownards was promised a new library in 2002.

I have written to the Minister to ask for an update on the newbuild in Newtownards, as the present library has neither been updated nor refurbished for some 30 years. It remains as it was some time ago. Although the population of Ards has grown, its library has not kept pace with either the demographical trends or the level of building in the town.

As far back as 2002, I requested details of the new library for Newtownards from the then Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, Michael McGimpsey. He replied that Bangor was second on the Department's priority list and that Ards was next. In 2003, my colleague Iris Robinson asked a similar question in Westminster and was told that the Department was considering the new library.

Here we are four years further on, and there is no sign of a new library for Ards. Work has begun in Bangor, of course, and, therefore, I ask that the new library authority honour the previous arrangements and begin plans for the Newtownards library. It is imperative that the new library authority retain the understanding that Ards will receive a newbuild library.

Once again, I have asked a Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the cost, proposed location and likely completion date for the new library. I look forward to the reply. In 2002, it was estimated that the newbuild would cost £2 million. I have no doubt that, as time has marched on, that amount has risen. However, it is for the newly constituted library authority to deliver on the priority list to which the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure is working. The new library in Newtownards must be delivered urgently.

The new library authority must cater for people with visual disabilities, as, at present, they are not provided with the necessary services.

Members have referred to mobile libraries. For some of my constituents, mobile libraries provide their only contact with people outside their own homes. Many people are keen that the service provided by the mobile libraries be not only retained, but enhanced. I request that that be the case, not just for my constituency of Strangford, but for the whole of the Province.

I support the Second Stage of the Libraries Bill. It is vital that Members remember what we were told yesterday: consultation, and the opportunity to table amendments to the Bill, can continue until the second

or, perhaps, even the third, week of September. Therefore Members have a long time in which to consult on the Bill, table amendments, and ensure that all points of view are taken on board.

Everyone should have an interest in our libraries, and it is important that those who do not are encouraged to change. I hope that steps are taken to encourage our society, which was once rich in the gifts of storytelling and tales, to discover the joys of our culture and heritage that can be found in the books and other services that the new library authority will provide.

I support the Bill.

Mr T Clarke: Given the number of Members who have spoken, many of my questions have been asked. Therefore I will not rehearse them.

I have concerns about the level of local involvement in the Libraries Bill and that local people might become detached from the process. Therefore will the Minister tell me how local people can ensure that they have input in the decision-making process? For example, will they have a say in the location of new libraries?

Is the Minister aware of the timescale for the commencement of building the long-awaited library in Railway Street in Antrim?

Mr S Wilson: I am disappointed that the Minister has chosen to introduce the Libraries Bill at this time. The Department seems to want to drive forward decisions before any real consultation has taken place. Whether it is, as was announced this morning, setting a nine-day deadline for the decision on the stadium at the Maze or the premature introduction of the Libraries Bill, we are seeing the dregs of direct rule — Departments think that they can still behave in an unaccountable way.

Mr Beggs: Ministers.

Mr S Wilson: I will come to that in a moment or two.

There is still a Civil Service mentality in Northern Ireland. Civil servants and Departments have been used to controlling Ministers like puppets on strings and still think that they can drive through measures that may or may not be good for Northern Ireland or have public support. They are not even prepared to have their proposals tested in the Assembly, which is the forum in which such decisions are meant to be made.

As far as the current structure is concerned, I understand what the Minister has said. Although we do not yet know what will happen — as the Minister of Education has not yet announced what she intends to do with education and library boards — the current structure for education could be dismantled by April next year and, if that happens, a structure needs to be put in place for libraries. However, I would have thought that, rather than changing the current

structures immediately, we would have had some opportunity to consider alternative temporary measures until we know what will happen under the RPA.

The changes proposed in this Bill are linked to decisions on education and local government, but we do not know what those decisions are as yet. Indeed, if anything, this Bill jumps ahead of those aspects of the RPA. I had understood that all parties in the Assembly shared a desire to ensure that, even if the RPA process has to be lengthened out a little, it leaves us with a structure of government in Northern Ireland that provides for more efficient delivery of services and stops the uncertainty for a long time to come.

In his opening remarks, the Minister said that he had had to make some quick decisions — whether those decisions needed to be taken as quickly as possible is a matter of debate — but that we would be able to revisit the issue. However, that is not what the explanatory and financial memorandum to the Bill indicates. The memorandum states that the Bill will put in place:

“the framework for the direction of the library service over the next ten years”.

That does not strike me as an interim measure that could be easily changed or revisited, either during the RPA process or at some point subsequent to that.

Another point that I want to make concerns the appointment that the Minister and his Department — and, again, they are not unique in this — have made. I make no comment on the person who has been appointed, but am concerned by the fact that, before the Bill was introduced and before the Assembly had had an opportunity to comment on the proposed structure, a person had already been appointed to head that structure. The Department of Education has done that as well.

Eventually, the Minister of Education will introduce a Bill to determine what kind of structure we should have for education — and that structure will, supposedly, be for debate in this Assembly. If the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure thinks that I am being hard on him, he should wait until I deal with the Minister of Education —

Mr McElduff: Will the Member give way?

Mr S Wilson: No. I offered to make a helpful intervention during the speech of the Member opposite. I am always happy to give way, but I like to see some reciprocation and, without that, I will not give way.

The same thing is happening in education, where a chief executive designate has been put in place before we even know what the structure will be. We need to escape from that. If this Assembly and its Committees are to have any genuine input into policy in Northern Ireland, we must have an opportunity to discuss these issues properly, not within a framework of tight

legislation with decisions already made and people already appointed.

11.30 am

There appears to be a belief in the Assembly that we should try to get decision-making down as close to communities as possible — and that may affect debate on a whole range of other issues as well, including education and local government. Perhaps that belief is coloured by the fact that most Members have also served on local councils, and having served in local government for 20-odd years, I think that that is good. Sometimes councils can be frustrating places, and the decisions that are taken can be bad — just as they can be elsewhere — but at least they are taken at a local level. This Bill will ensure that decisions about what is a basic service will be taken at a regional level, and not at a local level.

Mr McNarry: Control freaks.

Mr S Wilson: It is not a case of control freakery. It is something that originated during direct rule: civil servants hoped that they would never have to have any interface with local politicians, which can sometimes be a bit uncomfortable.

There will be inefficiencies if decisions are taken away from local areas, and I will give an example of that. The Member for North Belfast Nelson McCausland referred to the Grove Wellbeing Centre. When the decision had to be made about putting health and library facilities in one centre — which made sense, as it brought leisure facilities together, and there were certain economies of scale — Belfast City Council had to deal, not with a regional authority, but with the Belfast Education and Library Board. It was a different authority, but at least it was operating in the same geographical area.

However, it took two and a half years to get a decision on whether the Belfast Education and Library Board could buy into the library facilities. One reason for the delay was that the Belfast Board had a certain path for its capital spending programme, and Belfast City Council had a different path for its capital spending programme. Belfast City Council had £15 million to spend on a well-being centre, and the Belfast Board had other priorities. It took two and a half years to bring those two things together and make a decision. If Members believe that libraries are part of leisure, and that local councils will be delivering leisure, then it makes sense to have the decision-making process all under the one roof.

The Minister talked about efficiency, and Sinn Féin, wrongly, rubbished it. Sinn Féin's view on the whole question of efficiency is that things should not be done in order to save money; that that should not be a factor that counts in this decision.

Mr McElduff: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr S Wilson: I doubt whether the Member is making a point of order.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Point of order.

Mr McElduff: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I want to clarify that when I spoke to the House this morning, I was doing so in my capacity as the Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure —

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order, Mr McElduff.

Mr S Wilson: I did not think that it would be a point of order, and I am glad that you intervened quickly, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I know that Sinn Féin does not care too much about spending taxpayers' money. Its control of the purse strings, and its unending demands for spending, in local government show that Sinn Féin is not a good custodian of public money.

The Minister is right. If efficiencies can be generated, then that should be one of the factors involved in deciding whether to have a single authority or devolve matters locally. It is only one factor, but it is an important one.

The explanatory and financial memorandum, however, gives no indication as to whether savings will be generated. There is an indication that there will be upfront costs and that, indeed, in the first year it might cost more — actually, that will also apply to a lot of the other reorganisations. Based on the memorandum, it is impossible to make a judgement as to whether there will be savings. It states:

“There is no separate accounting process within the Education and Library Boards ... part of corporate services ... therefore the existing libraries budget within DCAL covers direct costs only.”

Members do not actually know, therefore, the total cost of delivering the Library Service under the existing boards. How, then, can we know whether there are going to be overall savings? That is something that we should know before we make a final decision on the Bill.

The other thing that I have noticed is that upfront costs have been identified already. New premises are mentioned. Again, Members must ask whether, if we went down the road of keeping libraries within the education and skills authority — if that is set up — we would need separate premises. Would we need separate premises if the service were given to local councils? Would there not then be certain costs that could be shared, rather than setting up a brand new structure for libraries?

My last point is on accountability. Under schedule 1 to the Bill, the Department may appoint up to 14

members to the library authority. The Bill does not say whether those 14 members will include any public representatives; therefore, the quango that will be set up will be able to delegate decision-making to committees and to officers — a further remove from accountability. Decisions have to be made about the types of services, the costs of services, the opening hours of libraries, the location of libraries, and everything else, and I am not sure that those are the kinds of decisions that we want to give to a quango in an era when we want to involve local people more.

Those are all issues that need to be addressed. I hope that those issues will be teased out during the debate on the Bill and that there will be a close scrutiny of all of those kinds of points. I regret that this has been rushed to the Assembly in the way that it has. I understand that, to a certain extent, it is an inheritance from direct rule. Nevertheless, there are ways in which the process could have been slowed down. The message must be sent very clearly from the Assembly today to Government Departments that the period of unscrutinised Government during direct rule is over. Assembly Members will want to have their input and to ensure that, whatever decisions are made about future structures in Northern Ireland, there are clear opportunities for Members to do so.

In the Education Committee, I have already encountered people who have come along and been asked awkward questions and have then gone back to their various bodies and said: “That crowd there — sure, they know nothing. Did you hear the questions that they were asking?” Just because the questions were awkward does not mean that they should not have been asked. For a long time, those professionals have not had any scrutiny. Perhaps sometimes Members do ask stupid questions — there is a learning curve for us — but that is what democracy is all about, and that is what we should be standing up for in this House today.

Mr Poots: On the whole, it has been a useful and informative debate, and I thank Members for their contributions. Most of the points that have been raised I can cover now; if there any that I am not able to, I will write to the Members involved.

The Chairperson of the Committee of Culture, Arts and Leisure, along with Mr Brolly and Mr Ramsey, made a point about the introduction of the Libraries Bill to the Assembly. That process reflected the Executive's wish that, when devolution returned, Bills should be brought to the Assembly for early consideration. My Department thought it timely to introduce the Bill. The First and Second Stages were introduced in a form intended to assist the House in allowing the matter to go to Committee and to allow the Committee to get its teeth into the issues.

Next week, I represent my Department at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington, and will, therefore, be unavailable. That is why the Libraries Bill was introduced in that way — it was not a Machiavellian exercise, and there was no sleight of hand. My intention was to get the Bill onto the table before the summer recess to allow the researchers to start on their work and the Committee to address the issues.

I look forward to the Committee process. As the Libraries Bill has been introduced in that way, the Committee will have not only its full 30 days but the possibility of an extension to that time, should that be considered necessary. Making haste now will allow Committee members to take their time in considering the real issues, and the Committee's scrutiny of the Bill will benefit. My officials briefed the Committee in advance of the Bill's introduction. I will work closely with it in developing the Bill and in considering proposed amendments. I shall be surprised if none is proposed.

Mr McElduff raised the issue of library closures. Over the past few years, several libraries have closed; however, over the course of time, populations and people's needs change. Library services have to adapt to those circumstances. I do not anticipate a significant number of library closures, but I cannot state categorically that no libraries will close. I do not have a crystal ball and cannot look into the future.

Ultimately, the wish is to improve library provision, increase library service and make them more readily available to the public. My Department will take that role.

The Libraries Bill offers an exciting way forward. Library services will no longer be a poor relation, or an afterthought, among the responsibilities of an education and library board; rather, the proposed Northern Ireland libraries authority will drive them forward. The authority will be exclusively committed to meeting the needs of those members of the public who use library services, and will compete for the finance to deliver library service. That commitment will be to the benefit of library users.

Mr McElduff mentioned the issue of opening hours. People want public services to be available when they are free to make use of them, and when they can do so as families. Libraries must, therefore, be open in the evenings and at weekends. My Department has set targets to ensure that opening hours are extended beyond the working day to accommodate local need.

I welcome Mr McNarry's return to terra firma.
[Laughter].

I thank him for his kind remarks. However, as his speech progressed, I began to think he was again going into orbit. I thank him, nonetheless.

With regard to the appointment of the chief executive designate of the proposed Northern Ireland

library authority, I declare again that there has been no sleight of hand. The post of chief executive designate is a secondment, and the position will not become permanent before the Libraries Bill has become law.

Mr McNarry: Will the Minister clarify that statement? I understand that the position of chief executive designate is a secondment. Is it therefore true that the appointee will be chief executive of an education and library board that will become defunct? How long will the secondment last?

11.45 am

Mr Poots: The chief executive designate is the current chief executive of the South Eastern Education and Library Board. If the House should reject the idea of establishing a single library authority, the secondment would end immediately. The chief executive designate will carry out the professional arrangements for establishing a library authority by March 2008.

It is important to recognise that, come March 2008, the education and library boards will cease to exist. If, for some reason, the boards happen to survive beyond March 2008, we are prepared for that situation. However, if the boards do not survive, and we have not done what is required of us and taken care of arrangements for libraries, there will be no organisation with the competence to deal with library services.

It is therefore essential that we put the wheels in motion to establish a single library authority. That is not to presume that the House will automatically follow. The Department requires the House to make the decision to proceed with a single library authority before the post of chief executive can become permanent. The chief executive designate has accepted the position on the understanding that it is a designate position and a secondment and the post cannot become permanent until the House decides to approve the establishment of a single library authority. I trust that that clears up the matter.

Mr McElduff and Mr P Ramsey mentioned employment and staff contracts. Employment contracts will transfer to the new employers, and contractual terms will be agreed under the TUPE regulations. In addition, contracts may only be varied subject to constraints specified in those regulations. The TUPE regulations provide only limited protections for pensions. As public-sector pensions are an important part of the remuneration package, it was considered important to provide additional protections for them. The Libraries Bill does that, so it is actually more helpful to staff than The Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 2006.

Mr McCausland raised a number of issues. He mentioned the joint provision of services at the Grove Wellbeing Centre, which is under development in north Belfast. Library services are being delivered

alongside other public services in many other places, too. They can add to health and education services and retail outlets. I would like to expand that approach in other areas. We will continue to give full consideration to useful partnerships that can improve the accessibility of libraries for the public. Mr McCausland also mentioned that we do not have a national library, and I will consider that matter in due course.

Start-up costs have been estimated at £67,000, and the Department has the funding for that.

Mr McNarry mentioned delivery standards. The first set of public standards for Northern Ireland was published in the document 'Delivering Tomorrow's Libraries', which was launched last July. Those standards include maintaining expenditure and stock and improving opening hours and accessibility. Library service performance will be monitored against those standards, and my Department will publish reports on how the service is meeting them.

Mr McElduff and Mr Shannon raised the issue of charges. There are no plans to introduce charges for core library services, and I want to put that into context. At the moment, there are charges for some library services; for example, users will incur charges for the late return of books or for photocopying documents. However, there are no charges for core services, nor will there be. I want to make it clear that core services will continue to be provided free to the public at the point of delivery. There will be no charges for those services unless approved by the Department under a particular scheme.

Several Members, including Mr Ramsey, referred to services in rural areas. There are clearly difficulties in delivering any public service to an area where the population is dispersed. Library services are provided in some of those areas through mobile libraries when it is not viable to provide such areas with a purpose-built library. To ensure that local library services are maintained, 'Delivering Tomorrow's Libraries' requires that 85% of households should have access to a library building or have a regular mobile library stop within two miles.

Mr McCarthy asked about library services for schools, which will continue to be the responsibility of the Department of Education. The chief executive designate of the library authority and the proposed education and skills authority will consider the best way of ensuring that all parties work closely together for the mutual benefit of all services.

Lord Browne raised the matter of appointments to the board. Board members will be appointed on merit, in line with the code of practice that has been issued by the Commissioner for Public Appointments. I do not see any need for a large number of board members, and the plan for between seven and 14 members is in

line with recommended good practice. I am happy to consider the views of the Assembly, and of the Committee in particular, on nominated places. The democratic involvement of people at a level at which local accountability can be introduced is important, if not crucial, and that is something that we are happy to consider.

On options for library services, Lord Browne raised their remaining within the education authorities. Libraries have cultural, recreational and community roles, as well as an educational one, and they also have a wider customer base than schools. Moreover, they play a significant role in providing informal learning opportunities. Delivery alongside schools does not reflect that wider and more informal role.

There is some evidence to suggest that the junior status of libraries in the education and libraries boards has not been to their benefit or that of their customers. For example, there has historically been an lower level of library use in Northern Ireland than in other parts of the United Kingdom. Earlier, I stressed that libraries could make a better case for themselves under their own authority, because they would be wholly committed to the delivery of library services.

A number of Members raised the need to protect the interests of staff. The policy objectives behind schedule 2(4) were agreed with the Public Service Commission and the trade unions. That demonstrates the commitment to staff and to their interests.

Mr Shannon raised the issue of Newtownards library. It is unusual for Mr Shannon to be parochial, but I will forgive him in this instance. *[Laughter.]*

The South Eastern Education and Library Board is revising an economic appraisal and considering the cost and option of delivering a replacement library on the site of the old Castle Gardens Primary School. The board anticipates that that appraisal will be submitted to the Department by the end of June 2007, and, subject to consideration and approval by my Department and by the Department of Finance and Personnel, it should be possible for construction to commence on the site in about a year to 15 months. That is to allow for detailed design work, the planning application and the approval process, so if the planning process is held up, do not blame this Minister.

I also agree with Mr Shannon about the importance of the mobile library service for meeting the needs of people in rural areas and of people who have difficulty in gaining access to those services in other ways.

Trevor Clarke referred to local accountability, and I trust that I went some way towards dealing with that matter when discussing the library authority's membership. Ultimately, the library authority will be accountable to my Department, to whoever the Minister happens to be of the Department, and to the

Assembly Committee of the day. Democratic accountability will not be lost as a result of the Bill.

I make it clear to the House that the Assembly will have control over the library authority, its operation and its chief executive. Members should bear in mind that all matters relating to the authority will come before the Minister and, ultimately, the House.

Mr Trevor Clarke mentioned the newbuild library in Antrim. Subject to approval, it is anticipated that work on the site will begin in November or December this year. I thank the Member for attending this debate, and for his interest in the new library and his ongoing work in relation to it.

My colleague Sammy Wilson was the last Member to speak in the debate, and he raised a number of issues. Prior to its introduction, there was a consultation process on the Libraries Bill. Of the 24 consultation responses received, only one consultee suggested that library functions would be better served by local authorities. The RPA considered that increasing the number of education and library boards from five to seven would make the system more unwieldy. Similarly, if the Assembly were to opt for 11 or 15 councils in Northern Ireland, that would be akin to moving from the ridiculous to the ludicrous. While I certainly would not recommend that route, I shall, however, be in the hands of the House on whatever decision is taken.

Mr Wilson also mentioned the mentality of the Civil Service. The main difficulties that I have had with the mentality of the Civil Service, especially when the Assembly was suspended, were its inability to make decisions, its tendency to be risk-averse and its apparent lack of courage to make decisions. I assure the Member that my courage will not be found lacking when difficult decisions have to be made. I will not make decisions as a puppet of a civil servant. Decisions will be made based on evidence that I, as Minister, will receive.

Sammy Wilson suggested that the Department should have considered other alternatives. I have not heard any alternatives. Neither have I heard an alternative on the other subject that he mentioned — I have been waiting for two and a half years for an alternative on that issue, so setting a deadline now might not be a bad thing, as it might concentrate minds. However, I cannot afford to wait two and a half years for an alternative to the new library authority, because something must be in place by March, otherwise there will be no library service. I will not wait for two and a half years for alternatives from anyone else.

I also remind Members that the explanatory and financial memorandum is not part of the legislation, and we are dealing only with the Bill.

New premises are usually located wherever the Government have an existing stock of premises, and, under the RPA, premises will become available for library headquarters. If no premises are available — and if Sammy Wilson is ruling out east Antrim as the potential location for the headquarters of the new library service — that will be noted.

[Laughter.]

I thank Members for their contributions, and I look forward to working with the Committee on the Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Libraries Bill [NIA 5/07] be agreed.

Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill

Second Stage

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I beg to move

That the Second Stage of the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill [NIA 2/07] be agreed.

The Bill amends the provisions of the Health and Personal Social Services (Northern Ireland) Order 1972 in relation to the regulation of the four family practitioner services: general practitioners, opticians, pharmacists, and dentists. It sets out a legislative base for new contracts for dental practitioner services

12.00 noon

The Bill allows for greater protection of patients and equality among practitioners providing treatment to them. The health and social services boards and Health Service tribunals have a role to play, and the measures included in the Bill will strengthen their roles further.

The Bill also amends the Smoking (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 and makes provision to permit smoking by performers taking part in performances if artistic integrity so requires.

The measures will also help Northern Ireland to retain parity with rest of the UK as far as possible. The draft Bill has been the subject of a wide-ranging consultation exercise, and I am pleased to say that respondents were generally in favour of the new policies.

The main provisions will allow for the implementation of a new contract for the provision of dental services by general dental practitioners that will underpin a modernised, high-quality dental service provided through real contracts between health and social services boards and general dental practices.

There is consensus that the current contractual arrangements for Health Service dentists no longer meet the needs of dentists or patients. Many Health Service dentists are particularly unhappy with the current fee-per-item payment, a system that focuses on treatment carried out rather than on preventative measures.

General dental practitioners do a valuable job and it is our intention to involve them in the wider process of Health Service modernisation including pay reform, improving working lives, lifelong skills improvement and clinical governance.

The new primary dental service will improve the working lives of dentists by reducing the treadmill effect. It will allow them to provide accessible, good-quality, patient-focused care. The primary dental-care strategy, which was developed with input from all stakeholders, was published in November 2006. I have accepted that strategy as the blueprint for the new service, subject to

adequate piloting. The clauses relating to dental services in the Bill will provide the legislative framework to deliver the new arrangements.

Dentists will receive a guaranteed regular income that will reward them for their time rather than for the volume of work they produce. Dentists are under no obligation to treat Health Service patients, but under the new legislation, services will be commissioned locally to meet requirements, and access to Health Service dental treatment will be integral to that. The new commissioning powers given to health and social services boards will ensure better access to Health Service dentistry and place greater emphasis on prevention than the current contract permits. That alternative approach will put in place a regional contract with local flexibilities that will deliver an improved patient experience, greater clinical consistency, and clarity between private and Health Service care.

To improve the safety and protection of patients, the Bill will extend the powers of the health and social services boards to allow them to directly suspend practitioners. That will apply to the four family practitioner services: general practitioners, opticians, pharmacists and dentists. Suspension could take place, pending, for instance, referral to the Health Service tribunal, the outcome of a court case, or a hearing by a professional regulatory body.

There will be no right of appeal against a board's decision to suspend. Suspension in such circumstances will be classed as a neutral act, not a disciplinary sanction. The intention is that the power will protect the interests of patients, staff and the practitioner who is suspended.

Suspension is a temporary measure. It does not imply guilt and will be a neutral act during an investigation. It will be important to a board that the person who takes the decision to suspend a practitioner is able to substantiate that decision. Currently a practitioner may continue to treat patients while a court case is being decided, but boards will be able to take fast and effective action when concerns about a practitioner are raised. The Bill will also enable a board to allow a practitioner to practise as long as he or she agrees to be bound by specific conditions. Those powers will now extend to all practitioners, including locums, deputies and employees.

The Bill also extends the powers of the Health Service tribunal, allowing it to deal with a practitioner who has been referred because of inappropriate professional or personal conduct, and to categories of persons subject to the tribunal's jurisdiction to incorporate all practitioners, including those who assist with the provision of services.

This Bill as it stands includes an exemption for performers from the smoke-free legislation. Clause 15 of the Bill would amend The Smoking (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 by providing a power to exempt by regulation from smoke-free provision smoking by a performer in a performance in which the artistic integrity of the performance makes it appropriate to smoke. The previous Administration inserted that clause in the original Order in Council at Westminster. The Order was subsequently translated into the Assembly Bill that is now before Members. To avoid any delay in introducing the Bill's important provisions, which, as I have just outlined, will increase patients' safety, I agreed that the proposed amendment in clause 15 could remain in the Bill at least until it could be debated in the Assembly.

I have considered the theatrical profession's arguments in favour of the exemption. Those arguments were based on the premise that to outlaw actual smoking would severely compromise a production's artistic integrity. I have also listened carefully to representations from health professionals and others on the exemption. Those representations focused largely on concerns that such an exemption would undermine the rationale behind the introduction of the smoke-free legislation; namely, the protection of public health.

On the subject of artistic licence, the Lone Ranger, for example, managed to rule the wild west without firing real bullets. Those who have portrayed Julius Caesar on stage and screen have cause to be grateful that the assassination scene did not require them to shed real blood for the sake of their art. Actual smoking is not essential in order to protect the integrity of a particular performance. Even if it were, however, the argument that artistic integrity would be compromised does not outweigh the public-health argument. I am therefore minded to table an amendment to the Bill to remove clause 15.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr McGimpsey: I recommend the Bill to the Assembly, as I believe that it provides the opportunity to strengthen the quality of primary-care services in Northern Ireland by introducing measures that will enhance patients' safety and will provide new arrangements for commissioning general dental services and contracting with general dental practitioners. However, as I have said, I will not support the exemption to the smoke-free legislation for performers and others.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mrs I Robinson): The Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill is relatively short, but it certainly lives up to its title. One might say that it does exactly what it says on the tin. As the Minister has already explained, the Bill

contains several separate and unconnected measures, three of which I shall deal with briefly.

The first relates to measures aimed at enhancing public safety that have already been implemented in England, Scotland and Wales. As the Minister has said, the introduction of those measures arose out of concerns about the case of Dr Harold Shipman. Dr Shipman, as Members will know, was jailed for life in 2000 for the murder of 15 of his patients. He was subsequently found to have been responsible for more than 200 murders. Part of the Bill's provisions seems to be aimed at ensuring that a similar case cannot ever happen again.

I have some concerns that, although those public-safety measures were introduced in the rest of the United Kingdom some time ago, they are still to be introduced in Northern Ireland. The Bill will give health and social services boards the power to suspend a range of family practitioners — GPs, dentists, opticians and pharmacists — pending a hearing by a professional regulatory body, a court case or the Health Service tribunal. During the Committee's initial consideration of those provisions, some members expressed concern that, although such a suspension by a board would be described as a neutral act, pending the outcome of any inquiry, the public would not perceive it as such. As a result, the good name and reputation of a practitioner would risk being seriously and irrevocably damaged.

Other Members of the Committee may wish to elaborate on that matter and more fully explore that concern during the Committee Stage of the Bill.

The availability of dental services is a further concern. The relevant provisions of the Bill are intended to give the health and social care trusts the tools to deal with those areas where patients find it difficult to register with a Health Service dentist. An increasing number of dentists no longer offer Health Service treatment and provide only private dental treatment.

It is widely recognised that Northern Ireland has the worst dental health in the United Kingdom, and that has been the case for a considerable time. Last week, the Chief Medical Officer, Dr Michael McBride, briefed the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety on public health services. His report highlights the scale of the problem, which is particularly bad for children from the most deprived areas of Northern Ireland. The Committee was told that, compared to the UK average, 12-year-olds in Northern Ireland have almost three times the level of decay for their age group. That is an issue that can and must be tackled. I support the Health Bill if its provisions will help in even a small way.

I welcome the decision by the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to drop the clause

that exempts performers from the smoking ban. The Committee had not yet taken a position on that exemption, but I had intended to highlight the strong opposition that has already been voiced by some Committee Members during an initial briefing by the Department of Health. Removing the exemption for performers is correct because there is no more suitable group to provide appropriate props.

Last Thursday, during an evidence session of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety on public health issues, the Chief Medical Officer pointed out that the recent introduction of a smoking ban in work places was a major step forward, but that much more needed to be done. He also reminded us that smoking claims the lives of approximately 2,300 people a year in Northern Ireland, which is a damning and shocking statistic. I welcome the smoking ban in workplaces. Any relaxation of the ban would send the wrong message.

Commenting on the proposed exemption for performers, the Chief Medical Officer told the Committee:

“From a public health perspective, which is the only perspective from which I, as Chief Medical Officer, can comment, I could not support the introduction of such a provision.”

He also referred to dangers to the actors and audiences involved in the performances, and the message that that would send to the wider public. In the light of the advice from the Chief Medical Officer, I am not surprised that the Minister of Health has rethought the matter, and that is welcome.

When the Department of Health undertook a public consultation on the exemption of performers from the smoking ban earlier in the year, there were 26 responses, of which 22 were strongly opposed to the exemption. That only four responses — three from organisations and one from an individual — supported the exemption makes its own case. I welcome the Minister’s change of heart, and his commitment to remove that clause from the Bill at Consideration Stage. Aside from that clause, I support the general provisions of the Bill.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat. I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill. My comments will be made without prejudice to the possibility of tabling an amendment at a later stage.

Members agree that transparency is good for health professionals and their patients. There are concerns about the potential misinterpretation of ambiguities in the legislation. Everyone agrees that regulation is the right way forward, but the manner in which that regulation is carried out may lead to lobbying from groups of doctors and their representatives.

There are concerns regarding the principle of ensuring that professional regulation and workplace

regulation connect in a manner that is respectful to distinct but complementary roles.

12.15 pm

Doctors are working under pressure and are delivering healthcare in difficult circumstances. However, they would welcome particular aspects of regulation. For doctors, personal regulation is about putting patients first, which is an ethos that is enshrined in medical practice. Team-based regulation is about the performance of the team and risk-management strategies for patient care. Workplace regulation is about governance and performance-management systems. Professional regulation includes ongoing work on standards, education and regulation licensing to include revalidation and fitness of practice procedures. If all those items could be included in the Bill’s explanatory and financial memorandum, the potential for misinterpretation would be reduced.

I am delighted that the Minister is going to table an amendment to remove clause 15 from the Bill, as the argument about artistic integrity is not valid. I am sure that many Members have been lobbied by various health promotion charities, such as Action Cancer and the Ulster Cancer Foundation, and the families of people who have died as a result of disease caused by smoking. I hope that the proposed removal of clause 15 from the Bill is a good-news story that will be reported by the media, because it is an action that puts the needs of people first.

I am also glad that there has been adherence to the smoking ban, and that the first opportunity for an amendment to dilute it has been resisted.

I have no major concerns with the Bill. However, as I have said, Members will be examining it again and will be making further representations at Committee Stage. I welcome the opportunity to comment on the Bill, and I appreciate the remarks of the Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure. Go raibh maith agat.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I welcome the Minister’s comments regarding artistic integrity and smoking. I cannot see the logic of keeping that particular part of the Bill, and I am glad that the Minister has made it clear that it will not be retained. When a precedent like that is set, through pressure from a particular section of the community, it encourages others to seek other changes in the legislation. I fully support the Minister’s intention to remove the clause relating to smoking from the Bill.

Recently, when speaking in the debate on junior doctors, I emphasised how important it is that the medical profession regulates itself. I am deeply suspicious of doctors being regulated by anyone other than fellow doctors, and I will set my face against administrators’ regulating doctors. The medical

profession has regulated itself successfully for many hundreds of years, with few notable exceptions.

I am concerned that there are elements of the innocuously named Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill that will undermine and dilute the principle of self-regulation in a manner that is neither justified nor acceptable. The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has spoken about his strong support for the professionals in the Health Service and their integrity. From my personal experience of the Minister, I know that his support is genuine.

The failure of the Bill to mention the widely accepted and recently reformed disciplinary mechanisms of the General Medical Council (GMC) is difficult to explain and could be construed in some quarters as ominous. How can a Bill that purports to address regulatory mechanisms fail to refer to such tried and tested devices? That seems a strange omission. To fail to set any new regulatory mechanisms in the context of recently revised GMC standards raises doubts as to whether the new provisions are designed to undermine, rather than complement, existing regulations and regulatory bodies. I know that there is considerable disquiet in the medical profession about the extension of powers to a health and social services board to suspend a medical practitioner before — and I repeat, before — referral to the Health Service tribunal. The Chairperson of the Health Committee rightly said that such a suspension would cast a shadow of doubt over that individual and would raise concerns among those whom he has been treating. Not only that; it would cast a doubt into the practitioner's mind that would prove very difficult to remove, even if the suspension were lifted.

No one would deny the local board the right to act in matters of patient protection. However, not all matters are quite so clear-cut. The provision conjures up visions of possible victimisation and has the potential, in the wrong hands, to be misused.

We should not entertain the prospect of unilateral action by a health and social services board without the sanction of any balancing and medically competent counterweight. I always look closely at any new legislation that comes before the Assembly and ask myself what is its real intention. I try to discern the true intentions behind what is being proposed. In the case of this Bill, the definition of the new grounds for disqualification — to be added to those of fraud and prejudice to the efficiency of the service — lacks clarity, to my concern.

Lack of clarity could be construed as another attempt to undermine the medical profession's independent standing and to subject doctors to still further decision-making by bureaucrats. Ill-defined law is always bad law. The Bill therefore requires further scrutiny to address the growing concerns that

many doctors and other professionals, and their professional body, the British Medical Association (BMA), have about it. I am sure that all MLAs will see that as the bounden duty of the House, and I look forward to the Committee Stage of the Bill.

Mrs Hanna: I welcome the opportunity to comment on the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill.

I also welcome the Minister's decision not to water down the Smoking (Northern Ireland) Order 2006. That would be to clearly contradict and undermine the aims of the Order by putting at risk the health of actors, stage workers and audiences. Consistency of the regulations is essential in order that we do not send out mixed messages. Certainly, the SDLP still believes that a total ban on smoking in all enclosed places is the only way in which to protect all workers from the harmful effects of passive smoking.

The Bill also makes provision to further strengthen the quality of primary-care services and to bring our services in line with those in England, Wales and Scotland. I welcome the move to include all practitioners — GPs, dentists, opticians, pharmacists, and ophthalmic and pharmaceutical bodies — on a single list of performers of primary medical services in each health and social services board.

Although this is not part of the Bill, it is equally important to note that it is essential that all health professionals, and indeed, all professionals allied to health matters, be around the table of primary-care partnerships to ensure that a more holistic approach to healthcare in the community is developed.

Many new parents need the support and encouragement of midwives and others with parenting, and older people may need a podiatrist or an occupational therapist much more than they need any other health professional.

It has been mentioned that the proposal to extend the powers of health and social services boards has concerned the BMA and the GMC. Those bodies have acknowledged that patient protection is the reason behind the argument for local suspension. I have no doubt that those concerns will have to be taken on board. However, I believe that all practitioners should be independently regulated, and patient safety is the bottom and top line for me.

The SDLP believes that wider access to NHS dentistry in all areas is necessary. There should be more training places for dental hygienists and nurses, and the working environment of NHS dental-care staff should be improved.

The fact that many dentists have pulled out of contract negotiations in England and Wales is worrying for us. There must be plans to ensure that dentists are satisfied with their contracts and will stay in the NHS

in order that everyone, particularly children and young people, can register with a National Health Service dentist. It is frightening that the children of Northern Ireland cannot at present be treated on the NHS. According to the British Dental Association, children's teeth in Northern Ireland are much worse than those of their contemporaries in the rest of Ireland and the UK. As NHS dental cover declines, so does dental health, and, indeed, our poor record of dental health is increasing. It is essential that every patient who is eligible to register can do so. Furthermore, dentists should be local — patients should not have to travel many miles to find a National Health Service dentist. The proposed policy change must ensure that the health and social services boards have the power to commission dentists. I will certainly monitor that closely to ensure that NHS dentists are available and that access is widened adequately. We must ensure that we get away from the "fill and drill" culture of the contracts. We must recruit and retain good dental-health staff.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr McCarthy: I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill.

The Bill's provisions on dentistry are almost replicas of legislation that has been implemented across the water, primarily in England. However, those have not been regarded as very successful. The legislation in England was meant to improve access to dentistry, but the three price bands for treatment has meant that that has not happened. The top price band of £189 means that dentists simply will not take on treatment that is worth up to £900, thus those who need dental treatment will not receive it.

The legislation in England was also meant to improve prevention of tooth disease; however, there has been an increase in extraction and a reduction in root treatment. The real problem is that health spending in Northern Ireland has increased by some 64% in the past decade, but dental spending has risen by only 22%, resulting in a real crisis in dental services. Surely we cannot and should not blindly follow a system that does not work.

As I understand it, the Scottish Parliament rejected similar proposals, acknowledging that such a system would not help prevention or access, but would only make a bad situation worse. More work is required in that regard.

12.30 pm

My party is totally opposed to any regulation that makes it possible to smoke in public places — even for performers or artists, for whom I have the highest regard. It should not be beyond the imagination or innovation of those in that business to think of a substitute for the act of smoking.

It was agreed earlier this year in Northern Ireland that smoking in public places was detrimental to the health of our people, and action was taken to put into force measures to address that. The vast majority of Northern Irish people have accepted that smoking is a deadly habit. It has also been accepted that non-smokers should not have their lives endangered by other people's smoke.

Real progress has been made in Northern Ireland on the issue of smoking, and many people now acknowledge that smoking is, and has been, detrimental to health. Considering the efforts made by many Members of this Assembly, by local councils across Northern Ireland, and by organisations that are concerned with health, it would be a real slap in the teeth to all of us and all of those organisations if the provision to allow performers or artists to smoke during a performance remained in the Bill.

I am delighted that the Minister has accepted the will of the people and that he has listened to the people on that issue. I hope that the Minister throws out that exemption. That will enable people in Northern Ireland to continue to have smoke-free workplaces. I am glad to support the Bill.

Mr Easton: It gives me particular pleasure to support the vast bulk of the Bill, which is designed to strengthen further the quality of primary-care services in Northern Ireland.

Prior to my election to the Assembly, I worked in the Health Service for 16 years. I had ample opportunity to appreciate the commitment and contribution of so many people in caring, nursing and other areas of the medical community. Those people, unstintingly, give their time and talents in the service of those who are ill or in need of treatment. I have often been concerned that their work has been made more difficult by the requirement to work within restrictive bureaucratic parameters. These particular proposals are therefore most welcome.

Patients' safety and patients' confidence in the system must be major priorities. It is vital that patients have complete confidence in the ability and experience of their GP, dentist, pharmacist or optician, or, indeed, in anyone involved with their examination and treatment.

Experience has taught us that patients must never be left in a position of doubt or insecurity. Where the competence of a medical practitioner is in question, the health authority must have the ability to conduct prompt investigations, or to impose appropriate limits and conditions. It is better in such situations to take no risks and to err on the side of caution, rather than to ignore concerns or to sideline a problem situation.

I am also happy to support legislation to introduce improvements in the way in which dental services are organised. No one should be in a position where they have difficulty in accessing dental care. The facility to

allow health boards to commission local dental services is a very sound one and has my full support.

I cannot, however, in all conscience, support the proposed legislation to amend the Smoking (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 in order to permit smoking by those taking part in performances. Legislation has been the critical factor in shaping the cultural change in community attitudes to smoking. The vast majority of people are opposed to smoking and do not want any watering down of the legislation. Smoking is a killer and treating those made ill by smoking is a huge drain on our medical resources.

Members will remember the days when having actors smoking in films was used as a subliminal vehicle for cigar and cigarette product placements by unscrupulous tobacco companies. If actors are required to smoke on stage, it should be in a simulated form only — that would be a challenge to their acting ability. There must be no weakening in our determination to make Northern Ireland a smoke-free country. There should be no tinkering with the legislation, and I welcome the Minister's response today.

I broadly welcome the changes proposed to prevent discrimination on the grounds of age with regard to the retirement age for GPs and dentists. I know of many older people working well beyond their normal retirement age. There is no substitute for experience.

I am a little concerned that the provision for exemption from Health Service charges could be exploited by those who are known as medical tourists to the detriment of people in our own community. If we want to exempt those granted leave to enter Northern Ireland from paying for a course of treatment, or other medical services, we must carefully monitor the situation to ensure that it is not over-exploited.

Any treatment that is given free of charge to foreign visitors is given at the expense of those who have paid National Insurance contributions for many years. Although all visitors should be welcomed to Northern Ireland, we should nevertheless ensure that the humanitarian grounds in such cases are exceptional and are supported by firm evidence.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat. I too welcome the opportunity to comment on the Bill at this stage. I look forward to its coming before the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety for further scrutiny and to hearing evidence from those who have an interest in it.

The Bill's main purpose is to introduce policy changes that are designed to strengthen the quality of primary care services in the North. My colleague, Ms Ní Chuilín, has commented on concerns in respect of patients' safety, greater accountability and the relaxation of the smoking ban. I welcome the Minister's decision not to relax the smoking ban.

I will comment on dental services across the North and the proposals included in the Bill. I must agree with the Minister on the unacceptable lack of availability of dental services. At present there are people who cannot locate a dentist in their area with whom they can register as an NHS patient. That cannot be allowed to continue, especially in the light of the poor oral health of the North's population.

Oral health in the North has been poor for many years, with those living in deprived areas being most affected. It is a well-recognised fact that social deprivation has a strong influence on dental decay. Children living in the 20% of most deprived wards in the North are almost twice as likely to have experienced dental decay as children from the 20% of most affluent wards.

Overall, the poor state of oral health is particularly bad in comparison to the South of Ireland and to England. The average five-year-old child in Belfast has approximately 2·5 teeth affected by tooth decay, whereas a child of the same age in London has 1·5 teeth affected by tooth decay, and a child in Dublin has only one tooth affected by tooth decay. Those comparisons make it ever clearer that there is a crisis in dental services.

The Bill will provide the Department with the opportunity to commission dental services and to directly employ dentists. That should go some way towards achieving better outcomes. However, the Department needs to target resources to the areas of greatest need and to encourage dentists to register and provide care for those patients with the greatest need. That needs to be a priority for the Department.

Mrs I Robinson: Will the Member give way?

Mrs O'Neill: I am almost finished, if you do not mind.

As I said, I welcome the opportunity to comment on the Bill. However, I reserve the right to make amendments and further comments when the Bill comes before the Health, Social Services and Public Safety Committee.

Mr McCallister: I welcome the forthcoming opportunity to review the Bill in the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety and to discuss it in more detail. I welcome the proposed changes to some of the dental services. I also welcome the Minister's comment that he will discuss those changes with dental practitioners. It is most important that they are involved in the process. It is also important that huge steps forward are taken in patient care, perhaps including a long-term strategy on preventative dental care.

Other Members have highlighted the fact that we, in Northern Ireland, lag badly behind in the provision of dental care and in preventative dental care. The Bill also proposes changes regarding tribunals that will bring Northern Ireland into line with England. The smoking ban has already been mentioned; I welcome the Bill's provisions on that.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is ideally placed to make judgements on the extension of the smoking ban to cover theatres as he is a former Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure. The most important issue regarding the extension of the ban is the message that it sends out, as Members from all sides of the House have welcomed it. I look forward to discussing the Bill at Committee Stage, and I give broad support to its provisions.

Mr McGimpsey: I thank all of the Members who contributed to the debate for their remarks. I shall attempt to deal with some of the issues that were raised, and I look forward to discussion of the Bill at the Committee Stage.

The changes to the powers and duties of the health and social services boards and of the tribunal will strengthen quality assurance and improve protection of patients. A new dental contract will allow local commissioning of a high-quality dental service that is responsive to the needs and wishes of patients. The proposed legislation reflects the Department's desire to improve primary care services for the people of Northern Ireland.

As I mentioned at the outset in my opening speech, the Bill contains the clause on smoking. I am grateful for the comments of colleagues about the smoking provision, and I assure them that, bearing in mind my responsibility for all the people in Northern Ireland and that I was previously the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, I see no reason why the recent smoking ban in public places should be broken to permit that activity. At the Bill's Consideration Stage, I shall table an amendment to withdraw that clause. The issues that follow are dealt with in no particular order.

Local commissioning for dentistry will be introduced to provide for and meet the needs of the local community, and access to Health Service dental treatment is an integral part of that. Boards will be required to define the services that they want to commission, and that service must take the oral health needs of the population into account. Primary dental services must be provided, and their provision secured.

Mrs Robinson made the point that that provision should have been available earlier, and she is correct; however, apart from Orders in Council, to which I referred, this is the first opportunity that the devolved Assembly has had to progress the issue. The timing was under the control of the previous Administration. Legislation on the provision of primary dental services was set up for an Order in Council, and, as I explained, rather than delay matters, I allowed it to come forward to give the Assembly an opportunity to discuss it. Before devolution resumed, the legislation was offered to me as an Order in Council, but that is part of the old, bad ways, and I know that the House will approve my taking the view that it was a matter for the Assembly.

Concerning the dental contract, dentists are currently paid for activity, and Mrs Hanna referred to that as "drill and fill". That will no longer be the case; dentists will be paid according to the time that they have spent. Therefore, they will have more time to advise their patients, particularly on oral health. As Mrs Robinson correctly pointed out, Northern Ireland has the worst dental health in the UK: we are bottom of the list. Our dental health is much worse than that of the Irish Republic. In that important area, prevention is better than cure.

There is a need for more dentists, and a review, published at the end of March 2006, contained plans to increase, as soon as possible, the number of places in the dental workforce by at least 40 a year.

I welcome Robert Coulter's support on the smoking amendment. Moreover, he raised concerns that bureaucrats are responsible for the regulation of practitioners. That does not run against the powers of the General Medical Council (GMC), which is still the regulatory body. Only the GMC has the power to strike off a general practitioner.

However, in the wake of the Shipman Inquiry, the Donaldson Report recognised that there is a gap between national and local regulations. The provision is designed to close that gap. If there is lack of clarity, as Bob Coulter says, the process will aim to provide clarity through the enabling powers of the Bill.

12.45 pm

Suspension is a temporary measure that is designed to protect patients and practitioners. The statement is designed to be neutral, and the Committee can give me its opinions on that. Suspension would occur during an investigation, and the suspending authority must be able to justify and substantiate such a decision. It is a double-edged sword — a two-way situation — because the onus is on a board or tribunal to justify exactly why it has taken an action. If the board or tribunal cannot do that, the stigma will be on it, rather than on the practitioner.

I appreciate that Members have raised other questions, to which I have not had time to respond. I look forward to the Committee Stage and to the Committee's deliberations and conclusions, which will inform the legislation as the process progresses. I am grateful to Members who have contributed to this helpful debate on an important piece of legislation.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill [NIA 2/07] be agreed.

Welfare Reform Bill

Further Consideration Stage

Mr Deputy Speaker: No amendments have been tabled to the Bill. The Further Consideration Stage of the Welfare Reform Bill is therefore concluded. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Budget Bill

Further Consideration Stage

Mr Deputy Speaker: No amendments have been tabled to the Bill. The Further Consideration Stage of the Budget Bill is therefore concluded. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Members will know that the Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately on suspension for lunch. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.30 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 12.49 pm.

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

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Teacher Induction Year

2.30 pm

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

Two amendments have been received and are published on the Marshalled List. If amendment No 1 is made, amendment No 2 will fall. The proposers of the amendments will each have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes for winding up.

Mr Ross: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes that, following the McCrone Report: 'A Teaching Profession for the 21st Century', a teacher induction scheme guarantees a one-year teaching post to every student graduating from a Scottish university with a teaching qualification; and calls upon the Minister of Education to liaise with the Scottish Executive on this matter, with a view to a similar scheme being introduced for teachers who train in Northern Ireland.

I am willing to accept amendment No 2, tabled by the Members opposite for Lagan Valley and for Mid Ulster. Therefore, I reject the amendment tabled by the SDLP. I am somewhat bemused by its content, as it deals with current teachers and does not seem to address the issue at hand. Undoubtedly, Mr Bradley will elaborate on that.

I welcome the opportunity to raise the issue of teacher induction. It is increasingly difficult for university graduates to find work, particularly newly qualified teachers. Northern Ireland does not have the same teacher shortages as other regions of the United Kingdom. Teaching courses and Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) courses remain heavily oversubscribed, with sometimes as many as five times more applicants than available places.

Currently, only about 22% of new teachers manage to find work in the first year after graduation. That indicates a significant problem, about which I have been contacted numerous times in my constituency.

Figures for 2001-02 reveal that 83.4% of those recently graduated teachers who returned destination information forms were employed as full-time teachers six months after graduation. That figure fell to 77.7% in 2002-03 and to 73.7% in 2003-04. The figures reached an all-time low in 2004-05, with only 62.2% of new teachers finding work.

The statistics can be misleading because many recently qualified teachers who have not managed to find work have not returned destination information forms. There is little doubt that the situation is getting worse, and evidence that I have recently heard leads me to believe that even more young people have been unable to find work in the last year. Seamus Searson of the National Association of Schoolmasters and Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) suggests that that figure might be as low as 22% and that the situation is reaching crisis point in Northern Ireland. He also suggests that 25% of graduates have gained only temporary posts. With that in mind, the Assembly must look at ways to help young teachers enter the profession.

One option, which was implemented in Scotland with the support of the NASUWT, is to guarantee new teachers a job for at least one year. That policy emerged from the McCrone Report, which was welcomed by many in the profession and has met with much praise since its implementation.

We are clearly not calling for that policy to be introduced immediately in Northern Ireland. We are simply asking the Minister to liaise with her Scottish counterpart and to examine whether it is a desirable and worthwhile policy that could be introduced in Northern Ireland.

At present, huge amounts of money are spent on training new teachers, but once students complete their courses, they are unable to find permanent employment in teaching. Many of those graduates cannot find work as supply teachers because many older teachers are taking early retirement and are doing supply work or covering for maternity leave. It is far more attractive for principals to take on someone who has years of experience, rather than a complete novice. Young teachers have no experience, but how can they gain experience if no one will employ them?

Former full-time teachers are ideal candidates for supply work; they know the job and they have the experience that headmasters need. However, that makes it difficult for new teachers to get started.

The age profile of current teachers is another issue to be addressed, as well as falling pupil numbers. Added together, those circumstances contribute to a significant problem. How can the Assembly address the problem and get younger teachers into schools? How can graduates gain the experience that they need if they cannot find jobs, even as supply teachers?

A guaranteed year of teaching for all new teachers is one possible way forward. That policy has been implemented in Scotland, and should be given serious consideration by the Assembly.

The introduction of a teacher induction year would also ensure that young teachers were not thrown in at the deep end, but given an individually tailored programme

that built on skills that they had already gained during their training period, while providing a system of support. Young teachers would be mentored and supported by experienced staff, and principals would monitor progress to ensure that individuals received that support.

The NASUWT and the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland (GTCNI) support the idea of a teacher induction year. In its final report for the Department of Education, the GTCNI recommended the introduction of a guaranteed induction year for all newly qualified teachers. The Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO) also expressed its concerns about losing the most talented teachers, saying that it feared that:

“our brightest and best young teachers were to be lured across the water by an offer of £5,000.”

Although the guarantee of full employment would be for only one year, it would go some way to giving a degree of experience to student teachers. That experience would be beneficial in building a new teacher's portfolio and helpful when applying for jobs.

It is important that consideration be given to how best to facilitate the placement of, and provide support for, new teachers. Surveys have shown that the quality of support that teachers receive in their early years has a major impact on their experiences as a teacher. Many young teachers have become demoralised simply because they cannot find work. On 6 April 2005, ‘The Scotsman’ reported of the McCrone report that:

“One of the greatest achievements has been the organised system for probationer teachers in their induction year.”

What will be the consequences if Members do not take action to help young teachers? Unlike other regions of the United Kingdom, Northern Ireland is unique in not having a shortage of teachers, and, therefore, we have a generally higher standard of teaching due to competition for places, which results in a requirement for higher entry grades. If graduates cannot find work in Northern Ireland they will be forced either to abandon their chosen profession, which they have been trained for, or to consider going to the mainland to teach. Given that students already get paid to undertake PGCE courses in some parts of the UK, there is a risk that many of the most talented young teachers will be forced to leave Northern Ireland. It is unlikely that, having settled into a new job in a new place, they will ever return.

I have already mentioned the vast amounts of money that are spent on the training of teachers in Northern Ireland. Is it prudent to spend such money on teachers who ultimately head for the mainland to find a job? Should Members not ensure that there is a return on that investment by keeping teachers for schools in Northern Ireland?

The brain drain has received media attention in recent months, and it is undoubtedly of concern to Members. As with other skills, the most talented local people

must be kept and availed of in Northern Ireland rather than elsewhere.

I was struck by the story that the Scottish First Minister Alex Salmond told in his address to the Assembly yesterday. He told of a man he had spoken with at Westminster who said that he had gone south in search of work. When asked if he would return to Scotland, the man said that he would if the opportunity were there to do so. That is the crux of the issue. Do young teachers have the opportunity to follow their chosen career at home, or must they leave Northern Ireland?

Members should be creating opportunities for those talented teachers; opening doors, instead of closing them. If Members fail to do that, the likely outcome will be that school-leavers who are enthusiastic and keen to follow a teaching career will decide that it is in their best interests to follow another path.

Publicity about shortages of teaching jobs in Northern Ireland acts as a disincentive to even the keenest students. That should not be the case. Members should be encouraging the brightest and most enthusiastic students into that profession.

I look forward to hearing the views of Members — particularly those who are former teachers. I refer, of course, to my esteemed colleagues Mr Sammy Wilson and Miss Michelle McIlveen, who may have an insight into this problem and who might elaborate on their experiences and the finer details of the idea of having an induction year.

The introduction of an induction year might not mean that a teacher would be guaranteed a job at the end, but it would mean that they would at least have a fighting chance. I hope that Members will give the motion their careful consideration and their support.

Mr D Bradley: I beg to move amendment No 1: Leave out all after “post” and insert

“in Scotland to every student teacher graduating from a Scottish university; further notes the publication of the Curran report ‘Improving Conditions, Raising Standards’, with the recommendation that a similar induction scheme is introduced in Northern Ireland; and calls on the Minister of Education and the Executive to implement the recommendations of the Curran report, including those on newly qualified teachers.”

Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the motion in the names of Mr Ross and Miss McIlveen. The motion seeks to give one year’s teaching experience to newly qualified teachers from Northern Ireland’s teaching university colleges and sources the historic changes that took place in Scotland after the publication of the McCrone Report. However, in moving amendment No 1, I want to draw the attention of Members to two important facts that are not covered in the original motion.

The source document for the improvement of teachers’ conditions of service in Northern Ireland is the Curran

Report, part 1 of which was published in 2003, with part 2 being published in 2004. The independent Curran inquiry into teachers’ salaries and conditions of service was set up by a former Minister of Education, Martin McGuinness. The inquiry had the unanimous support of the five recognised teachers’ unions in Northern Ireland and all the employing authorities on the management side of the teachers’ negotiating committee. Sean Curran CBE chaired the committee, which considered developments in Scotland under the McCrone Report and the subsequent negotiations, as well as developments in England and Wales, where there are no independent negotiations but instead a schoolteachers’ review body and a national agreement.

Significantly, the key objective of the Curran committee was to take the best features of the Scottish and English experience and to contextualise them in the largely small-school system in Northern Ireland. The Curran committee of inquiry was established with almost exactly the same terms of reference as the McCrone committee of inquiry, and it reflected best practice in England and Wales. For those reasons, I call on the Assembly to accept my amendment, because it reflects the best independent judgement of an inquiry that was established by our Department of Education and that reported to our teachers’ negotiating committee.

I am pleased to report that all the Curran inquiry team recommendations were accepted by the management side, which represents the education employing authorities, and by the Northern Ireland Teachers’ Council, which represents the unanimous view of the five recognised trade unions.

Today’s DUP motion is worthy, but I am sure that that party would accept that its recommendation is also one of the key recommendations of the Curran committee of inquiry. The SDLP agrees with the Member who moved the motion that newly qualified teachers need one year of guaranteed employment. A complex range of factors combine to ensure that most of those teachers, in the first year after graduation, do not secure permanent teaching posts and are therefore unable to complete their professional teaching induction qualification. That is disastrous. Our schools and pupils need these young enthusiastic teachers, and the teachers need to complete their teaching qualifications. As Mr Ross said, it is a vicious circle.

I therefore call on the Member who moved the motion to accept that the motion’s objective already forms the basis of a key recommendation of the independent Curran committee of inquiry. The motion, and the Curran recommendation, must be implemented as soon as possible, and my amendment would facilitate that.

What happened to the Curran committee of inquiry and all its recommendations? The inquiry team comprised distinguished persons, many of whom had long years

of experience in education. The independent Curran inquiry into teachers' pay and conditions was established in the final days of the Assembly's first mandate, and the implementation of the recommendations fell to successive direct rule Ministers with responsibility for education, the first of whom was Barry Gardiner. The rules of the House do not allow me to elaborate on the description of him that readily comes to mind. In any case, all the Curran recommendations, including the important recommendation to guarantee one year's permanent employment to all newly qualified teachers in Northern Ireland, were left hanging in the wilderness because the direct rule Ministers were not prepared to seek the resources to implement them. I hope that our devolved Ministers will not leave themselves open to the same accusation.

2.45 pm

The proposal to introduce an induction scheme for newly qualified teachers has been discussed in detail by the joint working party of the teachers' negotiating committee. A business case for the phased implementation of the scheme, which was unanimously agreed by management and the teachers' unions, has been presented to the Minister of Education. Why should the Assembly refer to the Scottish experience when we are already moving towards implementation?

I call on the Minister of Education to implement the scheme and relieve school principals of the pressures and the intolerable workloads that they have endured for too long. Pupils from largely rural communities would benefit enormously from the scheme proposed in this admirable motion.

It is important that the Assembly unanimously supports assistance for newly qualified teachers. However, it should also be noted that a range of significant recommendations made in the Curran Report were placed in limbo under direct rule, such as the implementation of planning, preparation and assessment time — a proposal that became a statutory condition of service for every teacher in England and Wales on 1 September 2005 — and the provision of two days' administration time for every teaching principal in small schools across Northern Ireland. Those innovations would be a boon to teaching principals, their pupils and the largely rural communities served by their schools.

Leading education administrators have been working for more than 20 years to achieve those aims, and the case is unanswerable. The trade unions and the management side have prioritised the proposal and have put a business case to the Minister of Education. The SDLP wants the Minister to enact the Curran recommendations.

My amendment calls on the Assembly to recognise that Northern Ireland has already established a high-powered committee of inquiry under Séan Curran's leadership, which has made detailed recommendations,

including specific proposals relating to newly qualified teachers. The Curran Report is available on the Department of Education's website and those of the various employing authorities and teachers' unions in Northern Ireland. There should be no more dithering: the recommendations of the Curran Report must be implemented, and to that end, I am pleased to move my amendment.

Under the Good Friday Agreement, the Assembly is responsible for teachers' salaries and conditions of service in Northern Ireland. What better way to implement that mandate responsibly than by accepting my amendment and adopting all the recommendations of the Curran Report, which would end the dithering that was the hallmark of direct rule Ministers.

The DUP motion is worthy; we have the Curran Report with its set of recommendations, and the teachers' unions and the employers have already presented a case to the Minister of Education and her Department. Why should we delay all of that by referring to the Scottish experience? We have already learned from the Scottish experience, and from the experiences of the English and Welsh education sectors. The sum total of that experience and best practice is reflected in the Curran Report. I ask the House to support my amendment to the motion. Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Mr Butler: I beg to move amendment No 2: Leave out all after the third "to" and insert

"asking the Executive to consider the matter in the context of the Comprehensive Spending Review, and in light of other budgetary pressures facing the Executive."

Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank Mr Ross and Members of the House for accepting my amendment, which represents a more sensible approach to teacher induction.

I support the spirit of the motion, because there have been a lot of positive developments for newly trained teachers in Scotland arising out of the McCrone Report.

It is generally accepted that the McCrone Report has been good for the teaching profession in Scotland and has led to an increase in teachers' salaries. The teacher induction scheme mentioned in the motion puts great emphasis on continuing professional development for teachers. The scheme in Scotland has produced an increase in support staff.

There are obvious concerns for new teachers, such as the lack of guaranteed employment after the one-year induction period. Probationary teachers will have to compete in the job market against other applicants. That said, the McCrone Report has been good for the teaching profession, and the Assembly could learn much from it.

Mr D Bradley: From his comments, am I now to assume that Mr Butler disowns the report initiated by his colleague, Martin McGuinness, the Minister for Education in the former Assembly?

Mr Butler: I am addressing the motion before the House, which concerns the McCrone Report and teacher induction schemes.

Teachers in the North of Ireland are finishing their training without a proper induction period. We must also accept the reality that school rolls have fallen, with 50,000 empty desks across the country. There has been an overproduction of teachers. For example, at St Mary's University College and Stranmillis University College, the number of places on teaching courses has been limited. The subject of the motion should be considered in that context.

Mr B McCrea: Does the Member accept that, if he has read the very fine report by Mr Curran, the number of newly qualified teachers has been falling since 1978? At that time, there were 1,000 new teachers, 75% of whom were in permanent employment. The extensive literature on the matter shows that, by 1996, the number of new teachers had fallen to 782, with only 34% in permanent employment. Those issues have been properly and thoroughly dealt with already, and there is no need to go over the same ground.

Mr Butler: I thank the Member for Lagan Valley for that piece of information.

A structured approach to graduate teachers is needed and, alongside that, the money to implement the proposal in the motion. That is where Sinn Féin's amendment is relevant. The Executive should consider the proposal in the context of the comprehensive spending review. The Department of Education has estimated that the cost of implementing the proposal in its first year to be around £12 million.

We must recognise that the teaching profession here is organised differently than in Scotland. Furthermore, the Scottish Parliament is far more advanced than this Assembly, not least in the area of economic decision-making and the ability of the Scottish Executive to set their own priorities. This Assembly is less than two months old and, although I am all for setting the Assembly ambitious targets, we must be realistic about what we can achieve. For that reason, I ask the House to support the Sinn Féin amendment to the motion. I acknowledge that the Member who proposed the motion has accepted it. It is prudent to await the outcome of the comprehensive spending review, rather than set priorities that cannot be met.

The issue of teaching principals, and whether they should work all week or possibly three days a week, has been raised with the unions and needs to be addressed further. Dominic Bradley mentioned the time required by teaching principals for planning, preparation and

assessment. Teachers in Great Britain devote 10% of their time to those tasks. It must also be recognised that, according to the Department of Education, 90% of teachers here find gainful employment after graduating from teacher-training college.

Mr B McCrea: I am pleased to address the House on this important issue. As the House will know, my party included a commitment to a guaranteed induction year for teachers in its election manifesto, and my party takes the matter very seriously.

I am somewhat surprised by amendment No 2. During the debate on the Second Stage of the Libraries Bill this morning, I thought that I heard parties on the opposite Benches deciding that money was not an issue and that if something is the right thing to do it should be done.

I fail to understand why — now that we are debating education, rather than libraries — Sinn Féin feels that that argument no longer applies. Furthermore, Mr Butler stressed that Scotland is not the same as Northern Ireland, and neither is England or Wales.

I take the point that my hon Friend Mr Bradley made, which was that, if we have done all the work, why should we attempt to reinvent the wheel? Why should we consider the Scottish experience? The situation is different there. I accept, however, that there are lessons to be learned from Scotland, and the Curran Report has taken those on board.

In Glasgow, the biggest problem that the authorities face is that there are far too many qualified teachers. The authorities have to offer those teachers incentives and bonuses to teach in areas outside Glasgow. However, barely 30 miles down the road, in more rural areas, the authorities find it difficult to attract teachers because teachers do not want to work in those areas.

Perhaps the situation in Glasgow is understandable, but it is not the same as the situation here. In fact, one of the big questions in Scotland lies in the fact that, despite its producing lots and lots of teachers, the authorities do not know where they go. That is their big question: "Where are all the teachers that we trained?"

To reiterate the point about differences, paragraph 79 of the Curran Report states that:

"There is a problem with teacher retention in Northern Ireland. It is unlike the situation in England and Wales where there is a problem in retaining young teachers."

Therefore, the set-up in England and Wales is completely different to ours.

People often ask why there are so many premature retirements from the teaching profession. Is it because of stress? Is it because of the workload? If it is for either of those reasons, we ought to find a way to employ more teachers. Another situation that is addressed in the Curran Report is the question of why teachers are allowed to retire early, only to come back

to work as substitute teachers. That seems to be counter-intuitive. Allowing such a practice does not seem to give younger teachers any opportunities.

I was struck by an issue that we discussed yesterday when the Minister responded to questions put by myself and members of the Alliance Party. We raised the issue that, in Northern Ireland, there are, apparently, 50,000 empty desks. What impact does that have on teacher training? Members are agreed that numeracy and literacy are among the highest priorities. Why, therefore, can the resource that we are producing — surplus qualified teachers — not be used to deal with the very important issue of those empty desks?

Why can we not agree that that is a prime problem, and use those people to solve it? All parties have agreed that that is a problem, and every year that we delay blights someone's life. That is not contentious; the Assembly has agreed on that issue. We must take action now. There is too much prevarication and talk of pushing the matter back. The people of this country elected us to do something, not to commission more reports.

This is a strategic decision. The subject of today's motion has been debated time and again. We merely talk about solving the issue before bouncing our decision back to the Executive to see whether we can afford the solution. What, therefore, is the purpose of the rest of us, who are not in the Executive, talking about these matters? If we are only here to rubber-stamp decisions, if we have no voice, if we are not important, why waste taxpayers' money by being here? The Assembly should be making decisions, giving guidance to the Executive and demanding action.

The Ulster Unionist Party supports amendment No 1 and rejects amendment No 2.

Mr Ford: The timing of today's debate is welcome because it addresses a matter that is of significant importance to many young people in Northern Ireland and to their families. As student teachers approach their graduations, too many of them face the future with no certainty of jobs ahead.

3.00 pm

I can remember conducting interviews, as a member of a board of governors, a few years ago on 30 June for a post that was to be taken up on 1 September. More than 50 applicants — all girls, as it happened — applied for that junior primary school post. They were all leaving college and at that stage, apart from a small number who dropped out of the process, they had no prospect of employment in the profession for which they trained. Clearly, that is a significant issue that we need to address.

However, as when we considered the employment and training prospects of junior doctors a few weeks ago, we must also bear it in mind that we do not need a

short-term, one-year fix but something that ensures a degree of continuity and provides some career progression. It is questionable whether the scheme currently operating in Scotland is necessarily what we need in Northern Ireland. Indeed, the Scottish scheme may not be applicable at all because the demographics are quite different here. I certainly do not wish to oppose the sentiments of the motion, but we must be extremely careful about the fine detail of what is proposed. If we want to ensure that we provide for those teachers who aspire to a career that lasts a considerable number of years — rather than until early retirement — we need something more than just the one-year fix that the motion is in danger of leading us to. Therefore, let us send a message to the Executive that we want the potential for such a scheme to be explored while recognising that the scheme that the McCrone Report laid out for Scotland may not be entirely relevant to Northern Ireland.

Mr D Bradley: Does the Member accept that, if we introduced 10% planning, preparation and assessment time and two days' administration time for every teaching principal, newly qualified teachers would benefit from that? That would mean that we would provide not just a short-term fix but more employment on a longer-term basis for newly qualified teachers.

Mr Ford: The Member makes, more eloquently than I hoped to do, a similar point to the one that I was about to make on the issue of class sizes. In discussing our priorities for education funding, it may well be that we conclude that additional posts will need to be created if we are seriously to address the problem of class sizes in some of our schools, especially those in which we are trying to mainstream pupils with special needs. The need to reduce class sizes might provide opportunities, as might the need to provide suitable relief for teaching principals in the way that the Member has highlighted.

Unless we provide such opportunities, however, we will need to face the issue that we currently train too many teachers. Indeed, despite the statistics that Mr Basil McCrea quoted that show a reduction in the number of people being trained, an increasing proportion of the students still do not have long-term employment at the end of their course. We need to ensure that we go beyond the one-year, short-term arrangement that is proposed and consider the details of the issue. It is rather sad that, as I understand it, those who are training for teaching posts in Stranmillis University College and St Mary's University College are encouraged to develop other skills because of the threat that they might not secure a job in teaching. We need to be rather more careful than the motion suggests that any proposed scheme should suit the needs of Northern Ireland rather than be based too closely on the Scottish one.

We also need to ensure that we have the money to deliver. If we do not have the money to deliver reductions in class sizes, we will not be able to go down that route. That prompts the question that other Members have raised about the spare capacity of 50,000 school places. There is an urgent need to rationalise the school estate to ensure that money goes to employing teachers and providing for the needs of pupils rather than to maintaining buildings and bureaucrats. I suspect that the Minister of Finance and Personnel, who is the deputy leader of the party to which the proposer of the motion belongs, will be grateful for the Sinn Féin amendment because, as Mr Butler highlighted, it would be dangerous to adopt the proposal without ensuring that matters have been fully costed.

We also need to ensure that, overall, there is a balance in the teaching profession. We have heard talk of teachers leaving early because of stress. The reality is that an apparently ever increasing number of teachers do not continue in work until the normal retirement age because of the difficulties that they experience. The danger is that we could end up with a scheme that artificially gives jobs to young teachers at the expense of mature teachers. That issue needs to be addressed.

Miss McIlveen: I find it disappointing that a motion to help newly qualified teachers who have invested so much in their education is now being hijacked by SDLP Members, who have taken us down a cul-de-sac by referring to a report that is of little relevance to what we are concentrating on today.

Furthermore, Mr McCrea's comments confused me somewhat. I thought that his party was represented in the Executive.

Mr D Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Miss McIlveen: No, I do not have much time.

I can speak on this subject from a personal perspective. I was once a young teaching graduate fresh out of Queen's University and filled with great ideals of educating, and I was fortunate in obtaining employment early in my probation period. However, many colleagues from my postgraduate certificate in education course — competent people with a huge amount to offer the education system — fell by the wayside. Indeed, I found myself employed alongside Mr Sammy Wilson in my first teaching job, and now, in my new post, I find that the same Sammy Wilson is the Chairman of the Committee for Education.

Northern Ireland faces a problem as a result of falling pupil numbers. A surplus of newly qualified teachers is currently unemployed. Around 370 newly qualified teachers emerge from Stranmillis University College, Queen's University, the University of Ulster and St Mary's University College each year. According to figures released in 2004-05, only 62.5% of graduates were employed as full-time teachers six months after

graduation. For Members whose mental arithmetic is not up to scratch, that represents 138 teaching graduates who are still not in employment six months after graduating. Those figures are conservative, but they show that Northern Ireland has a pool of teaching talent that is going to waste as supply teachers, engaged in alternative employment away from teaching, or, increasingly, applying for teaching jobs in other parts of the United Kingdom.

There is a further problem. The teaching talent that remain in Northern Ireland and attempt to establish themselves in such a competitive area face difficulties in adequately completing their induction period. Five competencies must be satisfied within that period: understanding of the curriculum and professional knowledge; subject knowledge and subject application; teaching strategies and techniques and classroom management; assessment and recording of pupils' progress; and foundation for further professional development. If full-time employment is not available, how will it be possible to attain those competencies to an appropriate professional standard?

Under the current scheme, induction can be started if the newly qualified teacher is working as a supply teacher, or is employed on a short-term contract. If an inductee moves from school to school, perhaps works a week here and a week there, or is in different schools on different days, it seems highly improbable that any of the competencies would be satisfied.

Furthermore, under the current induction scheme there should be a teacher tutor. That person would be responsible for monitoring, supporting and assessing the inductee. One must wonder how someone moving from job to job throughout a year could be properly monitored, supported or assessed.

The motion proposes that the Minister of Education should liaise with the Scottish Executive in order that a scheme, similar to that in Scotland, could be introduced in Northern Ireland. In Scotland, inductees are guaranteed a one-year training post, a maximum class commitment of 70% of a full-time equivalent, dedicated time set aside for professional development, a nominated mentor and a salary of around £19,500 a year.

Obviously, Northern Ireland and Scotland have different education systems. While Northern Ireland has no shortage subjects, Scotland has a number of more remote areas where teachers are required. Valuable information could be gathered from our near neighbours on that innovative and successful scheme that could be applied to Northern Ireland, with a view to improving our current situation.

However, such a scheme is not cheap. The induction scheme in Scotland costs around £24 million a year, and involves around 2,730 inductees. I am not suggesting that we are required to spend that amount of money,

but surely, if the Minister, and her Department, were to do some creative thinking, and take into consideration the colossal amount of £45 million that was spent on supply teachers in 2006-07 alone, something could be done. We must remember that, in return for such investment, we will have teachers who will have a full year's experience, who will be properly mentored and assessed and who will be suitably prepared to enter the job market — a much more attractive employment proposition than the current situation.

It is vital for Northern Ireland to have a high standard of teaching talent, with relevant and appropriate post-qualification training, to tackle the continuing challenges of literacy and numeracy.

In supporting the motion, I ask the Minister to liaise with the Scottish Executive to establish a best-practice model for Northern Ireland.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I congratulate the Member on retaining her sanity, having served under Mr Wilson.

Mr K Robinson: Perhaps I also have suffered under Sammy Wilson, so my sanity is up for grabs as well.

I should like to preface my remarks by thanking the Members who have brought this important issue before the House, and by declaring an interest by virtue of my role as a governor at two Newtownabbey schools.

The topic of the debate highlights not only how the Scottish Administration can address fundamental flaws in the field of education, but also how the community in Northern Ireland has drifted under the dead hand of a succession of direct rule Ministers. The NIO continues to churn out trainee teachers from four institutions while simultaneously overseeing other education bodies that are engaged in closing and amalgamating schools. What sort of coherent manpower planning does that suggest?

We require the highest level of entry qualifications from our young teachers of any part of these islands, yet when they emerge with their qualifications after extensive training and a considerable cost to the public purse, we fail to provide them with opportunities to practice their craft. We produce the best young teachers in the UK, so it is small wonder that when we fail to employ them here, they are snapped up with glee by education authorities across the UK and beyond. At the weekend, I heard of one going to the Gulf after a telephone interview.

This is another glaring example of the brain drain that has so afflicted Northern Ireland under direct rule. McCrone's report on the difficulties encountered by Scottish teachers going through their induction process is worthy of note, and could be adapted to suit conditions in Northern Ireland. It is but one example of how the Scottish Executive are seeking to seriously address the shortcomings of the Scottish education system.

Other elements are designed to improve standards. They include a substantial pay rise to attract and retain teachers; improvements to their conditions of service; and a commitment to reduce class sizes and deal with disruptive pupils. All of those approaches indicate a co-ordinated drive to put in place a system that can provide the skills required to develop a knowledge-based economy. We cannot do this on the cheap. If we are going to invest in education — if we want a knowledge-based economy — the money has to go in now.

This lesson must be grasped by the Department of Education. No amount of Celtic mythology from the Minister can be allowed to mask the fact that her Department is failing young teachers. The present trend for isolated days of temporary teaching, spread over several schools and many months, is not the best way to ensure that they complete their induction process in a coherent, cohesive and consistent manner. The best way to ensure that the desired high standards are consistently reached is for new teachers to be under the constant tutelage of experienced mentors. This critical stage of teacher development, and the subsequent stages of early professional development, require a more stringent process of standardisation than can be adequately achieved under the present approach.

The McCrone Report has lessons for all of us in its attempts to bring stability and order to the induction year by providing a one-year window of opportunity for new entrants to the profession. However, it does not fully address the issue of teacher employment after that initial year, although the Scots are now moving towards a more realistic pupil-teacher ratio, which should provide more teaching posts and enable them to focus on the core issue of raising the level of basic literacy and numeracy skills in their primary schools.

The Department of Education's approach of producing time-limited, ring-fenced, bolt-on initiatives to tackle specific problems must end. The current policy means that, once improvement has occurred, funding is promptly removed from the schools in question. The end result is that any progress that has been achieved is eroded, thereby leading to greater disillusionment for pupils and teachers.

The Department should instead form a task force, with young, post-induction teachers assigned specifically to those schools wrestling with literacy and numeracy problems. In such a scenario, the young teachers can learn their craft from the more mature staff members who are currently being burnt out by having to cope with impossible burdens. It would also help to reduce the sickness levels among teachers that were reported recently.

The impact of such groups would be beneficial to both sets of teachers and to those pupils who most need to be enthused by education. Let us now match the needs of our education system with the children it seeks to

serve through adequate numbers of properly trained, professionally inducted and enthusiastic young teachers. Perhaps then we will achieve a competent and cost-effective system upon which to build the knowledge-based economy that we all aspire to see in place.

3.15 pm

Mr Storey: I support both the motion and amendment No 2, and I commend my colleagues for bringing the matter to the attention of the House.

There will always be dissatisfaction when substantial investment is made from the public purse towards the education and training of individuals who then choose to ply their trade outside Northern Ireland, although there will always be cases that are entirely understandable. We must accept that individuals may move overseas or change occupation as a result of wedlock. We cannot disallow people from travelling and choosing to live elsewhere. However, it is essential that we do not operate policies that encourage people to leave Northern Ireland. I trust that we have left those days behind, and that no Member will encourage that.

I speak not only of the teaching profession, for this issue has implications for the Health Service and for many professions in Northern Ireland. We must ensure that training, recruitment and retention practices are appropriate and effective, particularly in view of growing competition from other parts of the world for talented graduates from the Province.

The number of training posts in all professions must match the demand in the workplace. We cannot afford to train too many teachers for the available full-time posts, particularly given the fall in pupil numbers predicted for the coming year, which has already been referred to.

Perhaps, since the Minister is present, she will tell us the average cost to the public purse of training a student teacher in Northern Ireland. It must be soul-destroying for young people in this part of the United Kingdom to put so much work into studying, only to find that they cannot obtain a job in Northern Ireland — the very place where they want to work.

Substantial numbers of newly trained teachers leave for England and Scotland each year. At their age, many will not return to live here. For those teachers, it must be infuriating to see older, retired teachers supplementing a healthy pension through being employed by schools on a short-term basis.

Mr K Robinson: Will the Minister agree that, sometimes, principals of primary schools, when faced with disruptive pupils, have no alternative but to bring in experienced teachers for their prowess in discipline, rather than employ younger teachers, even though they may wish to do so?

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for elevating me to the position of Minister; I thought that I was but a humble Member of the Assembly. However, given that the Member's party colleague Mr McCrea referred to his commitment to a pledge in an election manifesto, delusion may exist in the Ulster Unionist Party in many spheres.

Mr B McCrea: Since the Member discusses facts and figures, will he comment on the 'House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts: The management of substitution cover for teachers: Twenty-seventh Report of Session, 2002-03', which includes suggestions on how we might better manage the supply and demand of teachers? We have failed absolutely to achieve that. Should that not be raised with the Minister?

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for his intervention. Since the DUP has control of the finances of Northern Ireland, it will have no difficulty in ensuring that the Executive's duties will be exercised prudently. We need no lectures from the Member: to date, his party's policies have failed.

As I said, it is infuriating for newly trained teachers to see schools resort to the temporary employment of retired teachers. I accept the point made earlier. A principal running a school is in an unenviable position, for he must satisfy ever-increasing demands.

Members must ensure that the spirit of the motion is preserved. The SDLP spokesman took us down a cul-de-sac to divert Members from the motion. He failed to understand that the motion reads:

"That this Assembly notes ... the McCrone Report ... and calls upon the Minister of Education to liaise with the Scottish Executive".

I fail to see, therefore, how —

Mr D Bradley: Does the Member not recognise that the Curran Report already encapsulates all those issues and contextualises them in the Northern Ireland situation? That is not taking a trip down a cul-de-sac; it is travelling straight up the main road towards the objective.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for his intervention.

I shall conclude by quoting from the Audit Scotland report, 'A mid-term report: A first stage review of the cost and implementation of the teachers' agreement — A Teaching Profession for the 21st Century'. The report stated that the induction year:

"has successfully addressed the significant weaknesses in previous induction and support arrangements ... It is well-regarded by those involved and has been particularly successful in reducing the length of the probation period, increasing training and development opportunities for probationers and increasing entry to the system from university to probation."

I support the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker: After the Member's brief elevation, I am glad that he has acknowledged that he had every right to be humble. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McCallister: It is vital that the House has an opportunity to debate this important matter. Many issues have been raised. My colleague Mr Ken Robinson talked about building a knowledge-based economy. Of course we must do that, and schools are the place to start. It is important to get teacher training right and for teachers to have a year's mentored experience in schools so that they can have some consistency.

Miss McIlveen is an excellent example of someone who has been mentored throughout school and into the Assembly —

Mr B McCrea: And beyond.

Mr McCallister: And beyond. However, I should point out that Mr Wilson's control has started to slip. It was refreshing to see that Mr Wilson was not afraid to get stuck into his own Minister this morning, whereas Miss McIlveen wishes to protect the DUP party line that the Minister of Finance and Personnel controls everything.

Miss McIlveen certainly missed Basil McCrea's point that money was suddenly not an issue for Sinn Féin during this morning's debate on the Libraries Bill. More cynical people than I might note —

Mr S Wilson: The Minister was converted by my argument.

Mr McCallister: As many of us have been.

[Laughter.]

If Mr Wilson wants to call on the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to resign, we will be happy to support him.

Money was not an issue for Sinn Féin this morning. Yet, when a Sinn Féin Minister is involved, Sinn Féin Members all cuddle around and try to get the DUP on board. Suddenly, money is the big issue. However, the real issue, as my colleagues have said, is the need to introduce a better, more focused, system of training.

Preparation time for full-time teachers was discussed.

Mr K Robinson: The Member has raised an important point, which was also raised by some of my colleagues on this side of the Chamber. Preparation time is absolutely essential. We have talked about giving young teachers proper inductions and quality training time. However, it is equally important that teachers who are already in post have good quality preparation time at their disposal as well. Otherwise, how can the level of expertise and content of their lessons be quantified?

Mr McCallister: I could not agree more, and I am sure the rest of the House also agrees with the Member.

Preparation time is vital. The teacher induction scheme could improve teachers' lives in a range of areas; it could boost morale in the teaching profession and, of course, could reduce the burden on principals. This is a vital issue, and it is incumbent on all of us to support the proposals.

Mr B McCrea: I wonder whether the Member supports the recommendation at paragraph 78 of the Curran Report — a report commissioned by the then Minister of Education, Martin McGuinness — that:

"A support scheme should be introduced to assist unemployed [newly qualified teachers], in the first year after qualification, to have a guaranteed full-time teaching post and this should be in place by September 2005."

Mr McCallister: And, nearly two years later, nothing has happened.

Mr B McCrea: It does not appear to be important.

Mr McCallister: Well, shame on those responsible. I do not know whether the DUP Members have read that report.

Mr B McCrea: I do not think that they have.

Mr McCallister: Well, perhaps the Member could read it for them.

Mr B McCrea: Or they could ask Sinn Féin.

Mr S Wilson: Can I have a copy of the Member's speech?

Mr McCallister: I am happy to give the Member a copy of the speech. I do not have a problem with that, as long as somebody can read it out for him.

Mr McNarry: Can the Member tell the House if he knows at what time on Fridays the Ministers queue up outside Peter Robinson's office to get their pocket money and to tell him what money they need for the next week?

Mr McCallister: I cannot, but I will get some research done to see if I can find the answer.

On a more serious note, I support the motion and the amendment.

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Perhaps John should join us all in the group huddle. He is obviously feeling very excluded from it.

Cuirim fáilte roimh an díospóireacht ar an cheist tábhachtach seo. Sa tréimhse ghairid seo dom i m'Aire, tá ardchaighdeán, chomh maith le tiomantas agus gairmiúlacht, ár múinteoirí feicthe agam ar láthair na hoibre.

I would like to pay tribute to the professionalism of our teachers. They do a tremendous job, and I wish to give them every possible support. We are fortunate in that we continue to attract large numbers of very able and very professional young people.

As I have said before, we need to sustain the conditions in which we have confident, articulate and creative young adults coming out of the school system, many wanting to be teachers. The 2005 report from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 'Teachers Matter: Attracting, Developing and Retaining Effective Teachers', points out that improving the efficiency and equity of schooling depends in large measure on ensuring that competent people want to become teachers, that their teaching is of high quality, and that all students have access to high-quality teaching.

As the most significant and costly resource in schools, teachers are central to school improvements. In other words, teachers are central to the quality of education and, increasingly, social outcomes. The demands on schools and teachers from society and from parents are becoming more complex. Schools are now expected to deal effectively with students from different ethnic backgrounds; to be sensitive to culture and gender issues; to promote tolerance and social cohesion; and to respond effectively to the learning needs of disadvantaged students. This is a considerable set of expectations.

The 2007 teaching award ceremony at the Waterfront Hall yesterday provided an opportunity to recognise and celebrate the important role that teachers play in the development of young people in the North. I am sure that all my colleagues will want to join me in congratulating all the award winners.

In the past few weeks, I have met many educationalists and education stakeholders to hear their concerns, ideas and thoughts. I have also attended a number of important conferences. By listening to people on the ground, I get a real sense of the key problems facing the education system. I am very keen to listen to the views of everyone with an interest in education, and I include the Education Committee in that.

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

Yesterday — and I welcome Michelle McIlveen's comments — I met Alex Salmond, the recently elected First Minister of Scotland. We had dinner at the request of the First and Deputy First Ministers, and we agreed that it would be useful if I met Fiona Hyslop, Scotland's Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, to discuss a range of educational matters, including the education of teachers. Scotland has only one Minister for education. I spoke to Reg Empey this morning, and this is something in which he is interested. So I agree with what Michelle said about learning from Scotland. We need to.

With regard to the motion in the names of Alastair Ross and Michelle McIlveen, issues relating to teacher supply are complex. There is no point in pretending otherwise; and I welcome Mervyn Storey's comments on that.

3.30 pm

Mr B McCrea: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Ruane: I will in a few minutes, Basil. Let me get going on my argument first. Members know that while some young teachers find it difficult to get full-time jobs, they may secure some temporary part-time teaching. The higher education statistics agency (HESA) collects information on student destinations through the destinations of leavers from higher education survey (DLHE), which is conducted six months after graduation. The latest available HESA data refers to the 2004-05 academic year. It shows that of those students who returned destination information and had gained initial teacher training qualifications in the higher education institutions in the North of Ireland in that year, 85% were employed as teaching professionals and 62.6% as full-time teachers six months after graduation. Figures obtained from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for April 2007 show that 258 jobseeker allowance claimants specified teaching as the occupation sought, and 53 of those claimants were underage. I do not know where Basil McCrea got his figure of 50,000, but I respectfully suggest that it was the wrong figure. Perhaps, he was referring to the substitute register, which has over 5,000 names. I suggest that Basil revisits his figures.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Ruane: I will give way to Basil if he tells me what the 50,000 refers to. I look forward to that.

Mr B McCrea: I will deal with that, Minister. You know that we try in the cut and thrust of things. There are plenty of Ministers round here apparently — at least there were, although I see that one of them has left.

I mentioned the 50,000 empty desks in schools across the country due to the fall in school registers. Mr Deputy Speaker, I know that I sound slightly jokey, but my question is serious: does the Minister accept the Curran Report? I got my information from that report, and it contained some recommendations. Furthermore, if I could be cheeky, is it the Education Minister or the Finance Minister who runs education policy?

Ms Ruane: I will answer Basil McCrea's first question in the course of my speech. To the second: the Member knows I am the Minister of Education, but the Executive work jointly to make decisions; we are a team. Perhaps that has been lost on the UUP Benches.

Mervyn Storey asked about the cost of training teachers. It varies by institution and type of training, but I require further information from the Department for Employment and Learning on that subject, and I will give Mr Storey a written response.

Other Members raised important issues. There is a shortage of teachers in such subjects as the Irish language and mathematics. The direct matching of

supply and demand is difficult given that young people make their own choices of specialisms and sectors. Demography is an important factor in that area. Pupil numbers have declined from almost 347,000 in 2001-02 to almost 333,000 in 2005-06. In the same period, the full-time equivalent teacher count dropped by just over 1,000. It is the Department's understanding that numbers will continue to fall over the next five years. Demography and those falling numbers are a huge problem for our education system, and the continuing decline will have a significant impact on the number of newly qualified teachers required in the coming year.

The Assembly could bury its head in the sand — as some Members appear to be doing — or it could deal with reality. We must deal with reality: if we do not, the numbers of teachers trained will far exceed the jobs available. There is no point in giving teachers a year's employment merely because the Assembly passes a nice motion, only for the young teachers to discover that there are no jobs for them after that year.

Mr Attwood: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Ruane: No, I will not. I want to keep going on my argument. The North of Ireland has not experienced difficulties in teacher recruitment. In 2006-07, there were 776 intakes to the initial teacher-training courses offered by the North's four main initial teacher education providers.

All the courses that are on offer are heavily over-subscribed, with up to eight times more applications than places. That is an indication of the strength of the education system, the attractiveness of teaching as a career and the life choices that young people wish to make.

We have to look at this issue in two ways. We must find alternative educational opportunities for the teachers who are currently trained; there is much potential in them and the system will benefit from having them. However, we also must examine the career opportunities that are on offer and whether it is correct to say that we do not have enough educational psychologists and speech therapists, but are oversupplied with teachers. We must get real. We must face demographic decline. Unless there is some amazing increase in the birth rate, fewer teachers will be needed.

I turn to the issue of demand. The number and type of vacancies for which newly qualified teachers may be eligible to apply in any one year is influenced by a wide range of factors, but principally by the decisions of schools on the desired size of their teaching complements and on the designation of teaching posts as full time or part time; permanent or temporary.

Schools make those decisions in the context of their overall budgets and particularly in the light of the funding that they receive under the local management of schools (LMS) common funding formula arrangements. I will

continue to seek to maximise the resources that schools receive under those arrangements so that, on the demand side, schools have the finances to employ their most valuable resource.

The demand for teachers is also affected by the numbers who leave the education service each year. Over the last three years, about 2,300 teachers have left our schools due to age retirement, efficient discharge, infirmity and redundancy. The age profile of our existing workforce will also influence the number of newly qualified teachers who are employed in future years.

Of the 19,796 teachers who are on permanent or temporary contracts registered with the General Teaching Council (GTCNI), nearly 30% — that is 5,878 — are 50 or over. The Department of Education has already recognised the impact that demography is having and will have on the number of teachers that we need. The level of intake to teacher-education courses is determined annually by the Department, with the aim of maintaining a reasonable balance between the numbers being trained and the projected number of teaching vacancies. That determination is informed by a statistical teacher-demand model that is sensitive to a number of supply-and-demand factors. The annual intake numbers for the initial teacher-education institutions have been reduced by almost 20%, from 800 to 699, in 2007-08.

As for the point that Alastair Ross raised, my Department has issued guidance to employers, exhorting them to give preference to newly qualified teachers and experienced non-retired teachers who are seeking employment. Schools have also been advised that they should recruit to vacancies on a permanent rather than a temporary basis, unless the vacancy is clearly of a temporary nature.

Before 1999-2000, evidence suggested that schools were appointing low-cost substitute teachers when the costs were met from the schools' budgets, but high-cost teachers when costs were met centrally. Since then, the reimbursement of substitute teachers from all boards' centrally held funds has been restricted. That measure enabled more funds to be delegated to schools while providing an incentive to schools to employ newly qualified teachers for substitution purposes. However — and this is an important point — schools have the flexibility to decide to engage a teacher at a higher cost.

The suggestion that teachers should effectively be banned from seeking further employment after early retirement has been made on a number of occasions, and while I understand the sentiment behind that point, the Department has resisted it on two grounds. First, that has been resisted on the grounds of age discrimination. As a restriction of someone's right to seek employment, such a measure would be open to legal challenge.

Secondly, that has been resisted because schools have to depend on the ability of substitute teachers to meet urgent demands.

In some areas, a prematurely retired teacher may be the only one who is available at short notice or with the experience that is required.

Mr Attwood: The House is listening very attentively, but the Minister seems to be singularly avoiding the core issue at the heart of the motion and the amendments — namely whether the Department will introduce a scheme such as the Scottish model, whereby those coming out of teacher training colleges have a year's guaranteed employment? The Minister has not, in 12 or 13 minutes of her speech, yet addressed that matter.

The Minister said earlier that some teachers coming out of college who have not found employment:

“may secure some temporary part-time teaching.”

Does the Minister think that it is good enough that, after the years of primary, secondary and third-level education that those students have spent preparing for a vocation, the best guarantee that she can offer them is that:

“they may secure some temporary part-time teaching”?

Ms Ruane: If I were not being constantly interrupted, I would have got to that point.

First, people must be careful not to act like ostriches, with their heads in the sand.

Mr McNarry: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Ruane: No, I will not. I have one minute left, and —

Mr McNarry: Will the Minister ever give way?

Ms Ruane: I have already given way.

I would welcome the additional resources to support the education service's many priorities. However, like all Ministers, I have a budget within which I must operate and difficult decisions to make on spending priorities. We play as a team. I request that the UUP and the SDLP join us in playing as part of that team.

Mr McNarry: Will the Minister give way now?

Ms Ruane: No, I will not give way.

The potential costs —

Mr McNarry: There is no point in —

Ms Ruane: I am not giving way.

The potential cost of introducing a scheme that guarantees a one-year teaching post for all students here who graduate with a teaching qualification, similar to the scheme introduced in Scotland following the McCrone Report, is substantial. It would cost £12 million in the first year and £19 million in subsequent years.

I look forward to receiving support when I bring our comprehensive spending review proposals to the Executive table, and I very much look forward to support for my proposals from UUP and SDLP Ministers. I am nearly out of time, so I welcome the fact that the proposer —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Minister will draw her remarks to a close, please.

Ms Ruane: I will, Mr Deputy Speaker. I also ask that people do not interrupt me. Not you, Mr Deputy Speaker, obviously.

I welcome the fact that the proposer of the motion has accepted the amendment standing in the names of Paul Butler and Michelle O'Neill. That amendment deals with the financial reality that all in the Executive face. Mr Bradley's amendment does not.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat. Sinn Féin believes that the Assembly should be doing all that it can to support newly qualified teachers. We recognise the value that they bring to our children's lives. As one Member has said, Audit Scotland analysed the McCrone proposals. It concluded that the teacher induction scheme was one of the most successful elements of those proposals. That is widely agreed across the board, but we must look at what is best for us. We must examine all aspects of our education system. How many of our graduates are achieving employment? What are our pupil-teacher ratios? We need to examine our own needs.

That is not to say that we cannot learn from others. Yesterday's visit by the First Minister of Scotland has led the way in working with others and sharing experiences. However, it is clear that Basil McCrea and Dominic Bradley were not paying attention in class yesterday when Alex Salmond was addressing Members in the Senate.

3.45 pm

Mr McNarry: Will the Member give way?

Mrs O'Neill: No, I will not. *[Laughter.]*

Alex Salmond addressed us in the Senate and suggested that we learn from one another and work together. We should examine what others have done and learn from good practice. The Assembly, as we now know it, is still in its infancy. Our approach to the various pressing issues that come before the House must be a realistic one. We are today expressing the wish of the Chamber, and I am sure that the Minister will take on board the issues raised in this debate in any decisions that she may make.

Amendment No 2 adds to the motion and offers a more realistic approach by asking the Executive to consider the issue in the context of the comprehensive spending review.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá áthas orm achoimriú a dhéanamh ar na hargóintí a rinneadh ar son leasú uimhir a haon. I am please to deliver the winding-up speech on amendment No 1.

What a ridiculous situation the House finds itself in today. We have a report from a high-powered Committee, an inquiry initiated by a devolved Minister — a representative of one of the parties in the House — yet we debate a Scottish report. Have we lost our senses altogether? What is the point of having devolution, and spending public money to produce reports, and getting agreement from employers and trade unions on them, if we then run off to take advice from Scotland? That is ridiculous, and, as my colleague Mr Basil McCrea said, worse than reinventing the wheel.

Today was “dump Marty day”. Sinn Féin dumped its colleague, the former Minister of Education Martin McGuinness — big time. Mr Butler disowned a report that was initiated by his colleague Mr McGuinness. Later, Mr McGuinness was dumped by Michelle O'Neill, and, finally, came the worst cut of all: the current Minister of Education stabbed him in the back. Et tu Caitríona?

The introduction of planning, preparation and assessment time will create long-term employment for hundreds of young teachers. The introduction of two days' administration time for teaching principals in small schools will alleviate their burden of stress and reinforce the creation of employment.

The lessons of best practice that have been learned from England, Scotland, and Wales are encapsulated in the Curran Report, in the form of a business case supported by a teachers' union and employers' representatives. The outworking of that report is already with the Department of Education; however, the Minister of Education did not refer to it — perhaps she has not yet heard about it. Should the Assembly tell those people that they are wrong, and that Sinn Féin and the DUP want to take the scenic route?

Perhaps the DUP will take the high road and Sinn Féin the low road, but where will it end up? It will end in a delay for newly qualified teachers' being guaranteed a year of full-time employment, and delay a measure that will add to their chances of full-time employment well beyond that year. It will delay teachers in general being given 10% extra planning, preparation and assessment time, and principals' in small schools being given two days' administration time.

All of those matters are interrelated. A guaranteed first year of employment for newly qualified teachers is interdependent with planning, preparation and assessment time, and with administrative time for teaching principals. The initiatives support each other. Without planning, preparation and assessment time,

the newly qualified teacher's guarantee of a year of employment will end abruptly. Administrative time for principals of smaller schools will increase the chances of longer employment for newly qualified teachers.

One problem with the DUP's motion was a failure of mentoring. Miss McIlveen's guru Sammy Wilson has let down his protégée; he should have told her about the Curran Report, before she went wandering through the heather in search of a wee dram. Sammy should have told Michelle the facts of life. We have the answer in Northern Ireland, and a business case is already with the Department of Education.

I commend the first amendment. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call on Mr Sammy Wilson to wind up the debate on the substantive motion. I remind Members that we are winding up the debate and not the House.

Mr S Wilson: I will do my best to wind up both. *[Laughter.]*

I welcome the debate. My two colleagues have brought an important issue to the attention of the House and of the Minister, and have given it a public forum.

That issue is about those who invest heavily in their own education — and there is a substantial investment in time, money and commitment — and who find themselves subsequently unable to pursue their chosen career.

Secondly, I welcome the debate because for the first time I have seen SDLP Members awake in the House. Dominic Bradley seemed positively excited during the debate, which is the first time that I have noticed any SDLP Member getting excited. The reason for his bluster was that he knew that his arguments were weak. He therefore decided to set them aside and cover them with a bit of bluster.

Mr Bradley has taken the opportunity, in this House, to perhaps mislead people who have not had a chance to read the Curran Report.

Here is the scandal of what Mr Bradley and the Ulster Unionist Party, which apparently is going to support him today, are doing. This motion is about the newly qualified teachers coming out of teacher training college who do not have an opportunity to gain a years experience and complete their probationary year. What is Dominic Bradley doing? I can understand why he proposed his amendment — it is a prime example of the vested interests in teaching that ignore the needs of young teachers.

The Curran Report does not just have the two recommendations that Dominic Bradley quoted freely and often, and that Mr B McCrea repeated: the majority of the recommendations in the report deal with existing

teachers; their pay structures, career structures, workload and organisation. The SDLP is scandalously and shamelessly diverting attention away from the issue of spending some resources on teachers who are just —

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr S Wilson: The Member can shout and bully all he wants. I may give way, but not until I have finished my point. Most of the recommendations in the Curran Report deal with people who are already in the teaching profession. The motion — and I admit that it has limitations — is about investing the limited resources that are available in measures that may give students emerging from teacher-training college the opportunity to get their probationary year out of the road and gain some long-term experience that is more substantial than the short-term experience they would gain in a school during that one-year period.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr S Wilson: I will give way in a minute. Will the Member just sit down and behave? *[Laughter.]*

Dominic Bradley is diverting attention towards other issues that could absorb millions of pounds of the education budget. Those who know what is in the Curran Report should realise the implications of the amendment. It takes away from the thrust of what Alastair Ross and Michelle McIlveen are trying to promote in the House today. I will give way now.

Mr B McCrea: Thank you Sammy. Only you are in the full flow of histrionics, and, apparently, it is only you who are allowed to be so. The Ulster Unionist Party also cares deeply about the issue. The reason we are supporting the SDLP is that we want to introduce the measure now. It is something that has been agreed.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member please address his remarks through the Deputy Speaker?

Mr B McCrea: My apologies. A hushed House will now hear a calm question. Does the Member accept that everyone in the House wants to see action for newly qualified teachers as quickly as possible, which does not require a huge debate and is something that the Assembly should get on with?

Mr S Wilson: If the Curran Report is introduced into the equation, huge debate will be necessary. If we are to address the matter we must do so in the context of resources, whether the Ulster Unionist Party, the SDLP or anybody else likes it.

If amendment No 1 were to be made, it should be noted that the amended motion would be calling for the Curran Report's recommendations to be implemented in full. As I have pointed out, if that were to happen, the majority of resources that the amended motion would be demanding from the Minister would go not to newly qualified teachers but to the teaching profession

in general. That is OK for someone who lives in an unrealistic world in which the infantile economics that some Ulster Unionist Members talked about operate: the "Gimme, gimme, gimme" stance.

Mr McCallister said:

"money should not be the issue".

Those words were fairly similar —

Some Members: He was quoting Sinn Féin.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr S Wilson: A bit of barracking does not matter; it raises the temperature in here a little.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that this is the Northern Ireland Assembly, not some ancient school.

Mr S Wilson: It is like a bad third-form class on a Friday afternoon, and the bad boys are in the corner to my right.

Mr McCallister: Snitch. *[Laughter.]*

Mr S Wilson: We cannot divorce the matter from the fact that resources are finite and that we must therefore target them. There is no point in blaming Peter Robinson for the lack of resources. We get a block grant, and we can raise extra money from the regional rate. Some Members have said that we must spend the money on implementing the entire Curran Report, and I am waiting to hear from them what they will make a lower priority and from where they will get the money.

Mr D Bradley: I remind the Member that I said that the Curran Report's three elements — guaranteed teaching employment in the first year after graduation, more planning, preparation and assessment time, and administrative time set aside for principals who teach — are interrelated and feed into one other. I understand that the business case that has been given to the Minister proposes a strategic, incremental pathway to the introduction of those measures. That pathway would not eat up all the resources in the manner in which the Member thinks.

Mr S Wilson: Whether the measures are introduced incrementally or all at once makes little difference: resources will still be diverted from the particular issue that was the thrust of the motion. Do not forget that about 95% of the recommendations of that report have nothing to do with newly qualified teachers.

We must live in a world in which resources are finite and in which we must decide on priorities. I welcome the fact that, as recently as this morning, Sinn Féin was willing to engage in reckless fiscal behaviour, yet that attitude had changed by this afternoon. That is one reason why Mr Ross accepted that party's amendment. Such a conversion should be welcomed, not pilloried. Those Members should not be blamed or

condemned for making that change — it should be welcomed.

Mr McNarry: Will the hon Member give way?

Mr S Wilson: Ah, why not?

Mr McNarry: I thank the hon Member for giving way.

Earlier, the Minister said that the House was bound by the Executive's making decisions as a team. In view of the hon Member's earlier excellent speech on the Libraries Bill, in which he certainly won all five stars that —

Mr S Wilson: Let me answer that quickly. I know the point that the Member — *[Laughter.]*

Perhaps the Member would remind the Minister for Employment and Learning that — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Two Members cannot be on their feet to speak.

4.00 pm

Mr McNarry: Does the Member accept that the freedom that he expressed this morning has been lost by the Minister of Education? Are we to be subjected only to Executive approval or —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, order. Will the Member resume his seat?

Mr Wilson, I will allow you a few seconds to finish.

Mr S Wilson: I appreciate that very much, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Let me just remind the Member that —

Mr McNarry: Does he want to hear it again?

Mr S Wilson: No, I do not need to hear it again. The Member might need to read things again, but I do not need to hear them again. *[Interruption.]* Let me just remind the Member that the same constraints that the Minister of Education will serve under, and which other Members will serve under, his Minister for Employment and Learning — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, order.

Mr S Wilson: —will serve under as well, when it comes to the payment of teachers and lecturers.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The time is up.

Mr McClarty: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Only those Members who have five minutes or less to speak are allowed extra time for interventions — those who have more than that do not.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Thank you, colleague and fellow Deputy Speaker, for that useful advice. I thought that, in the circumstances, Mr Wilson deserved an extra few seconds.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I think that we all can be grateful that the modern classroom is not conducted in this manner: I spent 30 years in it.

I remind Members that if amendment No 1 is made, then amendment No 2 will fall.

Question put, That amendment No 1 be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 26; Noes 54.

AYES

Mr Armstrong, Mr Attwood, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Burns, Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Cree, Mr Durkan, Mr Elliott, Mr Gallagher, Mrs Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Mr A Maginness, Mr McCallister, Mr McClarty, Mr B McCrea, Dr McDonnell, Mr McFarland, Mr McGlone, Mr McNarry, Mr O'Loan, Ms Purvis, Mr K Robinson, Mr Savage.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Burns and Mr Gallagher.

NOES

Mr Adams, Ms Anderson, Mr Boylan, Mr Brady, Mr Bresland, Mr Brolly, Mr Buchanan, Mr Butler, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Easton, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Ms Gildernew, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mrs Long, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Mr McElduff, Mrs McGill, Mr McHugh, Miss McIlveen, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McQuillan, Mr Molloy, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Murphy, Mr Neeson, Mr Newton, Ms Ni Chuilin, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr G Robinson, Mrs I Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Ms Ruane, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr B Wilson, Mr S Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Miss McIlveen and Mr Ross.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That amendment No 2 be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes that, following the McCrone Report: 'A Teaching Profession for the 21st Century', a teaching induction scheme guarantees a one-year teaching post to every student graduating from a Scottish university with a teaching qualification; and calls upon the Minister of Education to liaise with the Scottish Executive on this matter, with a view to asking the Executive to consider the matter in the context of the Comprehensive Spending Review, and in light of other budgetary pressures facing the Executive.

4.15 pm

Classroom Assistants' Dispute

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

Mr D Bradley: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Education to take immediate action to settle the issue of job evaluation for classroom assistants, by giving approval to the Education and Library Boards to put an equitable offer to the representative Trades' Unions.

Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá an-áthas orm an rún seo a mholadh. I am pleased to move the motion. I declare an interest in the classroom assistants' dispute. I have been a teacher for over 20 years and I know at first hand the work that classroom assistants do in support of pupils in mainstream education and in support of pupils with special needs. Classroom assistants are an essential and integral part of the education workforce. Their professionalism and dedication are highly respected and valued by all those who work with them, and by the parents of the children with whom they work. The pupils themselves, when they are old enough, tell me that they appreciate the tremendous work that classroom assistants did on their behalf.

Classroom assistants facilitate access to school and to the curriculum for thousands of pupils. They support and encourage them. They provide a front-line service and work directly with pupils every school day. Investment in classroom assistants is investment in front-line services.

A letter that I received recently from a primary-school principal illustrates the important role that classroom assistants play in the education system. That letter states that the successful implementation of the revised curriculum will require additional assistants — personnel who are so essential in today's primary schools as aids to the quality of learning and to the inclusion of all children, without discrimination.

When morale in the profession is already so low, I wonder from where those much-valued classroom assistants will come to implement the revised curriculum. I also received a letter from a classroom assistant. That assistant wrote that morale is low, and that tension and stress levels are at breaking point. Sadly, industrial action may loom on the horizon.

The way in which classroom assistants have been treated by their employers is nothing short of being the biggest industrial relations scandal in the history of Northern Ireland. It is incredible that the dispute has been ongoing for 12 years without resolution. Nevertheless, that dedicated group of professionals has continued to serve children without major disruption. It

is shameful that its legitimate demands have not been equitably met. The dispute involves over 7,000 classroom assistants. Unions have described the £30 million that has been offered to solve it as a drop in the ocean.

Almost all job advertisements for mainstream, primary 1 classroom assistants state that national vocational qualification (NVQ) level 3 is an essential requirement for the job. However, their employers — the education and library boards — insist that NVQ level 3 is not essential for classroom assistants in their job evaluations. How can a qualification be deemed essential for people to be employed to do the job, but be totally ignored when it comes to the job evaluation? Employers demand that people have the qualification. However, they choose to ignore it when it comes to the evaluation. Why do they adopt that attitude? They do so simply because they know that to take account of the qualification would have a positive effect on the job evaluation. That is a totally hypocritical stance. If a qualification is necessary to do a job, and people have that qualification, surely they should be given credit for it in their job evaluation.

The boards insist that the special needs allowance is incorporated into the job evaluation exercise and should not be an extra payment. However, teachers who are in receipt of a special needs allowance are paid it over and above their salaries. The teachers' special needs allowance is either £1,818 or £3,597 per annum depending on the duties that are involved. Classroom assistants are the only group of school-based board employees who work directly with pupils in the classroom setting. In respect of the special needs allowance, it seems legitimate that the comparison be made with teachers, and not with other staff who do not work in the classroom setting.

Historically, as part of their terms and conditions of employment, classroom assistants' full-time hours equated to 32.5 hours each week. The boards now insist, on the basis of equality with clerical officers and manual workers, that that should be increased to 36 hours each week and that their hourly rate of pay be calculated accordingly. However, as their title clearly indicates, classroom assistants are classroom-based staff. Once again, the obvious comparable group is teachers, who work full-time hours of 32.4 hours each week, which is almost equivalent to those of classroom assistants.

Had employers settled the dispute between 1995 and 2002, many of the current difficulties would not exist. Classroom assistants are being made to pay for their employers' maladministration. All of this may impact on their pensions, and that aspect of the dispute has not been taken into account.

I am pleased that no amendments have been proposed, and I ask Members to support the motion and to support the classroom assistants in their attempts to achieve the equitable settlement that is their due, and for which they have waited 12 long years. Go raibh maith agat.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr S Wilson): I echo Mr Bradley's words. Those people who have waited for 12 years for a job re-evaluation, hoping that their work would be recognised at the end of it, must be gravely disappointed, especially when one considers the consequences of the completed evaluation.

When the Minister took over, she quickly announced that £30 million would be made available to settle the dispute and to complete the job evaluation. Many people hoped that that would put to rest an issue that has been festering for a long time. However, rather than putting the issue to rest, it caused massive disappointment and has had severe consequences for classroom assistants. Let us not forget that classroom assistants are not extremely well paid. Many of them fall into the lower-paid bracket.

The problem seems to be the decision to move from the previous arrangements, whereby the hourly rate of pay was based on a 32.5-hour week, to a 36-hour week. As the hourly rate is worked out by dividing the weekly rate by 36, that brings the hourly rate down. Many classroom assistants do not work a full week anyway; they might only work for 10 or 12 hours. Therefore, the hourly rate is important to them.

What surprises many people is that, up until now, payment was based on working a 32.5-hour week. Secondly, even if a classroom assistant wanted to work a 36-hour week, because he or she is tied to the school working week, he or she could not do so. Even if a classroom assistant works for the full week, he or she could only earn 90% of the annual salary as a result of the way in which the new rules have been implemented.

I do not suppose that it will be helpful to go into the technicalities, because the negotiations are detailed and complex. However, I want to ask the Minister two questions. First, when the Department allocated the £30 million, did the Minister question officials and assure herself that it would lead to a fair settlement, or was she aware of the consequences of the settlement?

The consequences are that most of the 6,000 classroom assistants will not get any back pay for the 12 years that they have been waiting. They will actually end up with a pay cut when they come off the old pay scales in June. When they start again in September, they could lose up to £1.50 an hour because the new scales divide the week by 36 hours rather than by 32.5 hours. Given that they cannot work a 36-hour week, there are implications for their pensions.

Did the Minister apprise herself of that? If so, did she simply, for the sake of spin, decide to go down that route because £30 million looked good?

4.30 pm

I hope that this Minister is different from the previous Sinn Féin Minister of Education, who had form on the issue. When he was out of office, he promised those

low-paid, term-time-only workers that he would support their pay claim — and then denied it when he was eventually in office. I trust that there will not be a repeat of that.

If the right questions were not asked, the Minister must go back and ask them. If there was a deliberate decision to spin the allocation of £30 million in order to look good, with the consequences being unimportant — that is scandalous.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I acknowledge the great work that 7,000 classroom assistants have done over many years in the education system. They have filled a vital role in that system, particularly in working with children with learning difficulties and special needs in special and mainstream schools. The work that classroom assistants do with those children ensures that they are not left behind by the education system. Classroom assistants are an essential part of the teaching staff in all schools, and Members should acknowledge that and pay tribute to them.

The dispute about job evaluations for classroom assistants has been running for a long time — 11 years, in fact. The Minister of Education, Caitríona Ruane, responded as quickly as she did after coming into office in order to settle the dispute. The Minister approached a resolution to the dispute by recognising —

Mr D Bradley: The Member said that the Minister responded after coming into office. Discussions that I have had with officers in the education and library boards reveal that that £30 million has been around for two years.

Mr Butler: I thank Dominic Bradley for that information. This is one of the first items on Caitríona Ruane's agenda, and negotiations with the classroom assistants' unions are ongoing.

The issues of remuneration and the correct grading of jobs are important. The Minister is operating within existing resources, and she has made a credible offer to resolve the dispute and has set aside £30 million to cover the costs of that settlement. It is a complicated matter that involves many interests: classroom assistants, their trade unions and the education and library boards. Coherence should be brought to each element of the ongoing negotiations, with the aim being to settle the dispute.

As has been said about many issues in the Chamber, each Minister has a limited amount of money to spend. I understand that this issue is frustrating for classroom assistants, and efforts have clearly run into some difficulties. However, I am satisfied that, with good faith on all sides, a fair and acceptable settlement for classroom assistants will emerge. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr B McCrea: I support the motion on this important issue. If a dispute goes on for 12 years, there is a

tendency to think that something will eventually be done. Although I did not know the details, when I heard earlier this year that £30 million was to be put aside, I thought, like Sammy Wilson, that that was the matter sorted out. Therefore, it is disturbing to discover that a well-intentioned action has caused more problems that it hoped to solve, which highlights a number of serious issues raised by other Members.

All the evidence that I have seen supports the fact that better training, early intervention and people looking after young people provide immense results for society, and Members owe a huge debt of gratitude to those who help in that part of the education system.

I note Mr Bradley's point that it is inconsistent to make a NVQ 3 qualification an essential requirement for the post of classroom assistant while at the same time failing to offer adequate remuneration for the job. There is a flaw in the negotiation process; either possession of a NVQ 3 is adequately recompensed, or a lesser qualification is accepted, in which case a different pay grading or structure is required.

The nought-to-seven strategy was discussed yesterday during questions to the Minister of Education — I mentioned the situation in Finland, and Mr Bradley mentioned Moldova. I have been struck by the level of professionalism, commitment and skill demonstrated by those who look after young people in other parts of the world. We could make a step change in the way in which we educate our young people in the social and behavioural spheres as well as in literacy and numeracy. We must get that right.

No amendments to the motion have been tabled, so we will not have the type of discussion that we had with the previous motion. However, I am pleased to note that we do not have to refer this matter to the Executive, nor does it depend on resources becoming available. We must deal with this matter now. I support the motion, because it is not for me to say what is equitable and what is not. Sammy Wilson said that the issue is highly detailed and complicated. I urge Members to get into the detail and try to sort the matter out.

In yesterday's discussion of the nought-to-seven strategy, I agreed with the Minister of Education when she said that:

"there is a big difference between the education that children receive in pre-school centres and that which they receive in primary schools. What happens — I saw this when my own child went from pre-school into primary school — is that there is a shock to the system". — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 22, p495, col 2*].

Many children — of all ages — need help in coping with that shock to the system, and the classroom assistants take the load of that shock. Without them, the whole situation would be immeasurably worse.

We must increase the effectiveness of the resources in the education system, and I urge the Minister of

Education, when she considers the nought-to-seven strategy, to resolve the dispute equitably and as soon as possible.

Mr McCarthy: I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this debate. However, I am extremely disappointed that the motion has had to be tabled in the Assembly, considering that the matter in hand was first raised in 1994.

The evaluation of the work of classroom assistants was agreed several years ago, and it is a disgrace that those most valuable members of the learning profession have not yet received fair and proper remuneration. The important role played by classroom assistants in the education of children should have been recognised by the employers a long time ago, and proper remuneration should have been paid to those staff who have given so much service over the years.

I have stood on picket lines with classroom assistants and marched with them to the headquarters of the education and library boards to appeal to employers to come clean and pay those workers the wages that they deserve. There can be no more delays or excuses: payment must be made now. As a parent of someone with learning difficulties I recognise the dedication of classroom assistants and the work that they have done over the years. It is a shame and a disgrace that this dispute has been allowed to fester for the past 12 years.

Similar evaluations have been carried out for caretakers, drivers, secretaries and gardeners and other workers. Classroom assistants in England have had their work evaluated and are now being paid the appropriate amount. The time for speeches, marches and pickets is over. It is now time for the Minister of Education to authorise payment to those dedicated workers. I support the motion.

Mr Shannon: The independent regulators Ofsted hae foun' tha' haein classroom assistants maks betther the quality o' learnin fer weans in primary schuils an' they ir gyely valuable tae the education o' weans wi' special needs. Thair isnae onie doot at they hae baecum an intricate pairt o' the education system heir in the Province gien extra attention tae thaim at ir needfu' o' a wee heft tae grasp the notions, mebbe especially fer thae weans wha ir 'young' in thair yeir bein boarn in Mai ir Juin an wha ir fit tae thrive wi' a wee bit extra tim' at the teacher hasnae gat tae spare.

The independent regulator Ofsted has found that the presence of classroom assistants to improve the quality of learning for pupils in primary schools is invaluable to the education of special needs students. Although the role of the assistant was originally intended to ease the workload of overstretched teachers, they have undoubtedly become an integral part of the education system in the Province, giving extra attention to those who need that little bit of extra help to grasp the concepts

and reach their full potential. They are vital to the growth of our children, especially those who are a little young for the year having been born in May or June, who would thrive with the little extra time that the teacher cannot afford to spare. Those in special needs education are able to achieve greater goals when aided by a classroom assistant than without one.

The Minister of Education has made much of her pledge to provide £30 million for the sector, but as so often happens, strings are attached. While the dispute rumbled on for 12 years, classroom assistants proved themselves invaluable in controlling classes and offsetting large class sizes. As more smaller schools face closure and class sizes swell again, the added help that those workers bring is essential. They are indispensable in helping with statemented students, and their input to overall grades and class management is not to be sneezed at.

As the classroom assistants play such a major role they deserve to have their pay agreed. No wage agreement can go ahead if the side deals include a large number of classroom assistants facing wage reductions, or, as my colleague Sammy Wilson points out, a loss of pay protection.

I call on the Minister of Education to sort out this issue once and for all. Classroom assistants truly deserve the wage increase without the strings. They have waited long enough. I have been contacted by numerous constituents who fight for fairness for their children by fighting for their classroom assistants, whom they regard as having a very positive influence upon the schooling of their children. I have also been contacted by teachers, and by assistants themselves, who are caught in the confusion. Amidst all the talking they do not know where they stand.

The issue affects 7,000 jobs in the Province through the classroom assistant placements, and further affects countless teachers, head teachers and boards of governors, as well as the parents and pupils themselves. It deserves the focus and attention of people who are dedicated to sorting it out. If this were Shorts, or any other employer, the issue would not have taken so long to resolve.

The Minister and her Department need to take heed of the Assembly and the proposal before the House today. She needs to listen to the classroom assistants and the people of the Province, and to ensure that the dispute is sorted out properly and satisfactorily for all involved.

Mrs Long: Does the Member agree that it is imperative that it is the Department of Education that takes this forward? Simply to agree pay within current education and library board budgets will lead to an overall reduction in the number of classroom assistants but not actually benefit children in the classroom. Increased budgets are required.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Member for her intervention, and I agree wholeheartedly with what she has said.

To give an example of the numbers, there are 1,362 classroom assistants in the South Eastern Education and Library Board area in my own constituency. It would be remiss of me, in my duty as an elected representative, not to mention them, fight their corner and put forward their case at the highest level in the debate today.

The education board needs to push for a settlement, as my East Belfast colleague Mrs Long so rightly said. It is up to the Minister of Education not only to pledge the money, as she has done, but also to solidify the position. Our teachers, who are currently overstretched, would not be able to cope without the aid of classroom assistants. It would be to the detriment of the child if we did not follow this through. A leading teachers' union, the National Association of Schoolmasters and Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT), stated that teachers highly valued the support and appreciated the benefit of having another adult in the classroom.

In these days of very stringent child protection the presence of another adult also gives peace of mind. Loss of the classroom assistants would be sorely felt by teachers, and would have an adverse impact on the students.

I support the motion.

4.45 pm

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I speak in favour of the motion, which calls on the Minister of Education to address the issues around the pay dispute. I fully accept that the matter is complex, so I will comment only on the broader context.

The issue has been drawn out for far too long, so there is an urgent need to address the matter promptly, as morale among classroom assistants is low and they feel undervalued and demoralised. Classroom assistants are professional people who want their work to be recognised, and we fully support them in that.

It is important to clarify from the outset that there is no dispute about the contribution that classroom assistants make. We all recognise the important role that they play, especially in providing assistance to children with special educational needs. Like the previous speaker, I have stood on the picket line with classroom assistants in support of their role.

In her short term in office since devolution, the Minister has tried to address the matter within the narrow confines of the budget. The £30 million that she made available was a genuine attempt to alleviate the situation. I totally sympathise with the classroom assistants, but we need to deal with the matter in the framework that we have before us. I am sure that all Members are only too aware of the confines of her

budget but, despite that, the Minister has committed to resolving the dispute. I fully support her on that.

I hope that, through ongoing negotiation, the matter can be resolved to the satisfaction of all and in a quick manner. Go raibh maith agat.

Ms Purvis: I thank my hon Friend Mr Dominic Bradley for moving the motion. I had initially considered proposing an amendment but none is required. Given the offer that her Department has made, the Minister of Education has not settled the issue of job evaluation for classroom assistants. The education and library boards have not made an equitable offer to the trade union representatives.

'A Gender Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland' states that the Executive aims:

"to ensure the economic security of both men and women"

and

"to achieve equal value for paid work done by women and men, and promote their equitable participation in the paid and unpaid labour force".

Economic independence is a vital element in ending the discrimination and disadvantage that women face. I believe that the way in which classroom assistants have been treated since 1995 goes against the grain of our gender equality strategy. In my opinion, the treatment of classroom assistants could amount to indirect discrimination, on the grounds that all those affected are women.

Mr D Bradley: Does the Member agree that, if the majority of the classroom assistant workforce were male, the dispute would probably have been settled years and years ago?

Ms Purvis: I thank the Member for his intervention. The issue would surely have been settled in months in 1995 rather than 12 years later, in 2007.

This whole sorry episode has involved the down-grading, devaluing and demoralising of classroom assistants. Although colleagues have referred to 7,000 classroom assistants, the number of women affected is actually somewhere in the region of 10,000 because, in addition to the 7,000 current employees, some 3,000 members of staff have left over the past 12 years. Some have actually died waiting for their arrears to be paid. That is an absolute disgrace.

Classroom assistants provide a valuable service and they were previously treated on a par with teachers. In some cases — and I refer Members to a document on leave of absence, issued by the South Eastern Education and Library Board — that parity continues, as the policy treats classroom assistants and teachers as one and the same. As my colleague said earlier, classroom assistants are classroom based, but the insulting offer from the Department of Education downgrades their role from a professional grade to a clerical grade.

As Sammy Wilson mentioned, paying classroom assistants pro rata for 36 hours will actually make them part-time employees. How will that affect their superannuation and future pension arrangements? Classroom assistants work the same hours — 32·5 hours per week — as teachers. There is no work available for them for 36 hours per week. The Department has simply engaged in a cost-saving exercise. Calculating arrears based on the new hourly rate is just a money-saving exercise that, in effect, robs classroom assistants of what they have been due for the past 12 years.

I will give Members an example of the potential arrears. The arrears due to one classroom assistant who came to see me, if calculated on the previous hourly rate, would be £24,000 of back pay over 12 years. Under the new hourly rate, the back pay would be in the region of £3,000. The Department is seeking to claw back money. Pay them what they are due.

Removing the special-needs allowance cuts the wages of classroom assistants by up to 60p an hour. It also removes the specialism of dealing with children with varying needs, preventing those children from accessing the education that they are entitled and thereby enabling them to reach their full potential. That is further evidence of the devaluation of the work of classroom assistants.

The treatment of classroom assistants over the past 12 years had been scandalous. Offers have been made and retracted, there has been uncertainty and instability, salaries have been changed from monthly pay to lunar pay, and for what value? Some classroom assistants have had to borrow a week's wages from their lying month just to get by. That shows how low-paid they are. Why? To save the Department money.

Now there is this offer. One could be forgiven for thinking that the Department's action over the past 12 years has been nothing but a stalling tactic and a money-saving exercise, in the hope that classroom assistants would get fed up and leave. Many have left — over 3,000 — but 7,000 remain. Those 7,000 classroom assistants need to be valued, to be fairly treated, to have security of employment, and to have an equitable offer.

My colleague Mr Butler said that the offer put forward by the Department was a "credible offer". That is Sinn Féin speak for "protect our Minister at all costs".

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Ms Purvis: I look forward to being proved wrong. I support the motion.

Mr K Robinson: It is a scandal that this dispute has been allowed to drag on for so long. It is another indictment of the direct rule approach to education in Northern Ireland over many years.

Members have just debated a motion on teacher induction and employment. Reference has also been

made to that long-running dispute, which continues to bedevil progress in the further education sector. Those disputes do nothing to support and encourage the very groups that this society is relying on to deliver the often-mentioned "knowledge-based economy".

Since their introduction into schools some years ago, classroom assistants have increased, both as regards their numbers and their impact on quality learning situations in our schools. The stability of classrooms is important at a time of flux and uncertainty, with the rationalisation of the number of schools very definitely on the agenda. That is why we can do without another added element of uncertainty.

Between 1997 and today, the number of classroom assistants has multiplied steadily, and they now represent a sizeable component of the educational workforce. The primary-school sector has 8,063 full-time equivalent teachers; the post-primary sector has 10,509; in special schools, the figure is 789; while there are currently 7,144 classroom assistants. My colleague mentioned those who have left the service over previous years for a variety of reasons.

Classroom assistants are not negligible or marginal add-ons. They are clearly an intrinsic part of the delivery of quality education to our children. Properly qualified and specifically tasked classroom assistants have brought an added dimension to the learning process. The stability of the classroom-assistant workforce impacts directly on schoolchildren. Quite frankly, I am at a loss to understand how the boards and the Department have got themselves into such a mess in this long-running saga.

On the face of it, the £30 million recently announced by the Minister as a final settlement sounded both generous and conciliatory. However, on closer inspection, it is obvious that it has impressed neither the unions nor the classroom assistants. When divided between serving and former classroom assistants — and considering that the offer seeks to address some 11 to 12 years of dissatisfaction — the individual sums are not nearly so impressive as at first glance.

Mr S Wilson: Does the Member accept that, as a result of the new formula, many classroom assistants will face a pay cut? They could be financing their own pay deal in future years.

Mr K Robinson: I thank Mr Wilson for his intervention. The issue was referred to earlier, and it is another one that must be dealt with by the Minister.

Another puzzling aspect is the boards' insistence, when advertising classroom assistant posts, that NVQ level 3 is an essential criterion for the position. However, when it comes to evaluating the job, the boards appear to insist that that is not a consideration. The boards cannot have it both ways.

Removing the special needs allowance from classroom assistants who are central in enabling children with a variety of individual and special needs to reach their full potential is also a concern.

It is incumbent on the Minister and her Department to spell out clearly to the House how what appeared, at first sight, to be a reasonable settlement to the dispute has become the focus of so much anger and dismay among classroom assistants and their union representatives. The Minister must also specify what impact removing the special needs allowance will have on the pay of some classroom assistants. Changes in the methods of calculating hourly rates of pay, both future and retrospective, are an obvious focus for the suspicions and the fury of classroom assistants. Members must be clearly informed of the impact of the changes.

Mr Newton: I welcome the motion and add my support for it. It is valid and deserves the support of the whole Assembly.

The issue is highly emotive. Every Member has been lobbied by trade unions, individual trade-union members or groups of classroom assistants from schools in their constituencies. The Minister has called on the education and library boards to settle with the trade unions. However, a settlement has not been achieved and the trade unions have warned of the possibility of strike action. As has been said a number of times, the issue has been ongoing for 12 years, during which time there have been protests by trade unions. Reference has been made to the vital role that classroom assistants play in school life. They relieve teachers of some duties and they allow pupils to receive more attention and further assistance with their studies.

The issue is being dealt with through a job evaluation process, which is a process that is agreed with public-sector employees and their trade unions. The evaluation process provides a means of ensuring that pay grades are determined in a fair and consistent manner and ensures that jobs of equal value receive equal pay. The solution to the problem lies in the job evaluation exercise, which forms the last part of a major programme of job evaluation for all board staff.

The Department of Education has given approval to the education and library boards to make a final settlement. The evaluation of classroom assistant jobs extends to some 7,000 staff. I read that the Department has made £30 million available for the settlement; I do not know whether that figure is correct. We must have some clarity on that: we need to know how that figure has been arrived at and how it will be spent.

Ms Purvis: Is the Member aware that the £30 million announced recently by the Minister was already announced, some time ago, by the direct rule Minister Maria Eagle as being ring-fenced for classroom assistants?

5.00 pm

Mr Newton: I thank the Member for that intervention.

Employees and employers have been unable to agree upon terms for a settlement. The very principle of job evaluation means that no classroom assistant should suffer any financial loss as a result of the exercise. However, reference has already been made to the fact that there may be losses and that those who have moved on from the scene may well emerge as losers.

As has already been said, this issue has been ongoing for 12 years, and a settlement is long overdue. It is only reasonable that classroom assistants receive a fair and equitable settlement, as their role is of the utmost importance in the education and development of the children in their care.

Supporting this motion will be a step towards securing a fair and equitable settlement for classroom assistants, and it will confirm that Members value classroom assistants and their work.

Mr Savage: I welcome the opportunity to speak in today's debate.

I welcome the Department of Education's intentions, and I acknowledge its apparent willingness to resolve this matter, which has gone on for far too long. A sum of £30 million is nothing more than a step in the right direction. This debacle has lasted for 12 years, which is 12 years too long.

It is abhorrent to think that many classroom assistants in gainful employment are working with kids and full-time teaching staff but are not receiving adequate reward and remuneration for their work. The situation must be urgently addressed.

With every passing year, the number of classroom assistants grows and their role becomes more important. In 1997, there were 2,181 part-time classroom assistants and 705 full-time classroom assistants. By 2003, those figures had risen dramatically to 5,133 part-time, and 1,178 full-time, classroom assistants. We can safely assume that now, midway through 2007, those figures have increased again. I conservatively estimate that there are now around 6,500 part-time classroom assistants and 2,500 full-time classroom assistants.

I want to highlight one important statistic. The Southern Education and Library Board area, which covers my constituency of Upper Bann, has the highest number of classroom assistants of any board area. Figures provided in January 2006 show that there were 1,249 classroom assistants in the primary-school sector; 267 in the secondary-school sector; and 132 in the special-needs sector. That leads me to conclude that most of those currently involved in this dispute over back pay come from, or work in, my constituency. I want to know what the Minister intends to do to sort

out this problem, because, frankly, £30 million for the whole of Northern Ireland is an insult. Classroom assistants put a lot of effort and hard work into what they do. Sadly, they are taken for granted and do not receive an adequate reward for their efforts.

I am particularly interested in the Minister's view on some of the issues that the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA) raised. NIPSA has, justifiably, raised concerns about the boards' intentions as regards changes to how the hourly rates of pay are calculated, both in future and retrospectively. One can understand that the proposed new education authority must review the calculation of the hourly rates of pay, but it is deeply worrying that the boards wish to apply that retrospectively. It is unjust and unfair. Classroom assistants should be paid properly for the work that they do, and they should be paid the money that they are owed.

The removal of the special needs allowance for classroom assistants is a major bone of contention, and it only compounds the problem with the hourly rates of pay.

The removal of the allowance is a kick in the teeth to the thousands of patient and caring classroom assistants whose work enables children with special needs or learning difficulties to learn at their own pace and to reach their full potential.

Further concern has been raised about the boards' insistence that NVQ level 3 is not a prerequisite for the position of classroom assistant, when their advertisements for such positions specify the NVQ level 3 as an essential criterion. The boards must decide exactly what the criteria are when advertising for classroom assistants. The current situation is bringing the vocation of classroom assistants into disrepute, and the boards must make a decision and stick with it.

I trust that the Minister will respond in detail to the points that I have made, and I look forward to her response. I also put on record my sincere thanks and appreciation to classroom assistants, who do sterling work in serving young constituents across the area.

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá a ról mar chroílár ár n-iarrachtaí leis an chuimsitheacht a chothú agus le ligean do níos mó páistí agus daoine óga oideachas a fháil i scoileanna príomhshrutha i gcuideachta a gcomhpháirtithe.

I welcome the opportunity to engage in this debate and the chance that it presents to set out the steps that the Department of Education has taken to help secure settlement of a dispute that — Members are agreed — has gone on for too long. I also want to echo the comments made by those Members who have spoken and to put on record my appreciation of the work of the over 7,000 classroom assistants who work in our

schools — large and small — across the North of Ireland.

I have been fortunate enough to have many opportunities to visit schools since 8 May, and I have seen at first hand the dedication and commitment of many individuals. One of the first schools that I visited was a special school, where I saw highly professional classroom assistants providing learning support to some of society's most vulnerable young people. In that school, I saw not only the professionalism of the classroom assistants, but their caring and sensitivity to the needs of the children that they were supporting.

In other schools I witnessed the excellent work of classroom assistants whose role is to support children in mainstream settings. Their role is core to the Department's efforts to promote inclusion and to allow more children and young people to be educated in mainstream schools, where appropriate, alongside their peers.

Ní foláir do na boird agus na ceardchumann teacht chun réitigh, laistigh dá gcóras caidreamh tionsclaíoch, ar na hábhair chúraim eile seo.

Classroom assistants do more than support children with special educational needs. Under the Making a Good Start initiative, the Department provides funding for a classroom assistant for every primary 1 class, and for primary 2 classes in areas where attainment is low and social deprivation is high. In my visits to primary schools I have seen at first hand the invaluable role that classroom assistants play as support to the class teacher and as a hugely positive force in the lives of the children in those classrooms.

There is no doubt about the value of the role that classroom assistants play in the education of our children and young people. So, if we are in agreement about that valuable role, why has it taken so long to reach agreement on a job evaluation process designed to ensure a fair rate of pay for the important job that they do?

Job evaluation is not a means of giving staff automatic pay increases — no matter how highly valued they are. It is an agreed process between public-sector employers and the trade unions to ensure that job grades are determined in a fair and consistent manner, and that jobs of equal value receive equal pay. The boards have advised that the results of the evaluations show that many of the classroom assistants are correctly graded and that their pay compares favourably with that of their counterparts in England, Scotland and Wales.

The job evaluations have been completed, and three generic job descriptions covering the different roles played by classroom assistants have been agreed: classroom assistant in — so-called — mainstream schools; classroom assistant in special needs; and classroom assistant in additional special needs. If an individual —

Mr Shannon: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Ruane: No. I have a lot of issues to deal with. I did not get a chance to finish my last speech, so I want to ensure that I say all that I want to in this debate before I give way.

If a classroom assistant considers that the duties that he or she performs fall into a higher grading, an appeal mechanism exists for that person to have their grading reconsidered.

The £30 million funding has already been provided to the education and library boards in anticipation of a settlement of this long-running story. Naomi Long suggested that this money is not additional, but it is and will not in any way detract from other areas of the boards' work. At a time when education budgets are under pressure, that investment represents a huge commitment to our classroom assistants, but it cannot be right for a sum of such magnitude to sit in board accounts year after year. The priority must be to reach a settlement that will allow the money to be released into the pay packets of hard-working classroom assistants.

I want to clarify a couple of issues that were raised by Sammy Wilson and others. Money has been allocated to education and library boards, and the bulk of the £30 million has been with the boards as employers for some time on the basis of their calculations of the cost of implementing the agreed job evaluation scheme. The boards remain of the view that £30 million is more than adequate to meet the costs of the agreed scheme. Lest there be any confusion, I, in conjunction with the Department of Finance and Personnel, gave approval to the employers to make a formal offer to trade unions, which reflected the negotiations to date.

The motion calls on me to give approval to the education and library boards to put an equitable offer to the representative trade unions. That I have already done. Following a lengthy process, one that I fully agree has taken far too long, I was pleased to note that the employers and the unions had reached a point in their negotiations where the employers were ready to put a formal offer on the table.

Members will appreciate that, in line with Government accounting rules, any offer required the prior approval of both the Department of Education and the Department of Finance and Personnel. Following consideration of the proposal received from the boards — who are the employers in this case, not the Department of Education — the two Departments gave their approval to the proposed deal. That was communicated to the employers on 31 May 2007.

What are the next steps? I hope that the recent progress will enable the boards and the unions to press ahead to secure an early and final settlement that will allow the funding to be released into the pay packets of eligible classroom assistants as soon as possible. The

boards have tabled their final settlement offer to the unions and the unions are consulting their members.

The trade unions raised concerns about salary protection arrangements, which have been included in the proposed settlement to ensure that no classroom assistant will suffer any financial loss as a result of the evaluation of their post. Unions also voiced concerns about pro rata pay arrangements and the level of GNVQ qualifications required for mainstream classroom assistant posts.

The priority must now be for the education and library boards and the trade unions to reach agreement through their established industrial relations machinery on these additional concerns.

I welcome the role that the Labour Relations Agency played recently in helping to deliver progress, and I call on all those involved to work together to reach a final agreement with the further assistance of the Labour Relations Agency, if necessary.

The role of the Department of Education was to ensure that the proposed settlement was workable and affordable. That is the basis on which the boards were given approval by the Department of Education and the Department of Finance and Personnel to proceed to the final settlement. This matter is urgent and I am engaged in meetings with all the boards and the trade unions about it. However, it would not be appropriate for me to become directly engaged in the established industrial relations machinery or to intervene while negotiations between the two sides are at such an advanced stage.

However, I will encourage both sides to reach an early settlement, which will allow funding to be released into the pay packets of classroom assistants at the earliest possible date. That is what is needed here and now.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

5.15 pm

Mrs M Bradley: After listening to the Minister of Education, I am angry. I am not at all pleased.

Over the years, classroom assistants have been used. Their case has been like a football, kicked between the education boards and the Department of Education. Today, all Members agree that classroom assistants, who do wonderful work, and do it well, deserve to be recognised.

I do not believe that they will be recognised. If the Minister of Education has made an equitable offer, why are the unions and classroom assistants so angry? Why are they considering industrial action? That threat is coming from people who are dedicated to their jobs, and have been for years. People on whom our children depend every day of the week, and on whom teachers and principals depend for the help that is required to

give our children, and especially those with special needs, the best education and care possible.

The work that classroom assistants do cannot be counted in pounds. That work has not been recognised either in the past or by the Chamber today. I feel ashamed that after 12 years, this is the best that we can do for people who have given their all for all our children.

Mr Shannon: Does the Member agree that the Minister of Education needs to go the extra mile and ensure that extra funding to resolve the dispute for once and for all — not the £30 million that has been spoken of for umpteen years — is made available?

Mrs M Bradley: The Member must be reading my mind, as that is what I had intended to say. I have a two-page speech, but I am so angry that I feel that what I have written is totally inadequate.

Classroom assistants must get the recognition that they deserve. I agree with Mr Shannon: the Minister of Education must go the extra mile, so that our children do not lose out by being denied the people who look after them and help to educate them.

We all say that we want the best education for our children. The Minister of Education says that she wants to provide the best education. My advice to the Minister is that if she goes the extra mile, she will address that issue and provide the best education for our children. Otherwise, the children who attend our schools will lose out.

After 12 years, it is almost incredible that we are dealing with an issue that the people who went before us disregarded and hoped would go away. The issue has not gone away. It will not go away. Classroom assistants deserve what they are asking for. They should be given what they are asking for.

I thank all Members for their positive remarks in supporting the motion brought by my colleague Mr Dominic Bradley. He was right to bring the matter to the House. However — and I say this with anger — the situation with classroom assistants should have been dealt with 12 years ago.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Education to take immediate action to settle the issue of job evaluation for classroom assistants, by giving approval to the Education and Library Boards to put an equitable offer to the representative Trades' Unions.

Motion made:

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

ADJOURNMENT

Car Parking Problems at Daisy Hill Hospital, Newry

Mr D Kennedy: I am grateful to those Members who intend to remain in the House. In the past, I have been accused of having made moving speeches. I am not sure how many people I will move today. [*Laughter.*] However, Members do seem to be moving out of the Chamber.

Nevertheless, the car parking problems at Daisy Hill Hospital represent an important issue that should be debated in the Assembly. I am pleased that my colleague and good friend, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety Michael McGimpsey has joined us in the Chamber. Hopefully, by the end of the debate, he will be an even better friend.

Car parking problems at Daisy Hill Hospital is a long-standing issue. It has been a concern of local residents, hospital workers, patients and neighbouring businesses.

As a member of Newry and Mourne District Council, an interest that I am happy to declare, I can confirm that the council has continued to make representations to both the former Newry and Mourne Health and Social Services Trust and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety on the issue. The council has sought to co-operate with the trust and assist wherever possible. In practical terms, the council has recently leased some land on which an emergency helicopter can land.

The issue of car parking at Daisy Hill Hospital must be resolved as soon as possible. Several key problems need to be addressed. Residents face the ongoing problem of vehicles being parked outside their properties for long periods. Those vehicles are effectively abandoned. All-day parkers take up spaces that impact on the light and private amenities of properties.

There is also a lack of adequate road markings. Even where they are still visible, road markings that have been there for a number of years simply identify permanent parking bays that cause a nuisance to local residents and inconvenience them. The issue is cross-cutting. It is not only a matter for the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety but for the Minister for Regional Development, who represents Newry and Armagh. I am sorry that he is not present.

A traffic study and a full review of the parking trends on the hospital road and in other nearby areas are needed. When the Minister for Regional Development reads Hansard, I hope that he will respond to that call, which I hope that other local representatives will also endorse. A traffic study is necessary, and it must be undertaken by the Minister for Regional Development in conjunction with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

Householders adjacent to Daisy Hill Hospital have been very patient and long-suffering over many years. They have endured major inconvenience and, on occasions, considerable abuse from hostile individuals. Those householders deserve some consideration.

Hospital staff are equally inconvenienced and frustrated due to the difficulties that they face when trying to park at their place of work. They want to see action, too. Perhaps the most important people to be considered are those who attend the hospital as patients or visitors.

Daisy Hill is a large regional acute hospital. We are very pleased with it, and we wish to maintain and retain its services. That is something that I am happy to put on record in the presence of the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, who I know supports Daisy Hill's position as an acute regional hospital.

However, this is a hospital that provides essential services to many thousands of people in the south Down, south Armagh, Newry and, indeed, north Louth areas. From a council and a local representation point of view, Daisy Hill Hospital remains the jewel in our crown, providing health services in the region. The many people who attend as patients or who visit patients share the frustration of trying to achieve a parking spot in what can often be very emotional and difficult circumstances; they are there to receive treatment themselves — perhaps urgent treatment — or to give comfort to a relative.

Consequently, parking takes place in a very haphazard manner, and the one-way system and very poor signage at the hospital combine to exacerbate the problems. There needs to be a creative solution and some imagination shown. Earlier today, the Minister used very creative language when he talked about the Lone Ranger, and so forth. Sadly, some of us are old enough to remember the Lone Ranger and Silver and Tonto and Kemo Sabe — but I digress.

In an ideal situation, we would demand a multi-storey car park. That would provide an early solution, but clearly there are cost implications and also the potential introduction of charging for people using such a facility. That might not prove popular to those public representatives who would have to put it forward.

I press the Minister to at least initiate a proper study to review the problems and bring forward a costed proposal

to see if we can make progress on this matter. In the meantime, I also appeal, in his absence, to the Minister for Regional Development to carry out the necessary remedial measures to improve the current situation. Short-term improvements in markings and signage can and should be made, and the local trust should co-operate with those improvements as far as it can.

Finally, I express my thanks to everyone for their interest and input into this issue, particularly the Minister for his attendance. I particularly thank the residents, staff and visitors; I know that they will certainly appreciate the input and the attention that the Assembly will want to give this important subject.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am sure that Danny is old enough to remember the name of Tonto's horse, but we will not go into that at the moment.

On a more serious note, this debate is welcome, and I concur with everything that Mr Kennedy said about parking at Daisy Hill Hospital. It is certainly a sufficiently serious issue to be raised in the Chamber. It is an immediate problem for the hospital, but it is symptomatic of the larger traffic problems affecting the Newry area. Part of it, to a large degree, is the parking issue. In Newry, the vast majority of parking spaces are located on one side of the city, which unfortunately is not the side where the hospital is located. That does not help matters.

A proposal presented to Newry and Mourne District Council by my colleague Turlough Murphy has received the support of the council. The idea is to open Daisy Hill Nursery, which is adjacent to the hospital, as a temporary parking area. That, however, is merely a temporary solution to a much wider problem. A permanent solution, as Mr Kennedy said, must be found.

5.30 pm

Photographs are often published of officials considering the traffic problems in Newry; however, nothing ever seems to be done to address those problems. It is time that all the agencies got together to implement a permanent solution that is fit for the city.

Daisy Hill Hospital is one of the biggest — if not the biggest — employers in the area. That creates a problem, as once staff get their cars parked, little room is left for the cars of visitors and those attending outpatient clinics.

Most people who have used the car park would agree that abandoned cars are a problem. Furthermore, there is no regular parking, and the car parks are not supervised: it would be possible to go into the car park and disappear for three months.

Mr Kennedy mentioned the helicopter pad at the hospital, which took up a proportion of parking spaces. One of the playing fields is now used as a landing area;

in fact, a sea-rescue helicopter landed there last week. It is easily accessible to the hospital, and ambulances can go down to the field to collect casualties quickly.

The hospital has a big catchment area, and Mr Kennedy mentioned north Louth. I have spoken to people from that area who use the renal unit at Daisy Hill Hospital. A reciprocal agreement is in place that enables people from that part of the South to use those facilities.

I would welcome any study that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety might initiate to solve the problem. It has existed since the new hospital was built at Daisy Hill, and nothing has been done to solve it.

I entirely agree with what has been said about the residents, because in many cases the gateways of the people who live opposite the hospital are blocked off. Furthermore, cars have been vandalised on numerous occasions. I agree with Mr Kennedy and ask that a solution be found quickly. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá an-áthas orm an deis seo a bheith agam chun labhairt ar rún a bhaineann le mo thoghcheantar féin.

I am pleased to speak in a debate that concerns my constituency, and I thank Mr Kennedy for bringing the issue before the House. I also thank the Minister for his presence and for his recent confirmation on the future of the trauma services at Daisy Hill Hospital — a very important issue to everyone in that area.

Mr Kennedy is correct in saying that time and time again the issue of car parking at Daisy Hill Hospital has been raised by public representatives in the Newry and Armagh constituency and by councillors in the Newry and Mourne area. I have had several meetings with the chief executive of the former Newry and Mourne Health and Social Services Trust about the situation. More parking spaces were provided on the upper site, near to the old hospital buildings. Unfortunately, that has not been enough to eliminate the problem.

Daisy Hill Hospital has a wide catchment area that seems to be growing. It serves areas from east Down, to north Louth and to beyond Armagh city. It includes, particularly in the winter months when winter flu and chest infections are prevalent, an overflow from Craigavon Area Hospital. Many of those patients return to the hospital for outpatient appointments, and this adds to the pressure on already inadequate parking facilities. That results in outpatients and some visitors being forced to park on the pavements adjacent to the hospital, as all other parking spaces are often in use during outpatient clinics and visiting hours.

The enforcement of parking regulations has meant that patients, some of whom are already suffering from

stress due to illness, have returned to their vehicles to find that they have received parking fines.

Obviously, parking on the pavement is highly undesirable and can cause difficulties for the pedestrians who are forced to walk on the road, exposing them to the risk of injury from passing traffic. Also, it is undesirable for people to walk on a road that is also the route of emergency ambulances. Members know the difficulties and the dangers — Mr Brady and Mr Kennedy have outlined some of them. However, how do we solve the problem?

Mr Brady has suggested one possible solution. Another solution, which might be implemented quite quickly, would be to open the hospital site's Camlough Road gate and allow the Busy Bus service — if it were well advertised and offered a frequent service — to circulate around the hospital complex. I am sure that that would go some way towards alleviating the parking problem by reducing the need for people to travel to the hospital by car. It may not solve the problem, but it would go some way towards addressing it. Nonetheless, due consideration should be given to that option without further delay.

The road opposite the hospital's lower entrance, where people park at present, could be improved and parking spaces could be marked out. Once again, although that may add a few extra parking spaces, it would not provide a total solution to the problem — and it would involve the Department for Regional Development, as has been mentioned earlier by Mr Kennedy.

The nature of the Daisy Hill Hospital site is such that, under present circumstances, the number of options remaining is limited. I agree with Mr Kennedy that the multi-storey car park option may be necessary to solving the parking problems and might be advanced as part of the plans for the new Daisy Hill Hospital.

Two years ago, I met Dr Andrew McCormick and his colleagues at the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. They led me to believe that plans for a new hospital in Newry were moving along; that a business case had been received from the then Newry and Mourne Health and Social Services Trust, and that the Department had considered it and returned it to the trust for amendment. My understanding then was that the resources were in the system for the new hospital. I would be interested to hear the Minister clarify, for us all, the situation regarding the new Daisy Hill Hospital.

Returning to the parking issue, measures to address parking problems would be welcome in the short term. However, I am sure the Minister will agree that those would only be a sticking-plaster solution. In the long term, we need a fully integrated parking solution that, I suspect, would be part of a new hospital complex. I look

forward to hearing the Minister's response to those issues. Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Mr McCallister: I will say, at the outset, that I have only seen repeats of 'The Lone Ranger' — I am not even sure if it has been put on DVD. I thank my colleague, the very old Danny Kennedy, for bringing this important issue to the House, and it is excellent that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is here to respond.

As has been said, Daisy Hill Hospital serves a large area covering Mr Kennedy's constituency of Newry and Armagh, as well as a large part of my own South Down constituency. Everyone from that area is proud of the hospital, its record, its staff, and the services that it provides.

It has already been said that there are serious parking problems at the hospital. There are issues, which Mr Bradley has mentioned, regarding people who cannot find a parking space and who are forced to park on the pavement — something that has a knock-on effect with the involvement of the "red coats", illegal parking and fines, and the problems those cause. As Mr Kennedy pointed out, local residents have been exceptionally patient —

Mr Elliott: Does the Member accept that Daisy Hill Hospital is not the only hospital that has parking problems?

A similar problem exists at the Erne Hospital in Enniskillen. For a long time, the car-parking attendant was not contracted by the local health and social services trust but by an outside body that was responsible for catering and portering arrangements at the hospital. Does the Member accept that it is inappropriate for a car-parking attendant to have to sit in a rodent-infested hut outside the hospital?

Mr McCallister: I accept Mr Elliott's intervention; in true style, he did not shy away from bringing the debate back to Fermanagh.

There are many hospitals where car parking is a huge issue. At Daisy Hill Hospital, the one-way system forces staff and patients almost to abandon their vehicles. The site of the car park is also problematic; it is extremely steep and is inadequate to meet the requirements of such a large, busy hospital. When patients are being dropped off or collected, they may need two people to help them: one to drive them there and another to accompany them into the hospital, and vice versa. That is unacceptable, especially in winter weather. I join Mr Kennedy in calling on the Minister to review the situation and to work with the Minister for Regional Development, Conor Murphy, to find a way through the issue in order to help the residents, patients and staff at Daisy Hill Hospital.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I recognise that car parking at hospitals is a serious problem, not only for Daisy Hill but for a number of hospitals, including the Erne Hospital. The increasing level of car ownership and the rise in the number of people who attend hospitals mean that there is a greater demand for car-parking spaces, which causes stress for many people. However, it is vital that staff such as doctors and nurses have adequate access to their place of work because, without those people, hospitals cannot function.

There is a lack of car-parking spaces, not least at Daisy Hill Hospital. Currently, 442 spaces are available at Daisy Hill, but that creates a shortfall, even when the site is managed. It is estimated that 612 spaces are needed. The Daisy Hill site is so congested, restricted and bounded by roads that it is virtually impossible to find a new area to develop as a car park. Newry and Mourne District Council has offered a piece of adjacent ground for possible inclusion in the complex to allow for car parking. Unfortunately, the council has offered that only on a temporary short-term lease, and the investment costs of its development make it prohibitive, because the hospital does not own the land and does not expect to do so.

The Department estimates that a multi-storey car park would cost around £10,000 for each car-parking space. The creation of the required car-parking spaces at the hospital would cost between £6 million and £7 million. That does not count in the fact that, during construction, which could take between nine months and one year, the car park at Daisy Hill would virtually be taken away because the new car park would be built on the original site.

Therefore there are no easy solutions. Around 80 cars are routinely parked on the street because it offers kerbside parking that is convenient to the front door of the hospital, and there is no charge. Unfortunately, that parking is in a residential area. Given the nature of the hospital, which is open 24/7, cars are always parked there — day and night, seven days a week. Clearly, that is a nuisance to residents. However, neither the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety nor the Southern Health and Social Care Trust can deal with that problem. It is the responsibility of the Department for Regional Development and Roads Service. As Mr Kennedy has mentioned, the MP and MLA for Newry and Armagh, the constituency in which Daisy Hill Hospital is situated, is also the Minister for Regional Development and is in charge of roads. I would have thought that he is well placed to alleviate the problems of the residents of that area.

5.45 pm

Although the hospital has explored certain solutions, I am not satisfied that everything possible has been

done and that no stone has been left unturned. Wider consideration is therefore required. I have instructed my officials to carry out a regional review of car parking in order to establish a consistent policy across all Health Service trusts because there are different schemes in different areas; in certain sites, such as the Royal Hospitals, charging is routine. A consistent policy is needed.

At Daisy Hill Hospital, a review must be carried out of the members of staff who are entitled to free car parking. Those include essential workers such as medical staff, doctors and nurses. Consideration must be given to how to deal with other employees who are essential to the running of the site; it might be possible to accommodate those staff in adjacent sites. The Department is also considering a park-and-ride facility and is in discussion with Translink about how that might be introduced. However, there is also the possibility that examination of the design of the car park will enable the Department to determine whether the number of spaces can be increased.

As things stand, however, with people's requirement to travel by car and their insistence on doing so, it is difficult to see how everybody will be accommodated during busy times. There will, therefore, need to be some form of rationing of car-parking spaces on the site. I have asked for the review to examine closely the management of the site, the scope for encouraging better use of car-parking space on the site, the restriction of on-street parking in consultation with DRD, and for the trusts to work with that Department to consider what can be done to enhance car-parking restrictions.

A residents-only car-parking scheme on Hospital Road is necessary; that is, if Roads Service can be persuaded to introduce one. If Roads Service can be persuaded to introduce such a scheme there, the question is whether it could be persuaded to introduce schemes in other areas, such as south Belfast. However, that is an old theme of mine.

In response to Mr Bradley's question, there are ongoing discussions and plans with an outline business case to redevelop the site. The Department is considering that business case, which proposes that the preferred option would be to rebuild and refurbish the existing site, including the provision of a multi-storey car park as part of that redevelopment. That will create an additional 212 spaces, which, the Department believes, will solve the parking problem. It will also contribute to the investment on the site that is required for the hospital to meet the latest standards.

With regard to the Erne Hospital, Mr Elliott will know that, given that Enniskillen is getting a brand new hospital, I visited it last Thursday.

That acute hospital represents a £260 million investment and will occupy a very large site close to

the town. There should not be any car-parking problems because the site is so big. However, in the meantime, the Department can ask the trust to review the parking arrangements at the Erne Hospital.

Mr D Bradley: I thank the Minister for giving way, and for his update on the new hospital at Daisy Hill. What will the level of investment be there?

Mr McGimpsey: I was not warned of that specific question, so I am unable to tell the Member how much it will be. It was part of the discussions with the previous trust. It is now a matter for the Southern Health and Social Care Trust, and that context must be considered. However, I will make enquiries and reply to the Member.

I have magically been handed a note, which tells me that it is £136 million. It is a substantial development at a very early stage —

Mr Kennedy: Tonto brought it.

Mr McGimpsey: Kemo Sabe passed it to me. It is absolutely amazing; if only our car-parking technology were as good.

As I said, I have asked the trust to report back to me as quickly as possible, and as soon as I receive that information, I shall convey it to Mr Kennedy, Mr McCallister, Mr Bradley and others.

Adjourned at 5.52 pm.

Written Answers

This section contains the written answers to questions tabled by Members. The content of the responses is as received at the time from the relevant Minister or representative of the Assembly Commission and has not been subject to the official reporting process or changed in any way.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Out of Hours Service

Friday 18 May 2007

Written Answers to Questions

ENVIRONMENT

Mullaghglass Landfill Site

Mr Paul Butler asked the Minister of the Environment if she will undertake to carry out an investigation into the running and operation of Mullaghglass landfill site on the Mullaghglass Road in Lisburn; and in particular if she will look at the complaints of many residents in the area about this landfill site as regards flies, litter and problems with odour. (AQW 6/07)

The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster): I am deeply concerned at the effect that flies, litter and odour appear to be having on the quality of life of Mullaghglass residents. Since being made aware of their concerns, my officials in the Environment and Heritage Service (EHS), in conjunction with Lisburn City Council, have been investigating residents' complaints. EHS has been undertaking regular site inspections including conducting an odour survey to measure odours on site and in its vicinity.

Extension of Shooting Season

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment what discussions she and her Department have had about extending the shooting season until the end of February. (AQW 16/07)

Mrs Foster: There has been no discussion on the issue of extending the shooting season until the end of February, however I am open to discuss the issue with you and any other Members.

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide an update on the provision of a doctor-led 'Out of Hours' Service in the Mournes and to provide an estimated start date for the commencement of the Service. (AQW 4/07)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): The Southern Health & Social Services Board is currently engaged in a joint working process with a panel of representatives elected by the community in the Mournes, to develop a model of Out of Hours care that will meet the specific clinical needs in the area.

The joint working panel hopes to submit a report to the Southern Health & Social Services Board for consideration in July 2007.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

PPS14 Sustainable Development in the Countryside

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his plans to address the problems caused by Planning Policy Statement 14: Sustainable Development in the Countryside, and to advise of his plans to address them. (AQW 5/07)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): Draft Planning Policy Statement 14 'Sustainable Development in the Countryside' is the responsibility of the Department for Regional Development and your question has therefore been passed to me for answer.

I am aware of the views expressed during the public consultation on the draft policy, and of the contents of the Report of the Programme for Government Committee on RPA and Rural Planning. The draft policy is also the subject of a judicial challenge.

Ensuring that appropriate rural planning policy is devised is a priority for me and I shall be taking full account of all the representations made as I consider the future content of PPS14.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 25 May 2007

Written Answers to Questions

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Voluntary Modulation

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline her policy on voluntary modulation. (AQW 1/07)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): I am currently reviewing the announcement on voluntary modulation made by my predecessor on 23 March 2007. I will consider the issues carefully, including the views of the range of rural stakeholders, and will come to a decision in the coming weeks.

Single Farm Payments

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to state how many applicants have not yet received their Single Farm Payments and to advise on the date by which all outstanding payments will be made. (AQW 2/07)

Ms Gildernew: At 16 May 2007 93.8% (37,418) applicants had either been paid their 2006 Single Farm Payment or been advised that a payment is not due because of ineligibility or the application of penalties under scheme rules 2,456 applications have not yet been finalised; not all of these claims may subsequently be eligible for payment. Validation of the 2006 applications continues and the objective is to pay out at least 96.14% of the budget by 30 June 2007 as provided for in European Council legislation.

Cross-Compliance Farm Inspections

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she will outline her plans in relation to cross-compliance farm inspections. (AQW 42/07)

Ms Gildernew: Under the Integrated Administration and Control System the Department is required to undertake both eligibility inspections and Cross-Compliance inspections.

Despite an increase in the number of Statutory Management Requirements to be considered in cross compliance inspections this year compared to last, the Department expects to reduce the number of Cross-Compliance inspection visits this year by 400, and by a further 400 next year.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Fishing in the River Dibney in Killyleagh

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what action he has taken to enhance fishing in the Dibney River in Killyleagh, County Down. (AQW 13/07)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Poots): The Department has no statutory remit to enhance fishing where it does not acquire or own the fishing rights. It does not own the fishing rights to the Dibney River. However the Department's Fisheries Officers have and will continue to provide advice to the Dibney River Trust, which is investigating the enhancement of fishery habitat and fishing in the Dibney River.

EDUCATION

Under-Representation of Males in the Teaching Profession

Mr Ken Robinson asked the Minister of Education how she intends to redress the current under-representation of males:

1. entering the teaching profession; and
2. employed in primary schools. (AQW 67/07)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): The gender balance of the teaching profession has traditionally favoured women, particularly within the primary school sector. The providers of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) courses have been asked by my Department to draw attention to the under-representation of males within their Access Agreements (particularly in the primary sector) and to review their recruitment procedures. As a result, the Higher Education Institutions have sought to encourage males to apply for ITE courses through a range of actions, including: ensuring that

males are well represented in publicity materials for their ITE courses; targeting all-male schools and male groups in mixed schools for careers talks and presentations; and, meeting regularly with careers teachers and senior staff to seek their help in encouraging males to apply for ITE courses.

Kirkistown Primary School

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Education what plans the South Eastern Education and Library Board has to address the increasing numbers of pupils attending Kirkistown Primary School. (AQW 68/07)

Ms Ruane: The South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB) is reviewing provision at a number of controlled schools within its remit, including Kirkistown PS, as part of its Strategic Capital Development Plan 2004-2009. The SEELB advise that it is likely that the review covering the Ards peninsula will be completed in 2008.

The enrolment at Kirkistown PS has increased steadily in recent years and a minor works scheme to provide a multi-purpose hall for the school is currently in planning and, subject to the necessary approvals, is scheduled for completion by the end of March 2008.

ENVIRONMENT

Grouse Moors

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment if she will sponsor a survey for grouse moors in North Antrim that would consider the impact of birds of prey on their numbers. (AQW 18/07)

The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster): EHS commissioned a survey of all Red Grouse habitat in Northern Ireland which reported in December 2004. This can be found at http://www.ehsni.gov.uk/red_grouse_survey_04.pdf

Because the Red Grouse population is low at present it is unlikely that birds of prey affect it significantly. Studies in Northern Ireland demonstrate that smaller birds, notably Meadow Pipit and Skylark, make up the bulk of the diet of the Hen Harrier, the species most likely to prey on Red Grouse. If, in the future, management of Red Grouse increases the population to a point where birds of prey could have an adverse effect, it may be necessary to consider action to mitigate this effect. As all birds of prey are specially protected under the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 any action taken would have to comply with the Order.

Lignite Mining in North Antrim

Mr Daithi McKay asked the Minister of the Environment what steps will be taken to ensure that lignite mining will be prevented in North Antrim; and what further action will be taken to ensure that those living in lignite-designated areas are not subject to planning restrictions related to the presence of lignite. (AQW 27/07)

Mrs Foster: The Planning Strategy for Rural Northern Ireland contains the current regional planning policy for mineral extraction and it requires that, where proven reserves of minerals which are of particular value to the economy occur, they are protected from surface development which would prejudice their future development.

Lignite has been identified by DETI as such a valuable mineral and the reserves in Northern Ireland form an integral part of its energy strategy. The Department is therefore obliged to protect this valuable resource through the planning process.

You will no doubt appreciate the necessity to protect minerals that are recognised as valuable to the economy of Northern Ireland and that it would not be appropriate to pre-judge the outcome of any possible proposal.

The protection does not necessarily mean that a future application would be approved as each application would be treated on its merits and all environmental implications considered.

Applications for dwellings within these areas will be considered in the light of all relevant policies and will be treated on their individual merits.

Protection for Urban Streams

Mr Ken Robinson asked the Minister for the Environment what steps she intends to take in order to enhance the levels of protection that may currently exist for urban streams. (AQW 49/07)

Mrs Foster: It is the role of the Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) to conserve, protect and where possible improve the aquatic environment in Northern Ireland. It does this through a range of activities including the control of effluent discharges, water pollution prevention programmes, the promotion of good practice in new development (through its response to planning consultations) and the education of the industry sector and the wider community. EHS also operates a Water Pollution Hotline, available 24 hours per day, 365 days per year. In order to combat or minimise the effects of pollution, EHS co-ordinates and manages the response to reports of pollution within set targets, depending on the severity of the incident.

Where pollution does occur, EHS takes appropriate formal enforcement action.

High Hedges Legislation

Mr Ken Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment what steps she intends to take to progress the nuisance high hedges legislation commenced by her direct rule predecessor. (AQW 51/07)

Mrs Foster: I am aware of the large number of responses to the consultation on this issue in 2005 and the interest expressed by fellow members. I am keen to bring forward legislation. However, the timing will be subject to consideration of other competing priorities.

Local Government Planning Functions

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment if she will give a timescale for the return of planning functions to the control of local government; and if she will explain whether it will be a staged return, or if local authorities will only become responsible for these functions following completion of the Review of Public Administration. (AQW 78/07)

Mrs Foster: I am now working with my colleagues in the Executive to consider how we proceed in relation to the RPA decisions of the previous administration in respect of local government. It is clear to me that we need to consider what we expect local government to deliver in the context of a fully-functioning devolved Assembly and Executive, and to consider the number of councils and functions that we believe would be required to do so.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Additional Funding

Mr Roy Beggs asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he will list all additional monies that have been allocated to the Northern Ireland Executive subsequent to the original budget allocation; and if he will indicate the source of the additional funding. (AQW 7/07)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Robinson): As part of the preparations for restoration, since late 2006 the local political parties have been in discussion with the Chancellor of the Exchequer regarding a financial package for the Northern Ireland Executive. Those discussions, which are now being led by the First Minister and deputy First Minister, supported by me, are on-going. The latest position on

offer from the Chancellor was set out in his Written Statement to the House of Commons on 8 May 2007. I have placed a copy of this in the Library.

Information Systems, E-Business and Related Services Framework Agreement

Mr Mark Durkan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he will provide a list of all the applicants under the Network Infrastructure Services category of the Information Systems, E-Business and Related Services Framework Agreement; and if he will outline the successful applicants and their locations. (AQW 9/07)

Mr Robinson: The information requested is given in the following table. The Framework Agreement was awarded after a competition in accordance with the EU Directive and associated UK regulations. The location of applicants was not a factor considered in the evaluation process, nor could it be under procurement law.

LIST OF ALL APPLICANTS UNDER THE NETWORK INFRASTRUCTURE SERVICES CATEGORY OF THE INFORMATION SYSTEMS, E-BUSINESS AND RELATED SERVICES FRAMEWORK AGREEMENT.

Applicant	Successful	Location
Actica Consulting	No	Guildford, England
Amey Business Services	No	Belfast
ASM Horwath	Yes	Belfast
Blackbox	Yes	Antrim
British Telecom	Yes	Belfast
Business and Scientific Services	No	Belfast
Computacenter (Belfast)	No	Belfast
Damovo	No	Newtownabbey
DELL/Sureskills	No	Belfast
Deloitte & Touche	No	Belfast
Fujitsu Services	No	Belfast
Helm	Yes	Moirra
Hitachi Consulting	No	London
Hewlett-Packard Ltd	No	Belfast
Hyder Consulting	No	Belfast
ICS Computing	Yes	Belfast
Improcom	No	Lutterworth, England
Logica CMG	No	Belfast
McCaughan Associates	Yes	Hollywood
NCC Group Plc	No	Manchester, England

Applicant	Successful	Location
Northgate Information Solutions	No	Newtownabbey
Parity	No	Antrim
Plannet 21	Yes	Belfast
Price Waterhouse Coopers	Yes	Belfast
QI Consulting	No	London, England
Real Time Systems	No	Carryduff
Red Squared	No	Altrincham, England
Siemens Business Solutions	No	Belfast
Socitm	No	Holyhead, Wales
Steria	No	Hollywood
Stiona Software	No	Belfast
Stirk lamont Associates	Yes	Belfast
Tribune Business Systems Limited	No	London, England
Wellington Computer Systems	No	Belfast

Information Systems, E-Business and Related Services Framework Agreement

Mr Mark Durkan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he will provide a list of all the applicants under the E-Business Services category of the Information Systems, E-Business and Related Services Framework Agreement; and if he will outline the successful applicants and their locations. (AQW 10/07)

Mr Robinson: The information requested is given in the following table. The Framework Agreement was awarded after a competition in accordance with the EU Directive and associated UK regulations. The location of applicants was not a factor considered in the evaluation process, nor could it be under procurement law.

LIST OF ALL APPLICANTS UNDER THE E BUSINESS SERVICES CATEGORY OF THE INFORMATION SYSTEMS, E-BUSINESS AND RELATED SERVICES FRAMEWORK AGREEMENT.

Applicant	Successful	Location
Accenture	No	Dublin
Actica	No	Guildford
Agility Consulting	No	Dungannon
Amaze	No	Runcorn, England
AMT Sybex (NI) Limited	No	Belfast
Asidua Ltd	No	Belfast
ASM Horwath	Yes	Belfast
Bearing Point	No	Belfast

Applicant	Successful	Location
Biznet Solutions	No	Belfast
British Telecom	No	Belfast
Business & Scientific Services	No	Belfast
Computacenter (Belfast)	No	Belfast
D4 Business Solutions	No	Ballynahinch
Deloitte MCS Limited	No	Belfast
Ecom Software Limited	No	Belfast
Evolve Business Consultancy Limited	No	Surrey, England
Fluent	Yes	Belfast
Fujitsu Services	No	Belfast
Gartner Consulting	No	Dublin
Goldblatt McGuigan	Yes	Belfast
Helm	Yes	Moirra
Hitachi	Yes	London, England
Hewlett Packard Ltd	No	Belfast
IB Solutions	No	Dublin
Icon eBusiness	No	Londonderry
ICONI Software	No	Belfast
ICS Computing	Yes	Belfast
Inc Consulting	No	Belfast
Inphoactive	No	Jordanstown
Integrity Consulting Partners Limited	No	London, England
Kainos Software	No	Belfast
Level Seven	Yes	Belfast
Logica CMG	No	Belfast
Mentec	No	Belfast
Microsoft	No	Belfast
Neueda Technologies	No	Randalstown
Northgate Information Solutions	No	Belfast
Original Solutions	No	Limerick
Parity	No	Belfast
Plannet 21	No	Belfast
Price Waterhouse Coopers	Yes	Belfast
QI Consulting	No	London, England
Real Time Engineering	No	Glasgow, Scotland
Red Squared	No	Cheshire, England
Siemens Business Services Limited	No	Belfast
Singularity	No	Londonderry
Socitm	No	Anglesey, Wales

Applicant	Successful	Location
Sopra Group	No	Belfast
Steria	No	Holywood
Stiona Software	No	Belfast
Stirk Lamont Associates	No	Belfast
Tibus	No	Holywood
UU Tech Limited	No	Newtownabbey
Version 1 Software limited	No	Dublin
Wellington Computer Systems	No	Belfast
Western Connect Limited	No	Londonderry
Yarra Software	No	Belfast

Information Systems, E-Business and Related Services Framework Agreement

Mr Mark Durkan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he will provide a list of all the applicants under the Telecoms Services category of the Information Systems, E-Business and Related Services Framework Agreement; and if he will outline the successful applicants and their locations. (AQW 11/07)

Mr Robinson: The information requested is given in the following table. The Framework Agreement was awarded after a competition in accordance with the EU Directive and associated UK regulations. The location of applicants was not a factor considered in the evaluation process, nor could it be under procurement law.

LIST OF ALL APPLICANTS UNDER THE TELECOMS SERVICES CATEGORY OF THE INFORMATION SYSTEMS, E-BUSINESS AND RELATED SERVICES FRAMEWORK AGREEMENT.

Applicant	Successful	Location
Actica	No	Guildford, England
British Telecom	Yes	Belfast
Business & Scientific Services	No	Belfast
Computacenter	No	Belfast
Damovo	No	Antri
DELL/Sureskills	No	Belfast
Deloitte MCS Limited	No	Belfast
Fujitsu Services	No	Belfast
Helm	Yes	Moirra
Hitachi Consulting	No	London, England
Hewlett Packard	No	Belfast
Hyder Consulting	No	Belfast
Improcom	No	Jordanstown

Applicant	Successful	Location
Kainos	No	Belfast
Mason Communications	Yes	Dublin
McCaughan Associates	No	Sainfield
PA Consulting	Yes	Belfast
Parity	No	Antrim
Plannet 21	Yes	Belfast
Price Waterhouse Coopers	Yes	Belfast
QI Consulting	No	London, England
Siemens Business Solutions	No	Belfast
Singularity	No	Londonderry
Socitm	No	Anglesey, Wales
Steria	No	Holywood
Stirk Lamont Associates	No	Belfast
Western Connect	No	Londonderry

Information Systems, E-Business and Related Services Framework Agreement

Mr Mark Durkan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he will provide a list of all the applicants under the IT Security Services category of the Information Systems, E-Business and Related Services Framework Agreement; and if he will outline the successful applicants and their locations. (AQW 12/07)

Mr Robinson: The information requested is given in the following table. The Framework Agreement was awarded after a competition in accordance with the EU Directive and associated UK regulations. The location of applicants was not a factor considered in the evaluation process, nor could it be under procurement law.

LIST OF ALL APPLICANTS UNDER THE IT SECURITY SERVICES CATEGORY OF THE INFORMATION SYSTEMS, E-BUSINESS AND RELATED SERVICES FRAMEWORK AGREEMENT.

Applicant	Successful	Location
Actica	Yes	Guildford, England
ASM Horwath	Yes	Belfast
British Telecom	Yes	Belfast
Business & Scientific Services	Yes	Belfast
DBI	Yes	Kenilworth, England
Deloitte & Touche	Yes	Belfast
Echelon	No	Fleet, England
Evolve	Yes	Surrey, England
Fujitsu Services	No	Belfast

Applicant	Successful	Location
Griffin Security Management	No	Newark, England
Helm	Yes	Moira
Hitachi Consulting	No	London, England
Hyder Consulting	Yes	Belfast
Hewlett Packard Ltd	No	Belfast
Improcom	No	Lutterworth, England
LA International	Yes	Stoke on Trent, England
Logica CMG	Yes	Belfast
Mentec	No	Belfast
MMT Digital	No	Rutland, England
NCC Group Plc	No	Manchester, England
Neuda Technologies	No	Randalstown
Northgate Solutions Limited	Yes	Newtownabbey
PA Consultancy	No	Belfast
Parity	No	Belfast
Price Waterhouse Coopers	Yes	Belfast
QI Consulting	No	London, England
Quadra	No	Holywood
Sapphire	Yes	Cleveland, England
Siemens Business Services Limited	No	Belfast
Socitm	Yes	Anglesey, Wales
Sopra Group	Yes	Belfast
Steria	Yes	Holywood
Stirk Lamont Associates	Yes	Belfast
Wellington Computer Systems	No	Belfast

Information Systems, E-Business and Related Services Framework Agreement

Mr Mark Durkan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he will provide a list of all the applicants under the Web Services category of the Information Systems, E-Business and Related Services Framework Agreement; and if he will outline the successful applicants and their locations. (AQW 15/07)

Mr Robinson: The information requested is given in the following table. The Framework Agreement was awarded after a competition in accordance with the EU Directive and associated UK regulations. The location of applicants was not a factor considered in the evaluation process, nor could it be under procurement law.

LIST OF ALL APPLICANTS UNDER THE WEB SERVICES CATEGORY OF THE INFORMATION SYSTEMS, E-BUSINESS AND RELATED SERVICES FRAMEWORK AGREEMENT.

Applicant	Successful	Location
Accenture	No	Dublin
Amey Business Services	No	Belfast
Asidua Limited	Yes	Belfast
ASM Horwath	Yes	Belfast
Astounding Technologies	No	
Aurion Limited	Yes	Belfast
Bearing Point	No	Belfast
Biznet	Yes	Belfast
British telecom	Yes	Belfast
Business & Scientific Services	No	Belfast
Cadan Solutions	Yes	Banbridge
Castle WebSolutions	Yes	Carrickfergus
Connect Internet Solutions	No	Liverpool
Cora Systems	No	Carrick-on-Shannon
D4 Business services	Yes	Ballynahinch
Deloitte MCS Limited	No	Belfast
Ecom Software Limited	No	Belfast
EG Information Consulting	Yes	Belfast
Ernst & Ernst	No	Crumlin
eSpatial Solutions	No	Dublin
Evolve Business Consultancy Limited	No	Surrey, England
Fluent	Yes	Belfast
Fujitsu Services	Yes	Belfast
Helm Corporation Limited	Yes	Moira
Hitachi Consulting	No	London
Hewlett Packard Limited	No	Belfast
Icon eBusiness	Yes	Londonderry
Iconi	Yes	Belfast
ICS Computing	Yes	Belfast
Kainos Software	No	Belfast
Level 7	Yes	Belfast
Logica CMG	No	Belfast
MMT Digital	No	Rutland
Mentec	No	Belfast
Neueda Technologies	Yes	Randalstown
Open Sky	Yes	Limerick
Parity	No	Antrim
QI Consulting	No	London

Applicant	Successful	Location
Real Time Engineering Ltd	No	Glasgow, Scotland
Red Squared Plc	No	Cheshire, England
RMA Systems & Services	Yes	Belfast
Siemens Business Services Limited	No	Belfast
Singularity	Yes	Londonderry
Socitum (Society of Information Technology Management)	No	Anglesey, Wales
Sopra Group	No	Belfast
Steria Ltd	No	Holywood
Stiona Software Ltd	No	Belfast
Stream On.Net	Yes	Belfast
Syn3rgy	No	Armagh
System Concepts Ltd	No	London
Tibus	Yes	Holywood
UU Tech Ltd	No	Newtownabbey
Version 1 Software Ltd	No	Dublin
Wellington Computer Systems	Yes	Belfast
Yarra Software	No	Belfast

Information Systems, E-Business and Related Services Framework Agreement

Mr Mark Durkan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he will provide a list of all the applicants under the Application Development category of the Information Systems, E-Business and Related Services Framework Agreement; and if he will outline the successful applicants and their locations. (AQW 35/07)

Mr Robinson: The information requested is given in the following table. The Framework Agreement was awarded after a competition in accordance with the EU Directive and associated UK regulations. The location of applicants was not a factor considered in the evaluation process, nor could it be under procurement law.

LIST OF ALL APPLICANTS UNDER THE APPLICATION DEVELOPMENT CATEGORY OF THE INFORMATION SYSTEMS, E-BUSINESS AND RELATED SERVICES FRAMEWORK AGREEMENT.

Applicant	Successful	Location
Accenture	No	Dublin
AMT Sybex	No	Belfast
Asidua	Yes	Belfast
ASM Horwath	Yes	Belfast
Bearing Point	No	Belfast

Applicant	Successful	Location
Biznet	No	Belfast
British Telecom	Yes	Belfast
Cadan Solutions	Yes	Banbridge
Centrix	No	Dublin
Connect Internet Services	No	Liverpool, England
Cora	Yes	Carrick on Shannon
D4 Business Solutions	No	Ballynahinch
DELL/SureSkills	No	Belfast
Deloitte	No	Belfast
Ecom Software	Yes	Belfast
EG Information Consulting	Yes	Belfast
Ernst and Ernst	No	Belfast
eSpatial Solutions	No	Swords
Fluent	Yes	Belfast
Foyle Tech	No	Londonderry
Fujitsu Services	Yes	Belfast
Goldblatt McGuigan	No	Belfast
Helm	Yes	Moirra
Hitachi Consulting	No	London, England
Hewlett Packard Ltd	No	Belfast
iB Solutions	No	Dublin
Icon eBusiness	No	Derry
Iconi	Yes	Belfast
ICS Computing	Yes	Belfast
Kainos	No	Belfast
Logica CMG	No	Belfast
Mentec	No	Belfast
Neueda Technologies	No	Randalstown
Northgate Information Solutions	No	Newtownabbey
Open Sky	Yes	Limerick
Original Solutions	No	Dublin
Parity	No	Belfast
PriceWaterhouseCoopers	No	Belfast
Qinetiq	No	Farnborough, England
QI Consulting	No	London, England
Real Time Engineering	Yes	Glasgow, Scotland
Red Squared	No	Altrincham, England
RMA Systems and Services	Yes	Belfast

Applicant	Successful	Location
Siemens Business Services Ltd	No	Belfast
Singularity	No	Londonderry
Sopra Newell and Budge	No	Belfast
Steria	No	Holywood
Stiona Software	No	Belfast
Stirk Lamont Associates	No	Belfast
Syn3rgy	Yes	Lurgan
Systems Network Ltd	Yes	Belfast
UU Tech	No	Newtownabbey
Version 1	No	Dublin
Wellington Computer Systems	Yes	Belfast
Yarra	No	Belfast

Information Systems, E-Business and Related Services Framework Agreement

Mr Mark Durkan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he will provide a list of all the applicants under the Programme and Project Management Support category of the Information Systems, E-Business and Related Services Framework Agreement; and if he will outline the successful applicants and their locations.

(AQW 36/07)

Mr Robinson: The information requested is given in the following table. The Framework Agreement was awarded after a competition in accordance with the EU Directive and associated UK regulations. The location of applicants was not a factor considered in the evaluation process, nor could it be under procurement law.

LIST OF ALL APPLICANTS UNDER THE PROGRAMME AND PROJECT MANAGEMENT SUPPORT CATEGORY OF THE INFORMATION SYSTEMS, E-BUSINESS AND RELATED SERVICES FRAMEWORK AGREEMENT.

Applicant	Successful	Location
Accenture	No	Dublin
Actica Consulting	Yes	Guildford, England
Agility Consulting Limited	Yes	Dungannon
Amey Business Services	Yes	Belfast
AMT Sybex	No	Belfast
Asidua Limited	No	Belfast
ASM Horwath	Yes	Belfast
Bearing Point	No	Belfast
British Telecom	Yes	Belfast
Business and Scientific Services	No	Belfast

Applicant	Successful	Location
Computacentre (Belfast)	No	Belfast
Cora Systems	No	Carrick-on-Shannon
D4 Business Solutions	No	Ballynahinch
Damovo	Yes	Newtownabbey
DELL/SureSkills	No	Belfast
Deloitte MCS Limited	Yes	Belfast
Ecom Software Limited	Yes	Belfast
Eolas Solutions	No	Londonderry
Evolve Business Consultancy Limited	No	Tongham, England
Fabrio	No	Bangor
Fujitsu Services	Yes	Belfast
Gartner Consulting	No	Dublin
Goldblatt McGuigan	Yes	Belfast
Helm Corporation Limited	Yes	Moirra
Hitachi Consultancy	Yes	London, England
Hewlett Packard Ltd	Yes	Belfast
Hyder Consulting	Yes	Belfast
iB Solutions	No	Dublin
Inc. Consulting	Yes	Belfast
Integrity Consulting Partners Limited	Yes	London, England
Kainos Software	Yes	Belfast
L.A. International Computer Consultants Limited	Yes	Stoke on Trent, England
Logica CMG	Yes	Belfast
Mason Communications Ireland	No	Dublin
McCaughan Associates	No	Holywood
NCC Group Plc	Yes	Manchester, England
Neueda Technologies	Yes	Randalstown
Northgate Information Solutions	Yes	Newtownabbey
Original Solutions	No	Limerick
Outperform UK Limited	No	Wrexham, Wales
PA Consulting Group	No	Belfast
Parity	No	Antrim
PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP	Yes	Belfast
QI Consulting	No	London, England
Real Time Engineering Limited	Yes	Glasgow, Scotland
Real Time Systems Limited	No	Carryduff
Red Squared Plc	No	Altrincham, England

Applicant	Successful	Location
RMA Systems and Services	No	Dundonald
Siemens Business Services Limited	No	Belfast
Socitm	Yes	Holyhead, Wales
Sopra Group	No	Belfast
Steria Limited	Yes	Hollywood
Stirk Lamont Associates	No	Belfast
Syn3rgy	No	Lurgan
Tribune Business Systems Limited	No	London, England
UU Tech Limited	No	Newtownabbey
Version 1 Software Ltd	No	Dublin
Western Connect	No	Londonderry

Information Systems, E-Business and Related Services Framework Agreement

Mr Mark Durkan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he will provide a list of all the applicants under the General IS/IT Advice category of the Information Systems, E-Business and Related Services Framework Agreement; and if he will outline the successful applicants and their locations. (AQW 37/07)

Mr Robinson: The information requested is given in the following table. The Framework Agreement was awarded after a competition in accordance with the EU Directive and associated UK regulations. The location of applicants was not a factor considered in the evaluation process, nor could it be under procurement law.

LIST OF ALL APPLICANTS UNDER THE GENERAL IS/IT ADVICE CATEGORY OF THE INFORMATION SYSTEMS, E-BUSINESS AND RELATED SERVICES FRAMEWORK AGREEMENT.

Applicant	Successful	Location
4Sol	No	Belfast
Accenture	No	Dublin
Actica Consulting	No	Guildford, England
Agility Consulting Limited	Yes	Dungannon
Amaze	No	Cheshire, England
Amey Business Services	No	Belfast
AMT Sybex (NI) Limited	No	Belfast
Asidua Limited	No	Belfast
ASM Horwath	Yes	Belfast
Aurion Limited	Yes	Belfast
Bearing Point	No	Belfast

Applicant	Successful	Location
British Telecom	Yes	Belfast
Business and Scientific Services	Yes	Belfast
Computacentre (Belfast)	Yes	Belfast
D4 Business Solutions	Yes	Ballynahinch
Damovo	No	Belfast
DELL/SureSkills	No	Belfast
Deloitte MCS Limited	No	Belfast
Ecom Software Limited	No	Belfast
EG Information Consulting	Yes	Belfast
Eolas Solutions	No	Londonderry
Evolve Business Consultancy Limited	No	Tongham, England
Fabrio	No	Bangor
Fujitsu Services	Yes	Belfast
Gartner Consulting	No	Dublin
Goldblatt McGuigan	Yes	Belfast
Helm Corporation Limited	Yes	Moirra
Hitachi Consultancy	No	London, England
Hewlett Packard	Yes	Belfast
Hyder Consulting	Yes	Belfast
iB Solutions	No	Dublin
Improcom	Yes	Leicestershire, England
Inc. Consulting	Yes	Belfast
Integrity Consulting Partners Limited	Yes	London, England
Logica CMG	No	Belfast
McCaughan Associates	Yes	Hollywood
Microsoft Ireland	No	Belfast
NCC Group Limited	No	Manchester, England
Neueda Technologies	Yes	Randalstown
Northgate Information Solutions	No	Newtownabbey
Original Solutions	No	Dublin
PA Consulting Group	No	Belfast
Parity	No	Antrim
PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP	Yes	Belfast
QI Consulting	No	London, England
QinetiQ	No	Malvern, England
Real Time Engineering Limited	No	Glasgow, Scotland
Real Time Systems Limited	No	Carryduff
Red Squared Plc	No	Altrincham, England

Applicant	Successful	Location
Siemens Business Solutions	No	Belfast
Socitm	No	Holyhead, Wales
Sopra Group	No	Belfast
Steria Limited	Yes	Hollywood
Stiona Software Limited	No	Belfast
Stirk Lamont Associates	Yes	Belfast
Syn3rgy	No	Lurgan
Tribune Business Systems Limited	No	London, England
UU Tech Limited	Yes	Newtownabbey
Version 1 Software Limited	Yes	Dublin
Wellington Computer Systems	No	Belfast
Western Connect Limited	Yes	Londonderry

Information Systems, E-Business and Related Services Framework Agreement

Mr Mark Durkan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he will provide a list of all the applicants under the Microsoft Product-centric Services category of the Information Systems, E-Business and Related Services Framework Agreement; and if he will outline the successful applicants and their locations.

(AQW 38/07)

Mr Robinson: The information requested is given in the following table. The Framework Agreement was awarded after a competition in accordance with the EU Directive and associated UK regulations. The location of applicants was not a factor considered in the evaluation process, nor could it be under procurement law.

LIST OF ALL APPLICANTS UNDER THE MICROSOFT PRODUCT-CENTRIC SERVICES CATEGORY OF THE INFORMATION SYSTEMS, E-BUSINESS AND RELATED SERVICES FRAMEWORK AGREEMENT.

Applicant	Successful	Location
4 Sol	No	Belfast
Accenture	Yes	Dublin
Amey Business Services	No	Belfast
Asidua	Yes	Belfast
Bearing Point	No	Belfast
Biznet	No	Belfast
British Telecom	Yes	Belfast
Business & Scientific Services	No	Belfast
Cadan Solutions Ltd	No	Banbridge
Centrix	No	Dublin

Applicant	Successful	Location
Computacentre (Belfast)	No	Belfast
DELL/Sureskills	No	Belfast
Deloitte & Touche	No	Belfast
EG Information Consulting	No	Belfast
Ernst & Ernst	No	Crumlin
Fluent	Yes	Belfast
Fujitsu Services	No	Belfast
Helm	No	Moirra
Hitachi Consulting	Yes	London, England
Hewlett-Packard Ltd	No	Belfast
ICON eBusiness	No	Londonderry
ICS Computing	Yes	Belfast
Kainos	No	Belfast
Mentec	Yes	Belfast
Microsoft	No	Belfast
Northgate Information Solutions	No	Belfast
Parity	Yes	Belfast
Price WaterhouseCoopers	No	Belfast
QI Consulting	No	London, England
Real Time Systems	No	Carryduff
Red Squared	No	Altrincham, England
RMA Systems and services	Yes	Belfast
Siemens Business Solutions	No	Belfast
Singularity	No	Londonderry
Sopra Newell & Budge	No	Belfast
Steria	No	Hollywood
Stiona Software	No	Belfast
Stirk Lamont Associates	No	Belfast
Version 1	No	Dublin
Wellington Computer Systems	No	Belfast
Yarra	Yes	Belfast

Decentralisation of Public Sector Jobs

Mr Barry McElduff asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he will make a statement detailing a proactive approach regarding decentralisation and the location of public sector jobs, and to make a specific commitment that areas west of the River Bann will receive equality in this matter.

(AQW 53/07)

Mr Robinson: The consultation on 'The Guiding Principles for the Location of Public Sector Jobs in Northern Ireland' which closed on 30 April 2007 is the first step in developing a framework which would facilitate future decision-making on the location of public sector jobs. Responses to the consultation are currently being analysed. Once this work is complete I would wish to discuss the matter further with the Executive Committee.

Decentralisation of Civil Service Jobs

Mr Patsy McGlone asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the existing plans for decentralisation of civil service jobs; or, in the absence of any such proposals, what future provision will be made to do so. (AQW 65/07)

Mr Robinson: Current dispersal policy relies on taking advantage of opportunities when they arise where value for money can be demonstrated. While currently, there are no plans for decentralisation of civil service jobs, the consultation on 'The Guiding Principles for the Location of Public Sector Jobs in Northern Ireland' which closed on 30 April 2007 is the first step in developing a framework which would facilitate future decision-making on the location of public sector jobs, including those in the Civil Service. Responses to the consultation are currently being analysed. Once this work is complete I would wish to discuss the matter further with the Executive Committee.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Respite Care

Mr John O'Dowd asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what provision he is making to ensure that there is proper and equitable respite care for people suffering from mental health problems and their families in the Portadown area, as well as in the entire Upper Bann constituency. (AQW 8/07)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): The Southern Health and Social Care Trust provide respite in a range of settings. These include statutory domiciliary home care services, day services such as those provided at Trasna Day Centre in Lurgan, Home Response and Floating Support, in partnership with Praxis Care Group, and 3 drop-in centres in partnership with Rethink in Portadown, Banbridge and Lurgan. In addition, the Trust provides funding to a charity called C.A.U.S.E

who organise carer support and activities specifically for those caring for someone with a mental illness.

Community Mental Health Services also provide emergency respite for clients in residential facilities, both statutory and private. Older people with serious mental health difficulties can avail of planned respite purchased from the independent sector.

Macular Degeneration

Mr Patsy McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps have been taken to provide treatment of macular degeneration by introducing new drugs, including Lucentis. (AQW 20/07)

Mr McGimpsey: Additional funding of £24 million has been allocated in 2006-07 and 2007-08 for specialist hospital drugs. It is for Health and Social Services Boards, as commissioners of services, to prioritise how funding is used, taking into account local circumstances, the strategic objectives established for the Health and Social Care (HSC) sector and demands and pressures generally for access to a wide range of new effective drug therapies.

Specialised treatments are available in Northern Ireland for the treatment of wet age-related macular degeneration (AMD), including photodynamic therapy with the drug verteporfin (Visudyne). Two new treatments for wet AMD – pegaptanib (Macugen) and ranibizumab (Lucentis) – are currently being appraised by the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) and the Institute is expected to publish its guidance in September 2007. When that guidance is published, the Department will consider the applicability of the NICE guidance to the HSC. In the interim, the Health and Social Services Boards have agreed that they will consider funding treatment with Macugen or Lucentis for those patients presenting with the greatest clinical priority, on a case by case basis.

Gorse Fires

Mr Willie Clarke asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will detail the costs that have been accumulated in relation to the number of gorse fires in Northern Ireland in the last six months. (AQW 29/07)

Mr McGimpsey: There were 2,450 gorse fires responded to by Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS) in the period 1 November 2006 to 30 April 2007. The total cost to NIFRS was £503,971 of which approximately £300,000 was additional. Gorse fires have also added costs through damage to habitats and wildlife which cannot easily or accurately be

quantified and they also detract from the enjoyment of the countryside for recreation.

Telecommunication Masts

Mr Willie Clarke asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will provide any available evidence of cancer clusters which are in close proximity to telecommunications masts; and if he will make this evidence available to the public.
(AQW 61/07)

Mr McGimpsey: Major literature reviews such as the Stewart report¹ and its follow up² have not uncovered any evidence indicating that proximity to telecommunication masts increases the risk of developing cancer. Work however is continuing worldwide on this issue due to public concern. The Northern Ireland Cancer Registry (NICR) conducted an investigation in 2004 with regard to one particular mobile phone mast located in Cranlome due to the local perception of a cancer cluster in this area. Cancer levels were found to be within the expected range and of the expected pattern. The work concluded that no cancer related health effects were detected in the area under study. This research is publicly available on the NICR web site and was published in the Ulster Medical Journal in 2006 (<http://www.qub.ac.uk/research-centres/nicr/FileStore/Fileupload,36606,en.pdf>)

References:

- 1 Stewart W, Chairman. Mobile phones and health: a report from the Independent Expert Group. Didcot, Oxfordshire: IEGMP; 2000. <http://www.iegmp.org.uk/report/text.htm>
- 2 National Radiological Health effects from radio-frequency electromagnetic fields: report of an Independent Advisory Group on Non-ionising Radiation. Didcot, Oxfordshire: NRPB; 2004, Vol 14, No. 2. http://www.hpa.org.uk/radiation/publications/documents_of_nrbp/pdfs/doc_15_5.pdf

2004/05

Board Area	Total Responses	Responses within 8 min	% response within 8 min	Responses within 18/21 min	% responses within 18/21 min
EHSSB	42,087	23,664	56.2%	40,316	95.8%
NHSSB	19,024	7,959	41.8%	17,316	91.0%
SHSSB	12,501	5,000	40.0%	11,571	92.6%
WHSSB	11,276	5,516	48.9%	10,312	91.5%
NI	84,888	42,139	49.6%	79,515	93.7%

Autism Act for Northern Ireland

Mr Patsy McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the measures that have been taken to introduce an Autism Act for Northern Ireland.
(AQW 63/07)

Mr McGimpsey: No measures have been taken to introduce additional legislation specifically for Autism. People with Autism are already covered by existing legislation, including The Disability Discrimination Act 1995, Chapter 75 of the 1998 Northern Ireland Act, The Special Educational Needs and Disability (Northern Ireland) Order 2005.

Ambulance Response Times

Mr Patsy McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, by Trust, ambulance response times, outlining the percentage of emergency ambulance call outs which met the emergency response times for the years 2004/05, 2005/06 and 2006/07, including category A calls.
(AQW 66/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) does not collect emergency response times data for Health and Social Care trust areas. However, data is collected by Health and Social Services Board area and this is set out in the following tables.

It should be noted that two response targets apply during the periods concerned. During 2004/2005, NIAS's targets were to respond to 50% of all 999 calls within 8 minutes and 95% of 999 calls within 18 minutes in its Eastern Division or 21 minutes in the remainder of Northern Ireland. During 2005/06 and 2006/07 NIAS's target were to respond to 75% of Category A (life threatening) calls within 8 minutes.

2005/06

Board Area	Total Responses	Category A Responses			All 999 Responses	
		Responses	Responses within 8 min	% response within 8 min	Responses within 18/21 min	% responses within 18/21 min
EHSSB	43,125	15,076	9,161	60.8%	40,586	94.1%
NHSSB	21,467	9,370	3,986	42.5%	19,229	89.6%
SHSSB	13,569	6,109	2,382	39.0%	12,186	89.8%
WHSSB	12,216	5,773	2,877	49.8%	11,116	91.0%
NI	90,377	36,328	18,406	50.7%	83,117	92.0%

2006/07

Board Area	Total Responses	Category A Responses			All 999 Responses	
		Responses	Responses within 8 min	% response within 8 min	Responses within 18/21 min	% responses within 18/21 min
EHSSB	47,607	16,197	10,768	66.5%	44,963	94.4%
NHSSB	23,525	8,171	3,588	43.9%	21,148	89.9%
SHSSB	15,695	5,504	2,380	43.2%	14,311	91.2%
WHSSB	13,679	5,178	2,658	51.3%	12,268	89.7%
NI	100,506	35,050	19,394	55.3%	92,690	92.2%

Carrickfergus Ambulance Depot

Mr David Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail when the new ambulance depot planned for Prince William Way, Carrickfergus, will be in place. (AQW 88/07)

Mr McGimpsey: Planning approval for this development has now been received. However as it is likely that completion will take a further 6 – 9 months, it is not possible at this stage to provide a firm date.

Sexually Transmitted Diseases

Mr David Simpson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many new cases of (a) HIV; (b) chlamydia; (c) gonorrhoea; (d) syphilis; (e) genital warts; and (f) genital herpes were reported in Northern Ireland by people aged (i) 16 or under; (ii) 17-19; (iii) 20-25; and (iv) over 25, in the last 12 months. (AQW 98/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The numbers of new cases of all of these sexually transmitted diseases recorded in Northern Ireland in the past 12 months, within these specified age groups, are not available.

The numbers of new episodes of certain diagnoses within these conditions, recorded at Genito-Urinary Medicine clinics across Northern Ireland during the calendar year 2006, are available for the age groups included in the table below.

Condition	Age Bands				Total Number of new episodes
	15 and Under	16-19	20-24	25 and Over	
(a) HIV		9		46	55
(b) Chlamydia ¹	22	307	903	747	1,979
(c) Gonorrhoea ²	0	15	75	105	195
(d) Syphilis ³	0	1	13	16	30
(e) Anogenital Warts ⁴	11	392	796	957	2,156
(f) Anogenital Herpes Simplex ⁵	2	40	81	151	274

Source: Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre Northern Ireland (CDSC (NI)).

Notes:

- 1 Uncomplicated Chlamydial Infection only
- 2 Uncomplicated Gonorrhoea only
- 3 Primary and Secondary Infectious Syphilis only
- 4 Anogenital Warts - first attack only
- 5 Anogenital Herpes simplex - first attack only

Figures relate to the period 1st January 2006 to 31st December 2006. The figures are currently provisional and may subsequently change.

These figures relate to episodes of diagnosis and/or treatment of infection or disease and not individual

people. Thus one individual may contribute to more than one episode.

Figures for (a) HIV have been presented in collapsed age groups to avoid the potential of deductive disclosure.

Figures previously reported by the Department of Health Social Services & Public Safety included additional diagnoses within each condition. Age breakdown is only available for the selected diagnosis within each condition as outlined above.

Society for the Protection of Unborn Children

Mr Sammy Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what representations have been made to him over the last year by the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children. (AQW 115/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The Society for the Protection of Unborn Children (SPUC) have made representations to the Department of Health and Public Safety (DHSSPS) on the draft abortion guidelines circulated to interested parties for their comments on 9th January 2007. Within this process SPUC met with Departmental officials on 2nd February 2007 to discuss the guidelines, and presented their written comments to DHSSPS on 20th April. The Department is currently considering all comments received and will produce a summary consultation document.

There have been no direct representations made to the Minister for Health and Social Services and Public Safety by the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children outside of this consultation process

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

PPS 14: Sustainable Development in the Countryside

Mr Patsy McGlone asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will confirm that no provision is made for disabled people and/or their carers to have independent, stand alone single dwellings in the open countryside under Planning Policy Statement 14: Sustainable Development in the Countryside; and if he will outline what measures will be taken to address this inequity. (AQW 19/07)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): There is no policy provision in draft PPS 14 to specifically consider a person's personal and/or domestic circumstances as an exception to the presumption against development. However, Policy HOU 16 (House Extensions) of 'A Planning Strategy

for Rural Northern Ireland' has not been superseded by draft PPS 14 and facilitates the provision of partially self-contained accommodation for elderly or dependant relatives, as an alternative to a separate house in the countryside. I will be reviewing this and other issues as I consider how to take forward rural planning policy.

Review of Public Administration and Rural Planning

Mr Patsy McGlone asked the Minister for Regional Development what he intends to do with the Committee on the Programme for Government Report on Review of Public Administration and Rural Planning. (AQW 23/07)

Mr Murphy: I regard the Rural Planning section of the Committee on the Programme for Government Report on the Review of Public Administration and Rural Planning as an important piece of work. It will greatly assist me as I consider the appropriate way forward on rural planning policy.

Dual Carriageway from M1 to Ballygawley Roundabout

Mr Tommy Gallagher asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will confirm that work on the provision of a dual carriageway from the M1 to the Ballygawley roundabout is going ahead; if he will indicate the commencement date for this work; and the funding to be allocated for the scheme. (AQW 24/07)

Mr Murphy: The A4 Dungannon to Ballygawley dual carriageway scheme is one of the schemes included in my Department's Roads Service Design Build Finance and Operate (DBFO) Package 2 project. The final negotiations with the provisional preferred bidder are currently taking place. It is hoped that this DBFO contract will be awarded before the end of June 2007 and that work will commence on the Dungannon to Ballygawley scheme in the Spring of 2008.

The overall cost of this scheme is in the order of £102 million, which includes preparation costs, land acquisition and construction. The DBFO contractor will provide the funds for the construction of this capital scheme and will be repaid by service payments over a 30 year period. These payments will also include provision for the cost of maintaining the road network within the project area over the contract period.

A20 Frederick Street Link, Newtownards

Mr Simon Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development when work will commence on

the construction of the A20 Frederick Street Link in Newtownards. (AQW 30/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that, subject to the satisfactory completion of the on-going tendering process, it is anticipated that construction of this road will begin during autumn 2007 and will continue for approximately six months.

A20 Newtownards Southern Distributor

Mr Simon Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development when work will commence on the construction of the A20 Newtownards Southern Distributor. (AQW 31/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that, subject to the satisfactory completion of the on-going tendering process, it is anticipated that construction of this road will begin during autumn this year and will continue for approximately one year.

Brownfield Policy

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to introduce a brown field policy in relation to sites on which rural dwellings once stood, with a view to making them eligible as one-off sites for replacement dwellings. (AQW 39/07)

Mr Murphy: Rural planning policy is the responsibility of the Department for Regional Development so your question has been passed to me to answer.

The re-use of previously developed sites in the countryside is a proposal which was put forward by many respondents to the public consultation on draft PPS 14. The Report of the Programme for Government Committee on RPA and Rural Planning also concluded that a more flexible and innovative approach to policy in relation to replacement dwellings was needed. I shall certainly be taking this fully into account in considering the most appropriate way forward on rural planning policy.

Companion Free Travel

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development if he has any plans to introduce companion free travel, to allow eligible free travellers who require assistance when travelling to bring a nominated companion with them, also free of charge. (AQW 41/07)

Mr Murphy: I have no plans at present to extend the Northern Ireland Concessionary Fares Scheme to include free companion travel. The Department recently reviewed the Scheme and, as a result of this, is looking at the possibility of extending the scheme in a number

of ways. However, the ability to make changes would be dependent on securing the necessary resources as part of the Comprehensive Spending Review.

Temporary Waste Water Treatment Works at Ballyhalbert

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will give a timescale for the completion of the temporary waste water treatment works at Ballyhalbert. (AQW 43/07)

Mr Murphy: The Water and Sewerage Services (NI) Order 2006 transferred responsibility for the delivery of water and sewerage services from the Department's Water Service Agency to a statutory water and sewerage undertaker. A government-owned company, Northern Ireland Water (NIW) has been appointed as the undertaker and the issues raised are operational matters for it. I have asked the Chief Executive of NIW (Mrs. Katharine Bryan) to write to you in response to this questions.

Comber Bypass

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will make a statement on the next phase of work on the Comber Bypass; and if he will give a possible start date. (AQW 44/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that the draft Ards and Down Area Plan includes a proposal to provide a link road from the Ballygowan Road into the existing Comber By-pass. The scheme was the subject of a number of objections which were heard at the recent Public Inquiry. The Department awaits the Planning Appeals Commission inspector's report, which is expected towards the end of 2007. The scheme is currently not considered a high priority.

Rail Travel in East Antrim

Mr Ken Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps he intends to take to ensure that rail travellers in east Antrim experience a quality train service equivalent to that enjoyed by passengers on other parts of the railway network in Northern Ireland. (AQW 48/07)

Mr Murphy: None of the 23 new C3K trains are deployed on the Belfast to Larne line. This decision was an operational one made by Translink for the following reasons:

- The deployment of the C3K trains on the Bangor/Belfast/Portadown corridor permits maximum use of 90 mph track sections and mixes well with the higher speed Enterprise service;

- The line to Derry is mainly single track with passing loops and hence overall punctuality is particularly sensitive to the need for each train keeping exactly to time; and
- C3K trains, as well as being more suitable seating-wise for the longer journeys to the North West, are more capable of making up time lost as a result of delays.

Services on the Larne line are provided by class 450 trains. While these are much older than the C3K trains used elsewhere, they have recently been refurbished at a cost of £3.5 million and should provide a good standard of passenger comfort. NIR is looking to initiate the procurement processes needed to replace these trains and this is included within the costs of the various investment options in an appraisal being undertaken by officials. The appraisal will inform Ministerial decisions on proposed future railway services. It will then be necessary to seek the required funding in the Priorities and Budget exercise and the Investment Strategy.

Road No.	Location	Annual Average Daily Traffic (AADT)		
		2004	2005	2006
A2	Newcastle - Annalong, at Bloody Bridge	5,230	5,370	5423
A2	Warrenpoint Road, Newry	13,790	13,360	13854
A25	Downpatrick - Clough, at Tullymurry	6,840	6,810	7279
A24	Clough - Ballynahinch, at Castlenavan	8,780	8,430	8922
A2	Dundrum - Clough	11,060	10,540	11595
A25	Rathfriland Road, Castlewellan	4,900	5,070	5220
A25	Castlewellan - Clough, at Magherasaul	5,690	5,780	5863
A24	Belfast Road, Ballynahinch	9,330	9,300	9685

Vehicle Figures

Mr Willie Clarke asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail, for the last 3 years, the vehicle figures for the following roads:

- Newcastle to Kilkeel;
- Newcastle to Belfast;
- Newcastle to Newry;
- Castlewellan to Banbridge; and
- Downpatrick to Newry.

(AQW 58/07)

Mr Murphy: You recently requested vehicle figures for the last 3 years for the following roads, Newcastle to Kilkeel, Newcastle to Belfast, Newcastle to Newry, Castlewellan to Banbridge and Downpatrick to Newry.

I should explain that my Department's Roads Service collects traffic volume data by means of 273 automatic census points strategically located across the road network. The information is recorded either for 365 days per year or for one week in each quarter and an annual average calculated. The results are published in Roads Service's annual Traffic and Travel Information report, which presents the traffic volumes in a variety of formats for each site.

Roads Service has a number of traffic census points on the roads leading to and from Newcastle. The latest data on the average daily number of vehicles travelling past these census points is provided in the table below.

Pedestrian Crossings

Mr Willie Clarke asked the Minister for Regional Development what formula is used to assess the need for pedestrian crossings; and if this formula is comparable to that used in other European Union countries.

(AQW 59/07)

Mr Murphy: I am advised that the normal assessment process for pedestrian crossings, adopted by my Department's Roads Service, has two main components.

Firstly an initial sift is carried out using a calculation based on the number of pedestrians and volume of traffic at the site. This gives an indication of the level of 'demand' and degree of 'difficulty' at a particular location and provides a measure of the potential conflict at the site.

This is presented numerically in the equation PV^2 where 'P' represents the number of pedestrians using the site (the initial demand factor) and 'V' the volume of traffic (the initial difficulty factor). If this number is less than 0.2×10^8 or if the average number of pedestrians per hour is less than 8, in general no further assessment is undertaken.

The second part of the procedure uses a 'need assessment scorecard' to assign scores to various other 'demand' and 'difficulty' factors. The 'demand' factors reflect the users of the crossing and in particular, vulnerable road users who experience most difficulty in crossing. These include such groups as the elderly, people with mobility difficulties and children. The proximity to public amenities including hospital, schools, libraries, health centres, post office and bus/

rail station will also be taken into account. The 'difficulty' factors include considerations such as the number of lanes of traffic, crossing widths and speed of traffic.

Sites with the highest scores will receive priority attention, within normal budgetary constraints.

Additionally, I am advised that, in recognition of the peculiar circumstances pertaining in rural settlements situated on the Trunk Road Network, Roads Service may give special consideration installing a crossing in the event of the following criteria being met:

- where 8 pedestrians per hour, or more, cross the road during peak traffic flow;
- where a speed limit restriction, not greater than 40mph, already exists;
- where infrastructure is in place to support a crossing facility e.g. footways, street lighting, electricity supply etc;
- where local community facilities exist e.g. post office, surgery, community hall etc; and
- where the length of road being assessed is defined as the village/town centre.

I am assured that the assessment procedures in place do not at any stage consider the cost of providing a crossing. They do however, allow each potential site to be given an individual score which helps to ensure that the limited funding available is targeted at locations of greatest need.

Finally, I am informed that Roads Service has not carried out any benchmarking with pedestrian crossing assessment procedures in other European Union countries however, it does draw on, and adapts the practice set out in the Department for Transport Local Transport Notes; 1/95 – 'The Assessment of Pedestrian Crossings', and 2/95 – 'The Design of Pedestrian Crossings'.

Waste Water Treatment Works at South Down

Mr Willie Clarke asked the Minister for Regional Development what progress has been made towards improving waste water treatment in south Down.

(AQW 60/07)

Mr Murphy: The Water and Sewerage Services (NI) Order 2006 transferred responsibility for the delivery of water and sewerage services from the Department's Water Service Agency to a statutory water and sewerage undertaker. A government-owned company, Northern Ireland Water (NIW) has been appointed as the undertaker and the issues raised are operational matters for it. I have asked the Chief

Executive of NIW (Mrs. Katharine Bryan) to write to you in response to this question.

Residents Parking in South Down

Mr Willie Clarke asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline when residents-only parking schemes will be introduced in south Down.

(AQW 75/07)

Mr Murphy: Following the completion of a public consultation exercise in February 2007, my Department's Roads Service is currently finalising a new policy which will facilitate the introduction of Residents' Parking Schemes. Roads Service hopes to complete this work by the end of June 2007, and subject to my approval, introduce the first schemes towards the end of 2007.

These pilot schemes will be in the Belfast area, subject to further local consultation. There have not been any requests for pilot schemes in the South Down area.

Belfast to Larne Rail Line

Mr David Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will give an assessment of difficulties faced by the passengers on the Belfast to Larne rail line, relating to punctuality and comfort. (AQW 85/07)

Mr Murphy: The Passenger's Charter Standard produces a target for trains on the Belfast to Larne line of 95% arriving within 5 minutes of the published timetable. Translink advise that the average punctuality figure for the year to 25 March 2007 was 91.9%.

Comfort levels have improved following the £3.5m refurbishment of the Class 450 trains used on the line.

The NIR plan to replace these trains is addressed within the costs of the various investment options in an economic appraisal commissioned by DRD. That appraisal will inform Ministerial decisions on proposed future railway services here. Appropriate levels of funding will be sought in the Priorities and Budget exercise and via the updated 'Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland'.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Investment in the Warm Homes Scheme

Mr Simon Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development what the total investment in the Warm Homes Scheme has been to date in each of the 18 Northern Ireland constituencies. (AQW 32/07)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): The Warm Homes Scheme was introduced in Northern Ireland on 1 July 2001 and the total investment in the scheme, by constituency, from then up to 31 March 2007 is set out in the table below.

Constituency	Spend £
Belfast East	2,027,897.83
Belfast North	3,092,760.70
Belfast South	2,046,298.12
Belfast West	3,416,947.00
East Antrim	2,012,753.40
East Londonderry	2,583,627.00
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	5,056,640.34
Foyle	3,522,607.81
Lagan Valley	2,070,524 .67
Mid Ulster	5,306,070.14
Newry & Armagh	6,096,676.36
North Antrim	2,810,429.22
North Down	1,855,669.86
South Antrim	2,708,186.76
South Down	5,251,579.44
Strangford	2,021,245.20
Upper Bann	4,804,999.23
West Tyrone	4,134,386.37
TOTAL	60,819,299.45

Uptake of the Warm Homes Scheme

Mr Simon Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development what the uptake of the Warm Homes Scheme has been to date in each of the 18 Northern Ireland constituencies. (AQW 33/07)

Ms Ritchie: The Warm Homes Scheme was introduced in Northern Ireland on 1 July 2001 and the uptake of the scheme, by constituency, from then up to 31 March 2007 is set out in the table below. It should be noted, however, that some homes may have received both heating and insulation measures, therefore, adding these two measures together will not give an accurate picture of the number of homes completed.

Constituency	Number of Homes Insulated	Number of Homes with Heating Installed
Belfast East	1,700	560

Constituency	Number of Homes Insulated	Number of Homes with Heating Installed
Belfast North	2,581	923
Belfast South	1,128	352
Belfast West	2,795	938
East Antrim	1,565	542
East Londonderry	1,666	612
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	2,153	1,244
Foyle	2,366	899
Lagan Valley	1,544	538
Mid Ulster	2,621	1,211
Newry & Armagh	3,306	1,362
North Antrim	1,785	668
North Down	1,544	465
South Antrim	1,978	652
South Down	3,077	1,138
Strangford	1,562	481
Upper Bann	2,876	1,168
West Tyrone	2,349	937
Total	38,596	14,690

Fuel Poverty

Mr Simon Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development how many people in Northern Ireland are estimated to be living in fuel poverty, broken down by each local government district and each constituency. (AQW 34/07)

Ms Ritchie: Figures on fuel poverty are classified in terms of households rather than by numbers of people and are collected through the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's House Condition Survey. The 2004 Interim House Condition Survey collected fuel poverty information on a Northern Ireland wide basis but, due to the small sample size, to break down the information into parliamentary constituency or district council area would not be truly representative. The sample tested indicated that the overall number of households in fuel poverty has reduced from 203,000 in 2001 to 153,530 with the number of vulnerable households decreasing from 181,000 to 126,100 for the same period.

NI Game Licensing Legislation

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to explain what she intends to do in

regard to Northern Ireland's game licensing legislation, with reference to the recent consultation by the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on changes to game licensing and game management.
(AQW 47/07)

Ms Ritchie: In Northern Ireland licences for taking, killing and dealing in game were originally introduced to prevent poaching and the sale of illegally killed game and to ensure that game was not killed during breeding seasons. I am aware of the proposals by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs for the reform of the game licensing system in England and Wales. This is a matter that is under consideration and I will reflect carefully on the way forward for Northern Ireland, taking into account the wider implications of any decision to reform the current arrangements.

Social Housing in Cookstown and Magherafelt

Mr Patsy McGlone asked the Minister for Social Development if she will detail waiting lists for social housing in the Cookstown and Magherafelt districts; provide new build numbers in those districts for the years 2002/03, 2003/04, 2004/05, 2005/06 and 2006/07; and provide information on projected new build for the years 2007/08, 2008/09 and 2009/10.
(AQW 64/07)

Ms Ritchie: At March 2007 there were 367 applicants on the waiting list for Cookstown of whom 133 were in housing stress. Of these 133 applicants, 67 were single persons and a further 35 were small families. There were 77 allocations in the year to 31 March 2007.

At March 2007 there were 495 applicants on the waiting list for Magherafelt of whom 276 were in housing stress. Of these 276 applicants 110 were single persons and a further 95 were small families. There were 70 allocations in the year to 31 March 2007.

Units completed in the period 2002/03-2006/07 were as follows:

District	Completions 2002/2003	Completions 2003/2004	Completions 2004/2005	Completions 2005/2006	Completions 2006/2007
Cookstown	-	5	-	-	5
Magherafelt	-	-	6	3	-

The following units have been included in the current Social Housing Development Programme for the period 2007/08 – 2009/10

	2007/2008	2008/2009	2009/2010
Cookstown	3	0	0
Magherafelt	0	9	16

The waiting list west of the Bann is now experiencing increased growth and this will be taken into account when the programme is rolled forward.

Beechfield Estate, Donaghadee

Mr Alex Easton asked the Minister for Social Development what plans she has to put in place a strategy for neighbourhood renewal for Beechfield Estate, Donaghadee.
(AQW 89/07)

Ms Ritchie: The Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy targets the worst 10% of deprived neighbourhoods across Northern Ireland using the Noble Index for Multiple Deprivation. The Beechfield Estate in Donaghadee falls well outside the worst 10% of deprived neighbourhoods and is therefore not included as one of the 36 Primary Neighbourhood Renewal Areas which have been identified for funding.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 01 June 2007

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Planning Appeals

Mr Tommy Gallagher asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister if it will provide the following information in relation to planning appeals to the Planning Appeals Commission:

1. The number of appeals received in the years 2005, 2006, and 2007; and
2. The time taken currently to determine those appeals that (a) request a formal hearing and (b) request written representation. (AQW 25/07)

The First Minister and Deputy First Minister (Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness): The Planning Appeals Commission is a tribunal Non Departmental Public Body, and I understand the Chief Commissioner has written to the honourable Member in the following terms:

“I have been asked to provide you with information requested in the above Assembly Question. I have set out, in the following table, the total number of appeals received in the 2004/05, 2005/06 and 2006/07 financial years.

Year	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
Appeals received	762	1265	2765

I have also provided, in the table below, figures for the average time taken to decide an appeal for all of the procedures available. These figures indicate the time taken to determine appeals already heard and illustrate the position as at 30 April 2007.

Procedure	Median Time (Weeks)
Formal Hearing	64
Informal Hearing	66
Written Representation (accompanied Site Visit)	63
Written Representations (unaccompanied Site Visit)	62

The Commission publishes updates of these figures on a monthly basis via its website. I would be happy to provide any further information you require arising out of this response or to meet with you to discuss the matter if that would be more suitable.”

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Fishing Industry

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what discussions she has had with the Anglo-North Fish Producers' Organisation and the Northern Ireland Fish Producers' Organisation regarding promotion of the fishing industry. (AQW 107/07)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Prior to taking up my Ministerial appointment I met the Chairmen and Chief Executives of the Anglo-North Irish Fish Producers Organisation and the Northern Ireland Fish Producers Organisation on 26 April 2007 to hear at first hand about the main issues facing the fishing industry. I hope to meet with both organisations again in the near future.

DARD Direct (Enniskillen)

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to give a date by which the evaluation of the DARD Direct (Enniskillen) experiment will be made known; and to advise whether a consultation process will be entered into, following the formal evaluation. (AQW 122/07)

Ms Gildernew: The evaluation should be completed by the end of July 2007 and at this stage no decision has been taken on consultation.

Kilkeel Harbour

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline her plans to upgrade the entrance to Kilkeel Harbour. (AQW 123/07)

Ms Gildernew: My Department is funding the further technical studies recommended in the Wallingford Report. The studies will assess the feasibility of a new breakwater with regard to solving the safety issues at the entrance to Kilkeel harbour and assess the impacts of the structure.

No decision on construction of a new breakwater can be taken until after the studies are completed in 2008.

Animal Health

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to provide full details of progress made in dealing with animal health issues on an all-island basis, since the collapse of the previous Assembly in 2002. (AQW 124/07)

Ms Gildernew: Despite the suspension of the machinery of the North South Ministerial Council (NSMC), co-operation in the field of animal health and welfare has continued through the work of the nine working groups set up under the auspices of NSMC arrangements to discuss a range of animal health and welfare issues.

The most significant achievements of the working groups to date have been the development of a broadly similar system of sheep identification, broad (though not total) alignment of policies in respect of border controls to prevent introduction of animal disease, convergence of policies on scrapie, sharing of data on animal disease trends and outbreaks, close liaison on Avian Influenza, Equine Infectious Anaemia and a range of other epizootic diseases, co-operation on contingency planning for exotic disease outbreaks and co-operation on testing regimes for TB and Brucellosis in border areas.

As I have already announced, the issue of the All-island Animal Health and Welfare Strategy is one of my key priorities. It is my intention to meet the new Minister for Agriculture in the South, at the earliest possible opportunity, in order to discuss how we can develop the Strategy.

Organic Horticulture

Mr Peter Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans she has to introduce capital grants for organic horticulture, for polytunnels and specialist machinery. (AQW 141/07)

Ms Gildernew: There may be scope for capital grant support through a proposed Farm Modernisation measure within the Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme 2007-2013 (NIRDP). However, negotiations are ongoing with the European Commission and I hope

to announce more detailed information after the NIRDP has been approved.

Designation of Less Favoured Areas

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what action has been taken to ensure that areas of Northern Ireland designated as 'less favoured' will retain their designation. (AQW 165/07)

Ms Gildernew: The European Commission plans to carry out a major review of the approach to the designation of Less Favoured Areas across the EU in 2008-9. This has been prompted by criticism of the current regime by the European Court of Auditors. The Commission is still at an early stage in this process.

DARD is closely engaged with its counterparts in the rest of the UK in preparing for this review. DARD will be seeking a robust and objective set of criteria for future LFA designation.

Farm Nutrient Management Scheme

Mr Tom Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many applicants for the Farm Nutrient Management scheme have not yet received approval; and what is the timescale for the receipt of such approvals. (AQW 225/07)

Ms Gildernew: At 24 May 2007, 3332 applicants had not received approval to the Farm Nutrient Management Scheme. Issue of approvals to all of these applicants is subject to additional funding being made available.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Waterways Ireland

Mr Willie Clarke asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what progress has been made in relation to the disparity of pay between Waterways Ireland employees north and south. (AQW 28/07)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Poets): The disparity of pay between Waterways Ireland employees north and south is due to the differing public sector pay increases which have applied North and South in recent years. The movement in the euro-sterling exchange rate has also had an impact. Southern staff have their pay linked to ROI public sector pay whilst Northern staff pay is linked to Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) rates. These arrangements have been agreed through the North South Ministerial Council (NSMC) procedures.

The Chief Executives of the North/South Bodies have raised a number of concerns about the pay and conditions of service of their staff. These are complex issues and the NSMC Joint Secretariat, in consultation with Sponsor and Finance Departments north and south, is currently considering them with a view to agreeing a possible response.

Orange Order Funding

Mr Mervyn Storey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how much funding was allocated for the promotion of (a) the annual Orange Order 12 July celebrations; (b) the Independent Orange Order 12 July celebrations; (c) the annual Sham Fight of Scarva; (d) the Maiden City Festival; and (e) the annual Royal Black Institution Black Saturday celebration, in each of the last three years. (AQW 91/07)

Mr Poots: Funding as follows was allocated to support the annual Orange Order 12th July celebrations and the Maiden City Festival. No funding has been made available to support the Independent Orange Order 12th July celebrations, the annual Sham Fight of Scarva or the Annual Royal Black Institution Black Saturday celebration, in the last three years.

	2004-2005	2005-2006	2006-2007
Orange Order 12 July	£2000	£34,705	£136,533
Maiden City Festival	£87,100	£84,100	Nil

Financial Assistance to Football Clubs

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what financial assistance was made available to football clubs for the financial years 2002/03; 2003/04; 2004/05; 2005/06; and 2006/07, for (1) Premier League clubs; (2) 1st Division clubs; and (3) Intermediate Clubs. (AQW 114/07)

Mr Poots: Sport Northern Ireland (SNI) is responsible for the development of sport in Northern Ireland including the distribution of funding. SNI has provided financial assistance to football clubs for the financial years 2002/03; 2003/04; 2004/05; 2005/06 and 2006/07, for (1) Premier League clubs; (2) 1st Division clubs; and (3) Intermediate clubs as follows:

2002/03 - EXCHEQUER FUNDING TO SOCCER

Organisation	Award (£)	Premier league	1st Division	Inter-mediate
Armagh City FC	2,657	2,657		
Dungannon Swifts FC	1,910	1,910		

Organisation	Award (£)	Premier league	1st Division	Inter-mediate
Larne FC	2,492	2,492		
Bangor FC	2,248		2,248	
Omagh Town FC	2,817	2,817		
Ballymena Utd FC	22,685	22,685		
Glenavon FC	74,630	74,630		
Institute FC	15,275	15,275		
Linfield FC	99,863	99,863		
Ards FC	2,625		2,625	
Ballyclare Comrades FC	2,157		2,157	
Carrick Rangers FC	2,775		2,775	
Cliftonville FC	5,760	5,760		
Coleraine FC	75,194	75,194		
Crusaders FC	81,304	81,304		
Glentoran FC	12,772	12,772		
Limavady Utd FC	3,625	3,625		
Lisburn Distillery FC	3,285	3,285		
Newry City FC	4,100	4,100		
Portadown FC	71,043	71,043		
Totals	489,217	479,412	9,805	0

2002/03 – LOTTERY FUNDING TO SOCCER

Organisation	Award (£)	Premier League	1st Division	Inter-mediate
Knockbreda FC	30,345			30,345
Tandragee Rovers FC	70,000			70,000
Totals	100,345	0	0	100,345
Total Funding	589,562	479,412	9,805	100,345

2003/04 – EXCHEQUER FUNDING TO SOCCER

Organisation	Award	Premier League	1st Division	Inter-mediate
Ards FC	1,900		1,900	
Ballymena Utd FC	3,010	3,010		
Cliftonville FC	5,083	5,083		
Coleraine FC	3,250	3,250		
Crusaders FC	2,360	2,360		
Dungannon Swifts FC	2,160	2,160		
Glentoran FC	6,362	6,362		

Organisation	Award	Premier League	1st Division	Inter-mediate
Glenavon	3,110	3,110		
Institute FC	2,220	2,220		
Larne FC	1,940	1,940		
Limavady Utd FC	1,820	1,820		
Linfield FC	7,121	7,121		
Lisburn Distillery FC	2,080	2,080		
Newry City FC	2,500	2,500		
Omagh Town FC	1,830	1,830		
Portadown FC	3,606	3,606		
Totals	50,352	48,452	1,900	0

2003/04 LOTTERY FUNDING TO SOCCER

Organisation	Award (£)	Premier League	1st Division	Inter-mediate
Ballinamallard Utd FC	85,000			85,000
Dungiven Celtic FC	70,000			70,000
Rathfriland FC	76,004			76,004
Totals	231,004	0	0	231,004
Total Funding	281,356	48,452	1,900	231,004

2004/05 EXCHEQUER FUNDING TO SOCCER

Organisation	Award (£)	Premier League	1st Division	Inter-mediate
Coleraine	1,370	1,370		
Ards FC	1,800		1,800	
Ballymena Utd FC	3,230	3,230		
Cliftonville FC	4,385	4,385		
Dungannon Swifts FC	2,220	2,220		
Glentoran FC	7,135	7,135		
Institute FC	2,190	2,190		
Limavady Utd FC	2,460	2,460		
Linfield FC	7,045	7,045		
Lisburn Distillery FC	2,170	2,170		
Loughall FC	2,200	2,200		
Newry City FC	2,290	2,290		
Omagh Town FC	1,610	1,610		
Portadown FC	3,970	3,970		
Totals	44,075	42,275	1,800	0

Organisation	Award (£)	Premier League	1st Division	Inter-mediate
Total Funding*	44,075	42,275	1,800	0

* There were no lottery awards issued to soccer in financial year 2004/05.

2005/06 – There were no exchequer or lottery awards issued to soccer in this financial year.

2006/07 EXCHEQUER FUNDING TO SOCCER

Organisation	Award (£)	Premier League	1st Division	Inter-mediate
Ballymena Utd FC	168,326	168,326		
Newry City FC	2,179	2,179		
Dungannon Swifts FC	2,402	2,402		
Portadown FC	4,995	4,995		
Glentoran	11,706	11,706		
Ards FC	1,888		1,888	
Linfield FC	11,628	11,628		
Armagh City FC	3,365	3,365		
Cliftonville FC	4,023	4,023		
Crusaders FC	2,134	2,134		
Donegal Celtic FC	3,150	3,150		
Totals	215,794	213,906	1,888	0
Total Funding*	215,794	213,906	1,888	0

* There were no lottery awards issued to soccer in financial year 2006/07.

Re-opening of the Ulster Canal

Mr Daithi McKay asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans he has to help secure the re-opening of the Ulster Canal. (AQW 172/07)

Mr Poots: I am well aware of proposals to re-open the Ulster Canal as a major cross-border project and I am actively considering the options open to me at this time.

Irish Language Funding

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what funding has been given by Foras na Gaeilge to the Irish language organisation Pobal, in each year from 2000 onwards. (AQW 198/07)

Mr Poots: The funding given by Foras na Gaeilge to POBAL since 2000 is shown in the table below:

Year	Amount
2000	£50,000

Year	Amount
2001	£115,800.00
2002	£143,155.00
2003	£156,530.00
2004	£150,240.00
2005	£154,387.10
2006	£169,582.00

Colmcille Funding

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what funding has been given to the Gaelic language network Colmcille in each year from 2000 onwards. (AQW 199/07)

Mr Poots: The amount of funding given by my Department to Colmcille from 2000 is shown in the table below.

2000-2001	2001-2002	2002-2003	2003-2004
£67,500	£150k	£177k	£180k

2004-2005	2005-2006	2006-2007	2007-2008
£180k	£180k	£180k	£30k to date

Future Viability of the Belfast Festival at Queen's

Mr David McNarry asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what long-term plans are in place to secure the future viability of the Belfast Festival at Queen's. (AQW 218/07)

Mr Poots: The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, Belfast City Council and the Queen's University Belfast are engaging in on-going discussions, with the aim of securing the future viability of the Belfast Festival at Queen's.

Queen's University, Belfast, is currently preparing a three year plan intended to move the festival towards a more sustainable business model.

Football Task Force

Mr David McNarry asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans are in place to reinstitute the Football Task Force for Northern Ireland; and whether he is satisfied that Windsor Park will continue to maintain its status as an international venue. (AQW 227/07)

Mr Poots: The Irish Football Association (IFA) is the governing body of football in Northern Ireland and primarily responsible for implementing the recommendations contained within the Soccer Strategy Advisory Panel's report of October 2001. The IFA is presently implementing these recommendations and, consequently, there is no need to reinstitute the Panel. As part of this process, the Association is also considering the status of Windsor Park as an international venue in conjunction with the owners of the ground, Linfield FC.

Financial Procedures at Ordnance Survey

Mr David McNarry asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether he is satisfied that controls at the Ordnance Survey of Northern Ireland, as described by a Northern Ireland Audit Office report on a £70,000 fraud perpetrated against the agency, have been resolved. (AQW 229/07)

Mr Poots: The Agency completed a review of financial procedures in November 2003 which identified control weaknesses and made recommendations for improvement. All of the recommendations have now been implemented. The recommendations included new management checks, new arrangements for collection of valuable receipts and better segregation of duties in post opening and the handling of valuables.

Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta Funding

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what funding has been given by Foras na Gaeilge to Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta, in each year since its formation. (AQW 231/07)

Mr Poots: The funding given by Foras na Gaeilge to Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta is shown in the table below:

	£
2002	Nil
2003	75,000
2004	50,000
2005	25,000
2006	Nil

Creative Connections Plan

Mr David McNarry asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what assessment has been made of the Arts Council for Northern Ireland's five-year

‘Creative Connections’ plan; and what meetings he has had in relation to the plan. (AQW 233/07)

Mr Poots: The Arts Council’s 5 year plan ‘Creative Connections’ was approved by my Department prior to its launch on 29th January 2007. This is a high level strategic plan and I support the vision and themes set out in it.

I have not yet held a business meeting with the Arts Council to discuss the plan in detail, though I have received a broad outline of its key principles in an introductory meeting with the Council’s Chairman and Chief Executive.

EDUCATION

New School for Ballywalter

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Education if she will give an update on the new school for Ballywalter; and if she will confirm that a site for the new school has been identified. (AQW 45/07)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): The South Eastern Education and Library Board submitted a draft economic appraisal for Ballywalter Primary School to the Department of Education in November 2005. The recommended option is for the provision of a new seven classbase school on a new site in Ballywalter. The capital scheme for the school is one of a number of such schemes currently with the Department and in line with the recommendations of the Bain Report, the planning of the new school is being considered within the context of area-based planning and a Shared Future.

The South Eastern Education and Library Board has identified a proposed new site for the school, some 300 metres from the existing school.

Victoria Primary School, Ballyhalbert

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Education if she will confirm the start date for construction of the new primary school adjacent to Victoria Primary School in Ballyhalbert. (AQW 46/07)

Ms Ruane: There are several planning, site and cost issues which require to be addressed before work on the new school for Victoria P.S. could start on site. The South Eastern Education and Library Board have advised that they expect these issues to be resolved by July and subject to that being the case, they anticipate that construction work for the new primary school could start in August 2007.

Educational Psychologists

Mr Barry McElduff asked the Minister of Education to detail the shortage of available educational psychologists in each of the five Education and Library Board areas; and to detail the measures she will take to ensure adequate provision of, and to remove barriers to the recruitment of, same. (AQW 52/07)

Ms Ruane: I am advised by the Chief Executive Officers of the Education and Library Boards that the shortage of available educational psychologists in each Board is currently as follows;

Belfast Education and Library Board	4
South Eastern Education and Library Board	6
North Eastern Education and Library Board	4.5
Western Education and Library Board	3
Southern Education and Library Board	1

Since 2004/045 The Department of Education has provided an additional £53m to enable the Boards to improve services for children with special educational needs, including the provision of additional Educational Psychologists.

DE has increased the number of Educational Psychology trainees to 12 per annum and to attract applicants provides funding for an annual bursary of £15,000 per trainee for the three year duration of the course at QUB.

I am informed by the Chief Executives of the Boards that due to the high number of young women in this profession the Boards have introduced family-friendly working arrangements to help retain their employment in the Educational Psychology Service. In addition, the vacancy control measures, imposed because of the Review of Public Administration, have been lifted in relation to the recruitment of permanent Educational Psychology staff due to the unique situation of the Educational Psychology Service.

Transport Assistance for Pupils Attending School in ROI

Mr Barry McElduff asked the Minister of Education to detail the measures she plans to introduce to ensure that pupils who reside in Strabane, Co. Tyrone, but who attend their nearest post-primary school in the Irish medium sector in Letterkenny, Co. Donegal, receive financial assistance towards transport costs. (AQW 54/07)

Ms Ruane: The Western Education and Library Board cannot legally provide assistance for a pupil to

attend a school which is not grant-aided under the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Orders.

It is, however, prepared to provide transport assistance for pupils in Strabane to attend the post-primary Irish-Medium unit Coláiste Bhríde in Londonderry which is the nearest suitable grant aided school.

I intend to meet with the incoming Minister for Education in the South to discuss a range of issues. You will be aware that the North South Ministerial Council will be meeting and this will create an opportunity for issues like this to be raised. In the meantime I will discuss this matter with my officials.

New Schools in Upper Bann

Mrs Dolores Kelly asked the Minister of Education when the new schools building programme for the Upper Bann constituency, which was announced during direct rule, will commence; and if she will give the dates for completion of the programme on a school by school basis. (AQW 73/07)

Ms Ruane: Planning is underway for each of the schools which have been allocated funding for major capital building works in the Upper Bann constituency. The table below provides the estimated dates for construction work to start on site and estimated completion dates for each of the schools. The dates are subject to each stage of the planning and building processes being completed and approved within agreed timescales.

School	Estimated Start Date	Estimated Completion Date
St Teresa's P.S., Lurgan	December 2007	March 2009
Tannaghmore P.S., Lurgan	August 2008	November 2009
St Mary's P.S., Banbridge	March 2009	June 2011
St Patrick's College, Banbridge	June 2009	May 2011
Waringstown P.S.	July 2007	September 2008
Banbridge Academy	December 2007	January 2011
Lurgan College	March 2008	July 2011
Portadown College	April 2008	April 2011

Meeting with ROI Education Minister

Mr Sammy Wilson asked the Minister of Education what are her plans to meet with her counterpart in the Republic of Ireland to discuss education matters. (AQW 117/07)

Ms Ruane: I have met with the previous Minister in the South – Mary Hanafin and intend to meet with the incoming Minister following the elections.

Locally Produced Food in Schools

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Education to outline her plans to increase procurement levels of locally produced food in schools. (AQW 125/07)

Ms Ruane: Procurement of food for schools must be undertaken in the context of European and Government procurement requirements and in a way which is designed to ensure value for money and that the appropriate specifications regarding food content and quality are met. Within that framework, Education and Library Boards make every effort to source food from local producers wherever possible. The creation of the new Education and Skills Authority will provide a new opportunity to look at procurement arrangements to see if further improvements can be made in ways that can support local producers.

My Department is also investing additional funding of over £3 million to improve the quality of food served in schools. Through that funding it has been possible to increase spending on ingredients and raise the quality, attractiveness and nutritional content of the food being served.

Naiscoil Choin Ri Uladh Funding

Mr Daithi McKay asked the Minister of Education if she will provide the necessary funding for Naiscoil Choin Ri Uladh (Baile Meanach) to operate in 2007/08; and if she will confirm that the school will be included in the Pre-school Education Expansion Programme. (AQW 260/07)

Ms Ruane: To receive funding in respect of places in the voluntary pre-school sector from the Department of Education would require Naiscoil Choin Ri Uladh to be in the Pre-School Education Expansion Programme.

I understand that the North Eastern Education and Library Board (NEELB) Pre-School Education Advisory Group (PEAG) have received correspondence from Naiscoil Choin Ri Uladh requesting 13 places in the Programme from September 2007.

The NEELB PEAG is currently going through the re-allocation of places process. Until this is completed, hopefully by mid June, they cannot confirm whether new providers will be admitted to the Programme.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Permanent Teaching Posts

Mr Ken Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many teachers, upon completing their studies in Northern Ireland in the years 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004 and 2005 have yet to obtain a permanent teaching post in a primary school in Northern Ireland. (AQW 50/07)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): The Department for Employment and Learning only holds information on the destination of graduates 6 months after they complete their studies.

The table below indicates the number of students, who returned information and for which a destination is known, gaining primary school teaching qualifications between 1999/00 and 2004/05 and who had not gained a permanent teaching post in a primary school in Northern Ireland 6 months after they graduated.

1999/00	207
2000/01	227
2001/02	261
2002/03	307
2003/04	317
2004/05	357

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency

Restriction of Funding for Adult Learning Courses

Mr Stephen Moutray asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what assessment he has made of the number of learners who will be denied access to adult learning courses, following the decision to restrict funding to colleges delivering non-externally regulated qualifications; and if he will publish the figures. (AQW 133/07)

Sir Reg Empey: Under existing policy, Further Education colleges are required to increase the proportion of their provision that is on nationally accredited qualification frameworks, in order to ensure quality, recognition by employers, and progression routes for learners. My Department's strategy for Further Education includes a review of curriculum policy. The revised policy will be the subject of an Equality Impact Assessment and public consultation later this year. No final decision has been taken on how this will impact on college funding and provision. An analysis of the potential impact on learners will be included in the EQIA and consultation process.

Equality Impact Assessment for Adult Learning Courses

Mr Stephen Moutray asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what equality impact assessments his department has carried out to determine which learners will be denied access to adult learning courses, following the decision to restrict funding to colleges delivering non-externally regulated qualifications. (AQW 134/07)

Sir Reg Empey: To date there has been no Equality Impact Assessments on the revised curriculum policy for Further Education however one will be conducted later this year

Further Education Means Business Strategy

Mr Stephen Moutray asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many adult learners aged 16 and over are not within the level two band identified by his department in its 'Further Education Means Business' strategy; and if he accepts that progression routes must be made available to encourage as many of these learners as possible to progress to level two and above. (AQW 135/07)

Sir Reg Empey: In the 2005/06 academic year there were 70,493 (27,543 of which were on assessed courses) adult learners aged 16 and over enrolled on provision below level 2 in the Northern Ireland FE sector. All qualifications on the National Qualifications Framework must have clear progression routes that meet quality criteria laid down by the Regulatory Authorities of England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Accordingly, the Department for Employment and Learning promotes qualifications on the National Qualifications Framework as the qualifications of first choice to ensure quality and guarantee progression routes for learners. The Department encourages colleges to review their lower level provision, and where possible move it onto the National Qualifications Framework.

Qualifications Framework for Adult Learners

Mr Stephen Moutray asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if he will (a) support a qualifications framework; and (b) review departmental funding, to enable progression of more adult learners into the level two band identified by his department in its 'Further Education Means Business' strategy. (AQW 136/07)

Sir Reg Empey: My Department supports the National Qualifications Framework and, in conjunction with the administrations in England and Wales, is

working towards developing a new national qualifications and credit framework – the National Database of Accredited Qualifications (NDAQ). Within this major programme of reform of vocational qualifications the participating administrations are also testing and trialling new funding arrangements.

Adult Learning

Mr Stephen Moutray asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if he will outline his department's strategy for providing meaningful learning opportunities for progression of the significant number of adult learners currently below the level two band identified by his department in its 'Further Education Means Business' strategy. (AQW 137/07)

Sir Reg Empey: Through its 48 campuses and 876 outreach centres, the Further Education sector offers an extensive range of vocational and non-vocational provision for adult learners. FE colleges also help deliver various labour market programmes designed to provide adults with opportunities to develop the skills needed to obtain and retain employment.

To further improve opportunities for learner progression, my Department is developing arrangements for better collaboration between FE colleges and community-based education and training organisations. Through these arrangements, adult learners, particularly those who may be disadvantaged or who were previously reluctant to engage in further education, will be actively encouraged and assisted to progress towards qualifications at level 2, and above. Consultation on these new arrangements is expected to take place later this year.

English Classes for Non-English Speakers

Mr Roy Beggs asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to advise what financial support his department gives towards English classes for non-English speakers. (AQW 219/07)

Sir Reg Empey: Expenditure, funded by the Department for Employment and Learning, on English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses in Further Education colleges, in each of the last 5 years, was:

2006/07	£1,469,297
2005/06	£865,059
2004/05	£691,628
2003/04	£486,093
2002/03	£349,276

Funding is also available within the New Deal programmes. However, it is not possible to separately identify this funding.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Lignite Mining

Mr Mervyn Storey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if he will make a statement on his Department's policy on lignite mining in County Antrim. (AQW 96/07)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Dodds): My Department is responsible for issuing and regulating prospecting and extraction licences for all non-precious minerals, including lignite.

As a result of the considerable amount of data compiled from exploration activity, the Department has, since October 2004, suspended the issue of any further prospecting licences for lignite. The position is to be reviewed later this year.

In relation to extraction, it will be necessary for a company seeking a mining license to obtain planning and other statutory approvals before consideration is given to the application. Currently there are no lignite mining applications under consideration.

The Department's Strategic Energy Framework acknowledges the strategic importance of lignite reserves. The Framework is consistent in its approach to the use of lignite with policy on prospecting and extraction licensing and indicates that any application under Article 39 of the Electricity (NI) Order 1992 to use lignite for power generation will only be considered against published criteria.

North Coast Tourism Industry

Mr David McClarty asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what policy he will pursue in relation to the tourism industry on the north coast. (AQW 111/07)

Mr Dodds: Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) will be pursuing the following policies in relation to the tourism industry on the North Coast:

"Tourism in Northern Ireland - A Strategic Framework for Action 2004-2007" has identified the Causeway Coast/Antrim Glens area and the Walled City as Signature Projects.

The Causeway Signature Project is being delivered through "The Causeway Tourism Masterplan 2004-

2013" (including the Causeway Coastal Route and the development of new visitor facilities at the Giants Causeway) and is the blueprint for sustainable development in the region. Financial investment to date in the delivery of the Masterplan has been £10m.

Phase 1 of The Walled City Signature Project is now complete with £4.6m invested in a Visitor Orientation Programme and the Tower Museum/ Armada in Ireland exhibition. A further £9.1m has been secured for Phase II including the City Lighting Scheme and a Built Heritage Programme.

Giant's Causeway Visitors' Centre

Mr David McClarty asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what is the current position in regard to (i) his Department's involvement in; and (ii) the current status of, a new visitors' centre at the Giant's Causeway site. (AQW 112/07)

Mr Dodds: Following disagreement between key stakeholders on development of new visitor facilities at the Giants Causeway my Department has been in the lead in planning for a replacement centre. It is the intention that a planning application will be submitted once car park requirements and financial viability issues have been settled. Progress on the Department's application will be related to that on a separate private sector application.

ENVIRONMENT

Mournes/Slieve Croob Area

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of the Environment if she will outline her plans to assist the members of the farming community concerned about the consequences to the industry that will arise if the Mournes/Slieve Croob area is granted National Park status. (AQW 3/07)

The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster): I am awaiting the recommendations of the Mourne National Park Working Party which are expected within the next few months and I will consider these before making any decision on the proposal to establish a National Park in the Mournes.

I can assure you that I will take the interests of the farming community and all other stakeholders fully into account.

Ards/Down Area Plan

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment what is the timescale for completion of the Ards and Down Area Plan 2015. (AQW 14/07)

Mrs Foster: The Public Inquiry into the draft Ards and Down Area Plan has now ended and the Department awaits the Report on the Inquiry from the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC). The PAC Report is expected at the end of 2007.

The Department intends to publish the adopted Plan as expeditiously as possible. It is not possible however to give a precise date for publication at this point in time as this will depend on both the date of receipt of the PAC Report and the nature of its content.

Ards/Down Area Plan

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment if the Ards and Down Area Plan 2015 will be made available to elected representatives prior to its announcement to the press and public. (AQW 17/07)

Mrs Foster: The Ards and Down Area Plan 2015, when published in final form, will become the statutory plan to guide development in Ards and Down over the plan period. The adopted Plan will be made available to all interested parties, including elected representatives, at the same time. In line with established practice, it is not intended to make the adopted Plan available to elected representatives prior to it being made available to the press and public.

Policy Planning Statement 14

Mr Patsy McGlone asked the Minister of the Environment to detail how many applications received since 16 March 2006 met the criteria for Planning Policy Statement 14: Sustainable Development in the Countryside, and were subsequently approved, in the following categories:

1. replacement dwellings (number per District Council Area);
2. infill sites (number per District Council Area); and
3. farm dwellings (number per District Council Area).

(AQW 21/07)

Mrs Foster: Details of the number of applications received since 16 March 2006 meeting the criteria for PPS 14 and subsequently approved as replacement, infill or farm dwellings are shown in the attached table.

District Council Area	Farm	Infill	Replacement
Ballymena Division			
Antrim	2	0	17
Ballymena	3	1	34
Carrickfergus	0	0	2
Larne	1	0	11
Magherafelt	6	1	45
	12	2	109
Belfast Division			
Belfast	0	0	2
Castlereagh	1	0	9
Newtownabbey	0	0	4
	1	0	15
Craigavon Division			
Armagh	0	0	1
Banbridge	0	0	5
Craigavon	3	0	8
Newry and Mourne	0	0	5
	3	0	19
Downpatrick Division			
Ards	5	0	21
Down	4	1	26
Lisburn	6	0	42
North Down	0	0	4
	15	1	93
Londonderry Division			
Ballymoney	1	0	15
Coleraine	0	0	20
Derry	1	0	6
Limavady	2	0	16
Moyle	3	0	7
	7	0	64
Omagh Division			
Cookstown	0	0	14
Dungannon	1	0	27
Fermanagh	1	0	24
Omagh	1	0	23
Strabane	0	0	19

District Council Area	Farm	Infill	Replacement
	3	0	107
Total	41	3	407

Note: These figures represent the number of approvals recorded on the Planning Service's database, from descriptions provided by applicants/agents, as replacement, infill or farm building. There may be some approvals on the database which have not been described in this way but which otherwise meet the PPS 14 criteria. It is not possible to provide figures for these cases. It should be noted that a considerable number of applications received after 16 March 2006 still are in the "backlog" of applications in some Districts, particularly Armagh and Newry & Mourne Districts and have not been decided.

Single Houses in the Countryside

Mr Patsy McGlone asked the Minister of the Environment to detail, per district council area, how many outline planning applications for single houses in the countryside were approved in the financial years 2004/05; 2005/06; and 2006/07. (AQW 22/07)

Mrs Foster: The number of outline planning approvals for single houses in the countryside over the last 3 financial years are shown in the attached table

District Council Area	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07*
Ballymena Division			
Antrim	315	206	76
Ballymena	432	266	111
Carrickfergus	10	3	4
Larne	20	22	7
Magherafelt	309	296	118
	1086	793	316
Belfast Division			
Belfast	3	0	0
Castlereagh	7	4	1
Newtownabbey	5	6	5
	15	10	6
Craigavon Division			
Armagh	269	317	174
Banbridge	248	168	108
Craigavon	132	130	44
Newry and Mourne	619	504	152
	1268	1119	478

District Council Area	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07*
Downpatrick Division			
Ards	246	64	14
Down	220	89	51
Lisburn	206	74	36
North Down	6	4	6
	678	231	107
Londonderry Division			
Ballymoney	236	267	85
Coleraine	226	260	140
Derry	60	62	41
Limavady	216	145	59
Moyle	95	85	33
	833	819	358
Omagh Division			
Cookstown	371	303	181
Dungannon	585	678	457
Fermanagh	798	790	710
Omagh	459	583	434
Strabane	176	329	142
	2389	2683	1924
Totals	6269	5655	3189

* It should be noted that a considerable number of applications received after 16 March 2006 still are in the "backlog" of applications in some Districts, particularly Armagh and Newry & Mourne Districts and have not yet been decided.

Policy Planning Statement 14

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of the Environment what plans she has to apply withdrawn status, or similar, to planning applications refused as a direct result of Planning Policy Statement 14: Sustainable Development in the Countryside, or on the grounds of prematurity arising out of delays in the production of Area Plans; and if she has any plans to refund application fees in respect of such applications. (AQW 40/07)

Mrs Foster: Once an application has been determined it cannot be withdrawn as this is a formal decision. Moreover, application fees cover the costs of processing and it would not be appropriate to return a fee after an application has been determined. I therefore have no plans to apply withdrawn status or similar to applications refused as a result of PPS14 or

on the grounds of prematurity arising out of delays in the production of Area Plans. I also have no plans to refund application fees in respect of such applications.

Salmonid Rivers

Mr Ken Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment what safeguards she will introduce to ensure that salmonid rivers and their tributaries in rural and urban areas receive a higher level of protection than is currently the case. (AQW 55/07)

Mrs Foster: DCAL has overall policy responsibility for the supervision and protection of salmon and inland fisheries. Its Salmon Management Plan informs conservation measures, such as restrictions on commercial and recreational fishing and habitat protection and improvement programmes. The Conservation Officers of the Fisheries Conservancy Board and the Loughs Agency seek to detect unlicensed and illegal fishing and liaise with my Department on pollution and fish habitat matters.

My Department has responsibility for protecting rivers and lakes important for Atlantic Salmon through the use of nature conservation legislation. To date Lough Melvin, the River Foyle system and the River Roe system have been declared both as Areas of Special Scientific Interest under domestic legislation, and as Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) under the European Habitats Directive.

In response to EU concerns that more rivers may need to be formally protected, my Department has commissioned a report from experts in the field of freshwater fisheries and will act upon its findings to ensure that Atlantic Salmon are given the highest reasonably practicable level of protection.

My Department has also designated 4154km of our rivers and some lakes as salmonid waters, requiring that they comply with quality standards specified in the European Freshwater Fish Directive. We seek to protect, and, where possible, to improve the quality of the aquatic environment. My response to your Question (AQW 49-07) on urban streams gives more detail of our water quality work.

Proposed Review of Road Safety

Mr Raymond McCartney asked the Minister of the Environment if she will outline the timescale for her proposed review of road safety; and if the process of consultation will include the relevant agencies in the Republic of Ireland. (AQW 56/07)

Mrs Foster: It is my intention to seek an early meeting with the Department for Regional Development and the Police Service of Northern

Ireland, the other key stakeholders involved in developing the Road Safety Strategy, to discuss the way forward.

My Department works closely with the relevant authorities in the Republic of Ireland to ensure shared road safety benefits.

Extensions to Rural Businesses

Mr Patsy McGlone asked the Minister of the Environment to detail how many planning applications made since 16 March 2006 for extensions to rural businesses have been refused planning permission.

(AQW 62/07)

Mrs Foster: Since 16 March 2006, 2 applications concerning extensions to rural businesses have been refused planning permission.

Rotting Seaweed at Ballyferris Beach

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment if she will detail the outcome of discussions between the Environment and Heritage Service and Ards Borough Council regarding the clearing of rotting seaweed from the beach at Ballyferris. (AQW 80/07)

Mrs Foster: Representatives of Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) met with Ards Borough Council officials on the 5 May 2007 to discuss the impact of beach cleaning upon ASSIs within their district, especially the Outer Ards shoreline. An approach was agreed that would allow litter and rubbish to be removed from the beaches in a timely and environmentally friendly manner, taking care not to impact upon the ASSI. The exact proposals will be finalised soon and all legal and public health obligations will be addressed, with the Council obtaining an open-ended assent from EHS to continue to maintain their amenity beaches to the expected high standards.

Unauthorised Developments

Lord Morrow of Clogher Valley asked the Minister of the Environment (a) how many unauthorised developments have occurred in Northern Ireland in the last three years; and (b) what are her plans to stop this type of illegal behaviour. (AQW 82/07)

Mrs Foster: It is not known how many unauthorised developments have occurred. However, my Department has opened some 11,229 files on possible breaches of planning control in the last 3 years.

I should add that not all unauthorised developments are illegal, but if a breach of planning control has been established and the offender has failed to resolve the

breach following a formal notice, then the activity is illegal.

The Department's general policy approach to dealing with breaches of planning control is contained within Planning Policy Statement (PPS) 9 "The Enforcement of Planning Control" and having regard to existing enforcement legislation. Changes to legislation were made in 2003 and 2006 and I have no proposals to introduce any new legislative measures at present.

Enforcement Action

Lord Morrow of Clogher Valley asked the Minister of the Environment what action her Department proposes to take against developers who have not sought appropriate approval. (AQW 83/07)

Mrs Foster: If a developer carries out a development without the appropriate planning approval, this may constitute a breach of planning control. If there is a breach, my Department takes the appropriate enforcement action to remedy it and regularise the situation.

Carrickfergus Town Walls

Mr David Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment if she will give an assessment of the present condition of the town walls in Carrickfergus. (AQW 86/07)

Mrs Foster: About half of the original circuit of the 17th century Carrickfergus town walls is still extant and the best-preserved stretch is in the Joymount area (the north east corner) where the walls stand to their full height of around four metres and have impressive battlements. North Gate is the only surviving gateway. This was re-modelled in the early 20th century. Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) has cared for these walls for many decades, most recently conserving the portion along the back of the Lancasterian Street carpark. The only upstanding portion not in State Care is a fragment of 'bastion' in Albert Road. The walls are mainly in good condition. They display many interesting features including artillery bastions, wall walks and a blocked door. Ongoing maintenance is always necessary to keep such a monument in good condition. The site is monitored regularly by EHS and action is undertaken as appropriate.

Unauthorised Developments

Lord Morrow of Clogher Valley asked the Minister of the Environment to list, by constituency, the number of unauthorised developments in each of the last three years. (AQW 97/07)

Mrs Foster: I regret that my Department does not keep this information in the format requested. However, across Northern Ireland as a whole it has opened some 11,229 files on possible breaches of planning control in the last 3 years.

I should add that not all unauthorised developments are illegal. However, if a breach of planning control has been established and the offender has failed to resolve the breach following a formal notice, then the activity is illegal.

Draft Metropolitan Area Plan

Mr Alex Easton asked the Minister of the Environment what plans she has to release greenbelt land in north Down for development. (AQW 110/07)

Mrs Foster: The draft Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan (dBMAP) includes proposals for development affecting some greenbelt land in North Down. These and other proposals in the draft Plan have been the subject of a significant number of objections which are being considered by the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) at an ongoing public inquiry. My Department will, therefore, not be in a position to decide finally on such proposals, including those for development affecting greenbelt land, until after it receives and considers the PAC Inquiry report.

Illegally Dumped Waste

Mr Simon Hamilton asked the Minister of the Environment what estimates have been made of the tonnage of waste, originating in the Republic of Ireland, that is illegally dumped in Northern Ireland. (AQW 154/07)

Mrs Foster: Estimates suggest that up to 250,000 tonnes of household waste from ROI were illegally deposited on land within Northern Ireland between October 2002 and the end of 2004, the latest period for when figures are available.

Recycling of Domestic Waste

Mr Simon Hamilton asked the Minister of the Environment what percentage of domestic waste is recycled in each of the 26 district council areas. (AQW 155/07)

Mrs Foster: In 2005/6, District Councils in Northern Ireland recycled an average 24.5% of domestic waste. Details for each Council are set out in the table below.

Waste Management Group	District Council	Percentage of household waste recycled and composted as % of total household waste arisings	
		2004/05	2005/06
ARC 21	Antrim Borough Council	38.4	44.0
	Ards Borough Council	20.4	24.0
	Ballymena Borough Council	23.4	26.9
	Belfast City Council	8.9	14.4
	Carrickfergus Borough Council	17.2	17.4
	Castlereagh Borough Council	22.2	32.5
	Down District Council	19.2	33.7
	Larne Borough Council	16.5	25.0
	Lisburn City Council	12.3	19.8
	Newtownabbey Borough Council	19.9	22.5
	North Down Borough Council	17.2	24.6
	ARC 21	16.7	22.9
SWaMP	Armagh City & District Council	23.3	26.7
	Banbridge District Council	39.2	41.0
	Cookstown District Council	20.6	28.1
	Craigavon Borough Council	23.4	29.3
	Dungannon & South Tyrone Borough Council	20.1	19.5
	Fermanagh District Council	21.0	20.8
	Newry and Mourne District Council	20.0	24.9
	Omagh District Council	19.6	17.8
	SWaMP	23.0	25.9

Waste Management Group	District Council	Percentage of household waste recycled and composted as % of total household waste arisings	
		2004/05	2005/06
NWRWMG	Ballymoney Borough Council	24.02	24.4
	Coleraine Borough Council	18.6	24.3
	Derry City Council	13.7	28.1
	Limavady Borough Council	17.3	35.9
	Magherafelt District Council	31.4	35.7
	Moyle District Council	11.3	25.5
	Strabane District Council	17.3	21.3
	NWRWMG	19.3	27.6
Northern Ireland		18.9	24.5

Job Losses in the Driver and Vehicle Agency

Mr John Dallat asked the Minister of the Environment what action has been taken to compensate for the proposed loss of vehicle registration and licensing jobs at County Hall, Coleraine; and what steps have been taken to ensure that there will be no further job losses in the Driver and Vehicle Agency. (AQW 247/07)

Mrs Foster: DVA carry out vehicle licensing work in Northern Ireland on behalf of the Department for Transport (DfT). DfT have decided to integrate the NI and GB IT systems and to bring the delivery of vehicle licensing services in NI into line with the rest of the UK. This re-alignment of services would have meant the loss of 260 jobs from the peak number of posts funded by DfT. However, DfT have agreed to transfer a block of UK-wide work to NI, safeguarding 93 jobs. In anticipation of these changes, DVA have been allowing the number of permanent staff employed to run down through natural wastage and replacing permanent staff who leave with casual employees, where possible. At present, it is projected that around 100 permanent staff will be surplus when these changes take place in November 2008. The Central Personnel Group of the Department of Finance and Personnel, working with the DoE, are seeking to identify redeployment opportunities for the staff losing their posts in vehicle licensing. The expectation is that all the surplus staff will be redeployed somewhere in the wider Civil Service and redundancies are not anticipated. The identification of redeployment opportunities will include examining if work from functions in DoE or other NI Departments could be relocated to Coleraine. Future employment levels on vehicle licensing in

Coleraine will be determined by DfT, in line with business needs. However, these proposed changes will put NI on to the same basis as the other 3 operational regions in the UK and there is no reason to believe that different criteria would be applied to employment levels in NI than in the rest of the UK.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Review of Public Administration

Mr Roy Beggs asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what are the most recent cost estimates of the current Review of Public Administration proposals; and what funding has been identified within the (a) 2007/08 Budget; (b) 2008/09 Estimates; and (c) 2009/10 Estimates; and if he will provide a breakdown of the costs. (AQW 186/07)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Robinson): Work is ongoing to update the cost and savings estimates arising from the Review of Public Administration (RPA) proposals. That work will also need to recognise any emerging views from the Executive as to the nature of RPA. For the current year, I can confirm that any costs arising will be managed through a combination of opening budget allocations and the normal in-year mechanisms. Provision for the 2008-09 and 2009-2010 years will be considered as part of the forthcoming Programme for Government and Budget processes

Sick Absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service

Mr Roy Beggs asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to advise of the number of days absence that were recorded, by department, over each of the last five years; how this compares to the private sector; what investigations have occurred to account for any variations; and what action has been taken. (AQW 187/07)

Mr Robinson: In answering this question it has been assumed that the number of day's absence relates to days lost due to sickness absence. The answer reflects the position for the non-industrial grades only and covers the 11 Departments of the Northern Ireland Administration, including Executive Agencies.

Sickness absence statistics for the Northern Ireland Departments are analysed by financial year as opposed to calendar year. Published statistics for Northern Ireland Departments for the financial years 2001/2002 – 2005/2006 are accessible on the Department's website at www.dfpni.gov.uk/publications.

Information relating to the 2006/2007 financial year will be published in the autumn.

Information on sickness absence rates in Northern Ireland Departments is set out in Table 1. Table 2 and Table 3 include statistical information drawn from reports published by Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) and Confederation of British Industry (CBI) respectively.

It should be noted that it is not possible to make statistically valid comparisons between the information contained in Tables 2 and 3, and Table 1. The methods used by CIPD and CBI to collect the information differs significantly to the current arrangements in the Northern Ireland Departments where there is a very robust, accurate and comprehensive means of recording and analysing sickness absence data.

Managing sickness absence is a key priority within Northern Ireland Departments and there is a comprehensive range of policies and procedures in place to deal with sickness absence. Much work has been done to ensure that the policies and practices reflect organisational best practice, including an academic research project that was carried out by the University of Ulster and ongoing benchmarking with a range of public and private sector organisations in Northern Ireland and with Government Departments in the UK.

In addition, the Northern Ireland Audit Office has been undertaking a major review of sickness absence in the non-industrial NICS and their report is awaited.

TABLE 1: 11 NI DEPARTMENTS - AVERAGE DAYS LOST PER STAFF YEAR FOR NON-INDUSTRIAL STAFF

Department	2001/ 2002	2002/ 2003	2003/ 2004	2004/ 2005	2005/ 2006
DARD	11.8	13.4	12.4	11.5	11.1
DCAL	14.6	13.8	15.1	11.0	10.3
DE	13.2	12.5	11.7	12.8	12.9
DEL	19.0	18.7	17.7	14.7	14.0
DETI	13.0	12.7	11.8	9.9	10.7
DFP	13.5	13.6	14.3	13.7	13.0
DHSSPS	14.6	13.2	12.3	9.5	10.7
DOE	14.1	14.5	13.4	12.0	11.1
DRD	11.4	10.7	12.0	10.2	8.2
DSD	18.4	19.1	19.7	19.4	18.3
OFMDFM	11.6	12.2	12.6	8.6	8.6
Overall	15.1	15.4	15.5	14.2	13.4

TABLE 2: FINDINGS FROM THE CIPD SURVEYS FROM 2002 TO 2006 AVERAGE DAYS LOST PER EMPLOYEE

CIPD	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Private Sector	8.4	7.0	7.8	6.8	6.8
Public Sector	10.9	10.6	10.7	10.3	9.9

- The figures in Table 2 come from a series of annual reports produced by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD).
- These reports set out the findings of surveys of sickness absence policy and practice in public, private, manufacturing and production, and non-profit organisations.

TABLE 3: FINDINGS FROM THE CBI SURVEYS FROM 2002 TO 2006 AVERAGE NUMBER OF WORKING DAYS LOST PER EMPLOYEE

CBI	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Private Sector	6.5	6.9	6.4	6.0	6.3
Public Sector	8.9	8.9	9.1	8.5	9.0

- The figures in Table 3 come from a series of annual surveys published by the CBI and AXA.
- These reports set out the findings of surveys of sickness absence and labour turnover in public, private, manufacturing, and service organisations.
- The information in Table 3 is for Private Sector organisations only.

Departmental Underspend

Mr Roy Beggs asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to list, by department, (a) the underspend for 2006/07; (b) the amounts that have been agreed that can be carried over to the financial year 2007/08; and (c) the amounts that will be returned to the Treasury from those allocated from the 2006/07 Budget.

(AQW 188/07)

Mr Robinson: Information on the extent of any underspend for 2006-07 is not yet available, and I will publish details in due course. However, I would emphasise that all department underspend remain available for redeployment within Northern Ireland in future years.

Funding for Children and Young People

Mrs Dolores Kelly asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he will confirm that there will be no retraction of the funding for Children and Young People during the lifetime of this Assembly. (AQW 194/07)

Mr Robinson: The Executive has adopted the inherited spending plans for the current financial year

(2007-08), and thus no change in funding for the area in question is planned for this year. For the longer term, public expenditure allocations for the period 2008-09 to 2010-11 will be determined as part of the local Programme for Government and Budget processes, due to be completed by the end of the year. Those processes will be developed in the context of the Executive's view of priorities and available resources.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Attacks on Fire Fighters

Mr Willie Clarke asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will give an assessment of the costs associated with attacks on Northern Ireland Fire Service crews in terms of (a) number of injured personnel; and (b) damage to equipment. (AQW 74/07)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): Attacks on fire-fighters have a human cost which, although difficult to quantify, is no less important than the financial costs. Seven firefighters were injured in attacks between 1 April 2006 and 31 March 2007. Of these, one resulted in a one day's absence from work at an approximate cost of £250. Thirty seven appliances were damaged during 2006/07 at an estimated cost of £18,050.

Agenda for Change

Mrs Dolores Kelly asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm that each Health Board and Trust has been given the funds to meet the commitments to staff under the Agenda for Change programme; if he will give a detailed report, by Trust area, on whether the budget allocated has been spent for the purpose intended; and if he will highlight any outstanding financial shortfalls. (AQW 76/07)

Mr McGimpsey: Since 2004-05, my Department has provided the following funding to Health Boards and Trusts to meet the cost of implementing Agenda for Change.

2004-05	£22.8m
2005-06	£57.7m
2006-07	£79.6m
2007-08	£94.6m

I can confirm that the budget allocated has been spent for the purposes intended and represents a

significant investment in our 65,000 staff, many of whom have benefited from increases in earnings of 6% on average above inflation.

Allocation to Boards, Trusts and Non Departmental Public Bodies for Agenda for Change in 2007-08 is set out in the table below.

Trust	2007- 08 Allocation (£)
Belfast	24,948,138
Northern	16,402,223
Southern	15,479,780
South Eastern	12,172,511
Western	13,931,700
NIAS	8,259,079
Sub Total	91,193,431
Board	
Eastern	566,787
Northern	373,598
Southern	278,161
Western	335,938
Sub Total	1,554,484
NDPB	
Central Services Agency	978,825
NI Blood Transfusion Service	295,846
NI Guardian Ad Litem Agency	95,756
NI Practice and Education Council for Nursing and Midwifery	20,187
NI Regional Medical Physics Agency	204,647
NI Social Care Council	55,464
Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority	169,360
Sub Total	1,820,085
Total	94,568,000

A further £3 million has been held centrally towards the cost of meeting proposed changes to the unsocial hours regime, bringing the total allocation for Agenda for Change to some £97.57 million.

At this stage of the financial year, it is too early to identify the existence and/or extent of shortfall in funding for 2007-08 but I can advise that all Health and Social Care bodies will be expected to manage any potential deficits as part of their break-even plans for 2007-08.

Healthcare Centre for Carrickfergus

Mr David Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will give an update on the current progress of plans for the provision of a level two healthcare centre for Carrickfergus, as outlined by the former Homefirst Community Trust.

(AQW 87/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The provision of a Level 2 Health and Care Centre and a replacement Day Centre facility (formerly at Taylor's Avenue) are included in the Primary and Community Care Infrastructure Programme. Both facilities have been identified as high priority and the project is expected to proceed later this year to site acquisition and the design stage. The current estimated capital cost of the combined project is £28m.

Carrickfergus Day Centre

Mr David Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans are being made to facilitate the clients of Carrickfergus Day Centre (formerly at Taylor's Avenue), currently displaced to locations in Larne and Newtownabbey, in respect of the provision of a centre in their own borough.

(AQW 92/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The provision of a Level 2 Health and Care Centre and a replacement Day Centre facility (formerly at Taylor's Avenue) are included in the Primary and Community Care Infrastructure Programme. Both facilities have been identified as high priority and the project is expected to proceed later this year to site acquisition and the design stage. The current estimated capital cost of the combined project is £28m.

Unused Medications

Mr Mervyn Storey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is the estimated cost of unused medications in Northern Ireland for the last 12 months.

(AQW 93/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The information requested is not collected routinely. Extrapolating figures from Great Britain, it is estimated that the cost of unused medicines in Northern Ireland amounts to approximately £2.5million per year. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is pursuing a number of initiatives to reduce waste in drug costs.

Mixed Sex Wards

Mr Mervyn Storey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many mixed wards there are in each hospital in Northern Ireland; and what measures he has taken to reduce the number.

(AQW 94/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The following table shows the number of mixed sex wards that there were in each hospital in Northern Ireland at 22 February 2007.

Trust / Hospital	Number of mixed sex wards at 22 February 2007
Armagh & Dungannon	
Mullinure Hospital	0
Longstone	3
St Luke's	4
Altnagelvin	
Altnagelvin Hospital	17
Waterside (Ward 5)	1
Belfast City	
Belfast City Hospital	21
Cancer Centre*	4
Windsor House	0
Causeway	
Causeway (inc Ross Thomson Unit)	2
Dalriada	0
Robinson Hospital	0
Craigavon & Banbridge	
Craigavon PNU	4
Craigavon Area	
Craigavon Area	12
Lurgan	5
South Tyrone	2
Down Lisburn	
Lagan Valley	7
Downe	4
Foyle	
Gransha	1
Waterside	7
Stradreagh (now Lakeview)	5

Trust / Hospital	Number of mixed sex wards at 22 February 2007
Greenpark	
Forster Green Hospital	3
Musgrave Park Hospital	8
Forest Lodge	0
Homefirst	
Holywell	8
Whiteabbey PNU	1
Mater	
Mater Hospital	1
N&W Belfast	
Muckamore Abbey	4 (day space only)
Newry & Mourne	
Daisy Hill	6
Royal Group	
Royal Victoria	31
RBHSC	9
S&E	
Knockbracken	6
Young Peoples Centre	1
Shaftesbury Square	0
Sperrin Lakeland	
Tyrone County	2
Erne	0
Tyrone & Fermanagh	4
Ulster Community	
Ards	1
Bangor	0
Ulster	21
United Hospitals	
Antrim	13
Braid Valley	1
Mid Ulster	4
Moyle	2
Whiteabbey	6

Source: HPSS Trusts

Where a mixed sex ward exists, within such a ward patients would normally be cared for in single sex bays. Mixed sex accommodation may be necessary in the provision of some specialised services such as critical care units. On occasion, a patient may need to be admitted to mixed sex accommodation rather than wait on a trolley in an Accident and Emergency Department. In such cases, they would be moved to a suitable bed, in either a single room or single sex bay, at the earliest opportunity.

In May 2004, the Department issued guidance to the HPSS on new standards for patient accommodation that require all new build acute ward accommodation to be planned on the basis of 50% single bedded ensuite rooms. Increasing the proportion of single bedded rooms will improve patient privacy, facilitate better utilisation of hospital beds, and reduce the need to care for patients in mixed sex accommodation.

Ambulances in Rural Areas

Mr David Simpson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what analysis his Department has carried out concerning the deployment of ambulances in rural areas of Northern Ireland.
(AQW 99/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service has procedures in place to minimise non-availability of ambulances. These procedures include use of relief staff and overtime cover to reduce non-availability due to absence. However, the pattern of cover provided is on the basis of shifts ranging from 8 to 12 hours, and it would, therefore, be misleading to measure non-availability in days.

Similarly, non-availability as a result of mechanical failure of the vehicle is compensated by regional management of the total ambulance fleet. Sufficient vehicles are maintained in a state of readiness in excess of the number required by planned crews at any one time to ensure that planned ambulance availability is not compromised over an extended period.

For these reasons it is not possible to answer the question in the format requested.

Ambulance Availability

Mr David Simpson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail for how many days ambulances were unavailable in the last 12 months.
(AQW 100/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service has procedures in place to minimise non-availability of ambulances. These procedures include use of relief staff and overtime cover to reduce

non-availability due to absence. However, the pattern of cover provided is on the basis of shifts ranging from 8 to 12 hours, and it would, therefore, be misleading to measure non-availability in days.

Similarly, non-availability as a result of mechanical failure of the vehicle is compensated by regional management of the total ambulance fleet. Sufficient vehicles are maintained in a state of readiness in excess of the number required by planned crews at any one time to ensure that planned ambulance availability is not compromised over an extended period.

For these reasons it is not possible to answer the question in the format requested.

Ambulance Journey Times

Mr David Simpson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps his Department (a) has taken in the last 12 months; and (b) proposes to take, to reduce (i) the average time taken for ambulance emergency journeys; and (ii) the number of occasions on which the average journey time was exceeded by 50%. (AQW 101/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The performance of the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) is not measured in terms of average ambulance journey times but by its achievement of the national target for responding to Category A (life-threatening) emergency calls within 8 minutes in each financial year.

The Department recognises that, currently, NIAS's performance in meeting its response targets is well below the required standard and, during the last year, has been working closely with the Trust and the Health and Social Services Boards' Commissioning Group for Ambulance Services (CGAS) to address this issue. In particular, NIAS, at the request of the Department, was benchmarked against the Staffordshire Ambulance Service, widely regarded as the best performing UK ambulance service. As a direct result of this exercise, NIAS agreed that the service should be re-engineered to adopt a high performance ambulance service model.

The Department is also currently working closely with NIAS and the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) to develop outline business cases for the modernisation of the Trust's estate, fleet and equipment. A Business Case for the introduction of Automatic Vehicle Locating Systems and Mobile Data Transmission in the current year has been submitted to the Department for approval.

The Department is now monitoring NIAS's performance on a fortnightly basis to review its achievement of the Trust's 2007/08 Priorities for Action targets.

Patient Mortality in Ambulances

Mr David Simpson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail how many people in Northern Ireland died while being taken to hospital by ambulance in each of the last three years (a) in total; and (b) broken down by ambulance deployment point. (AQW 102/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The information requested cannot be provided without disproportionate cost as Northern Ireland Ambulance Service personnel do not routinely record patient mortality in transit on Patient Report Forms. It is not possible to retrieve such data from the Trust's IT system and a manual search of hard copy records would require considerable time.

Macular Degeneration

Mr Sammy Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what efforts he will make to ensure that those suffering from wet age-related macular degeneration get the treatment they need. (AQW 116/07)

Mr McGimpsey: Additional funding of £24 million has been allocated in 2006-07 and 2007-08 for specialist hospital drugs. It is for Health and Social Services Boards, as commissioners of services, to prioritise how funding is used, taking into account local circumstances, the strategic objectives established for the Health and Social Care (HSC) sector and demands and pressures generally for access to a wide range of new effective drug therapies.

Specialised treatments are available in Northern Ireland for the treatment of wet age-related macular degeneration (AMD), including laser treatment and photodynamic therapy. Two new treatments for wet AMD – pegaptanib (Macugen) and ranibizumab (Lucentis) – are currently being appraised by the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) and the Institute is expected to publish its guidance in September 2007. When that guidance is published, the Department will consider the applicability of the NICE guidance to HSC. In the interim, the Health and Social Services Boards have agreed that they will consider funding treatment with Macugen or Lucentis for those patients presenting with the greatest clinical priority, on a case by case basis.

Ambulance Service Deployment Point for Ards Peninsula

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will give an update on the out-station for the Ards peninsula, to be

provided by the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service.
(AQW 126/07)

Mr McGimpsey: There are no plans at present to provide an additional Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) deployment point for the Ards Peninsula.

Emergency ambulances are deployed on the basis of historic patterns of demand. NIAS reviews its deployment locations continually to ensure they are sited where demand for emergency response is likely to be highest.

Emergency Services Response Times in the Ards Peninsula

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will give details of emergency services response times for the Ards peninsula: how many calls were responded to (a) within 10 minutes; (b) within 15 minutes; (c) within 20 minutes; and (d) in over 20 minutes.
(AQW 127/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The following table shows Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) and Northern Ireland Fire & Rescue Service (NIFRS) emergency response times in the Ards Peninsula during the period 1 April 2006 to 31 March 2007. NIAS has used the BT22 postcode to source the data provided whereas NIFRS has provided data for Bangor, Newtownards, Donaghadee, Ballywalter and Portaferry Fire Stations.

Timeframe	NIAS responses	NIFRS responses
Within 10 minutes	51	1509
Within 15 minutes	152	228
Within 20 minutes	225	38
Over 20 minutes	370	15
Total Calls	798	1790

Emergency Services Co-response Initiative in the Ards Peninsula

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will give an update on the co-response initiative between the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service and the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service for the Ards peninsula.
(AQW 128/07)

Mr McGimpsey: While primary responsibility for attending medical emergencies rests with the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS), the Northern Ireland Fire & Rescue (NIFRS) is working closely with NIAS to develop co-responder schemes so that its personnel can support Ambulance personnel in cases involving cardiac arrest.

Portaferry and Ballywalter Fire Stations in the Ards Peninsula have been identified as locations where co-response would be beneficial. NIFRS personnel at those locations have completed additional medical training with defibrillation equipment and vital casualty stabilisation techniques to provide limited medical care prior to the ambulance's arrival.

However the English High Court ruled in October 2006 that Firefighters are not contractually obliged to participate in co-responder schemes. NIFRS is considering, therefore, how best to progress its co-responder initiative and, as an interim measure, has placed defibrillation equipment on Fire Appliances at Portaferry and Ballywalter, initially for use at incidents where NIFRS personnel would normally arrive first (fires, road traffic collisions, etc) and their intervention is appropriate.

Cataract Operations

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many cataract operations have been carried out in each of the last five years.
(AQW 138/07)

Mr McGimpsey: Information on the number of cataract operations carried out in acute hospitals in Northern Ireland in each year from 2000/01 to 2005/06 (the latest year for which data is available) is shown in the table below.

Year	Number of Cataract Operations
2001/2002	7,196
2002/2003	7,676
2003/2004	8,513
2004/2005	8,391
2005/2006	9,441

Source - Hospital Inpatient System

Waiting Lists for Cataract Operations

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will give details of waiting lists for cataract operations; how many people have been waiting for (a) 3 months; (b) 6 months; (c) 9 months; and (d) 12+ months.
(AQW 139/07)

Mr McGimpsey: Information on the number of patients waiting (a) less than 3 months and (b) less than 6 months for cataract surgery at 31 March 2007 (the latest available validated statistics) are provided in the following table. There were no patients waiting more than 6 months for cataract treatment at 31 March 2007.

Quarter ending	Number of Patients Waiting for Cataract Surgery at 31 March 2007:		
	(a) Less than 3 months	(b) Less than 6 months	Total Waiting
March 2007	1909	2256	2256

Source - Departmental Information Return PFA 211

Enquiries in the Irish Language

Lord Browne asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the percentage of enquiries made to his department in the Irish language. (AQW 166/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The information requested is not collected. However, research has suggested that there have been no enquiries made to the Department in Irish in the past 5 years.

Publications in Irish

Lord Browne asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the full breakdown of costs for the implementation of the decision taken by the former Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to produce all publications in Irish. (AQW 167/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The Department of Health, Social Services does not produce all publications in Irish. It is the current policy of the department to produce both press releases and advertisements in Irish. Translated copies of documents and other associated materials are provided by the department upon request.

The costs incurred by Irish translation since 2002/2003 are provided in the table below:

	Irish Translations ¹	Publications	Total
2002/03	£72,500	£16,652.86	£89,152.86
2003/04	£26,185	£3,120.80	£29,305.80
2004/05	£8,389	£1,203.76	£9,592.76
2005/06	£8,974	£0	£8,974.00
2006/07	£14,046.45	£45.55	£14,092.00
Totals	£130,094.45	£21,022.97	£151,117.42

¹ Irish Translation figures include costs for Press releases, speeches and advert translations.

Child Obesity

Mr David Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he plans to take to reduce child obesity. (AQW 177/07)

Mr McGimpsey: At a regional level, the report of the Fit Futures taskforce on tackling obesity in children and young people was published in March 2006. The report includes over seventy recommendations designed to deliver on the Public Service Agreement target to stop the increase in levels of obesity in children by 2010. Responsibility for this target is shared by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Department of Education and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure

A governmental response to the report, including a cross-departmental implementation plan, has subsequently been developed and was issued for consultation. Following an analysis of the responses to the consultation, this final implementation plan will be published shortly.

At a local level, the four Health and Social Services Boards have been tasked with developing local integrated plans to tackle the issue of childhood obesity. These plans should address specific priorities set out in the original Fit Futures report, including enhanced training for front line staff, additional support for children in care, training to improve cooking skills in low income families, and initiatives to tackle specific health and social inequities.

Waiting Times at the Royal Victoria Hospital

Mr Dominic Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps he is taking to reduce waiting times at the fracture clinic at the Royal Victoria Hospital; and when improvements will be seen. (AQW 181/07)

Mr McGimpsey: Patients who sustain a definite or suspected fracture are seen by the fracture service without delay, and there is no waiting list for a first outpatient appointment. When assessed by the fracture service, patients are triaged according to their clinical need.

I am committed to improving access for patients who require surgical intervention following a fracture. A comprehensive programme of reform is being taken forward across Northern Ireland to reform and modernise hospital services across a wide range of healthcare activity including the fracture service. This will deliver shorter waiting times for both emergency (fracture) patients and elective (waiting list) patients.

By March 2008, I expect that at least 75% of patients should, where clinically appropriate, wait no longer than 48 hours for inpatient fracture treatment, and by March 2009, 98% of patients should have their fracture surgery within 48 hours.

Waiting List for Speech and Language Therapy

Mr David McClarty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will make a statement on the average length of time patients have to wait on a speech and language therapist waiting list, before availing of the service. (AQW 192/07)

Mr McGimpsey: Information on the average length of time that patients have to wait on a speech and language therapy waiting list is not collected centrally. However, information is collected on the number of completed waits for a first appointment with a community speech and language therapist.

Waiting list information for speech and language is collected by time band. It is therefore not possible to calculate the average waiting time on a waiting list.

During quarter ending 31 December 2006, 2,649 patients had a first appointment with a community speech & language therapist in Northern Ireland. Of these, 82% (2,177) had waited less than 3 months from referral to the community speech and language therapist to the first appointment actually taking place, 13% (334) waited 3 to 6 months, and 5% (138) had waited 6 months or more.

Heroin Replacement Drugs

Mr David Simpson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many heroin addicts have been prescribed heroin replacement drugs in each of the last three years, broken down by (a) health trust and (b) substitute drug prescribed; how many in each year were new cases; and how many were continued prescriptions from previous years. (AQW 214/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The information requested is available only for 2004/2005 and 2005/2006.

(a) Table 1 shows the number of cases for both 2004/2005 and 2005/2006 broken down by the Health Trust structure established on 1 April 2007.

TABLE 1 – CASES BY HEALTH TRUST.

		2004/2005	2005/2006	
		New Cases	Continuations from Previous Year	New Cases
Health Trust	Belfast	48	47	25
	South-Eastern	41	34	14
	Northern	87	90	43
	Southern	5	4	8
	Western	12	10	9
Total		193	185	99

(b) Table 2 shows the number of cases for both 2004/2005 and 2005/2006 broken down by the substitute medication prescribed.

TABLE 2 – CASES BY SUBSTITUTE MEDICATION.

		2004/2005	2005/2006	
		New Cases	Continuations from Previous Year	New Cases
Substitute Medication*	Methadone	89	93	42
	Buprenorphine	102	85	47
	Dihydrocodeine	2	7	10
Total		193	185	99

* The substitute medication prescribed at the beginning of treatment.

Eating Disorders

Mr David Simpson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people are estimated to be suffering from (a) anorexia nervosa and (b) bulimia nervosa in each of the last three years; and what help is made available to (i) people suffering from the conditions; and (ii) families of people suffering from the conditions. (AQW 215/07)

Mr McGimpsey: As many of the people suffering from eating disorders are diagnosed by their GPs, it is difficult to estimate the numbers suffering from anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa. Best evidence from the UK indicates that approximately 300 to 1,700 in Northern Ireland people suffer from anorexia nervosa and approximately 17,000 suffer from bulimia nervosa.

Specialist teams have been established in each of the 4 Boards since 2006. These 4 teams link with each other to form a Regional Clinical Network. The teams provide various services which include structured

psychological therapy, dietetic input and physical health monitoring. The teams also provide consultation, supervision and training for those cases managed at primary and secondary care level.

The specialist teams, wherever possible, involve families in the treatment process and, in conjunction with the voluntary sector such as the Eating Disorders Association and Adapt, provide carer support.

Treatment for Heroin Abuse

Mr Daithi McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people presented themselves for treatment for heroin abuse in 2004/05; 2005/06; and 2006/07, in each Health and Social Care Trust area. (AQW 259/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The information requested is available only for 2004/05 and 2005/06. Information on individuals presenting to treatment services with problem drug misuse is held on the Northern Ireland Drug Misuse Database. The table below shows the number of problem drug users who presented to treatment services and gave their consent for their details to be held on the database, with heroin as their main problem drug, broken down by the Health and Social Care Trust area.

Health and Social Care Trust Area	2004/05 ⁽¹⁾	2005/06 ⁽²⁾
Belfast	50	62
Northern	123	41
Southern	20	28
South Eastern	16	20
Western	13	16
Prison	15	6
Total	237	173

- (1) During 2004/05, a further 47 Problem Drug Users presented to treatment services with heroin listed as a subsidiary drug of misuse rather than their main problem drug.
- (2) During 2005/06, a further 41 Problem Drug Users presented to treatment services with heroin as a subsidiary drug of misuse rather than their main problem drug.

Compensation on Behalf of Health Boards and Trusts

Mr John Dallat asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail what action has been taken to ensure that fraud is eliminated from

compensation claims handled by solicitors on behalf of Health Boards and Trusts. (AQW 283/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The Department and HPSS systems are regularly audited and reported on in order to gain assurance on expenditure. Updated guidance has been issued recently in relation to compensation claims handled by solicitors on behalf of HSS Boards and Trusts. This guidance sets out a requirement for each HSS body to review the position in their organisation and implement immediately any controls not already in place.

Radiologists

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many radiologists are currently employed within the National Health Service in Northern Ireland. (AQW 285/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The number of Radiologists employed within the Northern Ireland Health and Social Care Services is given in the table below:

NUMBER OF RADIOLOGISTS EMPLOYED WITHIN THE NORTHERN IRELAND HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE SERVICES BY GRADE AS AT 31ST MARCH 2007

Grade	Headcount	WTE
Consultant	99	96.59
Special Registrar	34	34.00
Total	134	131.59

Source: Human Resource Management System

Accident and Emergency Services at Causeway Hospital

Mr David McClarty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will confirm that he has no plans to cut back Accident and Emergency Services at the Causeway Hospital in Coleraine. (AQW 305/07)

Mr McGimpsey: There are no plans to reduce the Accident and Emergency services currently provided at Causeway Hospital.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Unadopted Roads

Mr Willie Clarke asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of unadopted roads

rejected by his Department in each of the last four years on the grounds that they have not been brought up to the required standard. (AQW 57/07)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): I have assumed that the Member's Question relates to longstanding unadopted roads/laneways rather than roads in new housing developments.

The number of such unadopted roads rejected in each of the last four years on the grounds that they have not been brought up to the required standard is as follows:

Financial Year	Unadopted Roads Rejected
2003/04	13
2004/05	11
2005/06	15
2006/07	8

There are many such private roads and laneways across the North and over the years there have been many requests for such roads to be adopted into the public road network by my Department's Roads Service. Unfortunately, very few of them are fit for adoption and public funds are not available to enable Roads Service to embark on a general programme to bring them up to adoption standards.

I should explain that a road can be considered for adoption under Article 9 of the Private Streets (Northern Ireland) Order 1980 as amended, where:

- the majority of frontagers request it; and
- the roads or streets are first brought up to the required standard at the expense of the frontagers.

Roads Service is always willing to provide whatever assistance is required in individual cases in terms of guidance and advice relating to adoption standards however the cost of any actual design work must also be borne by frontagers.

Castlebawn Bypass

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development when work will start on the new bypass for Newtownards, known as Castlebawn; and how long will it take to complete. (AQW 69/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that, subject to the satisfactory completion of the on-going tendering process, it is anticipated that construction of the A20 Newtownards Southern Distributor road, sometimes referred to as Castlebawn, will begin during autumn this year and will continue for approximately one year.

Roads Service Budget Allocation

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will confirm the budget allocated to the Ards section of Roads Service for the last five financial years. (AQW 70/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that some elements of its operational budget including resurfacing, patching, gully emptying, grass cutting etc. are allocated on a Section Office basis. However these figures do not give a realistic indication of actual spend within the section as sizeable elements of the budget are allocated either on a Divisional basis, or indeed on a province-wide basis. These include major and minor improvement works, traffic management, and street lighting.

Roads Service does, however, undertake an analysis of actual spend during the preceding financial year in each District Council area, which in the case of Ards Borough Council coincides with the Ards Section Area.

The table below provides details of spend in the Ards Borough Council area during each of the last five years for which information is available.

Functional Area	2001/02 £K	2002/03 £K	2003/04 £K	2004/05 £K	2005/06 £K
Capital	690	2879	3685	1859	1785
Maintenance	3087	3216	3547	3661	6181
Total	3777	6095	7232	5520	7966

Roads Service Budget Allocation

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will confirm the budget allocated to the Downpatrick section of Roads Service for the last five financial years. (AQW 71/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that some elements of its operational budget including resurfacing, patching, gully emptying, grass cutting etc. are allocated on a Section Office basis. However these figures do not give a realistic indication of actual spend within the section as sizeable elements of the budget are allocated either on a Divisional basis, or indeed on a province-wide basis. These include major and minor improvement works, traffic management, and street lighting.

Roads Service does, however, undertake an analysis of actual spend during the preceding financial year in each District Council area, which in the case of Down District Council coincides with the Downpatrick Section Area.

The table below provides details of spend in the Down District Council area during each of the last five years for which information is available.

Functional Area	2001/02 £K	2002/03 £K	2003/04 £K	2004/05 £K	2005/06 £K
Capital	1626	528	719	1721	2675
Maintenance	4366	4641	5089	5042	3476
Total	5992	5169	5808	6763	6151

Grass Cutting

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development what discussions he has had with the Housing Executive regarding a single contract for the cutting of grass, in order to ensure that a uniform cutting takes place for grass within the responsibility of the two organisations. (AQW 79/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that there is a distinction between the public use of the lands belonging to both organisations and accordingly each employs necessarily different maintenance regimes.

Roads Service cuts grass on areas of land which it owns to prevent overgrowth onto carriageways and footway surfaces and the obstruction of sightlines and traffic signs.

- These grass cutting operations are carried out for road safety reasons and not for aesthetic or amenity purposes. A recent policy review concluded that roadside verges should be cut five times per year in urban areas and twice a year in rural areas.
- The Housing Executive is responsible for open spaces predominantly in and around areas of public housing. As these open spaces provide vital social and recreational facilities for local communities, I understand the grass is cut mainly for aesthetic or amenity purposes.

Roads Service has not entered into any discussions with the Housing Executive on this issue, as, in reality, it would be difficult to operate and manage a single contract for grass cutting in light of the above points.

However, Roads Service does have a number of partnership arrangements with District Councils which, for aesthetic or amenity purposes, wish to have a higher standard of grass maintenance in certain urban areas than is provided by Roads Service. In these cases the Councils accept responsibility for the work within their respective boundary and are reimbursed by Roads Service for the cuts which would have been carried out under Roads Service Policy.

I have asked officials in Roads Service to consider a similar arrangement with the Housing Executive.

Pedestrian Connection - Ballywalter

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development if he intends to provide a footpath (pedestrian connection) from Springvale Road, Ballywalter, to the Bowling Club, Ballywalter; and if he will give a date for commencement of this work, and a timescale for completion. (AQW 81/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Roads Service advise me that it has carried out a full technical assessment of the proposal to provide a footway linking the Kilns to the Bowling Club on the Springvale Road, Ballywalter. However, this was found to attract a low priority status when compared to other proposals included in the Minor Works Programme and accordingly, it has not been included in that Programme for the Ards Council area.

Desludging of Septic Tanks

Mr Patsy McGlone asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will detail (a) the number of septic tanks serving private properties currently waiting to be desludged by Northern Ireland Water; and (b) the expected time from the initial request until the septic tank is desludged. (AQW 103/07)

Mr Murphy: The Water and Sewerage Services (NI) Order 2006 transferred responsibility for the delivery of water and sewerage services from the Department's Water Service Agency to a statutory water and sewerage undertaker. A government-owned company, Northern Ireland Water (NIW) has been appointed as the undertaker and the issues raised are operational matters for it. I have asked the Chief Executive of NIW (Mrs. Katharine Bryan) to write to you in response to this questions.

Improvement Scheme for Main Street, Greyabbey

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the timescale for commencement of the improvement scheme for Main Street, Greyabbey; and if he will give a completion date for the work. (AQW 105/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that, in terms of priority, this scheme is next on its list of village improvement schemes for the divisional area. However, I must advise you that at present, funding is not available to carry out this scheme. Therefore, I am unable to provide you with even a tentative start date.

I understand that the works associated with this scheme are of such an extent that the costs involved

will mean that the overall scheme will have to be carried out in two stages. While I cannot promise anything now, the situation may change as the financial year progresses and this may allow the first stage of the scheme to proceed. I have asked the Southern Divisional Roads Manager to write to you as soon as a start date for the scheme is established.

Waste Water Treatment Works - Greyabbey

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development when the landscaping for the waste water treatment works at Greyabbey will commence; and what is the agreed duration of the work.

(AQW 106/07)

Mr Murphy: The Water and Sewerage Services (NI) Order 2006 transferred responsibility for the delivery of water and sewerage services from the Department's Water Service Agency to a statutory water and sewerage undertaker. A government-owned company, Northern Ireland Water (NIW) has been appointed as the undertaker and the issues raised are operational matters for it. I have asked the Chief Executive of NIW (Mrs. Katharine Bryan) to write to you in response to this questions.

Kiln Lodge, Lurgan

Mr John O'Dowd asked the Minister for Regional Development if he is satisfied that Roads Service has followed its own criteria in approving road access to a further development at Kiln Lodge, Lurgan.

(AQW 129/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the access design and layout to Kiln Lodge, Lurgan meets the criteria required to serve both the existing and the currently proposed developments.

Traffic Disruption in Lurgan

Mr John O'Dowd asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will make a statement outlining his plans to alleviate the continued traffic disruption in Lurgan caused by the three railway crossings in the town.

(AQW 131/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that, during the development of the Draft Sub-Regional Transport Plan 2015, which included consultation with elected representatives from Craigavon Borough Council, a Transport Study carried out in Lurgan identified the William Street railway crossing as a location where traffic congestion was prevalent in the town. The two other crossings at Bell's Row and Lake Street, were not identified as problem areas.

Following a meeting between senior officials from my Department and elected representatives from Craigavon Borough Council, it was agreed that a further study would be carried out to assess the William Street crossing and develop and consider options for its possible removal. The results of this study have recently been received and are being considered. Officials will be issuing the final report to Craigavon Borough Council for comment in the near future

Roads Salting Schedule

Mr Daithi McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will review the main criteria for including roads on the Roads Service salting schedule; and if he will address the problem of roads that qualify for salting in terms of traffic volume, but are not salted because they are not considered main routes.

(AQW 164/07)

Mr Murphy: There are no plans at present to amend the current winter service policy, which was subject to a detailed review in July 2001.

One of the key outcomes of the review, which was fully debated and accepted by the Assembly, was that the practice of targeting the limited resources available for this service on the busier main through routes should continue.

My Department's Roads Service salts main through routes carrying more than 1,500 vehicles per day and, in exceptional circumstances, roads with difficult topography carrying between 1,000 and 1500 vehicles per day. The application of this policy ensures that 28% of the total road network, which carries around 80% of traffic, is salted at an annual cost of approximately £5 million. If the salting schedule was to be extended to cover 90% and 100% of traffic volumes, the cost would rise to approximately £10million and £20million per annum respectively.

Whilst I can understand the concerns of those who use roads that are not included in the salted network, it is simply not practical to salt all roads given that the North, together with Scotland, is already top of the UK league in terms of the length of road salted per head of population. There is a fine balance to be drawn between putting even more funds into salting or to the many other demands on Roads Service, many of which are also safety related.

I should add that salt bins/grit piles are provided at various locations, on roads not on the salting schedule, for local residents to use on a self-help basis and in periods of prolonged icy conditions Roads Service staff will continue to respond to requests from the public for assistance.

Bus and Railway Station at Ballymartin

Mr David Ford asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will make a statement on the progress made towards the establishment of a bus and railway station at Ballymartin, Templepatrick.

(AQW 171/07)

Mr Murphy: The land required for the construction of the Ballymartin Bus and Rail Park and Ride facility has been acquired and the Department has given approval for an Economic Appraisal to be commissioned. It is expected that initially the project will provide approximately 200 spaces with room for expanding to up to 650 spaces should the need arise. The indicative opening date for this facility is 2010.

Sewage Treatment Plant, Limavady

Mr George Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development when will the upgrading work commence on the sewerage treatment plant on the bypass in Limavady; and if he will make a statement on the delays that this work has experienced to date.

(AQW 174/07)

Mr Murphy: The Water and Sewerage Services (NI) Order 2006 transferred responsibility for the delivery of water and sewerage services from the Department's Water Service Agency to a statutory water and sewerage undertaker. A government-owned company, Northern Ireland Water (NIW) has been appointed as the undertaker and the issues raised are operational matters for it. I have asked the Chief Executive of NIW (Mrs. Katharine Bryan) to write to you in response to these questions.

Policy Planning Statement 14

Mr Tom Elliott asked the Minister for Regional Development when he will bring forward substantive proposals for the replacement of the current draft Planning Policy Statement 14: Sustainable Development in the Countryside.

(AQW 224/07)

Mr Murphy: PPS 14 is a priority for me. I am currently reviewing the results of the public consultation on draft PPS 14 and the Assembly's Preparation for Government Report of 23 January which are important considerations in developing the way forward. A further consideration is that the draft policy is subject to judicial challenge which is scheduled for Hearing on 18 and 27 June.

Newry Railway Station

Mr John McCallister asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide an update on, and timescale for, the plans to replace Newry railway station.

(AQW 274/07)

Mr Murphy: The Department for Regional Development has given approval to Translink for a project to build a new railway station in Newry, costing some £12.6m. The Department has also given approval to the Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company to vest the land required by Translink to build the station. The process of vesting the land is almost complete and Translink hope to be able to begin tendering for the project in the next few weeks in order to start work on site by late autumn. Construction will take approximately 18 months to complete.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Beechfield Estate, Donaghadee

Mr Alex Easton asked the Minister for Social Development if she intends to visit Beechfield Estate in Donaghadee to see at first hand the living conditions in which residents have to live.

(AQW 90/07)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): I understand that the Chief Executive of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive met with the Honourable Member on 24 May about this estate. I will of course be happy to consider visiting the Beechfield Estate if invited to do so.

Affordable Housing

Mr Peter Weir asked the Minister for Social Development what elements of the Semple Review of affordable housing does her department intend to implement.

(AQW 146/07)

Ms Ritchie: As I indicated during the Assembly debate on 21 May 2007, I am committed to addressing the issue of Affordable Housing. However, this is an issue that impacts across Government and the Semple Review contains a considerable number of cross-cutting recommendations, many of which fall outside my Department's remit.

Therefore, with the agreement of the Northern Ireland Executive I have undertaken to establish and chair an Inter Departmental Group which will respond to the Review's recommendations. The Group will seek to develop links with organisations outside central government and to establish a partnership

approach to tackling affordability. In addition to this, I intend to establish an Expert Reference Panel, comprising academics and relevant experts from across the housing arena, to provide specialist advice to the Interdepartmental Group.

I have also asked the Housing Executive to set in motion the necessary activity to produce an Empty Homes Strategy and to keep me informed of progress.

First Time Applicants for Housing Executive Homes

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development if she will explain the rationale behind the approach the Housing Executive takes to interview first time applicants for Housing Executive homes; and if she will explain the rationale behind the system for applicants who require a review of circumstances to be carried out. (AQW 162/07)

Ms Ritchie: In determining the accommodation needs of an applicant within the Common Selection Scheme, an assessment is made not only of the applicant's personal needs, but also the needs of all members of the household who might be reasonably expected to reside with the applicant.

Applicants are normally visited in their home so that a comprehensive housing needs assessment can be carried out. Providing they are eligible, they are then ranked on the basis of their points total on the Common Waiting List that is used by all social landlords.

During the initial housing needs assessment visit, applicants are advised to let the Housing Executive know of any changes in their address or in their circumstances which could affect the number of points they have been awarded. They are reminded of this in the decision letter that is issued to confirm the level of points and areas of choice. Applicants also receive an annual waiting list renewal letter which contains a further reminder.

Any subsequent notification of a change in circumstances may result in the Housing Executive carrying out a further visit in order to carry out an updated housing needs assessment. Housing Executive staff will meet with applicants to discuss their circumstances at any stage of the application process.

Social Security Benefit

Mr Peter Weir asked the Minister for Social Development what plans she has to increase public awareness of social security benefit entitlement. (AQW 204/07)

Ms Ritchie: On 14 May I launched the Social Security Agency's 2007/08 Benefit Uptake Programme to increase awareness of social security benefits aimed at ensuring that vulnerable clients are receiving their full benefit entitlement. The programme will target 230,000 clients and will focus on those people with a disability/mental health problems/long-term illness, pensioners, carers and children/families.

The Social Security Agency also provides a range of services to ensure that people are advised of their potential entitlement to benefits. This includes outreach services, participation in local promotional activity, the production of specific publications and general assistance with advice and information.

ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

Day of Reflection

Mr Tommy Gallagher asked the Assembly Commission what are its plans for Assembly staff and officials to participate in the Day of Reflection on 21 June 2007, organised by the Healing Through Remembering project. (AQW 148/07)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Coulter): The Assembly Commission considered your request at its meeting on 24 May 2007. It has been agreed that staff will be made aware of the event on 21 June by providing an internet hyperlink to the Healing Through Remembering website.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 08 June 2007

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Commissioner for Older People

Mr Peter Weir asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what plans it has to create an Older People's Commissioner.
(AQW 147/07)

The First Minister and Deputy First Minister (Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness): Ministers fully recognise the distinctive needs of older people. Ministers will continue to focus on the needs of older people and will discuss at an early stage how the commitments in "Ageing in an Inclusive Society" will be taken forward.

A key issue for Ministers is how best to champion and take forward older people's issues. No final decision has yet been reached on this issue but is currently being addressed. Junior Ministers have been given particular responsibility for older people which has been unanimously endorsed by the Executive.

Victims' Commissioner

Mrs Dolores Kelly asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister when it will announce the appointment of the Victims' Commissioner.
(AQW 195/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: We hope to make an announcement before the summer recess.

Default Retirement Age

Mr David Simpson asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister if it will consider

abolishing the default retirement age for people in Northern Ireland.
(AQW 220/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: The Employment Equality (Age) Regulations (NI) 2006 provide for a default retirement age of 65. The effectiveness of the default retirement age is being monitored, and will be reviewed in 2011 and if the evidence shows that it is no longer necessary, it will be removed.

English Classes for Non-English Speakers

Mr Roy Beggs asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to advise what funds are committed by (a) OFMDFM and (b) the Community Relations Council towards the provision of English classes for non-English speakers during 2006/07 and 2007/08.
(AQW 221/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: Neither the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister nor the Community Relations Council has committed funding for the provision of English classes for non-English speakers during 2006/07 and 2007/08. Funding from both the department and the council is focused more on supporting interventions at local level to develop good relations between people of different community and ethnic backgrounds.

Office Cost Allowances

Mr Danny Kennedy asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail what discussions have taken place with Northern Ireland Office officials in respect of recently proposed increases to office cost allowances.
(AQW 242/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: Discussions between officials of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and officials from the Information Service of NIO took place during the period 8 – 11 May 2007. The purpose of these discussions was to provide clarification, following press inquiries, of the terms of the increase to Office Cost Allowances, applied by the Secretary of State before the restoration of devolution on 8 May.

Energy Efficiency Measures

Mr Danny Kennedy asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what plans are in place to offset the environmental impact of travel by Ministers, departmental officials and civil servants, and what renewable energy alternatives are currently used by the department.
(AQW 245/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister will be considering offsetting schemes as a potential adjunct to energy efficiency and renewable energy initiatives in the delivery of the Sustainable Development Strategy target to make the Government estate carbon neutral by 2015.

In common with other departments, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has been sourcing a proportion of its energy requirements from renewable sources since 2000. Latest figures indicate that government as a whole is on track to meet the current target of 10% by March 2008. In addition, plans for a wood-chip fuelled boiler to provide heat and power for the Stormont estate are being progressed under the Environment and Renewable Energy Fund programme.

Staffing in OFMDFM

Mr Danny Kennedy asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister how many civil servants are employed within the department; and what is the total number of press officers and special advisers currently employed within the department. (AQW 246/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: At 25 May 2007, there were 405 full-time and part-time civil servants employed within the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

That figure includes 8 Press Officers who provide support to the First Minister, deputy First Minister, Junior Ministers and corporate media support to departments across the Northern Ireland Civil Service. In addition, while the appointment process has not yet been completed, there are 6 Special Advisers currently employed in the Department.

Section 75 Northern Ireland Act 1998

Mr Mervyn Storey asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what assessment it has made of the impact of section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. (AQW 373/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland has a statutory responsibility under Schedule 9 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 to keep under review the effectiveness of the duties imposed by Section 75 of the same Act. The Commission has just published its' review of the effectiveness of Section 75. This review included a focus on the impact that the legislation has had on individuals within the nine categories covered by the legislation, and on the impact that the

legislation has had on the development and implementation of public policy. Further information on the review, the research underpinning it and the full report can be accessed on the Commission's website at www.equalityni.org

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Compensation for Alpha-nortestosterone

Mr Tom Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if compensation will be paid to cattle farmers who did not receive payments due to positive test results for alpha-nortestosterone, in cases where the hormone was not found to have been administered illegally. (AQW 228/07)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): The Department is required by law to remove any animal which tests positive for alpha-nortestosterone from the food chain, regardless of whether or not evidence of illegal administration has been found and is permitted to do so without incurring legal liability to pay compensation. Therefore, compensation cannot be paid to farmers in these cases. However, I have decided that all farmers who have had an on farm emergency slaughter male animal condemned due to a positive alpha-nortestosterone test will receive a goodwill payment equal to the value of the animal at the time of slaughter. This payment is in recognition of the fact that affected farmers have suffered financially through no fault of their own.

I have also met with affected farmers and apologised for the disturbance and indignation caused by on-farm searches, particularly at the outset, when the level of follow-up action was greater, before the emerging evidence prompted a progressively reduced and less intrusive approach.

Furthermore, I have undertaken to initiate a review of the handling of the alpha-nortestosterone issue and to see what lessons could be learned. The outcome of this review will be made public.

Agri-Food Business

Mr David Hilditch asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she will give her views on Wales becoming sustainable and producing all its own food; and what plans she has to consider this approach for Northern Ireland. (AQW 230/07)

Ms Gildernew: It is my understanding that this is not a policy which has been adopted by the Welsh Assembly Government.

However, our agri-food business is heavily export orientated: approximately 38% of production is sold on the local market; and 62% is exported.

Forestry Grants

Lord Morrow of Clogher Valley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (a) what forestry grants were paid out for tree planting in south Tyrone over the past three years; (b) what stipulations were laid down before payment of these grants; (c) what was the number of trees planted and their species; and (d) what is the location of all grant-aided tree planting schemes. (AQW 312/07)

Ms Gildernew:

- a) In total, 31 forestry grants were paid out in South Tyrone in the last three years: 28 Woodland Grant Scheme (WGS) Establishment Grants to support establishment of new woodlands, all of which were in receipt of Farm Woodland Premium Scheme (FWPS) annual premia payments. Two WGS Restocking Grants were paid to support replanting of woodland areas which had previously been clearfelled. In addition, one area of Short Rotation Coppice (SRC) was established under the SRC Challenge Fund grant.

The total value of grant aid paid to date is £117,000. This does not include second stage WGS payments (payable at the end of five years), ongoing commitments relating to FWPS annual premia payments and a final instalment payment for establishment of SRC under the Challenge Fund.

- b) All WGS grants were paid as part of an agreement under which the owner undertakes to maintain the woodlands in accordance with good forestry practice, encompassed within the UK Forestry Standard and associated guidelines, for a minimum of 30 years in the case of predominantly broadleaved woodlands and 20 years in the case of predominantly conifer or fast growing broadleaved woodlands.

FWPS annual payments are made for 10 or 15 years, depending upon the trees planted and how they will be managed. To receive annual payments over 15 years, more than 50% of the area of the wood must be planted with broadleaved trees. The wood must not be felled within 30 years following the first annual payment. Woodlands with 50% or more of the area of the wood planted with conifers, or fast growing broadleaves to be felled in less than 30

years (e.g. Poplar), receive annual payments for 10 years. They must not be felled within 20 years of the first annual payment. Woodlands which are to be felled before 20 years are not eligible for FWPS.

- c) The number of trees planted varied across the applications and was dependent upon the primary management objective of the woodland. Stocking levels varied between 1100 and 2500 stems per hectare for broadleaved woodlands. Conifer woodlands were established at a stocking density of 2250 stems per hectare. SRC was established at a stocking level of 15000 stems per hectare.

The approximate number of trees planted in the three year period was 691,000. This figure was broken down thus: 39,000 conifer (6%); 652,000 broadleaved (94%). The total area planted was 116.0 hectares.

- (d) Woodlands were established/replanted in the following townlands: Ballagh, Ballywallon Island, Bockets, Carnagat, Cavanboy, Corcreevy, Cranlome, Crilly, Cronghill, Cullamore, Culrevog, Demesne, Derrycloony, Derrycor, Dromore Lower, Drumderg, Drumgold, Drumlee, Drummond, Drumnamoless, Dungorman, Farriter, Glenroe, Killyfaddy, Killyneill, Kilnahusogue, Lismore, Lowerstown, Moyard, Seyloran, Shantavny Irish, Tattanellan, Tirelunan, Tullyglush.

A location map can be obtained from the Library.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

National Stadium in Belfast

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what discussions he has had with the Northern Ireland Supporters' Club regarding the location of the national stadium in Belfast. (AQW 108/07)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Poots): I am aware that representatives of the Amalgamation of Official Northern Ireland Supporters Clubs have expressed a preference for international soccer games to be played at a stadium located in Belfast. Representatives of the Amalgamation have recently agreed to a suggestion from me that I meet with them to discuss their views on this issue. A meeting is currently being arranged which I expect will take place in the near future.

National Stadium in Belfast

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he has met with Irish Football

Association (IFA) officials to consider a new stadium in Belfast, in light of the IFA securing a £10 million sponsorship package with Sky TV. (AQW 109/07)

Mr Poots: The Irish Football Association (IFA) has already agreed in principle to participate in a proposed Multi-Sports Stadium development at the Maze/Long Kesh. Discussions are on-going with IFA officials in relation to design and business planning issues associated with this proposal. I understand that the IFA have not been in discussions with either Belfast City Council or those bidding to develop a Stadium in Belfast. Neither a new stadium in Belfast nor the IFA's sponsorship package with Sky TV are being considered as part of these discussions.

Funding for NI Football Clubs

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what financial assistance is available for football clubs in (1) the Premier League; (2) the 1st Division; and (3) the Intermediate League, in the financial year 2007/08. (AQW 113/07)

Mr Poots: Sport Northern Ireland (SNI) is responsible for the development of sport in Northern Ireland including the distribution of funding. There are three funding programmes available to football clubs in (1) the Premier League; (2) the 1st Division; and (3) the Intermediate League, in the financial year 2007/08. These are as follows:

Building Sport is a Lottery programme which is open to all Premier League, First Division and Intermediate League football clubs.

Stadia Safety and Safety Management programmes are Exchequer programmes which are open to Premier League clubs only.

2012 Olympic Games

Mr David McClarty asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail what discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport in relation to Northern Ireland's involvement in the 2012 Olympic Games in London. (AQW 193/07)

Mr Poots: I have recently had a discussion, with Lord Seb Coe, Chair of the London Organising Committee for the Olympic Games (LOCOG), regarding Northern Ireland's involvement in the 2012 Games, and a further meeting is currently being arranged. My Department works in close partnership with the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) the lead Government Department for the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games, and with the LOCOG, to ensure Northern Ireland maximises the opportunities available from London hosting the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games. DCMS have established

an Inter-Departmental Group at which the Department for Culture, Arts and Leisure is represented at a senior level. DCAL is also represented on a LOCOG, Nations and Regions Group (NRG).

Arts Sector Funding

Mr David McNarry asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what discussions he and his departmental officials have had regarding increasing per capita spend on the arts sector, to bring Northern Ireland into line with the rest of the United Kingdom. (AQW 234/07)

Mr Poots: I have held discussions with officials in my Department regarding arts funding in the context of determining priorities for the 2007 Comprehensive Spending Review.

Development of Swimming Strategy

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if there is a strategy for the development of swimming; and what organisation is responsible for implementing that strategy. (AQW 292/07)

Mr Poots: At a national level, Swim Ireland has launched a strategy for the sport entitled "A Sport for Life and for All" 2002-2012. At a regional level, Swim Ulster has produced a development plan for the period 2006-2010 which aligns at the strategic goals, as set out by the parent body, Swim Ireland.

Swim Ireland and Swim Ulster are responsible for the implementation of their respective strategies/development plans.

Ulster-Scots Academy Implementation Group

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if it is his intention that, through 'resolute action', as required by part two of the Council of Europe Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, the Ulster-Scots language will be moved forward to part three status. (AQW 334/07)

Mr Poots: Proposals have been drafted by the Ulster-Scots Academy Implementation Group as to how Ulster-Scots can be advanced to Part III status of the Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. The activities and initiatives detailed in a road map which would meet the criteria to progress Ulster Scots to Part III status have been issued for comment to the appropriate government departments. Once received by my Department the collated responses will be forwarded to the Group.

Interdepartmental Charter Implementation Group

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what is the role of the Interdepartmental Charter Implementation Group in relation to the Council of Europe Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. (AQW 369/07)

Mr Poots: The terms of reference for Interdepartmental Charter Implementation Group are:

- To oversee and monitor the implementation of the Charter by Government Departments in Northern Ireland
- To prepare periodic reports for the Committee of Experts (COMEX) of the Council of Europe Council of Ministers
- To develop guidance to Northern Ireland Departments (and Whitehall Departments that operate in Northern Ireland) as necessary
- To advise on resource implications

Migration of Salmon and Smolts

Mr Barry McElduff asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what is his assessment of the impact of water abstraction from the River Camowen at Campsie, Omagh, to facilitate the generation of hydro-electricity, on the upward migration of salmon and the downward migration of smolts. (AQW 443/07)

Mr Poots: Sections 54, 58 and 59 of the Fisheries Act (Northern Ireland) 1966 require any persons abstracting water from a river or lake to put in place fishery protection measures to protect migratory fish and facilitate their passage.

The Department has assessed the impact of the hydro-electric station at Campsie and suitable fishery protection measures have been incorporated in the design of the station. These include provision of gratings to prevent fish entering the abstraction and return channels and the alteration of the existing fish pass to ensure that a compensatory flow of water is maintained in the river at all times to assist salmon and smolt migration

Supporters' Trust

Mr Peter Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what contact he has had with Supporters Direct; and what plans he has for the extension of the Supporters' Trust concept to Northern Ireland. (AQW 453/07)

Mr Poots: I wrote to the Chief Executive of Supporters Direct in Great Britain on 29 May 2007

offering a meeting with DCAL officials to discuss Supporters Direct's proposals for the extension of the Supporter's Trust concept to Northern Ireland. Any plans for the extension of the concept to Northern Ireland would be a matter, in the first instance, for Supporters Direct and football supporters in Northern Ireland.

EDUCATION

Autistic Spectrum Disorders

Mr Tommy Gallagher asked the Minister of Education if she will provide, for each Education and Library Board for the five financial years prior to 31 March 2007, the number of applications for funding of home based Autistic Spectrum Disorders programmes received; the number of those applications approved by each Board; and the number of applications awarded by tribunal. (AQW 26/07)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): I am advised by the Chief Executive Officers of the Education and Library Boards as follows;

Financial years 2002/03 - 2006/07	Number of applications	Number approved	Number awarded by tribunal
Belfast	20	8	0
North Eastern	6	2	0*
South Eastern	5	5	0
Southern	3	0	0
Western	11	8	0

* Two appeals are currently at tribunal but have not yet proceeded to hearing.

Glastry College

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Education when the new build for Glastry College will commence; and when the new school will be completed. (AQW 77/07)

Ms Ruane: The South Eastern Education and Library Board have advised that they expect construction work on the new build school for Glastry College should start in May 2008 and estimate that the new school should be completed in April 2010.

New Schools Programme for Newry and Armagh

Mr Dominic Bradley asked the Minister of Education when the new schools programme for the Newry and Armagh constituency, which was announced under direct rule, will commence; and if she will give the dates for completion of the programme on a school by school basis. (AQW 119/07)

Ms Ruane: Planning is underway for each of the schools which have been allocated funding for major capital building works in the Newry and Armagh constituency. The table below provides the estimated date for construction work to start on site and estimated completion dates for each of the schools. The dates are subject to each stage of the planning and building processes being completed and approved within agreed timescales.

School	Estimated Start Date	Estimated Completion Date
St Catherine's College, Armagh	Dec 2007	Nov 2008
Abbey Christian Brothers G.S. Newry	Sept 2007	Nov 2009
St Colman's College, Newry	May 2006 (actual start date)	Feb 2009
St Patrick's G.S. Armagh	April 2008	Sept 2010
Dromintee P.S.	Feb 2008	Feb 2009
St Joseph's Convent P.S. Newry	June 2008	Jan 2010
St Oliver Plunkett's P.S. Forkhill	Jan 2008	March 2009
St Clare's Abbey P.S. Newry	Aug 2007	March 2009
St Peter's P.S. Cloughreagh	July 2007	July 2009

A Shared Future: First Triennial Action Plan 2006-2009

Mr Dominic Bradley asked the Minister of Education when she will provide the education authorities with guidance as to the criteria for 'A Shared Future: First Triennial Action Plan 2006-2009'. (AQW 120/07)

Ms Ruane: The Department of Education has set up a working group to take forward the recommendations of 'A Shared Future: First Triennial Action Plan 2006 – 2009'. The Department is examining the Triennial Action Plan in the context of the Bain Reports recommendations on sharing and collaboration and will engage with education partners on this in due course.

Procurement for Capital Schemes

Mr Dominic Bradley asked the Minister of Education when she will implement the new procurement arrangements to facilitate the reduction of delays in the delivery of capital schemes. (AQW 121/07)

Ms Ruane: A review commissioned by the Department in 2004 recommended a radical shift away from how we currently procure capital projects, recommending that we should introduce strategic partnering arrangements. Given that such arrangements would take time to implement, the report recommended that we should develop Interim Framework Arrangements to help us to start delivering on the ground.

Steps are currently being taken to introduce three Framework Agreements covering: Construction Major Works for capital projects of a value greater than £500k; Construction Minor Works for capital projects valued at less than £500k; and a Professional Services Framework to provide client support services including Project Management.

The Major Works framework is being established to deliver capital projects totalling £550m - £650m through the life of the framework (max 4 years). The pre-qualification stage for the Construction Major Works framework closed on Friday 4 May and responses are currently being assessed to provide a shortlist who will be invited to tender as part of a primary competition.

In regard to the Professional Services Framework, a contract notice was placed in the Official Journal of the European Union (OJEU) on Wednesday 23 May. My officials are also working on the details of the Construction Minor Works framework and hope to issue a contract notice in the OJEU in the near future.

Funded Nursery School Places

Lord Morrow of Clogher Valley asked the Minister of Education how many funded nursery school places were allocated at the commencement of the 2006/07 school year in south Tyrone; and how this compares with the previous two years. (AQW 140/07)

Ms Ruane: The number of statutory nursery school places at the commencement of each of the three years 2004/05, 2005/06 and 2006/07 has remained the same. It is 156 places in statutory nursery schools and 104 in nursery units attached to statutory primary schools.

The number of pre-school places available in statutory nursery schools and nursery units in statutory primary schools is supplemented by places in voluntary and private playgroups and day nurseries that have pre-school places funded under the Pre-School Education Expansion Programme. Numbers in

respect of voluntary settings are 372 (2004/05), 374 (2005/06) and 433 (006/07).

South Tyrone has been interpreted as Dungannon Council Area – being the only council area within the Southern Education and Library Area that is part of Fermanagh South Tyrone.

Nursery School Places in Newtownards

Ms Michelle McIlveen asked the Minister of Education when funding will be made available to address the need for additional nursery school places within the Newtownards town area; and if she will confirm whether a site has been identified for a new unit. (AQW 144/07)

Ms Ruane: The South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB) Pre-School Education Advisory Group (PEAG) has confirmed that in the Newtownards town area the availability of pre-school places equates to 90% provision against the P1 intake to primary schools. This is sufficient to meet the Pre-School Education Expansion Programme (PSEEP) aim of providing a year of good quality pre-school education for every child whose parents wish it.

The SEELB are currently undertaking a review of provision in the Newtownards town area. I look forward to seeing any proposals in relation to pre-school places on completion of the review.

Primary School Teacher Training

Mr Ken Robinson asked the Minister of Education what measures she will introduce to ensure that sufficient in-service training is available to primary school teachers, to enable them to feel confident when introducing the proposed curriculum changes. (AQW 150/07)

Ms Ruane: The revised curriculum is being phased in from 2007/08 to 2009/10 to give schools time to prepare and adjust, with the first year being a transitional one. My Department has allocated £9million to the Partnership Management Board (PMB) over 2 years for a detailed programme of training for principals and teachers, sequenced in line with the phasing in timescales. The training programme is well underway and is being independently evaluated to inform its continuing roll-out. A range of guidance and support materials have been provided to all schools, with more to follow, and the Department has also made 5 school development days available to support schools in their preparation.

Educational Standards

Mr Ken Robinson asked the Minister of Education what progress has been made in addressing the specific problems affecting Protestant working class children, that were highlighted in the recent Westminster inquiry into educational standards in Northern Ireland. (AQW 151/07)

Ms Ruane: The Department's response is being directed at low achievement levels in all schools based on objective need throughout the north of Ireland.

The two research projects identified in the response to the Public Accounts Committee report are underway and will be completed shortly.

New policies for school improvement and literacy and numeracy are well advanced and will be consulted on in the Autumn.

The Department is working with the Education and Library Boards and other Departments on a long term, strategic intervention targeted at low performing schools.

Prematurely Retired Teachers

Mr Ken Robinson asked the Minister of Education what steps she will take to ensure that recently retired teachers who have left the profession as 'prematurely retired' are not re-employed as substitute teachers in schools, thereby reducing the opportunities available to recently qualified teachers. (AQW 152/07)

Ms Ruane: The recruitment of teachers is the responsibility of teachers' employers. However, guidance issued by the Department to employers exhorts them to give preference to newly qualified teachers and experienced non-retired teachers who are seeking employment. The Department has also advised employers that retired teachers should only be re-employed to provide short-term cover where newly qualified teachers or experienced non-retired teachers are unavailable. The capping of the levels of the central reimbursement of the costs of substitute cover also provides an incentive for schools to employ newly qualified teachers as substitutes.

Cost of Duplicating Publications in Irish

Lord Browne asked the Minister of Education to detail the full breakdown of costs to date for the implementation of the decision of the former Minister of Education to duplicate all publications in Irish. (AQW 168/07)

Ms Ruane: The former Minister for Education did not require all publications to be translated into Irish. I list below the cost of publications that have been translated into Irish since April 2000.

Financial Year	Cost of Publications (including leaflets/forms) Translated into Irish
2000/2001	£1,497.80
2001/2002	£7,427.00
2002/2003	£1,741.78
2003/2004	£3,970.20
2004/2005	£9,095.18
2005/2006	£4,075.23
2006/2007*	£2,522.58

* Figures for 2006/07 are incomplete as a number of invoices are still outstanding.

Enquiries in Irish

Lord Browne asked the Minister of Education to detail the percentage of enquiries made to her department using the Irish language. (AQW 169/07)

Ms Ruane: The information requested is not collected by my Department.

Annual Pre - Employment Checks

Mr David Hilditch asked the Minister of Education if she will confirm that annual pre-employment checks are completed for all staff employed in schools. (AQW 176/07)

Ms Ruane: A pre-employment check is carried out on all schools' staff, whether paid or unpaid, before employment starts. Where a concern occurs over an individual's conduct during the course of employment, the agency charged with investigating the concern will notify the employer who will take appropriate action.

The current guidance to employers is DE Circular 2006/06, Child Protection: Recruitment of People to work with Children and Young People in Educational Settings (available at www.deni.gov.uk)

Classroom Assistants

Mrs Dolores Kelly asked the Minister of Education when she will initiate job evaluations for classroom assistants in all Education and Library Board areas; if she will indicate the timeframe for completion; and if she will confirm that there will be adequate budgetary provision to meet any necessary commitments. (AQW 196/07)

Ms Ruane: The job evaluations for classroom assistants in all Board areas have in fact been initiated and completed and significant resources have already been provided by my Department to the five education and library boards. Until recently, the Boards and Trade Union Side (TUS) have been unable to reach final agreement on all related issues. However, I understand that as a result of recent further, extensive negotiations between the Boards and TUS considerable progress has been made and that the Boards are now ready to put a formal final offer to TUS. Before Boards can present proposals to Trade Union Side for final agreement they require Department of Education and Department of Finance and Personnel approval, to ensure that the proposed settlement is both workable and affordable from within the resources that have been made available. That approval was given on 31 May and represents a major step forward and will now, I hope, enable a final settlement to be achieved quickly and which will allow the funding to be released into the pay packets of eligible classroom assistants as soon as possible.

Victoria Primary School

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Education if she will consider retaining the old Assembly Hall building at Victoria Primary School in Ballyhalbert for use by the local community, instead of using the whole site as a turning circle. (AQW 205/07)

Ms Ruane: It is not feasible to retain the old Assembly Hall building at Victoria P.S. Ballyhalbert.

The entire school site, which is the minimum area recommended for a 7 classbase school, will be required for the provision of the new school building along with provision of adequate staff parking and a pupil drop-off zone, which are requirements of the Roads Service. These facilities, together with a new grass play area, will be provided on the site of the existing school building. It has been agreed with Ards Borough Council that the grass play area will be available for community use outside of school hours. The Assembly Hall in the new school building will also be available for community use on application to the Board of Governors of the school.

Teaching and Learning of Irish in Secondary Schools

Mr Dominic Bradley asked the Minister of Education what plans she has to provide teaching and learning resources for the teaching of Irish in post-primary English-medium schools in Northern Ireland. (AQW 206/07)

Ms Ruane: The Department is providing resources to the Southern Education and Library Board, on behalf of all boards, to support the development of an Irish language resource for post-primary English medium schools.

In addition, CCEA provides schools with generic guidance for language teaching and commercially produced resources are also available for schools to purchase.

The Department, however, does not prescribe the teaching and learning resources to be used in schools for any part of the curriculum - that is a matter for schools to decide, with advice from their Education and Library Board.

Male Staff Numbers in the Teaching Profession

Mr Mark Durkan asked the Minister of Education what steps she is taking to encourage men into the teaching and education profession. (AQW 211/07)

Ms Ruane: My Department's focus is on ensuring that there is appointment on merit to all posts in the education sector.

In the teaching profession, the gender balance has traditionally favoured women, particularly within the primary school sector. The providers of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) courses have been asked by my Department to draw attention to the under-representation of males within their Access Agreements (particularly in the primary sector) and to review their recruitment procedures. As a result, the Higher Education Institutions have sought to encourage males to apply for ITE courses through a range of actions, including: ensuring that males are well represented in publicity materials for their ITE courses; targeting all-male schools and male groups in mixed schools for careers talks and presentations; and, meeting regularly with careers teachers and senior staff to seek their help in encouraging males to apply for ITE courses.

The Education and Library Boards, who are the main employers of non-teaching staff, appoint on merit, in keeping with their Equal Opportunities policy. Advertised posts include a welcoming statement in line with that policy and which welcomes applications from all suitably qualified applicants, irrespective of gender.

Male Secondary School Teachers

Mr Mark Durkan asked the Minister of Education what percentage of (a) primary and (b) secondary school teachers are male, broken down by Education and Library Board area. (AQW 213/07)

Ms Ruane: The following table provides the number of male teachers and the corresponding percentage of all teachers in primary and post-primary schools by Education and Library Board area in Northern Ireland in 2005/06.

ELB area	School Type ^{1,2}	No. of Male Teachers	Percentage of all Teachers (%)
Belfast	Primary	254	18.5
	Post-primary	853	37.7
Western	Primary	275	17.9
	Post-primary	722	36.7
North Eastern	Primary	263	13.8
	Post-primary	862	36.3
South Eastern	Primary	311	16.1
	Post-primary	694	35.5
Southern	Primary	311	15.7
	Post-primary	836	35.6
Total	Primary	1414	16.2
	Post-primary	3967	36.4

- 1 Primary figures include teachers working in preparatory departments of grammar schools.
- 2 Post-primary figures include teachers working in secondary and grammar schools.

Cultural Rights of Children

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Education how she monitors the implementation, within the education system, of the cultural rights of children, as set out in Articles 29.1(c) and 30 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, (a) in the controlled sector; (b) in the maintained sector; (c) in the Irish-medium sector; (d) in the integrated sector; and (e) in the voluntary grammar sector. (AQW 235/07)

Ms Ruane: The revised statutory curriculum, to be introduced on a phased basis from September 2007, includes a new strand of Citizenship education, where young people will be able to learn about their cultural identity, cultural heritage and cultural diversity within our society.

The Education and Training Inspectorate monitors routinely aspects of provision, including citizenship, across all sectors of the education system.

Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Education where Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta is based; and how many staff it employs. (AQW 251/07)

Ms Ruane: Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta is based in:

Teach an Gheata Thiar	Westgate House
4 Sráid na Banríona	4 Queen's Street
Béal Feirste	Belfast
BT1 6ED	BT1 6ED

It employs 16 staff.

The funding provided to Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta since its establishment is as follows:

2001/02 £	2002/03 £	2003/04 £	2004/05 £	2005/06 £	2006/07 £
210,000	282,494	422,700	473,500	533,000	515,000

Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta was established in August 2000 to promote for the benefit of the public the development of all aspects of Irish-medium education.

Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta is a company limited by guarantee and not having a share capital, with charitable status, established under the Companies (Northern Ireland) Order 1986, and operating under a Memorandum and Articles of Association.

The membership of the Board of the Company is constituted as follows:

- 3 nominations from Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta
- 1 Gaeloiliúint
- 1 Council for Catholic maintained Schools
- 1 Universities Council for the Education of Teachers
- 1 Association of Education and Library Boards
- 2 Department of Education
- 1 Altram
- 1 Foras na Gaeilge
- 1 Pobal
- 1 Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta
- 1 Gaeleagras um Shainriachtanas Oideachais
- 1 Association of Northern Ireland Colleges
- 4 school principals
- 1 teacher
- 1 parent
- 1 school governor

Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Education what funding has been given to Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta in each year since its formation. (AQW 252/07)

Ms Ruane: Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta is based in:

Teach an Gheata Thiar	Westgate House
4 Sráid na Banríona	4 Queen's Street
Béal Feirste	Belfast
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- 1 Gaeleagras um Shainriachtanas Oideachais
- 1 Association of Northern Ireland Colleges
- 4 school principals
- 1 teacher
- 1 parent
- 1 school governor

Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Education when Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta was formed; and what is the role of this organisation.

(AQW 253/07)

Ms Ruane: Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta is based in:

Teach an Gheata Thiar	Westgate House
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210,000	282,494	422,700	473,500	533,000	515,000

Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta was established in August 2000 to promote for the benefit of the public the development of all aspects of Irish-medium education.

Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta is a company limited by guarantee and not having a share capital, with charitable status, established under the Companies (Northern Ireland) Order 1986, and operating under a Memorandum and Articles of Association.

The membership of the Board of the Company is constituted as follows:

- 3 nominations from Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta
- 1 Gaeloiliúint
- 1 Council for Catholic maintained Schools
- 1 Universities Council for the Education of Teachers
- 1 Association of Education and Library Boards
- 2 Department of Education
- 1 Altram
- 1 Foras na Gaeilge
- 1 Pobal
- 1 Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta
- 1 Gaeleagras um Shainriachtanas Oideachais
- 1 Association of Northern Ireland Colleges
- 4 school principals
- 1 teacher
- 1 parent
- 1 school governor

Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Education how Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta is constituted. (AQW 254/07)

Ms Ruane: Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta is based in:

Teach an Gheata Thiar	Westgate House
4 Sráid na Banríona	4 Queen's Street
Béal Feirste	Belfast
BT1 6ED	BT1 6ED

It employs 16 staff.

The funding provided to Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta since its establishment is as follows:

2001/02 £	2002/03 £	2003/04 £	2004/05 £	2005/06 £	2006/07 £
210,000	282,494	422,700	473,500	533,000	515,000

Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta was established in August 2000 to promote for the benefit of the public the development of all aspects of Irish-medium education.

Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta is a company limited by guarantee and not having a share capital, with charitable status, established under the Companies (Northern Ireland) Order 1986, and operating under a Memorandum and Articles of Association.

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- 1 Gaeleagras um Shainriachtanas Oideachais
- 1 Association of Northern Ireland Colleges
- 4 school principals
- 1 teacher
- 1 parent
- 1 school governor

Cultural Identity of Children

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Education if her department has a strategy or action plan for the implementation, within the education system, for the child to learn about 'his or her own cultural identity', as set out in Articles 29.1(c) and 30 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. (AQW 255/07)

Ms Ruane: The revised statutory curriculum, to be introduced on a phased basis from September 2007, includes a new strand of Citizenship education, where young people will be able to learn about their cultural identity, cultural heritage and cultural diversity within our society.

In addition, my Department is publicly consulting on a draft policy to assist the promotion of equality of opportunity for all children and young people who have English as an Additional Language. Part of this policy will be the promotion of cultural awareness in schools, through the new Ethnic Minority Achievement Service.

Industrial Tribunal Claims - Education and Library Boards

Mr Danny Kennedy asked the Minister of Education to detail payments made in settlement of cases brought for industrial tribunal claims in each Education and Library Board over the past two years. (AQW 256/07)

Ms Ruane: The Education and Library Boards tell me that £146,500 was paid out in settlement of cases brought for industrial tribunal claims during the 2005/06 and 2006/07 financial years. A breakdown of the amount paid out by Board in these two years is provided in the table below:

	£
BELB	40,000
NEELB	11,000
SEELB	41,000
SELB	51,000
WELB	3,500

Revised Literacy and Numeracy Strategy

Mr Dominic Bradley asked the Minister of Education what level of resources she will devote to the revised Literacy and Numeracy Strategy. (AQW 268/07)

Ms Ruane: The revised literacy and numeracy strategy will be available for consultation in early autumn 2007. Funding levels will be dependent on the content of the finalised strategy and the CSR outcome.

Free Pre-School Places

Mr Dominic Bradley asked the Minister of Education if she will make available the necessary resources to ensure that all children who are entitled to a free pre-school place this year will get one. (AQW 272/07)

Ms Ruane: The aim of the Pre-School Education Expansion Programme is to provide one year of high quality funded pre-school education, in the year before compulsory education, for every child whose parents wish it.

With the additional finance provided by the Children and Young People Funding Package, £800k in respect of the 2007/08 financial year, it is expected that this objective will be attained. However, it should be noted that demand is not geographically exactly matched to supply.

Education and Library Boards, who operate the admissions process, are now going through the re-allocation process. It is hoped that they will be in a position to confirm any shortfall in funded places in their respective areas by mid June.

Movilla High School, Newtownards

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Education to supply figures for enrolment for Movilla High School, Newtownards, for the last 3 years. (AQW 275/07)

Ms Ruane: The enrolment in Movilla High School over the last three years was as follows:

2004/05	779
2005/06	698
2006/07	652

Physical Education in Schools

Mr Robin Newton asked the Minister of Education to confirm the number of hours devoted to sport/games within primary and secondary level education. (AQW 289/07)

Ms Ruane: Physical Education is compulsory for all pupils from age 4 to 16. The Department does not prescribe the amount of time schools should spend on any part of the curriculum. It is a matter for schools to determine how much time is devoted to PE, but they are encouraged to provide pupils with at least 2 hours of physical activity per week.

Recently I met with the GAA and the IFA to look at ways of providing more opportunities for our young people to get involved in sport and develop their physical literacy skills.

Wind Turbines at Schools

Mr Ken Robinson asked the Minister of Education what advice her department provides to schools seeking to erect wind turbines within their grounds; and how does her department co-operate with the Department for the Environment to ensure that all risks and impact upon pupils, staff and local residents have been fully assessed. (AQW 310/07)

Ms Ruane: The Department does not provide specific advice on the installation of wind turbines at schools. The installation of a wind turbine is subject to planning permission.

Suspensions and Expulsions from Secondary Schools

Mr Alastair Ross asked the Minister of Education how many pupils have been (a) expelled, and (b) suspended, from secondary schools in Northern Ireland in each of the last five years. (AQW 329/07)

Ms Ruane: The information requested is shown in the following table:

School Year	No of pupils suspended	No of pupils expelled
2000/01	4,477	78
2001/02	4,690	76
2002/03	5,004	67
2003/04	5,194	69
2004/05	5,101	61

The suspension and expulsions statistics for 2005/06 school year are currently being analysed by the Department's statistics branch and will be placed on the Department of Education website when this has been completed.

Expulsions and Suspensions from Primary Schools

Mr Alastair Ross asked the Minister of Education how many pupils have been (a) expelled, and (b) suspended, from primary schools in Northern Ireland in each of the last five years. (AQW 330/07)

Ms Ruane: The information requested is shown in the following table:

School Year	No of pupils suspended	No of pupils expelled
2000/01	263	2
2001/02	361	0
2002/03	278	3
2003/04	290	2
2004/05	313	2

The suspension and expulsions statistics for 2005/06 school year are currently being analysed by the Department's statistics branch and will be placed on the DE website when this has been completed.

Blind and Partially-Sighted Pupils

Mr Alastair Ross asked the Minister of Education what steps are being taken to ensure that blind and partially-sighted pupils have access to school text books. (AQW 331/07)

Ms Ruane: In early 2007 the Department of Education established a working party to consider the adequacy of the arrangements being made by Education and Library Boards for the provision of suitably adapted materials for pupils with visual impairment. The group has reported and the Department will now consider the recommendations made. The Department will then take this forward to ensure that improved arrangements are put in place to meet the needs identified.

Attacks on Teachers

Mr Alastair Ross asked the Minister of Education how many attacks on teachers have been reported in each of the last five years. (AQW 332/07)

Ms Ruane: The Department does not collect the information requested.

However, from the 2002/03 school year, statistics on the reasons for suspension have been gathered annually from each education and library board and relate to the number of individual suspensions, not to the number of pupils suspended.

TABLE 1 DETAILS THE NUMBER OF SUSPENSIONS¹ FOR PHYSICAL ATTACKS ON STAFF IN THE 2002/03 - 2004/05 SCHOOL YEARS:

TABLE 1

Year	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05
No. of suspensions for physical attacks on staff	365	320	262

Note:

- 1 The count of occasions is based on each incidence of suspension, where an incident is defined as a count from the first day a pupil was suspended until the last day suspended. Prior to 2004/05, the count of occasions was based on each record of suspension identified by the education and library boards, and in some instances longer periods of suspension may have had more than one record. This change is due to an improvement in the data collection systems for suspensions in the education and library boards, which has enabled better analysis of the data. As a result, the number of occasions pupils were suspended in 2004/05 has decreased from previous years. However, care should be taken when comparing the number of occasions in 2004/05 with the number of occasions in previous years.

Reasons for expulsion were first collected in 2003/04.

TABLE 2 BELOW SHOWS THE TOTAL NUMBER OF PUPILS EXPELLED FOR PHYSICAL ATTACKS ON STAFF FOR THE 2003/04 AND 2004/05 SCHOOL YEARS:

TABLE 2

Year	2003/04	2004/05
No. of expulsions for physical attacks on staff	7	7

The suspension and expulsions statistics for 2005/06 school year are currently being analysed by the Department's statistics branch and will be placed on the DE website when this has been completed.

Kilcooley Primary School

Mr Alex Easton asked the Minister of Education what assessment she has made of the status of Kilcooley Primary School, in line with the Department of Social Development's 10 year plan for neighbourhood renewal and regeneration for the Kilcooley Estate, Bangor.

(AQW 335/07)

Ms Ruane: Kilcooley Primary School is a controlled school within the remit of the South-Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB) and therefore the future planning of the school is a matter for the SEELB in the first instance.

Following a review of controlled primary provision throughout the Bangor area, the SEELB produced a strategic plan that was published by the Board in December 2005. One of the recommendations is for an Economic Appraisal to consider a number of options in relation to Kilcooley PS, with the aim of meeting the needs of the future primary population within a climate of demographic decline.

The SEELB is aware of the Department of Social Development's (DSD) neighbourhood renewal activities in the Kilcooley estate and has yet to bring forward any proposals to the Department of Education in respect of Kilcooley Primary School.

Conlig Primary School

Mr Alex Easton asked the Minister of Education what are her plans for Conlig Primary School, in relation to its application for integrated status.

(AQW 336/07)

Ms Ruane: Whilst I am aware that Conlig Primary School is considering publishing another development proposal to support the transformation of the school to controlled integrated status, a proposal has not yet been brought forward. I cannot therefore comment further.

Teaching of Evolution, Creations and Intelligent Design

Mr Mervyn Storey asked the Minister of Education what (a) discussions; (b) meetings; and (c) correspondence her department has had with the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment in the last three years about the teaching of (i) evolution; (ii) creationism; and (iii) Intelligent Design, in schools in Northern Ireland. (AQW 337/07)

Ms Ruane: The Department of Education has engaged with the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) in the context of previous questions and correspondence about the teaching of evolution, creationism and intelligent design. In carrying out its statutory duty to advise on curriculum matters, CCEA has considered the place of evolution, creationism and intelligent design in curricular areas and examination specifications, and has had discussions with interested parties on these issues.

Expenditure on Substitute Teachers

Mr Alastair Ross asked the Minister of Education how much money has been spent on substitute teachers in each Education and Library Board in each of the last five years. (AQW 351/07)

Ms Ruane: The information requested is provided in the attached table: -

	2002-03 £	2003-04 £	2004-05 £	2005-06 £	2006/07 £
Belfast	6,842,327	7,014,820	6,376,348	6,669,593	7,203,867
North Eastern	9,165,736	9,448,192	8,754,272	10,005,241	8,289,562
South Eastern	7,822,331	8,210,121	7,588,690	8,470,610	10,259,767
Southern	8,883,186	9,406,939	9,446,171	10,773,341	8,515,692
Western	7,095,673	7,526,599	7,413,210	8,069,669	11,019,450
Total	39,809,253	41,606,671	39,578,691	43,988,454	45,288,338

Notes

1. Cover based on hours and days paid via job-costing module at rate at time of payment
2. Cover based on financial years
3. Excludes Voluntary Grammar Schools, FE Colleges, Special and GMI schools.
4. Excludes employers superannuation & national insurance

Pre-School Places in Glenavy/Crumlin Areas

Mr Thomas Burns asked the Minister of Education what action will be taken to review immediately the provision of pre-school places in the Glenavy/Crumlin areas, in response to demographic changes which have shifted the location and size of demand. (AQW 361/07)

Ms Ruane: The Glenavy electoral ward falls within the South Eastern Education and Library Board area. For the 2007/08 school year there are 65 pre-school places available. Using the Primary 1 enrolment number (68) from the school census as a proxy for the pre-school cohort, indicates a level of provision of 96%.

The Crumlin electoral ward falls within the North Eastern Education and Library Board area. For the 2007/08 school year there are 222 pre-school places available. Using the Primary 1 enrolment number (148) from the school census as a proxy for the pre-school cohort, indicates a level of provision of 150%.

The Boards and the Department continue to monitor pre-school provision in the respective areas in order to address any need for additional pre-school places when identified.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Vocational Training Provider Contracts

Mr Mervyn Storey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the reasons why his department only allocates vocational training provider contracts to one provider per council area. (AQW 157/07)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): Although normal practice, it is not always necessary to use NVQ frameworks in undertaking a Modern Apprenticeship. However, all apprentice frameworks must include a competence based element assembled from the National Occupational Standards set by the employment sector for which the framework is designed and, if required, other employment sectors.

The content of the competence element may be determined by the Sector Skills Councils, Sector Bodies and their employers. Subject to assessment methods designed to test competency, it is not a mandatory requirement to use National Vocational Qualifications. Alternatives may be considered.

Expanded Apprenticeship Courses

Mr Mervyn Storey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what analysis he has made of the content of expanded apprenticeship courses; and if he will prioritise the views of small and medium-sized enterprises in determining the content of such courses. (AQW 158/07)

Sir Reg Empey: With the introduction of Training for Success, apprenticeships are being expanded from the current Level 3 apprenticeship provision to include Level 2 Apprenticeships.

All apprentices follow a training framework approved for delivery and developed in conjunction with the relevant industry. To maintain both quality and relevance of content, Sector Skills Councils and Standard Setting Bodies are required to take the views of employers of all sizes into consideration when developing training frameworks for apprenticeships. The Department for Employment and Learning is working with the Skills Councils to develop Sector Skills Agreements and in doing so is encouraging engagement with the full range of employers for that sector, including SMEs.

Vocational Training Report

Mr Mervyn Storey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what analysis his department has made of the report on vocational

training conducted by the Northern Ireland Audit Office; what recommendations his department has made in response to the findings of the report; and what is his assessment of the effectiveness of those recommendations. (AQW 159/07)

Sir Reg Empey: The Department, in its Memorandum of Reply, 16 December 2005, responded to the 23 conclusions of the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) following on from the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) report on Jobskills. In the response the Department outlined the actions it would take. The two main actions have been the establishment of a new Quality Performance Branch and the creation of a new professional and technical training provision, Training for Success, to commence 3 September 2007.

In January 2007 the Department published 'Success through Excellence: A Quality Improvement Strategy for the Further Education and Training System'. Implementation of this strategy will have a positive impact. The composition and structure of Training for Success addresses the conclusions and recommendations of PAC. The implementation of Training for Success will be reviewed during its first year.

Leitch Review of Skills

Mr Mervyn Storey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if he accepts the recommendation of the Leitch Review of Skills, to substantially expand apprenticeships by 2020; and what proposals are being brought forward to achieve this. (AQW 160/07)

Sir Reg Empey: The Leitch Report published in December 2006 contained a recommendation to achieve 500,000 apprentices in the UK by 2020. The Department of Employment and Learning had previously set its own target of 10,000 apprentices in training by 2010.

In Northern Ireland an Interdepartmental Group has been established, chaired by DEL, to develop a response to the Leitch Review of skills. This group is currently drafting an initial Northern Ireland response which will then be consulted on with key stakeholders before going through the Assembly processes.

In respect of Leitch related decisions, the DEL Minister agreed that the appointment of the position of Chair of the new UK-wide Skills Commission. This post was advertised in late February 2007. With that exception no decisions have been taken in relation to the Leitch Review recommendations.

ESOL Courses

Mr Alastair Ross asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many courses are available on teaching English as a second language. (AQW 328/07)

Sir Reg Empey: The Department provided funding for 347 English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses in 2005/2006, the most recent period for which figures are available. These figures relate only to ESOL courses funded by the Department in the statutory further education sector. No figures are available for ESOL courses provided by FE colleges outside of the Department's funding arrangements, or for similar courses provided by non-statutory organisations.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Ballycastle to Campbeltown Ferry

Mr Peter Weir asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what plans he has to provide support for the reinstatement of the Ballycastle-Campbeltown ferry. (AQW 142/07)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Dodds): In light of the current Comprehensive Spending review process and public spending priorities that lie ahead there are no current plans to provide financial support for the reinstatement of the Ballycastle to Campbeltown ferry service. However my Department and its agencies remain committed to enhancing economic opportunities across the North Antrim area and will continue to seek investment and entrepreneurial support to promote economic prosperity in the region.

Tourism Ireland

Mr David Hilditch asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if he will give an assessment of Tourism Ireland's marketing of Northern Ireland as a tourist destination. (AQW 173/07)

Mr Dodds: Tourism Ireland (TIL) was established in 2000 to promote Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic as a preferred tourist destination in the rest of the United Kingdom and overseas. From 2003, (when the methodology for collating tourism statistics was revised), to 2006, out-of-state visitor spend grew by 31% to £371million. Tourism Ireland operates 19 overseas offices and it is active in 27 markets providing Northern Ireland with unprecedented exposure to

potential international visitors. My Department will continue to set stretching targets for the company, and monitor its performance closely to ensure that Northern Ireland receives value for money for its investment. I will be meeting TIL Officials shortly to consider how we might build on their performance.

Employment in Manufacturing

Mr David Simpson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many people were employed in manufacturing in the last year (a) in total; and (b) broken down by constituency.

(AQW 216/07)

Mr Dodds:

- (a) The most up-to-date estimates of the number of employee jobs in the Manufacturing sector in Northern Ireland are available from the Quarterly Employment Survey (QES). Provisional estimates for December 2006 show there were 85,560 employee jobs in the Manufacturing sector.
- (b) Estimates of the number of employee jobs below Northern Ireland level are only available from the Census of Employment on a biennial basis and the most up-to-date figures relate to September 2005. Estimates of the number of employee jobs in Manufacturing at September 2005 for each Parliamentary Constituency Area within Northern Ireland can be found in Table 1 below.

TABLE 1 NUMBER OF EMPLOYEE JOBS IN MANUFACTURING AT SEPTEMBER 2005 FOR EACH PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY AREA

Parliamentary Constituency Area	September 2005
Belfast East	6,948
Belfast North	3,945
Belfast South	2,024
Belfast West	1,987
East Antrim	4,010
East Londonderry	4,453
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	7,658
Foyle	4,801
Lagan Valley	6,629
Mid-Ulster	7,576
Newry & Armagh	4,076
North Antrim	7,094
North Down	1,637
South Antrim	5,609

Parliamentary Constituency Area	September 2005
South Down	3,548
Strangford	2,990
Upper Bann	9,514
West Tyrone	3,198
Northern Ireland	87,697

Source: Census of Employment, DETI

Potential Inward Investor Visits to Northern Ireland

Mr Simon Hamilton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of company visits organised by and/or through Invest NI in each of the last five years, broken down by (i) each of the 26 local government districts; and (ii) each of the 18 Northern Ireland constituencies.

(AQW 236/07)

Mr Dodds: The two tables below show the breakdown of the number of potential investor visits to Northern Ireland District Councils and Parliamentary constituencies since April 2002. It should be noted that a Council area may include more than one Parliamentary constituency and a Parliamentary constituency may cover more than one Council area. Invest NI does not determine locations for visits for a potential investor: this decision is taken by the investor.

TABLE 1 - POTENTIAL INWARD INVESTOR VISITS PER NORTHERN IRELAND DISTRICT COUNCIL AREA:

	02/03	03/04	04/05	05/06	06/07
Antrim	8	6	5	2	1
Ards	3	1	0	2	0
Armagh	4	1	1	1	0
Ballymena	0	1	0	1	0
Ballymoney	1	0	0	0	0
Banbridge	0	0	0	0	0
Belfast	78	79	82	62	67
Carrickfergus	7	4	1	1	1
Castlereagh	0	1	3	1	1
Coleraine	8	2	1	1	0
Cookstown	0	0	0	0	4
Craigavon	3	6	3	1	6
Derry	22	18	6	8	15
Down	3	1	0	0	0
Dungannon	0	1	1	0	0
Fermanagh	2	0	0	1	0

	02/03	03/04	04/05	05/06	06/07
Larne	1	0	3	2	0
Limavady	1	0	0	0	0
Lisburn	4	4	2	0	0
Magherafelt	1	1	0	0	0
Moyle	0	0	0	0	0
Newry & Mourne	7	4	5	9	6
Newtownabbey	20	6	4	8	17
North Down	4	2	2	5	1
Omagh	5	1	0	1	5
Strabane	1	3	2	0	0
Total	183	142	121	106	124

Land Held by Invest NI for Industrial Use

Mr Simon Hamilton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the amount of land held by Invest NI for industrial use, broken down by (i) each of the 26 local government districts; and (ii) each of the 18 Northern Ireland constituencies. (AQW 237/07)

Mr Dodds: Invest NI holds 2,793 acres of land across Northern Ireland. Almost 1,945 acres of its estate are already occupied by Clients leaving 848 acres currently available for industrial use.

The two tables below show the breakdown of the 848 available acres by local government district council area (Table 1) and by parliamentary constituency area (Table 2).

TABLE 1:
INVEST NI LAND BY DISTRICT COUNCIL AREA AT MAY 2007

Council Area	Land Available	Land Holding
	Total Acres	Total Acres
Antrim	27	110
Ards	9	32
Armagh	3	33
Ballymena	34	81
Ballymoney	2	13
Banbridge	0	27
Belfast	9	137
Carrickfergus	22	108
Castlereagh	0	13
Coleraine	50	74
Cookstown	6	38
Craigavon	212	360
Derry	107	419
Down	53	129

Council Area	Land Available	Land Holding
	Total Acres	Total Acres
Dungannon	59	90
Fermanagh	38	126
Larne	5	36
Limavady	15	51
Lisburn	26	313
Magherafelt	26	72
Moyle	3	6
Newry and Mourne	2	100
Newtownabbey	103	283
North Down	20	63
Omagh	16	47
Strabane	2	29
Total at May 2007	848	2793

TABLE 2:
INVEST NI LAND BY PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY AREA AT MAY 2007

Parliamentary Constituency	Land Available	Land Holding
	Total Acres	Total Acres
Belfast East	0	0
Belfast North	3	16
Belfast South	0	7
Belfast West	20	190
East Antrim	27	144
East Londonderry	65	126
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	96	217
Foyle	107	419
Lagan Valley	12	239
Mid Ulster	32	110
Newry and Armagh	3	37
North Antrim	39	100
North Down	20	63
South Antrim	131	394
South Down	55	225
Strangford	9	45
Upper Bann	212	385
West Tyrone	18	76
Total at May 2007	848	2793

Investment by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board

Mr Simon Hamilton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the total amount of investment made by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board in each of the last five years, broken down by (i) each of the 26 local government districts; and (ii) each of the 18 Northern Ireland constituencies. (AQW 239/07)

Mr Dodds: The total amount of financial assistance paid to tourism related businesses by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board in each of the last five years is

broken down in the two tables attached. Table A details the financial assistance paid broken down by each of the 26 local government districts while Table B shows the analysis for each for the 18 Northern Ireland constituencies.

While the investment is shown on a council / constituency basis, the economic and tourism benefits that this brings will have a much wider effect. For example, investment in the five Signature Projects will bring benefits across all of Northern Ireland.

Also, Invest NI have provided £12,094,558 to the hotel sector over the past five years.

TABLE A

FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE PAID TO ALL TOURISM PROJECTS BY DISTRICT COUNCIL

District Council	2002/2003	2003/2004	2004/2005	2005/2006	2006/2007	Total
Across all Councils and X Border*	£953,401.82	£2,562,807.68	£1,487,400.89	£1,199,553.76	£4,322,949.52	£10,526,113.67
Antrim Borough Council	£9,700.00			£11,113.17		£20,813.17
Ards Borough Council	£56,736.58	£57,375.74		£3,660.65		£117,772.97
Armagh & City District Council	£26,630.56	£24,356.71				£50,987.27
Ballymena Borough Council	£1,500.00	£1,000.00				£2,500.00
Ballymoney Borough Council		£13,047.18				£13,047.18
Banbridge District Council						£0.00
Belfast City Council	£53,800.63	£70,400.00	£27,814.95	£158,928.61	£252,643.59	£563,587.78
Carrickfergus Borough Council		£500.00			£8,231.61	£8,731.61
Castlereagh Borough Council	£1,500.00					£1,500.00
Coleraine Borough Council	£87,673.88	£72,427.32		£2,272.82	£15,259.37	£177,633.39
Cookstown District Council	£100,348.63					£100,348.63
Craigavon Borough Council						£0.00
Derry City Council	£151,307.26	£175,535.10	£99,498.28	£679,784.00	£1,726,164.46	£2,832,289.10
Down District Council	£81,127.98	£18,691.99		£72,333.18	£9,923.27	£182,076.42
Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council		£20,790.00	£2,310.00		£63,693.98	£86,793.98
Fermanagh District Council	£157,503.48	£265,129.58	£75,592.42	£125,936.20	£80,678.09	£704,839.77
Larne Borough Council	£1,500.00				£6,242.44	£7,742.44
Limavady Borough Council	£2,300.00	£4,602.91	£3,000.00			£9,902.91
Lisburn Borough Council	£3,500.00	£2,021.79		£2,510.40	£11,380.34	£19,412.53
Magherafelt District Council	£17,416.40			£3,974.68		£21,391.08
Moyle District Council	£24,185.92	£14,410.75	£14,709.16	£40,049.44	£71,952.19	£165,307.46
Newry & Mourne District Council	£37,397.60	£3,379.51	£36,801.19		£138,115.65	£215,693.95
Newtownabbey Borough Council						£0.00
North Down Borough Council	£700.00			£1,493.37		£2,193.37
Omagh District Council	£14,453.28		£7,093.37			£21,546.65
Strabane District Council	£25,432.99				£4,158.64	£29,591.63
	£1,808,117.01	£3,306,476.26	£1,754,220.26	£2,301,610.28	£6,711,393.15	£15,881,816.96

* Relates to projects across multiple district council areas or cross border

TABLE B
FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE PAID TO ALL TOURISM PROJECTS BY CONSTITUENCY

Constituency	2002/2003	2003/2004	2004/2005	2005/2006	2006/2007	Total
Across all constituencies & x-border*	£953,401.82	£2,562,807.68	£1,487,400.89	£1,199,553.76	£4,322,949.52	£10,526,113.67
Belfast East	£17,500.00	£49,400.00	£10,000.00	£6,565.70		£83,465.70
Belfast North	£4,000.00	£1,000.00	£4,500.00	£3,891.56		£13,391.56
Belfast South	£13,800.63		£13,314.95	£137,655.95	£252,643.59	£417,415.12
Belfast West	£20,000.00	£20,000.00		£10,815.40		£50,815.40
East Antrim	£400.00	£500.00			£14,474.05	£15,374.05
East Londonderry	£49,093.95	£77,030.23	£3,000.00	£2,272.82	£13,002.07	£144,399.07
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	£157,503.48	£265,495.09	£75,592.42	£125,936.20	£144,372.07	£768,899.26
Foyle	£174,740.25	£175,535.10	£99,498.28	£679,784.00	£1,730,323.10	£2,859,880.73
Lagan Valley	£3,800.00	£2,021.79		£2,510.40	£11,380.34	£19,712.53
Mid Ulster	£118,765.03	£20,790.00	£2,310.00	£3,974.68		£145,839.71
Newry & Armagh	£57,274.62	£23,991.20	£7,000.00		£6,050.00	£94,315.82
North Antrim	£68,065.85	£28,457.93	£14,709.16	£51,162.61	£74,209.49	£236,605.04
North Down	£28,700.00	£8,000.00		£3,266.34		£39,966.34
South Antrim	£8,000.00					£8,000.00
South Down	£69,381.52	£14,071.50	£29,801.19	£72,333.18	£141,988.92	£327,576.31
Strangford	£46,736.58	£57,375.74		£1,887.68		£106,000.00
Upper Bann	£500.00					£500.00
West Tyrone	£16,453.28		£7,093.37			£23,546.65
	£1,808,117.01	£3,306,476.26	£1,754,220.26	£2,301,610.28	£6,711,393.15	£15,881,816.96

* Across all constituencies and cross border relates to projects which straddle more than one Parliamentary Constituency

Wind Farms

Mr Daithí McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the amount of electricity produced by wind farms in 2004; 2005; and 2006.

(AQW 264/07)

Mr Dodds: The amount of electricity produced by Northern Ireland wind farms in the past 3 years is:

2004/05:	241 Gigawatt-hours (GWh)
2005/06:	266 GWh
2006/07:	335 GWh

Community Interest Companies

Mr Jonathan Craig asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what plans are in place to promote and raise public awareness of Community Interest Companies; and how many social economy enterprises have taken on CIC status since the award came into effect earlier this year.

(AQW 318/07)

Mr Dodds: The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) hosted an awareness raising seminar on 30 March 2007 in Belfast. The keynote speaker was John Hanlon, CIC Regulator and the event was attended by around 80 delegates. The event was featured in the Belfast Telegraph, Irish News, Newsletter and on the UTV and other websites. Since the legislation came into effect on 6 April 2007 there have been no CICs incorporated by Companies Registry.

Closure of Belfast City Hall and Ulster Museum

Mr David McNarry asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether his department has made an economic assessment of the possible negative effects on the local tourism industry of simultaneously closing Belfast City Hall and the Ulster Museum, and, if so, what are the cost implications of these long-term closures.

(AQW 321/07)

Mr Dodds: The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) has not carried out an economic

assessment of the possible effects on the local tourism industry of the long term closure of Belfast City Hall and the Ulster Museum. However, DETI, Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB), Belfast City Council (BCC), Belfast Visitor and Convention Centre (BVCC) and Tourism Ireland Ltd. (TIL) met recently to discuss a range of issues including the closure of these attractions.

It was agreed that BCC will liaise with DETI regarding a list of other government buildings that should be open to the public and that BCC and BVCC will begin a process of encouraging other attractions to consider opening or extending their opening times.

Tourists Attractions in East Antrim

Mr Alastair Ross asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what efforts he is making to ensure that areas within East Antrim are being specifically promoted as tourist attractions.

(AQW 349/07)

Mr Dodds: Areas within East Antrim are promoted as part of the Causeway Coastal Route. This is an international touring route which links key attractions and destinations together to increase visitor numbers, spend and length of stay in this area.

The Northern Ireland Tourist Board supports the promotion of the attractions along the route through the Causeway Coast and Glens Regional Tourism Partnership as well as ensuring that the route is visibly promoted within the Belfast Welcome Centre; ensuring visitors arriving in Belfast are encouraged to travel along the Causeway Coast.

The Causeway Coastal Route is promoted internationally by Tourism Ireland; in 2006 this world class driving route gained international recognition through extensive coverage in several publications including the Lonely Planet and Guardian Newspaper.

Out of State Visitors

Mr Alastair Ross asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many tourists visited Northern Ireland in each of the last five years; and what was the average duration of their stay.

(AQW 350/07)

Mr Dodds: Figures relating to the number of out of state visitors (who spent at least one night in Northern Ireland) and their average length of stay during the period 2002-2006 are outlined in the Table 1 below.

TABLE 1: NUMBER OF OUT-OF-STATE¹ VISITORS STAYING AT LEAST ONE NIGHT IN NORTHERN IRELAND & AVERAGE LENGTH OF STAY (2002-2006)

	2002 ²	2003	2004	2005	2006
Visitors (million)	1.741	1.896	1.985	1.972	1.979
Average Length of Stay (nights)	4.9	4.7	4.3	4.8	4.9

1 Out of state refers to visitors from outside Northern Ireland, i.e. excludes domestic tourism.

2 Due to changes in methodology 2003-2006 data should not be compared with data pre 2003.

Economically Inactive People

Mr Simon Hamilton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what is the estimated number of economically inactive people in Northern Ireland, broken down by District Council area.

(AQW 367/07)

Mr Dodds: The latest available estimates for the number of economically inactive persons aged 16 and over in each District Council area can be found in the table below. The figures relate to the period October – December 2006.

ECONOMICALLY INACTIVE PERSONS AGED 16 AND OVER BY DISTRICT COUNCIL AREA

District Council Area	Number of Economically Inactive persons aged 16+
Antrim	14,000
Ards	29,000
Armagh	14,000
Ballymena	19,000
Ballymoney	8,000*
Banbridge	17,000
Belfast	98,000
Carrickfergus	9,000
Castlereagh	16,000
Coleraine	20,000
Cookstown	8,000*
Craigavon	25,000
Derry	35,000
Down	18,000
Dungannon	15,000
Fermanagh	23,000
Larne	8,000
Limavady	13,000

District Council Area	Number of Economically Inactive persons aged 16+
Lisburn	32,000
Magherafelt	10,000
Moyle	6,000*
Newry & Mourne	22,000
Newtownabbey	25,000
North Down	25,000
Omagh	14,000
Strabane	18,000
Northern Ireland	538,000

* Estimates are based on small sample sizes and are therefore subject to a higher than usual degree of sampling variability. They should therefore be treated with caution.

Source: Labour Force Survey, Quarter 4 (Oct-Dec) 2006

ENVIRONMENT

Equine Industry

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment what discussions she has had with representatives of the equine industry to consider changes to planning legislation, so that the equine industry is treated similarly to other agricultural sectors. (AQW 72/07)

Mrs Foster: I have not had discussions with representatives of the equine industry to consider changes to planning legislation. Changes in planning legislation would be linked to the Agriculture Act which is a matter for the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development.

Lignite Mining

Mr Mervyn Storey asked the Minister of the Environment if she will make a statement on the suitability of proposed sites for lignite mining in County Antrim. (AQW 95/07)

Mrs Foster: There are no current planning applications for the extraction of lignite in County Antrim. However, current planning policy requires proven reserves of minerals that are of particular value to the economy to be protected. Lignite has been identified by DETI as such a valuable mineral and the reserves in Northern Ireland form an integral part of their energy strategy.

You will no doubt appreciate the necessity to protect minerals that are recognised as valuable to the economy

of Northern Ireland and that it would not be appropriate to pre-judge the outcome of any possible proposal.

The protection does not necessarily mean that a future application would be approved, as each application would be treated on its merits and all environmental implications considered.

Town and Country Planning

Mr Sammy Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment what plans she has to introduce the Town and Country Planning (Control of Advertisements) Regulations 2007, which have been in force in England since April 2007. (AQW 118/07)

Mrs Foster: I have asked my officials to consider whether provisions similar to that in the Town and Country Planning (Control of Advertisements) (England) Regulations 2007 should be introduced in Northern Ireland. I wish to reflect on the outcome of that work before deciding on the next steps.

Development at Kiln Lodge, Lurgan

Mr John O'Dowd asked the Minister of the Environment what assessment she has made in relation to the planning application for a development at Kiln Lodge, Lurgan, in terms of the amount of open space being incorporated into design plans, as plans include 0.2 per cent of open space, when the departmental recommendation is at least 10 per cent. (AQW 130/07)

Mrs Foster: I am satisfied that the open space provision of less than 10% is acceptable in this instance due to the proximity of zoned open space to the application site.

Planning Policy Statement 8 (PPS 8), Policy OS2, states that in new residential developments of 25 units or more, a normal expectation of public open space provision will be at least 10% of the total site area. However, the policy goes on to state that provision at a rate of less than 10% of the total site area may be acceptable where the residential development is close to and would benefit from ease of access to areas of existing public open space. Annex A of PPS 8 sets out the definition of open space and includes outdoor sports facilities such as tennis courts, bowling greens, sports pitches and golf courses etc. Directly opposite the application site is a large area of land that is zoned open space in the Craigavon Area Plan 2010, which includes a golf driving range, ski slope, equestrian centre, playing pitch and undeveloped areas of land.

High Hedges

Mr Ken Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment if she proposes to bring forward legislation based on the outcome of the consultation on high hedges in 2005; and if she will give a timescale for the introduction of this legislation. (AQW 149/07)

Mrs Foster: I would refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave him on the 30 May. (AQW 51/07)

Staff Turnover at Downpatrick Divisional Planning Office

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment how many employees have left the Ards section of the Downpatrick Divisional Planning Office in each of the last 3 years, due to promotion; resignation; or disciplinary measures. (AQW 163/07)

Mrs Foster: Details of staff leaving the Ards section of the Downpatrick DPO are as follows:

	Promotion	Resignation	Disciplinary
2004/05		1	
2005/06	1	1	
2006/07		1	

Plastic Bag Levy

Mr Daithí McKay asked the Minister of the Environment what she will do to help secure the introduction of a plastic bag levy in Northern Ireland. (AQW 180/07)

Mrs Foster: At present my Department is considering ways to tackle a number of local environmental problems such as litter, including plastic bag litter. I am aware that in the Republic of Ireland the levy on plastic bags has changed consumer behaviour. However, it is interesting that after detailed consideration, Scotland recently decided against such a tax. Alternatives to plastic bags often entail their own environmental problems and we need to consider all of the issues before deciding on the most appropriate way forward for Northern Ireland.

Aggregates Levy Credit Scheme

Mr Roy Beggs asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the funding that has been raised through the Aggregates Levy Credit Scheme and allocated to Northern Ireland for expenditure during each financial year since its introduction; and the estimated funds that will be generated during 2007-08. (AQW 183/07)

Mrs Foster: The Aggregates Levy Credit Scheme is unique to Northern Ireland and entitles members of the Scheme to an 80% reduction in the Aggregates Levy, in return for carrying out environmental improvements. The Scheme does not generate revenue.

The Aggregates Levy was introduced throughout the UK in April 2002. Revenue from the Levy was used to create an Aggregates Levy Sustainability Fund and to fund a 0.1percentage point reduction in Employers' National Insurance Contributions. Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs has provided the following figures for the Levy revenue from NI companies who pay the Levy:

2002 - 03	2003 - 04	2004 - 05	2005 - 06	2006 - 07 (provisional)	2007 - 08 (Estimated)
£9.7m	£15.9m	£9.13m	£7.66m	£8.26m	£8.26m

Aggregates Levy Sustainability Fund 2007/2008

Mr Roy Beggs asked the Minister of the Environment to advise when funding raised through the Aggregates Levy Credit Scheme will be allocated to projects which will benefit the local environment; to detail the mechanism for distributing the funding; and to account for any monies allocated to date. (AQW 185/07)

Mrs Foster: My Department is currently producing a Business Case with a view to introducing an Aggregates Levy Sustainability Fund in 2007/08.

Environmental Protection Agency

Mr Tom Elliott asked the Minister of the Environment if she intends to establish an Environmental Protection Agency. (AQW 222/07)

Mrs Foster: I am open minded as to whether or not there should be an Environmental Protection Agency.

Grievance Procedures Against Council Chief Executives

Mrs Dolores Kelly asked the Minister of the Environment what is the policy and procedure within local government for a grievance procedure against a Council Chief Executive; to detail how many grievances have been heard in the past five years, including grievances that have been lodged but subsequently withdrawn; to detail the approach that has been taken; and how they have been resolved. (AQW 265/07)

Mrs Foster: Procedures and policies pertaining to grievances are matters for each district council and not

the responsibility of my Department. The Department is not aware of the total number of grievances lodged against chief executives over the past five years.

District councils may seek guidance or advice from the Local Government Staff Commission and over the past five years the Commission has been involved in a total of six cases which have concluded: - 1 was dismissed, 3 were resolved by conciliation, mediation or agreement following independent investigations and 2 resolved by the use of individual compromise agreements which also dealt with associated disciplinary matters or tribunal proceedings. The Commission is aware of three on-going cases.

Re-introduction of the Red Kite

Mr John McCallister asked the Minister of the Environment if she supports the proposal for the re-introduction of the red kite to Northern Ireland; and, if so, what role will her department play in facilitating re-introduction. (AQW 278/07)

Mrs Foster: The Department has recently received an application from the RSPB for a licence under the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 to release Red Kite into the wild at a location in Co Down. I am awaiting the advice of my officials. In arriving at my decision on the matter, I will take fully into account the wide level of support from conservation and other bodies for the re-introduction of Red Kite into Northern Ireland.

Road Safety

Mr John Dallat asked the Minister of the Environment to detail her plans for the establishment of an all-party working group to improve road safety within Northern Ireland, and between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. (AQW 282/07)

Mrs Foster: I have no plans to establish an all-party working group between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

I have indicated my intention to review the Road Safety Strategy. How that will be taken forward is currently being assessed, and I do not wish to speculate at this stage on what working groups may need to be set up under the review.

My Department works closely with the relevant authorities in the Republic of Ireland to ensure shared road safety benefits.

Grouse Population

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment what steps are being taken to address the

number of foxes and grey-back crows, which are adversely impacting upon the grouse population on the moors at present. (AQW 291/07)

Mrs Foster: The control of foxes and 'grey-backed' or Hooded Crows for the protection of game birds is the responsibility of the owner of the sporting rights. Foxes are not legally protected and therefore may be killed using legal methods by anyone with the permission of the land owner. Hooded Crows may be shot by authorised persons to protect wild birds under the terms of a general licence issued by Environment and Heritage Service. It is not proposed to change the terms of the general licence.

Protected Areas of Larne Lough

Mr Ken Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment what steps the Environment and Heritage Service is taking to ensure that the protected areas of Larne Lough, adjacent to Ballystrudder, are not compromised by the current and proposed sewage disposal arrangements for that end of Islandmagee and Ballycarry. (AQW 308/07)

Mrs Foster: It is the role of the Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) to conserve, protect and where possible improve the aquatic environment in Northern Ireland.

Water Order Consent standards for discharges into Larne Lough have been set by EHS at levels which will enable water quality standards, required by relevant Directives and EHS targets for the quality of coastal waters, to be complied with.

It is the responsibility of Northern Ireland Water to provide the level of treatment necessary to achieve these Consent standards.

The Waste Water Treatment Works (WWTW) serving Ballycarry currently provides secondary treatment (that is treatment by a biological treatment process) and is normally compliant with its Consent standard.

The Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive requires appropriate treatment for discharges; hence, for Ballystrudder WWTW, secondary treatment is required.

Currently, Ballystrudder WWTW provides primary treatment (that is settlement in a tank for a period of time with the settled solids removed off-site and the top liquor discharged as effluent).

EHS has issued a Water Order Consent to Northern Ireland Water for the discharge from Ballystrudder WWTW. This means that secondary treatment must be provided at this site within a reasonable timescale or that the discharge be moved to a more suitable location.

Ulster Farm By-Products Ltd

Mr Thomas Burns asked the Minister of the Environment what steps have been taken to ensure that smoke and odours from Ulster Farm By-Products Ltd, Glenavy, do not further affect the surrounding community, especially residents of Crumlin.

(AQW 363/07)

Mrs Foster: The Ulster Farm By-Products operation is regulated by the Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) through a permit issued under the Pollution Prevention and Control (NI) Regulations 2003.

In 2005, the Company spent some £2m installing thermal oxidisers to destroy odours arising from the operation, widely accepted as the most effective odour treatment for this type of installation.

The thermal oxidisers did not operate as well as expected, but, following detailed investigations, operational improvements have now been made. These improvements have substantially reduced the visual and odour impacts from the thermal oxidisers.

In line with permit requirements, further investigation of other on-site sources of odour has been carried out. Measures to address these are due to be implemented in the next few months.

Significant progress has been made in addressing the environmental impacts from this installation since 2005. EHS will continue to ensure that the plant is effectively regulated and the resulting impacts are minimised as far as possible.

Left Hand Drive Limousines

Mr Paul Butler asked the Minister of the Environment if she will give a timescale for the introduction of legislation in relation to left hand drive limousines, to ensure that they operate within the law in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 431/07)

Mrs Foster: My Department is currently taking steps to regularise the standard of left-hand drive limousines and other “novelty” vehicles for use as public service vehicles. Work is currently under way to amend existing legislation to legalise such vehicles as American stretched limousines and the current target for introduction of the required amending regulations is early 2008.

It is also planned to introduce new powers in the Taxis Bill later this year to regularise the standard of all such vehicles used as public service vehicles. The Bill is scheduled to be introduced into the Assembly on 11 June 2007.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Civil Service Jobs in East Antrim

Mr Ken Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what steps he will take to address the under-representation of regional civil service posts in the east Antrim boroughs of Carrickfergus, Larne and Newtownabbey.

(AQW 191/07)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Robinson): Current dispersal policy relies on taking advantage of opportunities when they arise where value for money can be demonstrated. Currently, there are no plans for decentralisation of civil service jobs to the boroughs of Carrickfergus, Larne and Newtownabbey. However, the consultation on ‘The Guiding Principles for the Location of Public Sector Jobs in Northern Ireland’ which closed on 30 April 2007 is the first step in developing a framework which would facilitate future decision-making on the location of public sector jobs, including those in the Civil Service. Responses to the consultation are currently being analysed. Once this work is complete I would wish to discuss the matter further with the Executive Committee.

Financial Package for Northern Ireland

Mr Seán Neeson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to make a statement on progress towards obtaining a financial package for Northern Ireland.

(AQW 226/07)

Mr Robinson: I refer to my answer to AQW 7/07.

Decentralisation of Northern Ireland Civil Service Jobs

Mr John Dallat asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what plans are in place to decentralise civil service jobs to Fern House and Mill House, Coleraine, to compensate for the proposed loss of jobs in Customs and Revenue at these locations.

(AQW 250/07)

Mr Robinson: Current dispersal policy relies on taking advantage of opportunities when they arise where value for money can be demonstrated. I understand that HM Revenue and Customs have made no final decisions on staffing requirements for any of their offices in Northern Ireland, and will not do so until they have completed a review of each location. The review of their offices at Fern House and Mill House is not planned to start until April 2008 and decisions once taken could take some years to implement. There are, therefore, no plans for decentralisation of Northern Ireland Civil Service jobs to Coleraine.

However, the consultation on 'The Guiding Principles for the Location of Public Sector Jobs in Northern Ireland' which closed on 30 April 2007 is the first step in developing a framework which would facilitate future decision-making on the location of public sector jobs, including those in the Civil Service. Responses to the consultation are currently being analysed. Once this work is complete I would wish to discuss the matter further with the Executive Committee.

Inquiries to Land and Property Services

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many (i) inquiries and (ii) complaints have there been to Land and Property Services in this calendar year about (a) valuation of houses; and (b) increases in rates demands.
(AQW 327/07)

Mr Robinson: The Agency does not hold the information required in the form requested. However, since 1 January 2007 the Valuation and Lands Agency and Rate Collection Agency, (Land and Property Services from 1 April 2007) received some 18,000 inquiries in respect of revaluation matters and over 200,000 inquiries in respect of rate collection matters. In the same period 27 formal complaints about the valuation of houses and 18 formal complaints about rate increases have been received.

Social Housing

Mr Thomas Burns asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what assessment he has made in relation to the urgent need for social housing, in light of the Semple Report, and to ask if this will be a spending priority.
(AQW 381/07)

Mr Robinson: On the 25 May the Executive agreed to the establishment of an inter-departmental taskforce to follow up on the proposals contained in the Semple Report on affordable housing.

Along with Executive colleagues, I will await the findings of the taskforce before taking a considered view on the way forward.

The issue of spending priorities will be considered by the Executive in the context of the development of the Programme for Government.

Ministerial Drivers

Mr Jonathan Craig asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if there is any variation between his department and other Northern Ireland departments in the payment of Ministerial drivers; if he will detail the nature of these variations; and if he will outline which

form of payment applies to drivers for the Minister for each department.
(AQW 444/07)

Mr Robinson: There is now no variation between my department and other Northern Ireland departments in the payment of Ministerial drivers. On 23 May 2007 I withdrew the delegation from all other NI departments to pay for Ministerial drivers. This ensures there will be a consistent approach which conforms with best accounting practices.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Ambulance Availability at the Mid-Ulster Hospital

Mr Patsy McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail ambulance availability at the Mid-Ulster Hospital, Magherafelt, for each hour between midnight and 8am on Wednesday 23 May 2007; and if he will advise on overall night and early morning ambulance provision at the Mid-Ulster site.
(AQW 263/07)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): Emergency ambulance availability at Magherafelt Ambulance Station on the Mid-Ulster Hospital site between midnight and 8.00 am on 23 May 2007 was as follows:

Time	Ambulances available
Midnight- 1.00 am	2
1.00-2.00 am	2
2.00-3.00 am	1*
3.00-4.00 am	1*
4.00-5.00 am	1*
5.00-6.00 am	2
6.00-7.00 am	2
7.00-8.00 am	2

* NOTE: One ambulance left the station to deal with a call during the periods from 2:03 to 2.57 am and 3.29 am to 4.24 am.

Overall night and early morning planned emergency ambulance provision for Magherafelt Ambulance Station is two Accident & Emergency crews between 9.00 pm and 8.00 am.

Number of Radiologists Employed in the NHS

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if there are any plans to increase the number of radiologists that the

National Health Service employs within each of the hospitals in the province. (AQW 286/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The recruitment of staff is a matter for individual Health and Social Care Trusts taking into account factors such as service needs and available resources. The Department has a role in ensuring that sufficient suitably qualified staff are available to meet the needs of the service. The current numbers in radiology training would allow for an increase of 20 Consultants over the next five years.

Cancer Clusters

Mr Daithí McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide details of cancer clusters in Northern Ireland in 2004, 2005 and 2006. (AQW 288/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The Northern Ireland Cancer Registry (NICR) do not routinely check for cancer clusters in small areas unless specifically asked by a member of the public/medical profession etc. However

on a larger scale NICR produce Standardised Incidence Ratios and Standardised Mortality Ratios at Local Government District (LGD) (see Table 1 below). Table 1 aggregates information for 1993-2004 combined, as the number of cancers would not support a robust analysis for 2004 only. Complete information for 2005 and 2006 is not yet available.

Belfast LGD had the highest number of newly diagnosed cancers and cancer deaths each year due to its higher population. The standardised incidence and mortality ratios show that these values were still much higher than what would be expected if cancer cases and deaths were evenly distributed across Northern Ireland. Derry and Newry & Mourne LGDs also had higher than expected levels of newly diagnosed cancer and cancer deaths. Higher levels of cancer in these areas were driven by high incidence of lung (in Belfast and Derry), stomach (in Belfast and Newry & Mourne) and colorectal (in Derry and Newry & Mourne) cancer. This is likely to be linked to higher levels of deprivation and the associated higher levels of tobacco use in these areas.

TABLE 1: STANDARDISED INCIDENCE AND MORTALITY RATIOS FOR ALL CANCERS (EXCLUDING NON-MELANOMA SKIN CANCER) BY LGD: 1993-2004

Local Government District	Average number of cases per year	Standardised Incidence Ratio (95% CI)		Average no. of deaths per year	Standardised Mortality Ratio (95% CI)	
Antrim	158	96.8	(92.5,101.2)	88	100.7	(94.6,106.8)
Ards	276	92.6	(89.4,95.7)	158	95.7	(91.4,100.0)
Armagh	194	97.6	(93.7,101.6)	103	94.5	(89.3,99.8)
Ballymena	223	91.8	(88.3,95.2)	126	93.3	(88.6,98.1)
Ballymoney	94	91.0	(85.7,96.3)	51	88.5	(81.5,95.6)
Banbridge	145	95.4	(90.9,99.9)	74	88.2	(82.3,94.0)
Belfast	1,294	109.7	(108.0,111.4)	775	116.0	(113.6,118.4)
Carrickfergus	143	100.3	(95.6,105.1)	82	105.2	(98.6,111.8)
Castlereagh	292	98.3	(95.1,101.6)	160	96.0	(91.7,100.3)
Coleraine	224	99.1	(95.4,102.8)	122	96.3	(91.4,101.3)
Cookstown	102	88.4	(83.5,93.4)	55	86.6	(80.0,93.2)
Craigavon	289	98.1	(94.8,101.4)	150	93.4	(89.1,97.7)
Derry	350	110.6	(107.2,113.9)	198	118.5	(113.8,123.3)
Down	235	98.5	(94.9,102.1)	127	96.1	(91.3,101.0)
Dungannon	167	96.9	(92.6,101.1)	87	92.0	(86.4,97.6)
Fermanagh	221	95.9	(92.3,99.6)	120	92.4	(87.6,97.2)
Larne	136	104.0	(98.9,109.0)	74	102.1	(95.3,108.8)
Limavady	96	95.9	(90.3,101.4)	51	95.1	(87.5,102.6)
Lisburn	366	95.5	(92.6,98.3)	193	92.6	(88.8,96.4)
Magherafelt	129	95.3	(90.6,100.1)	68	91.3	(85.1,97.6)
Moyle	69	103.3	(96.3,110.4)	36	95.7	(86.6,104.7)
Newry & Mourne	317	106.5	(103.2,109.9)	175	108.4	(103.8,113.1)
Newtownabbey	319	100.3	(97.2,103.5)	173	99.2	(94.9,103.4)
North Down	335	95.5	(92.5,98.4)	179	89.4	(85.6,93.2)
Omagh	153	91.4	(87.3,95.6)	77	83.0	(77.7,88.4)
Strabane	127	95.9	(91.1,100.7)	70	97.7	(91.1,104.3)

Local Government District	Average number of cases per year	Standardised Incidence Ratio (95% CI)		Average no. of deaths per year	Standardised Mortality Ratio (95% CI)	
Unknown	65			38		
Total	6,519	100.0		3,609	100.0	

- 1 Both the standardised incidence and mortality ratios permit comparisons between regions and over time by taking into account differences in population structure. The ratio is of observed to expected incidence or deaths, multiplied conventionally by 100. Thus if mortality levels are higher in the population being studied than would be expected, the SIR or SMR will be greater than 100.
- 1 Figures in brackets represent the 95% confidence interval which is the range of values within which there is a 95% probability of finding the true value for the incidence or mortality rate.

This information was provided by the NI Cancer Registry and is the most up-to-date available.

Inspection of Residential Care Homes

Mr Robin Newton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm the current number of residential care homes; and how often these are inspected. (AQW 297/07)

Mr McGimpsey: There are 334 residential care homes currently registered with the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA).

The RQIA inspects these homes on at least two occasions per year – one pre-arranged inspection and one unannounced inspection, which can take place at any time of the day or night.

Where improvements are required or issues of concern arise, the RQIA may carry out further inspections.

Vacancies in Residential Homes

Mr Robin Newton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm the number of vacant places within residential care homes; and the number of people currently on the waiting lists. (AQW 298/07)

Mr McGimpsey: Information on the number of vacant places within residential homes and the number of people currently on the waiting lists is not collected centrally.

Residential Care Homes

Mr Robin Newton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm the number of residential care homes that have been deregistered in the past five years; and the number of homes that have failed to meet the registration standard in this time period. (AQW 299/07)

Mr McGimpsey: Since April 2005, when the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) was established, a total of 27 residential care

homes have been de-registered. Of these, 11 were de-registered in 2005/2006 and 16 in 2006/2007. All have been as a result of voluntary closure.

During the same period, 2005 to 2007, no residential care homes received “failure to comply” notices. However, in order to improve care practices, four residential care homes had conditions temporarily imposed upon them.

Prior to the establishment of the RQIA in April 2005 each of the four Health and Social Services Boards were responsible for registration and inspection through their Registration and Inspection Units. During the period 2002-2005, 83 residential care homes deregistered voluntarily. One had its registration cancelled. Seven homes were issued with “failure to comply notices” during this period.

During 2002-2003, 55 residential care homes deregistered with the four Registration and Inspection Units. Many of these homes de-registered in order to seek out new funding under the “Supporting People” programme, introduced in April 2003.

Islandmagee First Responders Scheme

Mr Ken Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps he will take to support the work carried out by the Islandmagee First Responders Unit; and what plans he has to encourage the formation of similar groups in other areas where ambulance response times may be subject to delay, by virtue of distance to be covered. (AQW 311/07)

Mr McGimpsey: Islandmagee First Responders Scheme is a community led initiative established in 2004 with technical help from the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) and training, preparation and administrative help from St John Ambulance. The Scheme relies on community-minded volunteers who have been trained to attend certain 999 calls in support of NIAS’s role. It is not funded by NIAS nor has my Department been directly approached for support.

However, my Department is keen to promote the introduction of First Responder schemes throughout Northern Ireland and is currently working with Professor Frank Kee, Queen's University, NIAS, and other key stakeholders to establish a Northern Ireland Strategy for First Response and Public Access Defibrillation under the auspices of NIAS which will co-ordinate the activity of existing schemes and assess the potential for new schemes where appropriate.

Alzheimer's Disease

Mr Alastair Ross asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps he is taking to help those caring for, and those suffering from, Alzheimer's Disease. (AQW 353/07)

Mr McGimpsey: A range of treatment and care is provided for people with Alzheimer's disease, across the primary, community, specialist and secondary care sectors.

The treatment and management of Alzheimer's disease includes life-style measures and therapeutic interventions, which aim to promote active physical and mental health and help maintain an individual's capacity for independence. Appropriate specialist drug interventions are also provided, including medicines designed to improve cognitive function.

My Department's strategy for carers, published in January 2006, aims to recognise, value and support the valuable role they play in our society. Carers are entitled to have their needs assessed and have access to a range of advice, training and practical support.

A Dementia Services development centre is also to be established in Northern Ireland. The centre will provide training, consultancy and research for people with dementia and their carers.

Out of Hours Services

Mr George Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what are his plans to address the £2.5 million shortfall in funding for the out of hours service in the Western Health and Social Services Board in 2007/08 and 2008/09; and to ensure that this service is ongoing from 18.00 to 09.00. (AQW 424/07)

Mr McGimpsey: There has been no reduction in the actual budget for the provision of Out of Hours services in the Western Health and Social Services Board area specifically, or in Northern Ireland as a whole. In January 2005, when responsibility for Out of Hours services transferred from GPs to the Health and Social Services Boards, the Department agreed to provide bridging finance for a period of 3 years to

assist with the additional costs associated with this transfer. As agreed with the Health and Social Services Boards at that time, the bridging finance would decrease in 2007/08 and cease in 2008/09.

Under the General Medical Services Contract, the Out of Hours period is defined as, "(a) the period beginning at 6:30pm on any day from, and including, Monday to Thursday and ending at 8am on the following day; (b) the period between 6:30pm on, and including, Friday and 8am on the following Monday; and (c) any public holiday or local holiday agreed with the Board." There are no plans to amend this definition or service under the contract.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Winter Gritting

Mr William Irwin asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will undertake to ensure minor roads that currently fall below the specified vehicle threshold for winter gritting, but that carry school buses, will be included in Roads Service gritting schedules for this winter. (AQW 170/07)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): You will be aware that a review of Roads Service's winter service policy and procedures was last carried out in 2001, following severe snow falls.

One of the key outcomes of the review, which was fully debated and accepted by the Assembly, was that the practice of targeting the limited available resources on the busier main through routes should continue. In effect, Roads Service salts through-routes carrying 1500 vehicles per day or more and, in exceptional circumstances, roads with difficult topography carrying between 1000 and 1500 vehicles per day are also gritted. The application of this policy ensures that 28% of the total road network, carrying 80% of traffic, is salted at an annual cost of approximately £5 million.

The review considered the inclusion of all school bus routes in the salted schedule but took cognisance of the fact that the inclusion of all such routes would more than double the annual cost of the salting operation, in addition to a substantial initial capital investment.

The review did, however, recognise that a modest increase in the salted network was justified, mainly for the benefit of rural communities, and recommended that buses in service, including school buses, receive special consideration so that, for example, a 40 seat bus is now counted as 40 vehicles when determining whether a road should be included in the salting schedule. In addition small settlements containing 100

dwelling or more now have a salted link via the shortest route to the main salted network.

Whilst I fully understand your concerns, I am sure you will appreciate that there is a fine balance to be drawn between putting even more funds into salting or into the many other worthwhile demands on Roads Service, many of which are also safety related. It is felt that the most effective use of Roads Service's limited resources is to salt the busiest roads and this forms the basis of their current policy which is applied objectively and consistently across the country.

Public Transport in Greater Belfast

Mr David Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to encourage commuters to use public transport in the greater Belfast area.

(AQW 175/07)

Mr Murphy: The Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan, published in November 2004, set out transport proposals for the Belfast area for implementation by 2015, subject to detailed economic appraisal, funding availability and statutory processes. The Plan's proposals represent a balanced and multi-modal approach to transport aimed at encouraging greater use of public transport and greater levels of walking and cycling. Some specific initiatives are:

- in addition to the funding recently spent on introducing new trains to the rail network, which has resulted in increased passenger numbers in the greater Belfast area, options for future railways provision, which would include the purchase of more new trains to enhance capacity on the Belfast commuter rail network, are currently being examined;
- a study is being carried out into the feasibility of two pilot Rapid Transit routes in the Belfast area;
- funding of £48m was made available during the period 2004-2007 for the purchase of 352 new buses. Metro bus services in the greater Belfast area have benefitted from this investment. The fleet has been substantially modernised; average vehicle age has reduced to 6 years; and accessibility levels have increased to 96%. This has helped generate an increase in passenger numbers of 15% over the two years to March 2007;
- Translink's Metro phase II expansion plan will introduce 25 additional buses to increase frequency on three main routes; and, if this proves successful, a further 33 new buses will be introduced to increase frequency on all the main bus corridors;
- Translink is promoting park-and-ride schemes from locations on the outskirts of Belfast;

- Roads Service and Translink are working to implement a Quality Bus Corridor programme to provide bus priority measures which will improve bus journey times, reliability and frequency of bus services and to provide high quality bus shelters and passenger information.
- Roads Service, through its Travelwise initiative, is raising awareness of a range of sustainable transport measures, including the promotion of public transport to employers, commuters and schools;
- A pilot Personalised Travel Planning scheme recently began in South Belfast to promote sustainable travel, including public transport.

Road Safety in Glenravel

Mr Daithí McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development when road safety measures and additional footpaths will be introduced along the Cushendall and Glenravel Roads in Glenravel.

(AQW 179/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that it is aware of concerns over road safety issues on the A43 Cushendall Road and that it has been monitoring the safety record of the road.

Following a number of meetings with MLAs and others regarding the route, it has been agreed to provide footway links on the A43 from Martinstown to the Chapel and from Cargan to the playing fields. Stage 1 of the Martinstown link will be undertaken during this financial year and the other stages will compete for inclusion in future programmes.

In addition a collision remedial scheme at the scene of the latest fatal collision that occurred on New Year's Day 2007, near Cargan, is also programmed to be undertaken this financial year. Work will include the provision of kerbing, resurfacing and additional warning signage.

You will also be interested to know that a route study is currently being carried out on the A43 to identify whether any further warning signage or road markings can be provided to ensure that drivers are fully aware of the road layout. Any shortcomings identified will be addressed during this financial year.

A8 Trans-European Route

Mr Ken Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development when he intends to complete the dualling of the A8 Belfast to Larne Trans-European route; and what discussions his officials have had with their counterparts in Scotland, during the period 2005-

2007, regarding the section of the route which is located in Scotland. (AQW 189/07)

Mr Murphy: I should explain that the composition and delivery of the major works programme of my Department's Roads Service, is consistent with the level of investment proposed under the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland (ISNI), published in December 2005. The ISNI sets out a high level view of planned investment up to 2015 with proposals for up to £1.4 billion of strategic road improvement schemes. Around £1 billion of these schemes have already been identified and Roads Service is currently considering responses to a consultation exercise on a further £400million of major works proposals.

The Irish National Development Plan 2007-2013, launched in January 2007, contains proposals for Irish Government investment in North/South projects. As part of the Chancellors package announced on 22 March 2007, the Irish Government confirmed its intention to make available further funding of £400 million to help fund infrastructure investment. This is in addition to an extra £200 million envisaged from the Treasury and will include a new roads programme to provide dual carriageway standard on routes within the North serving the North West Gateway of Letterkenny/Derry and on the eastern seaboard corridor from Belfast to Larne.

Work on the reassessment of the Strategic Road Improvement Programme is at an advanced stage, however it has not yet been finalised, and therefore I am presently not in a position to advise on details of its content or timing.

My officials have not held formal discussions within the past two years with counterparts in Scotland regarding this Trans-European Route.

B90 Road Junction

Mr Ken Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps he will take to address the road junction problems on the B90 at its intersection with the Carnmoney Road and the Carntall Road. (AQW 190/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that the junction to which you refer is the B59 Doagh Road with Carntall Road and Carnmoney Road North.

This junction was investigated in 2005 as part of a route management study for the B59 and was identified as a potential junction improvement scheme. In order to achieve the best long term solution for the route, detailed traffic modelling of this junction, together with the adjacent junction at B59 Doagh Road/B90 Old Carrick Road, is being carried out. This

modelling work is nearing completion and Roads Service expects to be in a position to report the outcome of this further study by Autumn 2007.

However, all road schemes must be prioritised in order to ensure the most urgent and best value for money schemes are progressed. This scheme will have to compete for priority with other proposed schemes in the Roads Service Minor Works programme and its implementation will be subject to the availability of the necessary lands and funding.

I have asked the Eastern Divisional Roads Manager to advise you of the outcome of the study on its completion.

Septic Tanks

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will give figures for those currently waiting for their septic tank to be emptied for each county in Northern Ireland; and if he will give reasons for the delays. (AQW 207/07)

Mr Murphy: The Water and Sewerage Services (NI) Order 2006 transferred responsibility for the delivery of water and sewerage services from the Department's Water Service Agency to a statutory water and sewerage undertaker. A government-owned company, Northern Ireland Water (NIW) has been appointed as the undertaker and the issues raised are operational matters for it. I have asked the Chief Executive of NIW (Mrs. Katharine Bryan) to write to you in response to these questions.

Translink - Remunerations

Mr John Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the salary packages paid to the last two Chief Executives of Translink in their final year of employment. (AQW 240/07)

Mr Murphy: The last Chief Executive of Translink, Keith Moffatt, left his post on 31 December 2006 by mutual agreement with his employer the Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company. His remuneration for the period from 1 April 2006 to 31 December 2006 amounted to £233,000. Mr Moffatt's Emoluments for the previous year amounted to £374,000. The previous Chief Executive, Ted Hesketh, retired on 31 March 2003. His final year's remuneration, as disclosed in the accounts of the Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company for the year ended 31 March 2003, was £215,000.

Translink - Severance Packages

Mr John Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development what severance packages were paid to

the last two Chief Executives of Translink.
(AQW 241/07)

Mr Murphy: The value of the severance package due to the last Chief Executive of Translink, Keith Moffatt, was £279,000. The previous Chief Executive, Ted Hesketh, retired on 31 March 2003. On his retirement the company paid £136k to augment Mr Hesketh's retirement fund.

Translink - Corporate Credit Cards

Mr John Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development how many corporate credit cards are used by senior management in Translink; the Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company and Northern Ireland Railways.
(AQW 243/07)

Mr Murphy: There are two corporate credit cards held by senior management in the Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company. One is used to facilitate the booking of business related travel and accommodation for the Chairman. Expenditure, which amounted to £626 in the year to 31 March 2007, is approved by the Director of Corporate Affairs. The other card is not used. There are no corporate credit cards held by senior management within Translink.

Magherafelt Bypass

Mr Patsy McGlone asked the Minister for Regional Development what is the commencement date for the Magherafelt Bypass.
(AQW 261/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Roads Service advises me that Magherafelt Bypass is one of a number of capital road works schemes included in its Strategic Road Improvement Programme. The scheme is currently being developed to identify a preferred route before commencing the Statutory Orders processes later this year. It is envisaged that the statutory notices could be published in 2008 and depending on the outcome of this public consultation, a public inquiry may be required. Commencement of the works will depend on the successful completion of the statutory processes, detailed economic appraisal and the availability of funding through the normal budgetary processes.

Cookstown Eastern Distributor

Mr Patsy McGlone asked the Minister for Regional Development what is the commencement date for the Cookstown Eastern Distributor.
(AQW 262/07)

Mr Murphy: A proposal for the Cookstown Eastern Distributor is identified, in the Regional

Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan 2015, as being included in the Forward Planning Schedule of my Department's Roads Service.

I understand a Consulting Engineer is to be commissioned by the end of June 2007 to take forward the design for a 2.8km long single carriageway distributor road under the management of Roads Service engineers. Typically it can take at least six years to progress a scheme through the various design and consultation stages to the start of construction. Progression will be subject to the scheme clearing the statutory procedures, obtaining a satisfactory economic appraisal and the availability of funds through the normal budgetary processes.

Parking Fines

Mr John McCallister asked the Minister for Regional Development how many fixed penalty parking fines have been issued to motorists in the past six months; and if he will give a breakdown for each District Council area.
(AQW 270/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Roads Service advises that a total of 77,684 penalty charge notices (PCNs) have been issued between 30 November 2006 and 30 May 2007. The breakdown of these PCNs per council area is as follows:

Council	Total PCNs
Antrim	1470
Ards	1528
Armagh	2272
Ballymena	2935
Ballymoney	912
Banbridge	1276
Belfast and Castlereagh	20389
Carrickfergus	1359
Coleraine	2898
Cookstown	1156
Craigavon	5092
Derry	8682
Down	1640
Dungannon	1629
Fermanagh	5472
Larne	601
Limavady	866
Lisburn	2530
Magherafelt	1324
Moyle	85
Newry and Mourne	3732

Council	Total PCNs
Newtownabbey	1126
North Down	2606
Omagh	3534
Strabane	2570
Total	77 684

Fixed Penalty Notices

Mr John McCallister asked the Minister for Regional Development how many motorists have challenged fixed penalty notices in the last twelve months, on the basis that 'pay and display' machines in the vicinity were inoperable. (AQW 271/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department assumed responsibility for the enforcement of on-street parking and waiting restrictions on 30 October 2006. Between 30 October 2006 and 30 May 2007, 287 motorists successfully challenged their penalty charge notice on the grounds that 'pay and display' machines were not working properly.

Prior to 30 October 2006, my Department was only responsible for the enforcement of excess and alternative charges for off-street car parks, with responsibility for the enforcement of on-street waiting restrictions being a matter for the police. Information relating to challenges prior to the 30 October was not categorised by either party and, therefore, is not available.

Car Plus Scheme

Mr John McCallister asked the Minister for Regional Development what has been the take-up rate for the Carplus scheme; what is the total set up cost of commissioning Carplus; and how many car sharing schemes are currently in operation across Northern Ireland. (AQW 276/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that, following a tender competition, Car Plus was commissioned at a cost of approximately £8,000, to conduct a scoping study into the potential for car clubs in Belfast. This study is ongoing.

In relation to the car share scheme established by Roads Service under its Travelwise initiative, I am advised that there are currently 19 such schemes in operation across the north with 2096 members.

Improvement of Rail Services

Mr John Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail plans for the improvement of

rail services between Belfast and Derry/Londonderry, including improvements to unmanned level crossings; the installation of passing loops; and improved timetables. (AQW 279/07)

Mr Murphy: Work on rail services between Belfast and Derry is currently being carried out to maintain services on the line at existing levels in accordance with the Railways Review Group Report published in 2004. Following the carrying out of an appraisal which assessed the merits of a range of options for future railways provision the Department is bidding for additional funding to upgrade the Derry line as part of the second Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland. This includes the provision of a passing loop and if the bid was to be successful it would allow for an improved timetable on the line.

There are two types of unmanned crossings on the line between Belfast and Derry: public highway level crossings and private user worked crossings.

The public highway level crossings which are generally automatic half barrier crossings are installed and maintained to industry standards. These crossings are subject to annual inspections involving the DRD, Roads Service, PSNI and NIR to ensure that they remain compliant and local issues are considered regularly.

Private User Worked Crossings (UWC) occur generally on private laneways and between fields where historical accesses have been bisected by the railway. NIR is currently considering the need to either close or improve the highest risk crossings. Inspections are carried out every six months at UWCs and a dedicated team carry out all maintenance work identified.

Airport Rail Link

Mr David McClarty asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will make it his policy to establish a departmental working group to explore the feasibility of a rail link between Belfast International Airport and the George Best Belfast City Airport. (AQW 306/07)

Mr Murphy: Priority is currently being given to establishing the future investment needs of the existing railway network and a range of options have been the subject of an appraisal. The results of this appraisal process will inform the Department's bids under the Priorities and Budgets and Investment Strategy exercises.

The establishment of a Departmental working group to explore the feasibility of a rail link between Belfast International Airport and George Best Belfast City Airport is not being considered at this time.

A26 Coleraine to Glarryford

Mr David McClarty asked the Minister for Regional Development when work will commence on the A26 between Coleraine and Glarryford; and if he will give a timescale for the completion of this work. (AQW 307/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Roads Service advises me that a scheme to provide a new dual carriageway on a 7 km portion of the A 26 between Glarryford crossroads and the junction with the A44 Drones Road, is one of a number of capital road works schemes included in its Strategic Road Improvement Programme. The scheme is being developed to identify a preferred route before commencing the Statutory Orders. Subject to the successful completion of the statutory processes, detailed economic appraisal and the availability of funding through the normal budgetary processes, it is currently envisaged that the scheme will be taken forward to procurement in 2010, with construction work being completed during late 2012/early 2013.

While there are no further schemes on the A26 currently in the Roads Service Programme, you will be interested to know that the proposed Expanded Strategic Road Improvement Programme 2015, published for consultation in 2006, includes a further improvement scheme on this road between Ballymoney and Coleraine. Roads Service is currently considering responses to this consultation.

Road Resurfacing in Donaghadee

Mr Alex Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to resurface the footpaths and roads in Beechfield Estate, Donaghadee. (AQW 313/07)

Mr Murphy: I understand that you have already raised this issue with Roads Service and that a meeting has been arranged for 6 June 2007 between yourself and local Roads Service officials. At that meeting you can be more specific in identifying the footpaths or roads that you believe need attention and discuss the other matters you have written to Roads Service about. I hope that this meeting will serve to resolve your concerns.

Traffic Calming in Donaghadee

Mr Alex Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to put in place the traffic calming measures that have been requested by the local community in Beechfield Estate, Donaghadee. (AQW 314/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Roads Service receives many requests for traffic calming schemes and, as demand greatly exceeds the capacity to supply these measures, priorities must be established.

I am advised that officials in Roads Service will complete a preliminary assessment of the Beechfield Estate in the next few weeks and I have asked them to write to you directly to inform you of their findings.

Raw Sewage in Dunloy

Mr Daithí McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development what immediate action he will take to stop raw sewage coming through manholes into residents' gardens in McClelland Park, Dunloy, and to minimise the health risk to children living there. (AQW 359/07)

Mr Murphy: The Water and Sewerage Services (NI) Order 2006 transferred responsibility for the delivery of water and sewerage services from the Department's Water Service Agency to a statutory water and sewerage undertaker. A government-owned company, Northern Ireland Water (NIW) has been appointed as the undertaker and the issues raised are operational matters for it. I have asked the Chief Executive of NIW (Mrs. Katharine Bryan) to write to you in response to this question.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Asbestos in Social Housing

Ms Michelle McIlveen asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the extent of the use of asbestos in social housing; and the steps being taken by the Housing Executive to remove it, in relation to both rented and recently purchased homes. (AQW 143/07)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): Asbestos containing materials (ACMs) were used extensively in social housing from the 1950s to the 1980s. The materials were most commonly used in roof coverings, soffit boards, lagging, flue pipes, floor coverings, insulation, panels and drip trays.

The Housing Executive's asbestos management strategy includes a five year plan, which began in April 2005, for the survey of all its properties to identify the presence of asbestos and the production and implementation of plans to manage it.

The management of asbestos uses three approaches

- leave the ACMs undisturbed;

- treat the surface of or enclosing the ACMs or
- remove the ACMs.

The approach in each case is determined by a risk assessment undertaken as part of the survey exercise. Any planned scheme of works includes an asbestos survey and subsequent management plan. To date surveys have been commissioned in 780 schemes covering 31,150 dwellings.

As far as purchased properties are concerned responsibility for asbestos lies with the property owner. Where it is found in properties sold by the Housing Executive financial assistance for its removal may be awarded through the Grants Scheme. The cost of survey and removal is included in the grant paid.

VACANT DWELLINGS

	At 31 March	Awaiting Imminent Relet	Difficult to let	Undergoing Major Improvements/ Held for Decanting	Pending Sale of Demolition	Total
Ballymena	2005	0	77	105	90	272
	2006	0	51	66	82	199
	2007	0	51	76	57	184
Ballycastle	2005	1	0	20	0	21
	2006	0	1	10	0	11
	2007	0	2	15	0	17
Ballymoney	2005	0	0	13	0	13
	2006	0	0	10	0	10
	2007	0	0	8	0	8

Homeless People

Mr Peter Weir asked the Minister for Social Development how many people are classified as homeless in each of the 18 parliamentary constituencies. (AQW 200/07)

Ms Ritchie: The information requested is not readily available in the form requested.

At 31 March 2007 the total number of households accepted as statutorily homeless and awarded full Duty Applicant Status was 9,031.

As I have previously stated I am determined to address the issue of housing supply and take the necessary steps to promote the social inclusion of the homeless.

Vacant Dwellings

Mr Daithí McKay asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of empty housing properties under the control of the Housing Executive in 2004, 2005 and 2006 in Ballymoney, Ballymena and Moyle districts, and the wards in which they are located. (AQW 178/07)

Ms Ritchie: This information is held by financial year and is not readily available by ward. The table below details the numbers of vacant dwellings within the Housing Executive's administrative areas for its Ballymoney, Ballymena and Ballycastle district offices.

Northern Ireland Housing Executive Waiting Lists

Mr Peter Weir asked the Minister for Social Development how many people are on the waiting list for (a) Northern Ireland Housing Executive; and (b) Housing Association accommodation in each of the 18 parliamentary constituencies. (AQW 201/07)

Ms Ritchie: The information is not readily available in the form requested and can only be provided on the basis of Common Landlord Areas.

Applicants for social housing are assessed and pointed under the Common Selection Scheme and placed in priority order on the Common Waiting List. Separate lists are not held for Housing Executive and Housing Association properties.

The attached table details the number of applicants appearing on the Common Selection Scheme waiting list at 31 March 2007.

WAITING LIST (AT 31 MARCH 2007)

District	2007
Belfast 1	1,130
Belfast 2	1,725
Belfast 3	1,058
Belfast 4	982
Belfast 5	816
Belfast 6	1,372
Belfast 7	1,987
Antrim	979
Ballycastle	301
Ballymena	1,411
Ballymoney	477
Carrickfergus	1,007
Coleraine	1,234
Larne	505
Newtownabbey 1	738
Newtownabbey 2	840
Armagh	828
Banbridge	674
Dungannon	753
Fermanagh	1,038
Lurgan	1,048
Newry	1,727
Portadown	721
Bangor	1,857
Castlereagh	1,150
Downpatrick	1,166
Lisburn Antrim Street	1,788
Lisburn Dairy Farm	603
Newtownards	1,525
Cookstown	367
Limavady	522
Londonderry 1	727
Londonderry 2	722
Londonderry 3	708
Magherafelt	495
Omagh	640
Strabane	561
Total	36,182

Unclaimed Social Security Benefits

Mr Peter Weir asked the Minister for Social Development what is the total amount of unclaimed social security benefits for each of the last five financial years. (AQW 202/07)

Ms Ritchie: The information requested is not available as statistical data for all benefit categories. The Family Resources Survey provides details of estimates of unclaimed income related benefits and shows that the annual amounts unclaimed in respect of Income Support, Housing Benefit, Minimum Income Guarantee/Pension Credit and Jobseeker's Allowance (Income-Based) lies in the ranges shown in the attached table. This information is only available for the period 2002 – 2005.

ESTIMATED ANNUAL AMOUNT (£ MILLION) OF BENEFIT UNCLAIMED FOR SELECTED BENEFITS

Estimate based on period	Income Support	Housing Benefit	Minimum Income Guarantee/ Pension Credit	Jobseeker's Allowance (Income-Based)
2002-04	5 - 82	6 - 37	na	12 - 76
2003-05	3 - 72	9 - 51	57- 134	3 - 35

Source:

Family Resources Survey: Income Related Benefits, Estimates of Take-Up in Northern Ireland 2003/2005

Due to sampling constraints, results are presented as a range of values

Complaints to the Housing Executive

Mr Daithí McKay asked the Minister for Social Development how many complaints the Housing Executive has received in 2004; 2005 and 2006, in regard to damp and condensation problems in Housing Executive properties. (AQW 257/07)

Ms Ritchie: The information requested is not readily available in the form requested.

The table below details the number of repair requests received by the Housing Executive relating to damp and condensation for the periods requested.

Year	*Repair requests
2004/05	507
2005/06	668
2006/07	785

* These include reports of condensation or dampness on and around the walls, floors and ceilings, as well as chimneys and windows, of properties.

Housing Waiting Lists for Ballymoney, Ballymena and Moyle

Mr Daithí McKay asked the Minister for Social Development if she will give a breakdown of the current housing waiting list, by area, within Ballymoney; Ballymena; and Moyle districts, specifically in relation to those who are homeless and in urgent need. (AQW 258/07)

Ms Ritchie: The total waiting lists for the Ballymoney, Ballymena and Ballycastle areas and, of that total, those in housing stress (with 30 or more points) are as follows:

TABLE 1
BALLYMONEY WAITING LIST (AT 31 MARCH 2007)

Common Landlord Area	Housing Applicants	
	Total	Housing Stress
District Town		
Townparks	45	21
Glebeside	82	31
Trinity Drive	18	7
Eastermeade	51	17
Westgate	36	15
Margaret Avenue	4	1
Carnany	31	13
Ballybogy	2	1
Balnamore	19	6
Cloughmills	24	9
Dervock	33	15
Dunloy	25	13
Loughguile	16	3
Rasharkin	39	18
Stranocum	7	2
Bendooragh	15	11
Clintyfinnan	3	0
Corkey	9	1
Druckendult	2	1
Dunaghy	6	2
Killyrammer	5	0
Macfin	2	1
Seacon	3	0
District Total	477	188

TABLE 2
BALLYMENA WAITING LIST (AT 31 MARCH 2007)

Common Landlord Area	Housing Applicants	
	Total	Housing Stress
District Town		
Adair/Demense	148	81
Rectory	61	30
Doury Road	22	9
Ballykeel 1	126	68
Ballykeel 2	61	34
Harryville	191	101
Fisherwick Cresc	20	5
Millfield	63	41
Dunclug	74	38
Dunvale	31	18
Ballee	130	74
Clonavon Estate	12	5
Duke Street	6	5
Balmoral Avenue /Princess Street	19	10
Herbison Park	19	9
Carniny	2	2
Galgorm	16	7
Gracehill	7	5
Tullygarley/ Riverdale	8	4
Ahoghill	68	37
Broughshane	99	50
Glenravel	19	15
Clough	10	4
Cullybackey	85	47
Kells	50	23
Portglenone	48	27
Moorlands/ Taylorstown	1	0
Slatt	2	1
Straid	0	0
Glarryford	4	4
Craigyarwarren	2	1
Procklis	0	0
Ballymarlow	0	0
Moorfields/ Glenwherry	7	0
District Total	1411	755

TABLE 3.
BALLYCASTLE WAITING LIST (AT 31 MARCH 2007)

Common Landlord Area	Housing Applicants	
	Total	Housing Stress
District Town		
Ballycastle	153	74
Bushmills	33	14
Cushendall	55	27
Armoy	17	11
Ballintoy	8	6
Ballyvoy	3	3
Mosside	4	4
Waterfoot	12	2
Cushendun	11	4
Liscolman	2	1
Rathlin	3	1
District Total	301	147

THE NUMBERS AWARDED FULL DUTY HOMELESS STATUS AS AT THE END OF MARCH 2007 ARE AS FOLLOWS:

Ballymoney	122
Ballymena	441
Ballycastle	83

Integrated Development Funding

Mrs Dolores Kelly asked the Minister for Social Development to detail, in relation to integrated development funding for Portadown, (a) the current level of spend, (b) the percentage of available funds spent on salaries, overheads, consultancy fees and on projects, (c) projects undertaken, and (d) to report on the progress and implementation of those projects. (AQW 266/07)

Ms Ritchie: In relation to the Integrated Development Funding for Portadown (as of 31 March 2007) the:

- Current level of spend is £86,823.16
- The percentage of available funds spent on:
 - Salaries is 54.92% (£47,681.61)
 - Overheads is 2.9% (£2516.18)
 - Consultancy fees is 19.4% (£16818.15)
 - Projects is 0% (£0).
- No projects have yet been undertaken.

Housing Waiting Lists for Coleraine and Limavady

Mr John Dallat asked the Minister for Social Development to detail waiting lists for social housing in the Coleraine and Limavady districts; to provide new build numbers in those districts for the years 2002/03; 2003/04; 2004/05; 2005/06; and 2006/07; and to provide information on projected new build for the years 2007/08; 2008/09; and 2009/10. (AQW 280/07)

Ms Ritchie: Waiting lists for Coleraine and Limavady as at 31 March 2007 are as follows:

District		
Coleraine	Applicants	1234
	Applicants in housing stress*	636
Limavady	Applicants	522
	Applicants in housing stress*	210

* Applicants in housing stress are those with 30 points or more

New build units completed for Coleraine and Limavady for the years requested are as follows:

	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2006/06	2006/07
Coleraine	7	18	27	45	3
Limavady	26	9	0	28	0

Projected new build for Coleraine and Limavady for the years 2007/08; 2008/09; and 2009/10 is as follows:

	No. of units		
	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10
Coleraine	44	13	37
Limavady	11	12	0

An additional 94 units are planned for 2010/11 and 2011/12 for Coleraine and 27 units planned for 2010/11 for Limavady.

Abbey Street Car Park

Mr David McClarty asked the Minister for Social Development when a decision on the Abbey Street Car Park in Coleraine will be made. (AQW 315/07)

Ms Ritchie: The Department for Social Development issued a development brief in respect of the Abbey Street and Mall car park sites in November 2005. One of the objectives of the development brief was to address the parking shortfall in Coleraine town centre. The Department is currently assessing the development proposals which have been submitted in response to the development brief. It is hoped that the

Department will be in a position to take a decision on the Abbey Street site by the end of July 2007.

Urban Renewal Scheme

Mr Fred Cobain asked the Minister for Social Development what plans are in place to implement departmental commitments in relation to the Urban Renewal Scheme in the Village area; and what meetings she has had on this issue. (AQW 319/07)

Ms Ritchie: The economic appraisal for the proposed Urban Renewal Scheme in the Village area is at present still being considered by the Department. However, the Greater Village Regeneration Trust has developed an alternative option which they wish to have considered. Senior Departmental officials have met twice with representatives from the area and a third meeting is at present being arranged. I have already indicated that my intention is to visit the area as soon as my diary permits. I hope that the visit will provide me with an opportunity to meet with representative groups.

Housing Association New Build - Ards and Strangford

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development if she will give figures for Housing Association new build for each of the last five years for (a) Ards Borough Council area; and (b) the Strangford constituency. (AQW 357/07)

Ms Ritchie: The information is not readily available in the form requested.

The table below shows the number of units completed by Housing Associations for the periods requested by the common waiting list administrative areas for Newtownards, Downpatrick and Castlereagh. The table also details units still onsite at 31 March 2007.

Area	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	On site at 31 March 2007
Newtownards	8	11	5	11	11	15
Downpatrick	60	0	40	18	11	21
Castlereagh	6	0	3	12	17	101
Total	74	11	48	41	39	137

Disability Living Allowance

Mr Peter Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of people in receipt of Disability Living Allowance by (a) constituency, (b)

District Council area, and (c) each Social Security Office. (AQW 376/07)

Ms Ritchie: The information requested is set out in the attached tables. The numbers shown reflect the number of claims where an amount of Disability Living Allowance is in payment at the date of extract.

TABLE 1: DISABILITY LIVING ALLOWANCE RECIPIENTS BY PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY AT 28 APRIL 2007

Parliamentary Constituency	Disability Living Allowance Recipients (28 April 2007)
Belfast East	7,306
Belfast North	12,181
Belfast South	7,239
Belfast West	16,087
East Antrim	6,605
East Londonderry	6,951
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	8,729
Foyle	13,566
Lagan Valley	7,856
Mid Ulster	9,177
Newry And Armagh	11,373
North Antrim	7,879
North Down	5,644
South Antrim	7,965
South Down	10,695
Strangford	7,696
Upper Bann	11,663
West Tyrone	11,847
Unallocated Postcode *	870
Total	171,329

* In producing this analysis, individual records were attributed to Electoral Wards and Parliamentary Constituency on the basis of their postcode. Not all records can be correctly allocated to a ward using this method, and some cannot be allocated at all.

TABLE 2: DISABILITY LIVING ALLOWANCE RECIPIENTS BY DISTRICT COUNCIL AREA AT 28 APRIL 2007

District Council Area	Disability Living Allowance Recipients (28 April 2007)
Antrim	4,140
Ards	5,960
Armagh	5,244
Ballymena	3,968
Ballymoney	2,530

District Council Area	Disability Living Allowance Recipients (28 April 2007)
Banbridge	4,026
Belfast	35,227
Carrickfergus	3,091
Castlereagh	5,101
Coleraine	3,925
Cookstown	3,993
Craigavon	9,233
Derry	13,566
Down	6,558
Dungannon	5,649
Fermanagh	5,024
Larne	2,328
Limavady	3,026
Lisburn	9,867
Magherafelt	3,240
Moyle	1,381
Newry & Mourne	10,069
Newtownabbey	6,653
North Down	4,813
Omagh	6,334
Strabane	5,513
Unallocated Postcode *	870
Total	171,329

* In producing this analysis, individual records were attributed to Electoral Wards and Parliamentary Constituency on the basis of their postcode. Not all records can be correctly allocated to a ward using this method, and some cannot be allocated at all.

TABLE 3: DISABILITY LIVING ALLOWANCE RECIPIENTS BY SOCIAL SECURITY OFFICE/ JOBS & BENEFITS OFFICE BOUNDARY AT 28 APRIL 2007

Social Security Office/Jobs & Benefits office boundary	Disability Living Allowance Recipients (28 April 2007)
Andersonstown	7,544
Antrim	5,063
Armagh	4,596
Ballymena	4,444
Ballymoney	3,690
Ballynahinch	2,342
Banbridge	4,161
Bangor	5,244

Social Security Office/Jobs & Benefits office boundary	Disability Living Allowance Recipients (28 April 2007)
Carrickfergus	3,093
Coleraine	3,930
Cookstown	3,420
Corporation Street	8,649
Downpatrick	3,263
Dungannon	5,213
Enniskillen	5,423
Falls Road	6,546
Foyle	8,876
Hollywood Road	6,976
Kilkeel	1,524
Knockbreda	5,698
Larne	2,331
Limavady	2,720
Lisburn	6,180
Lisnagelvin	5,065
Lurgan	6,319
Magherafelt	3,492
Newcastle	2,058
Newry	8,220
Newtownabbey	5,529
Newtownards	4,806
Omagh	6,189
Portadown	4,210
Shaftesbury Square	4,339
Shankill Road	3,636
Strabane	5,499
Unallocated Postcode*	1,041
Total	171,329

* Disability Living Allowance is a centralised benefit and therefore has no Social Security Office/Jobs & Benefits office indicator. Table 3 is a breakdown of customers whose postcodes fall within each of the 35 Social Security Office/Jobs & Benefits office boundaries. "Unallocated Postcode" in this instance refers to those postcodes which cannot be referenced on the Geographic Information System and therefore cannot be assigned to a Social Security office Boundary.

Incapacity Benefit Recipients

Mr Peter Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of people in receipt of Incapacity Benefit by (a) constituency, (b) District Council area, and (c) each Social Security Office.
(AQW 377/07)

Ms Ritchie: The information requested is set out in the attached tables. The numbers shown in receipt of Incapacity Benefit Recipients reflect the number of claims where an amount of Incapacity Benefit is in payment at the date of extract.

TABLE 1: INCAPACITY BENEFIT RECIPIENTS BY PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY AT 31 MARCH 2007

Parliamentary Constituency	Incapacity Benefit Recipients (31 March 2007)
Belfast East	2,878
Belfast North	4,373
Belfast South	2,757
Belfast West	4,632
East Antrim	3,144
East Londonderry	3,415
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	3,404
Foyle	5,329
Lagan Valley	3,378
Mid Ulster	4,021
Newry And Armagh	4,517
North Antrim	3,971
North Down	2,456
South Antrim	3,396
South Down	4,381
Strangford	3,522
Upper Bann	5,345
West Tyrone	4,603
Unallocated Postcode*	491
Total	70,013

* In producing this analysis, individual records were attributed to Electoral Wards and Parliamentary Constituency on the basis of their postcode. Not all records can be correctly allocated to a ward using this method, and some cannot be allocated at all.

TABLE 2: INCAPACITY BENEFIT RECIPIENTS BY DISTRICT COUNCIL AREA AT 31 MARCH 2007

District Council Area	Incapacity Benefit Recipients (31 March 2007)
Antrim	1,736
Ards	2,777
Armagh	2,367
Ballymena	2,059
Ballymoney	1,267
Banbridge	1,927
Belfast	11,937

District Council Area	Incapacity Benefit Recipients (31 March 2007)
Carrickfergus	1,466
Castlereagh	2,165
Coleraine	1,998
Cookstown	1,684
Craigavon	4,214
Derry	5,329
Down	2,552
Dungannon	2,194
Fermanagh	1,896
Larne	1,149
Limavady	1,417
Lisburn	3,754
Magherafelt	1,651
Moyle	645
Newry & Mourne	3,788
Newtownabbey	2,813
North Down	2,134
Omagh	2,347
Strabane	2,256
Unallocated Postcode*	491
Total	70,013

* In producing this analysis, individual records were attributed to Electoral Wards and Parliamentary Constituency on the basis of their postcode. Not all records can be correctly allocated to a ward using this method, and some cannot be allocated at all.

TABLE 3: INCAPACITY BENEFIT RECIPIENTS BY SOCIAL SECURITY OFFICE/JOBS & BENEFITS OFFICE BOUNDARY AT 31 MARCH 2007

Social Security Office/Jobs & Benefits office boundary	Incapacity Benefit Recipients (31 March 2007)
Andersonstown	2,123
Antrim	2,184
Armagh	1,988
Ballymena	2,326
Ballymoney	1,801
Ballynahinch	1,070
Banbridge	1,995
Bangor	2,286
Carrickfergus	1,467
Coleraine	2,012
Cookstown	1,410

Social Security Office/Jobs & Benefits office boundary	Incapacity Benefit Recipients (31 March 2007)
Corporation Street	2,996
Downpatrick	1,240
Dungannon	2,006
Enniskillen	2,077
Falls Road	1,766
Foyle	3,214
Hollywood Road	2,782
Kilkeel	595
Knockbreda	2,338
Larne	1,152
Limavady	1,243
Lisburn	2,634
Lisnagelvin	2,306
Lurgan	2,845
Magherafelt	1,733

Social Security Office/Jobs & Benefits office boundary	Incapacity Benefit Recipients (31 March 2007)
Newcastle	795
Newry	3,026
Newtownabbey	2,276
Newtownards	2,283
Omagh	2,287
Portadown	2,022
Shaftesbury Square	1,580
Shankill Road	1,330
Strabane	2,257
Unallocated Postcode*	568
Total	70,013

* Incapacity Benefit is a centralised benefit and therefore has no Social Security Office/Jobs & Benefits office indicator. Table 3 is a breakdown of customers whose postcodes fall within each of the 35 Social Security Office/Jobs & Benefits office boundaries. "Unallocated Postcode" in this instance refers to those postcodes which cannot be referenced on the Geographic Information System and therefore cannot be assigned to a Social Security office Boundary.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 15 June 2007

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Disabled Parking Bays

Mr John Dallat asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to outline proposals to ensure that regulations relating to parking bays reserved for disabled people in car parks operated by supermarkets and other retail outlets are enforced.
(AQW 460/07)

The First Minister and Deputy First Minister (Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness): There is no specific legislation relating to the use or misuse of parking bays for disabled people on private land (such as supermarkets and retail outlets) and therefore the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has no responsibility for enforcement in this regard.

Under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA), however, providers of services to the public, such as supermarkets, are under a duty not to discriminate against disabled people and make “reasonable adjustments” to the way they provide their services. The provision of disabled car parking bays could be considered a “reasonable adjustment” for disabled customers. A disabled person, if unable to access a supermarket, through the lack of provision of or misuse of a disabled parking bay could consider taking a case of discrimination under the service provisions of the DDA. It is for individual outlets to decide on how they deal with any misuse of such parking spaces.

Planning Appeals Commission

Mr Ian McCrea asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what controls it has over the Planning Appeals Commission.
(AQW 483/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: The Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) is a statutory independent appeal body established under the Planning (NI) Order 1991 to decide a wide range of appeals against decisions of the Department of Environment’s Planning Service and to report on various matters under planning and other legislation.

The Commission exercises its functions independently of OFMDFM but the Department is responsible for providing the resources needed for the Commission to discharge its responsibilities. Responsibility for planning policy generally rests with DRD and the DOE.

The roles and responsibilities of those involved in managing the PAC and its relationship with OFMDFM are set out in a Memorandum of Understanding. In addition to describing the relationship the Memorandum also defines the financial and administrative framework in which the Commission operates. The Department holds regular (quarterly) meetings with the Management Board of PAC.

Civic Forum

Mr John Dallat asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to outline proposals for a new Civic Forum.
(AQO 46/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: It is important that the most appropriate mechanisms and arrangements are in place for obtaining the views of civic society, as a whole, on issues which affect the lives of everyone living in Northern Ireland. That was recognised in August 2006 by the Assembly’s Preparation for Government Committee, on which all the major parties were represented, when they recommended that there should be “a review of the mechanisms for civic society to promote its views.” We intend to carry out that review.

The Civic Forum was originally established as a consultative mechanism on social, economic and cultural issues as they were perceived at that time. Civic society in Northern Ireland has changed enormously since the Forum was first established and the deputy First Minister and I want to determine what are the best arrangements for engaging with civic society in that changed environment.

In the meantime, we think that the current members of the Forum might play a role in contributing to the policy development process across the range of Executive consultation exercises and we will be writing to most members of the Forum asking them whether they would be prepared to reconvene while the review was being carried out. At this stage we are simply ascertaining how many of the current members are available and will decide then whether to recall them based on their responses.

Financial Cost of The Divide

Mr Brian Wilson asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what progress is being made on research commissioned by the Department into the 'Financial Cost of the Divide' in Northern Ireland. (AQO 22/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: The department commissioned Deloitte to undertake research into the 'Financial Cost of the Divide' in April 2006. The final report of the project was received just prior to devolution. This is a very comprehensive and complex piece of research and we wish to take time to consider it. We will publish the report as soon as possible.

First Minister of Scotland

Rev Dr Robert Coulter asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister if it has had any discussions with the First Minister of Scotland, and what has been the outcome of those discussions. (AQO 30/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: The deputy First Minister and I have both spoken to the First Minister of Scotland to convey our congratulations on his appointment and to extend an invitation to him to visit Belfast.

This visit will take place next week at which time we look forward to discussions on a range of issues of mutual interest.

Civic Forum

Mrs Dolores Kelly asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to make a statement on future plans for the re-establishment of the Civic Forum. (AQO 44/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: It is important that the most appropriate mechanisms and arrangements are in place for obtaining the views of civic society, as a whole, on issues which affect the lives of everyone living in Northern Ireland. That was recognised in August 2006 by the Assembly's Preparation for Government Committee, on which all the major parties were represented, when they recommended that there should be "a review of the mechanisms for civic society to promote its views." We intend to carry out that review.

The Civic Forum was originally established as a consultative mechanism on social, economic and cultural issues as they were perceived at that time. Civic society in Northern Ireland has changed enormously since the Forum was first established and the deputy First Minister and I want to determine what

are the best arrangements for engaging with civic society in that changed environment.

In the meantime, we think that the current members of the Forum might play a role in contributing to the policy development process across the range of Executive consultation exercises and we will be writing to most members of the Forum asking them whether they would be prepared to reconvene while the review was being carried out. At this stage we are simply ascertaining how many of the current members are available and will decide then whether to recall them based on their responses.

Reduction in Number of Government Departments

Mr Ken Robinson asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister when the Executive will be discussing proposals for a reduction in the number of Northern Ireland government departments. (AQO 29/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: We are aware of the view that the number of Northern Ireland government departments is too large to provide efficient and effective administration. For this reason we intend to establish an Efficiency Review Panel which will be charged to report on this issue, within terms of reference agreed by the Northern Ireland Assembly. It is not yet possible therefore to indicate precisely when any discussion by the Executive on this issue will take place.

Funding of Victims' Groups

Mr Simon Hamilton asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister if it will undertake a review of the funding of victims' groups and organisations. (AQO 5/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: We are currently considering how best to meet the needs of victims and survivors. We are doing this within the context of the comprehensive spending review.

We plan to bring forward detailed proposals that will address the needs of groups and individuals effectively, efficiently and in a systematic and comprehensive manner.

In doing so we will, of course, have regard to the report published by Bertha McDougall.

Remit of Executive Responsibility

Mr David Burnside asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to make a statement

on the powers of individual Ministers to take decisions outside the remit of Executive responsibility.

(AQO 4/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: Ministers direct and control their departments subject to the Ministerial Code and the Pledge of Office. The Ministerial Code requires Ministers to bring certain matters specified in the Code (namely matters which cut across the responsibilities of two or more Ministers, require agreement on prioritisation, require the adoption of a common position, have implications for the Programme for Government, are significant or controversial and are clearly outside the Programme for Government or are significant or controversial and the First Minister and deputy First Minister acting jointly have determined should be considered by the Executive) to the attention of the Executive to be considered by the Executive. The Pledge of Office requires Ministers to act in accordance with all decisions of the Executive.

Accordingly Ministers have power to take decisions without reference to the Executive on all other matters.

Sustainable Development Strategy

Mr Tommy Gallagher asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to set out the plans that are currently in place to monitor the contribution of government departments and public authorities to the objectives of Northern Ireland's Sustainable Development Strategy.

(AQO 27/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister will monitor the Sustainable Development Strategy contributions of Government Departments and any contributing public authorities by undertaking annual reviews of progress against the specific targets and actions in the Strategy's Implementation Plan. The first such review will be undertaken after 31 March 2008.

A set of sustainable development indicators is also being developed to measure overall progress towards the overarching strategic themes and objectives of the Sustainable Development Strategy. Arrangements will be put in place to monitor these.

Segregated Public Services

Dr Stephen Farry asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what research has been commissioned on the cost of segregated public services in Northern Ireland, and the timescale for its publication.

(AQO 23/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: The department commissioned Deloitte to undertake

research into the 'Financial Cost of the Divide' in April 2006. The final report of the project was received just prior to devolution. This is a very comprehensive and complex piece of research and we wish to take time to consider it. We will publish the report as soon as possible.

Ministerial Code

Mr Declan O'Loan asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to make a statement on the Ministerial Code.

(AQO 35/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: Under the provisions of paragraph 4 (2) of Schedule 1 of the Northern Ireland (St Andrews Agreement) Act 2006 the draft Ministerial Code approved by the Assembly on 20 March 2007 became the Ministerial Code for the purposes of Section 28A of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 upon the restoration of devolution. The statutory Ministerial Code therefore took effect from 8 May 2007.

Fair Employment Monitoring Regulations

Mrs Naomi Long asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what plans it has to review the current approach to Fair Employment Monitoring Regulations.

(AQO 11/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: A review of the current approach to Fair Employment Monitoring Regulations will form part of the process in bringing forward any Single Equality legislation. It is the intention that all Anti-discrimination and Equality legislation is fit for purpose and an integral part of ensuring legislative effectiveness is the duties that are imposed and how they are enforced. The Fair Employment Monitoring Regulations is just one of the elements to be examined in this context.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Farm Nutrient Management Scheme

Mr Tom Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans she has to provide additional funds for the Farm Nutrient Management Scheme for farmers who have applied, but have not yet received approval.

(AQW 412/07)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): I have secured the necessary financial assurances from the Department

of Finance and Personnel to allow DARD to continue to process applications received for the Farm Nutrient Management Scheme between now and the publication by the Executive of its draft Budget and Investment Strategy at the end of September 2007.

I have undertaken that DARD will seek to realise receipts from the strategic disposal of land assets within the period covered by the Comprehensive Spending Review, which ends in 2010/2011, to mitigate the pressure on public expenditure.

Relocation of DARD Staff

Mr Dominic Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many staff are to be relocated from Omagh, Ballymena and Newry DARD offices to Dundonald House. (AQW 414/07)

Ms Gildernew: None. While there may be some relocations outside Belfast, there are presently no plans to relocate staff from Omagh, Ballymena and Newry DARD offices to Dundonald House.

Proposed Reform of the Forestry Act (Northern Ireland) 1953

Mr Billy Armstrong asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans she has to use the proposed reform of the Forestry Act (Northern Ireland) 1953 to ensure that woodland is safeguarded in future legislation and policy; and if she will confirm that there will be an opportunity for interested bodies to contribute to this process. (AQW 435/07)

Ms Gildernew: My Department has completed an extensive review of forestry policy which included two rounds of public consultation. This resulted in the publication of NI Forestry: A Strategy for Sustainability and Growth in March 2006 which confirmed forest policy and produced a strategy for its delivery.

The Strategy outlines two key policy aims- an increase in the area of woodland; and the sustainable management of existing woods and forests. In order to deliver sustainable management of forests, the Strategy indicates, amongst other things, that the existing Forestry Act (NI) will be amended to allow the Department to regulate the felling of trees and the composition of regenerating woodland, in order to safeguard the area under forest use.

Once drafted, there will be a formal 13 week consultation period when interested parties will be given the opportunity to comment on the changes being proposed.

Fallen Animals

Mr William Irwin asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans she has to extend the subsidy for the collection and disposal of fallen animals, post November 2008. [R] (AQW 568/07)

Ms Gildernew: My officials, in conjunction with their counterparts in England, Scotland and Wales, are currently considering the National Fallen Stock Company's Business Plan, including their request for continued public funding beyond November 2008.

When all these options and proposals have been considered fully, I will be in a position to make the appropriate decisions.

Agri-Food Sector

Mr Willie Clarke asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what advances have been made in the promotion of the agri-food sector in her recent meetings with the European Union Agriculture Commissioner, and the United States Secretary of State for Agriculture. (AQO 53/07)

Ms Gildernew: I met the EU Agriculture Commissioner at the Open Forum arranged by UFU. This was the first meeting that I have had with Commissioner Boel and took place before I took up office. It was a useful meeting which gave me the opportunity to discuss some of the issues where the EU has a direct impact on the agri-food sector and the Commissioner was receptive to having further discussion on these important issues.

I am also pleased to have had an early opportunity of meeting Mike Johanns, US Secretary of Agriculture, to promote our local industry and secure his support in developing food and drink business and trade links with the USA.

This, along with my other business and Government meetings in Washington DC, succeeded in establishing relationships at the very highest levels, and in opening doors for local producers and processors. I was greatly encouraged by the warm welcome I received and America's genuine and wholehearted desire to help.

Initiating these links in the US is vital first step. And in the coming weeks I will be working with industry to identify potential market opportunities and build on the connections established to promote trade and rural tourism.

Voluntary Modulation

Mrs Michelle O'Neill asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what aspects of the rural development programme may benefit from

any monies raised through voluntary modulation.
(AQO 51/07)

Ms Gildernew: I refer my colleague to the statement that I made on Voluntary modulation to the Assembly earlier today.

The EU regulations governing the use of voluntary modulation require any monies raised through voluntary modulation to be allocated across the rural development programme rather than being concentrated on any particular sector or activity.

Given that the majority of funding in the new rural development programme will be required to support the improvement of the environment and the countryside, I expect that the lion's share of monies raised through voluntary modulation will go to that part of the programme. However, voluntary modulation monies will also be used to support the other two main elements of the programme – improving the competitiveness of the agricultural and forestry sectors and improving the quality of life in rural areas and diversification of the rural economy.

All-Island Animal Health Strategy

Mr Francie Molloy asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what work has been progressed on an all-island animal health strategy.

(AQO 50/07)

Ms Gildernew: Even though the machinery of the North South Ministerial Council was suspended in 2002, officials have continued to co-operate closely on animal health and welfare issues through a number of North/South working groups. A structured approach to the development of animal health and welfare policy across the island is therefore in place.

There have been a number of positive outcomes as a result of this co-operation, the most significant achievements of which include the development of a largely similar system of sheep identification, broad alignment of border control policies aimed at preventing the introduction of animal disease and on-going co-operation on contingency planning for exotic disease outbreaks, such as Avian Influenza and Equine Infectious Anaemia.

In addition, there continues to be co-operation on testing regimes for TB and Brucellosis in border areas and joint enforcement operations including the seizure of illegal medicines and hormonal substances.

Development of the All-Island Animal Health and Welfare Strategy, including the free movement of animals within the island of Ireland, are amongst my key priorities.

Whilst I welcome the ongoing North South co-operation by officials, my aim is to progress the development of the All-Island Animal Health and Welfare Strategy in order to provide an agreed framework for the further development of policy in this area.

To this end, I aim to meet my Southern counterpart in the near future to discuss how we can move quickly to develop the Strategy and to raise the possibility of organising an all-island consultative forum to take the Strategy forward.

Single Farm Payment

Mr Tom Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many farm inspections took place relative to the (a) 2005 Single Farm Payment Scheme; (b) 2006 Single Farm Payment Scheme; and (c) the estimated number of farm inspections to take place relative to the 2007 Single Farm Payment Scheme. [R]

(AQO 21/07)

Ms Gildernew: In 2005, my Department carried out 2,106 eligibility inspections. Of these 422 cases were also inspected for Cross-Compliance purposes. A further 55 Cross-Compliance inspections were carried out by the Environment and Heritage Service.

In 2006, my Department carried out 2,115 eligibility inspections. Of these 484 were also inspected for Cross-Compliance. In addition, 401 Cross-Compliance related inspections were carried out by the Environment and Heritage Service and the Safety Executive inspected 410 farm businesses, also for Cross-Compliance purposes.

To establish the level of farm inspections required for 2007 we have to analyse the outcomes of the 2006 inspections. While the results of the 2006 inspection are not yet finalised, indications are that a high level of error was found in the outcomes of the eligibility inspections. As a result, in line with Commission rules, the numbers of eligibility inspections in 2007 will need to increase.

The worst case scenario is that eligibility inspections increase from 5% to 7.5%. If this is the case we are likely to have to undertake approximately 2,925 eligibility inspections in 2007. The Cross-Compliance rate will remain at 1% for each Competent Control Authority.

Rural White Paper

Mr John Dallat asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to indicate a timescale for bringing forward a Rural White Paper. (AQO 47/07)

Ms Gildernew: The Member will appreciate that production of a Rural White Paper would be a large

and complex task involving input and commitment from many different Departments.

As a first step I have been pressing for the development of a Rural White Paper to be included in the forthcoming Programme for Government.

If agreement can be reached to include a Rural White Paper in the Programme for Government, it would be my view that a significant amount of work would then need to be carried out in scoping the issues, consulting with other Departments and stakeholders, and prioritising the areas where Government needs to take action.

Whilst I am fully committed to the development of a Rural White Paper, I am realistic enough to know that to develop one will take some time. I would, however, hope to see some progress by the end of this year.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Foras na Gaeilge

Mr Francis Brolly asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to investigate the impediments to Foras na Gaeilge, the cross-border language body, providing capital expenditure funding assistance to Irish language groups in the community.

(AQW 145/07)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Poots): Foras na Gaeilge and the Ulster-Scots Agency which comprise the North/South Language Body receive their funding from the Department of Community Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs and the Department of Culture Arts and Leisure. Neither Agency has delegated authority to administer capital expenditure grants programme.

Tourist Potential of 12 July Celebrations

Mr Ken Robinson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps he will take to further enhance the tourist potential surrounding the 12th July celebrations; and how he will engage with his counterpart in the Republic of Ireland to co-ordinate a more positive interpretation of both historical events and modern celebrations and commemorations.

(AQW 153/07)

Mr Poots: The Community Festivals Fund (CFF), which is administered on behalf of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure by the Northern Ireland Events Company, has made awards totalling £19,400 to 4 applicants from different areas of Northern Ireland who are organising events based around the 12th July celebrations in 2007.

In addition, the Department for Social Development is providing funding of £104,200, for the period 1 January 2007 to 31 December 2009, to the County Grand Orange Lodge of Belfast for the employment of a Development Officer for the Belfast Parade.

Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) and Tourism Ireland (TIL) continue to build positive working relationships with representatives of the Orange Order through regular meetings, and senior representatives from both organisations have attended the 12th July celebrations in recent years.

As part of these meetings NITB and the Orange Order have been discussing the development of the 'Orange Fest' concept with a view to developing the festival / carnival aspect of the 12th July celebrations. It is anticipated that this has the potential to result in more visitor friendly events that have the potential to appeal to both local and international visitors and to help address the negative perceptions that continue to surround this time of year in many key markets.

NITB is also currently undertaking research in the Republic of Ireland on the perception of Northern Ireland in that market and any barriers to visit that might exist. When this is complete, relevant information will be shared with the Orange Order.

NITB provides information on key 12th July events on its website with signposting to the relevant websites for visitors who want to find out more. NITB is also about to launch a new Cultural Tourism Strategy for Northern Ireland. This strategy outlines the NITB approach to working with the Orange Order and the 12th July celebrations under their key "Living Culture" theme.

I will liaise with Minister Dodds, Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, to consider how best to engage with our counterparts in the Republic of Ireland on this matter.

Foras na Gaeilge

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if Foras na Gaeilge will be required to provide an English language version of the minutes of its board meetings on its website.

(AQW 232/07)

Mr Poots: In accordance with the North/South Co-operation (Implementation Bodies) (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 the working language of the Irish Language Agency of the Body is Irish. As part of development work currently underway on the Foras na Gaeilge website, Foras are considering arrangements for minutes of its future Board meetings to be made available online in Irish. The Department has written to Foras na Gaeilge requesting that such minutes also

be translated into English and posted on the English language section of their website.

Re-stocking of the Dibney River

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he will consider assisting the local fishing initiative to restock the Dibney River.
(AQW 324/07)

Mr Poots: It is essential in a river such as the Dibney to carry out reinstatement works prior to restocking as the necessary habitat needs to be in place to support either wild or restocked fish. The Department is already assisting the local fishing initiative through the provision of advice on reinstatement and fishery enhancement measures.

Funding for Restocking the Dibney River

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what discussions he has had with other organisations in order to source funding for the Dibney River, in relation to restocking and working with the community.
(AQW 325/07)

Mr Poots: The Department has had no discussions with other organisations to source funding for restocking the Dibney River. Officials would assist any local communities interested in reinstating rivers to identify funding opportunities. However it would be the responsibility of the local community organisation to hold discussions with any funding provider. Department officials are already providing the local community with advice on fishery habitat enhancement measures in the River which would lead to improved wild fish stocks.

Training for 2012 Olympic Games

Mr David Hilditch asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail progress made in promoting Northern Ireland as a venue for Olympic team training camps prior to the 2012 Olympic Games.
(AQW 333/07)

Mr Poots: A sum of approximately £50 million has been included in the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland for the provision of Olympic Standard facilities. A competition for selection of venues is currently underway. Forty one applications, from venue operators and proposed venues in Northern Ireland, were submitted for inclusion in the London Organising Committee for the Olympic Games (LOCOG) guide, for pre-games training camps, these are currently being assessed by LOCOG.

In addition, representation from the Northern Ireland Events Company and SportNI, attended Sport Accord in Beijing this year to promote Northern Ireland in attracting world class competitions.

Funding for Olympic Games 2012

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what funding has been allocated to Northern Ireland for the London Olympic Games 2012.
(AQW 354/07)

Mr Poots: DCAL received exchequer funding of £200,000 for 2006/07 and £300,000 for 2007/08 for 2012 Games related business.

Improvements to Shooting Grounds

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if Comber Shooting Club, in conjunction with Hollow Farm Shooting Club, has applied for funding to improve its ground prior to the London Olympic Games 2012.
(AQW 355/07)

Mr Poots: Sport NI (SNI) is responsible for the development of sport in Northern Ireland including the distribution of funding. I can confirm that Comber Shooting Club, in conjunction with Hollow Farm Shooting Club, has applied for funding to improve its ground through the Elite Facilities Competition for Northern Ireland's Olympic/Paralympic Sports.

Funding for Shooting Clubs

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he will provide details of shooting clubs that have applied for financial assistance to improve their shooting grounds prior to the London Olympic Games 2012.
(AQW 356/07)

Mr Poots: Sport NI (SNI) is responsible for the development of sport in Northern Ireland including the distribution of funding. I can advise the following shooting clubs have applied for funding through the Elite Facilities Competition for Northern Ireland's Olympic/Paralympic Sports:

- Comber Rifle Club in partnership with Hollow Farm Shooting Grounds
- Dungannon Rifle and Pistol Club.

Promoting Target Sports

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what involvement his department has had with the government-backed initiative to promote target sports.
(AQW 358/07)

Mr Poots: Sport NI (SNI) is responsible for the development of Sport in Northern Ireland including the distribution of funding. With the awarding of the Olympic and Paralympic Games to London in 2012, Government, through the Elite Facilities Programme, is providing additional funding for the development of sports facilities across the UK. This programme proposes to invest up to approximately £53 million across a range of sports infrastructure projects in Northern Ireland through a series of competitions. As part of this process, a number of target sports have applied to SNI for investments which are currently being assessed.

Decisions on funding under this programme will be a matter for SNI.

Interdepartmental Charter Implementation Group

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how many times the Interdepartmental Charter Implementation Group has met, the dates of those meetings and the dates of any meetings of sub-committees or working groups.

(AQW 370/07)

Mr Poots: Since its formation there have been 16 meetings of the Interdepartmental Charter Implementation Group. The dates of these meetings are listed below:

1 st	8 February 2001	9 th	1 October 2004
2 nd	21 March 2001	10 th	14 December 2004
3 rd	24 September 2001	11 th	21 March 2005
4 th	13 December 2001	12 th	19 May 2005
5 th	22 January 2003	13 th	28 September 2005
6 th	5 March 2003	14 th	18 January 2006
7 th	30 September 2003	15 th	10 November 2006
8 th	1 March 2004	16 th	27 April 2007

There have been three Sub-Groups which have met – Training, Translation Service and Article 9. The

Training Sub-Group met on two occasions: 19 May 2004 and 28 September 2004. The Translation Service Sub-Group had three meetings: 18 May 2001, 10 September 2001 and 13 September 2002. Article 9 Sub-Group (Use of Irish in the Courts) met on three occasions: 16 August 2005, 7 September 2005 and 9 January 2006.

Irish Language Act

Mr Mervyn Storey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he will give an update on work done by his department on an Irish Language Act.

(AQW 372/07)

Mr Poots: Consultation on draft clauses for Irish language legislation closed on 5th June 2007. In the region of 11,000 responses were received. My officials are currently analysing these responses.

New Library in Newtownards

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if a site has been agreed for a new library for Newtownards; and if he will give a timescale for the construction of the library.

(AQW 383/07)

Mr Poots: The South Eastern Education and Library Board is currently revising an Economic Appraisal to build a replacement library on the site of the old Castle Gardens Primary School. The Board anticipates that the Appraisal should be submitted to the Department by the end of June 2007 and subject to consideration and approval by my Department and the Department of Finance and Personnel, it will take a minimum of 12 to 15 months before construction could commence on site. This is to allow for detailed design work and for the planning application and approval process.

2012 Olympic Games

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what discussions he has had with United Kingdom sports bodies in relation to the London Olympic Games 2012.

(AQW 384/07)

Mr Poots: I have recently met with the Chair of the London Organising Committee for the Olympic Games (LOCOG), Tessa Jowell, Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and discussed 2012 Games related business. Officials in my Department and in Sport NI are engaged in ongoing discussions with their counterparts in England, Scotland and Wales, regarding Olympic & Paralympic Games issues.

New Library in Newtownards

Mr Simon Hamilton asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he will give an update on what progress is being made on the provision of a new library for Newtownards.

(AQW 395/07)

Mr Poots: The South Eastern Education and Library Board is currently revising an Economic Appraisal to build a replacement library on the site of the old Castle Gardens Primary School. The Board anticipates that

the Appraisal should be submitted to the Department by the end of June 2007 and subject to consideration and approval by my Department and the Department of Finance and Personnel, it will take a minimum of 12 to 15 months before construction could commence on site. This is to allow for detailed design work and for the planning application and approval process.

Provision of Public Libraries

Mr Roy Beggs asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what resources have been earmarked to promote usage of public libraries; and if he is planning any further closures of libraries in the near future. (AQW 463/07)

Mr Poots: The provision of the public library service, including the promotion of libraries and any decision on the closure of libraries, is the responsibility of the Education and Library Boards. My Department requires the Education and Library Boards to promote libraries and manage the library estate from within their allocated resources.

Consultation on the Irish Language Act

Mr Barry McElduff asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to assess the number of respondents who encountered difficulty in making email submissions in response to the consultation on the Irish Language Act on, or before, Tuesday 5 June 2007. (AQW 476/07)

Mr Poots: All efforts were made by my officials to ensure that interested bodies and individuals had every opportunity to respond to the recent consultation. This included publication of office address, phone number, fax number, an email address, and a link to an email address from DCAL's website.

Arts Funding

Ms Anna Lo asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to make a statement on the level of arts funding per capita in Northern Ireland. (AQO 13/07)

Mr Poots: I recognise that funding for the arts in Northern Ireland lags behind the rest of the UK and the Republic of Ireland. This deficit has accumulated over many years.

I will be considering funding for the arts along with other priorities as I negotiate the Department's budget for the period 2008/09 to 2010/11 in the Comprehensive Spending Review.

PR Consultancy Expenditure

Mr Thomas Burns asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how much money has been spent by his department in the last five years on (a) public relations, and (b) other consultancy services. (AQO 39/07)

Mr Poots: In the last five financial years from 2002/03, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure has incurred no expenditure on public relations consultancy. Expenditure on other consultancy services for the same period is as follows:

2002/03	£1,156,659
2003/04	£647,159
2004/05	£423,113
2005/06	£328,847
2006/07	£1,295,309

Ulster-Scots and Irish Language Funding

Mr Gregory Campbell asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what measures are being considered to ensure that the Ulster-Scots cultural outlook is offered resources similar to those being offered to the Irish language. (AQO 8/07)

Mr Poots: The funding provided to the Ulster Scots Agency and Foras na Gaeilge, the Irish Language Agency, reflects their differing ranges of projects, programmes and supported organisations and is determined on the basis of the approved actions in their respective annual business plans.

Arts and the Tourist Industry

Mr Pat Ramsey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline whether his department has made an assessment of the impact on the tourist industry of expenditure by his department on the arts. (AQO 54/07)

Mr Poots: While no formal assessment has been made by my department, it is clear that the arts make a significant contribution to economic development and tourism. For example, it is estimated that major arts and cultural events supported by the Northern Ireland Events Company in 2005 supported 25,000 bed nights. 5,200 ticket sales for the Belfast Festival at Queens were to people with addresses outside Northern Ireland.

Northern Ireland Theatre Initiative

Mr David Ford asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to make a statement on the potential for a

Northern Ireland theatre initiative, in line with those already operating in Scotland and Wales. (AQO 18/07)

Mr Poots: I am not yet convinced that there is a case for a publicly funded national theatre for Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland is already well served with a good mix of theatre companies. In 2007/08 the Arts Council provides core funding to 7 theatre companies and lottery funding to a further 5 companies. Many of them produce original works and perform in a range of venues. The Arts Council is currently developing a drama strategy for Northern Ireland which will identify the key needs of the sector.

Arts Funding

Mr Trevor Lunn asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans he has to reallocate resources towards bringing per capita arts funding into line with Scotland and the Republic of Ireland. (AQO 14/07)

Mr Poots: I recognise that funding for the arts in Northern Ireland lags behind the rest of the UK and the Republic of Ireland. This deficit has accumulated over many years.

I will be considering funding for the arts along with other priorities as I negotiate the Department's budget for the period 2008/09 to 2010/11 in the Comprehensive Spending Review.

EDUCATION

Irish Language Qualifying Examination

Mr Dominic Bradley asked the Minister of Education what plans she has for initial and in service training of teachers from Northern Ireland in the Irish Language Qualifying Examination, to facilitate teachers from Northern Ireland who wish to teach in the Republic of Ireland. (AQW 132/07)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Teachers from here who wish to teach in the primary sector in the South of Ireland, but who do not hold the requisite Irish language qualification (*An Scrúdú le hAghaidh Cáilíochta sa Ghaeilge*), are granted provisional recognition as a teacher by the Department of Education and Science and are allowed 5 years to acquire the qualification.

In the case of post-primary schools, the Irish language requirement only applies to teachers employed in Gaeltacht schools, in Irish-medium schools, and to teachers who teach any subject through the medium of Irish.

The Higher Education Institutions in the North provide training which will subsequently enable teachers to teach the curriculum here. However, there are many competing demands for the inclusion of training on specific topics in Initial Teacher Education courses, and the time available for training students is limited.

As such, my Department has no plans at the moment to introduce an Irish language qualifying examination into initial or in-service training courses. I am asking the review to investigate the demand and interest in these courses.

Male Non-Teaching Staff

Mr Mark Durkan asked the Minister of Education what percentage of non-teaching staff in (a) primary; and (b) secondary schools are male, broken down by Education and Library Board area. (AQW 212/07)

Ms Ruane: The percentage of male non-teaching staff by Board area is as follows:

	BELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	WELB
Primary	6%	10%	6%	6%	10%
Secondary	24%	30%	23%	24%	23%

This information has been provided by the Education and Library Boards (ELBs) who are the employing authorities for non-teaching staff in the controlled and maintained sectors. It does not include non-teaching staff employed by the Boards of Governors of Voluntary Grammar and Grant Maintained Integrated schools.

Movilla High School, Newtownards

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Education to explain the rationale associated with the intention to reduce, by eleven, technician and support staff for the forthcoming financial year in Movilla High School, Newtownards. (AQW 273/07)

Ms Ruane: Matters relating to the employment of non-teaching staff in Movilla High School are the responsibility of the employer (the Board of Governors) and the employing authority (the South Eastern Education and Library Board, SEELB). I have been advised by the Chief Executive of the SEELB that it is not the Board of Governors' intention to reduce, by eleven, technician and support staff for the forthcoming financial year. However, due to a significant decline in pupil numbers, the Governors have found it necessary to propose reduced hours for some administrative and technical staff.

Donaghadee High School

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Education to explain in full the rationale and evidence considered for the proposed closure of Donaghadee High School. (AQW 277/07)

Ms Ruane: Following its strategic review of provision in the North East Ards area last year the South Eastern Education and Library Board has commenced preliminary consultations with Donaghadee High School and Movilla High School in relation to a potential rationalisation between the two schools. A formal consultation by the Board is expected to commence during the forthcoming autumn term. Any proposals the Board brings forward for the rationalisation of post-primary provision in the area will require the publication of a statutory development proposal.

Crossroads Primary School, Kilrea

Mr John Dallat asked the Minister of Education to detail her plans for the replacement of Crossroads Primary School, Kilrea, with a new build. (AQW 281/07)

Ms Ruane: A Feasibility Study that identified the options to be considered in an Economic Appraisal, to meet the accommodation needs of Crossroads Primary School, was returned to the Catholic Council for Maintained Schools (CCMS) in September 2006.

It was one of a number of feasibility studies that CCMS have been asked to review to ensure consistency with an area based approach to school planning and within the context of the recommendations of the Bain Report.

CCMS response in this respect is awaited.

School Funding for Sport

Mr Robin Newton asked the Minister of Education to confirm the funding provided to primary and secondary level schools for sport/games over the past five years. (AQW 290/07)

Ms Ruane: Figures provided by the relevant Funding Authorities, for identifiable recurrent funding made available to primary and secondary schools for sports/games in the past five years, are shown on the table below.

	2002/03 £000's	2003/04 £000's	2004/05 £000's	2005/06 £000's	2006/07 £000's
Primary	291	359	683	1,655	1,499
Secondary	1,630	1,952	1,956	3,361	3,408
Total	1,921	2,311	2,639	5,016	4,907

Notes: With the introduction of Common Funding in 2005/06, all primary and secondary schools receive funding under a common formula Sports Factor, to assist in meeting the statutory physical education curriculum. Figures include other recurrent funding such as Big Lottery, European funding and Sports & Youth Council grants to schools, but exclude capital, curriculum and advisory support services and training.

Priory College, Holywood

Mr Peter Weir asked the Minister of Education if she will give a timescale for the approval for a new build for Priory College in Holywood; and for the hold position to be rescinded. (AQW 294/07)

Ms Ruane: Following a review of previously announced capital schemes in planning conducted earlier this year, the project for Priory College, Holywood was put on hold pending further examination of the proposed scheme with the South Eastern Education and Library Board. The main issue for consideration is the projected enrolment trends for the area and the potential implications for the scheme. The Department expects to be able to provide confirmation of the position shortly.

Priory College, Holywood

Mr Peter Weir asked the Minister of Education when building work will commence on the new build for Priory College in Holywood. (AQW 295/07)

Ms Ruane: Following a review of previously announced capital schemes in planning conducted earlier this year, the project for Priory College, Holywood was put on hold pending further examination of the proposed scheme with the South Eastern Education and Library Board. The main issue for consideration is the projected enrolment trends for the area and the potential implications for the scheme. The Department expects to be able to provide confirmation of the position shortly.

Amalgamation of Holywood and Redburn Primary Schools

Mr Peter Weir asked the Minister of Education if she will give a timescale for building work to commence on the new build for Holywood and Redburn Primary Schools, on the existing Priory College site. (AQW 296/07)

Ms Ruane: A scheme to amalgamate Holywood and Redburn Primary Schools on a new site received New Starts approval in March 2006. The scheme includes Holywood Nursery school. The need for this project was confirmed by my predecessor following a recent review of capital schemes.

The scheme is at initial planning stage only and it is not possible at this time to provide a definitive indication of when this project will be able to commence on site. The use of the site at Priory College for the amalgamated school is tied to the development of a scheme for the College which was put on hold pending further examination of the proposed scheme with the South Eastern Education and Library Board. The Department expects to be able to provide confirmation of the position shortly.

Priory College, Holywood

Dr Stephen Farry asked the Minister of Education when a decision will be made on the approval of the capital project, regarding the location of Priory Integrated College at the Redburn site in Holywood. (AQW 300/07)

Ms Ruane: Following a review of previously announced capital schemes still in planning, the capital project for Priory College, Holywood was put on hold pending further examination of the proposed scheme with the South Eastern Education and Library Board. The main issue for consideration is the projected enrolment trends for the area and the potential implications for the scheme. The Department expects to be able to provide confirmation of the position shortly.

The school's Board of Governors has provided the Department with information relating to current and proposed collaborations and partnerships. They are currently working with Sullivan Upper School for some AS/GCE and AS courses. They are involved in the North Down/Ards Learning Partnership which comprises Priory Integrated College, Strangford Integrated College, Glastry College and St Columbanus' College, Bangor for GNVQ Level 2 qualifications. Operating as the Partnership, they are also working with the North Down and Ards Institute for the delivery of Occupational Studies qualifications.

Priory College, Holywood

Dr Stephen Farry asked the Minister of Education what criteria will be used in making the decision to approve the capital project regarding the location of Priory Integrated College at the Redburn site in Holywood. (AQW 301/07)

Ms Ruane: Following a review of previously announced capital schemes still in planning, the capital project for Priory College, Holywood was put on hold pending further examination of the proposed scheme with the South Eastern Education and Library Board. The main issue for consideration is the projected enrolment trends for the area and the potential impli-

cations for the scheme. The Department expects to be able to provide confirmation of the position shortly.

The school's Board of Governors has provided the Department with information relating to current and proposed collaborations and partnerships. They are currently working with Sullivan Upper School for some AS/GCE and AS courses. They are involved in the North Down/Ards Learning Partnership which comprises Priory Integrated College, Strangford Integrated College, Glastry College and St Columbanus' College, Bangor for GNVQ Level 2 qualifications. Operating as the Partnership, they are also working with the North Down and Ards Institute for the delivery of Occupational Studies qualifications.

Priory College, Holywood

Dr Stephen Farry asked the Minister of Education what information has been received by her department to confirm that Priory Integrated College is meeting the criteria for cross-sectoral collaboration, as set out in Professor Sir George Bain's Report of the Independent Strategic Review of Education. (AQW 302/07)

Ms Ruane: Following a review of previously announced capital schemes still in planning, the capital project for Priory College, Holywood was put on hold pending further examination of the proposed scheme with the South Eastern Education and Library Board. The main issue for consideration is the projected enrolment trends for the area and the potential implications for the scheme. The Department expects to be able to provide confirmation of the position shortly.

The school's Board of Governors has provided the Department with information relating to current and proposed collaborations and partnerships. They are currently working with Sullivan Upper School for some AS/GCE and AS courses. They are involved in the North Down/Ards Learning Partnership which comprises Priory Integrated College, Strangford Integrated College, Glastry College and St Columbanus' College, Bangor for GNVQ Level 2 qualifications. Operating as the Partnership, they are also working with the North Down and Ards Institute for the delivery of Occupational Studies qualifications.

Post - Primary Integrated Education

Dr Stephen Farry asked the Minister of Education what plans she has to address the growing demand for integrated education at post-primary level in the North Down, east Belfast and Ards areas. (AQW 303/07)

Ms Ruane: The Department has a statutory duty to encourage and facilitate the development of integrated education and also to have regard to the general

principle that, so far as is compatible with the provision of efficient instruction and training and the avoidance of unreasonable public expenditure, pupils shall be educated in accordance with the wishes of their parents. Proposals to increase places at integrated schools either through expansion of intakes at existing schools, or the establishment of new schools, are the subject of a statutory development proposal consultation process. Each such proposal is considered on its individual merits.

Enrolment at Priory College

Dr Stephen Farry asked the Minister of Education to outline the rationale for maintaining a cap of 450 pupils on the enrolment level of Priory Integrated College, given the strong demand for post-primary integrated education within its potential catchment area. (AQW 304/07)

Ms Ruane: The 450 approved enrolment at Priory Integrated College is based on a projected long-term enrolment which was agreed between the Department of Education and the South Eastern Education and Library Board. It takes account of historic intakes and the numbers in the lower age-groups at the main primary schools which provide pupils to the College. At October 2006 the school had an enrolment of 421 pupils.

Schools Selection System

Mr Mervyn Storey asked the Minister of Education what priority she will give to public opinion when preparing proposals for a replacement for the schools selection system. (AQW 338/07)

Ms Ruane: I am listening to the views of a wide range of individuals on the issue of the new arrangements for transfer from primary to post-primary education. When I complete this process I will prepare and publish draft regulations for consultation.

Academic Selection

Mr Mervyn Storey asked the Minister of Education if she has established a capped figure for expenditure on consultations, to determine a way forward on academic selection. (AQW 339/07)

Ms Ruane: When new arrangements for transfer from primary to post-primary education are agreed, draft regulations will be prepared and published for consultation. No upper limit has been set for expenditure on this, or any other form of consultation associated with this important issue, but any consultation that is carried out will be done so with due regard to the most cost effective use of public money.

Rainey Endowed School

Mr Billy Armstrong asked the Minister of Education if the rules of procurement bind Rainey Endowed School in Magherafelt into the Public Private Partnership process. (AQW 344/07)

Ms Ruane: Rainey Endowed School was assessed for initial designation as part of a Public Private Partnership scheme. An Outline Business Case (OBC) has been undertaken for this project which will confirm the appropriate procurement route based on a value for money assessment. Once the outcome of the OBC has been established and the procurement route determined, planning of the scheme will proceed in conjunction with the school to contract sign. I assure you that my Department will continue to work with the school to progress this project without delay.

Rainey Endowed School

Mr Billy Armstrong asked the Minister of Education if she will consider progressing the rebuilding of Rainey Endowed School through Design and Build, rather than through a Public Private Partnership. (AQW 345/07)

Ms Ruane: Rainey Endowed School was assessed for initial designation as part of a Public Private Partnership scheme. An Outline Business Case (OBC) has been undertaken for this project which will confirm the appropriate procurement route based on a value for money assessment. Once the outcome of the OBC has been established and the procurement route determined, planning of the scheme will proceed in conjunction with the school to contract sign. I assure you that my Department will continue to work with the school to progress this project without delay.

Rainey Endowed School

Mr Billy Armstrong asked the Minister of Education if she will explain why Rainey Endowed School is still waiting for work to commence on its planned rebuild through Public Private Partnership, in light of the fact that progress is being made on other schools, not in Public Private Partnerships, that submitted bids after Rainey Endowed; and if she will give an assurance that work will progress without further delay. (AQW 346/07)

Ms Ruane: Rainey Endowed School was assessed for initial designation as part of a Public Private Partnership scheme. An Outline Business Case (OBC) has been undertaken for this project which will confirm the appropriate procurement route based on a value for money assessment. Once the outcome of the OBC has been established and the procurement route

determined, planning of the scheme will proceed in conjunction with the school to contract sign. I assure you that my Department will continue to work with the school to progress this project without delay.

Ulster-Scots

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Education how much money her department has spent in relation to Ulster-Scots, in each year since the Council of Europe Charter for Regional or Minority Languages came into force in the United Kingdom. (AQW 360/07)

Ms Ruane: I list below expenditure in relation to Ulster-Scots since July 2001.

Financial Year	Expenditure
2001/2002	£00.00
2002/2003	£00.00
2003/2004	£69.95
2004/2005	£00.00
2005/2006	£49,000.00
2006/2007	£50.61

Nursery and Pre-school Education

Mr Thomas Burns asked the Minister of Education what is the current position in regard to the criteria-based selection system for nursery and pre-school places. (AQW 362/07)

Ms Ruane: The aim of the Pre-School Education Expansion Programme (PSEEP) is to provide one year of high quality funded pre-school education, in the year immediately before compulsory education, for every child whose parents wish it.

In determining the admissions criteria the Department of Education specifies some priorities i.e.

- Social disadvantage – because research has shown that those children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds tend to experience more difficulty at school than other children; and
- 4 year olds with July and August birthdays – because these children do not enter compulsory education until after their 5th birthday.

Pre-school settings must then set their own criteria to select children down to the last available place when too many children apply to a provider. These include a range of factors such as proximity to the school or the previous attendance of siblings and are at the discretion of the individual school/playgroup.

Nursery Unit at St Comgall's Primary School

Mr Thomas Burns asked the Minister of Education what progress has been made in relation to the request for a full nursery unit at St. Comgall's Primary School, Antrim. (AQW 364/07)

Ms Ruane: The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) are currently undertaking a consultation exercise for a nursery unit at St Comgall's Primary School and a development proposal is expected to be published once this is completed. The development proposal will be subject to a two-month statutory public consultation period.

Representations about Ulster-Scots

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Education what representations have been made to her department about the Ulster-Scots language and Ulster-Scots culture in each calendar year since 1997. (AQW 368/07)

Ms Ruane: My Department does not keep detailed records of correspondence received and I am therefore unable to provide you with the information requested.

However, I can advise you that one representation was made to the Minister for Education in January 2001 regarding the lack of educational resources available for the teaching of the Ulster-Scots language.

Donaghadee High School

Mr Alex Easton asked the Minister of Education to detail what plans she has for the long-term future of Donaghadee High School. (AQW 371/07)

Ms Ruane: The South Eastern Education and Library Board has advised that following a strategic review of provision in the North East Ards area last year it has commenced preliminary consultations with Donaghadee High School and Movilla High School in relation to a potential rationalisation between the two schools. A formal consultation by the Board is expected to commence during the forthcoming autumn term. Any proposal the Board brings forward for the rationalisation of post-primary provision in the area will require the publication of a statutory development proposal which will be subject to consultation.

Employment Opportunities for Teachers

Mr Alastair Ross asked the Minister of Education what steps are being taken to help recently graduated teachers get jobs in Northern Ireland. (AQW 387/07)

Ms Ruane: The recruitment of teachers is the responsibility of teachers' employers. However, the Department has issued guidance to employers exhorting them to give preference to newly qualified teachers and experienced non-retired teachers seeking employment. Schools have also been advised that they should recruit to vacancies on a permanent rather than a temporary basis unless the vacancy is clearly of a temporary nature. The capping of the levels of the central reimbursement of the costs of substitute cover also provides an incentive to employ newly qualified teachers as substitutes.

Moreover, following the review of teacher education in the north of Ireland which is being carried out jointly by the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning, both Departments are exploring ways by which newly qualified teachers can have greater stability in employment during their early years of teaching.

English as an Additional Language

Mr Dominic Bradley asked the Minister of Education how many pupils whose first language is not English attend schools in each of the Education and Library Board areas. (AQW 413/07)

Ms Ruane: The number of children who had English as an additional language attending schools in each of the Education and Library Boards in 2006/07 was as follows:

Education and Library Board	Total
Belfast	796
Western	455
North Eastern	582
South Eastern	526
Southern	1,552
North of Ireland	3,911

Note: Figures relate to nursery schools, primary schools, preparatory departments of grammar schools, post primary schools and special schools.

Ballywalter Primary School

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Education what discussion she has had with the landowner of the site for the new build for Ballywalter Primary School. (AQW 421/07)

Ms Ruane: The South Eastern Education and Library Board is responsible for negotiating the site purchase for the proposed new school for Ballywalter Primary School. I understand the Board had initial discussions with the local landowner.

Assaults on Teachers

Mr Peter Weir asked the Minister of Education to detail, for each of the last five years, the number of cases of assault against teaching staff recorded by her department, broken down by Education and Library Board. (AQW 497/07)

Ms Ruane: The Department does not collect the information requested. Cases of assault against teaching staff may be reported to the PSNI by the school or the teacher.

The Department holds information about the number of pupils expelled and the number of incidences of suspension as a result of a physical attack on any member of staff.

Children Excluded from School

Mr Peter Weir asked the Minister of Education how many children have been excluded from schools in each of the last five years, broken down by Education and Library Board. (AQW 498/07)

Ms Ruane: The information requested is shown in the following tables:

(A) THE NUMBER OF PUPILS SUSPENDED IN EACH EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD.

School Year	BELB	WELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	Total
2000/01	1,066	919	1,189	803	763	4,740
2001/02	1,229	882	1,107	919	914	5,051
2002/03	1,014	906	1,201	992	1,169	5,282
2003/04	1,191	936	1,286	987	1,084	5,484
2004/05	1,100	975	1,333	960	1,046	5,414

(B) THE NUMBER OF PUPILS EXPELLED IN EACH EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD.

School Year	BELB	WELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	Total
2000/01	5	19	29	11	16	80
2001/02	7	16	18	12	23	76
2002/03	18	12	17	16	7	70
2003/04	6	12	15	12	26	71
2004/05	7	11	26	9	10	63

The suspension and expulsions statistics for 2005/06 school year are currently being analysed and will be placed on the DE website when this has been completed.

Attendance at Irish Medium Schools

Mr Francis Brolly asked the Minister of Education to investigate the comparison in numbers of children attending (a) naiscoileanna, (b) bunscoileanna, and (c) meanscoileanna, from 1997-2007. (AQW 503/07)

Ms Ruane: The total number of children in each of the sectors over the period 1997/98 to 2006/07 was as follows:

	naiscoileanna (voluntary and private pre schools)	bunscoileanna (primary schools)	meanscoileanna (post primary schools)
1997/98	0	1,016	231
1998/99	146	1,064	268
1999/00	257	1,115	308
2000/01	295	1,159	332
2001/02	362	1,421	342
2002/03	345	1,608	364
2003/04	334	1,763	406
2004/05	397	1,888	442
2005/06	407	1,944	470
2006/07	448	2,041	489

Physical Assaults on Teaching Staff

Mr Peter Weir asked the Minister of Education to detail, for each of the last five years, the number of pupils excluded from schools for carrying out physical assaults against teaching staff, broken down by Education and Library Board. (AQW 504/07)

Ms Ruane: The Department does not collect the information requested.

However, from the 2002/03 school year, statistics on the reasons for suspension have been gathered annually from each education and library board and relate to the number of individual suspensions, not to the number of pupils suspended. The information shows the incidences of suspension for physical attacks on staff, which would include teaching and non-teaching.

Table 1 details the number of suspensions¹ for physical attacks on staff in the 2002/03 - 2004/05 school years:

TABLE 1
PHYSICAL ATTACKS ON STAFF

Education and Library Board	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05
Belfast	75	73	84
Western	99	72	51
North Eastern	91	49	57
South Eastern	64	79	21
Southern	36	47	49
NI Total	365	320	262

Note:

1. The count of occasions is based on each incidence of suspension, where an incident is defined as a count from the first day a pupil was suspended until the last day suspended. Prior to 2004/05, the count of occasions was based on each record of suspension identified by the education and library boards, and in some instances longer periods of suspension may have had more than one record. This change is due to an improvement in the data collection systems for suspensions in the education and library boards, which has enabled better analysis of the data. As a result, the number of occasions pupils were suspended in 2004/05 has decreased from previous years. However, care should be taken when comparing the number of occasions in 2004/05 with the number of occasions in previous years.

Reasons for expulsion were first collected in 2003/04.

Table 2 below shows the total number of pupils expelled for physical attacks on staff for the 2003/04 and 2004/05 school years:

TABLE 2
PHYSICAL ATTACKS ON STAFF

Year	2003/04	2004/05
No. of expulsions for physical attacks on staff	7	7

The suspension and expulsions statistics for 2005/06 school year are currently being analysed and will be placed on the DE website when this has been completed.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Funds Allocated for Teacher Training

Mr Alastair Ross asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how much has been spent on teacher training in each of the last five years. (AQW 352/07)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): Details of funds allocated for teacher training in Northern Ireland in each of the last five financial years are provided in the Table below.

	2002/03 Actual Allocation	2003/04 Actual Allocation	2004/05 Actual Allocation	2005/06 Actual Allocation	2006/07 Estimated Allocation
£m	32.409	35.129	36.150	40.929	46.626

Figures include Initial Teacher Education (ITE) funding provided by the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL); Capital Funding provided to St Mary's and Stranmillis University Colleges and In Service Teacher Training (INSET) funding provided by the Department of Education (DE). Capital funding provided to Queen's University Belfast and University of Ulster by DEL is not teacher training specific and is therefore not included.

Springvale Educational Project

Mr Paul Butler asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if he will carry out an investigation in relation to the Northern Ireland Audit Office report on the Springvale Educational Project, and, in particular, its criticisms of his department. (AQW 427/07)

Sir Reg Empey: The Assembly Parliamentary Accounts Committee (PAC) will be holding an evidence session on the Springvale Educational Project (SEP) on 14 June 2007. Following this hearing the PAC will publish a report on its conclusions and recommendations. The Department will be fully analysing the PAC Report and is committed to providing a detailed response on the findings of the hearing within 2 months of receipt of the report.

Undergraduate Enrolments

Mr Tom Elliott asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the numbers of full and part time undergraduate students at higher education institutions, broken down by (a) Protestant; (b) Catholic; (c) other; (d) male; (e) female; (f) persons with a disability; and (g) persons without a disability, for each of the last five years. (AQW 478/07)

Sir Reg Empey: Undergraduate enrolments at Northern Ireland higher education institutions by mode of study, religion, gender and disability 2001/02 – 2005/06

		2002/03		
		Full-time	Part-time	Total
Religion ^{(1), (2)}	Protestant	9,670	1,873	11,543
	Roman Catholic	13,648	2,197	15,845
	Other	839	236	1,075
	Not known/ available	5,141	5,328	10,469
	Total	29,298	9,634	38,932

		2002/03		
		Full-time	Part-time	Total
Gender	Male	11,818	3,007	14,825
	Female	17,480	6,627	24,107
	Total	29,298	9,634	38,932
Disability ⁽³⁾	Disabled	1,563	324	1,887
	Not disabled/ known/sought	27,735	9,310	37,045
Total		29,298	9,634	38,932

		2003/04		
		Full-time	Part-time	Total
Religion ^{(1), (2)}	Protestant	10,102	2,136	12,238
	Roman Catholic	14,092	2,623	16,715
	Other	989	267	1,256
	Not known/ available	4,819	5,678	10,497
	Total	30,002	10,704	40,706
Gender	Male	12,103	3,378	15,481
	Female	17,899	7,326	25,225
	Total	30,002	10,704	40,706
Disability ⁽³⁾	Disabled	1,796	412	2,208
	Not disabled/ known/sought	28,206	10,292	38,498
Total		30,002	10,704	40,706

		2004/05		
		Full-time	Part-time	Total
Religion ^{(1), (2)}	Protestant	10,575	2,186	12,761
	Roman Catholic	14,514	2,693	17,207
	Other	853	228	1,081
	Not known/ available	5,338	6,451	11,789
	Total	31,280	11,558	42,838
Gender	Male	12,486	3,793	16,279
	Female	18,794	7,765	26,559
	Total	31,280	11,558	42,838
Disability ⁽³⁾	Disabled	1,867	481	2,348
	Not disabled/ known/sought	29,413	11,077	40,490
Total		31,280	11,558	42,838

		2005/06		
		Full-time	Part-time	Total
Religion ^{(1), (2)}	Protestant	11,074	2,732	13,806
	Roman Catholic	15,670	3,128	18,798
	Other	753	276	1,029
	Not known/ available	4,191	5,134	9,325
	Total	31,688	11,270	42,958
Gender	Male	12,868	3,676	16,544
	Female	18,820	7,594	26,414
	Total	31,688	11,270	42,958
Disability ⁽³⁾	Disabled	2,163	590	2,753
	Not disabled/ known/sought	29,525	10,680	40,205
	Total	31,688	11,270	42,958

Source: HESA

- (1) Information on religion is only collected for NI domiciled students studying at NI institutions.
- (2) Religious affiliation is not a mandatory question and has a high non-response rate.
- (3) Information on disability is collected on the basis of a student's self assessment.

Recreational Learning

Mrs Naomi Long asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps will be taken to ensure that the funding changes within further education do not deter adult learners from engaging in recreational learning; and to detail how he intends to ensure that lifelong learning continues to be promoted throughout society. (AQW 488/07)

Sir Reg Empey: The new funding model used to distribute the FE Recurrent Grant to colleges does not deter people from engaging in recreational learning. While the Department for Employment and Learning sets the strategic framework for the Further Education sector in Northern Ireland, each college is responsible for its own curriculum offer. Recreational courses will continue to be subsidised by the Department, although this type of provision has always been subject to a lower level of funding. In addition, FE colleges, as incorporated bodies, have their own fees policies. It is for individual colleges to decide which of their

recreational courses they charge a fee for, and how they structure their charges for such courses.

As part of the implementation of the "Further Education Means Business" strategy, the Department is developing a new policy for curriculum delivered by colleges. Key elements of the policy will be to ensure that an appropriate balance is achieved between college provision that supports the economy and promotes social cohesion, and that learners are supported as appropriate throughout their lives. The new curriculum policy will be the subject of public consultation and equality impact assessment later this year, prior to its implementation from the 2008/09 academic year onwards.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Investment by Invest NI

Mr Simon Hamilton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the total amount of investment made by Invest NI in each of the last five years, broken down by (i) each of the 26 local government districts; and (ii) each of the 18 Northern Ireland constituencies. (AQW 238/07)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Dodds): Table 1 presents the amount of assistance offered by Invest NI in each of the last five years by District Council Area. The total planned investment, which represents the total costs of supported projects, is also included. Similar information is presented in Table 2, presented by Parliamentary Constituency Area.

It should be noted that these areas are not self-contained labour markets. A project assisted in a particular location has the potential to create benefits across a much wider area. Northern Ireland is a relatively small place and evidence indicates that many investments draw their workforce from areas beyond constituency and council area boundaries. In addition, Invest NI has limited scope for 'directing' investment to specific geographic areas, although it has been able to influence the location decisions of some inward-investment projects. In the case of established businesses, reinvestment patterns will be determined by the existing location of the business.

TABLE 1
INVEST NI ASSISTANCE BY DISTRICT COUNCIL AREA FROM 2002/03 TO 2006/07

DCA	2002/03		2003/04		2004/05		2005/06		2006/07	
	Assistance (£m)	Total Investment (£m)	Assistance (£m)	Total Investment (£m)	Assistance (£m)	Total Investment (£m)	Assistance (£m)	Total Investment (£m)	Assistance (£m)	Total Investment (£m)
Antrim	18.8	133.2	3.0	9.4	6.0	27.4	1.2	6.4	0.6	3.0
Ards	1.2	6.1	2.7	9.5	0.6	2.1	2.2	10.4	1.4	13.7
Armagh	5.2	19.2	1.4	4.9	1.3	5.4	0.6	4.8	3.9	20.3
Ballymena	1.8	10.5	4.6	27.7	4.7	22.9	0.7	4.3	3.5	18.1
Ballymoney	0.5	2.5	0.5	3.2	1.4	3.3	0.1	0.4	0.4	1.3
Banbridge	1.9	8.3	0.4	0.9	1.5	8.4	0.5	2.3	0.3	1.0
Belfast	29.3	83.6	53.1	218.6	45.3	119.2	30.3	148.1	43.2	182.6
Carrickfergus	2.2	8.2	0.3	0.9	0.7	1.4	0.6	3.3	0.2	1.6
Castlereagh	1.0	2.9	1.3	4.4	5.1	17.5	0.9	4.1	0.4	2.1
Coleraine	2.4	5.3	0.6	1.5	1.7	4.2	1.0	8.6	0.7	3.9
Cookstown	1.3	8.3	2.1	7.7	5.4	28.9	1.0	6.9	1.5	9.5
Craigavon	16.1	71.0	6.7	31.4	18.7	73.7	8.6	35.1	5.5	34.4
Derry	14.5	105.7	7.6	27.3	5.7	47.0	27.0	104.9	8.5	35.4
Down	1.3	7.1	0.6	2.6	3.0	3.8	0.4	1.8	0.4	1.7
Dungannon	2.4	9.5	2.7	14.2	3.4	13.3	3.0	18.4	2.4	18.4
Fermanagh	3.7	14.5	3.2	11.8	2.3	13.2	1.1	6.8	5.9	37.5
Larne	1.3	5.2	2.2	8.3	2.4	13.1	12.6	51.3	0.5	2.2
Limavady	1.9	9.7	4.9	9.5	0.4	4.6	9.6	26.5	1.1	2.5
Lisburn	1.4	7.0	2.1	7.0	3.8	17.4	9.7	82.3	4.1	16.7
Magherafelt	1.6	8.5	1.9	8.0	2.2	7.9	1.0	7.1	0.9	3.7
Moyle	0.2	0.7	0.2	0.4	2.2	8.2	0.1	0.5	0.1	1.1
Newry & Mourne	2.1	6.4	1.6	5.8	2.5	11.2	10.9	37.9	1.2	5.6
Newtownabbey	6.6	15.9	3.1	9.4	4.3	15.0	4.6	20.5	8.6	15.4
North Down	1.1	6.1	3.0	8.3	3.4	14.8	0.8	3.7	1.5	6.3
Omagh	1.0	3.2	1.5	5.5	1.0	2.8	2.0	15.9	0.7	4.4
Strabane	3.8	16.8	5.8	30.2	1.8	7.0	0.3	1.5	1.0	6.1
Total	124.7	575.5	117.2	468.1	130.6	493.9	131.0	613.7	98.5	448.5

Notes:

1. Total investment includes both the private sector and Invest NI contributions.
2. 2006/07 figures are provisional and may be subject to amendment.
3. An additional £33.5m of assistance was offered during the 5 year period, which is not analysed by geographic area.
4. Some differences in table totals may arise due to rounding.

TABLE 2
INVEST NI ASSISTANCE BY PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY AREA FROM 2002/03 TO 2006/07

	2002/03		2003/04		2004/05		2005/06		2006/07	
	Assistance (£m)	Total Investment (£m)	Assistance (£m)	Total Investment (£m)	Assistance (£m)	Total Investment (£m)	Assistance (£m)	Total Investment (£m)	Assistance (£m)	Total Investment (£m)
Belfast East	2.1	8.5	15.8	59.6	17.4	35.1	8.7	25.8	20.5	72.4
Belfast North	7.6	20.1	4.5	24.9	3.0	12.0	5.0	36.7	1.5	16.8
Belfast South	15.9	38.6	26.0	111.3	21.2	58.7	15.0	80.1	20.5	92.2
Belfast West	4.2	16.5	8.1	26.6	8.5	27.3	2.1	8.3	1.4	5.6
East Antrim	6.2	21.2	3.9	12.6	6.4	25.9	14.7	58.4	9.1	17.6
East Londonderry	4.2	14.0	5.5	11.0	2.1	8.8	10.6	35.1	1.8	6.4
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	5.4	20.9	4.3	16.1	4.7	22.6	2.8	20.4	7.5	51.4
Foyle	14.4	105.7	7.6	27.3	5.7	47.0	27.0	104.9	8.5	35.4
Lagan Valley	1.5	6.7	1.7	5.8	3.7	17.3	9.7	82.0	3.8	15.4
Mid Ulster	4.4	22.2	5.6	25.6	8.5	40.8	3.3	18.8	3.2	17.6
Newry and Armagh	6.3	22.3	2.1	8.5	2.8	10.8	7.5	29.3	4.5	21.9
North Antrim	2.4	14.2	5.3	31.3	8.2	34.4	0.8	5.2	4.0	20.5
North Down	1.3	6.5	5.1	15.2	3.4	14.9	0.8	3.7	1.5	6.6
South Antrim	22.9	142.9	4.5	15.1	7.0	30.9	4.0	21.6	0.7	3.2
South Down	2.4	12.6	1.2	4.2	4.6	13.5	4.8	16.6	1.1	6.0
Strangford	2.1	9.3	1.6	5.4	1.2	6.8	2.9	13.4	1.6	14.3
Upper Bann	16.6	73.3	7.0	32.0	19.4	77.2	8.8	35.9	5.6	34.6
West Tyrone	4.8	20.2	7.3	35.7	2.8	9.8	2.3	17.4	1.8	10.6
Total	124.7	575.5	117.2	468.1	130.6	493.9	131.0	613.7	98.5	448.5

Notes:

1. Total investment includes both the private sector and Invest NI contributions.
2. 2006/07 figures are provisional and may be subject to amendment.
3. An additional £33.5m of assistance was offered during the 5 year period, which is not analysed by geographic area.
4. Some differences in table totals may arise due to rounding.

International Air Routes between from Northern Ireland and USA

M Simon Hamilton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what work is being done to expand the number of air routes between Northern Ireland and the United States of America.

(AQW 341/07)

Mr Dodds: My Department, in partnership with the three Northern Ireland airports and Air Route Development Ltd., has been successful in directly developing 6 international air routes from Northern Ireland, including the Belfast to New York (Newark)

route, through the Northern Ireland Air Route Development Scheme. On foot of these successes the local aviation market has been stimulated and in excess of a further 20 international routes have been or will be established. The Northern Ireland Air Route Development Scheme is currently closed to new applications.

Single Natural Gas Market

Mr Seán Neeson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what plans have been made to develop a single natural gas market on the island of Ireland.

(AQW 388/07)

Mr Dodds: Development of a single natural gas market on the island would involve engagement of both Departments and Regulators, north and south, in discussions around the nature and potential mutual benefits of such a market. An essential first step would be an assessment by the Regulatory Authorities of the potential benefits for consumers in Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic.

Although some initial discussions have taken place, the current priority is the development of the Single wholesale Electricity Market (SEM) by 1 November 2007.

Industrial De-Rating

Mr Seán Neeson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what are his plans to deal with the impact of industrial de-rating on businesses. (AQW 389/07)

Mr Dodds: The Department of Finance and Personnel has engaged the Economic Research Institute (ERINI) to assess the effects of removing industrial derating from manufacturing businesses. This work is expected to be completed in September 2007.

My Department, through Invest NI, continues to help Northern Ireland manufacturing companies to improve their competitiveness through a broad portfolio of programmes aimed at improving productivity, encouraging more innovation and R&D and encouraging businesses to seek out opportunities in export markets.

Renewable Energy

Mr Seán Neeson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how his department is co-operating with other Northern Ireland departments in the development of renewable energy sources. (AQW 390/07)

Mr Dodds: DETI's overall responsibility for renewable energy policy and for the development of renewables capacity demands considerable co-operation, both formal and informal, with other Northern Ireland departments. Specifically, the Department chairs Inter-departmental Groups (involving DARD, DFP, DoE, DRD, DSD and Invest NI) aimed at promoting a coordinated and strategic approach to the development of bio-energy and the delivery of the Environment and Renewable Energy Fund (EREF). DETI also provides regular input to other Northern Ireland departments on energy related issues – for example, DARD's Renewable Energy policy and the Department of Environment's draft PPS18 on Renewable Energy.

Flight Cancellations

Mr Jonathan Craig asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if an economic assessment has been carried out in relation to the possible negative effects on the local tourism industry, of low cost airline flight cancellations to and from Northern Ireland's airports. (AQW 418/07)

Mr Dodds: No economic assessment has been carried out by DETI.

Issues relating to the cancellation of flights are governed by Regulation (EC) No 261/2004 of the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union. The Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) is the designated authority for the enforcement of this Regulation in the United Kingdom.

DETI officials have discussed the question with the CAA, the Air Transport Users Council, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and the Consumer Council for Northern Ireland. On the basis of these discussions, DETI concludes there is no quantitative or qualitative evidence that flight cancellations by low cost airline are impacting negatively on the local tourism industry.

Indigenous Renewable Sources

Mr Pat Ramsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to give the current percentage of electricity being generated from indigenous renewable sources, and to give interim targets set to measure progress. (AQW 423/07)

Mr Dodds: In the year ended 31 March 2007, 3.8% of electricity consumed in Northern Ireland was generated from indigenous renewable sources. All renewable sources, including imports, represented 6% of total consumption. The target is that, by 2012/13, the indigenous percentage will increase to 12%. DETI's 2006/07 Operating Plan included a target of 5% for that year.

Renewable Energy

Mr Pat Ramsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline his plans to accelerate the growth of implementation of the various renewable energy technologies, including micro-generation at farm and community level. (AQW 425/07)

Mr Dodds: The Environment and Renewable Energy Fund has already successfully accelerated the deployment of renewable energy technologies, including micro-generation, across the private household, social housing and rural community sectors as well as in the public sector. The micro renewables industry has developed very substantially over the past 2 years and

any further government intervention would be subject to economic appraisal and mainstream budgetary cover.

There is a need to continue promoting the benefits of renewable energy and, more particularly, energy efficiency and my Department will continue to focus attention on these areas, working with other key players in the sector.

Potential Tourist Attraction of Shooting and Target Sports

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if the Northern Ireland Tourist Board recognises shooting and target sports as a potential tourist attraction. (AQW 452/07)

Mr Dodds: As part of The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) Activity Tourism Strategy 2005-08 all activity products were evaluated and prioritised for development and future growth of activity tourism in Northern Ireland.

Field sports, including shooting, were not identified as a priority activity within the Strategy. NITB is focusing resources on golf, walking, cycling and adventure activities as the key priorities.

Tourist Signage

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if the Northern Ireland Tourist Board will erect a 'brown on white' sign for Hollow Farm Shooting Ground at the junction of Killinchy and Drumhirk Road, Comber. (AQW 454/07)

Mr Dodds: The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) and Roads Service of the Department of Regional Development operate a joint policy for white on brown tourist signing. A copy of the policy is available at <http://www.nitb.com/attachment.aspx?ID=391> Hollow Farm Shooting Ground was considered for tourist signing by NITB as part of the annual 2006 – 2007 application from Ards Borough Council.

Based on criteria set out in the policy guidelines Hollow Farm, as a sports facility, is not eligible for tourist signing. It is considered that anyone undertaking clay pigeon shooting will have pre-booked their shoot and at that point will have received either directions or a map to the facility. Events held by the facility where visitors are welcome can be signed by AA temporary signage which can be sourced from the local Roads Service office.

Invest NI

Mr Peter Weir asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if he will detail, by constituency, the jobs created by Invest Northern Ireland for each year of its existence. (AQW 455/07)

Mr Dodds: Invest NI does not create jobs. It provides assistance for businesses to improve their competitive position, which in turn may lead to employment creation. The number of jobs promoted and safeguarded through assisted inward-investment projects since 2002/03 is presented by parliamentary constituency area in Table 1.

It should be noted that these areas are not self-contained labour markets. A project assisted in a particular location has the potential to create benefits across a much wider area. Northern Ireland is a relatively small place and evidence indicates that many investments draw their workforce from areas beyond constituency and council area boundaries. In addition, Invest NI has limited scope for 'directing' investment to specific geographic areas, although it is has been able to influence the location decisions of some inward-investment projects the final location decision rests with the business.

In addition, the number of jobs expected to be created through assistance offered to new locally-owned business starts by parliamentary constituency area is presented in Table 2.

TABLE 1(A): JOBS PROMOTED THROUGH INWARD-INVESTMENT PROJECTS (2002/03 – 2006/07)

Parliamentary Constituency	Jobs Promoted					
	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	Total
Belfast East			410	232	630	1,272
Belfast North		163	27	46	54	290
Belfast South	216	649	1,379	675	1,010	3,929
Belfast West	35	72	750	120		977
East Antrim	100	67	112	190		469
East Londonderry		24				24
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	350	202		11	441	1,004
Foyle	93	486	40	361	754	1,734
Lagan Valley			16	71		87
Mid Ulster	32		166	40		238
Newry & Armagh	75			1,002	304	1,381
North Antrim			23			23
North Down	41	200	140		233	614
South Antrim	5		319	67		391

Parliamentary Constituency	Jobs Promoted					
	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	Total
South Down				127		127
Strangford	70	5	19		20	114
Upper Bann	16	110	13	49		188
West Tyrone		175	53	109	44	381
Grand Total	1,033	2,153	3,467	3,100	3,490	13,243

Notes:

1. 2006/07 figures are provisional and subject to change.
2. Figures include both first-time inward investments and reinvestments by existing externally-owned clients

TABLE 1(B): JOBS SAFEGUARDED THROUGH INWARD-INVESTMENT PROJECTS (2002/03 – 2006/07)

Parliamentary Constituency	Jobs Safeguarded					
	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	Total
Belfast East		369	79		60	508
Belfast North		218				218
Belfast South		671		47	123	841
Belfast West						0
East Antrim				358		358
East Londonderry				787		787
Fermanagh & South Tyrone		214	38	65		317
Foyle	1,033		117	1,258		2,408
Lagan Valley			17	278		295
Mid Ulster			118			118
Newry & Armagh				30		30
North Antrim		518	123			641
North Down			147			147
South Antrim	48			96		144
South Down				362		362
Strangford					16	16
Upper Bann	807	680	616			2,103
West Tyrone	1,127		57			1,184
Grand Total	3,015	2,670	1,312	3,281	199	10,477

Notes:

1. 2006/07 figures are provisional and subject to change.
2. Figures include both first-time inward investments and reinvestments by existing externally-owned clients

TABLE 2: EXPECTED JOB CREATION BY ASSISTED LOCALLY-OWNED BUSINESS START UPS (2002/03 – 2006/07)

Parliamentary Constituency	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	Total
Belfast East	70	127	151	111	103	562
Belfast North	75	95	120	150	99	539
Belfast South	114	176	230	170	166	856
Belfast West	91	122	178	177	155	723
East Antrim	148	186	277	213	225	1,049
East Londonderry	142	178	307	260	238	1,125
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	195	291	441	381	399	1,707
Foyle	182	276	468	329	303	1,558
Lagan Valley	189	156	233	217	205	1,000
Mid Ulster	242	291	356	365	303	1,557
Newry & Armagh	215	244	373	298	250	1,380
North Antrim	153	148	265	235	276	1,077
North Down	117	204	208	192	146	867
South Antrim	134	190	222	211	183	940
South Down	224	299	432	393	251	1,599
Strangford	153	225	276	263	204	1,121
Upper Bann	186	229	319	299	182	1,215
West Tyrone	142	178	243	256	265	1,084
Grand Total	2,772	3,615	5,099	4,520	3,953	19,959

Notes:

2006/07 figures are provisional and subject to change

Economic Impact of lost Working Days

Mrs Naomi Long asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the existing data on the cost to the Northern Ireland economy of working days lost due to stress or illness related to family breakdown.

(AQW 527/07)

Mr Dodds: There are currently no estimates available on the cost to the economy of working days lost due to stress or illness related to a family breakdown. It is however possible to use the Northern Ireland Labour Force Survey (LFS) to estimate the total number of working days that are lost due to any illness or injury in a specified reference week. For information, figures from the January – March 2007 LFS estimate that 30,000 scheduled working days were lost per week due to sick absence.

ENVIRONMENT

Prosecutions for Unauthorised Developments

Lord Morrow of Clogher Valley asked the Minister of the Environment how many developers have been successfully prosecuted for unauthorised developments in the last three years; and how many cases remain outstanding. (AQW 84/07)

The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster): There have been 120 successful enforcement prosecutions for unauthorised development in the last 3 financial years following court action. Currently there are some 63 cases outstanding where a summons has been issued and court action is pending.

Illegally Deposited Household Waste

Mr Simon Hamilton asked the Minister of the Environment what were the costs incurred in clearing up the estimated 250,000 tonnes of household waste from the Republic of Ireland, which was illegally deposited on land in Northern Ireland between October 2002 and December 2004. (AQW 343/07)

Mrs Foster: The Environment and Heritage Service estimates that the cost for the removal and legal disposal of this waste would be between £37.5 and £50 million. To date only 150 tonnes have been removed and disposed of to a legal site in the Republic of Ireland at an estimated cost of £34,000. The Department is in discussion with the relevant authorities in the Republic of Ireland to agree actions regarding the remaining material.

Blue Flag Scheme

Mr Willie Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment if she intends to consider the introduction of an all-island blue flag award for beaches. (AQW 365/07)

Mrs Foster: The Blue Flag scheme is a prestigious, international award scheme. It is administered in Northern Ireland by the charity, Tidy Northern Ireland and is managed internationally by the Foundation for Environmental Education (FEE).

The Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) does not have responsibility for the administration of the scheme. EHS supports and encourages participation in the scheme and provides relevant bathing water quality data and beach litter information, in line with other UK agencies, namely the Environment Agency for England and Wales and the Scottish Environment Protection Agency.

Marys' Stile Killyleagh

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to detail her department's expenditure

relating to the work done to Mary's Stile, Killyleagh, prior to the official visit of Prince Andrew in 1995. (AQW 382/07)

Mrs Foster: In 1994 the Department of the Environment advised Voluntary Services Belfast on work to conserve the east gable of the 15th-century church at Killyleagh near Killyleagh, County Down, otherwise known as 'Mary's Stile'. The work was grant-aided to the sum of £6,000. A further £1,000 was spent in refurbishing the actual stile into the graveyard.

Mullaghglass Landfill Site

Mr Paul Butler asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the chemicals being used to spray Mullaghglass landfill site; and if she will assure local residents living close to this site that no chemicals being used to spray the landfill are harmful, or will cause illness or health problems to humans. (AQW 401/07)

Mrs Foster: There are five chemicals currently being used as insecticides at Mullaghglass landfill - Ficam W, Fendona 6SC, Eco - Py, Eco Alpha, and Pybuthrin 33. These insecticides are widely used, in their dilute form, in the waste industry for controlling pests and bugs on landfills. The risk to residents is considered to be minimal. The chemicals are sprayed close to the waste mass, there are banked boundaries around the landfill and the waste faces are at a distance from the residents' dwellings.

Left Hand Drive Limousines

Mr Paul Butler asked the Minister of the Environment to give details of the number of left hand drive limousines that operate in Northern Ireland. (AQW 432/07)

Mrs Foster: The vehicle details recorded on the vehicle register do not show if a vehicle is left or right hand drive. The number of currently licensed limousines in Northern Ireland is 374.

North-South Electricity Inter-Connector

Mr Cathal Boylan asked the Minister of the Environment to provide details of the outcome of the environmental and health impact assessments, in relation to the development of the North-South electricity inter-connector. (AQW 534/07)

Mrs Foster: While Planning Service has had preliminary discussions with NIE in relation to the submission of a planning application and the carrying out of an environmental assessment for a proposed 400kV North-South electricity inter-connector, no application has so far been submitted. Because of this, no details of either an environmental impact assessment or a health impact assessment are yet available.

North-South Electricity Inter-Connector

Mr Cathal Boylan asked the Minister of the Environment what discussions she has had with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment in relation to the North-South electricity inter-connector. (AQW 536/07)

Mrs Foster: I have had no official discussions with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment in relation to the North-South electricity inter-connector.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Valuation and Rates Inquiries

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what additional staff have been employed by his department to respond to inquiries about valuation and rates. (AQW 385/07)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Robinson): The operation to handle first line valuation queries was outsourced to a private sector contact centre. Eight additional staff were employed within the Valuation and Lands Agency to deal with matters escalated from the contact centre. Thirty five temporary staff were employed by the Department to assist in the response to rate inquiries.

Cancer Survival Rates

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (a) which cancer type has led to the highest mortality rate amongst cancer sufferers, and (b) how many fatality cases associated with this cancer type there have been in each of the past three years. (AQW 394/07)

Mr Robinson: Amongst those diagnosed with cancer, Northern Ireland five year relative survival rates are lowest for pancreatic cancer. In 2004 there were 152 deaths from cancer of the pancreas¹, in 2005 there were 173 deaths and in 2006^P there were 194 deaths registered.

¹ International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision code C25.

^P Provisional data.

Female Cancer Deaths

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many women have died of cancer in each of the last three years. (AQW 402/07)

Mr Robinson: In Northern Ireland in the years 2004, 2005 and 2006^P respectively, there were 1,819, 1,835

and 1,840 female deaths registered where the primary cause of death was cancer (malignant neoplasms¹).

¹ International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision codes C00-C97.

^P Provisional data.

Male Cancer Deaths

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many men have died of cancer in each of the last three years. (AQW 405/07)

Mr Robinson: In Northern Ireland in the years 2004, 2005 and 2006^P respectively, there were 1,938, 1,900 and 2,008 male deaths registered where the primary cause of death was cancer (malignant neoplasms¹).

¹ International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision codes C00-C97.

^P Provisional data.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Northern Ireland Ambulance Service

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will explain the failure of the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service to respond to the request by the Ulster Hospital Accident and Emergency Ward, made on 10 May 2007, for an ambulance to take Mr John McGeehan to Scrabo Isles Nursing Home. (AQW 326/07)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I understand that the Chief Executive of the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service has responded fully to your letter raising the same question directly with him. In the circumstances there is nothing I can add to that reply.

Lung Cancer

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people have been diagnosed with lung cancer as a primary cancer in each of the last three years. (AQW 403/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The table below details the number of incidences of lung cancer (ICD-10 C33-C34) in Northern Ireland for the last three years available.

TABLE 1: INCIDENCE OF LUNG CANCER BY YEAR OF DIAGNOSIS: 2002-2004

2002	2003	2004
868	892	932

This information was provided by the NI Cancer Registry and is the most up-to-date available.

Breast Cancer Diagnoses

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many women have been diagnosed with breast cancer in each of the last three years. (AQW 404/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The table below details the number of incidences of breast cancer (ICD-10 C50) in females in Northern Ireland for the last three years available.

TABLE 1: INCIDENCE OF BREAST CANCER IN FEMALES BY YEAR OF DIAGNOSIS: 2002-2004

2002	2003	2004
945	1035	1117

This information was provided by the NI Cancer Registry and is the most up-to-date available.

Testicular Cancer

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many men have been diagnosed with testicular cancer in each of the last three years. (AQW 406/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The table below details the number of incidences of testicular cancer (ICD-10 C62) in Northern Ireland for the last three years available.

TABLE 1: INCIDENCE OF TESTICULAR CANCER BY YEAR OF DIAGNOSIS: 2002-2004

2002	2003	2004
56	56	69

This information was provided by the NI Cancer Registry and is the most up-to-date available.

Gorse Fires

Mr Willie Clarke asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will outline (a) the number of documented incidents of Fire Service call outs in relation to gorse fires in South Down during the last three years; (b) the overall costs to emergency services in dealing with these incidents; and (c) how the number of call outs compares statistically with other Westminster constituencies for which the department has responsibility. (AQW 436/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS) does not collect operational data on a Westminster constituency basis. However, the table below provides data based on NIFRS's area and district command structure.

It is not possible to provide information about overall costs as responsibility for the Police Service of Northern Ireland is a Reserved Matter under the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and, therefore, outside the remit of the Assembly. The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service does not collect operational data in a format that would enable it to identify responses related to gorse fires. NIFRS's overall costs for dealing with gorse fires was £730,038 in 2006/07; £533,798 in 2005/06; and, £614,639 in 2004/05.

NIFRS CALLOUTS TO GORSE FIRES

Area	District	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	Total	Area Total	% of NI Total
Eastern	Knock	251	177	228	656		
	Whitla	173	168	217	558	1214	14%
Northern	Ballymena	159	168	216	543		
	Coleraine	151	112	139	402		
	Glengormley	318	199	344	861		
	Lisburn	95	61	81	237	2043	22%
Southern	Portadown	237	189	410	836		
	Bangor	312	364	319	995		
	Newry	367	365	483	1215		
	Downpatrick	367	346	395	1108	4154	45%
Western	Crescent Link	150	181	299	630		
	Omagh	61	31	87	179		
	Cookstown	94	79	150	323		
	Enniskillen	253	155	181	589	1721	19%
	Total	2,988	2,595	3,549	9132		100%

Special Care Neo-natal Unit at the Causeway Hospital

Mr John Dallat asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline plans to open a special care neo-natal unit at the Causeway Hospital, Coleraine. (AQW 439/07)

Mr McGimpsey: There are no plans to open a special care neo-natal unit at the Causeway Hospital.

Renal Dialysis Unit at the Causeway Hospital

Mr John Dallat asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline his plans to provide a full renal dialysis unit at the Causeway Hospital, Coleraine. (AQW 440/07)

Mr McGimpsey: Plans to establish dialysis capacity for the Northern Ireland population are based on the Renal Services Review 2002, which addresses estimated demand to 2010.

One recommendation of the Review was to create two new renal Units, one at Causeway Hospital and a second in the east of the Province. The proposed renal unit at Causeway is to be considered once expansion of stations at existing units (Antrim, Daisy Hill, Tyrone County, Altnagelvin and Belfast City Hospital) is complete.

The Unit will operate as a satellite of Antrim Hospital with consultant medical input provided by the team based at Antrim. The Review, at the time, estimated that this unit would be required in 2010, depending on the need for dialysis across the region. Recent information, however, shows that the rate of increase in demand for renal dialysis has slowed, meaning that the date is likely to be beyond 2010.

Obesity Prevention

Mr Pat Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will give the budget allocation for his department, and for the other Northern Ireland departments with a role in the inter-departmental partnership in the prevention of obesity. (AQW 441/07)

Mr McGimpsey: In the financial year 2007/08 my Department has allocated £1.650m to obesity prevention.

The Department of Education has provided £3.725m to support New Nutritional Standards and Renewing Communities measures which will directly and indirectly contribute to the prevention of obesity in children.

Similarly the Department of Culture, Arts and Learning will contribute to the prevention of obesity

through the work of Sport Northern Ireland which has an overall budget of £19.002m.

General Practitioner Services in Millisle

Mr Alex Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to introduce a General Practitioner service for the residents of Millisle. (AQW 447/07)

Mr McGimpsey: There are no plans at present to locate a General Practitioner service in Millisle. Residents of Millisle can register with nearby GP practices in Donaghadee and Ballywalter.

Agenda for Change

Mr Alex Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to speed up the Agenda for Change programme for the Medical Records Department at the Ulster Hospital. (AQW 448/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The South Eastern Trust is working within a regionally agreed partnership process to implement Agenda for Change rates of pay for all staff. The Trust has advised my Department that this particular group of staff will receive their new rates of pay by September 2007.

Waiting Time for Cataract Operations

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will detail the number of people in each Health and Social Services Board waiting for cataract operations for (a) 6 months; (b) 12 months; and (c) 18 months. (AQW 449/07)

Mr McGimpsey: There were no patients waiting more than 6 months for cataract treatment at 31 March 2007. Information on the number of patients waiting less than 6 months for cataract operations, broken down by Health Board of residence, at 31 March 2007 is provided in the table below:

Health Board of Residence	Number of Patients Waiting for Cataract Surgery at 31 March 2007:	
	6 months or less	Total Waiting
Northern	654	654
Eastern	1030	1030
Southern	331	331
Western	241	241
Total	2256	2256

Source - Departmental Information Return PFA 211

Obesity Figures

Mr Pat Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will give an estimate of the number of men and women in Northern Ireland who are obese. (AQW 456/07)

Mr McGimpsey: Precise information on the number of men and women in Northern Ireland that are obese is not available. However the 2005/06 Northern Ireland Health and Social Wellbeing Survey (HSW) provided estimates of the proportion of the population that were obese. The 2005/06 survey indicated that, in Northern Ireland, 25% of males (aged 16 and over) and 23% of females (aged 16 and over) were obese. Applying these proportions to the latest available, 2005 mid-year population estimates would suggest around 162,000 males and 160,000 females in Northern Ireland (aged 16 and over) were obese.

Dental Treatment

Mr Danny Kennedy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of National Health Service patients currently receiving dental treatment; and if he will give an assessment of the number of EU nationals from outside Northern Ireland currently receiving dental treatment. (AQW 459/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The number of people registered to receive treatment with a Health Service dentist as at May 2007 was 897,619. This figure will include a small number of non-residents such as students. Patients are registered to receive treatment for a 15-month period. The number of registered people who actually received Health Service dental treatment during the 15-month period March 2006 to May 2007 was 784,054.

Information on persons registered with NI dentists who originally came from outside NI has only been recorded since July 2004 and is therefore considered incomplete. In addition, it is not possible to identify EU nationals from non-EU nationals or to identify those who may have previously registered elsewhere in the UK before coming to NI. For these reasons it is not possible to provide a reliable estimate of EU nationals currently being treated here.

Fire and Rescue Service

Mr Alex Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will give an assurance that responsibility for the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service will not be devolved to District Councils under the Review of Public Administration. (AQW 465/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The final decision regarding the Review of Public Administration proposal to transfer responsibility for the Northern Ireland Fire & Rescue Service (NIFRS) to Local Government will rest with the Northern Ireland Executive. Recognising that the Executive needs to consider the strategic direction of the Review of Public Administration in its entirety, the Executive agreed at its meeting on 24 May 2007 that there would be a review of the Local Government aspects of the Review of Public Administration led by the Minister of the Environment. The Minister of the Environment will prepare proposals for the review for consideration at a future Executive meeting.

However, without prejudice to the outcome of any review of RPA decisions, my view, which I recently expressed to the Health and Social Services Committee, is it would be a mistake to transfer responsibility for fire and rescue services to Local Government as a shared operational service.

Minor Injury Units

Mr Alex Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will provide figures for attendances at (a) Bangor; and (b) Ards Minor Injury Units for the last four years. (AQW 466/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The number of first and follow up attendances at Bangor and Ards Minor Injury Units for the years 2002/03 -2005/06 is provided in the table below:

Year	Number of Attendances					
	Ards Minor Injury Unit			Bangor Minor Injury Unit		
	First	Follow Up	Total	First	Follow Up	Total
2002/03	7,203	1,259	8,462	8,193	1,563	9,756
2003/04	7,764	1,556	9,320	8,951	1,734	10,685
2004/05	7,983	1,361	9,344	9,958	2,341	12,299
2005/06	8,581	1,443	10,024	10,590	2,397	12,987

Source- Departmental Information Return KH09 Part II

Car Parking Charges at the Ulster Hospital

Mr Alex Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will examine the issue of car parking fees at the Ulster Hospital, with particular reference to the free car parking provided for consultants and senior management, when all other staff members pay for parking. (AQW 467/07)

Mr McGimpsey: I have delegated the responsibility for answering this question to the Chief Executive of

the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust. I understand that he has replied as follows:

I refer to your recent enquiry regarding car parking charges at the Ulster Hospital and would confirm that charging for staff became operational on 1st May 2007.

All Ulster Hospital staff, including consultants and Senior Managers, pay for on-site parking and standard rates are applied for full and part-time members of staff.

There has recently been a significant capital investment made in respect of car parking provision on the site and this has greatly enhanced the patient and visitor experience when visiting the Ulster Hospital.

Staff and trade unions were widely consulted prior to the introduction of staff charges and to date the improved availability of secure parking has been very well received.

I hope this helps to clarify the position.

Ambulances on Call

Mr Patsy McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to clarify the method of communication between central ambulance control and individual ambulances out on call; and to outline any difficulties that have been encountered with those communications in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 469/07)

Mr McGimpsey: Primary communication from the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) Regional Emergency Medical Dispatch Centre to individual ambulance crews is by radio. Back up is by mobile phone or fixed land line. During 2007, NIAS will make the transition from analogue to digital radio.

NIAS has no record of any difficulty with communications within the Northern Health and Social Care Trust area.

Cancer Diagnosis Services

Mr Pat Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people tested at each of the cancer diagnostic services at Altnagelvin and in Belfast for each of the last five years. (AQW 472/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The information requested is not available.

Patients Domiciled in the ROI using services at Altnagelvin Hospital

Mr Pat Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, for each of

the last five years, the number of patients domiciled in the Republic of Ireland using the services at Altnagelvin Hospital. (AQW 473/07)

Mr McGimpsey: Information on the number of patients domiciled in the Republic of Ireland using all services at Altnagelvin Hospital, for each of the last five years, is not available.

Information on the number of patients domiciled in the Republic of Ireland, who were admitted to, or who received day case or outpatient treatment at Altnagelvin Hospital, for each of the last five years is outlined in the table below.

Year	Total Admissions	Total Day Cases	Total Outpatient Attendances
2002/03	362	226	993
2003/04	365	176	932
2004/05	434	132	961
2005/06	449	177	1,196
2006/07 ¹	495	241	1,788

Source: Western Health and Social Care Trust

- 1 Outpatient attendances in 2006/07 are inflated due to a cross border project carried out during this financial year.

Information on the number of medical imaging examinations performed on patients domiciled in the Republic of Ireland, at Altnagelvin Hospital, for each of the last five years, is outlined in the table below.

Year	Total Number of Medical Imaging Examinations ^{2,3}
2002/03	1,077
2003/04	1,059
2004/05	774
2005/06	983
2006/07	843

Source: Western Health and Social Care Trust

- 2 Medical imaging examinations include Plain Film, Ultrasound, MRI, Nuclear Medicine, CT, Bone densitometry, Angiography, Mammography and Fluoroscopy.
- 3 The number of tests does not equate exactly with the number of patients as a patient may receive more than one test.

Information on the number of histopathology tests performed on patients domiciled in the Republic of Ireland, at Altnagelvin Hospital, between 2002 and 2007 is outlined in the table below.

Period in time	Number of tests ⁴
2002 to 2007 (inclusive)	1,200

Source: Western Health and Social Care Trust

- 4 The number of tests does not equate exactly with the number of patients as a patient may receive more than one test.

Information on the number of cytopathology tests performed on patients domiciled in the Republic of Ireland, at Altnagelvin Hospital, since 2004 is outlined in the table below.

Year ⁵	Number of tests ⁶
2004	9,023
2005	12,961
2006	14,307
2007 (to 8 th June 2007)	6,250

Source: Western Health and Social Care Trust

5 The cytopathology service commenced in 2004.

6 The number of tests does not equate exactly with the number of patients as a patient may receive more than one test.

Patients from ROI using Cancer Diagnostic Services in Belfast

Mr Pat Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, for each of the last five years, the number of patients from the Republic of Ireland using the cancer diagnostic services in Belfast. (AQW 474/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The information requested is not available.

Joint Replacement Surgery

Mrs Naomi Long asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) how many people are currently awaiting joint replacement surgery; (b) the waiting time for such surgery; and (c) what steps will be taken to ensure that the current waiting lists for joint replacement surgery are reduced, in line with the targets set out in the statement by the previous Minister under direct rule. (AQW 485/07)

Mr McGimpsey: At 31 March 2007, there were a total of 1,314 patients waiting for joint replacement surgery. Of these, 862 were waiting 0 – 2 months, and 452 were waiting 3 – 5 months. No-one was waiting longer than six months.

I am fully committed to ensuring that waiting times for surgery are further reduced in line with the target that, by the end of March 2008, no patient will wait more than 21 weeks for surgery. My Department will continue to monitor performance on a weekly basis to ensure that satisfactory progress is made towards this target.

Revenue from Treating Patients from Republic of Ireland

Mr Pat Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide details

about the annual revenue that accrues to the National Health Service in Northern Ireland as a result of treating patients from the Republic of Ireland.

(AQW 499/07)

Mr McGimpsey: In 2005/06, the last year for which audited information is available, NI Trusts gained income of £1.3m from the Republic of Ireland for treating patients.

Availability of NI Ambulance Service

Mr David Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will list, for the last 12 months, the number of occasions on which the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (people carrier services), between Whiteabbey Hospital and the Royal Victoria Hospital, has not been available to patients.

(AQW 509/07)

Mr McGimpsey: Although the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service has planned Patient Care Service (PCS) and Intermediate Care Service (ICS) resources based at Whiteabbey Ambulance Station, there is no dedicated service to the Royal Victoria Hospital (RVH). The Whiteabbey PCS and ICS vehicles service a number of different hospitals and may also transport patients from the Whiteabbey area. It is not possible, therefore, to identify occasions when the service was not available for patients travelling to the RVH.

Hoax Calls to Emergency Services

Mr Raymond McCartney asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will detail the number of hoax calls experienced by (a) the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service; and (b) the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service; and whether his department has carried out any research in relation to the effect these calls have on the Services, and the resultant costs. (AQW 520/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The number of hoax calls received by the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS) and the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) in the last 3 financial years is as follows:

	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
NIFRS	5823	4960	4412
NIAS	2991	6403	5990

Hoax calls waste resources, divert emergency services away from real emergencies and can potentially cost lives. Our aim must be to stop this senseless anti-social behaviour. Both services have programmes in place to prevent and reduce the incidence of such calls.

Ban on Smoking in Public Places

Mr Peter Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if his department has recorded an increase in the number of people giving up smoking, since the introduction of the ban on smoking in public places in Northern Ireland. (AQW 535/07)

Mr McGimpsey: It is too soon to provide a realistic assessment of the impact upon cessation rates of the comprehensive controls on smoking introduced on 30 April. Information about smoking cessation is published on the Department's website:

http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/stats_research/stats-pubs.htm, both quarterly and annually. This relates to the number of smokers setting a quit date and also to the outcome of follow-up action at 4 and 52 weeks to establish current smoking status.

Encouragingly, data submitted to date shows that 1,696 quit dates were set in May 2007 compared to 564 in May 2006. The definitive figure for May 2007 is likely to increase as further information becomes available. In addition, figures recently released by community pharmacy smoking cessation services showed that, in the four months prior to April 2007, more than 4,000 smokers had set a quit date – more than five times as many as in the same period in 2006.

Bearing in mind that a smoker may set a quit date on the last day of the quarter, provisional data relating to current smoking status for the quarter ending 30 June 2007 will not be available before mid-August.

North-South Electricity Inter-Connector

Mr Cathal Boylan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what discussions he has had with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment in relation to the North-South electricity inter-connector. (AQW 537/07)

Mr McGimpsey: I have had no discussions with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment in relation to the North-South electricity inter-connector.

Maternity Provision for the Mid-Ulster Hospital

Mr Ian McCrea asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will consider a midwife-led maternity service for the Mid-Ulster Hospital. (AQW 560/07)

Mr McGimpsey: It is for the Health and Social Services Boards and Trusts in conjunction with their local communities to decide on the most appropriate pattern of local maternity services provision.

Tuberculosis

Mr David McClarty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will make a statement on the tuberculosis alert at the Causeway Hospital in Coleraine. (AQW 582/07)

Mr McGimpsey: On 4th June 2007 my Department was notified by the Northern Board of a healthcare worker from Causeway Hospital in Coleraine who had recently been diagnosed as having Multi-drug Resistant Tuberculosis. Precautionary screening of patients and staff who may have been in contact with the healthcare worker is currently taking place to determine the likelihood that this infection has been transmitted to exposed individuals. This is in line with national guidelines. However current expert advice is that this is not an easy infection to catch.

As part of this action, all patients and staff who may have been in contact with this healthcare worker have been contacted by telephone and/or letter. They have been advised of the risk and, if necessary, to make an appointment for screening. The Northern Trust is holding special clinics to facilitate testing.

A helpline has been set up from Friday 8th June for the immediate future from 9am to 9pm, seven days a week. This will enable those with concerns to speak to professionals, and where indicated to arrange appointments for screening.

My Department is continuing to monitor the situation with the Northern Board.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

A22 Belfast to Comber Road

Mr Simon Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to upgrade the A22 Comber to Belfast road. (AQW 342/07)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): There are currently no plans to upgrade the A22 Comber to Belfast road.

However, my Department's Roads Service are currently progressing a scheme to provide a combined off road footway/cycleway, from Comber through to Belfast City Centre, as an alternative to car travel. It is expected that this scheme will be completed by autumn 2008.

In addition the Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan (2015) outlines proposals for an EWAY rapid transit on the Metropolitan Transport Corridor including both the Newtownards and Comber roads. These proposals are currently subject to an economic appraisal which

is due to report to my Department in the autumn. There is also a proposal to construct the Quarry Corner East Link Road scheme in conjunction with EWAY which would also relieve congestion on the Upper Newtownards Road at Dundonald. A park and ride site at Millmount is also planned to be constructed in conjunction with EWAY.

Street Lighting in Rural Areas

Mr John O'Dowd asked the Minister for Regional Development what is his assessment of the current criteria for the provision of street lighting in rural areas; and if a review of this criteria is now required. (AQW 348/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Roads Service use two main criteria when considering the provision of street lighting in rural areas. These are the density of housing within a community, including public buildings with significant night time use; and road safety, where street lighting would contribute to a reduction in the number of night-time accidents.

These criteria serve to balance the demand for more rural lighting against the unwelcome effects of increased urbanisation of the countryside, the environmental impact of night sky light pollution on people, wildlife and flora and the financial costs of providing and maintaining additional public lighting installations.

I understand that the policy for provision of street lighting in rural locations was relaxed in 2002, so that a public building within a community, with significant evening use, would count as two dwellings when applying the housing density criteria.

Roads Service has no current plans for a further review of the criteria for the provision of street lighting in rural areas.

Speed Restrictions in Residential Zones

Mr Simon Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (a) how many twenty mile per hour residential zones are planned for Northern Ireland; and (b) what are the locations of the planned zones. (AQW 391/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Roads Service advises that a 20 mph speed limit, is not normally introduced on individual roads. It is more common to introduce 20 mph Zones, which are a form of traffic calming, in residential areas where an extensive network of streets is involved and self-enforcing measures can be provided to reduce vehicle speeds to approximately 20 mph. Whenever speeds have been reduced to this, it is then possible to introduce a mandatory 20 mph limit. If the level of traffic calming

measures is insufficient to reduce speeds to around 20 mph, then it is unlikely that the Police Service of Northern Ireland would agree to the introduction of a mandatory 20 mph limit.

Roads Service has implemented forty-eight such 20 mph residential zones to date and has plans to implement a further five 20 mph zones during the current financial year at the following locations:

- Scrabo Estate, Newtownards
- Derrychara Drive / Lakeview Park area, Enniskillen
- Cluney Gardens, Clady (near Strabane)
- The Mews, Ashfield Gardens, Fintona
- Lakeview Cottages, Ardboe.

Traffic Calming Measures, Strangford

Mr Simon Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development what is the location of traffic-calming measures that are planned in the Strangford constituency. (AQW 392/07)

Mr Murphy: Traffic calming schemes are proposed for the following locations in the Strangford constituency in the 2007/08 and 2008/09 financial years:

2007/08

Gateway measures at existing 30 mph signs, Killinchy
Gateway measures at Parsonage Road, Kircubbin
Old Ballygowan Road, Comber

2008/09

Gateway measures at existing 30 mph signs, Killyleagh
Gateway measures at existing 30 mph signs, Ballywalter
Strangford Heights, Newtownards
Ballyblack Road, Loughries.

Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 2006

Mr Patsy McGlone asked the Minister for Regional Development to confirm that the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 2006 have been adhered to in relation to all aspects of the Northern Ireland Water septic tank desludging contract, recently transferred from Road Safety Contracts to Precision Industrial Services; and if he will clarify specifically that there has been no detrimental change in employee rates of pay and public holiday/annual leave entitlement. (AQW 407/07)

Mr Murphy: The Water and Sewerage Services (NI) Order 2006 transferred responsibility for the delivery of water and sewerage services from the Department's Water Service Agency to a statutory water and sewerage undertaker. A government-owned

company, Northern Ireland Water (NIW) has been appointed as the undertaker and the issues raised are operational matters for it. I have asked the Chief Executive of NIW (Mrs. Katharine Bryan) to write to you in response to these questions.

Annual Salary for Parking Attendants

Mr George Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development what is the annual salary of a Roads Service/NCP parking attendant. (AQW 410/07)

Mr Murphy: As you will be aware, Traffic Attendants are employed by National Car Parks Services (Ltd), who are contracted to my Department's Roads Service, to provide parking enforcement and car park management services.

Attendants are paid £6.91 per hour. Their annual salary depends on the number of hours worked, but I can advise that a standard 37 hour working week would equate to an annual salary of £13,295.

Waste Water Infrastructure

Mr Billy Armstrong asked the Minister for Regional Development what measures are in place to reduce the potential for overload of waste water infrastructure; what pollution hotspots have been identified; and what strategies are in place to reduce sewage pollution. (AQW 434/07)

Mr Murphy: The Water and Sewerage Services (NI) Order 2006 transferred responsibility for the delivery of water and sewerage services from the Department's Water Service Agency to a statutory water and sewerage undertaker. A government-owned company, Northern Ireland Water (NIW) has been appointed as the undertaker and the issues raised are operational matters for it. I have asked the Chief Executive of NIW (Mrs. Katharine Bryan) to write to you in response to these questions.

New footpath at the Bowling Club, Ballywalter

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development if he is aware that Ballywalter Football and Bowling Club has over 600 members; and whether this information has been considered in assessing the need for a new footpath from the Kilns to the Bowling Club on the Springvale Road, Ballywalter. (AQW 450/07)

Mr Murphy: I recall you raised this issue during the recent Adjournment Debate about funding for the re-surfacing of roads in the Strangford Constituency.

As I indicated in my recent reply to your previous Assembly Question on this matter (AQW 81/07), my Department's Roads Service has carried out a full technical assessment of this proposal, to provide a footway linking the Kilns to the Bowling Club on the Springvale Road, Ballywalter. A crucial component of that assessment process was the use of pedestrian and vehicle surveys between both locations, to determine the amount of pedestrian and vehicle activity in the area.

The result of the whole assessment process was that this proposal attracted a low priority status when compared with other proposals being considered by Roads Service. Accordingly, the footway referred to in your question has not been included in Roads Service's Minor Works Programme for the Ards Council area.

New Footway at Killyleagh Football Club

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development if he has finalised plans for a new footpath from the football ground in Killyleagh to Maymore Cottages; and if he will give a timescale for its completion. (AQW 451/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Roads Service confirms that it has received several requests from elected and local representatives for the provision of a footway to link the Killyleagh Football Club with Maymore Cottages on the Comber Road, Killyleagh.

As a result of these requests, full technical assessments for a possible scheme were carried out during 2003 and 2005. However, as low levels of pedestrian activity were recorded on both occasions, the scheme did not receive a high enough priority, when competing with other similar requests, to be included in Roads Service's Minor Works Programme for the Down Council Area.

Roads Service officials consider that the circumstances have not changed significantly since 2005. They will, however, continue to monitor the situation and they have assured me that should circumstances change, the proposal will be reassessed.

Glenburn Road Car Park

Mr Paul Butler asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps he will take to remove an 11 July bonfire from a Roads Service car park on Glenburn Road in Dunmurry, which has been situated close to nearby houses and apartments. (AQW 484/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department has the power under the Roads (Northern Ireland) Order 1993 to remove any bonfire material near or on a public road, which may constitute a danger to road users. However, the support, co-operation and involvement of local

communities is an important factor, as was recognised in the report of the inter-agency group, which produced guidelines on bonfire management.

Roads Service also has a duty of care to its staff, and the immediate and ongoing safety of personnel tasked with removal work is always taken into account, in consultation with the police and other parties.

With regard to the Glenburn Road car park, I can advise that Roads Service, in conjunction with the Police, Lisburn City Council officials, Fire and Rescue Service and local representatives ensure that every effort is made to contain the impact that a bonfire has at this location and the surrounding area. This joint approach has ensured that there has been a vast improvement in the management of this bonfire site in the past few years.

In previous years, a little-used portion of this car park has been used for the construction of a bonfire, ensuring containment in an area with little impact on the general public. There has always been a risk that, with the removal of this local agreement, the bonfire could be moved onto the public thoroughfare, causing even greater problems.

Following discussions with a local representative this year, Roads Service officials placed temporary fencing around a small area at the rear of the car park to contain the collection of material to a confined area away from the apartments and to leave the remainder of the car park free for parking. This location, which has been agreed with the local community, is considered to be a safe distance from apartments under construction, providing that the safe height, agreed with the Fire and Rescue Service, is not breached. I am advised that the bonfire will also be built on a prepared base, so that the surface of the car park is protected from damage. These arrangements will mitigate greatly the negative impacts of the bonfire on members of the public.

As a result of an agreement with the local community to minimise the impact of a bonfire at Glenburn Road car park, it would not be appropriate to take action to remove all bonfire material from this site. Roads Service officials and other public bodies will, however, closely monitor this location so that the situation is managed as effectively as possible.

Skeoge Road Link

Mr Raymond McCartney asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will give a timeline for the work to be carried out in relation to the Skeogh Road Link, Derry/Londonderry, including a date for completion; and if he will confirm that effective traffic management systems will be in place at completion, following consultation with residents in the directly affected housing developments. (AQW 521/07)

Mr Murphy: Work on the provision of the Skeoge Link started on site on the 23 April 2007. It is anticipated that the road will be substantially completed by Spring 2008.

Concept master plans for the new housing developments in the area are being finalised with Planning Service and discussions between Roads Service officials and the developers are ongoing on the provision of the minor roads connections to the new Skeoge Link. These connections will be provided by the developers, to tie in with their new road and housing layouts. I can confirm that Roads Service officials have been heavily involved in agreeing the standards and also ensuring that walking and cycling provisions are included.

It is anticipated that the new road will provide great benefits for both strategic traffic and for local residents, especially in the Glengalliagh area.

Derry/Londonderry to Belfast Rail Network

Mr Raymond McCartney asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will provide information on the upgrade to the Derry/Londonderry-Belfast rail network, and in particular the requirement of a 'loop system' to increase the frequency of service in and out of Derry/Londonderry; and if his department has undertaken any work with Ilex in relation to relocation of the rail terminal. (AQW 522/07)

Mr Murphy: Work on rail services between Belfast and Derry is currently being carried out to maintain services on the line at existing levels in accordance with the Railways Review Group Report published in 2004. Following the scrutiny of an appraisal, which assessed the merits of a range of options for future railways provision, the Department is bidding for additional funding under the Priorities and Budget and Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland exercises. This includes the provision of a passing loop and if the bid was to be successful it would allow for an improved timetable on the line.

The Department has not undertaken any work with Ilex in relation to the relocation of the rail terminal in Derry. However, Northern Ireland Railways (NIR) has been in consultation with Ilex in respect of a relocated railway station and a direct footbridge linkage to Foyleside. Depending on the outcome of decisions regarding additional funding for the Belfast to Derry line proposals may be brought forward to the Department in the future.

Submissions Criteria for Review of Water Charges

Mr Fred Cobain asked the Minister for Regional Development when the Committee for Regional

Development was informed of the 31 May 2007 deadline for submission of suggested criteria for the review into water charges; and how that information was communicated. (AQW 597/07)

Mr Murphy: The letter of 6 June from the Committee's chairman to me following our meeting on 16 May states "You also asked to hear views on this issue from the Committee by the end of May 2007."

Review of Water Charges

Mr Fred Cobain asked the Minister for Regional Development to give the date on which the criteria for the review into water charges was drawn up. (AQW 598/07)

Mr Murphy: Drafts terms of reference were circulated to the Executive sub-committee on 31 May 2007. Further changes were made as a result of the sub-committee meeting on 4 June and an agreed draft circulated to the Executive on 5 June. Final terms of reference followed the Executive's agreement on 7 June.

Submissions Criteria for Review of Water Charges

Mr Fred Cobain asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the individuals and/or groups that made submissions in relation to the criteria for the review of water charges; when those submissions were received; and what is the content of those submissions. (AQW 599/07)

Mr Murphy: A number of groups and individuals made suggestions about the review. Submissions were received from the NI Authority for Utility Regulation (29 May) and from the Regional Development Committee (6 June) on the criteria for the review.

The submissions suggested areas that should be covered by the review and the manner in which it might be taken forward.

A copy of the submission received from the NI Authority for Utility Regulation is available in the Assembly Library.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Cathedral Quarter Arts Festival

Mr Fred Cobain asked the Minister for Social Development what long-term strategy is in place to progress the Cathedral Quarter development plans and secure the long-term survival of the Cathedral Quarter

Arts Festival; and if her department has realised its commitment to establish a new agency to promote the Cathedral Quarter. (AQW 322/07)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie):

The now dissolved Laganside Corporation set out its regeneration strategy for Cathedral Quarter in its Corporate Plan, published each year, and reported on progress in its Annual Report and Accounts. The Corporation's final Annual Report and Accounts will be laid in the Assembly in July 07 and will indicate that all remaining physical development projects in the area are on course for delivery of development plans. As part of the 2007/08 round, the Arts Council awarded the Cathedral Quarter Arts Festival an Annual Support for Organisations Programme (ASOP) grant of £69,300. The award is on a 3-year funding basis in recognition of the strategic importance of the festival. The Department for Social Development (DSD) has committed £500,000 funding for the period 2007 to 2009 for a grants package to support the arts and cultural sector in the Laganside area including Cathedral Quarter. On 29 January 2007 DSD announced that it would invite all stakeholders in Cathedral Quarter to give their views on establishing a body to market the area, in order to maximise and develop the promotion of the Quarter to become a distinct area of excellence for arts and culture, creative industries, business, retail, leisure and entertainment. DSD is currently consulting with Belfast City Council and Arts Groups on this proposal with the aim of finalising details as soon as possible.

Attendance Allowance

Mr Peter Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of people in receipt of Attendance Allowance by (a) constituency, (b) District Council area, and (c) each Social Security Office. (AQW 378/07)

Ms Ritchie: The information requested is set out in the attached tables. The numbers shown reflect the number of claims where an amount of Attendance Allowance is in payment at the date of extract.

TABLE 1: ATTENDANCE ALLOWANCE RECIPIENTS BY PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY AT 28 APRIL 2007

Parliamentary Constituency	Attendance Allowance Recipients (28 April 2007)
Belfast East	3,711
Belfast North	3,974
Belfast South	3,104
Belfast West	2,968
East Antrim	2,835

Parliamentary Constituency	Attendance Allowance Recipients (28 April 2007)
East Londonderry	3,148
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	3,903
Foyle	2,722
Lagan Valley	3,518
Mid Ulster	3,348
Newry And Armagh	3,959
North Antrim	3,870
North Down	3,627
South Antrim	2,946
South Down	3,949
Strangford	3,389
Upper Bann	3,643
West Tyrone	3,153
Unallocated Postcode *	403
Total	62,170

* In this analysis records are attributed to Electoral Wards and Parliamentary Constituency on the basis of their postcode. A small number of records cannot be directly allocated using this methodology.

TABLE 2: ATTENDANCE ALLOWANCE RECIPIENTS BY DISTRICT COUNCIL AREA AT 28 APRIL 2007

District Council Area	Attendance Allowance Recipients (28 April 2007)
Antrim	1,306
Ards	2,702
Armagh	2,117
Ballymena	2,085
Ballymoney	1,085
Banbridge	1,598
Belfast	11,073
Carrickfergus	1,290
Castlereagh	2,520
Coleraine	2,112
Cookstown	1,306
Craigavon	2,843
Derry	2,722
Down	2,354
Dungannon	1,933
Fermanagh	2,491
Larne	1,115

District Council Area	Attendance Allowance Recipients (28 April 2007)
Limavady	1,036
Lisburn	3,380
Magherafelt	1,521
Moyle	700
Newry & Mourne	3,358
Newtownabbey	2,868
North Down	3,099
Omagh	1,765
Strabane	1,388
Unallocated Postcode *	403
Total	62,170

* In this analysis records are attributed to Electoral Wards and Parliamentary Constituency on the basis of their postcode. A small number of records cannot be directly allocated using this methodology.

TABLE 3: ATTENDANCE ALLOWANCE RECIPIENTS BY SOCIAL SECURITY OFFICE/JOBS & BENEFITS OFFICE BOUNDARY AT 28 APRIL 2007

Social Security Office/Jobs & Benefits office Boundary	Attendance Allowance Recipients (28 April 2007)
Andersonstown	1,302
Antrim	1,880
Armagh	1,887
Ballymena	2,353
Ballymoney	1,665
Ballynahinch	1,070
Banbridge	1,662
Bangor	3,174
Carrickfergus	1,289
Coleraine	2,131
Cookstown	1,085
Corporation Street	2,394
Downpatrick	1,075
Dungannon	1,677
Enniskillen	2,703
Falls Road	1,051
Foyle	1,306
Hollywood Road	3,433
Kilkeel	640
Knockbreda	3,022
Larne	1,119

Social Security Office/Jobs & Benefits office Boundary	Attendance Allowance Recipients (28 April 2007)
Limavady	945
Lisburn	2,829
Lisnagelvin	1,537
Lurgan	1,813
Magherafelt	1,540
Newcastle	781
Newry	2,585
Newtownabbey	2,279
Newtownards	2,012
Omagh	1,669
Portadown	1,555
Shaftesbury Square	1,672
Shankill Road	1,148
Strabane	1,413
Unallocated Postcode *	474
Total	62,170

* Attendance Allowance is a centralised benefit and therefore has no Social Security Office/Jobs & Benefits office indicator. Table 3 is a breakdown of customers whose postcodes fall within each of the 35 Social Security Office/Jobs & Benefits office boundaries. "Unallocated Postcode" in this instance refers to those postcodes which cannot be referenced on the Geographic Information System and therefore cannot be assigned to a Social Security office Boundary

Pension Credit

Mr Peter Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of people in receipt of Pension Credit by (a) constituency, (b) District Council area, and (c) each Social Security Office. (AQW 379/07)

Ms Ritchie: The information requested is provided in attached tables. The numbers shown in receipt of Pension Credit reflect the number of beneficiaries i.e. claimants plus partners where appropriate.

TABLE 1: PENSION CREDIT BENEFICIARIES BY PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY AT 28 APRIL 2007

Parliamentary Constituency	Pension Credit Beneficiaries (28 April 2007)
Belfast East	5,324
Belfast North	8,013
Belfast South	4,364
Belfast West	8,236
East Antrim	4,576

Parliamentary Constituency	Pension Credit Beneficiaries (28 April 2007)
East Londonderry	5,940
Fermanagh And South Tyrone	7,070
Foyle	7,403
Lagan Valley	5,007
Mid Ulster	6,886
Newry And Armagh	7,748
North Antrim	6,853
North Down	4,307
South Antrim	4,865
South Down	6,721
Strangford	5,349
Upper Bann	7,172
West Tyrone	6,847
Unallocated Postcode*	579
Total	113,260

* In producing this analysis, individual records were attributed to Electoral Wards and Parliamentary Constituency on the basis of their postcode. Not all records can be correctly allocated to a ward using this method, and some cannot be allocated at all.

TABLE 2: PENSION CREDIT BENEFICIARIES BY DISTRICT COUNCIL AREA AT 28 APRIL 2007

District Council Area	Pension Credit Beneficiaries (28 April 2007)
Antrim	2,388
Ards	4,294
Armagh	3,454
Ballymena	3,563
Ballymoney	2,014
Banbridge	2,561
Belfast	21,564
Carrickfergus	1,944
Castlereagh	3,282
Coleraine	3,693
Cookstown	2,595
Craigavon	5,838
Derry	7,403
Down	3,891
Dungannon	3,885
Fermanagh	4,511
Larne	1,935

District Council Area	Pension Credit Beneficiaries (28 April 2007)
Limavady	2,247
Lisburn	5,379
Magherafelt	2,965
Moyle	1,276
Newry & Mourne	7,045
Newtownabbey	4,551
North Down	3,556
Omagh	3,206
Strabane	3,641
Unallocated Postcode*	579
Total	113,260

* In producing this analysis, individual records were attributed to Electoral Wards and Parliamentary Constituency on the basis of their postcode. Not all records can be correctly allocated to a ward using this method, and some cannot be allocated at all.

TABLE 3: PENSION CREDIT BENEFICIARIES BY SOCIAL SECURITY OFFICE/JOBS & BENEFITS OFFICE BOUNDARY AT 28 APRIL 2007

Social Security Office/Jobs & Benefits office boundary	Pension Credit Beneficiaries (28 April 2007)
Andersonstown	3,532
Antrim	3,272
Armagh	3,050
Ballymena	4,033
Ballymoney	3,086
Ballynahinch	1,521
Banbridge	2,650
Bangor	3,876
Carrickfergus	1,945
Coleraine	3,746
Cookstown	2,177
Corporation Street	5,136
Downpatrick	1,797
Dungannon	3,506
Enniskillen	4,894
Falls Road	3,213
Foyle	4,588
Hollywood Road	5,061
Kilkeel	1,215
Knockbreda	3,888
Larne	1,938

Social Security Office/Jobs & Benefits office boundary	Pension Credit Beneficiaries (28 April 2007)
Limavady	2,003
Lisburn	4,026
Lisnagelvin	3,095
Lurgan	3,795
Magherafelt	3,028
Newcastle	1,320
Newry	5,626
Newtownabbey	3,592
Newtownards	3,323
Omagh	3,089
Portadown	2,831
Shaftesbury Square	2,465
Shankill Road	2,622
Strabane	3,660
Unallocated Postcode*	661
Total	113,260

* Pension Credit is a centralised benefit and therefore has no Social Security Office/Jobs & Benefits office indicator. Table 3 is a breakdown of customers whose postcodes fall within each of the 35 Social Security Office/Jobs & Benefits office boundaries. "Unallocated Postcode" in this instance refers to those postcodes which cannot be referenced on the Geographic Information System and therefore cannot be assigned to a Social Security office Boundary.

Attendance Allowance

Mr Peter Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of new claimants for Attendance Allowance in each of the last five years by (a) constituency, (b) District Council area, and (c) each Social Security Office. (AQW 380/07)

Ms Ritchie: Information in the form requested is not available.

The total number of claims to Attendance Allowance for each of the last 5 years for Northern Ireland is as follows:

Year	Totals
2002/2003	9,878
2003/2004	9,341
2004/2005	8,743
2005/2006	8,275
2006/2007	8,357

Energy Performance Certificates

Mr Sammy Wilson asked the Minister for Social Development if she has any plans to introduce energy performance certificates or home information packs. (AQW 396/07)

Ms Ritchie: The Department for Social Development is working along with the Department of Finance and Personnel to prepare regulations that will implement the remaining requirements of the European Union Energy Performance of Buildings Directive, including the requirement for the production of energy performance certificates. These certificates will be introduced on a phased basis between January 2008 and January 2009.

There are no plans at present to introduce Home Information Packs and I will continue to monitor developments as regards their introduction in Northern Ireland and will establish a stakeholders group to consider this issue once the review of the 'Land Law Reform Project', a joint Office of Law Reform/Land Registers of Northern Ireland process has taken place. This initiative, which is scheduled for 3 years, commenced in April 2006 and will consider current land law and conveyance legislation and practice. It will look at all aspects of existing processes and legislation and consider examples of best practice which apply in other areas.

Carers Over 65

Mr George Savage asked the Minister for Social Development if she will take on board the concerns of those over 65 who care for ill relatives; and if she will consider a form of carer's allowance for such persons. (AQW 408/07)

Ms Ritchie: Since October 2002 carers aged 65 and over have been able to qualify for carer's allowance on the same basis as younger carers. However, it is a basic principle of the social security system that only one benefit at a time can be paid for the same purpose. Even though the circumstances which give rise to entitlement to carer's allowance and state pension are different, they are both designed to provide a degree of replacement for lost or foregone income. Entitlement to both benefits means that carer's allowance is not payable, or not payable in full, in addition to state pension. Where carer's allowance cannot be paid for this reason, the person will keep underlying entitlement to carer's allowance which gives access to the carer premium in the income-related benefits such as housing benefit or the similar additional amount for carers through pension credit. In line with the long-standing policy of parity in social security, there are no current plans to change the policy on overlapping benefits in respect of carer's allowance and state pension.

Pension Credit

Mr Peter Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of new claimants for Pension Credit, for each of the last five years, (a) by constituency; (b) by District Council area; and (c) by Social Security Office. (AQW 416/07)

Ms Ritchie: Information in the form requested is not available.

The total number of claims to Pension Credit between April 2005 and March 2006 and between April 2006 and March 2007 for Northern Ireland is set out in the table below.

Year	Totals
2005/2006	10,384
2006/2007	7,951

Land Purchase for New Build Social Housing

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development how many applications are pending for land purchase for new build social housing in (a) Ards Borough Council area; and (b) Strangford constituency. (AQW 430/07)

Ms Ritchie: The Social Housing Development Programme for 2007/08 and 2008/09 currently contains proposals for

- 14 new schemes in the Ards Borough Council area. Sites for eight are already in the ownership of Housing Associations or the Housing Executive. Housing Associations will be responsible for acquiring the remaining six sites; and
- 17 new schemes in the Strangford constituency, including those planned for the Ards Borough Council area. Sites for 10 of these schemes are already in the ownership of Housing Associations or the Housing Executive. Housing Associations will be responsible for acquiring the remaining seven sites.

Housing Associations are currently working with the Housing Executive to determine the feasibility of acquiring a number of further sites that do not currently feature in the published programme.

Renewing Communities Programme

Mr Paul Butler asked the Minister for Social Development if she will carry out a review of the Renewing Communities Funding Programme, in light of concerns about departmental funding through the programme. (AQW 461/07)

Ms Ritchie: The Renewing Communities Programme is a programme of actions shared across seven Northern Ireland Departments and the Northern Ireland Office and initiated by the direct rule administration. My Department, DSD, is responsible for the overall co-ordination of the programme including the administration of the inter-departmental Delivery Team. DSD has begun the process of examining the actions for which we have the lead responsibility to ensure that they are properly fortified and are keen to discuss with other Departments how we might proceed beyond March 2008 when the funding will cease.

Community Conventions Development Company

Mr Paul Butler asked the Minister for Social Development how much money has been allocated to the Community Convention and Development Company and related conventions since their establishment. (AQW 462/07)

Ms Ritchie: The Department for Social Development issued a Letter of Offer to the Community Conventions Development Company in January 2005 for £523k to deliver four community conventions by 31 December 2006. A further contract was in place until end May 2007 for £60,000. My Department is currently assessing an application from the Community Conventions Development Company for a further three years funding and has issued an interim contract for £20,000 pending a final decision by the end of June 2007.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 22 June 2007

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Planning Appeals Commission

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to provide figures for those waiting for a date to be set for a planning appeal to be taken in this calendar year; and to detail how many have been on the list for (a) 6 months, (b) 12 months, (c) 18 months, and (d) over 18 months. (AQW 269/07)

The First Minister and Deputy First Minister (Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness): The Planning Appeals Commission is a tribunal Non Departmental Public Body, and we understand the Chief Commissioner has written to the honourable member in the following terms:

“I have been asked to provide you with information requested in the above Assembly Question.

The Commission currently has 2848 appeals for determination. Appeals are allocated as Commissioners are available to determine them. There are 20 full-time Commissioners and 3 Panel Commissioners, though 9 of the full-time Commissioners are currently engaged in development plan work and are unavailable to undertake appeal work. I would expect that approximately 800 appeals would be determined in this calendar year.

I have set out, in the following table, the total number of valid appeals received, categorised by waiting periods, which have yet to be determined.

Period	More than 18 months	18 Months or less	12 Months or less	6 Months or less
Number of Appeals	16	2832	2584	1113

I would be happy to provide any further information you require arising out of this response or to meet with you to discuss the matter if that would be more suitable.”

Eradicating Child Poverty

Mr Fred Cobain asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what progress has been made towards achieving the UK-wide target of eradicating child poverty by 2020; and what meetings it has had on this issue. (AQW 316/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: The percentage of children in relative income poverty in 2002/2003 was approximately 26% (114,000).

The latest available figures for the number of children in relative income poverty for 2004/05 indicate approximately 24%(101,000).

During suspension, a Ministerial led Poverty and Social Inclusion Forum for Northern Ireland met for the first time on 8 March 2007 under the chairmanship of the Rt Hon David Hanson MP. An important aspect of the future work of this forum will be to monitor progress towards the eradication of child poverty. Any future meetings of this forum will be taken forward under Executive direction.

Targeting Social Need

Mr Simon Hamilton asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to list all wards in Northern Ireland that are presently designated with new Targeting Social Need status. (AQW 393/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: There is no designation of new Targeting Social Need status at ward level here.

The Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure 2005 (NIMDM 2005) identifies small area concentrations of multiple deprivation.

This information is available on the NISRA website at www.nisra.gov.uk.

Children and Young People

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister how many consultation meetings were organised by the Children and Young Peoples Unit earlier this year, in relation to the Government's report on the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child; to detail the date and location of each meeting; and to give a list of the organisations invited to attend.

(AQW 524/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: In keeping with recommendations by the UN Committee, consultations were held with both the NGO (Non Governmental Organisations) sector and with children and young people. Twenty-four meetings were carried out in total.

Consultation meetings were held with NGOs on the 14 February 2007 in the Glasshouse, Stormont Estate and on the 23 February 2007 in Castle Buildings.

A list of the organisations invited to attend is below.

Aware Defeat Depression
An Munia Tober
Ballymena & Larne Volunteer Bureau
Barnardo's
Belfast Central Mission
Belfast City Council
Big Lottery Fund
British Association for Adoption & Fostering
Carew II Family and Training Centre
Childline Northern Ireland
Children in Northern Ireland
Child Brain Injury Trust UK
Children's Law Centre
Contact Youth
Derry Children's Commission
District Childcare Partnership
Disability Action
Employers for Childcare
Extern
First Housing Aid
Family Caring Centre
Foyle Women's Aid
Gingerbread Northern Ireland
Home-Start
Include Youth
Lifestart Foundation Ltd
Mencap
Multi-Cultural Resource Centre
National Deaf Children's Society
NCH Northern Ireland
Northern Ireland Childminding Association
Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities

Northern Ireland Music Therapy Trust
Northern Ireland Womens Aid Federation
Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders
Northern Ireland Housing Executive
Northern Ireland Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder Family Support Group
Northern Ireland Youth Forum
NIPPA
NSPCC
Opportunity Youth
Parent's Advice Centre
PlayBoard
Probation Board Northern Ireland
Royal National Institute of Blind People
Royal College of Nursing
Save the Children
Sure-Start
Sustrans
The Fostering Network
Ulster Quaker Service Committee
Voice of Young People in Care
Whiterock Creche Association
Youth Com
Youth Council for Northern Ireland
Youth Justice Agency
Youth Net

A number of consultations also took place with children and young people throughout the month of February. An initial meeting was held with a consultant to discuss the children and young people's perceptions about children's rights in Northern Ireland, the draft UNCRC report and any changes they thought should be made. A second meeting was then held at which the children and young people discussed their key messages for Government with civil servants. Details of these consultations can be found below.

Organisation	Date of first meeting	Date of second meeting
Youth@CLC Children's Law Centre Philip House 3 rd Floor 123-137 York St, Belfast, BT15 1AB	Thursday 15 th February, 5-7pm, CLC, Belfast	Thursday 22 nd February, 5-7pm, CLC, Belfast

Organisation	Date of first meeting	Date of second meeting
GLYNI (Gay and Lesbian Youth Northern Ireland) 64 Donegall Street, Belfast, BT1 2GT	Monday 5 th February, 7-8pm, GLYNI	Monday 12 th February, 7-8pm, GLYNI
Leaving Care Project Somerset House, 234 Ormeau Rd, Belfast, BT7 2FZ	Wednesday 7 th February, 6-8pm, 7 Annadale Avenue, Belfast	Wednesday 14 th February 4-5pm with DH, 5-6pm with civil servant, 7 Annadale Avenue, Belfast
6th Sense Project The Children and Young People's Centre, Dobbin St, Armagh, BT61 7QQ	Saturday 20 th January, 10- 12pm, Children and Young People's Centre, Dobbin St, Armagh	Saturday 10 th February, 10- 11am with DH, 11-1pm with civil servants, Children and Young People's Centre, Dobbin St, Armagh
Generation Y Chinese Welfare Association, 133-135 University Street, Belfast, BT7 1HQ	Saturday 3 rd February, 10.30- 12.30pm, Great Victoria Street Church, Belfast	Saturday 17 th February, 10.30-11.30am (10-14s); 11.30-12.30pm (15-18s), Great Victoria Church, Great Victoria St, Belfast
NewStart Alternative Education Project, Newstart Education Centre, Unit 13/1, Blackstaff Mill Complex, 77 Springfield Rd, Belfast, BT12 7AE	Friday 2 nd February, 10.45- 12.30pm, New Start, Belfast	Thursday 22 nd February, 10.45- 11.30am with DH, 11.30-12.30pm with civil servants, New Start, Belfast
School Age Mothers Project Education Welfare Service, 93 Cliftonville Rd, Belfast, BT14 6JQ	Tuesday 6 th February, 11.15-12.45pm, Loughshore Educational Resource Centre, Shore Rd, Belfast	Tuesday 13 th February, 11.15- 11.45am with DH, 11.45-12.45pm with civil servants, Loughshore Educational Resource Centre
Young Voices Project Include Youth Alpha House, 3 Rosemary St, Belfast, BT1 1QA	Thursday 8 th February, 1-3pm, Include Youth, Belfast	Thursday 15 th February, 2-4pm, Include Youth, Belfast

Organisation	Date of first meeting	Date of second meeting
Oakgrove Integrated Primary School - Share Project, 19 Limavady Road, Londonderry	Tuesday 30 th January 11-12pm 'Share' Project:	Wednesday 21 st February 11-12pm 'Share' Project, Oakgrove School
Foyle View Special School - Share Project (met at Oakgrove School)	Foyleview Special School & Oakgrove Integrated Primary School	Wednesday 21 st February 1.15-2.15pm, Troy College
Troy College, Belmont House Special School, 17 Racecourse Road, Londonderry	Wednesday 31 st January 1.15-2.15pm Troy College, Belmont House Special School	Wednesday 21 st February 5.45-7.00pm, Traveller's After School Group
Traveller After School Group, 141 Racecourse Road, Ballyarnett Park, Londonderry	Organised through: Derry Children's Commission, 26-28 Bishop Street, Londonderry, BT48 6PP	Wednesday 31 st January 5.45-7.00pm, Traveller's After School Group

We understand the Member has already raised the issue of the Ulster-Scots community taking part in consultations. Officials have offered to forward a submission from him to DFES for consideration in the UK composite report.

Civil Service Bonuses

Mr Mervyn Storey asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to outline how many non-pensionable bonuses were paid to staff in each of the last three years; and what steps it has taken to ensure that such bonuses are not used as a cheaper alternative to an appropriate salary increase.

(AQW 641/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: Non-pensionable bonuses can be awarded to staff in two ways: (a) as part of the annual pay round and (b) under the special bonus scheme. The number of payments made in the last three financial years is as follows:

Year	Performance-Related Bonus	Special Bonus Scheme
2004/2005	257	9
2005/2006	282	32
2006/2007	338	39

Performance-related bonuses are an important and integral element of the Northern Ireland Civil Service reward strategy and are used as part of the annual pay round to acknowledge and reward higher performing staff;

The special bonus scheme is designed to reward members of staff for exceptional performance in particularly demanding tasks.

The award of bonuses is therefore regarded as being complementary to, rather than a substitute for, the award of consolidated pay increases.

Please note that information can be provided only in relation to staff currently employed by the Department.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Agri-environment Schemes

Mr Billy Armstrong asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what measures are in place to increase uptake of agri-environment schemes among the farming community; and what further strategies are in place to increase diversity and population numbers of local wildlife, and to protect natural habitats on farms. (AQW 438/07)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): The agri-environment programme, which has over 13,000 participants, will re-open to further applications after the Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme (“NIRDP”) (2007–2013) is approved by the European Commission and the appropriate local legislation is made.

The goal of the DOE-sponsored Northern Ireland Biodiversity Strategy is to increase and protect local wildlife. This is achieved through the Strategy’s Habitat and Species Action Plans. The NIRDP has been aligned with these Action Plans and is recognised as a key delivery mechanism.

Civil Service Bonuses

Mr Mervyn Storey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline how many non-pensionable bonuses were paid to staff in her department in each of the last three years; and what steps she has taken to ensure that such bonuses are not used as a cheaper alternative to an appropriate salary increase. (AQW 642/07)

Ms Gildernew: Non-pensionable bonuses can be awarded to staff at all grades to reward performance in two ways: (a) as part of the annual pay round and (b) under the NICS special bonus scheme.

Performance related bonuses are an important and integral element of the NICS reward strategy, and as

such are used as part of the annual pay round to acknowledge and reward higher performing staff.

The special bonus scheme is designed to reward staff for exceptional performance in particularly demanding tasks.

The award of bonuses is therefore regarded as being complementary to, rather than as a substitute for, the award of consolidated pay increases.

The number of payments made in the last three financial years is as follows:

Year	Performance-related	Special Bonus Scheme
2004/2005	3577	224
2005/2006	2515	224
2006/2007*	74	135

* The pay award including performance-related bonus for this year was not paid until the 2007/2008 year.

Rural Divisions Payments

Mr Dominic Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the reasons for centralising the Rural Division Payments processing, currently being undertaken at the three district offices in Newry, Ballymena and Omagh, to Dundonald House, and the implications for the staff currently carrying out that work in these district offices. (AQW 683/07)

Ms Gildernew: There is currently a duplication of effort and resources with regard to payments processing across the local Rural Development Offices. Utilisation of a Central Payment Unit will provide a speedier more effective service for the rural customer. This will mean a small reduction in posts in Newry, Ballymena and Omagh. There will be no job losses. Staff concerned will be redeployed to other Civil Service offices.

Organic Production

Dr William McCrea asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline what assistance is provided for farmers seeking to convert to organic production. (AQW 684/07)

Ms Gildernew: Subject to the European Commission’s approval of the Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme 2007-2013, I hope to offer a new Organic Farming Scheme to assist farmers who wish to convert from conventional to organic production. This new Scheme will offer conversion support to the organic cereal and horticulture sectors as well as to the organic livestock sector.

Capital Grant Programme

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she will detail any available grants for the construction, or conversion of, a shed for agricultural use. (AQW 706/07)

Ms Gildernew: There may be scope for capital grant support within the Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme 2007-2013 (NIRDP). However, negotiations are ongoing with the European Commission and I hope to announce more detailed information after the NIRDP has been approved.

Loop River

Mr Robin Newton asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail how often the Loop River and its tributaries within East Belfast are cleaned. (AQW 726/07)

Ms Gildernew: Designated open watercourse sections of the Loop River and its tributaries are routinely inspected and maintained on an annual basis, or more frequently if necessary, to ensure free flow. The culverted sections have manhole inspections every 3 years to ensure free flow. The grille structures at the inlet to these culverted sections are inspected and maintained on a weekly or monthly basis depending on their criticality in the context of the risk to life and property in the event of a flood.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Maps Produced by Waterways Ireland

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he will take steps to ensure that the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland is clearly visible on all maps and graphics produced by Waterways Ireland. (AQW 293/07)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Poots): Waterways Ireland advise me that the border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland has been marked on all mapping produced by them with the exception of their angling guides where the function of the map is to provide directions to a particular site from the major access points on the island.

I have asked Waterways Ireland to ensure that all future maps and graphics produced by them have the border clearly marked.

Funding for North West 200

Mr David Burnside asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to state what support, including financial support, has been given to the North West 200 over the past five years; and what financial support it will receive from his department in 2007. (AQW 399/07)

Mr Poots: Over the last five years the North West 200 (NW200) has received financial support as follows:

NORTHERN IRELAND TOURIST BOARD (NITB)

2002	£43,904.90
2003	£37,016.70
2004	£2,257.30
2005	£8,302.87
2006	Nil

NORTHERN IRELAND EVENTS COMPANY (NIEC)

2002	Nil
2003	£42,000
2004	£50,000
2005	£78,179.60
2006	Nil

Sport Northern Ireland (SNI)

In 2003, SNI made available to the Motor Cycle Union of Ireland £73,784 towards venue improvements at four circuits in Northern Ireland, including the NW200.

These figures do not include financial assistance obtained by the NW200 through private sponsorship deals or directly from the governing body, the 2&4 Wheel Motorsport Steering Group Limited (2&4 Wheel MSG).

In 2007, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, through SNI, provided an additional £150,000 funding to the 2&4 Wheel MSG. Of this, approximately £40,000 went directly to the NW200 event for the upgrading of health and safety at the site. £100,000 was used to purchase safety equipment such as bales, pole protectors and safety fencing which is available for use by any of the motorsport organisations. SNI is currently assisting 2&4 Wheel MSG with the preparation of a business case setting out further funding requirements.

Funding for the Ulster Grand Prix

Mr David Burnside asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to state what support, including financial support, has been given to the Ulster Grand

Prix over the past five years; and what financial support it will receive from his department in 2007. (AQW 400/07)

Mr Poots: Over the last five years the Ulster Grand Prix (UGP) has received financial support as follows:

NORTHERN IRELAND TOURIST BOARD (NITB)

2002	£5,000.00
2003	£3,500.00
2004	£3,514.56
2005	Nil
2006	Nil

NORTHERN IRELAND EVENTS COMPANY (NIEC)

2002/03	Nil
2003/04	£30,000
2004/05	£40,000
2005/06	£50,000
2006/07	Nil

Sport Northern Ireland (SNI)

In 2003, SNI made available to the Motor Cycle Union of Ireland £73,784 towards venue improvements at four circuits in Northern Ireland, including the UGP.

These figures do not include financial assistance obtained by the UGP through private sponsorship deals or directly from the governing body, the 2&4 Wheel Motorsport Steering Group Limited (2&4 Wheel MSG).

In 2007, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, through Sport Northern Ireland (SNI), provided an additional £150,000 funding to the 2&4 Wheel MSG. Of this, approximately £100,000 was used to purchase safety equipment such as bales, pole protectors and safety fencing which is available for use by any of the motorsport organisations. SNI is currently assisting 2&4 Wheel MSG with the preparation of a business case setting out further funding requirements.

Funding for Arts and Culture

Mrs Naomi Long asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps will be taken to ensure that investment in arts and culture in Northern Ireland is increased to a more sustainable level; and whether consideration will be given to funding parity with neighbouring regions. (AQW 486/07)

Mr Poots: I recognise that funding, for the arts in particular, in Northern Ireland lags behind the rest of the UK and the Republic of Ireland. This deficit has accumulated over many years.

I will be considering funding for arts and culture along with other priorities as I negotiate the Department's budget for the period 2008/09 to 2010/11 in the Comprehensive Spending Review

Antrim Library

Mr David Burnside asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he will give a timescale for the commencement of the new build Antrim Library on Railway Street, Antrim. (AQW 492/07)

Mr Poots: The North Eastern Education and Library Board is currently seeking planning permission to build a new library in Antrim and subject to approval it expects the work on site to begin in November/December 2007.

Irish Language Act - Consultation

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the number of replies that have been received in relation to the consultation on the proposed Irish Language Act. (AQW 495/07)

Mr Poots: In the region of 11,000 individual written responses were received in relation to the most recent consultation on the proposed Irish Language Act which ended on 5th June 2007. A number of petitions have also been received, which contain in total 629 signatures.

A previous consultation, from December 2006 – March 2007, resulted in 676 responses. During that consultation, my Department also received 1,266 postcards and a petition with 2,500 signatures supporting legislation, and a press advertisement, placed in two newspapers by POBAL (the Irish language umbrella group), contained 800 signatures.

Smithsonian Lottery Programme

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (a) which organisations or groups were included on the list, circulated at the Arts Council meeting on 20 July 2006, of potential applicants for the Smithsonian Lottery Programme; (b) which organisations or groups were on the expanded list, circulated at the meeting on 21 September 2006; and (c) which organisations or groups were eventually funded through the programme. (AQW 525/07)

Mr Poots: The information given below relates to applicants for the Re-discover Northern Ireland Arts and Culture Programme.

(a) The Arts Council approved the following list of potential applicants on 20th July:

- Camerata Ireland
- Queen's University
- Moving on Music
- Belfast Print Workshop
- Seacourt Print Workshop
- Artscare
- Francis McPeake School of Music
- Cahoots NI
- Opera Theatre Company
- Golden Thread Gallery

(b) The expanded list of potential applicants approved by the Council on 21st September was as follows:

- Camerata Ireland
- Queen's University
- University of Ulster
- Moving on Music
- Belfast Print Workshop
- Seacourt Print Workshop
- Artscare
- Sonic Arts Research Centre
- Foras na Gaelige
- Ulster Scots Agency
- Belfast Exposed
- Golden Thread Gallery
- Ormeau Baths Gallery
- Ulster Folk & Transport Museum
- Open House Traditional Arts Festival
- Northern Ireland Film & Television Commission
- Northern Ireland Music Industry Commission
- Nerve Centre
- Verbal Arts Centre Derry
- Young at Art
- Cahoots
- Opera Theatre Company
- Linenhall Library
- Press Photographers Association of Northern Ireland
- Tinderbox Theatre Co
- Washington Ireland Program/Belfast City Council
- Francis McPeake School of Music

(c) The following organisations were funded through the programme:

Organisation Name	Grant Amount (£)
Craft Northern Ireland	35,000
Golden Thread Gallery	50,000
Northern Ireland Film & Television Commission	25,000
Belfast Exposed Photography	27,560
Cahoots NI Ltd	19,981
Northern Ireland Music Industry Commission	30,000
Queen's University Belfast	1,940
University of Ulster	770
Visiting Arts	30,000
The Queen's University of Belfast	17,450
Tinderbox Theatre Company	31,620
Moving on Music	3,775
Camerata Ireland	63,000
Belfast Print Workshop	30,000
Sonorities Contemporary Music Festival (Queen's University)	9,980
Verbal Arts Centre	17,500
Ulster Orchestra Society	17,080
ArtsCare	27,134
Opera Theatre Company	20,470
Tinderbox Theatre Company	6,010
Open House Traditional Arts Festival Ltd	25,350
The Nerve Centre	7,000
Moving on Music	46,000
Northern Ireland Press Photographers Association	7,500

The organisations listed above managed aspects of the programme delivery, including payments to individual artists and sub-contracted organisations.

Arts Council Northern Ireland / An Chomhairle Ealaíon

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to give the dates on which North-South plenary meetings of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and An Chomhairle Ealaíon were held in (a) 2005; (b) 2006; and (c) 2007; the dates on which North-South committee meetings were held in each of these years; and to explain the difference between plenary meetings and committee meetings.

(AQW 526/07)

Mr Poots: The plenary meetings of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and the Arts Council/ An Chomhairle Ealaíon were held during the years 2005-2007 on the following dates:

2005	24 January, 2005
2006	25 April, 2006
2007	2 April, 2007

North-South committee meetings were held during the years 2005-07 on the following dates:

2005	11 October, 2005
2006	31 January, 2006; 25 April, 2006; 12 October, 2006
2007	2 April, 2007

Plenary meetings are open to members of both Councils, are held once per calendar year and are hosted by rotation in Belfast and Dublin by the respective bodies.

The North-South Committee comprises nominated members of each Council and meets inter-plenary to bring-forward matters of co-operation and mutual interest.

Irish Language Broadcast Fund

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (a) when the contract to prepare the business case for the Irish language film and television fund was awarded; (b) to which company it was awarded; and (c) when the business case was completed. (AQW 545/07)

Mr Poots: The contract for the business case for the Irish Language Broadcast Fund was awarded to Peter Quinn Consultancy Services on 20th March 2003. The final business case was received on 13th October 2003.

Irish Language Broadcast Fund

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (a) who were the original members of the committee of the Irish language film and television fund; and (b) when the first meeting of the committee was held. (AQW 546/07)

Mr Poots: The original members of the Irish Language Broadcast Fund Investment Committee were Peter Quinn (Chair), Kieran Hegarty, Pádraic Ó Ciardha, Ferdie Mac an Fhailigh, Aedin Ni Ghradhra and Fionntán de Brún. The Committee first met on 30 November 2004.

Irish Language Broadcast Fund

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure when the Irish language film and television fund was opened for applications. (AQW 547/07)

Mr Poots: The Irish Language Broadcast Fund opened its first round of funding in March 2005 but funding was not awarded to successful applicants until after 8 June 2005 when the European Commission granted State Aid approval.

Irish and Local Studies Library, Armagh

Mr Dominic Bradley asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the total cost of removal and storage of stock, dismantling and removing shelving, and replacing flooring at the Irish and Local Studies library in Armagh. (AQW 553/07)

Mr Poots: The Southern Education and Library Board incurred a total 'one off' expenditure of £8,800 on this project as follows:

- Staff cost for removal was approximately £3,500;
- Dismantling of shelving £2,000;
- Removal of shelving to Library Headquarters £300; and
- Repairs to flooring £3,000.

The annual estimated storage cost of the re-located material is £5,500.

European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages

Mr Paul Butler asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps his department has taken to ensure that the European Charter of Regional and Minority Languages is implemented as part of the Good Friday Agreement. (AQW 688/07)

Mr Poots: At the time of signing of the Good Friday Agreement the UK Government gave a commitment to sign up to the Council of Europe Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.

The UK Government fulfilled its commitment by signing up to the Charter on 7 March 2000. This was ratified on 27 March 2001 and came into force on 1 July 2001.

European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages

Mr Paul Butler asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he will put in place measures to ensure

that local authorities will implement the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages.
(AQW 689/07)

Mr Poots: Decisions on the practical implementation of the European Charter by District Councils rest first and foremost with the Councils themselves.

Interdepartmental Charter Implementation Group

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure when the last meeting of the Interdepartmental Charter Implementation group was held and when the next meeting will take place.
(AQW 701/07)

Mr Poots: The last meeting of the Interdepartmental Charter Implementation Group took place on Friday, 27th April 2007. No date has been set for the next meeting, but it will probably be held in the autumn.

Irish and Ulster-Scots Translation

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail, of the £70,000 spent on Irish and Ulster-Scots translation in 2005-2006, how much of this amount related to the Irish language, and how much to the Ulster-Scots language.
(AQW 704/07)

Mr Poots: The amounts paid by Northern Ireland Government Departments in relation to translation costs for the 2005/06 year were:

Irish	£64,554.85
Ulster Scots	£9,326.27

Smithsonian Folklife Festival

Mr Paul Maskey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the rationale behind the omission of the West Belfast Féile an Phobail festival from the programme of events relating to the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington DC, and from other festival programmes.
(AQW 749/07)

Mr Poots: At its annual Folklife Festival, the Smithsonian Institution focuses on the individuals who represent cultural traditions through performance or demonstration of a skill rather than the organisations for whom they work (if any). The Smithsonian Folklife Festival does not invite promoters or organisers of other festivals, only those individuals who are 'tradition bearers'. It does not incorporate the work of other festivals as this could lead to "a festival within a festival". For this reason, the Smithsonian did not feature the

Edinburgh Festival in Scotland's programme in 2003, nor the Calgary Stampede in the Alberta programme in 2006.

The Community Festivals Fund

Mr Paul Maskey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he will outline the ways in which his department and the Community Festival Fund are developing and providing stable growth to festivals, such as Féile an Phobail.
(AQW 750/07)

Mr Poots: The Community Festivals Fund (CFF) was introduced from April 2006 to improve the capacity of community festivals, to make them more sustainable and less reliant on public funding.

In 2006/07 the CFF provided financial support to 42 festivals across Northern Ireland, helping existing festivals to grow and emerging festivals get off the ground.

The CFF also provides a programme of training and support on a range of issues, to enhance the knowledge and expertise of Festival organisers.

EDUCATION

Funding for Independent Christian Schools

Mr Mervyn Storey asked the Minister of Education what she is doing to address funding issues for independent Christian schools.
(AQW 340/07)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): The Department is required to keep a register of all independent schools, and this is open to public inspection. Before final registration the Department has to satisfy itself, through inspection by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) that the school premises are adequate and safe and that efficient and suitable instruction is being provided.

Any independent school that wishes to acquire grant-aided status must publish a development proposal in accordance with Article 14 of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 (as amended).

The Department, on considering the proposal, will assess any such application against a number of statutory and other requirements which all grant aided schools must meet.

To date the Department has not received any proposals from Independent Christian schools.

Pay Parity between Secondary and Further Education Sectors

Mr David Hilditch asked the Minister of Education if she will give her assessment of pay parity between the secondary and further education sectors. (AQW 397/07)

Ms Ruane: The pay of teachers in grant-aided schools in the north of Ireland is negotiated locally through the Teachers' Salaries and Conditions of Service Committee (Schools). The pay of further education (FE) lecturers in the north of Ireland is also negotiated locally, but through separate collective bargaining arrangements. There are no links between the pay of schoolteachers and the pay of FE lecturers.

Artigarvan Primary School

Mr Allan Bresland asked the Minister of Education if she will detail her plans for the replacement of Artigarvan Primary School. (AQW 457/07)

Ms Ruane: Funding for the provision of a new 7 classbase school and nursery unit for Artigarvan Primary School was announced in March 2006. Planning of the project is currently being taken forward by the Western Education and Library Board. The Board have estimated that construction work on the new school should start on site in the summer of 2008 with an estimated completion date of May 2010.

Balmoral High School

Mr Paul Butler asked the Minister of Education what plans she has for the future of Balmoral High School when it closes in August 2008; and if she will investigate the future use of playing facilities associated with the school, with a view to ensuring that the local community can avail of their use. (AQW 471/07)

Ms Ruane: No decision has yet been taken on the future use of the facilities when Balmoral High School closes in August 2008. The Department and the Belfast Education and Library Board (BELB) will be seeking an alternative use and the use of the playing facilities will also be considered as part of this process.

Donaghadee High School

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Education if a decision has been taken to close Donaghadee High School and, if so, when will this take place. (AQW 529/07)

Ms Ruane: No decisions on the future of Donaghadee High School have been made. The South Eastern Education and Library Board has commenced

preliminary consultations with Donaghadee High School and Movilla High School in relation to a potential rationalisation between the two schools. A formal consultation by the Board is expected to commence during the forthcoming autumn term.

Funding for Iontaobhas na Gaelscolaíochta

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Education (a) when Iontaobhas na Gaelscolaíochta was established; (b) how much funding it has received from the Department of Education in each financial year since it was established; and (c) and how much money it has received from other sources since it was established. (AQW 551/07)

Ms Ruane: The funding provided by the Department of Education to Iontaobhas na Gaelscolaíochta since its establishment is as follows:

2000/01 £	2001/02 £	2002/03 £	2003/04 £	2004/05 £	2005/06 £	2006/07 £
1,250,000	500,000	500,000	450,000	420,000	75,000	200,000

Iontaobhas na Gaelscolaíochta is an independent charitable Trust. Under its Declaration of Trust it can 'raise and co-ordinate the raising of funds and invite and receive any contributions (solicited or otherwise) or payments or other assets of any kind from any person or persons whomsoever' so long as this is for the furtherance of the purpose of the Trust. The Department of Education does not gather information on external contributions to the Trust.

THE MEMBERSHIP OF THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES IS AS FOLLOWS:

Board Member	Representing
Liam Ó Cuinneagain	Department of Education
Seán Mag Uidhir (Chair)	Department of Education
Dónall Ó Baoill	Department of Education
Seán Ó Coinn	Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta
Séamus de Napier	Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta
Seán Mac Goill	Co-optee
Muireann Ní Mhóráin	Department of Education
Roise Ní Bhaoill	Department of Education

There is currently one vacancy.

Under the terms of the Declaration of Trust the Department of Education has the right of appointment for six trustees, and the Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta two trustees.

Trustees of Iontaobhas na Gaelscolaíochta

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Education who are the trustees of Iontaobhas na Gaelscolaíochta, the trust fund for Irish medium education, and how they were appointed.

(AQW 552/07)

Ms Ruane: The funding provided by the Department of Education to Iontaobhas na Gaelscolaíochta since its establishment is as follows:

2000/01 £	2001/02 £	2002/03 £	2003/04 £	2004/05 £	2005/06 £	2006/07 £
1,250,000	500,000	500,000	450,000	420,000	75,000	200,000

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There is currently one vacancy.

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Glastry College

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Education (a) which land has been identified for the new build at Glastry College, and (b) to confirm if this land is currently owned by the South Eastern Education and Library Board and, if not, when will the conveyance be completed. [R]

(AQW 563/07)

Ms Ruane: The land at the rear of the existing school has been identified as the site for the replacement

school for Glastry College. The land is not in the ownership of the South Eastern Education and Library Board at the present time. Negotiations for the purchase of the land are currently ongoing between the Valuation and Lands Agency, who are acting for the Board, and the landowner. Subject to the outcome of negotiations the Board hope to complete the acquisition of the land within the current financial year.

Education (Prohibition from Teaching or Working with Children) Regulations (NI) 2007

Ms Sue Ramsey asked the Minister of Education to confirm that, prior to the commencement of the Education (Prohibition from Teaching or Working with Children) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007, her department will issue guidance on the new provisions; specifically, on how to make referrals to the department and on the process to be followed for discretionary barring cases.

(AQW 581/07)

Ms Ruane: Guidance on the Education (Prohibition from Teaching or Working with Children) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007 will be issued to the relevant employing authorities including the Education and Library Boards, CCMS, and the Board of Governors of Voluntary Grammar, Integrated and Irish Medium schools. The Guidance will include the procedure on how to make referrals to the Department and the decision making process.

Teaching of Scientific Explanations for Origins

Mr Mervyn Storey asked the Minister of Education if she will bring forward proposals to ensure that scientific explanations for origins, other than Darwinian evolution, are taught in schools as scientific explanations.

(AQW 637/07)

Ms Ruane: I have no plans to bring forward such proposals. The revised curriculum provides greater flexibility for schools to include teaching of alternative theories to evolution and in Science there will be greater scope for pupils to explore other views about how the world came into existence.

Pupil Enrolment at Armagh Integrated College

Mr Danny Kennedy asked the Minister of Education to detail the pupil enrolment figures at Armagh Integrated College for the past three years.

(AQW 676/07)

Ms Ruane: The enrolment at Armagh Integrated College over the past three years was as follows:

Year	Pupils
2004/05	50
2005/06	106
2006/07	153

Funding Parity between Primary and Secondary Sectors

Mr Danny Kennedy asked the Minister of Education what assessment she has made as to the prospects for establishing parity of funding between the primary and secondary sectors. (AQO 96/07)

Ms Ruane: I accept that the funding differential should be smaller than it is currently. I do recognise the many challenges facing primary principals and also fully accept the vital role of early intervention in reducing later difficulties. I will be reviewing the relative share of funding for primary and post-primary schools following the budget settlement for education for the Comprehensive Spending Review period and, in doing this, will be looking at the scope for action to rebalance the primary and post-primary weightings in the current funding arrangements. In doing so the challenge will be to reduce the differential in a way which recognises the value of primary education yet does not create difficulties for the post-primary sector, and which also recognises the difference in the costs involved in delivery of the curriculum in each phase.

School Building Programme

Mr Seán Neeson asked the Minister of Education to make a statement on the school building programme announced by her department on 21 March 2007. (AQO 110/07)

Ms Ruane: Maria Eagle announced on 21 March that 84 schools should proceed with their building schemes. This followed a review of previously announced schemes which were at various stages of planning, to assess their consistency with the recommendations of the Bain Review. Eight schemes were stopped, and six schemes were put on hold pending further examination. My department is working with the relevant school authorities to progress those schemes which were confirmed as proceeding. The Department is also assessing the six schemes on hold so that the position can be confirmed shortly.

Expenditure on Consultancy Services

Dr Alasdair McDonnell asked the Minister of Education how much money has been spent by the department in each of the last five years on (a) public relations consultants; and (b) other consultancy services. (AQO 101/07)

Ms Ruane: Over the last five years, the department has had no expenditure on public relations consultancies. Over the same period the department has spent £658,000 in 2002-03, £828,000 in 2003-04, £856,000 in 2004-05, £704,000 in 2005-06 and an estimated £874,000 in 2006-07 on other consultancies.

The amounts quoted for 2006/07 are estimated, pending completion of the department's resource accounts.

Essential Subjects

Mr John McCallister asked the Minister of Education to identify those subjects which she believes are essential to enable young people to succeed in a knowledge-based economy. (AQO 94/07)

Ms Ruane: All areas of the curriculum are important, which is why they form part of the statutory provision, but it is essential in particular that all young people should have a high level of functional competence in the areas of literacy, numeracy and the use of ICT.

The revised curriculum, being introduced on a phased basis from September 2007, has literacy and numeracy at its core. The curriculum provides for a broad and balanced education and focuses on developing skills as well as teaching knowledge through the wide spectrum of curricular areas. The cross-curricular skills of Communication, Using Mathematics and Using ICT are statutory from Foundation to Key Stage 4 for all pupils.

In addition, the Entitlement Framework will allow for the introduction of a greater variety of vocational courses to school pupils, equipping them with the professional and technical skills that business and industry needs. It will guarantee all pupils access to a much wider range of courses, irrespective of the school they attend.

To support pupils in making their choices and decisions about their futures, we are also working closely with colleagues in DEL to develop high quality careers education, information, advice and guidance.

Also in conjunction with DEL and the business community, we are reviewing provision here of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM). I am clear this work needs to look at the importance of STEM to society and the economy and review the opportunities currently available for young people.

Primary School Principals

Mr Sammy Wilson asked the Minister of Education to report on any meetings she has held with primary school principals, to discuss issues pertaining to that sector. (AQO 73/07)

Ms Ruane: I have spoken at a conference in Armagh on 24th May organised by my Department in response to issues being raised by primary school principals. Over 600 primary principals attended.

I have also held three specific meetings and two dinners with groups of primary principals covering a range of issues.

I have attended various events, presenting the ECO schools certificates, attended the GTC publication event. I have spoken at the INTO, NASUWT, TUI, ASTI and ATL conferences and have made a number of visits to schools, included those in the Extended Schools Programme. I attended a major performance at the Waterfront Hall performed by schools from the Shankill. I have attended an event in Newry which included 4 schools from Bessbrook and Newtownhamilton area and have met with delegations from primary schools. These have provided me with various opportunities to discuss issues with primary principals and allowed me to see the issues on the ground first hand.

Physical Education in Primary Schools

Mr Barry McElduff asked the Minister of Education to detail her department's strategy for physical education in primary schools; and if she will give a commitment that the department will employ specialist physical education teachers in primary schools. (AQO 67/07)

Ms Ruane: My Department fully recognises the importance of a healthy lifestyle to all our young people and Physical Education is a compulsory part of our curriculum for all pupils at every Key Stage, from age 4 to 16. Schools are free to determine how much time is devoted to PE, but they are encouraged to provide children with opportunities for at least two hours physical activity per week.

On the question concerning specialist PE teachers in Primary schools, it is a matter for individual schools to make decisions on the desired size of their teaching complements and on the designation of teaching posts within their delegated budgets.

There are currently 8154 full time and pro rata teachers in the Primary School Sector, all of whom have taken Physical Education studies as part of their teacher training.

I am putting in place a sports programme to develop sports in schools, which will be supported through the use of peripatetic teachers and we are also working

with the GAA and Irish Football Association, with 20 coaches from each. This will promote participation in sports activities and confidence and enjoyment of "getting out there".

I have met Michael McGimpsey to discuss the Healthy Living agenda across our departments, and the Fit Futures framework in particular. I am also looking at current provision for PE within teacher training courses.

Modern Languages

Ms Sue Ramsey asked the Minister of Education what steps she has taken to improve the learning of languages in schools. (AQO 80/07)

Ms Ruane: The Department encourages schools to offer a wider range of modern languages and the revised curriculum provides them with greater flexibility to do so. Instead of being limited to offering 1 of only 5 languages as previously, schools are now able to choose any of the languages of the 25 EU member states to meet the minimum requirement, and any other additional languages they wish.

The Department has commissioned the universities to develop a languages strategy by March 2008, which will include recommendations on how we can build on the number of languages taught in schools and how best to introduce language learning at primary level as is common practice elsewhere in Europe. As an increasingly multi – cultural society, the languages of new arrivals in the country will also provide an opportunity to extend language learning.

There are now 3911 children and young people with English as an Additional Language (representing 354 different language groups). The largest language groups are Polish, Lithuanian, Cantonese/Mandarin and Portuguese. The Ethnic Minority Achievement Service has been established in the Education and Library Boards and it will be creating new services to support EAL pupils, their parents and teachers in February 2007. They have already set up interpretation and translation of documents services, which are aimed at helping parents communicate with teachers.

In the short term, I am exploring measures to support primary schools that want to introduce or extend language learning for their pupils.

Revised Curriculum

Mr Paul Butler asked the Minister of Education what steps she is taking to addressing the concerns of teachers about the introduction of the revised curriculum. (AQO 79/07)

Ms Ruane: The implementation of the revised curriculum is phased over three years commencing in September 2007 and I have told schools that the first year will be a transitional year. Schools can continue to use their existing lesson plans to teach— the key is that the curriculum is in place in June 2010.

I am providing an additional £3m for resources to support the Foundation Stage. I have also informed principals that an additional 20,000 laptops will be provided across primary and post-primary schools during the next school year.

In terms of assessment, teachers will have further training on the diagnostic assessment tool, INCAS. Schools will not be required to report the outcomes formally to parents, nor will the centre collect them, in the first year. The first year is about schools getting used to running the INCAS assessment.

Irish Medium schools will have access to INCAS. The Department is currently exploring the development of the INCAS through the medium of Irish, and will not be testing the children until this is developed.

There will be ongoing training for principals and teachers to build on what has been delivered already. Principals were invited to put forward views on how they would like to see this support delivered next year.

North-South Co-operation

Mr Mickey Brady asked the Minister of Education to detail how she will develop and expand education as an area of north-south co-operation. (AQO 99/07)

Ms Ruane: I have already met Mary Hanafin, and I look forward to future meetings with the new Education Minister.

There has already been a great deal of progress in a number of areas such as Special Educational Needs, for example the development of the Middletown Centre for Autism.

I am very keen to build on the progress made. In the Middletown project, for example it is expected that the Centre will begin offering the “training and advisory service” and the “autism research and information service” later this year, followed by the “educational assessment service”.

Among others are the:

North/South Ministerial Council

The aspects of North/South co-operation in Education that were agreed for initial consideration by the North/South Ministerial Council were education for children with special needs; educational under-achievement; teacher qualifications; and school, youth and teacher exchanges.

Special Education Co-Ordination Group

Two significant initiatives in relation to the production of resources (CD-ROMs and videos) in respect of autism and dyslexia were undertaken on a joint basis by the two Departments of Education. These were issued to all schools and other relevant professionals in Ireland.

The Special Educational Needs (SEN) Cross Border Professional Exchange Programme

Funded by Peace II with a grant of € 590,000, enabled teachers, principals and educational psychologists, from the North and the border counties of the South to participate in professional exchanges between December 2004 and May 2006. Very valuable resources for schools were produced as a result.

EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation (PEACE 2)

DE and DES were the Joint Implementing Body and Accountable Department for Measure 5.5 – Education, Cross-border School and Youth Co-operation.

14 projects were approved and the eligible expenditure incurred by those projects, €4,048,000, was split 50/50 between the two Departments.

Employment of Young Teachers

Mr John Dallat asked the Minister of Education to outline her proposals to help the 5,000 young teachers who have been unable to secure full-time employment in Northern Ireland. (AQO 91/07)

Ms Ruane: I do not recognise the figure of 5,000 young teachers referred to by John Dallat. The number quoted may relate to those teachers registered on the Substitute Teacher Register, on which there are now 5,400 teachers registered. However, it is important to note that the register includes not only young teachers but also: teachers of all ages who wish to be employed on a substitute teacher basis; and, teachers who no longer wish to be full-time members of the teaching profession.

My Department recognises the impact which demography is having, and will have, on the number of teachers that we need here. The approved intake numbers to the initial teacher education institutions have been reduced over the past four years and we will, as part of the annual initial teacher education approval process, be carefully considering the number of teachers needed in future years.

However, the recruitment of teachers is the responsibility of teachers' employers and my Department is committed to maximising the amount of funding which we distribute to schools under the Local Management of Schools Common Funding Formula arrangements. In addition, my Department

has issued guidance to employers advising them that preference should be given to newly qualified teachers and experienced non-retired teachers seeking employment. Schools have also been advised that they should recruit to vacancies on a permanent rather than a temporary basis unless the vacancy is clearly of a temporary nature. The capping of the levels of the central reimbursement of the costs of substitute cover also provides an incentive to employ newly qualified teachers as substitutes.

Moreover, following the review of teacher education in the North of Ireland which is being carried out jointly by the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning, ways will be explored by which newly qualified teachers employed in grant-aided schools can have greater stability in employment during their early years of teaching.

Numeracy and Literacy

Ms Martina Anderson asked the Minister of Education to ensure that Derry/Londonderry is included in the development of any programme to tackle poor numeracy and literacy levels. (AQO 78/07)

Ms Ruane: The new school improvement policy and revised literacy and numeracy strategy, both of which will be available for consultation later this year, will aim to improve the levels of literacy and numeracy of pupils in all schools.

Alongside this, we are committed to develop a programme targeted at the socially disadvantaged in Belfast. I have identified a need for this programme to be extended to Derry based on the objective need.

PEAG Places

Mrs Michelle O'Neill asked the Minister of Education to outline the procedures in place for allocating pre-school education advisory group (PEAG) places available to pre-school children, and to consider a review of the number of PEAG places, with a view to increasing the number of free places available to pre-school children. (AQO 75/07)

Ms Ruane: Department Circular Number: 2006/10 entitled "Open Enrolment in Nursery Schools: Arrangements for September 2007 Admissions" advises Principals and Board of Governors of the arrangements for the application of open enrolment procedures to admissions to nursery schools and nursery classes in primary schools which will apply for the 2007/08 school year.

The Department also issues a guidance note, based on the Circular issued to nursery schools and units, to

voluntary and private providers within the Pre-School Education Expansion Programme (PSEEP).

In determining the admissions criteria the Department of Education specifies some priorities, that is:

- Children in their final pre-school year;
- Social disadvantage – because research has shown that those children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds tend to experience more difficulty at school than other children; and
- 4 year olds with July and August birthdays – because these children do not enter compulsory education until after their 5th birthday.

When pre-school settings are oversubscribed they must then set their own criteria to select children down to the last available place. These include a range of factors such as proximity to the school or the previous attendance of siblings and are entirely at the discretion of the individual school/playgroup.

In 2006/07 there are 21,154 children in funded pre-school education: 14,158 in nursery schools or nursery classes in primary schools; 658 in reception classes/groups; and 6,338 in funded places in voluntary and private pre-school education centres.

The actual number of children enrolled in Primary 1 for the 2006/07 school year was 21,497. The school projection model predicts 21,442 P1 pupils in September 2007. This would indicate that the pre-school phase overall level of provision is running at 98%. Previous experience tells us that not every parent wants to avail of a pre-school place for their child.

There is currently a review of Irish Medium Education and one of the areas the review is examining is the number of pre-school places in Irish Medium settings.

However, the Early Years Team in the Department is liaising closely with Education and Library Officers to ensure that any shortfall is identified and appropriate action taken as soon as possible.

Shared Buildings for Rural Schools

Dr Kieran Deeny asked the Minister of Education to make a statement on the future of shared buildings for rural schools. (AQO 111/07)

Ms Ruane: The sharing of buildings and facilities can offer a sensible and effective way to deliver education, particularly for rural communities. At a time of falling rolls, school authorities should be exploring options which would best meet the needs of children and take account of local circumstances, and these options should include consideration of shared buildings, and collaboration between schools on the use of facilities.

English as an Additional Language

Ms Anna Lo asked the Minister of Education what proposals exist to secure funding for classroom assistants specialising in helping pupils whose first language is not English. (AQO 109/07)

Ms Ruane: Schools use a variety of ways to teach English to children whose first language is not English and it is for schools to decide the action they need to take. Schools must have the flexibility to determine what is the best way to teach English to each child.

Schools are provided with £943 per English as an additional language (EAL) child and they have access to advice and guidance from the Ethnic Minority Achievement Service (EMAS) which is operated by the Education and Library Boards. EMAS, on receiving an invitation from a school, can provide a range of services, including discussing with them ideas on teaching strategies and providing interpreting and translation of documents services, which can help the school communicate with parents who do not speak English. The total funding for EMAS for 2007/2008 is £888,000.

Future Viability of Schools

Mr Trevor Lunn asked the Minister of Education what proposals exist to ensure that pupil numbers is not the sole factor in assessing the future viability of schools. (AQO 107/07)

Ms Ruane: Pupil numbers are clearly an important factor in assessing the future viability of schools though they should not be the sole factor. The previous administration issued a consultation document on a Policy for Sustainable Schools which sets out six proposed criteria for helping assess the viability of schools. My Department is currently analysing the responses to that consultation exercise. The over-riding consideration must be the quality of education for the children that a school provides.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

New Deal Programme

Mr Jimmy Spratt asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the percentage of people resident in South Belfast who are on the New Deal programme, and who have previously participated in the programme. (AQW 588/07)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): Within the South Belfast constituency

159 people are currently participating in the suite of New Deal programmes, with 61% of these having participated previously.

Courses for Trainee Interpreters

Mr Sammy Wilson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if he will report on the progress that has been made towards establishing local training courses for trainee interpreters. (AQW 589/07)

Sir Reg Empey: I am pleased to report that progress on the “Enhancement of the supply of British and Irish Sign Language Tutors and Interpreters” has been made in the following areas:

My Department is currently examining a proposal for a pilot project to involve key educational providers including Belfast Institute of Further and Higher Education (BIFHE), in delivering a range of provision.

Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) officials attended a meeting of the Sign Language Partnership Group on 23 May 2007 where the proposal was discussed and welcomed by members of that group.

DEL officials have already met with colleagues in Wales to look at their apprenticeship scheme with a view to introducing appropriate proposals in Northern Ireland. A further meeting has also been arranged in July to learn more about their plans for evaluation of the current scheme and plans for future provision.

My Department has now secured funding from the Skills and Science budget for the first year to fund training provision for British Sign Language (BSL) and Irish Sign Language (ISL) tutors and interpreters and a bid has also been made via the Comprehensive Spending Review to fund training provision in subsequent years.

BIFHE are currently working on costed proposals for appropriate training provision and will shortly be submitted to my Department for consideration.

I hope this information reassures you that action is being taken to address the shortage of suitably qualified Sign Language tutors and interpreters in Northern Ireland.

Leisure Learning Courses

Dr Alasdair McDonnell asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if he will publish the results of screenings for adverse impact on the grounds of age, as required by the department’s equality scheme, that were undertaken in respect of the department’s decision that it would no longer fund leisure learning courses in further education colleges. (AQW 659/07)

Sir Reg Empey: My Department has made no such decision. Leisure learning courses will continue to be subsidised by the Department, although this type of provision has always been subject to a lower level of funding. While colleges are encouraged to deliver courses, including leisure courses, that lead to accredited qualifications, there is still scope for colleges to be funded for other types of leisure courses. In addition, colleges can, and do, charge learners for some leisure courses.

As part of the implementation of the “Further Education Means Business” strategy, the Department is developing a new policy for curriculum delivered by colleges. A key element of the new policy will be to ensure that an appropriate balance is achieved between provision that supports the economy and provision that promotes social cohesion, and to ensure that learners are supported as appropriate throughout their lives. Final policy decisions resulting from the review of curriculum will not be made until a full Equality Impact Assessment and proper consultation have been carried out, later this year. Any new curriculum policies would then be implemented from the start of the 2008/09 academic year.

Funding for Training and Education Courses

Dr Alasdair McDonnell asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how much funding was allocated by his department for all training and education courses in the academic years 2002/03; 2003/04; 2004/05; 2005/06 and 2006/07; how much was spent on leisure learning courses in the academic years 2002/03; 2003/04; 2004/05; 2005/06 and 2006/07; and what is the anticipated budget for 2007/08 and 2008/09 for (a) total training and education courses; and (b) leisure learning courses. (AQW 660/07)

Sir Reg Empey: The funding allocated to Further Education Colleges for training and education provision which includes a component for leisure courses is detailed in the table below.

Academic Year	Total Funding Allocation (inc Leisure)	Leisure Learning
2002-03	£110,012,245	£8,443,108
2003-04	£123,381,243	£9,375,681
2004-05	£131,736,336	£9,703,185
2005-06	£143,491,462	£9,161,827
2006-07 *	£142,242,953	£10,185,509

* This figure includes the Essential Skills allocation to 31 March 2007 only, as further in-year claims have yet to be processed.

Allocations for 2007/08 have not yet been determined, and the anticipated budget for 2008/09 will be subject to the Comprehensive Spending Review.

Leisure Learning Courses

Dr Alasdair McDonnell asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what is his department’s current policy with regard to the funding of leisure learning courses for the next academic year; and what are his plans to consult on the future of leisure learning courses. (AQW 661/07)

Sir Reg Empey: My Department has policy for the entire curriculum offered by colleges, including leisure provision. As part of the implementation of the “Further Education Means Business” strategy, the Department is developing a new policy for curriculum delivered by colleges. A key element of the new policy will be to ensure that an appropriate balance is achieved between provision that supports the economy and provision that promotes social cohesion, and to ensure that learners are supported as appropriate throughout their lives. Final policy decisions resulting from the review of curriculum will not be made until a full Equality Impact Assessment and proper consultation have been carried out, later this year. Any new curriculum policies would then be implemented from the start of the 2008/09 academic year.

The Higher Education Institutions are legally independent of government and have complete autonomy for their own policies and practices, including those relating to course provision and content. The Department for Employment and Learning does not sanction any courses at university level, therefore, has no remit or locus in individual course provision, including leisure learning courses.

Leisure Learning Course

Dr Alasdair McDonnell asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the total number of leisure learning courses taken in the academic years 2002/03; 2003/04; 2004/05; 2005/06 and 2006/07; and how many leisure learning courses were taken by (a) 55’s to 65’s; and (b) over 65’s, in the academic years 2002/03; 2003/04; 2004/05; 2005/06 and 2006/07. (AQW 662/07)

Sir Reg Empey: While the Department sets the strategic direction for the further education sector in Northern Ireland, and channels its funding accordingly, each college is responsible for its own curriculum offer. Colleges hold the information on the number of courses they deliver, but this could not be provided in the timescale required. The Department holds information on non-vocational enrolments in Further Education

colleges, and this is provided in the Table below for the years 2002/03 to 2005/06. Information is not yet available for 2006/07.

Academic Year	Total Enrolments	Age 55 to 65	Age 65 & Over
2002/03	62,924	11,353	14,184
2003/04	71,998	13,043	15,551
2004/05	74,688	13,433	15,566
2005/06	73,926	12,791	14,645

Notes:

1. Source: Further Education Statistical Record (FESR)
2. Data relates to enrolments (not students) over the whole academic year.
3. The enrolments relate to non-vocational courses at the Northern Ireland Further Education colleges, which is the closest proximity to leisure provision.
4. Age is at 1st July for the relevant academic year and the Age 65 & Over age group includes those of unknown age.
5. The Department does not hold information on the number of students on non-credit bearing/leisure courses at the NI HEIs for the academic years listed.

Leisure Learning Courses

Dr Alasdair McDonnell asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if his department's decision that it would no longer fund leisure learning courses in further education colleges was screened for adverse impact on grounds of age, as required by the department's equality scheme. (AQW 663/07)

Sir Reg Empey: My Department has made no such decision. Leisure learning courses will continue to be subsidised by the Department, although this type of provision has always been subject to a lower level of funding. While colleges are encouraged to deliver courses, including leisure courses, that lead to accredited qualifications, there is still scope for colleges to be funded for other types of leisure courses. In addition, colleges can, and do, charge learners for some leisure courses.

As part of the implementation of the "Further Education Means Business" strategy, the Department is developing a new policy for curriculum delivered by colleges. A key element of the new policy will be to ensure that an appropriate balance is achieved between provision that supports the economy and provision that promotes social cohesion, and to ensure that learners are supported as appropriate throughout their lives. Final policy decisions resulting from the review of curriculum will not be made until a full Equality Impact Assessment and proper consultation have been carried out, later this year. Any new curriculum policies would then be implemented from the start of the 2008/09 academic year.

Flags and Emblems in Further Education Colleges

Mr Paul Butler asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the steps he is taking to ensure that the new merged further education colleges will not display the Union Flag or any other flag, wholly associated with one community; and what policies will be put in place to ensure that all students will be taught in a neutral and welcoming environment.

(AQW 671/07)

Sir Reg Empey: Further education colleges in Northern Ireland, as independent, incorporated bodies determine their own policy in matters relating to flags and emblems. FE Colleges must, however, comply with any legislation in respect of this matter.

My Department has taken a number of steps to ensure that all students are taught in a neutral and welcoming environment through its support for Cultural Diversity and Good Relations best practice, as identified through a number of recent FE pilot programmes.

Funding for Legal for Practice Courses

Dr Stephen Farry asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to make a statement on access to post-graduate funding for legal practice courses, for Northern Irish students studying in both Northern Ireland and Great Britain. (AQW 769/07)

Sir Reg Empey: Support for postgraduate study has always been discretionary and subject to change to reflect wider Government strategy. The Department for Employment and Learning reviewed its priorities in light of the Government's 2002 Science, Engineering and Technology Strategy and decided that its post-graduate support budget should be redirected to fund Masters and PhD courses at the higher levels recommended in that report. As a consequence, funding for postgraduate diplomas, including those for legal practice, was withdrawn in 2004.

Financial Assistance for Legal Practice Courses

Dr Stephen Farry asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what financial assistance is available to Northern Irish students from low-income backgrounds, to help pay the fees for post-graduate legal practice courses in Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

(AQW 770/07)

Sir Reg Empey: The Department for Employment and Learning no longer provides funding for postgraduate diplomas including those for legal practice courses. For

students with particular financial difficulties, support may be available directly from the Northern Ireland institutions' support funds which are provided by the Department, or from the Access to Learning Fund for institutions in the rest of the UK.

Postgraduate Law Bursaries

Dr Kieran Deeny asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what proposals exist to ensure that bursaries available to postgraduate law students are available equally to everyone in Northern Ireland, regardless of the county of residence. (AQO 119/07)

Sir Reg Empey: The Department for Employment and Learning no longer provides funding for postgraduate diplomas including those for legal practice courses. It funds universities for research and certain approved courses of full-time study leading to higher degrees (Masters and PhDs). These awards are available to eligible students regardless of their county of domicile.

Careers Education

Mr Basil McCrea asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what consideration he has given to a review of the provision of careers education. (AQO 76/07)

Sir Reg Empey: The post graduate diploma in Careers Guidance, delivered by the University of Ulster, is the main qualification for careers guidance practitioners in Northern Ireland. The course is reviewed at the end of each academic year by the University, the Careers Service, the Institute of Careers Guidance and external verifiers. The qualification was externally revalidated in October 2006 and was approved to run for a further 5 years.

'Brain Drain'

Mr David Ford asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline what his department considers to be the primary reasons for Northern Ireland's 'brain drain'. (AQO 112/07)

Sir Reg Empey: The principle reasons for the 'brain drain' are varied. My Department has recently commissioned research that will examine the decision making process of pupils in order to assess the factors underpinning decisions to study in Northern Ireland and decisions to leave Northern Ireland for undergraduate study.

Apprenticeships

Ms Sue Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps have been taken to ensure that proper placements are available for all apprenticeships. (AQO 82/07)

Sir Reg Empey: Apprenticeships are demand led and all apprentices follow a training framework approved for delivery and developed in conjunction with the relevant industry. To maintain both quality and relevance of content, Sector Skills Councils and Standard Setting Bodies are required to take the views of employers into consideration when developing training frameworks.

Needs of Migrant Workers

Mr John Dallat asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to state what special measures have been taken in further education colleges to address the language and skills needs of migrant workers. (AQO 72/07)

Sir Reg Empey: Further Education colleges have taken various steps to improve the language and skills of migrant workers in Northern Ireland. In particular, all colleges offer provision in 'English for Speakers of Other Languages' (ESOL). The sector also ensures that the full range of college courses, including skills training are fully accessible to all communities in Northern Ireland, including migrant workers. In many instances migrant workers have a very high level of skills; it is their English which is a barrier.

Pay Parity for Further Education Staff

Ms Anna Lo asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether he agrees that many staff in further education are underpaid, and what proposals he is bringing forward to address this. (AQO 117/07)

Sir Reg Empey: Restrictions imposed under UK-wide public sector pay policy have prevented the equalisation of pay for further education lecturers with schoolteachers in Northern Ireland. Compared with the pay of school-teachers, the overall remuneration package for FE lecturers in Northern Ireland tends to be lower, though, at an individual level, the differential can vary widely. I support pay parity in principle for FE lecturers and would like to see movement towards parity when conditions permit. The pay of most of the non-lecturing staff in further education is determined through national pay agreements applicable to those occupational groups throughout the UK. No such nationwide pay arrangements apply to FE lecturers.

Pay Parity for Further Education Staff

Mr Trevor Lunn asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans exist to equalise pay for further education staff with that of colleagues elsewhere in the sector. (AQO 115/07)

Sir Reg Empey: Restrictions imposed under UK-wide public sector pay policy have prevented the equalisation of pay for further education lecturers with schoolteachers in Northern Ireland. Compared with the pay of school-teachers, the overall remuneration package for FE lecturers in Northern Ireland tends to be lower, though, at an individual level, the differential can vary widely. I support pay parity in principle for FE lecturers and would like to see movement towards parity when conditions permit. The pay of most of the non-lecturing staff in further education is determined through national pay agreements applicable to those occupational groups throughout the UK. No such nationwide pay arrangements apply to FE lecturers.

OFMDFM visit to Omagh College

Mr Barry McElduff asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to make a statement about his recent visit, with the deputy First Minister, to Omagh College. (AQO 68/07)

Sir Reg Empey: I was privileged to be invited to perform the official opening, together with the deputy First Minister, of Omagh College on the 30th May. This state of the art facility will provide access to a wide range of professional and technical training opportunities for the people of Omagh and the surrounding area.

Consultancy Services

Dr Alasdair McDonnell asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how much money has been spent by the department in each of the last five years on (a) public relations consultants; and (b) other consultancy services. (AQO 102/07)

Sir Reg Empey: The total expenditure by the Department for Employment and Learning on public relations consultants was: in 2002/03 nil; in 2003/04 £21,000; in 2004/05 £29,000; in 2005/06 £21,000; and in 2006/07 £26,000.

The total expenditure by the Department for Employment and Learning on other consultancy services was: in 2002/03 £410,000; in 2003/04 £430,000; in 2004/05 £420,000; in 2004/05 £620,000 and in 2006/07 £570,000.

Invest NI 'Go For It' Campaign

Mr Seán Neeson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether he believes graduates are the best target group for Invest Northern Ireland's 'Go for It' campaign. (AQO 118/07)

Sir Reg Empey: Graduates are a key target market within Invest NI's 'Go for It' campaign which is playing an important role in raising the level of start-ups and in creating a culture and society structure geared towards embracing entrepreneurship. Those with a doctorate qualification, for example, are around 4½ times more likely to be entrepreneurially active compared to those who have no qualifications.

Science and Technology Students

Mr Alastair Ross asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps he is taking to ensure that more students go on to study science and technology at third level education. (AQO 93/07)

Sir Reg Empey: My Department and the Department of Education are jointly carrying out a review of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) to produce a strategy for the development of STEM through schools and Further Education colleges. This will identify progression routes to higher education and employment and, emphasise the links to the skills and innovation needs of the wider economy. My Department also provides funding for the Step-Up programme which encourages pupils from secondary schools in the North West and Belfast to study science at university.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Economic Impact of Flight Cancellations between NI and UK

Mr Leslie Cree asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what is his assessment of the economic impact of the number of low cost airline flight cancellations between Northern Ireland airports and the rest of the United Kingdom. (AQW 442/07)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Dodds): No assessment of the economic impact has been carried out by DETI.

Issues relating to the cancellation of flights are governed by Regulation (EC) No 261/2004 of the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union. The Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) is the

designated authority for the enforcement of this Regulation in the United Kingdom.

DETI officials have discussed the question with the CAA, the Air Transport Users Council and the Consumer Council for Northern Ireland. On the basis of these discussions, DETI concludes there is no quantitative or qualitative evidence that flight cancellations by low cost airlines are impacting negatively on the Northern Ireland economy.

Inward Investment

Mr Peter Weir asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the amount of foreign direct investment, by constituency, secured by Invest Northern Ireland, for each year that Invest Northern Ireland has been in existence. (AQW 540/07)

Mr Dodds: Table 1 presents the amount of assistance offered by Invest NI to inward-investment projects in each of the last five years by Parliamentary Constituency Area. The total planned investment, which represents the total costs of supported projects, is also included.

It should be noted that these areas are not self-contained labour markets. A project assisted in a particular location has the potential to create benefits across a much wider area. Northern Ireland is a relatively small place and evidence indicates that many investments draw their workforce from areas beyond constituency area boundaries. In addition, Invest NI has limited scope for 'directing' investment to specific geographic areas, although it has been able to influence the location decisions of some inward-investment projects. In the case of established businesses, reinvestment patterns will be determined by the existing location of the business.

TABLE 1
INVEST NI INWARD INVESTMENT BY PARLIAMENTARY
CONSTITUENCY AREA FROM 2002/03 TO 2006/07

Parliamentary Constituency	2002/03	
	Assistance (£m)	Total Investment (£m)
Belfast East	0.0	0.0
Belfast North	0.0	0.0
Belfast South	1.2	4.0
Belfast West	0.4	3.0
East Antrim	1.6	5.4
East Londonderry	0.0	0.0
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	2.1	7.9
Foyle	10.3	92.0

Parliamentary Constituency	2002/03	
	Assistance (£m)	Total Investment (£m)
Lagan Valley	0.0	0.0
Mid Ulster	0.1	1.4
Newry & Armagh	0.4	0.9
North Antrim	0.0	0.0
North Down	0.2	1.6
South Antrim	0.0	0.5
South Down	0.0	0.0
Strangford	0.4	2.8
Upper Bann	9.0	37.9
West Tyrone	2.4	9.3
Total	28.1	166.7

Parliamentary Constituency	2003/04	
	Assistance (£m)	Total Investment (£m)
Belfast East	8.8	33.6
Belfast North	1.3	14.2
Belfast South	7.8	41.3
Belfast West	3.6	9.7
East Antrim	0.2	0.9
East Londonderry	0.2	1.1
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	1.4	3.9
Foyle	3.8	11.7
Lagan Valley	0.0	0.0
Mid Ulster	0.0	0.0
Newry & Armagh	0.0	0.0
North Antrim	2.7	14.4
North Down	0.6	1.2
South Antrim	0.0	0.0
South Down	0.0	0.0
Strangford	0.0	0.0
Upper Bann	1.8	12.8
West Tyrone	1.2	4.4
Total	33.5	149.4

Parliamentary Constituency	2004/05	
	Assistance (£m)	Total Investment (£m)
Belfast East	8.3	10.6

Parliamentary Constituency	2004/05	
	Assistance (£m)	Total Investment (£m)
Belfast North	0.2	0.5
Belfast South	9.2	34.8
Belfast West	6.4	21.4
East Antrim	1.1	8.0
East Londonderry	0.0	0.0
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	0.7	3.8
Foyle	2.5	37.1
Lagan Valley	0.1	1.1
Mid Ulster	3.8	23.1
Newry & Armagh	0.0	0.0
North Antrim	2.0	6.5
North Down	1.0	5.3
South Antrim	3.8	16.4
South Down	0.0	0.0
Strangford	0.1	0.8
Upper Bann	6.0	36.0
West Tyrone	1.2	4.4
Total	46.4	209.7

Parliamentary Constituency	2005/06	
	Assistance (£m)	Total Investment (£m)
Belfast East	1.7	11.6
Belfast North	2.6	25.1
Belfast South	8.1	55.7
Belfast West	0.1	0.3
East Antrim	11.7	47.8
East Londonderry	7.7	17.8
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	0.7	3.8
Foyle	19.1	72.6
Lagan Valley	7.0	66.3
Mid Ulster	0.2	4.2
Newry & Armagh	6.4	23.4
North Antrim	0.0	0.0
North Down	0.0	0.0
South Antrim	2.1	12.0
South Down	3.0	9.4
Strangford	0.0	0.0

Parliamentary Constituency	2005/06	
	Assistance (£m)	Total Investment (£m)
Upper Bann	0.1	2.0
West Tyrone	0.9	10.3
Total	71.4	362.2

Parliamentary Constituency	2006/07	
	Assistance (£m)	Total Investment (£m)
Belfast East	11.1	41.1
Belfast North	0.2	2.8
Belfast South	9.6	51.3
Belfast West	0.0	0.0
East Antrim	0.0	0.0
East Londonderry	0.0	0.0
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	4.9	32.2
Foyle	6.3	25.9
Lagan Valley	0.0	0.0
Mid Ulster	0.0	0.0
Newry & Armagh	2.1	7.5
North Antrim	0.0	0.0
North Down	0.9	4.0
South Antrim	0.0	0.0
South Down	0.0	0.0
Strangford	0.9	9.0
Upper Bann	0.0	0.0
West Tyrone	0.3	1.6
Total	36.3	175.3

Notes:

1. Total investment includes both the private sector and Invest NI contributions.
2. 2006/07 figures are provisional and may be subject to amendment.
3. Figures include both first-time inward investments and reinvestments by existing externally-owned clients.
4. Some differences in table totals may arise due to rounding.

Jobs in Coleraine

Mr John Dallat asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if he will establish a task force to attract new jobs to the Coleraine area, to replace those lost in Motor Taxation, Customs & Revenue, Social Services and the Ministry of Defence. (AQW 643/07)

Mr Dodds: Invest NI is already strongly committed to the area and the agency's Coleraine office works closely with the Council supporting a number of initiatives to promote economic activity in the borough and the North West region as a whole.

The Driver Vehicle Agency, Her Majesty's Customs & Revenue and the Ministry of Defence are working to minimise any compulsory redundancies and many of those affected have been offered alternative employment.

The Department for Employment & Learning (DEL), through the local Jobs & Benefits Office in Coleraine, can offer advice on job vacancies and training and employment opportunities. DEL can also waive normal eligibility criteria for programmes such as New Deal for people who have been made redundant.

Investment in Western Counties of Northern Ireland

Dr Kieran Deeny asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline three key 'unique selling points' that Invest Northern Ireland should use to promote the western counties of Northern Ireland as an investment location. (AQO 127/07)

Mr Dodds: Generally Invest NI's sales message is based on:

- Skills quality and availability
- Competitive costs
- Excellent infrastructure including property, transport and telecoms

Specifically Northern Ireland's unique selling points will depend on the potential investor and the other locations competing for the investment. Whilst Invest NI is concerned to see a spread of investment across the region its primary role is to promote Northern Ireland as an entity. In the period 2002-2007, Invest NI made 4148 offers to companies and offered £155m assistance in respect of projects in the western counties.

Ultimately the location decision rests with the investor. If the investor seeks information on a regional basis, such as the western counties, then Invest NI will work with stakeholders to best promote the area.

New Businesses in West Belfast and Greater Shankill

Mr Paul Maskey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to provide full details of his department's plans to attract new businesses into West Belfast and Greater Shankill areas. (AQO 86/07)

Mr Dodds: In the last 5 years Invest NI has made 307 offers to companies in West Belfast & Greater Shankill areas leveraging £84m in planned investment.

This includes 6 offers of assistance to internationally owned companies leveraging £34m in investment. There were 977 new jobs promoted through the inward investment projects. In addition, Invest NI has supported around 550 new locally-owned business starts in the area.

Whilst Invest NI is concerned to see a spread of investment across the region its primary role is to promote Northern Ireland as an entity. Ultimately the location decision rests with the investor. If the investor seeks information on specific areas within Northern Ireland then Invest NI will work with the local stakeholders to best promote the area.

Supporting Economic Development

Mr Barry McElduff asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if he will work closely with the Minister of the Environment to ensure that Planning Service will adopt a proactive approach to enable and support local economic development. (AQO 71/07)

Mr Dodds: An effective planning system is essential to growing our economy. My Department is already working closely with the Departments of the Environment and Regional Development to ensure that planning policy takes full account of the needs of businesses and the economy. I have also had initial contact with my colleague the DoE Minister in relation to some planning issues.

Performance of Invest NI

Mr Trevor Lunn asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether he believes Invest Northern Ireland is underperforming compared to the Industrial Development Agency (IDA Ireland) in the Republic of Ireland. (AQO 123/07)

Mr Dodds: Invest NI is not directly comparable to the IDA either in terms of functional responsibility or product offering. For example IDA focuses solely on foreign direct investment whereas Invest NI's clients comprise both locally and internationally owned companies. However, since 2002, Invest NI has performed strongly in the FDI area, supporting 169 inward investment projects; leveraging over £1 billion of investment; promoting over 13,200 new jobs and safeguarding almost 10,500 existing jobs.

Investment and Jobs in East Londonderry

Mr John Dallat asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to give his assessment of Invest Northern Ireland's performance in relation to attracting new investment and new jobs to the East Londonderry constituency. (AQO 90/07)

Mr Dodds: In the last five years Invest NI has made 506 offers to companies in East Londonderry leveraging £75.3m in planned investment. This includes 3 offers of assistance to internationally owned companies leveraging £18.9m assistance. There were 811 new and safeguarded jobs promoted through the inward investment projects.

However, given that the benefits of FDI transcend constituency boundaries it is probably better to assess Invest NI performance as the regional level.

Between April 2003 and January 2007 Northern Ireland, with 2.8% population share, secured 7% of contestable projects into the UK. This market share increases to 14% if the projects locating in SE England are excluded.

Broadband for Rural Business

Mr Kieran McCarthy asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether he believes availability of broadband gives rural businesses a competitive advantage in Northern Ireland, and whether this competitive advantage will be retained into the next decade. (AQO 122/07)

Mr Dodds: Broadband availability gives rural businesses the same advantages as businesses in urban areas and avoids a broadband divide. Gaining a competitive advantage now and in the next decade depends on how businesses use broadband. A recent survey undertaken by NISRA indicates that the take up of broadband in rural areas is on a par with urban areas.

New Businesses for North Belfast

Ms Carál Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to provide full details of his department's plans to attract new businesses into the North Belfast area. (AQO 85/07)

Mr Dodds: In the last 5 years Invest NI has made 388 offers to companies in North Belfast leveraging £110.4m in planned investment. This includes 10 offers of assistance to internationally owned companies leveraging £42.5 investment. There were 508 new and safeguarded jobs promoted through the inward investment projects. In addition, Invest NI has supported around 400 new locally-owned business starts in the area.

Whilst Invest NI is concerned to see a spread of investment across the region its primary role is to promote Northern Ireland as an entity. Ultimately the location decision rests with the investor. If the investor seeks information on specific areas within Northern Ireland then Invest NI will work with the local stakeholders to best promote the area.

West Belfast and Greater Shankill Taskforce

Ms Sue Ramsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline his plans to implement the recommendations of the West Belfast and Greater Shankill Taskforce Review. (AQO 97/07)

Mr Dodds: DETI is giving careful consideration to the review recommendations. Officials will meet with community representatives later this month to discuss issues relevant to this Department, such as economic development sites, small business development and tourism, with a view to agreeing detailed actions which can be taken forward quickly. DETI retains its oversight role for the Initiative and, in this regard, is looking to other Northern Ireland Departments, including DEL, DE and DSD, to take similar actions to facilitate development of a composite Action Plan.

Innovation Statistics

Ms Anna Lo asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what proposals his department has to adapt its statistics to recognise that innovation goes well beyond research and development of products, and includes innovation in marketing, recruitment and management. (AQO 125/07)

Mr Dodds: The statistics produced by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment are consistent with the Oslo manual's internationally recognised guidelines for collecting and interpreting innovation data. These go beyond the research and development of products to reflect the full range of changes that firms make to improve performance, and include innovation in marketing, training and management.

Inward Investment

Mr Gregory Campbell asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what action Invest Northern Ireland is taking to ensure that inward investment is being actively promoted in areas beyond the greater Belfast area, particularly in East Londonderry. (AQO 63/07)

Mr Dodds: In the last five years Invest NI has made 506 offers to companies in East Londonderry leveraging £75.3m in planned investment. This includes 3 offers of assistance to internationally owned companies leveraging £18.9m assistance. There were 811 new and safeguarded jobs promoted through the inward investment projects.

However, given that the benefits of FDI transcend constituency boundaries it is probably better to assess Invest NI performance as the regional level.

Between April 2003 and January 2007 Northern Ireland, with 2.8% population share, secured 7% of contestable projects into the UK. This market share increases to 14% if the projects locating in SE England are excluded.

North Down Business Village

Dr Stephen Farry asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline what restrictions Invest Northern Ireland has placed on companies seeking to operate on land owned by the North Down Business Village; and if he will give reasons for the existence of such restrictions. [R] (AQO 124/07)

Mr Dodds: Invest NI owns the land designated as North Down Business Village and it is therefore held for its client companies with a demonstrable immediate business need. Sites are however available on first refusal for clients brought to Invest NI by North Down Business Village.

Uses are limited to industrial or commercial, to ensure continued industrial use.

In line with Government policy and Invest NI's enabling legislation, uses such as retail, entertainment and housing, are precluded.

Consultancy Costs

Dr Alasdair McDonnell asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how much money has been spent by the department in each of the last five years on (a) public relations consultants; and (b) other consultancy services. (AQO 103/07)

Mr Dodds: DETI's expenditure on public relations consultants has been £207,000 in 2002-03, £218,000 in 2003-04, £378,000 in 2004-05, 253,000 in 2005-06 and £195,000 in 2006-07

DETI's expenditure on other consultancy services has been £3.4million in 2002-03, £3.7million in 2003-04, £2.8million in 2004-05, £2.8million in 2005-06, and an estimated £3.2million for 2006-07.

ENVIRONMENT

Planning Applications in Ards and Strangford

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment how many planning applications submitted in this calendar year are still to be

determined for (a) Ards Borough Council area; and (b) Strangford area. (AQW 161/07)

The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster):

In the Ards Borough Council area, the number of applications validated this calendar year and still to be determined is 419. The corresponding figure for Strangford is 346.

Delays in Processing Planning Applications

Mr Dominic Bradley asked the Minister of the Environment how long it took to process outline planning applications for (i) single houses in the countryside; (ii) housing developments; and (iii) business proposals, from the date the application was received until a decision notice was issued, in each of the last three years in (a) Ballymena; (b) Belfast; (c) Coleraine; (d) Craigavon; (e) Downpatrick; (f) Enniskillen; (g) Derry; and (h) Omagh planning offices; and what action she intends to take to reduce any delays which there may be in the system. (AQW 184/07)

Mrs Foster: The figures for single houses and housing developments are set out in the table below. It is not possible to produce a meaningful average in the business proposals category because of the relatively small number of applications each year in each Division.

These figures are calculated as the number of working weeks between the date the application is deemed valid and the date the decision notice is issued.

I am in the process of reviewing with my officials a range of measures aimed at streamlining the development control process. The emphasis will be on requiring more pre-application discussions, improving the quality of applications, reducing the time allowed for consideration and consultation after proposals are received, reducing the burden on the system by, for example, examining the scope for more extensive use of permitted development rights for small scale, routine, non-contentious applications. I intend bringing forward proposals for consideration during the next Assembly session.

In the meantime, work is continuing on the implementation of a comprehensive ICT system (e-PIC) that will allow the Planning Service to deliver a more open, effective and transparent service to all the citizens of Northern Ireland. I have also recently announced the setting up of a Divisional Support Team to help in addressing workload pressures on the development control side, starting in Craigavon.

My officials are also critically examining working practices, for example, in the handling of planning appeals and in the processing of reserved matters applications, with a view to making improvements that

will ensure that the recovery from the current pressures is sustained.

Planning Applications in Ards and Strangford

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment how many planning applications were approved in each of the last three years, in the Ards and Strangford sections of the Downpatrick Divisional Planning Office. (AQW 208/07)

Mrs Foster: The number of planning applications approved, refused and submitted to the Ards and Strangford sections of the Downpatrick Divisional Planning Office in each of the last 3 years are set out in the attached table.

BREAKDOWN BY DIVISION OF THE AVERAGE LENGTH OF TIME (IN WORKING WEEKS) TO PROCESS AN OUTLINE APPLICATION

Division	Single Houses in Countryside		
	04/05	05/06	06/07
Ballymena	37.53	48.90	53.94
Belfast	37.95	29.60	34.87
Craigavon	36.64	47.27	68.62
Downpatrick	34.35	57.13	67.68
Londonderry	34.04	35.55	45.15
Omagh	18.89	25.63	42.61

Division	Housing Developments		
	04/05	05/06	06/07
Ballymena	56.56	64.49	61.99
Belfast	71.11	53.31	66.40
Craigavon	68.20	65.00	94.79
Downpatrick	58.19	57.00	62.94
Londonderry	46.95	50.55	53.56
Omagh	56.70	48.66	52.00

Area	Financial Year	Approved	Refused	Submitted
Strangford	2004/05	1,255	266	1,740
	2005/06	1,057	75	1,345
	2006/07	757	37	1,181
Ards	2004/05	1,112	263	1,570
	2005/06	914	61	1,168
	2006/07	800	39	1,193

Planning Applications in Ards and Strangford

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment how many applications were refused in the Ards and Strangford sections of the Downpatrick Divisional Planning Office, in each of the last three years. (AQW 209/07)

Mrs Foster: The number of planning applications approved, refused and submitted to the Ards and Strangford sections of the Downpatrick Divisional Planning Office in each of the last 3 years are set out in the attached table.

Area	Financial Year	Approved	Refused	Submitted
Strangford	2004/05	1,255	266	1,740
	2005/06	1,057	75	1,345
	2006/07	757	37	1,181
Ards	2004/05	1,112	263	1,570
	2005/06	914	61	1,168
	2006/07	800	39	1,193

Planning Applications in Ards and Strangford

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment how many applications have been submitted to the Downpatrick Divisional Planning Office for the Ards and Strangford areas in each of the last three years. (AQW 210/07)

Mrs Foster: The number of planning applications approved, refused and submitted to the Ards and Strangford sections of the Downpatrick Divisional Planning Office in each of the last 3 years are set out in the attached table.

Area	Financial Year	Approved	Refused	Submitted
Strangford	2004/05	1,255	266	1,740
	2005/06	1,057	75	1,345
	2006/07	757	37	1,181
Ards	2004/05	1,112	263	1,570
	2005/06	914	61	1,168
	2006/07	800	39	1,193

Fermanagh Area Plan

Mr Tom Elliott asked the Minister of the Environment when work will commence on a new Fermanagh Area Plan. (AQW 223/07)

Mrs Foster: Within the current business year, Planning Service is giving priority to the preparation of the draft development plans for Antrim, Ballymena and Larne and for West Tyrone. There are currently no plans to begin work on the review of the Fermanagh Area Plan. This situation will however be kept under review in the light of competing work demands and other business plan objectives.

Land for Industrial Use in Ards Borough Council Area

Mr Simon Hamilton asked the Minister of the Environment what plans are in place for increasing the amount of land available for industrial use in the Ards Borough Council area. (AQW 249/07)

Mrs Foster: The draft Ards & Down Area Plan identifies land for industrial use within the Ards Borough Council area comprising 60 hectares of existing zonings as well as an additional 54 hectares within Newtownards, Comber and Donaghdee. Objections to some 28 hectares of the proposed zonings were considered by the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) at a Public Inquiry. The PAC Inquiry Report is expected by the end of 2007.

There are, therefore, no proposals to increase or modify the amount of industrial land zonings in advance of the receipt and consideration of that Report.

Staffing in Downpatrick Divisional Office

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment how many planning officials are currently employed in the Downpatrick Divisional Planning Office in the Strangford and Ards Council sections. (AQW 267/07)

Mrs Foster: Planning Service is unable to provide the information in the format requested. The areas serviced by the Planning Service development control and enforcement sections are co-terminus with the District Council boundaries. Strangford is contained within the Down District Council area.

The following details relate specifically to the Ards and Down Council Areas and include both professional (P&T) and administrative staff working in the development control and enforcement teams:

ARDS

Development Control Team:

1 Principal Professional Officer (PPTO) (50%); 9 P&T full-time, 3 Administrative Officers full-time and 1 Administrative Officer (25%);

Enforcement Team:

1 PPTO (25%); 2 P&T full-time and 1 Administrative Officer (50%).

Wind Turbines within School Grounds

Mr Ken Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment what powers are in place to regulate the placing of wind turbines within the grounds of a school; and if there are restrictions on the height, or proximity to nearby dwellings, of such structures. (AQW 309/07)

Mrs Foster: Wind turbines placed within school grounds require formal planning approval. Applications are assessed in the context of Planning Policy PSU12 contained in A Planning Strategy for Rural Northern Ireland, 'Renewable Energy' which seeks to balance provision of renewable energy sources with necessary protection of the environment including the amenity of residential property. Other material considerations in the assessment of such proposals include the responses of statutory consultees such as the Environmental Health Department of the District Council and any third-party representations. There is no specific policy or guidance relating to the height of wind turbines or proximity to other dwellings for proposals within school grounds or any other locations.

Gocean Lodge Development, Killyleagh

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment if she will provide the latest position on the Gocean Lodge development in Killyleagh; and if she will give a timescale for the commencement of the development. (AQW 323/07)

Mrs Foster: Objections to the exclusion of the lands surrounding Gocean Lodge from the settlement limit for Killyleagh have been heard by the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) as part of the Public Inquiry into the draft Ards & Down Area Plan which ended on Wednesday 17 January.

Until the Department receives and considers the PAC Inquiry Report which is expected at the end of 2007, it will not be in a position to advise on the acceptability or otherwise of development at Gocean Lodge. I am therefore unable to advise on a timescale.

Planning Applications in the Lagan Valley

Mr Paul Butler asked the Minister of the Environment to give details of how many planning applications for single dwellings in the countryside in the Lagan Valley constituency have been (a) approved; and (b) refused, since the introduction of Planning Policy Statement 14: Sustainable Development in the Countryside. (AQW 429/07)

Mrs Foster: Details of the number of planning applications for single dwellings in the countryside (a) approved and (b) refused in the Lagan Valley constituency since 16 March 2006 are as follows:

	Outline		Full	
	New Dwelling	Replacement Dwelling	New Dwelling	Replacement Dwelling
Approval	39	36	78	71
Refusal	146	18	15	6

These figures include an unspecified number of applications received prior to 16 March 2006 but decided after that date.

Compulsory Display of Insurance Cover

Mr John Dallat asked the Minister of the Environment to outline her plans for the compulsory display of evidence of insurance cover on all motor vehicles used on public roads. (AQW 437/07)

Mrs Foster: My Department has, in the past, taken up the issue of requiring vehicles to show evidence of being insured, by means of a windscreen insurance disc, with the Association of British Insurers (ABI).

The ABI believes its central insurance database, established in May 2001, which gives on-line access to the police for enforcement purposes, offers a more effective enforcement system than the display of insurance discs.

While there are no plans to introduce a compulsory car insurance disc in Northern Ireland, my Department is, however, planning to introduce a scheme of continuous enforcement of motor insurance requirements from the record. This will make it possible to prosecute for having control of an uninsured vehicle without first having to detect the person using it on a road.

The primary legislation – the Road Traffic (Northern Ireland) Order 2007 – is already in place. It is hoped to consult on the detail of the scheme later in the year and to introduce the new arrangements, which require subordinate legislation, during 2008.

Mullaghglass Landfill Site

Mr Paul Butler asked the Minister of the Environment if she will ensure that enforcement action is taken against the owners of Mullaghglass landfill site if they refuse to comply with condition 20 of their planning permission. (AQW 470/07)

Mrs Foster: Planning permission for Mullaghglass landfill site was granted subject to a number of conditions, among them condition 20 requiring that a footway be constructed before the site becomes operational along a section of the Mullaghglass Road fronting the site and adjacent properties.

The footway has not been constructed and the operators sought, by way of a planning application in November 2006, approval to operate the landfill without providing the footway. Planning Service brought an opinion to Lisburn Borough Council that the application should be refused. The Council concurred with that view and Planning Service will shortly formally refuse planning permission.

However, mindful of the likely outcome to the application described above, the operator submitted a further planning application in March 2007 seeking approval to construct the footway. This application remains under consideration with Planning Service.

It would not be expedient for Planning Service to pursue enforcement action in this particular case when it is actively considering a planning application for works which would resolve the current breach of planning control.

However, Planning Service continues to monitor and review activities on this site and will resort to enforcement action should the need arise.

Planning Application for Landfill Site at Garvagh

Mr Adrian McQuillan asked the Minister of the Environment what criteria will be used in assessing the planning application for a landfill site at Belraugh Road, Garvagh; whether article 31 procedures will be applied; and whether a public inquiry will take place. (AQW 490/07)

Mrs Foster: The planning application for a landfill site at Belraugh Road, Garvagh will be considered on its individual planning merits, taking account of all material planning considerations. Such considerations would include the relevant area plan provisions, regional planning policy guidance, waste management policy as it applies to Northern Ireland and to the sub-region of the North west, consultee advice and views expressed through the public consultation exercise.

The Planning Service is currently considering whether Article 31 procedures should be applied to this application.

The processing of the planning application is at a very early stage. It would be impossible and indeed inappropriate to comment at this stage on the possibility of a public inquiry taking place.

Planning Applications, Dunmurry

Mr Paul Butler asked the Minister of the Environment if she will carry out a review in relation to the increase in planning applications in the Dunmurry area; and, in particular, if she will look at the number of planning applications for apartments in the Dunmurry area. (AQW 543/07)

Mrs Foster: Planning Service is aware of the development pressures in Dunmurry and public concern about the increasing number of planning applications for apartments. All such applications are dealt with in the context of current planning policies and development plans, including the draft Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan (BMAP).

Planning Policy Statement 14

Mr Tommy Gallagher asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of planning applications for single dwellings in the countryside, received by Planning Service prior to 16 March 2006, which were assessed under 'Planning Policy Statement 14: Sustainable Development in the Countryside'; the total number of these applications that have been refused; and the figures for the total monies collected from the planning fees for all such applications that have been refused to date. (AQW 548/07)

Mrs Foster: Any application for a single dwelling in the countryside received on or prior to 16 March 2006 but found to be incomplete or invalid, and resubmitted as valid after 16 March, would be assessed under Planning Policy Statement 14. To date, 153 such applications have been determined. Of these, 71 have been refused, 82 have been approved. The total sum collected as fees for the 71 applications which were refused is £36,000.

Review of Public Administration

Mr Ian McCrea asked the Minister of the Environment if she will consider awarding Civil Service status to local government employees, post Review of Public Administration. (AQW 573/07)

Mrs Foster: Under the Review of Public Administration local government functions are not

transferring to the Northern Ireland Civil service and, therefore, it would not be appropriate to give local government employees civil service status.

Review of Public Administration

Mr Ian McCrea asked the Minister of the Environment if she will ensure that, post Review of Public Administration, all local government staff will have the same terms of employment as those transferred from the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

(AQW 574/07)

Mrs Foster: Any changes to the terms and conditions for staff in the new councils will be a matter for the new councils and will have to comply with the requirements of the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 2006.

All staff being transferred to new employers as a result of RPA decisions, whether the transfer is from the Northern Ireland Civil Service to the new councils or from the existing councils to the new councils, will have their terms and conditions protected by these Regulations. In addition their pensions will be protected in accordance with the principles outlined in the Treasury's guidance on a Fair Deal for Staff Pensions.

Any move by the new councils to achieve harmonisation in the terms and conditions for staff post-transfer can only be undertaken in limited circumstances using normal industrial relations machinery.

Unlicensed Waste Disposal

Mr Ian McCrea asked the Minister of the Environment what action she is taking to address unlicensed waste disposal in Northern Ireland, particularly in regard to the fly-tipping of (a) household waste; (b) commercial waste; (c) hazardous waste; and (d) agricultural waste, including dead animals.

(AQW 575/07)

Mrs Foster: Reports of unlicensed waste disposal are prioritised for further action. Where sufficient evidence is obtained, and the circumstances merit it, a file is passed to the Public Prosecution Service for its consideration.

During 2006-07, there were 110 successful convictions in the courts for waste offences, 11 of which were in the Crown Court. Convictions in 2006-07 have resulted in over £200,000 in fines and 4 prison sentences of up to 12 months' imprisonment. The Environment and Heritage Service has also referred cases to the Assets Recovery Agency.

The term 'fly-tipping' is normally used to describe largely domestic, low quantity incidents. Such small-scale cases are generally dealt with by District Councils

but the Environment and Heritage Service is currently implementing the Flycapture software used by the English Environment Agency, in order to facilitate a consistent approach to the impact of fly-tipping.

Unlicensed Waste Disposal

Mr Ian McCrea asked the Minister of the Environment what plans she has to give additional legislative powers, and the necessary resources, to enable District Councils to address small-scale unlicensed waste disposal and fly-tipping.
(AQW 577/07)

Mrs Foster: It is essential that my Department and district councils should work together to address the illegal deposit of waste. My officials are currently engaged with local government representatives in a joint working group to explore how this can best be achieved. The group is expected to make recommendations in the near future, and I will then consider any legislative and resource implications.

Processing of Tax Discs and Drivers Licences

Mr Mark Durkan asked the Minister of the Environment how many motor tax discs and driver licences have been processed through each DVLNI/DVA local office, in each of the past five years.
(AQW 591/07)

Mrs Foster: The table below sets out the number of motor tax discs processed in each of the DVLNI/DVA local offices in each of the past 5 financial years. Driver licence applications are all processed centrally in Coleraine but the local offices provide a service to enable applicants required to prove their identity to produce their supporting documents for checking locally. The table below sets out the numbers of applicants who used this facility in each of the local offices in each of the last five years.

TAX DISCS ISSUED

Local Office	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
Armagh	70039	71903	58941	57862	59564
Ballymena	75539	76433	62197	61403	58880
Belfast	159421	171145	147945	117368	117619
Coleraine	59861	62910	50862	50843	49492
Downpatrick	63427	63872	51471	48733	46760
Enniskillen	38027	37211	32187	33507	33183
Londonderry	50389	52295	44327	43768	43947
Omagh	49765	51408	44144	42717	42765

DRIVER LICENCE ID CHECKS

Local Office	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
Armagh*	0	0	1514	6432	7467
Ballymena	959	1937	2913	7525	7908
Belfast	3670	7772	11412	22660	24560
Coleraine^	0	0	0	0	0
Downpatrick	968	1779	2633	7034	7381
Enniskillen	689	1329	1751	3661	3917
Londonderry	212	1204	2387	5492	6130
Omagh*	0	0	836	3229	4083

* Service introduced in Armagh and Omagh from July 2004

^ Service in Coleraine is provided by the Driver Licensing Office, which is located in Coleraine

Processing of Motor Tax and Drivers Licences

Mr Mark Durkan asked the Minister of the Environment how many applications for (a) motor tax and renewals; and (b) driver licences; have been processed through means other than local DVLNI/DVA offices in each of the past five years, including online and by telephone.
(AQW 592/07)

Mrs Foster: The table below sets out the number of applications to register and licence a vehicle and the number of tax disc renewals processed by post, by the post offices and by telephone in each of the past 5 financial years. Online licensing is not available in Northern Ireland. A very limited telephone service was introduced on a pilot basis but it was not developed and is not promoted. The Automated First Registration and Licensing (AFRL) system, introduced in 2004/05, enables dealers to register and license new vehicles from their own premises. Driver licence applications are all processed centrally in Coleraine but the local offices provide a service to enable applicants required to prove their identity to produce their supporting documents for checking locally. The table below sets out the numbers of driver licences issued by the Driver Licensing Office in Coleraine over the past five years.

MOTOR TAX & RENEWALS

Medium	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
Post	199,546	188,781	173,515	173,484	178,284
AFRL			27,786	60,366	64,036
Telephone	4,914	5,741	3,988	3,599	5,186
Post Offices	301,001	390,638	448,457	531,977	561,853

DRIVER LICENCES ISSUED

Medium	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
Post	158,806	173,227	171,159	286,988	286,661

Issue of Tax Discs and Drivers Licences

Mr Mark Durkan asked the Minister of the Environment how many motor tax discs and driver licences have been issued in each District Council area, in each of the past five years. (AQW 593/07)

Mrs Foster: The numbers of tax discs and driver licences issued are not recorded by District Council area. I refer Mr Durkan to my previous answers, AQW 591/07 and AQW 592/07, which set out the numbers of discs issued by each local office and through other channels.

Closure of DVA Offices

Mr Mark Durkan asked the Minister of the Environment what criteria have been applied in order to determine which DVA offices should close on 6 June 2007, as announced by her department. (AQW 594/07)

Mrs Foster: The criteria used to assess possible locations were:

1. The optimum location to serve the maximum possible number of customers (as defined by vehicle ownership) within a 30 mile radius of the selected locations.
2. The optimum location to ensure, as far as possible, that 90% of the population are located within a 30 mile radius of a local office or the enquiry office at Coleraine.
3. The optimum location to ensure that 95% of the population are located within 5 miles of a local office or a licensing Post Office.
4. The optimum location to service the maximum number of vehicle dealers (defined as holders of trade licences) within a 30 mile radius of the selected location.

Based on these criteria, DVLA, on whose behalf my Department undertakes vehicle licensing work in Northern Ireland, have determined that the optimum location for the local offices should be Belfast, Armagh and Enniskillen, together with a customer enquiry office at DVA Licensing headquarters in Coleraine.

Although planned IT systems integration will be completed in November 2008 and the alternative delivery channels through the post offices, online and

by telephone will be available then, DVLA have agreed closure of offices should be phased in and that, it could take up to 18 months before all 5 local offices are closed. Detailed implementation planning will determine the phasing of office closures but it is anticipated that the first offices will close early in 2009.

DVLA's decision to centralise vehicle licensing, including the impact on the local office network, will be the subject of both an equality impact and rural proofing assessment.

Conservation of the Red Squirrel

Mr Alex Easton asked the Minister of the Environment to outline her strategy to enhance the protection of, and increase the red squirrel population in Northern Ireland. (AQW 613/07)

Mrs Foster: The native Red Squirrel population in Northern Ireland is declining in numbers and distribution.

It is widely accepted that the presence of the Grey Squirrel is the biggest threat to the conservation of the Red Squirrel.

A Species Action Plan (SAP) for the Red Squirrel is currently being prepared by officials and should be issued for public consultation later this year.

One of the measures likely to be recommended in the SAP is the creation of Red Squirrel Reserves which will be defended against the ingress of the Grey Squirrel.

Arthritis Treatment Centre, Randalstown

Mr Thomas Burns asked the Minister of the Environment if she will outline her position on the planning application for an Arthritis Treatment Centre in Randalstown, with particular reference to the use of the heat produced by a previously approved Biomass Combined Heat and Power (CHP) system. (AQW 655/07)

Mrs Foster: Given that planning application T/2006/0289/F (Construction of Arthritis Treatment Centre) is subject to an impending Article 33 Planning Appeal, the deemed refusal opinion, and associated reasons for refusal, are matters best left to the Planning Appeals Commission to consider within the scope of the future appeal hearing. This will include the location of the proposal relative to the Biomass Combined Heat and Power system and the use of heat produced by it.

Councillors' Allowances

Mr Paul Butler asked the Minister of the Environment if she will investigate Lisburn City Council's decision not to allocate the new councillors' allowances, in relation to Special Responsibility Allowance, equally across all political parties on the Council, in accordance with her department's directive instructing Councils to adopt the the guidance on councillors' allowances as good practice. (AQW 664/07)

Mrs Foster: It is for Lisburn City Council to decide how it wishes to distribute its Special Responsibility Allowance, within the maximum amount determined by the Department. A directive did not issue about safeguards to ensure a fair distribution of this allowance across a representative sample of political parties. However, in its Guidance on Councillors' Allowances issued in April 2007, the Department encouraged councils to consider adopting, as good practice, this recommendation which was made by the Councillors' Remuneration Working Group. There is no statutory requirement for councils to adhere to it, at present.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Industrial Rates

Mr Dominic Bradley asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel when he plans to announce a decision in relation to industrial rates. (AQW 417/07)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Robinson): My Department has engaged the Economic Research Institute NI to undertake a study into the effectiveness of the policy. This is expected to be completed in September 2007 and I will be reporting back to the Executive with my assessment as soon as possible thereafter. If a change of policy is considered necessary and a priority of the Executive, such a decision will have to be made by the end of the calendar year to ensure the necessary legislative change can be made before billing next April.

Obesity-Related Premature Deaths

Mr Pat Ramsey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he will provide an estimate of the number of people who die prematurely as a result of obesity-related illness. (AQW 491/07)

Mr Robinson: In 2006² there were 28 deaths where obesity¹ was mentioned on the death certificate and in 25 of those deaths the deceased was aged under 75 years of age at the time of death.

Of these cases, obesity was the underlying cause of death on, respectively, 9 occasions and 8 occasions.

¹ International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision code E66.

² Provisional data.

Findings of the Public Accounts Committee

Mr Danny Kennedy asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what measures are currently in place within his department, to ensure that findings of the Public Accounts Committee are fully acted upon by all departments concerned. (AQW 518/07)

Mr Robinson: Departmental commitments to the findings of Public Accounts Committee (PAC) are set out in the DFP Memorandum of Reply (MOR) which is the formal Government response to the PAC report. It is the responsibility of the relevant department to honour the commitments in the MOR. DFP has developed a database to facilitate departments with the monitoring of commitments made to the PAC. DFP conducts an annual exercise whereby departments update the action taken and confirm if the commitment has been completed. DFP reports annually to the Permanent Secretary Group on the progress in completing all outstanding commitments. DFP routinely follows up with responsible departments.

Non-Hodgkins Lymphoma

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many people have died of non-hodgkins lymphoma in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 561/07)

Mr Robinson: In Northern Ireland in the years 2004, 2005 and 2006² respectively, there were 111, 117 and 105 deaths registered where the primary cause of death was non-hodgkins lymphoma¹.

¹ International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision codes C82-C85.

² Provisional data.

Bowel Cancer Deaths

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many people have died of bowel cancer in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 562/07)

Mr Robinson: In Northern Ireland in the years 2004, 2005 and 2006² respectively, there were 430, 435 and 412 deaths registered where the primary cause of death was bowel cancer¹.

¹ International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision codes C18-C21.

² Provisional data.

Central Transfer Lists for Civil Servants

Mr Mark Durkan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what is the number of civil servants currently awaiting transfer to the Derry/Londonderry City Council area. (AQW 590/07)

Mr Robinson: The question referred to the Derry/Londonderry City Council area. The central transfer list (CTL) is operated by location i.e. town/ city and the information provided relates to Derry/Londonderry city.

Three hundred and ninety five (395) civil servants have requested to transfer to Derry/Londonderry.

Credit / Debit Cards for Senior Civil Servants

Mr Stephen Moutray asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what facility is available for senior civil servants to use (a) credit cards; and (b) debit cards provided by their department. (AQW 634/07)

Mr Robinson: At present there are no credit or debit cards issued to senior civil servants in the Department of Finance and Personnel.

Recruitment and Promotion of Staff Aged 55 or Over

Mr Stephen Moutray asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many people aged 55 or over have been (a) recruited; and (b) promoted by departments in the Northern Ireland Civil Service, in each of the last three years. (AQW 635/07)

Mr Robinson: Figures are based on all those who were aged 55 or over at the time of their recruitment into or promotion in the 11 NI Departments of the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

NUMBER OF STAFF AGED 55 AND ABOVE PROMOTED OR RECRUITED INTO THE 11 NI DEPARTMENTS 2004, 2005 & 2006
FIGURES ARE FOR ALL STAFF (PERMANENT, CASUAL AND INDUSTRIAL)

	Promotion	Recruitment
2004	25	37
2005	10	55
2006	12	23

Consultancy Services

Mr David Hilditch asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail his department's spend on consultancy services in the 2007/2008 financial year. (AQW 654/07)

Mr Robinson: Based on the most recent estimate the expected 2007-08 spend for the Department of Finance and Personnel on consultancy services is £6.6million.

General Register Office

Mr Daithí McKay asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to confirm that all General Register Offices have the facility to print fadas, when issuing death and birth certificates to members of the public. (AQW 771/07)

Mr Robinson: The General Register Office and all District Registration Offices in the 26 local authority areas have the facility to print fadas on birth, death, marriage, adoption and civil partnership certificates issued to the public.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Costs of Premature Mortality from Obesity

Mr Pat Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give the cost to the Northern Ireland economy, with particular reference to the direct costs to the health service, of temporary or long term absence from work and premature mortality arising from obesity. (AQW 426/07)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I am not in a position to provide the precise cost to the Northern Ireland economy or to the Health Service of temporary or long term absence from work and premature mortality arising from obesity.

However, Investing for Health, the public health strategy for Northern Ireland (March 2002), reported that obesity was estimated to be causing 450 deaths each year: the equivalent of over 4000 years of lost life. It is also estimated that, in Northern Ireland, obesity was resulting in 260,000 working days lost each year and was costing the economy £500 million. A mid-term review of the Investing for Health Strategy is due in 2008.

Cross-Border Health Service Provision

Mr Pat Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give his assessment of the impact of cross-border health service provision, in terms of the scope and quality of services that can be provided for all patients. (AQW 500/07)

Mr McGimpsey: It makes sense to pursue co-operation where it is in the mutual interests of the population on both sides of the border. The Belfast Agreement recognises this and the inaugural Plenary meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in December 1999 agreed the following five matters for co-operation on health – Accident and Emergency Services; Planning for major emergencies; Co-operation on high technology; cancer research and health promotion with an outline work programme on these aspects. Work to progress this has been taken forward at NSMC meetings in the Health Sectoral format and, through meetings of Ministers and officials, North and South. In addition, my Department has been working closely with colleagues in Dublin on Pandemic Flu and Cancer Research and Co operation and Working Together (CAWT) has done a lot of good work in taking this agenda forward.

These are the types of initiatives which I endorse as there are major benefits to be gained for the population of Northern Ireland. To ensure that these benefits are maximised my Department has recently embarked on an exploratory study in conjunction with colleagues in the Republic of Ireland to identify the potential of further areas of North South co-operation that could help improve the health and wellbeing and access to services for our population.

National Health Service Dentists in East Antrim

Mr David Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail his plans to provide more National Health Service dentists in the East Antrim area; and, in particular, the Carrickfergus area. (AQW 510/07)

Mr McGimpsey: In recent years access to Health Service dentistry has been increasingly difficult for patients across Northern Ireland. This includes the areas of East Antrim and Carrickfergus. To alleviate this problem, the Northern Health and Social Services Board (NHSSB) Dental Department have recently secured funds from the Department to enable the employment of a salaried Dental Practitioner. Their role will be to provide health service dentistry specifically for patients who cannot currently avail of such a service locally.

The new salaried dentist and team will be based at the recently opened Dalriada Urgent Care centre on the Larne Road, Ballymena. Sufficient funding has been secured to provide a “state of the art” dental facility, which will allow up to date treatments and procedures to be carried out. Emphasis will be placed on high standards of infection control, quality of care and easy access for patients.

Patients will soon be able to receive emergency and urgent care during normal working hours at the centre. They will then actively be encouraged to attend a “high street” General Dental Practitioner (GDP) in their area; after any urgent treatment has been carried out.

This is seen as a benefit to both patients and practitioners alike. Patients will soon not have to worry about being able to see a health service dentist, and practitioners who are accepting new health service patients will have a new source of referrals from the centre helping them grow their practices.

In addition to the above, the NHSSB, which includes the Carrickfergus area, is in the process of securing funding for a second salaried dentist. This will also help to alleviate access to dentistry problems in the NHSSB area.

Respite Care Provision in the North West

Mr Francis Brolly asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he can confirm that there is only one respite bed available in the North West area, from Strabane to Coleraine; and if he will take steps to provide adequate respite provision in that area as soon as possible. (AQW 517/07)

Mr McGimpsey: Respite bed provision is provided by Nursing Homes across the northern sector of the Western Health and Social Care Trust. The availability of beds is subject to local demand. However, the Trust has not found it necessary to contract specifically for respite beds given this existing capacity. In addition, there are six dedicated respite beds available in Spruce House, Altnagelvin, for people with a physical disability and these beds are used on an ongoing basis. Respite bed provision will be addressed by the Physical and Sensory Disability Strategy which my Department is currently developing.

Out of Hours GP Service

Mr Peter Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to ensure that out-of-hours doctor facilities are made more widely available, and more accessible. (AQW 530/07)

Mr McGimpsey: In 2005 the Department commissioned the 4 Health and Social Services Boards to review the current Out of Hours GP Service and to develop options to establish a regional approach for the delivery of Out of Hours services from April 2008. Work on this is ongoing at the present time.

Riverside Health Practice, Strabane

Mrs Claire McGill asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is the envisaged timeframe for the extension of services, such as radiology, to the Riverside Health Practice in Strabane; and what steps are being taken to ensure that this development takes place. (AQW 541/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The Western Health and Social Services Board is currently working with local Trusts to put in place a significant capital development, which is known as the Primary and Community Care Infrastructure Programme.

The aim of the programme is to put in place a modern fit for purpose infrastructure that will provide enhanced accessibility and greater responsiveness to a wider range of service provision in the community, close to where people live. The Strabane Health and Care Centre is part of this programme.

The Western Health and Social Services Board is currently finalising a Business Case for projects in the first phase of the programme in the Board area.

The Business Case is expected by July 2007 for approval in the Autumn of 2007.

Provision of Hospital Services

Mr Pat Doherty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is the reason for the delay in the outreaching of certain hospital services, such as radiology, to health centres in the Western Health and Social Services Board area. (AQW 542/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The Western Health and Social Services Board is working closely with local Trusts to put in place significant capital development, through the Primary and Community Care Infrastructure Programme.

The programme aims to provide enhanced accessibility, greater flexibility, and a wider range of services in the community, by putting in place modern facilities. In the main, this will be provided through a network of Health and Care Centres, located in main towns and cities across Northern Ireland.

Plans to deliver a range of enhanced primary care services, and some services previously only available in hospitals, are being developed as part of the Business Cases for each project.

Although each Health and Care Centre will deliver similar services, each Centre will be designed to meet local population needs. In determining these services, Board colleagues are taking into account key factors such as: population demographics, sustainability of services, optimum utilisation of technologies, and securing Value for Money.

Each Business Case expected imminently will be considered by the Department and on approval, which is likely to be by the Autumn of this year, each project will progress to design and subsequent procurement.

Speech and Language Therapy Services

Mrs Claire McGill asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline what steps are being taken to address the deficits in the provision of speech and language therapy services in the Foyle Trust area; and what specific provision is envisaged to tackle the waiting list for such provision in the Strabane District Council area. (AQW 544/07)

Mr McGimpsey: I refer you to the Assembly debate about Speech and Language Therapy which took place on 5 June 2007 in which I described the steps being taken to address waiting lists for Speech and Language Therapy throughout Northern Ireland.

There are 28.1 whole-time equivalent Speech and Language Therapists and 4 whole-time equivalent Technical Instructors employed within the Derry, Limavady and Strabane Council area.

In order to address waiting times in the Strabane District Council area, a further 4 temporary Speech and Language Therapists have been engaged. The waiting lists will be addressed beginning with those waiting longest and this approach will be delivered throughout the former Foyle Trust area to ensure that those waiting longest are dealt with first.

As a result of these initiatives, the longest waiting time for assessment has reduced from 6 months at March 2006 to 20 weeks at March 2007, and in terms of treatment, numbers waiting have reduced from 1488 (March 2006) to 565 (March 2007).

Smoking Information Packs

Mr Ian McCrea asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many information packs, which included no smoking signs, were issued by the Health Promotion Agency to businesses in

Cookstown and Magherafelt prior to, and since, the smoking ban came into effect on 30 April 2007.

(AQW 556/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The company responsible for issuing the packs, which included sample signage, distributed 2,078 in Magherafelt and 1,746 in Cookstown. Advertisements were also placed in the main newspapers on 23 April informing employers who had not received packs that they could be obtained from their district council's Environmental Health Department.

The advertisement also stated that the pack, signage and information on smoke-free legislation was available for downloading from the Health Promotion Agency's "Space to Breathe" website - www.spacetobreathe.org.uk

Magherafelt District Council issued 10 packs on request, post-30 April, while Cookstown District Council did not record the number of requests received.

Respite Care

Mr Ian McCrea asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail how many places are available for respite care, catering for the needs of those with severe learning and/or physical disability, broken down by Health and Social Services Board area.

(AQW 557/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The following table sets out the number of places currently available for respite care, in terms of available beds, for those with severe learning and / or physical disability, broken down by the four Health and Social Services Board areas.

Board Area	Current Places
NHSSB	66
WHSSB	29
SHSSB	109
EHSSB	60

Each place represents respite provision for many clients, depending on their individual level of need. Respite care can also be provided in different settings, including family based and domiciliary respite services. In all the Board areas additional respite provision is purchased as necessary.

Risk Assessment of the Mid-Ulster Hospital

Mr Ian McCrea asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will carry out a risk assessment of the Mid-Ulster hospital, in light of the removal of maternity services and night-time A&E services.

(AQW 558/07)

Mr McGimpsey: In spring 2005 the former United Hospitals Trust and the NHSSB commissioned an independent assessment of the risks associated with the maintenance of key acute services at Mid Ulster Hospital. In November 2006, following a period of public consultation, the Trust approved proposals for changes to services which included the transfer of obstetric services to Antrim Area Hospital and a reduction of Mid Ulster Accident and Emergency opening hours.

No further risk assessment is currently planned. The Northern Trust will continue to monitor service provision at the Mid Ulster Hospital to ensure safety and sustainability of services during its transition to a local hospital as set out in Developing Better Services.

Future Plans for Mid-Ulster Hospital

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will detail the future plans for the Mid-Ulster Hospital.

(AQW 559/07)

Mr McGimpsey: As set out in Developing Better Services, Mid Ulster Hospital will become a local hospital providing a wide range of services including a minor injuries service, day surgery, diagnostics and outpatient services. It is also expected to include inpatient beds for assessment and rehabilitation.

In June 2006 the Department approved the Outline Business Case Stage 1 for all the proposed changes required within the Northern Board area. This included the building of a new local hospital at Mid Ulster. The Northern Trust is currently working on Stage 2 of this Business Case.

Treatment for Multiple Myeloma

Mrs Naomi Long asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he plans to adopt for Northern Ireland the recommendations, made with respect to England and Wales, of the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence, to make bortezomib (Velcade) accessible to National Health Service patients suffering from multiple myeloma; and if he will outline the proposed timeframe for the implementation of such plans.

(AQW 566/07)

Mr McGimpsey: All guidance published by NICE from 1 July 2006 is reviewed locally for its applicability to Northern Ireland and, where appropriate, is endorsed by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for implementation in the Health and Social Care sector.

NICE is currently assessing Velcade for use in a new indication which would see patients being treated

with the drug at an earlier stage of the disease. The Institute has not indicated a date for publication of final guidance on Velcade, however, it is likely that the review process will not be completed until the autumn. The Department will issue advice on the status of the final guidance in Northern Ireland shortly after it is published by NICE for England and Wales.

General Practitioners

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will give figures for the ratio of General Practitioners per head of the population, for each of the Westminster constituencies in Northern Ireland; and if he will outline how this compares with figures for the rest of the United Kingdom. (AQW 579/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The number of general practitioners (GPs) per 10,000 resident population for each Northern Ireland parliamentary constituency and in other UK countries is given in Table 1. However, it must be noted that since the introduction of the General Medical Services contract in April 2004, it has not been a requirement for general practices to declare all GPs working in the practice, although most do. The average list size per GP within each constituency has also been provided in Table 1 to show the numbers of patients actually served by each GP and to help illustrate that many patients will not be registered in the constituency in which they live. It follows, therefore, that those constituencies which happen to have most GPs per resident population do not necessarily have the smallest registered list sizes and vice versa.

Table 1 shows that Northern Ireland has more GPs per 10,000 population (6.5) than in England (5.8) and Wales (6.1), but less than in Scotland (7.5). It is important to note that the Northern Ireland figure is not precisely equivalent to the other UK countries as it only includes unrestricted GPs and is more up-to-date.

TABLE 1

Parliamentary Constituency	General Practitioner Head count per 10,000 population ^{1 2}	Average Registered list size per General Practitioner ^{1 3}
Belfast East	8.4	1470
Belfast North	10.9	1590
Belfast South	7.8	1409
Belfast West	6.7	1655
East Antrim	4.7	1650
East Londonderry	6.2	1663
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	7.4	1601
Foyle	6.7	1656

Parliamentary Constituency	General Practitioner Head count per 10,000 population ^{1 2}	Average Registered list size per General Practitioner ^{1 3}
Lagan Valley	5.4	1643
Mid Ulster	5.1	1790
Newry & Armagh	6.7	1712
North Antrim	7.4	1463
North Down	5.2	1849
South Antrim	4.8	1822
South Down	5.4	1640
Strangford	5.8	1597
Upper Bann	6.6	1715
West Tyrone	6.0	1757
Northern Ireland	6.5	1635
England ⁴	5.8	Not available
Wales ⁴	6.1	Not available
Scotland ⁴	7.5	Not available

Source: Medlist database - Central Services Agency; National Health Applications and Infrastructure Services system (NHAIS)
- Central Services Agency; Mid-year estimate of population - Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency.

Notes:

- 1 The head count of general practitioners is at 1st June 2007. Only unrestricted principals are included. Head count of general practitioners has been used as whole time equivalent is no longer recorded.
- 2 The population figures are the 2005 mid-year estimate of population (latest available).
- 3 The general practice registered list size is as at April 2007.
- 4 The general practitioner counts used for each country (other than Northern Ireland) include both unrestricted and principal equivalents (UPEs) and restricted GPs as it is no longer possible to distinguish from these in the GP census. They relate to 2005.

Dentists Accepting National Health Service Patients

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give details, broken down by each Westminster constituency, of the ratio of dentists accepting National Health Service patients; and if he will make a statement on how this compares with the rest of the United Kingdom. (AQW 584/07)

Mr McGimpsey: Table 1 provides information on the percentage of dentists registered to provide Health Service dentistry in each constituency at December 2006 who have had new Health Service (HS) patient registrations in the previous year. However, note that this does not mean that those dentists will continue to accept Health Service registrations, nor that other dentists will not have Health Service registrations in the future. Information cannot be given on the percentage of

dentists in England, Wales or Scotland accepting NHS patients, as the information is not held centrally.

TABLE 1

Parliamentary Constituency	Percentage of HS dentists ^{1 2 3} with new Health Service patient registrations ⁴
Belfast East	95.3%
Belfast North	90.2%
Belfast South	91.2%
Belfast West	97.6%
East Antrim	96.9%
East Londonderry	97.6%
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	91.8%
Foyle	86.4%
Lagan Valley	97.4%
Mid Ulster	93.5%
Newry and Armagh	89.4%
North Antrim	81.5%
North Down	93.8%
South Antrim	97.3%
South Down	97.4%
Strangford	89.2%
Upper Bann	92.6%
West Tyrone	97.6%
Northern Ireland	92.4%

Source: Central Services Agency

- 1 Includes Principal dentists only - excludes assistants and Vocational Dental Practitioners.
- 2 Dentist numbers taken from the list of all dentists registered to provide Health Service dentistry in December 2006.
- 3 Should a dentist work in more than one practice within a constituency then they have only been counted once within that constituency but if they work across constituencies then they have also been counted once in each relevant constituency.
- 4 Includes HS dentists with registered Health Service patients at December 2006 who were not registered at January of the same year (i.e. new registrations).

Assaults Against Hospital Staff

Mr Jimmy Spratt asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of cases of assault against staff within the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, broken down by hospital. (AQW 596/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The Belfast Health and Social Care Trust (HSC) was established on 1 April 2007 and

therefore figures are not available in the format requested.

The number of cases of assault against staff for the year 1st April 2006 to 31st March 2007 recorded by the legacy Trusts who form the Belfast Trust totalled 1427; 347 verbal and 1080 physical; each incident however may have involved more than one member of staff.

	Verbal	Physical	Total
Belfast City Hospital	72	66	138
Green Park	8	9	17
North and West Belfast ¹	54	608	662
Royal Group	135	120	255
South and East Belfast	78	277	355
Total	347	1080	1427

¹ These figures include the figures for Muckamore

Community Commissioning Associations

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give an assurance that elected representatives will be invited to become members of the Community Commissioning Associations of the Health and Social Care Trust for the Ards Borough Council area. (AQW 601/07)

Mr McGimpsey: I am currently considering a proposal regarding the operating framework for devolved commissioning and the establishment of Community Commissioning Associations (CCAs) is one element of this. Working through the Local Commissioning Groups (LCGs) we intend to invite applications from local health and social care professionals and groups over the coming months to establish pilot CCAs.

The LCGs will assess the suitability of these proposals against essential criteria which includes a requirement to demonstrate that membership is representative of the local population. While elected representatives will not hold a position by right on any of the new health and social care bodies, members of the public resident in the CCA catchment area will be given the opportunity to become members.

Physical Disability Strategy

Mrs Michelle O'Neill asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety at what stage are her department's plans to develop a physical disability strategy. (AQW 605/07)

Mr McGimpsey: My Department is working in partnership with user and carer groups, the statutory,

voluntary, and community sectors to develop a Physical and Sensory Disability Strategy. Regional working groups have been established to review the provision of wheelchair and sensory impairment services. Further working groups will be established as required to address other key strands of the strategy. The findings of the working groups will inform the development of the draft strategy, which is expected to be ready for consultation by March 2008.

All-Ireland Ambulance Service

Mrs Michelle O'Neill asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm that the case for an all-Ireland ambulance service, including helicopter service, has been established; and what plans he has to take this matter forward. (AQW 606/07)

Mr McGimpsey: I am not aware of any work being undertaken at present to establish a case for an all-Ireland land-based and helicopter ambulance service.

Social Work Studies

Mr Allan Bresland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of students who applied to the Northern Ireland Social Care council for a social work bursary in 2004, 2005 and 2006; and to also detail the number of places available for social work studies in Northern Ireland in each of these years. (AQW 608/07)

Mr McGimpsey: No students applied to the Northern Ireland Social Care Council for a social work bursary in 2004, 2005 or 2006. My Department administers an Incentive Scheme for social work students who are domiciled and studying in Northern Ireland.

In 2004: 300 places were available for social work students in Northern Ireland.

In 2005: 300 places were available for social work students in Northern Ireland.

In 2006: 300 places were available for social work students in Northern Ireland.

Reduction of Waiting Time at A+E Altnagelvin Hospital

Mr George Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will explain what he intends to do to reduce waiting times at the Accident and Emergency department at Altnagelvin Hospital. (AQW 617/07)

Mr McGimpsey: A target has been set that, by March 2008, patients will be admitted, transferred or discharged within four hours of arrival at an Accident

and Emergency department, other than in exceptional circumstances where clinical reasons would not make this appropriate.

A programme of reform is underway to ensure the achievement of this target.

This programme is focused on the complete patient pathway, beginning with the ambulance journey, if required, continuing through the emergency care department and the hospital system itself and ending when the patient is discharged.

I am fully committed to ensuring that waiting times across all Accident and Emergency departments are reduced. My Department will continue to monitor performance on a weekly basis to ensure that satisfactory progress is made towards this target.

Screening and Immunisation Programme for Tuberculosis

Mr George Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he will take with regard to the introduction of a full screening and immunisation programme for tuberculosis, taking into account the 25% rise in infection rates in the United Kingdom. (AQW 618/07)

Mr McGimpsey: There is no evidence of a similar increase in TB rates here. The Centre for Communicable Disease Control Northern Ireland monitors TB rates in Northern Ireland on an ongoing basis. In Northern Ireland the rate is 5 per 100,000 of the population, which is substantially less than the rates in the rest of the UK.

New entrants from countries of high prevalence of TB are screened at UK entry, usually Heathrow and where appropriate port health notifies the relevant Health Board in Northern Ireland. Occupational health departments screen new healthcare workers.

The Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) advises the Department of Health in relation to current vaccination and immunisation programmes and on the development of new programmes. The current policy for selective BCG vaccination for those at high risk in Northern Ireland is in line with policy in the rest of the UK and there are no plans to introduce a full screening and immunisation programme.

Additional Day Care Places

Dr William McCrea asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to create additional day care places in the Northern Health and Social Services Board area. (AQW 626/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The Northern Health and Social Services Board is working closely with the Northern Health and Social Care Trust to examine ways in which day support services can be reformed and modernised to meet the needs of their local population. A number of proposals for additional day support places for adults are at various stages of the planning process across the full range of adult programmes of care. These include proposals for the provision of respite day support placements.

Occupational Therapy Assessments

Dr William McCrea asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people waiting for an Occupational Therapy Assessment (a) in Northern Ireland and (b) in each of the Health and Social Services Board areas.

(AQW 629/07)

Mr McGimpsey: At 31 March 2007, 7,345 people were waiting for assessment by community occupational therapists in Northern Ireland. At this time, the EHSSB (3,040) had the highest number of people waiting for assessment by community occupational therapists, 1,472 in the NHSSB, 1,466 in the SHSSB, and 1,367 in the WHSSB.

Delayed Discharge from Antrim Area and Whiteabbey Hospitals

Dr William McCrea asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the number of delayed discharge at Antrim Area Hospital and Whiteabbey Hospital for each of the six months, and (b) what steps he is taking to reduce that number.

(AQW 630/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The number of delayed discharges at both Antrim Area Hospital and Whiteabbey Hospital for the 6 month period from November 2006 to April 2007 are as follows:

Month End	Antrim	Whiteabbey
Nov-06	19	18
Dec-06	19	22
Jan-07	16	26
Feb-07	17	22
Mar-07	15	26
Apr-07	10	14

Source: Departmental Return, DD1.

Notes:

Figures are presented in respect of the position at the last day of each month.

Information is currently provisional and subject to change.

To reduce this number an Emergency Care Reform Programme is currently being taken forward by my Department which will improve emergency access for all patients in Northern Ireland. The improvements will focus on the entire patient journey beginning with the ambulance journey and ending when the patient is discharged.

To monitor progress relating to timely discharge, targets have been implemented that from April 2007, 50% of complex discharges from an acute setting should take place within 72 hours of the patient being declared medically fit, and all other discharges within 12 hours of the patient being declared medically fit. By 31 March 2008 all complex discharges will be within 72 hours and non-complex within 6 hours.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Free Transport for Disabled People

Mr Peter Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development what consideration he has given to extending the categories of disabled people who are in receipt of free public transport. (AQW 386/07)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): I can confirm that, following a review of the Northern Ireland Concessionary Fares Scheme, I have asked that bids be made as part of the Budget 2007 process to extend the Concessionary Fares Scheme in a number of ways, including an element to extend free travel to disabled persons who are currently eligible for half fare concessions. Any extension of the scheme would be dependent upon securing the necessary resources. This means that the case for extending the scheme will need to be considered alongside the many other spending priorities which will be put before the Executive later this year.

Traffic Attendants

Mr George Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development if Roads Service traffic attendants have daily, weekly or monthly targets; and if they are rewarded with a financial bonus for attaining these targets.

(AQW 409/07)

Mr Murphy: I should explain that Traffic Attendants are employed by National Car Parks (NCP) Services (Ltd), who are contracted to my Department's Roads Service, to provide parking enforcement and car park management services. I have assumed that when you refer to "targets", you mean this in relation to the number of penalty charge notices traffic attendants issue.

I can advise that in the contract Roads Service has with NCP Services (Ltd), traffic attendants do not have daily, weekly or monthly quotas to meet for the number of tickets they issue. I can further advise that neither NCP Services (Ltd) nor individual Traffic Attendants receive a financial bonus based on the number of tickets issued.

My Department's aim is to encourage motorists to park properly and if motorists comply with the parking regulations then traffic attendants will not be able to issue penalty charge notices.

Distribution of Car Parking Revenue

Mr George Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will outline (a) which organisation receives the money raised through car parking fines; and (b) what the revenue from car parking fines is spent on. (AQW 411/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Roads Service receives and retains the revenue derived from all parking penalties. This income, along with income from other sources, is offset against the expenditure Roads Service incurs in maintaining and developing the roads network.

Traffic Accidents on the Randalstown Road

Mr David Burnside asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will indicate what precautions are being taken regarding the series of traffic accidents on the main Randalstown Road, between Randalstown and Antrim, over the past five years. (AQW 493/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Roads Service has monitored the collision history of this route over a number of years. On average, between 2002 and 2005, there were two collisions per year involving personal injury. In 2006, however, there were eight such collisions and up to March this year, there were four. A number of these collisions involved fatalities. Many of the latest collisions were associated with a series of bends between the Rugby Club and the entrance to Shane's Castle.

Collision remedial measures for this route between Randalstown and Antrim have been included in the programme of Local Transport and Safety Measures for the current financial year. The scheme provides high friction surfacing, additional central hatching, coloured surfacing to hatched areas, extension of a double white line system and improvements to warning signage. This work is well advanced and the warning signage will be erected in the near future.

Over the past five years, Roads Service has included providing edge of carriageway road markings and has constructed a shared use cycle route and footway, which

also served to improve road markings and provided areas of central hatching near road junctions and bends. I have asked officials in Roads Service to continue to monitor the number of collisions on this road.

Roads Service Funding

Mr Ian McCrea asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail how much money has been allocated to Roads Service for use in Magherafelt and Cookstown, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 512/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that some elements of its operational budget including resurfacing, patching, gully emptying, grass cutting etc. are allocated on a Section Office basis. However these figures do not give a realistic indication of actual spend within the section as sizeable elements of the budget are allocated either on a Divisional basis, or indeed on a province-wide basis. These include major and minor improvement works, traffic management, and street lighting.

Roads Service does, however, undertake an analysis of actual spend during the preceding financial year in each District Council area, which in the case of Magherafelt District Council and Cookstown District Council coincides with the respective Magherafelt and Cookstown Section Areas.

The table below provides details of spend in the Magherafelt District Council and Cookstown District Council areas during each of the last three years for which information is available.

District Council	Functional Area	2003/04 £K	2004/05 £K	2005/06 £K
Magherafelt	Capital	637	1964	1344
	Maintenance	3449	3029	3242
	Total	4086	4993	4586
Cookstown	Capital	673	948	975
	Maintenance	3282	3026	2605
	Total	3955	3974	3580

Additional Funding to Roads Service

Mr Ian McCrea asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the additional funding that was made available to Roads Service for use in Magherafelt and Cookstown, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 513/07)

Mr Murphy: As I advised in my reply to your Assembly Question AQW 512/07, while my Department's Roads Service allocates a portion of its

operational budget to Section Offices, which are coterminous with district council boundaries, sizeable elements of the budget are allocated on either a Divisional or province-wide basis.

It is not possible, therefore, to calculate meaningful initial budgets for district council areas that would permit a comparison with spend at year-end and thereby identify the level of additional in-year funding that you sought.

Crown Immunity

Mr Ian McCrea asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail what exemptions are granted to Northern Ireland Water through crown immunity. (AQW 514/07)

Mr Murphy: Northern Ireland Water is not granted any exemptions through crown immunity.

Waste Water Treatment Infrastructure

Mr Ian McCrea asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail Cookstown's position on the priority ranking matrix for an upgrade to its waste water treatment infrastructure. (AQW 515/07)

Mr Murphy: The Water and Sewerage Services (NI) Order 2006 transferred responsibility for the delivery of water and sewerage services from the Department's Water Service Agency to a statutory water and sewerage undertaker. A government-owned company, Northern Ireland Water (NIW) has been appointed as the undertaker and the issues raised are operational matters for it. I have asked the Chief Executive of NIW (Mrs. Katharine Bryan) to write to you in response to this question.

Waste Water Infrastructure System, Cookstown

Mr Ian McCrea asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will make available the necessary funding for the upgrade of the waste water infrastructure system in Cookstown. (AQW 516/07)

Mr Murphy: The Water and Sewerage Services (NI) Order 2006 transferred responsibility for the delivery of water and sewerage services from the Department's Water Service Agency to a statutory water and sewerage undertaker. A government-owned company, Northern Ireland Water (NIW) has been appointed as the undertaker and the issues raised are operational matters for it. I have asked the Chief Executive of NIW (Mrs. Katharine Bryan) to write to you in response to these questions.

Phosphoric Acid

Mrs Naomi Long asked the Minister for Regional Development what quantity of phosphoric acid is used annually in the drinking water of Northern Ireland. (AQW 528/07)

Mr Murphy: The Water and Sewerage Services (NI) Order 2006 transferred responsibility for the delivery of water and sewerage services from the Department's Water Service Agency to a statutory water and sewerage undertaker. A government-owned company, Northern Ireland Water (NIW) has been appointed as the undertaker and the issues raised are operational matters for it. I have asked the Chief Executive of NIW (Mrs. Katharine Bryan) to write to you in response to this question.

Blue Badge Holders

Mr David Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development to review the policy relating to disabled parking, to allow blue badge holders to avail of more flexible parking times and allocations in pedestrian zones. (AQW 531/07)

Mr Murphy: The policy for the issue and management of Restricted Zone Access Permits was last reviewed by my Department's Roads Service in June 2006. At that time, careful consideration was given to the competing needs of achieving safe and largely vehicle free areas for pedestrian movement, with the requirements of road users with disabilities. As a result a balance has been largely achieved through the use of standardised procedures and guidance governing access to Pedestrian Zones throughout the North. Under this guidance, Roads Service officials may make special arrangements for disabled road users with particular or exceptional needs.

In these circumstances, I do not propose to carry out a further review at present.

Flooding in Lower Ormeau

Mr Alex Maskey asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the steps taken by Northern Ireland Water to prevent the recurrence of flooding in the lower Ormeau area. (AQW 549/07)

Mr Murphy: The issues raised are operational matters for Northern Ireland Water (NIW) and I have asked its Chief Executive (Mrs. Katharine Bryan) to write to you in response.

However, I am disappointed that out-of-sewer flooding has occurred again in the Lower Ormeau area and I fully sympathise with residents who have

had to endure flooding on this and previous occasions. I immediately requested a report into what had happened and I have since received this report. I shall place a copy of the report in the Library. I have also written to the Chief Executive to emphasise how I wish to see continued engagement between NIW and the local community and their representatives to address the issue of flooding in the area.

Flooding in Lower Ormeau

Mr Alex Maskey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail at what stage of the weekend of 2/3 June 2007 it became apparent to Northern Ireland Water that there was potential for flooding in the lower Ormeau area; and what remedial steps were put in place by Northern Ireland Water. (AQW 550/07)

Mr Murphy: The issues raised are operational matters for Northern Ireland Water (NIW) and I have asked its Chief Executive (Mrs. Katharine Bryan) to write to you in response.

However, I am disappointed that out-of-sewer flooding has occurred again in the Lower Ormeau area and I fully sympathise with residents who have had to endure flooding on this and previous occasions. I immediately requested a report into what had happened and I have since received this report. I shall place a copy of the report in the Library. I have also written to the Chief Executive to emphasise how I wish to see continued engagement between NIW and the local community and their representatives to address the issue of flooding in the area.

Dungiven By-Pass

Mr Francis Brolly asked the Minister for Regional Development whether work on the Dungiven by-pass, currently part of the proposed 30km of dualling of the A6 from Derry/Londonderry towards Belfast under the Regional Strategy Transport Plan 2015, will be prioritised and commenced as soon as possible, to relieve the current traffic congestion in Dungiven. (AQW 555/07)

Mr Murphy: Proposals for a bypass of Dungiven have been merged with plans to dual the A6 from east of Dungiven to Derry. I am advised by my Department's Roads Service that, from a practical perspective, it will be necessary to take forward the development of the bypass in conjunction with the adjoining sections of road.

I am further informed that, work on the development of the scheme has progressed and that an initial report on the various corridor options has been completed. Roads Service is currently examining the findings and

it is proposed to commission consultants in the near future, to expand on this work and to bring forward a preferred route. It is envisaged that it may take several years to complete the statutory procedures and, ultimately, the timing of the scheme will be dependant on the availability of funding. However, the scheme is currently planned to commence in the latter part of the Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan period, which ends in 2015.

Craigtlet Hills Road Network

Dr Stephen Farry asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans are being considered to realign the road network over the Craigtlet hills, namely the Ballysallagh Road, Whinney Hill and the Ballymiscaw Road, in order to address the weight of traffic and to better reflect the flow of traffic. (AQW 567/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Roads Service has investigated the feasibility of a number of schemes for improving the flow of traffic on the road network over the Craigtlet Hills. The preferred option currently being considered involves the provision of a roundabout at the junction of Craigtlet Road/Whinney Hill Road/Dunlady Road/Hollywood Road and a further roundabout at the Whinney Hill Road/Ballymiscaw Road junction.

Roads Service will now proceed to the initial design stage. I would, however, advise that commencement of the works will be dependant on the satisfactory outcome of an economic appraisal, of the statutory procedures and the availability of funding through the normal budgetary process.

There are no further plans to improve other parts of this route in the immediate future.

Residents' Parking Schemes

Dr Stephen Farry asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will reconsider the proposed charge of £80 per household, for the purchase of an annual permit as part of residents' parking schemes, taking into account the impact of planning decisions that have contributed to parking issues in residential areas close to city and town centres. (AQW 570/07)

Mr Murphy: Following the completion of a public consultation exercise in February 2007, my Department's Roads Service is currently finalising a new policy which will facilitate the introduction of Residents' Parking Schemes.

I am aware that the level of charge for permits was raised in a significant number of responses to the

consultation and Roads Service is considering these, along with all other responses, in drafting the final policy.

I anticipate that the final policy will be completed and sent to me shortly for approval. I note your concern and will bear this in mind in making a final decision on the policy.

As regards the impact of planning decisions, the amount of parking required in any development is negotiated with developers according to the specific characteristics of the development and its location having regard to the Planning Service's published standards. Lesser provision may be acceptable in some inner urban locations and other high density areas. Proposals should not prejudice road safety or significantly inconvenience the flow of traffic.

Transport Schemes

Mrs Michelle O'Neill asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will confirm the criteria for (a) door to door transport schemes; and (b) community rural transport schemes. (AQW 602/07)

Mr Murphy: The door to door transport scheme provides transport services for people with disabilities or who find it difficult using mainstream public transport and who reside in an urban area, which is defined as an area with a settlement population of 10,000 or greater.

The rural community transport scheme, supported by my Department's Rural Transport Fund, provides transport opportunities for people with reduced mobility in rural areas, which are defined as settlements with a population of less than 10,000 and the open countryside.

Transport Schemes

Mrs Michelle O'Neill asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will confirm that persons using the door to door transport scheme are excluded from using the community rural transport scheme. (AQW 603/07)

Mr Murphy: The schemes serve residents of different places and, therefore, a member of the door to door scheme cannot be a member of the rural community transport scheme.

Sustrans Cycle Route

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will give a timescale for the work to be done to the Sustrans cycle route between Comber and Dundonald. (AQW 622/07)

Mr Murphy: The proposed cycle route between Comber and Dundonald is being co-ordinated by Sustrans, (a charity whose aim is to promote cycling and walking). It is scheduled to be completed by September 2008.

Use of Hard Shoulder

Mr Raymond McCartney asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will consider opening up the hard shoulder on main arterial routes, for use by slow moving vehicles. (AQW 648/07)

Mr Murphy: I should explain that the Road Traffic Regulation (NI) Order 1997 precludes road users from using the hard shoulder of a carriageway as a running lane unless they are specifically directed to do so by authorised signs. Such hard shoulders are intended for emergency use only. They are not normally constructed to carry the weight of traffic, especially slower moving traffic, which may invariably consist of a high proportion of HGVs.

My Department's Roads Service has experimented with the provision of a lane designated specifically for slower moving traffic on the A4, near Ballygawley and on the A6, near Dungiven. Short sections of the hard shoulder were upgraded and signed for slower vehicles to use, thus allowing faster following traffic to overtake them. Monitoring of these lanes has indicated that they have been of little value in improving traffic flow as the slower moving vehicles are reluctant to use the facility because they experience difficulty merging into faster moving traffic when attempting to re-join the carriageway.

The Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan identifies a £1.6 billion programme of improvements to the strategic road network including new dual carriageways and widened single carriageways with overtaking facilities. As well as improving journey times and reducing driver frustration through the provision of additional passing opportunities, these investments should also considerably improve road safety.

Railway Line between Ballymena and Derry/Londonderry

Mr Gregory Campbell asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps are being taken to upgrade and improve the rail line and service between Ballymena Borough Council area and Derry/Londonderry City Council area. (AQW 677/07)

Mr Murphy: Work on rail services between Belfast and Derry is currently being carried out to maintain services on the line at existing levels in accordance with the Railways Review Group Report

published in 2004. Following the carrying out of an appraisal which assessed the merits of a range of options for future railways provision the Department is bidding for additional funding to upgrade the Derry line as part of the second Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland.

Translink have recently submitted to the Department an economic appraisal of options in support of a £12.0m project to deliver track life extension on parts of the Ballymena to Derry Line. This is currently with the Department's Economists who are carrying out an evaluation of the business case before it is forwarded to DFP for approval. It will then be considered in the light of the approach being taken in relation to the overall railways appraisal.

In the meantime, problems have arisen on the line close to Ballymoney where wet beds are leading to deterioration of the track. This requires urgent attention to avoid speed restrictions or possibly closure. The Department has approved capital grant of £489,000 to enable this to be addressed.

A network-wide programme of upgrading and improving railway stations and halts in accordance with Translink's New Rail Vision project and Disability Discrimination Legislation requirements is underway. Stations and halts between Derry and Ballymena will benefit from this work.

Drain Cleansing in Clarawood Estate

Mr Robin Newton asked the Minister for Regional Development to confirm the last date on which drain cleansing teams were working in the Clarawood area of Belfast, and, in particular, in Clara Park.

(AQW 727/07)

Mr Murphy: Roads Service aims to inspect, and clean where necessary, all gullies in urban areas twice each year. Gullies in rural areas are inspected, and cleaned if necessary, once each year. This policy ensures that a reasonable level of maintenance is carried out to drainage systems, taking account of the Department's finite funding and staff resource levels.

Within the Greater Belfast area, there are 136,000 storm water road gullies and so it requires considerable resource on an ongoing basis to inspect and clean the entire network of gullies and road drains.

The storm water road gullies in the Clarawood area were cleaned in October/ November/ December 2006. The gullies in Clara Park were cleaned on 31 October 2006.

I should point out that the extreme flooding which occurred in the afternoon of 12 June 2007 was not caused by any failure to maintain the operational effectiveness of the storm water gullies or road drains.

The gullies, road drains and watercourses were overwhelmed by the deluge of rain which fell within a 2 hour period.

Drain Cleansing in Clonduff Estate

Mr Robin Newton asked the Minister for Regional Development to confirm the last date on which drain cleansing teams were working in the Clonduff area of Belfast, and, in particular, in Clonduff Drive.

(AQW 728/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that it aims to inspect, and clean where necessary, all gullies in urban areas twice each year. Gullies in rural areas are inspected and cleaned, if necessary, once each year. This policy ensures that a reasonable level of maintenance is carried out to drainage systems, taking account of the Department's finite funding and staff resource levels. I can confirm that the storm water gullies in the Clonduff area of Castlereagh were cleaned between 29 December 2006 and 3 January 2007. Those in Clonduff Drive were cleaned on 2 January 2007 and 3 January 2007.

The extreme flooding which occurred in the afternoon of 12 June 2007 was not caused by any failure to maintain the operational effectiveness of the storm water gullies or road drains. The gullies, road drains and watercourses were overwhelmed by the deluge of rain which fell within a 2 hour period.

Drain Cleansing in Cregagh Area

Lord Browne asked the Minister for Regional Development to confirm the last date on which drain cleansing teams were working in the Cregagh area of Belfast, and, in particular, in Ardgowan Street.

(AQW 729/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Road Service has advised me that it aims to inspect and clean where necessary, all gullies in urban areas twice each year. Gullies in rural areas are inspected and cleaned if necessary, once each year. This policy ensures that a reasonable level of maintenance is carried out to drainage systems, taking account of the Department's finite funding and staff resource levels. I can confirm that the storm water road gullies in the Cregagh area were cleaned in January/February 2007. The gullies in Ardgowan Street were cleaned on 1 February 2007.

The extreme flooding which occurred in the afternoon of 12 June 2007 was not caused by any failure to maintain the operational effectiveness of the storm water gullies or road drains. The gullies, road drains and watercourses were overwhelmed by the deluge of rain which fell within a 2 hour period.

Drain Cleansing in East Belfast

Lord Browne asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the rota system that is employed, and the frequency of drain cleansing, for each drain in the East Belfast area. (AQW 730/07)

Mr Murphy: Roads Service aims to inspect and clean where necessary, all gullies in urban areas twice each year. Gullies in rural areas are inspected and cleaned if necessary, once each year. This policy ensures that a reasonable level of maintenance is carried out to drainage systems, taking account of the Department's finite funding and staff resource levels.

Within Eastern Division there are 136,000 storm water road gullies and so it requires considerable resource on an ongoing basis to inspect and clean the entire network of gullies and road drains. 29,231 gullies are located in East and South Belfast.

Gullies on the main roads in East Belfast are cleaned on a 6 monthly cyclical basis (twice annually) and the remaining gullies are cleaned every 12 months (annually).

The extreme flooding which occurred in the afternoon of 12 June 2007 was not caused by any failure to maintain the operational effectiveness of the storm water gullies or road drains. The gullies, road drains and watercourses were overwhelmed by the deluge of rain which fell within a 2-hour period.

Drain Cleansing in East Belfast

Lord Browne asked the Minister for Regional Development how many drain cleansing teams and vehicles operate in the East Belfast area, at any one time. (AQW 731/07)

Mr Murphy: Roads Service aims to inspect and clean where necessary, all gullies in urban areas twice each year. Gullies in rural areas are inspected and cleaned if necessary, once each year. This policy ensures that a reasonable level of maintenance is carried out to drainage systems, taking account of the Department's finite funding and staff resource levels.

Within Eastern Division there are 136,000 storm water road gullies and so it requires considerable resource on an ongoing basis to inspect and clean the entire network of gullies and road drains.

In the East Belfast area, up to three High Pressure Jetting / Gully emptying teams operate at any one time to undertake the cyclical maintenance programme.

Where specific problems are identified an investigatory drainage team is deployed as required.

In addition a Roads Service Emergency Squad is available to carry out works at short notice.

The extreme flooding which occurred in the afternoon of 12 June 2007 was not caused by any failure to maintain the operational effectiveness of the storm water gullies or road drains. The gullies, road drains and watercourses were overwhelmed by the deluge of rain which fell within a 2 hour period.

Drain Cleansing in Castlereagh Area

Lord Browne asked the Minister for Regional Development to confirm the last date on which drain cleansing teams were working in the Castlereagh area of Belfast, and, in particular, in Ladas Drive. (AQW 732/07)

Mr Murphy: I understand that the storm water road gullies in the Ladas Drive area were last cleaned in February 2007.

The extreme flooding which occurred in the afternoon of 12 June 2007 was not caused by any failure to maintain the operational effectiveness of the storm water gullies or road drains. The gullies, road drains and watercourses were overwhelmed by the deluge of rain which fell within a 2-hour period.

My Department's Roads Service aims to inspect and clean, where necessary, all gullies in urban areas twice each year. Gullies in rural areas are inspected and cleaned, if necessary, once each year. This policy ensures that a reasonable level of maintenance is carried out to drainage systems, taking account of the Department's finite funding and staff resource levels.

Within Eastern Division there are 136,000 storm water road gullies and so it requires considerable resources, on an ongoing basis, to inspect and clean the entire network of gullies and road drains.

Traffic Volume on Bangor Road, Newtownards

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide figures on the daily numbers of vehicles that use the Bangor Road, Newtownards. (AQW 760/07)

Mr Murphy: I should explain that traffic volume data is collected by my Department's Roads Service by means of 273 automatic census points strategically located across the road network. The information is recorded either for 365 days per year or for one week in each quarter during the year and an annual average calculated. The results are published in Roads Service's annual Traffic and Travel Information Report, which presents the traffic volumes in a variety of formats for each site.

Roads Service has a traffic census point located on the A21 Bangor Road, Newtownards and the annual

average daily two way traffic flow information for the last three years at this census point is shown in the table below.

Location	Annual Average Daily Traffic		
	2004	2005	2006
A21 Bangor Road, Newtownards	21,080	21,260	22,370

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Switchboard Services in the Housing Executive, Newtownards

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development if she will give details of the answering service for the Housing Executive office in Newtownards, in relation to (a) the location of the answering service for transferred/unanswered calls; and (b) delays in answering transferred calls. (AQW 433/07)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): Telephone calls to the Newtownards District and the Area Office in Newtownards are answered either through a switchboard operator based in the Newtownards District office; or through direct lines to individual members of staff.

- In the absence of the switchboard operator, calls are handled by switchboard services in the Housing Centre in Belfast. This change has been introduced in recent weeks and is part of a major upgrade to the telephony switchboard services. When a call is received by the switchboard operator, irrespective of the location of the operator, the calls are transferred to the appropriate officer, or, if that person is not available, to a member of staff within the department.
- There should be no delay in answering transferred calls.

Reduction of Error and Fraud within the Benefits System

Mr Roy Beggs asked the Minister for Social Development what action her department has taken to reduce error and fraud within the benefits system, with reference to the costs to the taxpayer of up to £400,000 a day in 2005/06. (AQW 464/07)

Ms Ritchie: The Department has a robust strategy for tackling fraud and error in the social security system wherever it occurs. The strategy focuses on

prevention, detection, correction of errors and where appropriate prosecution of fraudsters.

Activities include a comprehensive programme of reviewing cases; Accuracy Improvement Plans, staff training, systems modernisation, a counter fraud publicity campaign and where appropriate, investigation of suspected fraudulent cases.

Housing Benefit Expenditure

Mr Patsy McGlone asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the amount of money spent on payment of Housing Benefit in each of the years 2001/02; 2002/03; 2003/04; 2004/05; 2005/06; and 2006/07 for (a) Housing Executive tenants (respective number of claimants); (b) Housing Association tenants (respective number of claimants); and (c) private sector tenants (respective number of claimants). (AQW 468/07)

Ms Ritchie: The information is not available in the format requested. The following tables detail housing benefit expenditure by housing tenure for the period requested and the total number of housing benefit claimants by housing tenure respectively.

HOUSING BENEFIT EXPENDITURE BY HOUSING TENURE

Year	Public	Private*	Total
2001-2002	£199.6m	£127.5m	£327.1m
2002-2003	£199.1m	£152.9m	£352m
2003-2004	£192.4m	£154.6m	£347m
2004-2005	£195.0m	£176.5m	£371.5m
2005-2006	£195.1m	£191.0m	£386.1m
2006-2007	£195.5m	£209.9m	£405.4m

* Includes Housing Associations.

TOTAL NUMBER OF HOUSING BENEFIT CLAIMANTS BY HOUSING TENURE

Year	Public (NIHE)	Housing Association (HA)	Private Landlord**	Total Private (HA & Landlord)	Grand Total
2001/2002	85,958	*n/a	*n/a	42,361	128,319
2002/2003	81,844	*n/a	*n/a	47,543	129,387
2003/2004	75,322	*n/a	*n/a	50,732	126,054
2004/2005	72,641	17,177	38,284	55,461	128,102
2005/2006	71,536	17,070	41,272	58,342	129,878
2006/2007	68,681	17,880	43,417	61,297	129,978

* Data is not available for this period.

** Private landlord cases include those where only the rates element of the Housing Benefit claim is paid.

Asbestos in Housing Executive Properties

Mr Ian McCrea asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of Housing Executive properties in Cookstown and Magherafelt where asbestos has been identified. (AQW 481/07)

Ms Ritchie: The Housing Executive has commissioned surveys covering 294 of its dwellings in Cookstown, and 375 in Magherafelt to identify the presence of asbestos.

The surveys carried out to date have highlighted the presence of asbestos in 52 dwellings in the Coolnafranky Estate in Cookstown which requires remedial work to be carried out.

Preliminary results from survey reports for the Greenvale and Ratheen estates in Cookstown indicate that a further 38 dwellings will require similar remedial work.

No properties within the Magherafelt area have yet been found to require such remedial work.

A special scheme for asbestos remedial work to the affected dwellings in Coolnafranky Estate has been tendered. Work will commence in July 2007 and should be completed within three months.

Subsequently the Coolnafranky scheme will be extended to include any remedial work required to dwellings at Greenvale and Ratheen.

Asbestos in Housing Executive Properties

Mr Ian McCrea asked the Minister for Social Development to detail what plans she has to facilitate the removal of asbestos within Housing Executive properties in Cookstown and Magherafelt; and if she will give a timescale for the completion of this work. (AQW 482/07)

Ms Ritchie: The Housing Executive has commissioned surveys covering 294 of its dwellings in Cookstown, and 375 in Magherafelt to identify the presence of asbestos.

The surveys carried out to date have highlighted the presence of asbestos in 52 dwellings in the Coolnafranky Estate in Cookstown which requires remedial work to be carried out.

Preliminary results from survey reports for the Greenvale and Ratheen estates in Cookstown indicate that a further 38 dwellings will require similar remedial work.

No properties within the Magherafelt area have yet been found to require such remedial work.

A special scheme for asbestos remedial work to the affected dwellings in Coolnafranky Estate has been

tendered. Work will commence in July 2007 and should be completed within three months.

Subsequently the Coolnafranky scheme will be extended to include any remedial work required to dwellings at Greenvale and Ratheen.

Housing Waiting List, Down District

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development if she will outline the number of people on the waiting list for housing in Down District Council area (a) in priority housing need; and (b) on the transfer list. (AQW 506/07)

Ms Ritchie: At 31 March 2007 there were 663 applicants who were deemed to be in housing stress (ie who had been awarded 30 or more housing need points) in the Down District area. There are 250 current NIHE and housing associations tenants on the transfer list.

Housing Waiting List, Ards

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development if she will outline the number of people on the waiting list for housing in Ards Borough Council area (a) in priority housing need; and (b) on the transfer list. (AQW 507/07)

Ms Ritchie: At 31 March 2007 there were 880 applicants who were deemed to be in housing stress (ie who had been awarded 30 or more housing need points) in the Ards Borough area. There are 392 current NIHE and housing associations tenants on the transfer list.

Housing Waiting List, Castlereagh

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development if she will outline the number of people on the waiting list for housing in Castlereagh Borough Council area (a) in priority housing need; and (b) on the transfer list. (AQW 508/07)

Ms Ritchie: At 31 March 2007 there were 641 applicants who were deemed to be in housing stress (ie who had been awarded 30 or more housing need points) in the Castlereagh Borough area. There are 302 current NIHE and housing associations tenants on the transfer list.

Surplus Land and Property Assets

Mr Fra McCann asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the property and land assets of her department; the value of these assets; any assets identified as surplus; the value of surplus land and

property assets; and to identify all land and property assets that have not been valued. (AQW 538/07)

Ms Ritchie: My Department has property and land assets valued at £539 million. I am currently considering which of these lands could be used for social or affordable housing. The bulk of the assets listed are held for development purposes and none have therefore been identified as surplus. Details of all these assets are as follows:

Description	Valuation
Urban Regeneration & Community Development Group	£
Rathenraw Industrial Est	1,000.00
Nursery Pk Belfast Rd Bmena	12,000.00
184 North Queen St Belfast	25,000.00
232 Newtownards Road	35,000.00
17-21 Battenberg St Belfast	300,000.00
15-15a Greenland St Belfast	300,000.00
102 Mayo Street	950,000.00
Former Nicholl Engineering	850,000.00
20-32 Ormeau Rd Belfast	600,000.00
275 Albertbridge Rd Belfast	50,000.00
2-6 Bellevue St & 1a Sugarfield	100,000.00
Seagoe Wastewater Works	12,500.00
Land at 23 Carbet Rd Pdown	235,000.00
Land Adj 22 Carbet Rd	615,000.00
Land Adj 88 Kernan Gds	1,500.00
50-58 York Rd Belfast	80,000.00
30-34 Oldpark Rd Belfast	100,000.00
277 Albertbridge Rd Belfast	50,000.00
Franklyn Pk Lurgan	8,320.00
Cooke St/River Terrace Belfast	0.00
Carlisle Pass Steps	2.00
8 Castlereagh Street	15,000.00
286-294 Shankill Rd	350,000.00
P1 Portadown Rd/Ballynamoney	13,000,000.00
Derprob Bd 93-107 Shankill Rd	150,000.00
Land at 294-296 Crumlin Rd	200,000.00
72-74 Shore Rd Newtownabbey	200,000.00
378/380/382/384/386 Shankill Road	370,000.00
178-180 Shankill Road	200,000.00
Vennel Car Park, Bangor	550,000.00
Land at Willow Street	18,257.00

Description	Valuation
Lonsdale Road, Armagh	172,141.00
Plot 55 Ballee	12,480,000.00
Plots 5a and 30 Ballee	16,800,000.00
Plots 13 A & B Ballee	1,120,000.00
Ballee Road Link Ballymena	1.00
Plot 16, 23 & 49 Ballymena	7,360,000.00
Plot 39 Ballee	3,680,000.00
Plot 24b Galgorm	7,360,000.00
Ballykeel House	19,550,000.00
Plot 11 Ballee	1,440,000.00
Plot 45e Ballymena	1,840,000.00
58 New Lodge Road	230,000.00
New Lodge Road Antrim	7,000.00
Plots 3, 4 5c and 22 Toome Rd	38,400,000.00
Plot 39a Antrim Rd Ballymena	11,600,000.00
Antrim Rd Roundabout	920,000.00
Plot 45 Balltleson	12,000,000.00
Plot 41a Ballymena	1,120,000.00
Plots 11b 33 & 34 Ballee Road	20,480,000.00
Plots 45a and 45c Ballee	6,080,000.00
Niblock Road	25,600,000.00
Plot 6 Ballymena	14,000,000.00
Belfast Road 61a	320,000.00
Plot B Castle Road	3,750.00
Plot A Castle Road	1,250.00
Plot 47b Niblock Road	960,000.00
Plot 14 Birchill Road	50,000.00
Plot 34c Acc Moylena Rd	600,000.00
Plots 15, 16, 1 & 2 Irishtown	14,800,000.00
Plots 12 & 13 Birchill Road	23,200,000.00
Plots 42a & 42b Niblock Road	14,400,000.00
Spencer Road/Lower Fountain Hill	68,310.00
St Augustine's Site	614,790.00
City Hotel Site	2,732,400.00
North Bradley's Pass	492,538.43
Land at William Street	17,078.00
Bogtown Glen	714,840.00
Colin Way Amenity Site	6,325.00
Laurel Glen	18,975.00

Description	Valuation
Stewartstown Road	1,895,929.00
Land Adjacent to Pinebank	170,016.00
St Kieran's Site	32,603.00
Land Adjacent to Old Colin Wood	125,902.00
Land Adjoining Dairy Farm	358,628.00
Lanark Way Frontage Land	104,328.00
Land at Henry Place	130,410.00
Land at Ballygomartin Road	39,123.00
Woodvale Campus Site	352,107.00
Land at Brittons Pde/Mica Dr	130,410.00
Land at Springfield Ave/Dr	37,950.00
Land at Springfield Drive	29,342.00
284 - 296 Shankill Road	52,164.00
Land at Alliance Drive	260,820.00
Springfield Dam	75,900.00
Land at Millfield	939,517.19
Land at Samuel Street	181,426.31
Pani Site Springfield Parade	1,043,280.00
Paisley Park	0.00
Land at Forthriver Valley	6,521.00
Land at Meadowbank	1.00
Linenhall St Ballymoney	229,522.00
Plot 37a Ballee Road West	22,800,000.00
Culnafeigh Green, Antrim	40,000.00
4 Ballycraigy Road, Antrim	224,000.00
Plot 34b, Moylena Rd 27b-Belmo	21,600,000.00
Ballinacor Portadown	137,871.00
Lisniskey Portadown	64,000,000.00
Carbet Road Portadown	2,192,000.00
10 Ballynamoney Lane Craigavon	278,970.00
Ballinacor Portadown	149,500.00
45 Drumgor Lane, Portadown	368,000.00
57 Carbet Road, Portadown	108,397.00
120 Lurgan Road, Portadown	1,280,000.00
31 Clanrolla Road, Portadown	763,931.42
34 Ballynamoney Lane, Craigavo	800,000.00
Knockmenagh, Portadown	40,000,000.00
Westacres, Craigavon	2,080,000.00
Tannaghmore North Road	62,500.00

Description	Valuation
Old/New Charlestown Road	2,800,000.00
Old Charlestown Road, Portadown	129,408.22
P2 Drumnagoon Road Portadown	661,250.00
P1 Drumnagoon Road Portadown	155,250.00
Adjacent to Drumgor Park, Craigavon	1.00
Kilvergan Road/Carbet Road, Po	62,500.00
Carbet Road, Balteagh	558,750.00
Carbet Road, Portadown	230,000.00
Adj to Ardowen Estate, Craigav	1,280,000.00
Land Between 8-11 Masserene St	160,000.00
Plot 9 Toome Road, Ballymena	640,000.00
Plot 9a Toome Road, Ballymena	4,320,000.00
Plot 45b Ballee Road East	1,600,000.00
164 Toome Road, Ballymena	160,000.00
Wyncroft 18, Antrim Road, Ball	40,000.00
23 Steeple Road, Antrim	48,000.00
23 Steeple Road, Antrim	240,000.00
Gateway Site Strabane	204,930.00
Galliagh Linear Park	1.00
Land at 366-372 Shankill Road	50,208.00
Property at 499/501 Crumlin Rd	65,205.00
118-120 Antrim Road - Derelict Former Hotel	247,779.00
181 Duncairn Gardens Belfast	10,433.00
172 North Queen Street	15,649.00
Backland/Main St C'derg	172,141.00
Lands Fronting Kernan Gdns	402,500.00
Property 128-138 Peters Hill	123,890.00
Upper North St, Carrick Hill	35,863.00
Bankmore Street	1.00
Writers Square Belfast	1.00
Blackstaff Square Belfast	1.00
Coalisland	22,952.00
48 High Street, Antrim	143,750.00
Dublin Road, Antrim	240,000.00
Dublin/Lough Road, Antrim	1,000,000.00
Dublin Road Antrim	200,000.00
Larne Road, Ballymena	1.00
Moylena Road, Antrim (28078)	240,000.00
Land at Muckamore, Antrim	1,150.00

Description	Valuation
M1/M12 Motorway	517,500.00
308 Shankill Road, Belfast	19,562.00
312 Shankill Road, Belfast	19,562.00
310 Shankill Road, Belfast	19,562.00
Car Park, Coleraine	65,205.00
34 Union Place, D'gannon	2,142.00
Eden Street, Enniskillen	100,416.00
11 Market Square, D'gannon	1.00
5 Sites at Union St, D'gannon	127.00
Amenity Land, Dervock	822.00
Walls Site, Strabane	1.00
Main St, Carrickmore	86,071.00
Main Street, Belleek	1.00
Car Park at Cliff Road	86,071.00
Slaters Cross, Belleek	1.00
Old Customs Post, Tullyhommon	1.00
The Diamond, Castlederg	1.00
Plumbridge, Co Tyrone	1.00
Rodgers Quay, Carrickfergus	1.00
Car Park, Cornmill	229,522.00
Roadway, Stewartstown	1.00
Footpath Main Street, Clogher	1.00
Tullyhommon	1.00
Substation, Castle St Antrim	124.00
Bank Square, Belfast	1.00
Richmond Chambers	3,961,980.00
Roe Street, Belfast	8,477.00
Tullygarley Road	57,500.00
Riverside Walk	1.00
Belmont Rd Area Antrim	1.00
Cunningham Way Antrim	600,000.00
Belfast Road Antrim	5,000,000.00
Belfast Rd/Fountain Hill	0.00
Vacant Building	45,644.00
Castle St Antrim	115.00
Monbrief Rd Drumgask	19,562.00
183-191 Beersbridge Rd	189,095.00
2a Adam St Belfast	94,547.00
Fort George Former Army Base	14,904,000.00

Description	Valuation
Community Garden Poleglass	1.00
Former College Templemore	65,205.00
301-303 Donegall Road	371,669.00
211-217 Beersbridge Rd	97,808.00
357-361 Donegall Rd Belfast	208,656.00
Merkland Place / Cupar Way	32,603.00
Land at Avondale Manor	5,750.00
Moyraverty Craigavon	8,000,000.00
Land at Alliance Rd / Glenbryn	1.00
339-343 Donegall Rd Belfast	776,250.00
Kwik-Fit (Ni) Ltd N/Ards Rd	521,640.00
25 Rydalmere St Belfast	372,600.00
Clooney L/Derry	14,904,000.00
Clooney L/Derry	974,970.00
10 Castlereagh St Belfast	18,630.00
124-130 Sandy Row 39-49 Albion	953,235.00
Carrick Maritime	86,940.00
2,4 & 6 Castlereagh Street	69,000.00
10 York Road	20,700.00
52/56 Clandeboyne Street	184,000.00
139/141 Albertbridge Road	129,375.00
174 North Queens Street	13,800.00
130-138 Castlereagh St & 62-64clandeboyne Street	258,750.00
Middlepath St/N'ards Rd Bfast	3,450.00
Land at Ballysillan Park	71,875.00
Derelict Building Shankill Rd	164,450.00
92 Kilvergan Rd, Craigavon	531,250.00
374a Shankill Road	49,163.00
519 Falls Road	460,000.00
188-194 North Queens Street	304,750.00
Armagh House, Ormeau Road	1,150,000.00
Ravenhill Reach	575,000.00
22-28, 40 Old Park Road	23,000.00
42-44 Old Park Road	59,800.00
Ss Nomadic	171,353.94
12 York Road, Belfast	34,500.00
Girdwood Army Base	8,337,500.00
Total Urban Regeneration & Community Development Group	525,989,955.51

Description	Valuation
Social Security Agency	
Building 28 Temple Road Lisahally Londonderry	1,330,714.34
Building Plaza Buildings 31 - 41 Chichester Street Belfast	9,531,041.50
Building 28 Temple Road Lisahally Londonderry	68,228.52
Land	
Lisahally	2,152,500.00
Total Social Security Agency	13,082,484.36
Total Department for Social Development	539,072,439.87

Water Damage to Housing Executive Property

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development if she will explain why water damage to 29 Mill Street Court, Newtownards, caused by leakages in October 2005 from the flat above, has not yet been addressed; and why the elderly tenant has been using temporary electrical fittings since that time.

(AQW 571/07)

Ms Ritchie: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive received a report of water damage to an owner occupied property at 29 Mill Street Court on 24 November 2005, caused by a leak from one of its properties above. Arrangements were made for the Response Maintenance Contractor to make an immediate call-out to the affected Housing Executive property to remedy the defect. The work involved the replacement of taps and copper piping. No further work is outstanding at the property.

The Housing Executive is not liable for any damage to the owner occupied property or responsible for electrical fittings used by the occupier.

Requests for the Purchase of Housing Executive Land / Property

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the number of requests from tenants wishing to purchase Housing Executive land and/or property in the (a) Ards Borough Council area;

and (b) the Strangford constituency, that have been with the department for (a) 6 months; (b) 12 months; (c) 18 months; and (d) 24+ months. (AQW 572/07)

Ms Ritchie: There are no applications with the Department for the purchase of land/property from the Housing Executive in these areas.

Maintenance of Housing Executive Property

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development if she will give a timescale within which the Housing Executive will clear and clean the grass area, clear the builders' rubble and put in top soil at the front and rear of the bungalows at Halifax Way, West Winds, Newtownards, taking into account that repeated requests have been made and, to date, no action has been taken. (AQW 580/07)

Ms Ritchie: The Housing Executive has instructed the Contractor responsible for the relevant scheme to ensure that the requested work is completed within one week, from 15 June 2007.

Car Parking in West Winds, Newtownards

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development if she will give a date for commencement of the extra car parking provision at the rear of the bungalows at Halifax Walk, West Winds, Newtownards, in light of the fact that the scheme was agreed 4-5 months ago. (AQW 583/07)

Ms Ritchie: A Multi Element Improvement scheme is currently onsite in the West Winds estate. Provision for car parking was not initially included within this scheme but following your representations on behalf of the residents, the Housing Executive agreed to provide a small number of extra parking spaces on an unused green area. As this work was additional to the original contract, negotiations had to take place with the contractor undertaking the scheme. Appropriate Planning and Roads Service approvals had to be obtained. An Architect's Instruction was issued to the contractor to include the proposed amendments to the scheme and work has commenced.

For Health & Safety reasons, the work could not have commenced sooner as the improvement works to the dwellings had to be completed first.

Public Meetings with Village Residents

Mr Jimmy Spratt asked the Minister for Social Development if she will provide details of any public meetings between departmental officials and residents in the Village area of South Belfast, that have taken

place in the last six months; and if she will detail how residents were made aware of these meetings.

(AQW 586/07)

Ms Ritchie: No public meetings have taken place in the last six months between departmental officials and residents in the Village area of South Belfast.

Housing Waiting List, South Belfast

Mr Jimmy Spratt asked the Minister for Social Development if she will provide details of the number of people on the waiting list for housing in the South Belfast area, who are in priority housing need.

(AQW 587/07)

Ms Ritchie: At 31 March 2007 the waiting list for the Northern Ireland Housing Executive South Belfast district office area contained 1,126 applicants who were deemed to be in housing stress (i.e. any applicant who has been awarded 30 or more housing need points).

Purchase of Single Houses in Strangford

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development how many single houses in the Strangford constituency have each of the Housing Associations purchased, to use for rented accommodation, in the last twelve months.

(AQW 600/07)

Ms Ritchie: In the past 12 months 2 registered housing associations have purchased a total of 14 individual houses in the Strangford constituency to use for rented accommodation.

Bangor Social Security Office

Mr Alex Easton asked the Minister for Social Development if she will outline her plans for the future provision of services at Bangor Social Security Office.

(AQW 611/07)

Ms Ritchie: The Agency remains committed to the rollout of a Jobs & Benefits office in Bangor to ensure that clients benefit from the same enhanced work-focused service which is available elsewhere in the province. The Agency has advertised twice in the European Journal and local press to identify potential sites for the new office but without success. Efforts continue to secure an appropriate site for the new Bangor Jobs & Benefits office.

Social Housing Needs in Portadown

Mr John O'Dowd asked the Minister for Social Development what steps she is taking to address the social housing shortage in Portadown, and to look into

the viability of vesting the empty dwellings in Water Street in Portadown, for a possible social housing project.

(AQW 628/07)

Ms Ritchie: Over the short to medium term the projected need in Portadown will be largely met through the allocation of the additional properties being provided through the development programme and relets of existing social stock. In the financial year to 31 March 2007, 193 such properties were allocated to applicants on the waiting list.

The Housing Executive has concluded that it is not currently necessary to vest dwellings in Water Street on the basis of housing need. However on the wider housing front in Northern Ireland I have asked the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to start work on an Empty Homes Strategy to reduce the number of empty dwellings.

Child Support Agency

Dr William McCrea asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the average waiting time between a complaint being referred to (a) the chief executive of the Child Support Agency, and (b) the independent case examiner for the Child Support Agency; and the commencement of the investigation into that complaint.

(AQW 681/07)

Ms Ritchie: The Northern Ireland Child Support Agency does not measure the waiting time between a complaint being referred to the Chief Executive and the commencement of an investigation. The Agency does however monitor and measure the time taken to send a full reply to a complainant. The Agency aims to have a reply in at least 90% of cases within 20 working days of the date of receipt of the complaint.

In the 2006/2007 business year, the Northern Ireland Child Support Agency replied to 97% of complaints addressed to the Chief Executive within 20 working days of receipt.

Upon accepting a complaint for consideration, the Independent Case Examiner initially seeks to resolve issues through mediation. If this cannot be achieved, cases are then allocated to Investigation Officers as quickly as possible.

For the 12 months ending 30 May 2007, the average waiting times for Northern Ireland Child Support Agency cases were:

- From receipt to the start of the mediation process – 2.75 weeks
- From receipt to the start of a full examination of the papers – 18.03 weeks.

The aim is to clear complaints within an average of 34 weeks from receipt.

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