
Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 27 June 2011

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. I wonder whether you would be minded to ease the restriction on Members wearing jackets in the Chamber, given that it is very warm in the Building today.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Member for his point of order. As the Member will know, I am very strong on dress code in the Chamber. However, I am also very conscious — I know that the Member himself is very strong on dress code in the Chamber, too — that, on occasions, the Chamber can be very warm for a number of reasons. I am fairly relaxed if Members want to take off their jacket, provided that that is not abused.

Matters of the Day

Loughinisland: Police Ombudsman's Report

Mr Speaker: Caitríona Ruane has sought leave to make a statement on the Police Ombudsman's report on the Loughinisland killings, a matter that fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. I will call Ms Ruane to speak for up to three minutes on the subject, and I will then call other Members from the constituency to speak on the matter for up to three minutes. There will be no opportunity for interventions, points of order or a vote on the matter. I will certainly take points of order after the matter is dealt with. If that is clear, we shall proceed.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ar 18 Meitheamh 1994 nuair a bhí Éire ag imirt i gcoinne na hIodáile i gCorn an Domhain, mharaigh an UVF seisear fear i dteach tábhairne na Heights i Loch an Oileáin. Goineadh cúigear fear. On 18 June 1994, as Ireland was playing Italy in the World Cup, six men — Adrian Rogan, Patsy O'Hare, Dan McCreanor, Malcolm Jenkinson, Eamon Byrne and Barney Green — were killed by the UVF in the Heights Bar in Loughinisland, County Down. Five men were wounded.

The families made a complaint to the Police Ombudsman through their solicitor, Niall Murphy. I met the families, whose courage and determination continue to impress me, for the first time in 2005 at a hotel outside Ballynahinch. During those intervening years, I travelled with them to Brussels and to Westminster and had meetings in Dundalk with Dermot Ahern, ex-Minister for Foreign Affairs, about the massacre. During that time, we also had meetings with the Police Ombudsman, Al Hutchinson, one of the more recent being last

Wednesday — a meeting that lasted 10 hours. We met him again on Friday.

Al Hutchinson promised the families that he would carry out a thorough investigation and leave no stone unturned so that the families would get justice, but they have not got justice. They have been failed at every level by the state. They have been failed by the RUC, the PSNI and, now, by the Police Ombudsman. Despite the fact that the getaway car, the murder weapons, the balaclavas — one containing a hair follicle — gloves and boiler suits were found, no one was ever charged.

The man who planned the murders was an agent. The man who provided the car was an agent. The men who carried out the killings included agents, and the men who completed the getaway and clean-up were British agents. Special Branch was involved at every stage of this mass murder, from planning to execution and cover-up. At every stage in this murder plot, a state agent was central. British state agents murdering citizens is collusion, no matter what Al Hutchinson says.

The senior investigating officer refused to co-operate with the ombudsman's office, and, in a 56-page report by Al Hutchinson, there is not even a mention of Special Branch. The ombudsman's office wrote to the PSNI twice in the past two weeks to request the ballistic history of the weapons. The Chief Constable has refused, despite the fact that they were used in at least three other murders, as confirmed to us by the ombudsman's office and the PSNI. It was also confirmed that the weapons were part of the Brian Nelson shipments. Indeed, the driver of the getaway car is living openly, despite 70 convictions, among them rape, incest —

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

Ms Ruane: — and drug offences.

This goes right to the top. The driver received the royal prerogative of mercy from Mo Mowlam. Matt Baggott inherited the massacre at Loughinisland. By failing to provide key information and by protecting agents he is now unwittingly —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Ms Ruane: — or wittingly part of the cover-up. The families deserve truth. I support them in their quest for truth.

Mr Wells: Everyone will agree that the massacre in Loughinisland was a dreadful event. Totally innocent people who were simply watching the Republic of Ireland play Italy in the World Cup were gunned down. However, the Member for South Down cannot pick and choose. If she accepts the integrity of Al Hutchinson and that he carried out a rigorous inquiry into that dreadful act, she cannot decide to simply reject his report because it does not meet her prejudged view on the issue.

The reality is that an extensive inquiry was carried out, a report has been issued, and we have to accept the independence and integrity of the person who did it. It is a bit rich for the honourable Member for South Down to demand openness when her party is refusing to co-operate with the Historical Enquiries Team (HET). Indeed, more recently, we heard that one of her party's senior advisers in the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL), Mary McArdle, refused to have anything to do with the HET inquiry into the tragic death of Mary Travers. Therefore, you cannot have it both ways. You have to co-operate with all the inquiries and accept their results.

I accept that the results of this inquiry are not ones with which the relatives are happy. I accept that and the fact that the report has not brought the closure that they seek. However, the reality is that it was a rigorous report carried out professionally and at considerable expense. Sinn Féin will have to accept that, when such reports sometimes do not go the way that it wants, it must accept the findings, whether it likes them or not. Therefore, I am content to accept the bona fides of Al Hutchinson and his team. We need to move on.

I also make the point that we, as a unionist community, are told to move on and to forget atrocities that were aimed at our community. Yet, the Sinn Féin and nationalist side constantly seems to want to dig up such issues time and time again, at great expense to the taxpayer. If it is good enough for us to park and forget issues, it is good enough for Sinn Féin.

Mr McCallister: I say at the outset that it was certainly a dreadful, dreadful event and there was no justification for anything such as that. At that period, Northern Ireland was experiencing a truly horrific year, which included the Shankill bomb, the Greysteel murders and Loughinisland, and that was in the context of our not yet having

reached the first ceasefire. So, it was a truly dreadful time for Northern Ireland. We think, still, of the families of the six men murdered and of those injured at Loughinisland, as well as the families of all those who have suffered during the Troubles.

Turning to the ombudsman's report, I take issue with some of the remarks made by Ms Ruane. There is a report and a process to go through, and you have to agree that you accept that process. It is not the case that the results of that process should tie in or fit with your predetermined outcome. You have to have a process that will work. The Police Ombudsman's office is independent and impartial. It is not there to protect anyone or cover up any evidence. It found no evidence that police informers were protected. That is what the report states, and that is the office that we used, on this occasion, to investigate the matter. Therefore, we have to accept that report. We cannot have a system where we rubbish the report and rubbish and attack the office that provides that report if we do not like the outcome. That does serious damage and undermines confidence in such an office. That is not an acceptable way to move forward.

Dealing with any issues from our past is extremely difficult and, in all probability, has been one of the things that have proven most difficult for the Assembly to deal with. Dealing with the past and getting closure — the type of closure that Mr Wells talked about — and bringing that closure to a satisfactory conclusion is extremely difficult to achieve, given the legacy of the past 30-plus years. However, attacking the office of the Police Ombudsman because you do not like the report is not the way to do it, particularly when he could uncover no evidence to meet that objective.

Ms Ritchie: I can honestly say that no event in the entire history of the Troubles made a bigger impact on me personally than the brutal murder of six of my neighbours on that fateful day in June 1994 in Loughinisland. I remember vividly the shock and confusion that descended on a quiet community that day. Most of all, I remember breaking the news to my disbelieving parents that, in one moment of brutality, they had lost neighbours and two close family friends, Dan McCreanor and Barney Green. In fact, Dan McCreanor brought me directly from hospital to be baptised at St Patrick's Church, Downpatrick, many years ago. I remember the

devastated families and friends, and, years on, no one was ever brought to justice. Everyone believed that the police had not really tried to apprehend the murderers.

Last week, it had been expected that the long-awaited ombudsman's report on the police investigation of the Loughinisland killings would shed more light on what happened, confirm the inadequacies of the RUC response and confirm that there had been collusion. In the end, the several-times delayed ombudsman's report added little to the sum total of knowledge about the murders, but it did confirm the total inadequacy of the RUC response.

Despite the utter failures and systematic shortcomings of the RUC, the ombudsman has concluded that there was no collusion. That conclusion by the ombudsman flies in the face of his own evidence and, for the families of the victims, adds insult to injury. It is an unacceptable response. Former RUC investigators did not co-operate with the inquiry; there was systematic destruction of evidence and repeated failure to follow up leads or new evidence; many suspects brought in for questioning were not even fingerprinted or DNA tested; and informers and Special Branch were treated as off-limits. There was, undoubtedly, collusion in this case. The ombudsman's argument that there was incompetence but no collusion lacks basic credibility. I cannot explain the position of the ombudsman, other than to say that it was to prevent embarrassment or to protect other parts of the security and intelligence establishments. Such action is unacceptable.

12.15 pm

I have called on the Police Ombudsman to step down, a step I did not take lightly. I believe his position as ombudsman is no longer tenable, not just because he has let down the Loughinisland families on the issue of collusion — I share their anger — but because — *[Interruption.]*

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

Ms Ritchie: I am no longer certain that his office is sufficiently independent. It is a vitally important institution at the heart of our policing and justice reforms, and it lives and dies by its independence.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Ms Ritchie: It is an important part of new policing reforms. Friday was a bad day for our justice system and further pain for the Loughinisland families —

Mr Speaker: I must insist that the Member's time is up.

Ms Ritchie: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Kingsmills: Historical Enquiries Team Report

Mr Speaker: Mr Kennedy has sought leave to make a statement.

Mr Lunn: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I will take your point of order after this item of business. I will start again: Mr Kennedy has sought leave to make a statement on the Historical Enquiries Team (HET) report on the Kingsmills massacre, which fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. I will call Mr Kennedy to speak for three minutes on the subject. I will call other Members for the constituency concerned to speak for up to three minutes as well. Members will know that the convention is that there will be no interventions or vote on the matter. I will not take any points of order until after the issue is dealt with. If that is clear, we shall proceed.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful for the opportunity you have afforded the House to reflect on the welcome publication of the Historical Enquiries Team report on the Kingsmills massacre. I formally thank the HET for producing such a detailed report.

The massacre at Kingsmills represented one of the very darkest events of sectarian genocide ever witnessed by the people of Northern Ireland. It was a truly barbaric act that shocked and horrified the entire country. Like Mrs Ritchie's experience of the Loughinisland killings, the Kingsmills massacre had a profound impact on me personally, because I knew nine of the victims.

It is important that we reflect on the victims and their families at any opportunity that we have in the House. Therefore, for the record, those innocent victims that evening on 5 January 1976 were John Bryans, Robert Chambers, Reginald Chapman, Walter Chapman, Robert Freeburn, Joseph Lemmon, John McConville, James McWhirter, Robert Walker and Kenneth Worton. They were returning from their work in a Glenanne factory, armed only with lunch boxes. They were stopped and brutally murdered and done to death by the Provisional IRA. The ballistics report is devastating, as it links the killers of the 10 Protestant workmen to countless other murders and attacks prior to Kingsmills and in the years that followed.

Republicans have consistently tried to deny involvement in the incident, partly because of the deeply sectarian nature of the event. Now that the report has been published, the leadership of the republican movement has serious questions to answer. It will not be enough to say that the event was wrong, and it will not be enough or excusable to engage in “whataboutery”. The republican movement needs to come forward with the answers to the questions. Why did this happen? Why was it allowed to happen? Who was involved? Even now, will you admit it and give information to the police?

We should also say that there are serious criticisms of the role of the British Government and, particularly, the Irish Government. It is important that there are further investigations and inquiries into the actions of the police and the British and Irish Governments of the time. The families deserve clarity and answers. As a local representative and someone who knew the victims, I will stand by them in all their efforts.

Mr Irwin: Mr Speaker, I appreciate the opportunity to speak on the HET report into the Kingsmills massacre.

The publication of this HET report confirms what people have long suspected: the South Armagh Republican Action Force was merely a flag of convenience for the Provisional IRA's evil south Armagh brigade. The report exposes as a lie the claims of successive republican leaders that the Provisional IRA was not responsible for the murders. It also exposes as a lie the claims of successive generations of republicans that the Provisional IRA never engaged in sectarian acts. This was ruthless, sectarian murder by the criminals of the IRA's south Armagh brigade. For Mitchel McLaughlin to refuse to accept reality shows that he is deluding no one but himself. The IRA killed those innocent people, and the HET has confirmed that.

Ten innocent men were gunned down in cold blood for no other reason than that they were Protestants. As a consequence of the IRA's sectarian murder at Kingsmills, 14 innocent children were left without their fathers. Indeed, one other young man, Alan Black, suffered horrendous injuries from 18 bullets but survived. The Kingsmills massacre was a squalid sectarian act by a group of criminals. It stands out in the long, dark history of Northern Ireland for the sheer brutality of the way in which those men

were murdered. Armed terrorists demanded that people identify themselves according to their religion and then murdered those who were Protestants.

The publication of the report is important as it shows, in the public domain, that the IRA was responsible. No one from the republican movement will ever again be able to cast doubt on the identity of the perpetrators or seek to absolve the IRA of its guilt. We have it now in black and white that the IRA, not some freelance republican group, killed those men. It is to be hoped that the publication of the report will lead to new information coming forward. I hope that the criminals responsible are brought to justice.

Mr Murphy: The issues that we are dealing with, in the previous discussion and this one, highlight the challenge facing all of us in devising a process to deal with the legacy issues of the past.

What happened at Kingsmills was wrong and should not have happened. I have no difficulty in condemning it. I extend my sympathy to the families of those who were killed on that day. The unjustified killings took place in an era in which sectarian attacks on civilians were commonplace in County Armagh. Attacks on families, such as the Reavey and O'Dowd families, on public places, such as Donnelly's Bar and the Rock Bar in Keady, and on individuals were a common feature of life then. Some of those attacks and incidents, such as that on the Reavey family, have been the subject of inquiries, and others have not. In this case, the HET report and the many questions it raises highlight the urgent need to address the issue of legacy. Dealing with the past in a stop-start fashion, whether through HET reports or other work done by the ombudsman or work by campaigning families, does not address the broader issues or properly help the many, many families who continue to suffer in fighting for the truth. Taking opportunities in the Assembly to talk about specific incidents is dealing with the issue of legacy in a stop-start fashion. We need to grasp this issue. It is our firm view that an international truth commission is required. Unfortunately, to date, the British Government have run away from such an inclusive process.

I hope that the families of those killed in Kingsmills achieve a satisfactory outcome to the issues they have raised on the back of this report. The challenge for all of us is to devise a

process in which all those involved in or affected by the conflict can deal with the legacy issues that arise from that conflict in a manner that is as satisfactory as possible to all those involved. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The sectarian murder of 10 workmen at Kingsmills in January 1976 was one of the worst incidents of murderous slaughter ever to take place here. I come from Bessbrook myself and knew many of the victims, some of them very well, and, likewise, their families. All the victims were totally innocent men who were on their way home from doing a day's work. Eleven people were shot that day, 10 of whom died. Alan Black, the sole survivor, was left at death's door but survived. His life, too, has been blighted by the attack, as was the case with the late Richard Hughes, the only Catholic on the bus. He was singled out and told to walk towards Newry. His two friends Reggie and Walter Chapman, who died that day, held his arm and told him to stand his ground. That was a measure of the goodness of those men and of the friendship between them.

I welcome the report of the Historical Enquiries Team. It is the first thorough, official, documented recognition of what happened at Kingsmills. It attributes responsibility to the Provisional IRA, and I believe that the onus is now on Sinn Féin to live up to its plans for a truth and reconciliation commission by publicly accepting the HET forensic evidence on the firearms that were used.

I welcome the fact that the report makes it clear that Eugene Reavey was on his way to Daisy Hill Hospital that evening to receive the bodies of his two murdered brothers and could not possibly have been involved. I take the opportunity once again to appeal to Dr Paisley to do the honourable thing in relation to Mr Reavey.

Like the families of the Loughinisland victims, the families of the Kingsmills victims were failed by the police investigation. To this day, the police have never interviewed the first two witnesses on the scene of the Kingsmills murders. That is an indication of how superficial the investigation was, and I believe that the families deserve better.

I hope that the HET report leads the families of the Kingsmills victims a step closer to knowing the truth about what happened to their loved ones, and I will support them in every possible

way to achieve the justice that they so richly deserve.

Mr Speaker: Order. That ends Matters of the Day. I will take Mr Lunn's point of order now.

Mr Lunn: The Alliance Party would have wished to contribute to the discussions that have just passed, but you ruled that, because this was a constituency Matter of the Day, we could not do so, as we do not have a Member in either constituency. I ask you to reflect on the Hansard report of 22 February, when there was a similar discussion on the report on the bombing of McGurk's Bar. We were allowed to speak then even though we do not have a Member in that constituency, and I think that other parties also got the same allowance.

Mr Allister: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Let me deal with Mr Lunn's point of order first. Mr Dickson met me this morning on the issue, but all these matters are taken as individual Matters of the Day, and, as the Member will know, it is really at the call of the Speaker. I was happy to take the Member's point of order, and the Member now has it on the record. Let me reflect and take away what the Member has said and look at it over the summer. However, as the Member will know and as I will repeat, these decisions are matters for the Speaker. In fact, I will even go further and say to the whole House that these matters should not be challenged and it is not in order for any Member to challenge such a decision, especially on Matters of the Day. However, I am very happy to take on board what the Member said, and I will reflect on it.

Mr Allister: Further to that point of order, when reflecting on the exercise of the discretion, which, of course, one has to accept in this circumstance, is it not the case that, by its very nature, to qualify as a Matter of the Day, an issue must have wider ramifications than those that pertain to a particular constituency? These two dreadful atrocities well demonstrate that, because the ramifications affected the whole Province. In those circumstances, is it not surprising that debate is limited to what happens to be the constituency where the dreadful atrocity took place?

Mr Speaker: Once again, I hear what the Member said on the issue. I will take it away and reflect on what he and Mr Lunn said this morning.

However, Members need to understand that all these issues are taken as individual cases and are dealt with in the Speaker's Office as individual cases. Let me say to the whole House that Members know that I am very protective of the smaller parties in this Chamber and especially Back-Benchers.

As Speaker, I certainly have no desire to stifle debate in the Chamber. Members will know that I try, where possible, to accommodate the smaller parties in the House, and I will continue to do so in the future. Once again I say to Members that these decisions are taken by the Speaker, and the Speaker alone.

12.30 pm

Assembly Business

Extension of Sitting

Mr Speaker: Before we begin, I wish to advise the House that this morning I was given notice by Mr Swann and Mr Weir of a motion to extend the sitting past 7.00 pm, under Standing Order 10(3A). The Question on the motion will be put without debate.

Mr Swann: I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 10(3A), the sitting on Monday 27 June 2011 be extended to no later than 9.00 pm.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 10(3A), the sitting on Monday 27 June 2011 be extended to no later than 9.00 pm.

Executive Committee Business

Budget (No. 2) Bill: Further Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: I call on the Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Wilson, to move the Further Consideration of the Budget (No. 2) Bill.

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I beg to move that the Budget (No. 2) Bill do now pass. The passing of the Final Stage of the Budget Bill by the House will enable Departments to continue to use resources and to spend cash on public services for the remainder of the financial year. Of course, the monitoring rounds will amend the opening position reflected in the Bill, and I will bring a further Bill to the House in February 2012 to authorise the final position for 2011-12.

The public expenditure issues around the Bill have now been debated fully over the past two weeks, and — I am sure that you will be pleased to hear — I do not propose to repeat those today in my opening remarks. Suffice it to say that the provision in the Bill represents the first year of the Budget 2011-15, as agreed by the previous Assembly in March.

Mr Speaker: Minister, just to clarify: we are speaking to the Further Consideration Stage of the Budget (No. 2) Bill. We have not yet moved on to the Final Stage of the Bill. I am just getting clarity from the Minister.

Mr Wilson: Sorry, Mr Speaker. I thought that you called me to move the Final Stage. I am ahead of myself.

Moved, That the Further Consideration Stage of the Budget (No. 2) Bill be now taken. — [Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel).]

Mr Speaker: As no amendments have been tabled, there is no opportunity to discuss the Budget (No. 2) Bill at this stage. Further Consideration Stage is, therefore, concluded.

Budget (No. 2) Bill: Final Stage

Mr Speaker: Now we come to the Final Stage of the Budget (No. 2) Bill.

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

That the Budget (No. 2) Bill [NIA 1/11-15] do now pass.

I will not replay the tape so far but will instead take up where I left off.

I do not wish to repeat the remarks that have been made in the previous debates. Suffice it to say that the provision in the Bill represents the first year of Budget 2011-15, as agreed by the previous Assembly in March. However, Members will recall that the Budget included provision for an assistance package for the Presbyterian Mutual Society (PMS) savers. The Executive's and the Treasury's contributions were held at the centre awaiting the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's (DETI) confirmation that details of the rescue package had been agreed. I understand that the administrator will be in a position to start to make payments over the summer, subject to the satisfactory completion of the final legal and contractual issues. Therefore, I considered it vital to anticipate the June monitoring transfer to DETI and to include the PMS expenditure in the DETI Main Estimate and the Bill to provide DETI with the legal authority for the expenditure. To await the spring Supplementary Estimates and the related Budget Bill in February 2012 would delay the statutory provision for the PMS expenditure and hold up payments to investors and savers, for which they would not have forgiven either me or the Executive, especially as a final resolution of the saga is so tantalisingly close.

I now want to return to an issue that is related to the expenditure plans that we are approving today in the Bill and that I have brought to the attention of the House in previous debates: the long overdue review of our financial process that the previous Executive commissioned in February. The current financial process has existed for many years and is based on the Westminster model. The review is an opportunity for the Assembly to reform the process and publications in line with its requirements.

As recently as last Wednesday, my officials held a useful session with the Committee for Finance and Personnel to discuss the review

and to explore some of the areas that merit consideration. I have also asked my officials to present the issues to Members at a consultation event in the Long Gallery in the autumn. I encourage all Members to attend that event and to avail themselves of the opportunity to propose the areas that, in their view, merit reform. The review presents Members with a golden opportunity to reform the current process and publications that we inherited from direct rule. Therefore, over the coming months, I urge Members to consider the weaknesses in the current process and to make a considered contribution to the review.

My officials have also opened communication with Departments and the Northern Ireland Audit Office on the review. Over the coming months, the dialogue will continue, and I look forward, following a robust discussion of the issues with all key stakeholders — I consider the Assembly to be the main stakeholder — to bringing recommendations to the Executive and the House before the end of the financial year.

I will now speak about the remainder of this financial year and the challenges that lie ahead. As the recent June monitoring round demonstrated, the demand for additional resources always outstrips the funding that is available to the Executive for allocation. Therefore, Ministers and their Departments must continue to manage prudently the resources that are available to them throughout the remainder of the year. In particular, I call on Departments to surrender any reduced requirements in the next monitoring round rather than hold on to them until too near the end of the financial year, by which time it is too late for other Departments to spend the resources. We must act corporately and astutely as an Administration, particularly in the light of the proposed new budget exchange scheme and the efforts that will be required by all concerned to avoid surrendering any of our invaluable resources to the Treasury. With that appeal, I bring my remarks to a close, and I ask Members to support the Bill's Final Stage.

Mr Murphy (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. As I stated at Second Stage, the Committee for Finance and Personnel is aware of the potential consequences for departmental spending should the Bill not progress through the Assembly before the summer recess. In that regard, the Committee

was content for the Bill to proceed by accelerated passage.

The Minister will be aware that departmental officials informally briefed the Committee last week on the review of the financial process that the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) is taking forward on behalf of the Executive. Indeed, he referred to that meeting. The officials outlined a number of problems with the current process and publications that relate to Budgets, Estimates and Accounts. Committee members heard that there are a number of misalignments in the current process that may not be immediately evident, including the fact that, although it is set out in the Executive's Budget, capital spend is not voted on in the Budget Bills that come before the House. Indeed, it may surprise Members to learn that up to one quarter of all government spend is not voted on. There are also issues with the complexity of the Estimates; with the differing boundaries and controls for the Budgets and the Estimates; with the differing ways in which information is presented in the various associated publications; and with repetition in the process.

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

Immediately after the informal session with departmental officials, the Committee received a briefing from the Assembly's Research and Information Service on considerations for improving the wider Budget process in the context of the Executive's review of the financial process. The related research paper considered international best practice guidance and reports from the previous Committee for Finance and Personnel, and it set out key recommendations for the future Budget process. The recommendations include the establishment of a calendar in advance of future Budget processes that must be adhered to and that includes adequate time for consultation; the inclusion of a strategic phase before the production of the draft Budget to allow the Assembly to debate revenue measures and spending priorities; and the inclusion of a formal review stage in the process to allow for reconsideration of the Budget in the light of emerging spending pressures or policy reorientation. The Committee asked that those recommendations be taken forward by DFP in parallel with the Executive's review. In particular, as I mentioned during the previous debate, the Committee will be keen to ensure that formal engagement is incorporated into the process at an

early stage. We believe that that will facilitate the streamlining of the latter stages of the process.

It is clear that there is much work to be done to address those issues and create a Budget process here that is more transparent, provides greater accountability and meets the needs of the Assembly. Improved Budget and financial processes will underpin the important scrutiny role of the Assembly and, in turn, help to drive improvements in public services and ensure that the Executive's priorities are delivered and that government in general remains effective and accountable. My Committee looks forward to working closely with the Department in progressing this important work in the coming session. In the meantime, I support the motion.

Mr Girvan: I, too, speak in favour of the Bill. I welcome the opportunity to reiterate what the Minister said about the PMS. The process of accelerated passage will help the people who have suffered greatly over the past number of years due to the problems associated with the PMS. The Bill's passing will allow movement on that. I also welcome the review and reform of financial processes and how we set and debate Budgets. That will help to streamline the process.

We have debated the Budget Bill quite a bit in the past two weeks. I will not regurgitate everything that everyone else has already said. I support the Bill, as presented, to allow us to move forward. I do not wish to take any more time. I appreciate that some funds had to be allocated to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to allow a move forward on the PMS issue. It is important that we, as an Assembly, deliver on the Executive's agreed process and the Budget as presented.

Mr Cree: When this process resumed two weeks ago, I expressed my opinion that it was cumbersome, convoluted and repetitive. It lacks clarity and transparency and is not fit for purpose. Budgets, Estimates and accounts serve different purposes and have gone their own ways over the years. That makes it extremely difficult to understand, manage and scrutinise. Only about 60% of government spend is aligned across all the frameworks, so inefficient and burdensome reconciliations are required. However, work has begun on a new model that will better serve the Assembly. We have heard from the Minister and the Chairman of the Committee about that this afternoon.

The new process must draw together all the various parts of the Budget process, including the rates income stream and non-departmental bodies. Unfortunately, that has not helped us this year, and we are resigned to the circus that we call the Budget process. Fortunately, however, we also have a ringmaster to take centre stage and provide some light relief. Earlier this year, the Ulster Unionist Party did not support the Budget for several reasons that I have repeated in the House. We still have those concerns, but the DUP and Sinn Féin have approved the Budget and will endorse it again today. Therefore, it would be illogical for us to vote against it at Final Stage.

Dr McDonnell: I will make a few brief comments. I will avoid repeating some of the earlier comments and leave it to others to discuss the technical details. I will focus on the economic opportunities and the potential in the Budget to create economic development and opportunity.

I do not think that I am letting out any state secrets by saying that we are in difficult economic times. We need to be very careful that we avoid eating the seedcorn, as it were. However, in our Budget efforts, we need to ensure that we put aside some amount of money, no matter how small, to invest for the future and create and develop opportunities.

12.45 pm

Our economic outlook is challenging, to put it mildly, and the full impact of Government spending cuts of some £4 billion between 2011 and 2015 has yet to fully hit our economy. Output appears to be stagnant and growth is barely detectable. However, although we can focus on the negatives, I prefer to focus on the opportunities arising in the current context and ensure that we take the necessary steps through the Budget to deliver a creative and successful economic recovery strategy. If slippage money becomes available as we go through the year, I urge the Minister to invest it in creating opportunities, some of which I will refer to.

We want to ensure that the Northern Ireland economy is in a strong and vibrant position, able to meet future opportunities and business and commercial needs. The Budget goes some way towards facilitating an economic recovery strategy, but there are key areas that I want to highlight and urge the Minister to pay a little bit more attention to as we go forward. R&D is

the big one, the key opportunity, because even in good economic times, our efficiency and effectiveness was only at some 85% or 87% of GB's. There is some dullness or bluntness in our economic activity when we lag significantly behind Britain — Scotland, Wales and England — in our efforts — *[Interruption.]* Sorry. Pardon me. That was not planned.

R&D has to add value, and, if we are to compete with Third World countries and the Far East, we have to sharpen up our industry and how we do things in order to get a commercial edge and work to our strengths. We have many strengths.

Excellent research has been done in our universities and hospitals. Perhaps we fall down in supporting the full commercialisation and taking full advantage of some of the excellent brainpower we have. One of the things I think of immediately is the Belfast cancer centre. I urge the Minister to find ways and means of investing further in the next phase of the centre. We now have in Belfast a world-class, globally recognised cancer centre, to which we can recruit people from across the world for their manpower, expertise and specialist skills. However, we are one stage short of turning that round and selling those skills back to the rest of the world. In recent developments, I was fascinated to see on television that Belfast City Hospital researchers had managed to extract a cancer-curing product from the saliva of a Brazilian tree frog. That may sound very abstract, but that is the level we are at: the cutting edge of world cancer research. We should look at ways to find some money, no matter how small the amount, to recognise that we have potential in that area. If we invest in it, Belfast City Hospital, through its research, has the potential to become an economic engine for the twenty-first century, just as Harland and Wolff, Shorts, Mackie's and other firms were the engines of the nineteenth century. That is one example of how we might unlock potential.

I do not want to discuss the EU's seventh framework programme or the potential that lies there, but we have to find ways and means of encouraging our companies to open up their R&D and do things better, more efficiently and more effectively.

I also want to draw the Minister's attention to the fact that food production is a sunrise industry. For the past 30 or 40 years, the European Union has had a surplus of food,

but it is recognised that, by 2015, shortfalls will begin. The economies of China are now eating everything they can get. People in China now want better quality food and so on. In a few years' time, we will be unable to procure food from Australia or New Zealand. Similarly, we will be unable to procure it from the likes of Argentina. Food will have to be produced. I was fascinated to watch a brief documentary on television last night that stated that Britain, although it imports meat, exports its high-quality Aberdeen Angus beef to China. That is a position that we have to get into. We have to find ways of investing in food production, because we fall between two stools. We do not have a brand. Irish beef is highly branded and recognised across Europe, but British beef, and not just British beef but subdivisions—

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind the Member to return to the subject of the Budget.

Dr McDonnell: I am on the Budget. This is what the Budget has to invest in, Mr Deputy Speaker. There is a lot of opportunity in the food industry.

The other area that I want to draw the Minister's attention to is that of renewable energy. We have got to put more resources in. Our resources going into energy are far too limited. We need a stronger energy division. If I had my way, I would have a junior Minister for energy and a separate energy Department, and I would bolster the energy division in DETI. However, there are a number of issues, Minister, and although we have recognised some of the challenges, I feel that if we are to brace ourselves to become independent, with a high financial return, and to be successful in the future with a prosperous economy, there has to be a sharper focus in the Budget on developing sunrise industries. Those industries have the potential to return much more than we invest in them.

Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I apologise for the fact that my telephone rang. I thought that I had switched it off.

Mrs Cochrane: The Alliance Party will support the Final Stage of the Budget (No. 2) Bill for the same reasons that we gave in support of the Supply resolution and the Bill's Second Stage. However, I will take this opportunity to raise a few key points.

As we progress into the first year of the budgetary period of 2011-15, it must be acknowledged that, with inflation now well in excess of the level

on which the Budget was originally premised, Departments must work harder than ever to live within budget. They need to focus on making efficiencies wherever possible and on producing additional capital receipts as well as realising those already identified. I appreciate that that will not be easy for Departments and that many difficult decisions will have to be made if we are to be able to maintain spend on front line services.

We need to continue to focus on rebuilding the economy, creating jobs and preparing future generations and those out of work for the years ahead. We need to capitalise on tourism, which offers long-term benefits, as tourists spend money and contribute to our economy, and we need to ensure that situations such as what happened in east Belfast last week do not hinder that development. Just a matter of hours after the riots, and less than a mile from the scene, the Crown Princess cruise ship docked, with 3,100 tourists on board. Scores of coaches lined up to take avid travellers to various sites around Northern Ireland to spend money and take home stories of our beautiful country. So easily, the petrol-bombings, shootings and so on can send out the wrong message and wreck our chances of continuing to attract those vital visitors.

That brings me to my key point, which is that the only way in which we can deal with such issues and drive our economy forward is through greater collaboration among Departments. For example, DETI needs to generate investment, and that investment needs to be linked to the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) to invest in skills. Indeed, in his Budget statement in March, the Finance Minister spoke about the importance of such collaboration, but we need not just to talk; the emphasis must be on delivery.

We already have technology in place that allows sharing of information across Departments, yet we appear to choose not to use it to its full capacity. Around four years ago, Departments implemented Total Records and Information Management (TRIM) software. That can and should be much more than a document repository. It has a multitude of configuration options that allow Departments to have access to one another's information in a secure manner. Perhaps sharing such information could more effectively assist Departments in coming up with efficiency options, as well as solutions

to address the financial costs of our divided society. At a time when finances are so tight, and when we are trying to grow our economy, the resources wasted on managing division continue to be a massive millstone around our necks.

The Alliance Party will continue to promote more shared services on a North/South basis. This need not be about politics but about good finance and good economics. We welcome the scoping of the potential for that through the North/South Ministerial Council. As a member of the North/South Parliamentary Forum working group, I can see the benefits of working together across neighbouring jurisdictions. The forum could be another opportunity to benchmark in order to assist us in deciding how much should be spent in certain areas and assessing where inefficiencies exist and where we can improve. This is not about political grandstanding but about practical issues.

As a member of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, I have been involved in discussions about the level of detail provided during the budgetary process and whether it is available in sufficient time for adequate scrutiny. That has been highlighted by the Chair of the Committee and others. I look forward to the outcome of the review of the financial process, which, hopefully, will streamline the Budget and Estimates process and enhance scrutiny by, and accountability to, the Assembly.

I support the motion.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I will be very brief. I think that the Minister outlined in sufficient detail, without bearing any repetition, the salient and important elements of the Budget.

I would like to make a few remarks about the process. I very much welcome the review. The Finance Committee has been campaigning on this issue virtually since the beginning of the previous mandate, so it is long overdue but welcome.

The economic circumstances in which we approach the Budget this time challenged the Assembly, respective parties and MLAs to begin to think the process out. It was not just a matter of taking a cake of a particular size and having a discussion, as opposed to a Budget process, about how it should be divided up in the most equitable way. On this occasion parties here were challenged to come up with

suggestions for incrementally building on what was a greatly reduced cake in the circumstances of the comprehensive spending review (CSR) settlement. Most parties put in practical ideas.

That and the present campaign to bring fiscal powers back to the Assembly were the beginning of the Assembly's starting to consider the challenge of how it matches its expectations and ambitions in the delivery of programmes and services with its ability to supplement the block grant. I think that that process should continue. In that context, I also strongly support and welcome the work of the Budget review group, which is an all-party grouping of Executive Ministers who look at the various issues, including the questions of over-bureaucracy and the dismantling of what we might call the ugly scaffolding of direct rule.

Periodic reports on the work of the Budget review process would be very helpful, as perhaps would reminders to the parties to continue to contribute to that festival of ideas. That is because we need to be supportive if we are going to protect not just jobs but, crucially, front line services. On this occasion, the Budget has been complex, and I think that the discussions have been heated at times. However, generally speaking, people are rooted in the reality that we are operating in a deficit Budget situation and that we all have to put our shoulders to the wheel to come up with ideas for new revenues and more efficiencies, as well as to dismantle or strip down some of the overly complex bureaucracy that is slowing the system up.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. I recall, going back to the time before the beginning of this Budget period, when we were becoming aware of the magnitude of the cuts that we would be facing, the Finance Minister telling us that bitter medicine was coming from London and that we would have to swallow it. He said there would be no point in us opposing or railing against the cuts. To use his terminology, there was no point in "gurning" — we would have to pinch our noses and swallow the bitter medicine.

The SDLP took a different approach to the Budget settlement, and as early as 2009 we set out to find ways of mitigating its effect. We published our ideas in the paper 'New Priorities in Difficult Times'.

So anyone who says that the SDLP was negative about the budgetary process has only to look at our record, which clearly shows that we were first off the blocks to help to ensure that everything possible was done to mitigate the effects of the worst ever cuts — 8% to resource and 40% to capital — to face us here in Northern Ireland.

1.00 pm

As the Minister knows, our engagement in the budgetary process did not end there. We continued to work on ways of raising revenue, creating jobs, protecting front line services and ensuring the best possible deal for the most vulnerable in society. Our document 'Partnership and Economic Recovery' — I know that the Minister has read it many times — is a comprehensive approach to tackling the challenges that our economy and finances face. We were critical where we saw the need for improvements, and we were vociferous when we needed to be. The Minister did not always like what we had to say, but I think that even he realises that we are not nodding dogs that will sit here and hang on his every word.

The Budget is the Minister's baby, and I understand his desire to nurse it and protect it. The Minister gradually came round to our way of thinking that it was not enough just to sit back, open one's mouth and take the medicine without complaint. Work began on identifying sources of revenue to replace that taken by the cuts. The extent to which that work has been successful is a moot point. First, there was to be £1.6 billion; then there was £862 million; and now, I believe, there is £900 million, according to the Minister's speech in the Chamber last week. What happened to the remainder of the money is not quite clear.

We are not yet sure whether that £900 million is new money. I asked the Minister to clarify the situation by telling us how much of the £900 million was from the normal government receipts from the sale of Housing Executive properties, land, and so on, and how much of it was new money coming into the Budget. I do not think that he clarified that for us. During a previous debate, the Minister stated that the Budget was the best Christmas present that Northern Ireland could hope for, but, as I said, once you loosen the ribbons and remove the wrapping paper, there is not quite as much in the present as we were first led to believe.

That said, we are where we are. The SDLP is intent on continuing to work on and engage in reshaping and remoulding the Budget.

Mr Humphrey: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. I listened to what the Member said about the document, but I am not so sure that the Minister will have paid much attention to it. During previous debates in the House, the SDLP document was exposed as leaving clear gaps in the finance that it could provide for the Minister and the economy. I ask the Member: given the difficult situation in which we find ourselves in the United Kingdom, had the House voted in the way that the SDLP voted, how would your party have sustained the community and voluntary sector, which was crying out for money at that time?

Mr D Bradley: I thank the Member for his intervention. I do not claim that every proposal in the paper was perfect, but there were many viable proposals, which would and will produce additional revenue. I hope and expect that the Minister will continue to examine those proposals and that the Budget review group will do likewise. As I said, we will continue to engage, through the Committees and at Executive level, to reshape and remould the Budget to ensure that it meets the needs of the greatest possible number of people in Northern Ireland.

I was glad to hear from the Minister, during the Bill's Second Stage last week, that the First Minister and deputy First Minister had spoken to their counterparts in Scotland about the Scottish Futures Trust. He said that that initiative would be given further consideration. The Minister took the opportunity to score a few political points against the SDLP, but it was more a question of him being willing to wound but afraid to strike. We came out of that skirmish relatively unscathed.

The Minister also responded to the point that I made about the Belfast Harbour Commissioners. I was pleased to hear that the Minister for Regional Development is continuing to work with the commissioners to see how that money can be paid over to the Executive. The Minister said that he is willing to go down the legislative route if necessary. We continue to hold the view that this Budget should have been based on a Programme for Government for 2011-15 and an updated investment strategy, to demonstrate how strategic policies are driving

financial allocations rather than vice versa. I will be interested to hear from the Minister what progress has been made on the formulation of a Programme for Government and when we should expect to see it.

I also want to ask the Minister about the £4 billion in capital funding that remains to be paid for the final two years of the investment strategy up to 2017. Will there be continued negotiations on that, or is it his view that that money is now lost to Northern Ireland? I hope that that is not the case, because in this economic climate, with the huge cut to capital, we need that money more than ever.

As we know, the end-year flexibility (EYF) scheme is being replaced by the budget exchange scheme. There are some problems with that, especially around the predictions that have to be made in the October round. Departments have said that that will be extremely difficult for them and that money could be lost to Northern Ireland through that model. If the Treasury proposal continues in its present form, it will be tantamount to a further cut. I know that the Minister has entered negotiations with the Treasury in order to shape a better scheme for us. I urge him to continue his efforts in that direction, because it is money that we can ill afford to lose.

I thank the Minister for his representations to the Irish Government on the National Asset Management Agency (NAMA) situation and the possibility of a fire sale. I note that he said that he had discussions with Minister Bruton on the issue and that he has been reassured that such a fire sale will not take place. That is very welcome. If my memory serves me right, I asked the Minister last week whether he agreed that work should be undertaken on North/South health co-operation, given that 40% of budgets North and South are spent in that area. However, I do not recall the Minister responding to that point. Perhaps he will do so today.

One of the other points that I made last week was about the £4 million that was set aside for a childcare strategy. The Minister said that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) ministerial subcommittee was working on that issue. A number of childcare organisations, especially those which participated in the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) pilot schemes, are now in dire need of resources. I urge the

Minister to do all in his power to ensure that those resources become available to those groups as quickly as possible.

In conclusion, I reiterate that the SDLP will continue to engage on the Budget, which, as the Minister said, is not set in stone. Through the Committees and in the Executive, we will continue to ensure that the Budget is fit for purpose and best serves the needs of the people of Northern Ireland. Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Mr Byrne: Any Budget debate should primarily be about measuring the allocation of resources against a backdrop of trying to match government objectives with the targets and policy initiatives of an agreed Programme for Government. In this type of devolved government — a five-party mandatory coalition — the task of putting together a Budget for an agreed set of priorities and outcomes is difficult. It is even more difficult if the Finance Minister has to balance his party's priorities with other parties' objectives. The temptation then is to go for a Budget that lacks coherence and strategy.

We will get no real economic gain from the current Budget proposals. I do not see any stimulus for the local economy, particularly for the construction industry. Unfortunately, it is currently a purely accounting exercise, with no underpinning rationale other than to live within cash limits as delivered by the comprehensive spending review. That begs the question: can we have a meaningful Budget process when we do not have an agreed Programme for Government that includes a four- or five-year policy strategy? Almost every economist, economic commentator and, indeed, political party represented here says that the priority for the region and the Assembly should be to make the economy and economic development the key priority for the future. I accept that.

We all recognise that, in effect, the Assembly is charged with managing a delegated Budget, as delivered by the Treasury's Barnett formula. In reality, this regional economy is highly dependent on a net resources transfer from central government in London. The annual net subvention currently runs at £8 billion a year or more. That huge inward annual cheque highlights the public sector dependency culture that is now the norm for our regional economy. That affects us all, not just those who are

unemployed or on benefits. The challenge, therefore, is to see whether we can do anything with the devolved Budget to correct that imbalance and reconfigure the economy. That is a major task and a challenge for the new Assembly. The harsh economic reality is that the London Treasury will cut back on the annual subvention, making the entire business of government more difficult. We know about the 8% cut in revenue expenditure, and we are very aware of the 40% cut in capital expenditure over the term of the mandate.

On the surface, the welfare state has been very good for and generous to Northern Ireland, in that people have a safety net for a basic standard of living. Many communities and areas in Northern Ireland depend greatly on benefits. However, our public sector dependency of nearly 80% is quite staggering. It means that many private sector supply companies are highly dependent on government supply contracts.

The current debate and general consensus on corporation tax obliquely poses the big economic question: can the region become more economically viable through having a more competitive and productive private sector? That is the challenge. Can the regional economy get to a position of having a more effective and efficient public sector? Now we have a Budget that is just an accounting exercise, simply slicing up the Treasury transfer cake rather than tackling the more difficult challenge of setting out on a course to get better economic performance in the future.

I welcome what the Minister said about having a Budget review group, which is long overdue. Again, I pose the question: how can we have a meaningful budgetary process when we do not have an economic strategy determined by a Programme for Government? This Budget debate could centre on a piecemeal approach, as we all call for specific money for specific projects or services, but that only ignores and avoids the real problem and task ahead. A Budget process must attempt to shape and steer a local economy to a better performance in respect of productive output and general economic activity.

1.15 pm

We all come under constant pressure at a local level to lobby for funding for a project or a local service provision or facility. That is the stuff that all of us hear in our constituencies. The

bigger challenge for the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Finance Minister is how they formulate a Budget that is fit for purpose. That begs the real question: what is the key purpose and function of the key civil servants in the Department of Finance and Personnel in the entire process? The reality is that custom and practice, underpinned by the historical cost premise, rules the roost. How, therefore, will we get the economic gear change that is needed to reconfigure this local economy and have a more sustainable economic performance in the immediate to long term?

Are the current Budget proposals and the outlines for the rest of this mandate purely an accounting exercise, with no route map based on a Programme for Government or an investment strategy for Northern Ireland? We have had two investment strategies for Northern Ireland, but I have not heard much about any recently. Do the Minister and Executive intend to follow custom and practice, or is there a willingness or desire to have a better way, which has, at its core, the twin objectives of building a stronger local economy by having a more productive and expanding private sector and having a more effective and efficient public sector that delivers services to our people?

Do we have an economic modelling unit in the Finance Department? Do we have an economic forecasting and performance unit? For this devolved Assembly to function, it is critical that we have some sort of modelling unit in the Department.

What is the future for the Strategic Investment Board? It was set up about 10 years ago and was lauded; we were told that it would provide the intervention necessary to make capital projects work. I have not heard of the Strategic Investment Board for some time. Is it dead or alive? Is its executive director still on the payroll? Those are crucial questions that we have to ask.

The time is right to have a more radical and focused approach to our future economic planning and management. Do the Minister and the Department of Finance and Personnel accept that a different approach is desirable? Is it likely to be embarked on at this time? I welcome what the Minister said earlier.

Ms Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Go raibh míle maith agat,

a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to address the House as Chair of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety. When I spoke last week during the Bill's Second Stage, I talked about the Committee's desire to constructively engage with the Department about how it will manage its allocation for 2011-12. To that end, we will hear from departmental officials on that subject at our Committee meeting on Wednesday. We will take that opportunity to drill down into the details of the options that the Minister is considering to make the savings that are required this year if he is to balance the books.

Although savings have to be made, money is available to those who ask. The Committee noted that, under June monitoring, some £29 million of resource was allocated to various Departments. However, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) did not make any bids under June monitoring and, therefore, did not receive any money. The Committee was very disappointed to find out that that was the case given that specific projects that were previously funded by the Department up to March 2011 have now been left stranded because funding is not available.

For example, the Committee wrote recently to the Department to ask whether the decision to no longer fund the Music Therapy Trust could be reversed. It has been receiving central government funding since 2003 and has made a real difference to children and adults with a wide range of conditions. The trust requires only £400,000 per annum. Surely, if the Department had made a specific bid for funding for the project under the June monitoring round, £400,000 could have been found out of the £29 million that was available. A similar case could be made for Home-Start, which also has had its funding discontinued.

On making savings, last week, the Committee heard at first hand about the innovations that Health Service staff are coming up with and which are beneficial to patient safety and the public purse. Last Wednesday, we visited Altnagelvin Area Hospital and were briefed by staff from the Western Trust on the work that they are doing, particularly in the field of cancer. The Committee learned that radiotherapy, which the new centre at Altnagelvin will provide, is not only a highly effective treatment in curing and extending the lifespan of people with cancer but

is more cost-effective than surgery or drugs. By making sure that people receive radiotherapy quickly and appropriately, the Health Service can ensure the best chance of a good outcome for the patient and also for the budget.

Similarly, we heard about the excellent work that is being done at Altnagelvin in the provision of human papilloma virus (HPV) testing in the Western Trust. HPV is the main cause of cervical cancer, but the Western Trust is the only trust that is carrying out that important work. By being able to test for HPV and thereby being able to offer immediate treatment for those who need it, the trust is making massive savings on cervical screening. Under the old cervical screening pathway, a woman with an abnormal result may have to go through 13 screenings over a 12-year period. The new system will require only two screenings in an eight-month period. Given that each smear and screening costs £40, the savings soon add up. We also heard about the screening programme for bowel cancer. Again, if that cancer is caught in the early stages, the prognosis is very good, and costly treatments — in financial and, more importantly, in human terms — can be avoided.

There are great examples of people at the front line finding new ways of working that are yielding massive benefits to patients as well as being an efficient use of resources. Change is possible where there is the will to do it. In our previous meeting with the Department, the Committee was frustrated that, when we suggested that it should make the prescribing of generic drugs mandatory, we were told about the problems with making that happen rather than the solution to it. Therefore, we have asked the Department to produce a paper to detail the obstacles to, and complexities of, introducing a policy to make the prescribing of generic drugs mandatory and to clarify whether that would require a change to legislation. We look forward to discussing that further with the Department, because that is one way in which it could ensure that it lives within the 2011-12 budget.

The Committee recognises that this year will be difficult because of limited resources, but where there is the will to make changes and work differently, savings can be made without impacting on front line services.

Mr Eastwood: I do not propose to speak for too long, because the arguments around the Budget have been well rehearsed by now. In the

Chamber and other places, we have been told that the people voted for stability on 5 May. That is true; undoubtedly, people for voted stability, and they are delighted that we are working together in the Assembly and the Executive and laughing at each others' jokes. However, people will now begin to judge us by a higher standard, and, in four years, they will judge us on what we have delivered.

Unfortunately, I do not think that this Budget will deliver. The arguments on that are clear, and the bottom line is that the Budget will make people's lives worse not better. Thousands of public sector workers fear for their jobs, and there is no real attempt to buffer the most vulnerable people in society from the real impacts of the benefit cuts that will come from London. There is no strategy for job creation, and school principals will be panicking at the fact that there will be no real attempt to build new schools or to bring about much-needed repairs to others.

We are fearful about higher tuition fees and all that that can do, which the House will debate this afternoon, and about the potential scrapping of the education maintenance allowance. In my constituency in Derry, people are fed up with hearing about the jobs that are being created by the Executive. All the time, we are given examples of the hundreds and thousands of jobs that are coming to Northern Ireland, but we do not see them in Derry. People in my constituency will begin to hold the Executive to a higher standard.

We know all of the arguments and have made them a number of times. As party colleagues have done, I commit to keep working with the Minister and Executive colleagues to ensure that we do our best to make the Budget and the Programme for Government — when we ever see it — fit for purpose. That is all I have to say for now.

Mr Allister: Last week, in responding to the Second Stage debate, the Minister described me as the Elijah of the Assembly. If that was meant to be some sort of slight or insult from new DUP, I am afraid that I treat it more as a compliment because I am very happy to be associated with those who have not bowed the knee to terrorist-inclusive government. If, in my time here, I manage to slay — metaphorically, of course — a few prophets of Baal, I will be very happy with the work that that involves.

However, there are issues, whether the Minister likes it or not, that have to be returned to in respect of this Budget. For all the gloss, spin, hyperbole and bluster that the Minister delivers to us, it is quite clear to anyone who analyses the document that it is frayed, tawdry and bereft of detail that would speak to a cogent strategy. The Minister's colleague Mr Ian Paisley Jnr spoke of this place as not even matching up to a good county council. Would this Budget even match up to a good county council budget, given its lack of vision, cogency, and connection with what should be the pathfinders of policy? It is totally dysfunctional and displaced from any notion of a Programme for Government. It does not at all cross the tramlines of an investment strategy. It is simply a little self-contained allocation of block grant funding to various silo Departments in what passes for government in Northern Ireland. Each Department gets its allocation and each spends it as it pleases, with no coherence or common binding cause to inspire direction. They just spend it as they wish. Some will spend it on promoting a surfeit of all-Ireland connections. Indeed, it illustrates the lack of cogency in this Government that some Departments now have dedicated all-Ireland units.

Where is the economic direction of this Government? Are we seeking to tie ourselves to the fastest sinking economy in Europe: that of the Irish Republic? Or are we seeking to strengthen our ties with the sixth largest economy in the world: that of the UK? This Budget does not give us any direction as to where, economically, we are seeking to go. Therefore, it is a process and a Budget that really amounts to nothing in terms of plotting out and pointing out the economic direction that this part of the United Kingdom should be taking.

Last week and, indeed, the previous one, I asked for some specifics on the content of this Budget. That raised the ire of the Minister. I will take that risk again because I am going to ask again, tedious and tiresome as it may be, just where within this Budget we find the signals or indications of whatever became of the £800 million that was promised in the sales talk about the transfer of responsibility for policing and justice. The Minister, with great gusto, declared that he would answer that question last week. Last Monday, in answer, he said:

"the police budget now has money for a police college, the part-time Reserve gratuity fund and hearing loss claims. That is where the £800 million is." — [Official Report, Bound Volume 65, p75, col 2].

1.30 pm

Let us examine the point about the police college. On the same day last week — last Monday — the Minister's colleague Mr Poots told the House that that was a project costing £140 million. So, there is £140 million of the £800 million. The Minister said that the second component was the "part-time Reserve gratuity fund". We know that that is only £20 million. I must say that the negotiation on the Reserve gratuity fund was totally botched by those who negotiated it, when they failed to get the opt-out on taxation. That now means that that fund will be savaged by the Inland Revenue and is worth about half of what it was meant to be worth to the man or woman who is receiving it. That is down to the failure of those who negotiated it.

So, £140 million and £20 million makes £160 million. Then we have the hearing loss claims. The letter from the Prime Minister in October 2009 said that that was £12 million a year for up to five years, but, of course, it was to be paid for by the Executive handing over sellable assets. In notional terms, it is £60 million. So, £140 million, £20 million and £60 million makes £220 million and leaves us a long, long way short of the £800 million that the Minister likes to pretend was secured as part of the transfer of responsibility for policing and justice. So, where is it, Minister? It is not in the answer that you gave last week. So, let us try again this week and see whether we can get an answer to that.

What about the sellable assets in relation to the hearing loss money? Have any assets been transferred to the Treasury from the Northern Ireland Executive to offset the hearing loss money? Has any of that happened? Is any of it likely to happen? If so, when? Perhaps the Minister could tell us. Speaking of sales and assets, I ask again: what about the four bases that were handed over? What about their running costs? Where are those in this Budget? What was received for them? When are they likely to be realised?

Three debates later, the Minister does not want to answer those sorts of questions because, in truth, this is not a Budget at all in the sense that one understands it. It is, as I have described, a mere collection of budget

lines, which are very sparse in detail, that sets in motion a process whereby 11 or 12 Departments do what they please in a totally disjointed fashion. Halfway through, some may well decide to change horses. For example, we might have a sudden redirection on the spend anticipated in the Department for Regional Development (DRD) and Roads Service over the A5. Of course, none of that is foreshadowed, because this Budget sets the broadest possible parameters and allows for all the changes that, according to the exigencies of the political moment, might arise.

I want to return to the issue of the funding that the Budget provides for victims' groups, because a very sad and difficult situation is unfolding in Northern Ireland for innocent victims' groups. In this Budget, there is supposed to be match funding on Peace III projects, and there is supposed to be core funding. Yet we are virtually one third of the way through the financial year, and there are groups in this Province that have seen no money since the end of March to keep themselves going.

We have staff who are unpaid and projects that have ground to a halt. Why? It is because of the double whammy of the sheer incompetence of some who administer those funds from the Community Relations Council (CRC) and others, and the bind put upon them by those who insist on audits and accounting processes that are not insisted upon for others. Hitherto, those were not insisted on, and they are beyond what volunteer groups — for many are run by volunteers — could possibly cope with. So we have the situation in which many well-known victims' groups in the Province are moneyless.

That should concern the Finance Minister. He should be making strenuous efforts, I suggest, with the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to enquire as to why that blockage on funding to those vital victims' groups exists and why there has been an unfolding and apparently concerted and deliberate attempt to put some of them out of business. Of course, any financial irregularity is utterly to be pursued and utterly to be condemned. Where that has happened, Departments should certainly pursue it. However, that is no excuse for transferring the approach taken to such isolated cases to the generalised treatment of victims' groups. That, sadly, is what has been happening, particularly within the Protestant victims' sector,

and many well-known victims' groups are today in desperation.

Yes, the groups will have had meetings with junior Minister Bell and received all sorts of promises, but still no money. Sadly, a lot of this goes back to politics. It goes back to action by the First Minister's office on 18 February 2010, when, out of a fit of pique over a publication by one of the victims' groups that critiqued the Hillsborough agreement, an edict was issued to pursue that group. The product of that was the denial of funding. Yet nothing of substance has been found against that group. It cannot go on. It is the sort of thing that any Government worthy of the name would have arrested in its tracks and dealt with a long time ago.

The Budget, sadly for me, not only avoids creating a due vision for our economy and providing cogency on how we move forward, it also underpins the huge, perpetual waste in government. I mentioned it last week, but it bears repetition: the gross, incredible waste in the North/South Executive bodies. Over the four-year Budget period, £400 million is to be poured down that drain with no return. Yet, later today, we will discuss the tuition fee crisis facing families and the education sector. We are told that £40 million a year is required to plug that gap. No one knows where, if anywhere, it will come from. Yet we can find £400 million to pour down the drain of useless North/South bodies.

Unless or until Budgets in the House begin to address those realities, they will, like this one, continue to be documents of non-delivery, dysfunctional in their presentation and tawdry in their content.

Mrs McKeivitt: I welcome the opportunity to debate the Budget. As a member of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, I want to voice my concerns about the Budget's implications in that area. When one examines the proposed Budget, it is evident that we are certainly in difficult financial circumstances. The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) was allocated £580.4 million in the draft Budget settlement, which breaks down to £438.7 million in resources and £141.7 million in capital. Although a cut in the resource expenditure is significant, though not, perhaps, considered to be severe, the capital expenditure has dropped from £218 million in the three-year comprehensive spending review to £141.7 million for four years, which is severe. However,

the people of Northern Ireland want to know how that will impact on their lives and what the Budget will mean for them.

The first thing could be the closure of 10 libraries. That means that people in 10 rural communities will not have access to a library and may no longer have access to the Internet, and, more importantly, people could lose their jobs.

Most Members will be aware that recently there was a fire in Arthur Cottage, which caused severe damage to the ancestral home of the twenty-first American president. Given the difficult financial circumstances that we face, the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure stated that the Department could not provide financial assistance for the redevelopment of that historic site.

The Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure had made progress to improve sporting facilities in Northern Ireland. Three stadiums — Ravenhill, Windsor Park and Casement Park — will receive funds for redevelopment. A Member has already stated that stadium developments with a lower priority should not be given funding. The development of Casement Park, Ravenhill and Windsor Park is timely, with not only the Olympics approaching in 2012 but the Police and Fire Games in 2013 and the Commonwealth Games in 2014. Northern Ireland must have the facilities to encourage people and events to come, and it must continue to provide facilities to encourage our young athletes, so that one day we may have many more Rory McIlroys. The media attention that Rory has brought to Northern Ireland is fantastic, and we need the spotlight to shine on Northern Ireland for positive reasons to promote the economy and tourism.

It is easy to say that investment in culture should take place. However, cultural events are not only an opportunity to promote Northern Ireland, attract business investment and encourage tourism but an opportunity to promote a shared culture. Last week, we again saw rioting on the streets. Surely we should be doing our utmost to invest in the promotion of a shared cultural awareness to promote harmony and peace. We need a shared cultural awareness to establish a shared future for all the people of Northern Ireland. Will the Budget deliver that for the people of Northern Ireland? Mr Deputy Speaker, it is not even close.

Mr Wilson: I thank Members for their contributions to the Final Stage of the Budget

(No. 2) Bill for 2011-12. By necessity, as we have said time and time again during debates on the Budget, there will be some repetition. Some Members repeat what they said previously because they did not like the answer that they got, and they will probably get the same answer again. Some Members repeat what they said because they do not have anything different to say, and they will get the same response. However, I will deal with some points that were raised during the debate.

A common theme throughout the remarks was the need for a new process and the repetitive nature of the present process. Some people said that the weaknesses and the way in which information is presented do not enable them to scrutinise the accounts properly. Some people suggested that we contrived the weakness to ensure that the process is not subject to proper scrutiny. I welcome scrutiny of the Budget. We want proper scrutiny of the Budget, which is one reason why we started the review.

However, I suspect that it will not matter how much information we give to some Members; they will still complain, because, of course, they are not here to find how money is being spent. They are simply here to whinge. I will come to some of the whingers in a moment or two when I get into the substance of the comments.

1.45 pm

Mr D Bradley: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Wilson: Since one of the whingers wants me to give way, I will.

Mr D Bradley: I thank the Minister for giving way. Is he happy with the fact that, in all probability, the review will not be completed during this mandate? Does he agree that there is a need to accelerate the review process?

Mr Wilson: I want to make something clear to the Member: it will be completed during this mandate, and, as I said in previous debates, it will probably be in place after next year's Budget. By that time, Mr Hamilton will be the one who will have to respond to the new transparent Budget, which will give Members lots more questions to ask and lots more criticism to make, and I will be very happy to hand it over to him at that stage. The process does not allow the review to be done for the next financial year, but it will be completed for the third year of the Budget.

I welcome the fact that the Committee and many Members have already made very useful suggestions. Essentially, it will not be for the Assembly and the Committees alone to make the points; we want to hear suggestions from people outside the institutions as to how they would like to see the information being presented and how we can avoid some of the repetition that is in the process at present. I look forward to that. I know that Mr Cree made that point, as did Mr Bradley, Mr Allister and Mr Murphy.

Mr Girvan referred to the PMS. I am glad that we are close to the end of that process. The money has been allocated. The small savers will be totally protected; they will get the full £20,000, and I hope that the payments will start fairly soon. That will be up to the administrator, but the money is with the Department, and we have not left it to the February process.

I welcome Mr Cree's conclusion that, having gone through all of the process, his party sees it as illogical to vote against the Budget. I do not know whether that means that we are going to get its fulsome support — somehow, I doubt it. I think that we might see the same action from its Members of going through the two Lobbies to show that they are here but not actually voting for it. It will be a bit of a disappointment if they are not able to endorse the Budget, given that part of the reason why we are facing the current problems with the Budget is the support that his party gave to the Conservatives at the last election and, as a result of that, the £4 billion cut that was imposed for the next four years. I thought that they would at least have had the grace to accept that we have tried to manage the situation that they have created for us as best we could and would have given us some support for that. However, we will see; maybe we will get their support when the time comes.

Mr McDonnell is not in his seat, but may I say that of the contributions from the SDLP, I felt that his were, at least, the most constructive. Comments went quickly downhill after his contribution. They went from constructive to repetition of the past errors, to drivel, which, to be frank, became almost incomprehensible towards the end.

Let me deal with some of the points that Mr McDonnell made. He made the very important point that the Budget should be about creating economic opportunities for the future. We are in the middle of a recession. What is the Budget

trying to do, within the limits that have been imposed on us, and what has it done to try to improve economic opportunities? He talked about the need to spend on infrastructure, and he is right. The fact that we moved £256 million from current spending to capital spending, against a 40% cut in our capital budget from central government, was an indication that we sought to try to fill some of that gap.

By the fourth year of this Budget, we will be spending £1.4 billion on infrastructure and capital investment, which is equivalent to the long-term trend that there would have been over the lifetime of this Assembly, the previous Assembly and the Assembly before that. That is recognition in the Budget that, despite what some other Members said about there being no strategic direction, we have understood the importance of infrastructure to building up the economy and making this a place where private sector investors can come knowing that they have the ability to then do business. Whether that infrastructure is roads, railways, factory-building or broadband — whatever it happens to be — we have sought to provide additional resources for that. As well as that, we are, of course, looking at the redundant resources, infrastructure and buildings that government might have, which we no longer have use of or are not fully using. We are looking at how we can realise cash from those, again, to put into capital investment.

He also raised the issue of jobs. If you look at the allocation that has been made to DETI, you will see that Invest Northern Ireland is convinced that, with that allocation, it will be able to create 20,000 jobs over the Budget period 2011-15. Some of those jobs will be created very quickly by the £19 million that has been given for short-term jobs that can be brought online very quickly.

He also spoke about the importance of money spent on research and development. Only this week, we have had two very important examples of that. On Wednesday, I had the opportunity to visit FG Wilson in my constituency. It has spent £26 million on an engineering centre of excellence, in which generators can be tested for emissions, noise etc, and problems can be analysed. The centre will look at how generators can be built and run more efficiently, how they can become lower-maintenance, how they can use less fuel, etc. By keeping the research and development in Northern Ireland, that anchors

the manufacturing jobs in Northern Ireland. DETI played an important part in ensuring that that research and development facility was developed and, in turn, it will anchor thousands of other jobs.

The other good news last week was about Bombardier. Bombardier has now secured hundreds of millions of pounds worth of orders for its new jet. The carbon fibre was developed here in Northern Ireland and the research and development was done here in Northern Ireland. As a result, we have secured the manufacturing of wings, etc, which will secure thousands of jobs in engineering. Again, that emphasises the importance of being not just a manufacturing base but a place in which products can be researched and developed. Therefore, we get the benefit of then manufacturing that product when it comes onto the market.

I remember Arlene Foster being criticised because of the money that she wanted to give Bombardier to develop the C Series. At one stage, she got a lot of criticism and was asked why she was giving Bombardier so much money. This illustrates that there was far-sightedness on her part. She saw and believed that the potential that the firm suggested was there could secure jobs in the long-term future.

Mr McDonnell also mentioned food production in Northern Ireland. I am meeting the Northern Ireland food and drink industry within the next week to discuss the potential for new investment in that industry.

I come then to Mrs Cochrane's contribution. She talked about rebuilding the economy and the need to live within the Budget, about it being important for Committees to make sure that savings delivery plans have been abided by, and about ensuring that Departments spend money as they promised. She talked about the need to rebuild the economy, and especially about the role of tourism. I repeat that I share her views about what happened in east Belfast last week. I was incensed over the weekend at the excuses that were given for the interface violence that marred the news from Northern Ireland last week. People always look for someone to blame rather than look at those who perpetrated the violence.

The Member will know that East Belfast used to be my constituency and that there has been significant investment in the area, such as the new housing around the bottom of the

Newtownards Road. In fact, I was recently engaged with other Members in working with Habitat for Humanity on houses in Madrid Street. I remember when Madrid Street and Thistle Court were wastelands; now they are thriving communities, and new investment is going into them.

Some people think that investment only goes to community groups. A lot of money has gone into community activity, but there has been investment in schools and housing, investment by the voluntary sector and investment in the Skainos project at the bottom of the Newtownards Road. For people to say that, somehow or other, these things happen because the Government do not give money to those areas and that there has been no investment in communities is a cop-out. Such things happen because bad people do bad things. As a result, it makes it much more difficult for those of us who want to improve the situation in Northern Ireland.

The Member talked about co-operation across Departments; Mr Allister made a meal of that, as did Mr Bradley. I want to address that issue very forcibly. The idea that allocating money to the Department of Education, the Health Department, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and all the other Departments somehow reinforces a silo mentality is, quite honestly, one of the most infantile arguments that I have ever heard perpetrated in this Assembly. We allocate money to Departments because government is organised in Departments. That is the structure of our government, and to say that because we allocate money into all those silos we do not have joined-up government bears no resemblance to the facts.

I could cite plenty of examples, but I will give just one. Take the regeneration of town centres: the Department for Social Development spent money creating a master plan for town centres and picked out a number of vulnerable towns; it put money into key projects in those town centres to regenerate them. In the Budget, I announced that my Department would spend money on giving a small business rates relief. The idea of the small business rates relief was to ensure that small, vulnerable businesses, especially those in town centres, got a reduction in their overheads so that we could make it easier for them to survive.

The Department for Employment and Learning runs training schemes for retailers who work in town centres to ensure that they become more viable and more vibrant. The Department of the Environment does the same. Roads Service looks at schemes in town centres, such as traffic calming, and seeks to spruce them up, by environmental or other schemes.

That is just one example of where money goes into different pots but is not spent in some kind of silo way. There is co-operation between Departments to look at what can be done to make sure that money is spent effectively and individual sums of money are spent in a way that gives greater benefit than the individual sums of money added together. There are lots of other examples across government that we could quote.

2.00 pm

We have to get away from this nonsense. It really is juvenile for people to simply poke at what the Administration do, instead of recognising that some good work is done and that good work is a result of innovative ideas from public servants, officials, communities, businesses and politicians. We seek to spend money effectively by looking at those ways of doing so.

Mrs Cochrane also raised the issue of co-operation between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic and talked about the work of the North/South Ministerial Council. Actually, a lot of that co-operation never takes place at North/South Ministerial Council level at all. In fact — this is a theme that I come back to time and again, and it is one of the areas where I happen to be in some agreement with Mr Allister — I would like to see a reduction in a lot of the unnecessary structures that have been set up to bring about co-operation between Ministers and Departments in Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. I believe that that can be done much more effectively by Ministers who really want to get value for money in both jurisdictions working together. There is really no need for a lot of the architecture, but we have to live with it.

I have sought to ensure that there are as many efficiencies as possible to try to cut costs, as has the Finance Minister in the Irish Republic. A lot of co-operation takes place at departmental level between Ministers. Actually, there is no provision in the North/South structure for a lot of those things to happen because they are

outside its remit. However, that does not mean that they should not be pursued. Indeed, in the margins of those meetings, other Ministers and I often have meetings with our counterparts from the Republic to ensure that we get value for money. That in no way comprises my unionism. It does, however, make good economic sense at a time of economic austerity.

I will now deal with Mr McLaughlin's points. He talked about the approach that challenged the Assembly as far as the Budget was concerned and the need to supplement the block grant by looking for new revenue and efficiencies. I say that all the time as well, and, when you say it like that, it seems to roll off the tongue very easily. However, the truth of the matter is that new revenues and more efficient ways of delivering government in Northern Ireland will represent tough political decisions. As soon as we start to talk about raising new revenue, there will be some group who will be affected by that and will not want to pay, so it will lobby against it. As soon as we start to talk about more efficient ways of delivering government in Northern Ireland, we will hear about the implications for employment or whatever, and people will lobby against it. We must seek those opportunities, but they will not be penalty kicks and will not be easy to deliver on all of the time.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

As I said, the SDLP contribution started to go downhill after Mr McDonnell made his contribution. Mr Bradley started off in the normal way by complaining about the whole process. I could have written and, in fact, delivered his speech for him, for goodness' sake. However, there was one interesting thing at the very start of his speech, when he talked about how the SDLP had engaged fully in the Budget process and had brought forward ideas. Indeed, he even suggested that we had accepted some of those ideas. The constant theme of SDLP Members during the earlier debates on the Budget was that they would vote against it because they were not allowed to play any part in it and were blocked out and ignored. However, Mr Bradley has now told the House that not only did the SDLP engage fully in the process but it had some of its ideas accepted.

Mr Speaker, are you going to intervene on me? I think that you are.

Mr Speaker: No, I will allow the Minister to continue.

Mr Wilson: Thank you. I think that we are already finding that, by its own admission, the rationale that the SDLP had for opposing the Budget is beginning to unravel. The SDLP played a part. We could query, as I have, how useful some of its ideas were, but Mr Bradley is right to say that some of those ideas were taken on board and, as he also indicated, his party engaged fully in the process.

Mr Bradley said that he was unclear about what happened to the £1.6 billion of revenue raising. He suggested that we had had only £900 million of that, and he asked what happened to the other £0.7 billion. Of course, the truth of the matter is that some aspirational forms of revenue raising were included in that figure. Indeed, he will know all about aspirational revenue raising: his party's document was full of them, and some of the ideas were not very practical at all. Many ideas amounting to issues worth between £1.6 billion and £1.8 billion were brought to the Budget review group. Many of those ideas were rejected because they were not workable; some were put on the back-burner to see whether they were workable; and others are still being pursued to see how practical they are. However, a total of £900 million was raised.

Mr Bradley reverted to asking whether that money was new money. I am not too sure what he means by that. If he is asking whether it is money that we would not have had, had we not put those recommendations into the Budget, it is all new money. It may come from traditional sources, such as selling assets. However, those are not assets that were sold before or belong to someone else, unlike some of the ideas in the SDLP's document. The assets concerned are ones that we have and that we decided that we were going to dispose of because we could put the money from them to better use by furthering some of the objectives that we have set for ourselves. Some of it is new money in so far as it is additional money that we are collecting from rates, and some of it was previously unavailable to us because we are taking it from sources, such as the Belfast Harbour Commissioners, from whom we have not collected before. However, it is all new money, albeit from some of the sources that we have drawn on in the past to raise that kind of revenue.

Mr Bradley also raised the issue of progress on the Programme for Government. That is something for OFMDFM, and I think that that will be coming forward. He also raised the issue

of the £4 billion that should be available for investment in Northern Ireland in years 5 and 6 of the Budget. That has now been referred to the joint ministerial council as a dispute that we have with the Government. They are likely to say that they have provided Budget allocations only for the next four years, but it has been fed into that dispute mechanism.

Finally, Mr Bradley raised the issues of EYF and NAMA. I will meet the Treasury Minister tomorrow to discuss proposals for EYF, and, later this afternoon, I will meet representatives of NAMA to discuss the issues that he raised about the way that it treats things in Northern Ireland.

I will now move on to the points that Joe Byrne raised, and, as I said, the contributions from SDLP Members started to slip down the hill after Dr McDonnell's. That started with a statement from Mr Byrne, which I wrote down so that I did not get it wrong. He said that the Budget created no "stimulus for the local economy". I know that he was not here in the last mandate, but I would have thought that, before coming off with what I can only describe advisedly as drivel, he would at least have sought to acquaint himself with the facts of the Budget.

Over the next four years, albeit against a background of a 40% reduction, we have a considerable investment programme, culminating in £1.4 billion being spent in year 4, which will bring us back to the long-term trend. In the Budget, we have allocated money to DETI to create 20,000 jobs. We have the small business rate relief. We are seeking to help the manufacturing industry by keeping the cap on manufacturing rates at 30%. We are putting money into building new schools. We are putting money into the capital programme for health. It is absolute nonsense that there is no stimulus for the local economy in this Budget, and the Member knows it. He should have thought about it. I am not too sure what he meant, but he then went on to criticise the size of the subvention that we get from London. Maybe he wanted even more cuts, but it was certainly not clear. He complained about the subvention that we get from London but said that we were too dependent on the public sector. Does he want more cuts? Perhaps he will tell me now.

Mr Byrne: I was not criticising the fact that we get £8 billion; I was actually showing some gratitude for that. The reality is that the regional economy has to be reshaped and reconfigured.

Most economic commentators would expect us to say that we want to make the private sector more productive and become less dependent on the public sector. That is the gist of what I was saying.

Mr Wilson: Again, I am not clear. If he wants us to be less dependent on the public sector, does he want more public sector spending cuts? Is that what he is saying? It is totally unclear what he means.

All I can say is that this Budget seeks to rebalance the economy. It seeks to ensure that we put in place money to spend on infrastructure to encourage private sector investment. It puts money in place to create jobs, especially in the private sector and not the public sector, to try to change the balance. It tries to use what limited tax powers we have to encourage the private sector of the economy. The Member talked about wanting a better way and about rebalancing the economy, but all we got were the words. There were no suggestions for how it might be done.

Michelle Gildernew talked about the June monitoring round and deplored the fact that no application had been made for specific projects such as —

Ms Gildernew: Music therapy.

Mr Wilson: Yes, music therapy. Sorry. That was below the de minimis level. Therefore, the Health Department would have had the ability to move the money around and would not have had to make a bid for it. However, as I said, there was not a great deal of money available during the June monitoring round.

Mr Eastwood gave a list of things that he wanted money to be spent on. He said that the Budget will not deliver and does not protect public sector jobs. He did not recognise the fact that we froze public sector wages to try to save about 1,800 public sector jobs. He said that the Budget makes no real attempt to buffer the economy against the recession. He said that there is no strategic job creation or money for new schools. He went on and on and on about things that we should spend money on but gave no ideas about where the money should come from. I suppose that that is the type of bankruptcy that we have come to expect from some in the SDLP.

I now turn to the Elijah of the Assembly, who has not bowed the knee to Baal and wishes

to slay the prophets of Baal during his term here. I have to say that the sword that he uses to do the slaying is becoming more and more blunt every time he wields it. We get the same old arguments, and he hits the same old wall with them. He will not get anywhere with those arguments, because, of course, they are simply a repetition of things that do not have any substance.

2.15 pm

I have dealt with the issue of each Department getting its allocation and this Budget being based on a silo mentality. I hope that I have dealt with that through the example that I have given, and, if Members wish, I can give other examples.

Mr Allister said that he was going to be tedious and tiresome; he will do tedium and tiresomeness with great relish. We will all get very tired, very soon, of some of his arguments. For the third time, he asks, "Where is Gordon Brown's £800 million?". I have said to Mr Allister and I repeat that he is looking for some kind of Mr Bean accountancy that shows that, on 15 June, Gordon Brown gave Peter Robinson £800 million and, on 16 June, Peter Robinson did that, that, that and that with it. If he is looking for that kind of transparency in the accounts, I must tell him that that is not the way in which government accounts are done. However, let me repeat it, so that he knows.

Mr Allister talks about botched negotiations. At least the DUP got into negotiations, rather than standing on the sidelines throwing tantrums. We got involved in seeking additional money for policing and justice in Northern Ireland so that, when those powers were devolved, we did not hit an economic crisis. The money is allocated: it is for the police college, the part-time gratuity and the hearing loss settlement. Incidentally, in presenting the sums to the Assembly, Mr Allister could not even get it right. The Department of Justice had to find the first £12 million each year. Anything after that — the bill is likely to be £400 million — was to be provided by the Treasury. If Mr Allister is querying the sums, he should at least get the facts right.

The Department of Justice has also been able to draw down money to deal with terrorism over the next four or five years. Rather than having to make an application on a year-on-year basis, that £200 million has now been made available to the Department. If Mr Allister wants

to know where the money is, I can tell him that it has been allocated for pensions, equal pay, the hearing loss settlement, the police college and dealing with terrorism. That money makes policing more effective. Furthermore — this will be joy to his ears — money has been allocated for the legal aid bill in Northern Ireland. The money is all there, that is how it is allocated, and that is how I prefer the information to be presented, according to how it is spent and the impact that it will have.

Mr Allister: At the third attempt, the Minister has added new budget lines to his explanation of the £800 million, but they still come nowhere near £800 million. One hundred million pounds is to be spent on the police college, £20 million on the Reserve gratuity, and a figure will be spent on the hearing loss settlement. The Minister must not have read the Prime Minister's letter: it clearly states that anything above the £60 million — that is, above £12 million per annum for five years — is met through access to the reserve. Access to the reserve was never spun as part of the £800 million. The Minister has still not told the House where the £800 million is. He may have added a few lines today, but he is well short of the £800 million. He knows that the £800 million was a con on the community, and he cannot tabulate it. He cannot give it, which is why he tries to bluster his way out of it.

Mr Wilson: I am not going to bluster my way out of it. To make his figures add up, Mr Allister has already changed his mind. When he spoke not so long ago, he had £140 million for the college. Now it is down to £100 million, in a period of about 10 minutes. If anyone needs to get his head round the figures, it is Mr Allister, not me. I have given a list and examples of where the money has gone.

The important point is that, had we used the strategy that Mr Allister and his friends wanted, which was to stand and yap on the sidelines without getting involved in negotiations, we would not have had one penny of that £800 million. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Wilson: That £800 million is now available to be spent on security in Northern Ireland —

Mr Allister: Where?

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Wilson: At the risk of being tedious and tiresome, he asks, "Where?". I will go through

again where the money has gone: the police college, the hearing loss claims, the part-time Reserve, dealing with terrorism and pay equality.

Mr Allister: *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Wilson: He also raised the issue of victims' groups. I find it odd that anyone would want public money to be spent in a way that is not accountable. He spoke about transparency in the accounts of the Assembly. However, when we seek to make victims' groups accountable and transparent, Mr Allister seems not to like the kind of scrutiny to which one or two of those groups, which happen to be closely allied to him, are subjected.

Mr Allister: Is that why they are being victimised?

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Wilson: No. He asked that question from a sedentary position. First, they are not being victimised. Secondly, the groups were selected not by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister or the Executive but on the basis of a risk analysis exercise conducted by CRC. That exercise was carried out on all victims' groups that are in receipt of funding.

Mr Bell: I thank the Finance Minister for giving way on that specific point. I have met a number of victims' groups and compared their funding from last year with the funding allocated for this year. In all the cases that I considered, this year's funding is substantially greater than it was last year, and, in some cases, it is tens of thousands of pounds greater. Will the Minister reflect that, under direct rule, the money allocated to victims was less than £5 million, whereas this year, under the House's Budget, it is in the region of £12 million?

Mr Wilson: I appreciate what the junior Minister said, although I suspect that it will not make one whit of difference to the arguments that we will hear time and time again in the House. The arguments that Mr Allister will put forward will simply be ones that he happens to think justify his opposition to anything done by the Administration. Often, they will be arguments that he just happens to make up. He has made it clear that his *raison d'être* is to level criticism, justified or not, time and time again. I am happy to take criticism when we have done something wrong.

First, we have a four-year Budget, which is something that no other Administration in any part of the United Kingdom, apart from the Westminster Government, has. Scotland and

Wales did not get it, but we did. That Budget seeks to grow the economy in the face of a world recession and to rebalance that economy to try to improve the private sector. We have a Budget that seeks to protect public services, even in the face of swingeing £4,000 million cuts. It seeks to be innovative in raising new money to try to fill some of the gaps created by the reductions that came from Westminster. We have a Budget that is a result of listening to interest groups who told us what needs to be done to regenerate town centres, to stimulate employment, to get training going, to get research and development going and to help the construction industry. We have sought to tailor the Budget to those ends. That is an achievement, especially given that it had to be done in a mandatory five-party coalition and against the economic background that we had.

Those in the SDLP and the smaller parties can criticise because they do not have to take any responsibility. The larger, responsible parties in the Assembly could not leave Northern Ireland without a Budget. Public services would have collapsed had we done that. Those who, I suspect, will indulge themselves by going through the “No” Lobby at the end of the debate will do so in the sure knowledge that others will take the responsible decisions to take Northern Ireland forward. The irresponsible can traipse through the “No” Lobby. I hope that they hang their heads in shame as they do. They pass on the responsibility of keeping public services and public finances going, keeping the economy running and looking at a vision for the economy in Northern Ireland to others who will take the flak. Some things in the Budget are unpopular; that is the nature of a Budget that has less money than in previous years.

There is a stark choice between those prepared to be responsible politicians in Northern Ireland and those who simply want always to say the populist thing or use situations such as this to score cheap political points against their opponents. Of course you will do that in debate; that is what debate is about. However, when making a decision as important as how money is allocated, we have to recognise that the best possible job was done in difficult circumstances. For that reason I commend the Budget Bill to the House and look forward to Royal Assent.

Mr Speaker: As we come to Question Time at 2.30 pm, I suggest that the House take its ease until that time. After Question Time, we will put the Question on the Budget.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Office of the First and deputy First Minister

Mr Speaker: Question Nos 1, 8, 9 and 13 have been withdrawn and require written answers.

Victims' Groups: Audit

2. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the criteria used to determine why some victims and survivors groups were subject to a risk-based audit in relation to the establishment of a new Victims and Survivors Service. (AQO 180/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness (The deputy First Minister): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. First, let me make it clear that there is no relation between the risk-based audit that is currently being conducted and the establishment of a new Victims and Survivors Service. Those are two unique areas of work, and neither impacts directly on the other. In relation to the audit, groups were selected on the basis of a rigorously conducted risk-analysis exercise conducted by the Community Relations Council on all victims' groups in receipt of core and/or strategic support funding from the council at that time.

Four areas were reviewed: the value of funding received; the level of financial controls; the organisational governance arrangements; and the extent of multiple sources of funding. I am sure that the Member will understand that it would not be appropriate to identify the groups selected for the funding verification and control process while the audit is still being carried out. Once the findings have been presented to our Department, any weaknesses in systems or controls that might be identified will be addressed.

Work is progressing in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) to establish the new Victims and Survivors Service. We are still working to our previously agreed two-year time frame of April 2010 to April 2012. The new service will provide support for all victims and survivors, those who belong to victims'

groups and those who do not. Our aim is to establish a service that will listen and be responsive to the needs of victims and survivors. Support will be provided to victims and survivors based on identified and agreed need.

The time frame for the establishment of the service will not be impacted by the ongoing audit. We continue to be committed to delivering the highest level of support and services to victims, and that is evidenced by the amount of funding in that area. We have planned provision of £50 million to meet the needs of victims and survivors over the Budget period 2011-15.

Mr Nesbitt: I declare an interest as a former commissioner for the victims and survivors of the conflict. I thank the Minister for his answer. I wonder if, when he allocated an additional £3 million to victims in the 2007 comprehensive spending review, he imagined that the period would elapse without the service having come into being, that groups would largely feel that they will have no future once the service does arrive, and that the Northern Ireland Memorial Fund would stop processing new applications and would have a backlog of some 1,500. What does he intend to do about that?

Mr Speaker: I remind the Member that it is one inquiry, not multiple questions.

Mr M McGuinness: Work is progressing in OFMDFM to establish the new service. We are still working to our previously agreed time frame of 2010-12. The new service will provide support for all victims and survivors, and we continue to be committed to delivering the highest level of support and services to victims. In fact, we are still awaiting the completion of the comprehensive needs assessment by the victims' commissioners. That is vital to identifying and developing the support necessary for victims and to the work of the service. I would have thought that the Member, given that he was previously involved with the commission, would have understood the difference between the audit and the establishment of the service.

In relation to the Northern Ireland Memorial fund, before releasing further funding to it, we need to ensure full accountability and value for public money. We now have the necessary authorisations in place to confirm the memorial fund's budget for 2011-12, which will be approximately £3 million. Officials are currently working on a letter of offer for 2011-12, and

we expect that to be with the fund very shortly. When it accepts the terms and conditions of the letter of offer, further funding will be released to the memorial fund, and that will enable it to issue letters of award to those individuals whose applications have been fully assessed.

Last autumn, we approved the memorial fund's proposals for moving to a new individual-needs-based approach to provide financial support to victims and survivors. The memorial fund launched that new approach on 8 November 2010 and so far, it has distributed over £3.5 million. A total of £4.4 million was provided through the fund in 2011, which was more than double the allocation in 2008-09.

It is true that the memorial fund received a higher than anticipated number of applications. That put serious pressure on the fund's budget, which, ultimately, placed a strain on the Department's overall budget for victims and survivors. In light of that funding pressure, we wrote to the memorial fund on 29 March 2011, asking it to close its grant schemes to further applications from 18 April 2011, to facilitate a full consideration of the grant schemes and the new approach. Letters were sent to every previous applicant to the fund and to all victims' groups to ensure that news of the 18 April closing date was conveyed to everyone and that nobody missed out. Those issues are being dealt with, and, over the coming period, we hope that any outstanding applications will be expedited.

Mr Speaker: I remind Ministers about their time limits under Standing Orders.

Ms Ruane: An féidir leis an LeasChéad Aire insint dúinn cá mhéad airgid a thug a Roinn don memorial fund do Thuaisceart na hÉireann? Will the deputy First Minister outline the funding that has been made available for victims through the NI Memorial Fund?

Mr M McGuinness: I understand that this issue has been in the media recently. I know that people have, understandably, been frustrated by the length of time that it has taken to release funding via the memorial fund. I have already explained why that is the case. However, I am, again, very pleased to confirm that we now have the necessary authorisations in place for the memorial fund's budget for 2011-12, which will amount to approximately £3 million. Over £3.5 million has been distributed so far under the new needs-based process that was introduced in November 2010. Along with the £4.4 million

that was provided through the fund in 2010-11, that is more than double the allocation in 2008-09. Officials are currently working on a letter of offer, which we expect to be with the fund very shortly. When the fund accepts the terms and conditions of the letter of offer, further funding will be released that will enable it to issue letters of awards to those individuals whose applications have been fully assessed.

Mr Eastwood: Why has the deputy First Minister's Department not responded to several letters drafted by the victims' commissioners? Given the importance of those issues, will his Department respond at its earliest convenience?

Mr M McGuinness: It is not true to suggest that we have not responded to letters from the victims' commissioners. In fact, the First Minister and I will meet the victims' commissioners later this week.

Childcare Strategy

3. **Mrs McKeivitt** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what progress has been made on the development of a childcare strategy. (AQO 181/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: With your permission, a Cheann Comhairle, I will ask junior Minister Anderson to take this question.

Ms M Anderson (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): Go raibh maith agat. In the recent Budget settlement, £12 million was allocated — £3 million a year — towards providing support for a childcare strategy. The development and successful implementation of a childcare strategy calls for collaborative working across Departments and agencies and with families and other stakeholders. Strengthening and building on the existing provision and services, OFMDFM has begun to develop proposals, through the work of the ministerial-led subcommittee on children and young people, for consideration by the Assembly and the Executive. OFMDFM commissioned a policy and economic appraisal of the options for the childcare strategy. That report, which has detailed a range of essential and desirable actions to support a 10-year strategy, will inform the development of such a strategy as well as the Executive's decision on how the £3 million a year will be allocated.

Mrs McKeivitt: Can the junior Minister say what representations have been made to her Department on behalf of childcare groups that were part of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) pilot? When will new resources be open for applications from those groups?

Ms M Anderson: Representations will be made to the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development on behalf of those involved in the DARD pilot. That said, we have engaged with a number of groups and organisations to develop the childcare strategy. That work is continuing, and will continue into the future.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the junior Minister for her answers so far. What progress is being made on agreeing a lead Department for the delivery of the childcare strategy? That, to date, seems to have been a stumbling block.

Ms M Anderson: I understand the Member's concern, and he is absolutely right to point out that we previously reported to the House that no Department had yet agreed to take the lead role in taking forward the childcare strategy. In the light of that position, OFMDFM has agreed to take the initial lead in order to ensure momentum and alignment with other policies that will impact directly on children and young people. It is still our desire to see a Department, or Departments, take on that lead role.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. First, I congratulate the junior Minister on her appointment, and I welcome her to her first Question Time. When does she envisage the money for the childcare strategy hitting the ground? Furthermore, when will actions from it commence for groups?

Ms M Anderson: I thank the Member for those comments. I am extremely conscious of the fact that the Member has been acutely interested in the childcare strategy process. The Member will be aware that previous OFMDFM Ministers, through the ministerial subcommittee for children and young people, commissioned an economic appraisal of the strategic options for childcare. Based on the subcommittee's report, thankfully, we were able to secure £12 million in the Budget negotiations.

Since taking up my post, I have sought to ensure that any decisions that we take align with other policies, ensuring particularly that we maximise the impact for those most in need

in our society. With that in mind, it is clear that there is synergy between the childcare strategy and the actions flowing from the child poverty strategy, which is another area of concern for the Member. I am sure that all Members will want us to take our time to get it right to ensure that, at all stages, the delivery of the childcare strategy produces the best possible results for all children and young people.

Mr Agnew: Does the junior Minister agree that, in putting the economy first, as it is predicted the Programme for Government will state, we have to look at issues such as the childcare strategy, because economic and social issues are not separate? Indeed, the needs of workers must be considered as well as those of businesses.

Ms M Anderson: In line with the requirement of the Child Poverty Act 2010, OFMDFM consulted on the proposed strategy with local public bodies and children's organisations working with or representing children and other stakeholders, particularly those working in the field to which the Member referred. During the formal consultation period, which ended on 6 February 2010, a series of related events were held in places such as Belfast, Ballymena, Newry, Derry, Enniskillen and Omagh.

The local child poverty strategy was published on 24 March 2011, and it is hoped that a meeting of the ministerial-led poverty and social inclusion stakeholder forum will take place shortly to allow members to consider a first draft strategy and associated delivery plan, which will be very important for the process and will continue our work with colleagues in other Departments to prepare a monitoring framework that allows progress on eradicating child poverty to be measured. Therefore, Members can see that a strategy has been developed; we have a first draft of the associated action plan; and we are preparing a monitoring framework so that we can measure outcomes, which will be very important to ensuring that we deliver on the childcare strategy.

Rathlin Island: Executive

4. **Mr Storey** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what steps they have taken in relation to holding an Executive meeting on Rathlin Island. (AQO 182/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: Earlier this year, we received an invitation to hold an Executive meeting on Rathlin Island. Although pressures on ministerial diaries have so far dictated that the Executive have usually met in Stormont Castle, we keep arrangements for meetings, including their location, under review. We recognise the potential benefits of holding meetings in other locations, and we will certainly give full consideration to that and other invitations in our forward planning.

I know that a number of Ministers in the current Executive have independently visited the island at the request of residents. Indeed, I believe that my colleague the Minister for Regional Development, who has lead responsibility for taking forward the Executive's Rathlin Island policy and action plan, intends to visit the island in the near future. The Executive are also fully committed to implementing their Rathlin Island policy and the action plan that stemmed from it. The Executive recognise the particular challenges of island life and are committed to helping to support a vibrant Rathlin community and to increasing the involvement of islanders in developing the policies and projects that will improve conditions for them. I understand that islanders have indicated that they are broadly content with developments so far.

2.45 pm

Mr Storey: I thank the deputy First Minister for underlining the importance of ensuring that the island of Rathlin is properly serviced by the Administration and Departments in Northern Ireland. Will he ensure that, when it comes to implementation, OFMDFM will play an active role in making sure that there is delivery? We have had a lot of commitment in the action plan. We now need to see delivery on the ground that will benefit the people of the island of Rathlin.

Mr M McGuinness: The First Minister and I recognise the importance of giving as much support as we possibly can to the islanders. Those of us who have been to the island — I went there last year — appreciate and understand the islanders' particular exceptional difficulties, which people here on the mainland do not have. From our perspective, recognising the challenges that the islanders face, and recognising that those challenges are different from those faced here, means that they need to be addressed in a different way.

The Rathlin policy was drafted to develop a vibrant Rathlin community and increase the involvement of islanders in developing policies and projects to improve conditions for them while protecting the island's unique environment. The policy has four strategic aims to ensure efficient and equitable access to services and sustain an effective island community. The aims are to enhance the community involvement; to improve the provision of public services for islanders; to advance policies for a sustainable island community; and to conserve the island's exceptional environmental heritage. The Rathlin Island policy was endorsed by the Executive on 25 February 2010.

That is a very clear commitment from the Executive. A number of ministerial colleagues from the previous Executive were involved in visits to the island. We are intent on keeping up that level of contact and communication. It is also gratifying to know that those who speak on behalf of the islanders are very connected to all the work that we are involved in and, on the whole, are satisfied that they are getting a fair deal.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the Minister outline the practical logistics of holding an Executive meeting outside the confines of the Stormont estate?

Mr M McGuinness: I think that everybody here appreciates the practical difficulties that surround the prospect of Executive meetings being held outside Stormont Castle. Obviously, it is much easier to hold meetings there. There is a much tighter network around the castle and these buildings for ministerial colleagues, most of whom are based in their Departments in Belfast. However, there have been occasions in the past on which Executive meetings were held outside Belfast. As part of the first Administration from, I think, December 1999 to October 2002, I believe that at least one meeting was held in the city of Derry, which we all attended. That was a logistical nightmare for a lot of officials who serviced that meeting. However, it is something that we will consider. Now that the suggestion has been made by the Member for North Antrim, many Members will be very tempted to send in letters of offer for their particular areas. Given that there are 18 constituencies, that represents a big challenge.

Mr Speaker: Members need to rise quickly in their place if they want to ask a supplementary question.

Mr Swann: I was standing.

Mr Speaker: You have to continually stand. *[Interruption.]* Order. I have continually said to Members from all sides that you need to continually rise in your place. Standing once and then hoping to get in to ask a supplementary question will not get you in. This time, however, I will allow the Member some latitude.

Mr Swann: Thank you for your latitude, Mr Speaker. If the deputy First Minister were to take the Executive Committee to Rathlin, which I would fully endorse because it is a great part of north Antrim, would he make use of the facilities that were previously not made available to members of the Royal Family in their visit to the island?

Mr M McGuinness: The Member is a new kid on the block, and I know that that issue is of great interest to him and many other Members. But to ask me to become embroiled in that one is a bridge too far.

Child Abuse

5. **Mr Brady** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the progress that has been made by the task force on historical institutional child abuse. (AQO 183/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: The inter-departmental task force for historical institutional abuse has now completed its consultation with victims and survivors and with other key stakeholder groups. It is currently engaged in scoping out options on the nature of an inquiry. The task force will submit its recommendations to the Executive prior to the summer recess. As part of that scoping process, the task force has been drawing upon and learning from the experiences of other jurisdictions. The task force has also conducted a series of consultation meetings with victims and survivors of historical institutional abuse. Those took place in Armagh, Belfast and Derry in March 2011. The task force has also received written responses on the consultation. That information is currently being collated and analysed, and we wish to ensure that the way forward will be the right one for all those affected by that extremely difficult and very sensitive matter.

Mr Brady: I thank the Minister for his answer. What support is currently available to victims of institutional abuse?

Mr M McGuinness: In our meetings with victims and survivors, they indicated to us that they need support in trauma counselling and support; housing advice; information on benefit entitlement; advice on records search; information on training and employment support and opportunities; and PSNI referrals. With those points in mind, a page has been developed on the NI Direct website and an information leaflet has been produced, which contain key government contacts. In addition, OFMDFM officials are exploring in the Department and in other Departments how money can be made available to meet immediate needs. That includes providing support to facilitate victims and survivors' engagement with the task force, support mechanisms for victims and access to government services. As all Members will appreciate, it is an extremely sensitive subject and one that represents a major priority for the Executive.

Last year, the First Minister and I met a group of survivors, including Margaret McGuckin, who, I am pleased to say, is in the Gallery today. We were deeply affected by what we heard in the testimonies that were presented to us. We fully understood the importance of the need of victims and survivors to be believed and that that was a top priority for them. I can say without fear of contradiction that the First Minister and I believed their stories, as many others in our society do. That area of work is hugely important to us, and we intend to proceed as quickly as possible, in conjunction with the victims and survivors, to ensure that final decisions taken on the nature of the inquiry absolutely satisfies them.

Mr Campbell: The deputy First Minister outlined the considerable volume of work that the task force has undertaken, and his response alluded to the need to acknowledge the victims of the past. Does he also acknowledge that there is a need to ensure that the perpetrators co-operate fully and that they are made amenable before the law for the deeds that they have done in the past?

Mr M McGuinness: On the issue of historical institutional abuse, the First Minister and I and, indeed, many other politicians have made it absolutely clear that victims and survivors need to be acknowledged and supported. We have encouraged all of them that, if they have information, they should come forward and present that information to the PSNI. Many of

them do have information and may not have had the confidence to come forward thus far.

Mr McDevitt: I thank the First Minister and the deputy First Minister for their personal commitment to this issue. The deputy First Minister acknowledged the needs and wishes of those who have survived institutional abuse in this region. Their desired shape of and model for an inquiry must be kept to the forefront of our minds. Will he confirm that he believes that an independent state-led inquiry is the bare minimum that this House could offer survivors as a process through which to find the truth and justice that they have, so far, been denied?

Mr M McGuinness: I think that the Member knows that the interdepartmental task force met for the first time on 4 January 2011. A further four meetings have been held to date. Over the past five months, the task force has been scoping out options on the nature of an inquiry. That involves drawing upon and learning from the experiences of other jurisdictions to bring forward recommendations that best meet the needs and circumstances of victims and survivors of historical institutional abuse here. To date, the task force has met with officials in the South and in Scotland, Amnesty International, the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, children's rights organisations, the PSNI, and organisations that deal with victims' issues. Officials have continued to meet with representatives of victims' and survivors' groups through a number of specific consultation meetings that were held in March 2011.

This is all a work in progress, but the First Minister and I are absolutely dedicated to ensuring that, whatever final decisions are taken on the nature of an inquiry, it will be of total satisfaction to the people to whom we have been speaking and the representatives of those who have been abused down the years.

Budget Review Group

6. **Mr Molloy** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the work of the Budget review group. (AQO 184/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: The Budget review group recommenced its work at a meeting on 15 June 2011 and will continue to meet during this Assembly term. All parties in the Executive continue to be involved in the group's

discussions. Other Ministers are invited to attend if an issue relating to their Department arises. The ministerial Budget review group met several times before Christmas as part of developing the draft Budget and to consider a number of important cross-cutting strategic issues that are key components of Budget 2011-15, including public sector pay constraint, additional revenue-raising options, additional means of leveraging funds and measures to reduce bureaucracy. The Budget review group is continuing to explore potential additional options for revenue raising to be taken forward in the medium to longer term. The group will also take forward the review of arm's-length bodies so that recommendations can be made to the Executive.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for the update. I know that the Budget review group is looking at asset management. Will the Minister give us an update on what is happening on that aspect of its work?

Mr M McGuinness: The Executive agreed in January 2011 to establish a central asset management unit. Its range of functions includes developing with Departments an overarching corporate asset management strategy for public sector assets and assisting Departments to develop asset management plans. The unit will work to deliver the additional capital receipts of £100 million as agreed by the Executive in the final Budget, of which £10 million is to be delivered this year. That is a very challenging target in the current climate, and we will look to the unit to provide imaginative and innovative solutions to release resources for new investment.

The asset management unit will also work to realise potential savings from improved efficiency across the public sector. The unit is now operating with interim staffing arrangements to deliver its objectives. However, recruitment of permanent staff is well under way, and it is hoped that the permanent positions will start to be filled in the coming weeks. The unit will function within the Strategic Investment Board and will regularly report progress to the Executive.

3.00 pm

Mr Elliott: Following discussions by the Budget review group and the Executive on the Presbyterian Mutual Society resolution, has any

of that money been paid to the savers yet? If not, why not? When do they expect it to be paid?

Mr M McGuinness: I think that everybody in this House will be satisfied that we have found a way forward and have reached agreement with the British Government to ensure that those people who have been hugely disadvantaged by not being able to access their savings can now do so. So, the process to make those payments is now under way, and we understand the urgency of that. The people who have been detrimentally affected have, as a result of a democratic vote, pronounced that they are satisfied that their moneys will be recovered. That is a source of great comfort to them. So, it is a work in progress, and I expect that, since the way forward has now been agreed, the matter of ensuring that people have access to their funds will happen very quickly.

Social Development

Mr Speaker: Question 1 has been withdrawn.

Pensions Bill

2. **Mrs Cochrane** asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the implications for Northern Ireland of the Pensions Bill 2011. (AQO 194/11-15)

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): The Pensions Bill 2011 was introduced at Westminster on 12 January 2011 and is being considered by the House of Commons. It makes changes to state and private pensions. For example, it accelerates the equalisation of the state pension age at 65 by November 2018 rather than by 2020. It increases state pension age to 66 for men and women by April 2020 and makes provision to support the introduction of automatic enrolment into workplace pension schemes, beginning in 2012. Subject to Executive agreement, I anticipate that we will introduce a corresponding Assembly Bill to maintain a single system of pensions across the United Kingdom, but I have grave concerns about the impact of the proposed changes to pension age, particularly on women.

Mrs Cochrane: Will the Minister confirm that he will work with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to ensure that changes brought about as a result of this Bill, or from

wider pension reform, are advertised as widely as possible so that there is no confusion and people can properly prepare for their financial future?

Mr McCausland: I can, indeed, assure the Member of that. It is important that we keep in close contact with DWP in London as the process moves forward and that all the information is disseminated as widely as possible locally in Northern Ireland so that people are not caught unawares and are fully aware of the implications of any changes.

Mr Campbell: The Minister, the House and, I am sure, the wider community will be aware of the concern, particularly among a small number of women who will be adversely affected by the change. Many of us are working to try to minimise that. However, given that it will come before the Assembly, can the Minister outline the period of time that the women will have to make belated preparation for a retirement that they did not expect but that now appears will happen?

Mr McCausland: The amount of notice that an individual woman will receive will depend on her date of birth but could range from four and a half years to nearly seven years. Women whose state pension age is due to increase the most have a longer period of notice than those affected earlier, for whom the increase is smaller.

Mr Byrne: Does the Minister have any idea how many women could potentially be affected by the proposed Bill?

Mr McCausland: It is estimated that around 7,000 women will see a delay of between two months and 16 months in reaching their state pension age, depending on their date of birth. It affects women born between 6 April 1953 and 5 December 1953. The concern about the impact on women, therefore, has been raised in writing with Iain Duncan Smith, and I have urged him to consider measures to alleviate the impact of the proposals.

Town Centre Regeneration: Bangor

3. **Mr Dunne** asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the Bangor town centre master plan. (AQO 195/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The consultation on the Bangor town centre master plan has been

successfully concluded and I plan to visit Bangor on 6 July to officially publish the completed document.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he see the Bangor town centre master plan as a catalyst for the redevelopment of the derelict Queen's Parade and the regeneration of Bangor town centre?

Mr McCausland: Following the consultation exercise in 2009, the Queen's Parade developers revised their proposals for the site in light of the comments received. The Department will assess those revised proposals against the town centre master plan, when published, to ensure that it will contribute to delivering the overall vision for the town. Assuming that the outcome of that assessment is positive, the next steps will be to move through the site assembly and planning processes, which may take two years to complete. However, I agree entirely with the Member that the master plan is essential and central to the regeneration of the seaside resort of Bangor.

Mr Cree: The town centre's redevelopment has dragged on for a long time. Will the Minister advise whether any funds will come from the Department to kick-start this thing into operation?

Mr McCausland: In relation to funding, government finances operate in a way that means it is not possible for my Department to ring-fence or allocate specific pots of money to individual towns. Therefore, the resources necessary to implement actions identified in the various master plans, of which there is quite a number, will be assessed and approved on a project-by-project basis.

The funding for individual projects identified in master plans will be provided from the Department's urban regeneration funding lines. I cannot provide guarantees that funding will be provided for any individual project until all the necessary appraisal and approval processes have been completed. Although it would always be useful to have more money, my Department has a good record in securing funding for quality projects that have been worked up to a reasonable stage. Therefore, I am confident that the Department has adequate resources to deliver the master plans that are published.

Mr Agnew: Does the Minister agree that any master plan must provide space for young

people, given the period over which it is to serve the town? What consultations have taken place with young people, particularly teenagers, to ensure that Bangor has space for them?

Mr McCausland: As it is developed and taken forward, it is important that a master plan is responsive to the needs of all sections of the community, irrespective of their community background, age profile or whatever. If we are to have a vibrant Bangor town centre, we must accommodate the needs of younger people as well as middle-aged and older folk. I will write to the Member about the extent of consultation with younger people.

Mr Speaker: I take it that the Member wants to ask a supplementary question. I know that he has been up and down a number of times, but he should continue to rise in his place. I call Mr Fra McCann.

Mr F McCann: Five times; I was up that many times I was a bit dizzy the last time. Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Does the Minister agree that the sequencing of developments in Belfast city centre has been detrimental to the north and west sections of that city centre?

Mr Speaker: Order. I know and understand that supplementaries sometimes grow legs, but the question concerns Bangor town centre. I will ask the Minister whether he wishes to answer, but that supplementary has very little to do with the original question.

Mr McCausland: Far be it from me to criticise the geography of the Member opposite for his thinking that there is a connection between Bangor and Belfast town centre. However, there is certainly a point to be made that the sequencing of developments in Belfast city centre has an impact on the effectiveness of it. Also, developments outside Belfast have an impact on the sequencing, viability and sustainability of projects in the centre of Belfast.

Housing Associations

4. **Mr G Kelly** asked the Minister for Social Development to outline why seven housing associations have been suspended from building social housing. (AQO 196/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Seven registered housing associations have been suspended from the development programme because they failed

the Department's inspections on issues covering corporate governance, finance, property management and property development. Suspension action was taken to protect public funds and the rights of tenants.

The integrated inspection system, using suitably qualified accountants and technical experts in finance, property development and property management, was introduced in 2006 in response to Audit Office criticism on the scope of previous housing association inspections. Enhanced monitoring has been provided for reviewing housing associations' board minutes, management accounts and development progress. The Department has provided input to the Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations' training courses for new board members under all aspects of inspection.

Seven failed associations have already been suspended: Dungannon and District, Harmony Homes, Filor, SHAC, Helm, Rural and Habinteg. Successful associations include Clanmil, which received a substantial assurance, and Alpha, which received a satisfactory assurance when inspected recently.

Mr G Kelly: I thank the Minister for his answer. Is there the possibility that more associations will lose their development status? Does he agree that morale is pretty low in the associations and the Housing Executive? Connected to that is the time frame, which is why I asked my question: what is the time frame for bringing the matter to a conclusion?

Mr McCausland: There are 31 housing associations at present. Previously, there were 33, and we are now down to 31. When seven out of the 31 associations are removed from development status, that clearly indicates that there is a substantial element in the sector where there have been and still are difficulties. I appreciate the concern that that causes to people working in that sector, whether they are on the boards of housing associations or employed by housing associations. However, it is essential to ensure that the associations that are operating are fit for purpose and that they deliver a good service with the public money that passes to them and a good service to their tenants.

I had the opportunity recently to visit a number of housing initiatives carried out by a range of housing associations, and some are of exceptional quality in terms of both their organisation and delivery on the ground, and

that is indicated in the answer that I have already given. The process of monitoring and inspection will be ongoing. It is important that we do not simply get a snapshot of what it is today but what it will be over the next few years and thereafter. We must have a monitoring and inspection system in place that ensures good corporate governance and good delivery on an ongoing basis.

Lord Morrow: I listened intently to what the Minister said. With regard to the seven associations that have been suspended, is it right to say that the tenants received a good service? How long has the matter been under surveillance, and what sums of money have been involved to put right the wrongs that have gone on within the seven associations?

Mr McCausland: Each of the associations was assessed under four headings: corporate governance, finance, maintenance management and property development. Some associations that failed, failed in all categories, in that they were unacceptable right across the board. There were various degrees of shortcoming. It is possible to get the Member the information to identify those areas for each of relevant associations and to show their shortcomings. I do not have information regarding the amount of money that has been expended in trying to put those things right. In some ways, it would be difficult to do that, because you would be dealing with the amount of time that various inspections took and the number of people who were involved in them. I am sure that the Member would agree that it is essential that we have organisations that are fit for purpose. This will be an ongoing process. The resolution to the issue for the associations that are failed will vary from association to association, but, in some cases, the situation will be resolved through amalgamations with successful housing associations.

3.15 pm

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for his answer, and I wish him well in his new portfolio. Will the Minister give us any insight into whether the suspensions will have any impact on the public social housing newbuild programme?

Mr McCausland: I assure the Member that everything possible is being done to ensure that it will not. I am aware of a number of projects in which associations were involved that have been removed from development status. In

some cases, projects already started may be allowed to come to completion or transferred to another association. Everything will be done to ensure that we carry on as far as possible with the social housing development programme. I have no indication at the moment that there will be any significant impact on the programme. In some cases, it seems that it may be possible to transfer from one association to another in a matter of months.

Ms Lo: Helm Housing built a block of apartments without planning permission in the Markets in south Belfast. Given that it is now suspended from building social housing, what will happen to that block of apartments?

Mr McCausland: I will have to come back to the Member on that very specific issue. The Member will be aware of the discussions that have been ongoing about Helm generally, but I will have to come back to her on that block of apartments.

Mr Speaker: Next on the list for questions is Adrian McQuillan. Before I call Mr McQuillan, I once again remind Members from all sides of the House that there is a trick to asking a supplementary question. Members must rise in their place as the Minister is sitting down. That is how the issue is dealt with. Members who wait and hesitate as the Minister is sitting down will very seldom get to ask a supplementary.

Mr Campbell: What is so hard about that?

Mr Speaker: There does seem to be some problem with it. I call Mr McQuillan.

Housing Executive: East Londonderry

5. **Mr McQuillan** asked the Minister for Social Development how many multi-element improvement schemes the Housing Executive has planned for the East Londonderry area in the current financial year. (AQO 197/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Due to funding pressures in the housing budget, there are no multi-element improvement schemes planned for anywhere in Northern Ireland in the current financial year. On my recent visit to Londonderry, I was interested to see the pilot scheme in the Creggan. Residents there voted overwhelmingly to transfer from the Housing Executive to a housing association. The housing association will spend approximately £2.5 million of its own money carrying out multi-element improvements

to the homes in question. That is a significant development, and I want to see what potential it may have for other areas.

Mr McQuillan: I thank the Minister for his answer, but I am disappointed. How many empty homes in East Londonderry could be used to help meet the housing need that exists?

Mr McCausland: The Member asked a very relevant and important question. Although we are going through a very challenging economic climate, it is imperative that we make the best use of the resources that we already have. I am determined to bring more empty homes back into use. For example, there are 41 Housing Executive voids in the Limavady and Coleraine district office areas at this time. Nineteen of those are undergoing major repairs and will be brought back into use once those are complete. In Limavady, another 13 properties, which were previously difficult to let, have been offered to and accepted by applicants on the waiting list. That leaves fewer than 10 properties in the area for which the Housing Executive has not yet been able to identify applicants.

I have been in the Department for only a number of weeks, but, during that period, I have emphasised to officials the priority that we need to give to tackling the issue of voids or empty homes. It seems pointless to be developing additional social housing, if, at the same time, you are ignoring the fact that there is stock that, in some cases, becomes void, derelict and a blight on neighbouring properties. In one of the areas that I visited in the constituency the other day, there were around 15 void properties. They had been lying empty for more than 10 years and were under the ownership of a housing association. What can we do to get those and other houses back into use as soon as possible?

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he tell us whether there is enough finance in the Housing Executive budget to provide a full maintenance programme in each of the next four years?

Mr McCausland: One of the things that I have done is to look carefully at the budget, because, effectively, I was handed the budget apportionment by my predecessor. I have taken that away, and we are looking at it. We will make an announcement in the very near future.

Mr Dallat: Does he agree that, in the past, significant improvements have been made to the housing stock through improvement schemes? Does he agree that it is a false economy to neglect that aspect of housing, given that tenants are deserving of the same rights as anyone else who lives in a house?

Mr McCausland: I agree with the Member entirely. It is too easy to say simply that we will put all our money into newbuild and ignore maintenance and other things. There has to be a balanced approach in every element of the market, whether that be people looking for a new house or people in an existing house, so that everybody gets a fair deal from the Housing Executive and the public sector. That is something that I will look at very carefully.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for his response. I want to explore an answer that he gave earlier. How many vacant Housing Executive properties in the whole of Northern Ireland does he estimate are currently awaiting multi-element improvement work?

Mr McCausland: We are looking at the issue of multi-element improvement at the moment. Some research has been done on that, but, when the thing is discussed, there are conversations on what constitutes multi-element improvement. To some people, it is a very specific technical term. For others, it simply means a range of things to be done, whether that be installing new kitchens, doors, windows or whatever. We need to have a review. There is clearly a need for significant refurbishment work, and I think that that has perhaps been neglected in the past. A number of areas would certainly benefit from such work, but I do not have to hand exact figures on the number of properties involved. However, I am willing to look into that further and get back to the Member.

Welfare Reform

6. **Mr Hussey** asked the Minister for Social Development to outline how he intends to put forward the case to include regional differences in relation to welfare reform, while maintaining parity with Great Britain on social security matters. (AQO 198/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Welfare reform has been the subject of much debate since the coalition Government took up office last year and announced their proposals to restructure

radically our benefits and welfare system. Since taking up office, I have spoken with Lord Freud on the subject, and I intend to engage fully at ministerial and official level with colleagues across Whitehall as the proposals develop.

Northern Ireland receives more than £3 billion annually directly from the Treasury for social security benefits. That amount is based on need and the longstanding principle of parity, whereby someone in Northern Ireland receives the same rates of social security benefit and is subject to the same conditions as someone resident in Great Britain. The same standard should apply across all the United Kingdom. Social security is a devolved matter for Northern Ireland, which does set us apart from the other devolved Administrations, and consideration of regional differences in the current welfare reform proposals, in the context of parity, must be supported by clear evidence.

The Welfare Reform Bill going through Westminster contains a wide range of proposals aimed at ensuring that work always pays and at encouraging individuals to move from benefits into the labour market. Accepting that, we as an Assembly must recognise that this is not just about benefits. It is also about jobs, the economy, poverty, health and well-being, and it has implications across society. Therefore, it is essential that all Northern Ireland Departments be actively engaged in the process. It is expected that the Westminster Bill will gain Royal Assent by December 2011. Officials here are considering the implications of the proposals for Northern Ireland, on which there will be full consultation. I will bring my proposals for a Northern Ireland Welfare Reform Bill back to the Assembly in due course.

Mr Hussey: I thank the Minister for his response. The dangers of breaking parity are enormous. Therefore, it is an issue that needs to be treated extremely carefully. I hope that the new Minister is a little more firm in favour of retaining parity than his predecessor. Will he detail whether his departmental officials have begun investigating what administrative structures will be required to manage the new universal credit in Northern Ireland?

Mr Speaker: I understand that we have some new Members, but we need to get to the point at which Members do not read out supplementary questions. Therefore, I discourage them from doing so.

Mr McCausland: First, I agree with the Member that the principle of parity is essential. The implications of breaking parity would be considerable and detrimental, and a lot of work is going on to ensure that we are in a position to carry forward the implementation of any changes that come.

Mr Easton: What other Departments does the Minister envisage having a say in welfare reform?

Mr McCausland: As I already indicated, the proposals will impact right across society and, therefore, right across government. One of the main objectives of the proposals is to encourage individuals to move from benefits into work. That will have obvious implications for the Department for Employment and Learning, for example, and I have had some initial conversations with the relevant Minister and with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, given their respective responsibilities in dealing with issues of training, the unemployed and the wider regional economy.

Mr McGlone: I wish the Minister well in his new appointment. In light of our unique position of having higher levels of disability living allowance (DLA) claimants in the North, partly due to the legacy of the Troubles, what case has been made to Westminster to take account of those exceptional and unfortunate circumstances?

Mr McCausland: I have already had a telephone conversation with Lord Freud about the differences between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom, and I intend to have a direct meeting with him as soon as possible. The Member highlights well the fact that there are differences, but we need to be conscious of their causes and nature. It is not simply that there is a higher level of DLA uptake here than in the rest of the United Kingdom; it is about the nature of that uptake and the factors that contribute to it. Northern Ireland has a much higher level of DLA uptake by those with, for example, mental illness. Therefore, we need to look carefully at the nature of the differences, the reasons for them and how we address the issue of ultimately getting people back into employment. One key factor must be that people's quality of life is much better when they are actively engaged. Therefore, we will work on that across all benefits as we examine the differences.

Community Groups: Audits

7. **Mr McMullan** asked the Minister for Social Development to outline what action his Department has taken or is planning to take to ensure that publicly funded audits commissioned by community organisations will not have to be duplicated for different funding bodies. (AQO 199/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I and my colleagues on the Northern Ireland Executive recognise the vital contribution that voluntary and community sector organisations make to society across Northern Ireland. We also understand that, in the current economic climate, the demand on their services is likely to increase. Therefore, it is important that we work harder to find ways to ensure that the Government maintain their support to the many voluntary and community sector organisations, which provide much-needed front line services to people experiencing disadvantage and marginalisation. Only by eradicating unnecessary wastage and duplication of effort from our funding processes can we ensure that we achieve best value for money and the highest return from investment.

Duplication was one of a number of issues that the Comptroller and Auditor General identified in his report 'Creating Effective Partnerships between Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector', which was published in September 2010. Duplication is not just an issue for the Department for Social Development (DSD). It is incumbent on all Departments, their agencies and non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs) to ensure that governance arrangements for funding relationships with the voluntary and community organisations are adequate but proportionate.

DSD is leading a pilot project with a regional voluntary organisation and its range of funders to determine the extent and degree of disproportion, auditing and bureaucracy. The project is the first stage in a programme of work that will address bureaucracy-related issues across the sector. Examples of the areas in which there could be improvement are the concordat, audit compliance and community audits.

Mr Speaker: I ask the House to take its ease before we move back to the Final Stage of the Budget (No. 2) Bill.

3.30 pm

Executive Committee Business

Budget (No. 2) Bill: Final Stage

Debate resumed on motion:

That the Budget (No. 2) Bill [NIA 1/11-15] do now pass. — [Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel).]

Mr Speaker: Before we proceed to the Question, I remind Members that the Budget (No. 2) Bill requires cross-community support.

Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 65; Noes 15.

AYES

NATIONALIST:

Ms M Anderson, Mr Boylan, Mr Brady, Mr W Clarke, Mr Doherty, Ms Gildernew, Mr G Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McElduff, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan.

UNIONIST:

Mr S Anderson, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mrs Lewis, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr Wilson.

OTHER:

Mrs Cochrane, Mr Dickson, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr McCarthy.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr F McCann and Mr G Robinson.

NOES

NATIONALIST:

Mr D Bradley, Mr Byrne, Mr Dallat, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Mrs D Kelly, Mr McDevitt,

Dr McDonnell, Mr McGlone, Mrs McKeivitt,
Mr A Maginness, Mr P Ramsey, Ms Ritchie.

UNIONIST:

Mr Allister.

OTHER:

Mr Agnew.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Agnew and Mr Allister.

Total votes	80	Total Ayes	65	[81.3%]
Nationalist Votes	37	Nationalist Ayes	24	[64.9%]
Unionist Votes	35	Unionist Ayes	34	[97.1%]
Other Votes	8	Other Ayes	7	[87.5%]

The following Members voted in both Lobbies
and are therefore not counted in the result:
Mr Beggs, Mr Copeland, Mr Cree, Mrs Dobson,
Mr Elliott, Mr Gardiner, Mr Kinahan,
Mr McCallister, Mr B McCrea, Mr Nesbitt,
Mrs Overend, Mr Swann.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

*That the Budget (No. 2) Bill [NIA 1/11-15] do now
pass.*

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

**Finance (No. 3) Bill: Legislative
Consent Motion**

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

*That this Assembly agrees that the UK Parliament
should consider amendments to the Finance (No.
3) Bill to extend to Northern Ireland the provisions
dealing with mutual assistance for the recovery of
taxes etc.*

The motion, though technical in nature, seeks
the agreement of the Assembly to extend to
Northern Ireland the provisions in the Westminster
Finance (No. 3) Bill that deal with the mutual
assistance recovery directive (MARD). The
directive was agreed by EU Finance Ministers
last year. Under it, EU member states can provide
each other with assistance in the recovery of tax
debts and duties, which includes the service of
documents and the exchange of information in
connection with the recovery of claims.
[Interruption.] I think that there is a separate
Assembly meeting going on in the corner.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I assure you, Minister,
those Members will be quiet after this. Continue.

Mr Wilson: Thank you. The new directive
fundamentally modernises and expands the
scope of the existing directive. It affects
individuals and businesses owing taxes and
duties within the EU. The provisions to be taken
forward in the Finance (No. 3) Bill would fulfil the
UK's obligations in implementing the directive. It
provides reciprocal arrangements for recovering
and enforcing tax debts and for the exchange of
information across the EU.

Mr Allister: I listened to the Minister's
explanation. Will he confirm that this measure
could assist in bringing to financial justice criminal
empires such as that of Mr Slab Murphy?

Mr Wilson: I hope that it will be used for exactly
that purpose and others. Where people are
operating along the border between Northern
Ireland and the Irish Republic, the provisions
of this directive should enable Her Majesty's
Revenue and Customs (HMRC) to seek
information about activities, tax liabilities,
earnings etc on one side of the border for
someone living on this side of the border.
Therefore, although the Member may agree with
me on some issues around interference from

Europe, this is probably one example where we would agree that European directives could actually help in the pursuit of those participating in criminal activities. Hopefully, under this Bill, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs will vigorously pursue such people to ensure that the finances that they seek to hide on one side of the border are brought to light and tax liabilities are met. It will improve tax compliance and make the tax system fairer to those who already pay their taxes and charges, as opposed to those who seek to avoid them, as the Member pointed out.

Under EU law, the directive must be implemented by 31 December 2011. However, the current legislation does not provide for the introduction of a new directive. The Westminster Bill would permit the UK, as a member state, to assist other member states in ensuring that all taxes due are properly collected and relevant information is exchanged.

Among other things, the directive extends the scope of the existing directive to include all national taxes and duties, local taxes, motor taxes and agricultural levies. It permits member states to provide for the exchange of information without request on refunds, except for VAT; it provides for tax officials from one member state to attend or participate in administrative inquiries in another member state; and it permits a range of national bodies to engage in the mutual assistance process under the general oversight of a central liaison office.

The inclusion of Northern Ireland in the scope of the legislation is routine. The changes are considered to be necessary — indeed, unavoidable — and non-controversial. Although the Assembly could legislate in its own right, such legislation would not be as comprehensive in respect of future changes to the directive and could give rise to difficulties, given that the central liaison office for the UK as a member state has to be Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs. It would remain the case that the directive would have to be implemented by 31 December 2011.

As you will know, Mr Deputy Speaker, Westminster will not normally legislate on devolved matters except with the agreement of the devolved legislature in the form of a legislative consent motion. The UK Government tabled amendments to the Finance (No. 3) Bill earlier this month. Those will be considered by

Westminster at Report Stage, which is scheduled to take place in early July, following this debate. If the legislative consent motion is not agreed by this Assembly, those amendments would be withdrawn. The amendments in question remove provisions that exclude Northern Ireland transferred matters from the remit of the Bill, making changes to the relevant provisions within the Finance (No. 3) Bill. The provisions also implement similar changes for Scotland.

The view of other Departments has been sought on the legislative consent motion, and there has been liaison with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Department of the Environment, the two other Departments most likely to be interested in the issue. I understand that both Departments support the legislative consent motion, as do the relevant Committees. All other Departments were content or had no comment.

The changes introduced as a result of this legislative consent motion will provide a means for legislating for implementation of the mutual assistance recovery directive in Northern Ireland. The legislative consent motion has been reported on by the Finance and Personnel Committee, which indicated that it was content to support the motion. However, I would like to touch on two issues raised by the Finance Committee: the timeliness of the motion and the question of whether tax-varying powers that may be devolved to the Assembly in future, such as corporation tax, would be covered by the Westminster amendments. Committee members expressed concern about the very short notice given on the legislative consent motion. Its necessity was not brought to the attention of my Department until just before the dissolution of the Assembly in March 2011. At that point, the issue had to wait for the start of the new Assembly term. I share the concerns of the Committee in that respect and have written to the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury to register those concerns.

On general rating matters, I reassure the House that there is regular liaison between my Department and GB counterparts. The matter is much broader and outside the normal rating system. Nevertheless, I am seeking views on what steps could be taken to ensure that devolved bodies are advised by the coalition Government of the need for legislative consent motions as soon as possible. Account will

necessarily have to be taken of the steps that can be taken by both Administrations.

On the issue of future tax-varying powers, I have been advised that there will be no conflict between the implementation of MARD and any change in corporation tax levels. The MARD arrangements apply to all taxes and duties, including corporation tax. As a matter of European law, these arrangements would continue to operate in relation to corporation tax whatever any new arrangements may be. Indeed, MARD provisions could assist with collection. There may, however, need to be changes in the GB implementing legislation to reflect any future corporation tax arrangements for Northern Ireland. At this stage, the extent is unknown but can be kept under review.

Having received the support of the Executive Committee, I would welcome the support of Members of the Assembly.

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

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister of Finance and Personnel wrote on 20 May this year to seek the views of the Finance and Personnel Committee on a proposed amendment to the Finance (No. 3) Bill, which would extend to here provisions in respect of the implementation of the mutual assistance recovery directive. Given that this covers devolved matters, this Assembly's consent is required in the form of the legislative consent motion before us.

In his correspondence, the Minister advised that this matter may also be of interest to the Department of the Environment and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. To help to inform its deliberations, my Committee therefore sought the views of the relevant Assembly Statutory Committees on the proposed legislative consent motion and the implications for those Departments. The Agriculture Committee confirmed that it was content with the proposed legislative consent motion, and the Environment Committee advised that its Department did not envisage any difficulties in respect of the provisions of the directive.

The Finance and Personnel Committee took evidence from Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) officials on the proposed legislative consent motion on 8 June 2011, and details of the Committee's deliberations were set out in a short, informal report issued to all

MLAs last week. I shall, however, summarise the key points for Members' convenience and for the record.

In their evidence, DFP officials advised that the Department believed the inclusion of the provisions in the legislation to be, in this instance, routine and the changes to be unavoidable and non-controversial. Although it is possible for the Assembly to pass legislative provisions to implement the MARD, it was thought that those would be less comprehensive than if they were to be included in the Westminster legislation and would be limited in scope should any further amendments, additions or extensions be made to the directive. Additionally, local regulations would need to ensure that the directive is implemented by 31 December this year otherwise we could face infraction proceedings. Members were also advised that the Scottish Government were content for Scotland to be included in the amendment to the Westminster legislation.

During the evidence session, members sought clarification that any tax-varying powers that may be devolved to the Assembly in future, such as corporation tax, would be covered by the amendment to the Finance (No. 3) Bill. The Department, as the Minister mentioned, has since confirmed that some technical changes to the implementing legislation may be necessary in the event of the devolution of corporation tax. The central principles of the MARD will, however, continue to be applicable.

Although accepting the rationale for our inclusion in this amendment in this instance, members were concerned at the delays in bringing the matter before the Assembly. It must be stated, as the Finance Minister has just done, that that was not the fault of the Department of Finance and Personnel. The EU directive was agreed in March 2010. However, in correspondence with the Committee, DFP advised that there appears to have been a subsequent lapse in communication with the devolved Administrations, with the need for formal consent from Scotland and ourselves not being recognised by HMRC until March 2011.

Moving forward, it is clear to the Committee that the process relating to legislative consent motions needs to be further developed and refined. The Assembly must be given sufficient time to examine proposed Westminster legislation that relates to transferred matters and to determine

whether that is indeed the best way forward or whether it is more appropriate to pass our own legislation. In this respect, the Committee has asked the Department for clarification of the lines of responsibility for notifying the devolved Administrations of legislative or policy changes at Westminster or European level that will impact on transferred matters and of whether proactive measures are required locally in that regard.

4.00 pm

In respect of the motion, having considered the evidence, the Committee agreed to support the Department in seeking the Assembly's agreement that the Westminster Parliament should consider amendments to the Finance (No. 3) Bill to extend to here the provisions dealing with mutual assistance for the recovery of taxes etc. Therefore, on behalf of the Committee, I commend the motion to the House.

Ms Lo (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment): I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion as Chair of the Environment Committee. I thank the Minister of Finance and Personnel for introducing the legislative consent motion to the House. The issue was brought to the Environment Committee's attention by the Committee for Finance and Personnel on 2 June 2011. The Bill will allow the UK Government to implement the mutual assistance recovery directive, which permits member states to recover and enforce tax debts, to serve documents and to exchange information about debts across the EU.

The Environment Committee was advised that, although the Department of Finance and Personnel is taking the lead on the issue, it may be of relevance to the Department of the Environment in relation to the plastic bag levy. The Committee asked the Department for its position on the consent motion and was advised that the directive may be of some assistance in relation to the recovery of non-payment of the carrier bags levy by organisations moving to other member states. However, it did not envisage any difficulty with it. The Committee was content with that response and advised the Committee for Finance and Personnel accordingly.

I would also like to draw the House's attention to an additional comment from the Department of the Environment, just to ensure that there is no confusion. While first considering the impact of the directive in Northern Ireland, DFP considered that there might also be a link to the

Driver and Vehicle Agency, which is responsible for collecting vehicle licences. However, the vehicle licensing function is an excepted matter and is, therefore, the responsibility of the Secretary of State for Transport. It is administered in Northern Ireland by the Driver and Vehicle Agency under an agreement between the Department of the Environment and the Department for Transport and, therefore, is not relevant to the motion.

On behalf of the Committee, I support the motion.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tugaim tacaíocht don mholadh seo. We support the motion. As we know, Westminster is passing this part of what is a wider EU framework that applies to the island of Ireland. Obviously, harmonisation of fiscal powers right across this island is what Sinn Féin would like to see. We believe that it is common sense; it is good for the economy; it is good for business; and it is good for communities.

We currently have two competing economies on the island of Ireland, and it is in all our interests that the economies work together rather than compete against each other. It does not make sense that we have qualifications that do not match, mobile phone systems that do not match, and two health and education systems. It is stating the obvious, so we support the motion.

Mr Wilson: I am pleased that we have had a short debate on this issue. I welcome the support from the Chairman of the Finance Committee and the Chairperson of the Environment Committee. As I said in my opening speech, I would have preferred us to have a different approach to this, and I have written to the Treasury Secretary. This has been known about for some time — since, I think, about 2009. But it is only recently — just before the Assembly elections — that we were notified. I suppose, had the Assembly elections not intervened, we may have had more time in the House, but we were only notified in March that this was going to be included as an amendment to the Finance (No. 3) Bill, and that did not give the House much time.

Hopefully, through the contact that my officials have and that which I will have with the Treasury Secretary, that will not happen in future.

I will take up one point in particular, because I think that there was a bit of a misunderstanding

in one of Caitríona Ruane's comments. This is not about the harmonisation of taxes. Sometimes, in fact, the debts that arise may do so because there are different rates of taxes. However, this is all about situations where persons have a debt that is owed to the authorities in Northern Ireland or the United Kingdom but they have not paid that debt. In cases where such debts arise as a result of a tax liability, the proposed measure allows for information to be exchanged and for officials from the United Kingdom to seek information on that liability, and vice versa. In case there is a misconception, this is about pursuing debt and the information that is required to recover debt. It is not about the harmonisation of tax rates.

In conclusion, I believe that this measure will ensure that Northern Ireland does not lose out on any benefits brought about by the directive by having to self-legislate. It will enable us to pursue tax liabilities, which, of course, means more money for the public purse here in Northern Ireland. It will prevent people from avoiding their liabilities, and, therefore, I commend it to the House and look forward to support for it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly agrees that the UK Parliament should consider amendments to the Finance (No. 3) Bill to extend to Northern Ireland the provisions dealing with mutual assistance for the recovery of taxes etc.

Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order (Northern Ireland) 2011

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): I beg to move

That the Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order (Northern Ireland) 2011 be approved.

The Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order (Northern Ireland) 2011 is an annual Order that sets out the rates of contributory and non-contributory benefits, together with the various premiums that form part of the income-related benefits. In general, the new amounts are based on the increase in the consumer prices index (CPI) over the 12 months ending in September 2010, which showed an increase of 3.1%.

Members will be aware that, in past years, the retail prices index (RPI) was used as the basis for increasing most benefits. The Westminster Government decided that, from April this year, the uprating of benefits will be based on the increase in the consumer prices index. Although they acknowledge that no single index is perfect, the coalition Government view the consumer prices index as the most appropriate measure of price inflation for this purpose.

Whenever the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions makes an uprating Order under the Social Security Administration Act 1992, my Department is empowered to make a corresponding Order. There is no power to set different rates of benefits for Northern Ireland. The basic state pension, which, for many, is the foundation of income in retirement, is increased by 4.6%, in line with the commitment given by the coalition Government at Westminster. The new rate for the basic state pension is £102.15 a week for a single person, which is an increase of £4.50 a week. From April, increases in state pension credit mean that no single pensioner will have to live on less than £137.35 a week and no couple on less than £209.70 a week. The above-earnings increase in the pension credit guarantee underlines the continuing commitment to tackling pensioner poverty.

I am sure that Members across the House will welcome those increases to state pension and pension credit. I fully appreciate that many of us wish that we could do even more, but, as I mentioned, my Department has no power to set different benefit rates for Northern Ireland. It is empowered only to set the same rates as apply in Great Britain.

The total cost of the new benefit rates for this year is approximately £183 million.

I am sure that all Members will wish to ensure that people in Northern Ireland, including some of the most vulnerable in our society, continue to receive the new benefit rates and will, therefore, join me in supporting the Order.

Mr A Maskey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. As Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development, I support the motion. As we have just heard from the Minister, the Order is one of a series of statutory rules relating to the annual uprating for rates of social security benefit, pensions and allowances from April 2011.

At its meeting of 23 June, the Committee noted that the previous Committee was content with the proposed statutory rule on 10 February 2011, and, on 21 March 2011, it agreed a motion that it had no objections to the statutory rule laid in the Assembly on 18 March 2011.

I note that the Department for Social Development conducted an equality screening exercise on the proposals. It concluded that the proposals do not have any significant implications for equality of opportunity, as they merely discharge the Department's statutory duty and alter rates. I also understand that the Department has not specific authority to deviate from the rates and amounts specified in the GB Order and that that, therefore, maintains the parity principle in social security and pension matters. The maintenance of the parity principle is, of course, something that the House has discussed before and will, no doubt, have an opportunity to debate again in the near future, when welfare and pension reform proposals and legislation come before the Assembly.

I understand that the Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order 2011 includes provision for weekly rates of statutory paternity pay and adoption pay, which falls to the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL), and I am informed that DEL and the previous Committee for Employment and Learning were content with the proposals in the Order.

As I said, the Committee for Social Development noted the Order at its meeting of 23 June and, notwithstanding reservations over the parity principle that some Committee members have, agreed to support the motion.

Mr McCausland: I am pleased to note the Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development's comments and his reference to its meeting on 23 June. I am pleased that there is a consensus of support across the Committee and the Assembly for the Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order (Northern Ireland) 2011, and I thank the Committee for the positive way in which it dealt with it. I am certain that we all welcome the increase to benefits made by the Order, and I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order (Northern Ireland) 2011 be approved.

Protection of Freedoms Bill: Legislative Consent Motion

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I beg to move

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the provisions of the Protection of Freedoms Bill dealing with the Disclosure and Barring Service contained in chapter 3 of Part 5 of, and schedule 8 to, the Bill as amended at Committee Stage in the House of Commons.

I seek the House's approval of a legislative consent motion that relates to the extension to Northern Ireland of further safeguarding of vulnerable groups provisions of the Protection of Freedoms Bill, which was introduced in the House of Commons on 11 February 2011 and completed its Committee Stage on 17 May.

This is the second legislative consent motion in connection with safeguarding of vulnerable groups provisions in the Bill. Combined, the provisions are required to give effect to the recommendations of the review of the vetting and barring scheme (VBS), which started on October 2010. The review report was published on 11 February 2011. Changes are being made to the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups (Northern Ireland) Order 2007 to give effect to review recommendations, which require legislative change.

The first legislative consent motion related specifically to the safeguarding of vulnerable groups provisions contained in chapter 1 of Part 5 of, and schedule 7 to, the Bill as introduced. It was successfully debated in the Assembly on 21 March 2011. This second legislative consent motion relates to additional safeguarding of vulnerable groups provisions that were tabled as Government amendments at Committee Stage.

4.15 pm

The Protection of Freedoms Bill contains seven Parts. This legislative consent motion and the one that was approved under the previous mandate relate to clauses in Part 5 and its associated schedules only. The additional safeguarding vulnerable groups provisions are contained in chapter 3 of Part 5 of and schedule 8 to the Bill as amended. All were tabled as Government amendments. They provide for the establishment of a new body corporate called the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) and for the transfer of functions to the new body

from the Independent Safeguarding Authority (ISA) and the Secretary of State. The new schedule makes detailed provision in respect of the constitution and governance of the DBS.

Additional statutory provision is required to give effect to one of the vetting and barring scheme review report's recommendations, which is to merge the ISA and the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB). The ISA currently provides a barring function in Northern Ireland under the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups (Northern Ireland) Order 2007. The barring function relates to decision-making by the ISA about which individuals should be included on the barred list on the basis that they have harmed a child or a vulnerable adult or have placed a child or a vulnerable adult at risk of harm. The ISA assumed responsibility for barring decision-making from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) and the Department of Education in March 2009. The ISA also makes barring decisions in England and Wales.

Statutory provision is required to dissolve the ISA; to establish the replacement body, the DBS, and to make detailed provision in respect of the constitution and governance of the DBS; to transfer the barring function of the ISA to the new DBS; to transfer to the DBS certain functions of the Secretary of State under the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act 2006 and the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups (Northern Ireland) Order 2007 and functions of the Secretary of State under Part V of the Police Act 1997. The Secretary of State's functions under that Act relate to disclosure functions that are currently undertaken on behalf of the Secretary of State in England and Wales by the CRB. In Northern Ireland, the disclosure functions of the Department of Justice under Part V of the Police Act 1997 are undertaken by AccessNI. That arrangement is not impacted by any provision in the Protection of Freedoms Bill, and AccessNI will continue to issue disclosure certificates in Northern Ireland under Part V of the 1997 Act.

If the provisions to which the legislative consent memorandum relate are not extended, we are in danger of creating a period during which we have no body making barring decisions about individuals who are found to be engaging in behaviours that harm or place at risk of harm children and vulnerable adults in Northern Ireland. The ISA has been making barring decisions in Northern Ireland since March 2009. The

Department remains committed to the concept of barring decision-making by an independent body. It provides for a consistency in barring decision-making and also simplifies the processes of recognising barring decisions that are made in other parts of the UK and sharing barred list information across the UK. We have had the benefit of Northern Ireland representation on the board. Under the changes to legislation that are being made under the Protection of Freedoms Bill, Whitehall Ministers will be required to consult Northern Ireland Ministers when making future appointments to the board of the new Disclosure and Barring Service.

It is essential to place the vetting and barring scheme in context. It is only one of a range of mechanisms that are needed to safeguard children and vulnerable adults. Its specific aim is to prevent unsuitable individuals from gaining employment or volunteering opportunities with children and vulnerable adults. The legislation that establishes the scheme provides the definition of work with children and vulnerable adults, which is the range of positions from which barred people will be prevented from working. It creates requirements to check individuals seeking work in those positions against the barred list and creates offences for seeking work with children or vulnerable adults if barred or offering work to a barred individual.

The vetting and barring scheme effectively controls those who get across the door, or not, as the case may be. Given that nothing is known about 95% of people who apply to work with children and vulnerable adults, it is what happens after employees and volunteers cross the door that really matters. Good staff training, supervision and management are crucial, and my Department has provided guidance on what constitutes good safeguarding practice in organisations. Checking individuals prior to being offered work is only one measure of good practice.

The vetting and barring scheme and the legislation that establishes it is supported by Part V of the Police Act 1997. That legislation provides for the disclosure of information, including criminal conviction and caution information, barred list information and relevant non-conviction information that is known to the police. AccessNI, which is the responsibility of the Department of Justice, operates under Part V of the Police Act 1997.

AccessNI works closely with the PSNI, which, in turn, has in place well-established arrangements with the gardaí central vetting unit in the Republic of Ireland. I know that members of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety had some concerns about the sharing of information across the border for child and adult protection purposes. I hope that my officials provided some assurances on the extent to which information is shared already.

I offer similar assurances to the House. I accept fully that our land border creates a number of safeguarding challenges. However, under operational policing arrangements, the PSNI and the gardaí routinely share information for employment vetting purposes. Those arrangements have been in place for a considerable time and apply to individuals who have a current or previous Republic of Ireland address and who are seeking work with children or vulnerable adults in Northern Ireland. I accept that the arrangement does not currently extend to the exchange of "soft information", as non-conviction information is often referred to.

It is my understanding that, in the Republic of Ireland, legislation will be introduced that, if necessary, will make provision for agreements with other jurisdictions around the sharing of information for vetting purposes, including soft information. The latest position that has been provided by officials in the South is that draft heads of a Bill have now been completed and are currently being discussed with the Office of the Attorney General.

If I may, I will stray into an area that is the responsibility of the Minister of Justice. It is important to go there to place the vetting and barring scheme in the context of a wider public protection agenda and to illustrate the extent to which the agencies on both sides of the border co-operate for public protection purposes. I understand that here is a high level of operational co-operation and information sharing between the PSNI and An Garda Síochána on sex offenders who travel between jurisdictions. That is governed by an overarching agreement between the British and Irish Governments and an operational memorandum between the PSNI and the gardaí. In effect, that means that there are single points of contact in each service to deal with the issues, and that has resulted in swift action when necessary.

Members of An Garda Síochána also attend local area public protection meetings in border areas and exchange relevant information under current public protection arrangements in Northern Ireland. Both jurisdictions have legislation in place that requires sex offenders to notify their details to the police, and both are looking at ways to strengthen the requirements and increase public protection.

I am also advised that much work has been done to ensure that the border is not used to escape justice by offenders who are subject to conditions on release from serving custodial sentences. There are also aspects of shared research and training in risk assessment, and the Irish Probation Service is working with the Probation Board for Northern Ireland on developing practice guidelines to ensure that cross-border practices are similar.

Members will also be aware that, under the auspices of the North/South Ministerial Council, arrangements have been put in place to enable officials on both sides of the border to co-operate on child protection matters. As a result of that co-operation, a number of initiatives have been taken forward. They include the development of a joint protocol dealing with children and families about whom professionals have concerns and who move between both jurisdictions; work to jointly develop child protection advice and guidance material for anyone who has concerns about a child; and the development and roll-out of North/South child protection online information to inform safeguarding and child protection practice on both sides of the border.

Much progress has been made on child and adult protection, and I accept that much more remains to be made. An effective vetting and barring scheme that prevents unsuitable people from obtaining work with children and vulnerable adults is an essential part of our safeguarding portfolio. On that basis, I ask the House to support the motion.

Ms Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety took evidence on the Bill at its meetings on 8 June and 15 June, and we signed off a report on our findings at the meeting on 22 June. The Committee supports the legislative consent

motion, and we believe that the Protection of Freedoms Bill is an important tool in our ongoing campaign for improved safeguarding arrangements for children and vulnerable adults.

As the Minister said, the legislative consent motion is required as a result of amendments made to the Bill at Committee Stage in the House of Commons. The amendments provide for the establishment of a new body named the Disclosure and Barring Service, which will merge the functions of the Independent Safeguarding Authority and the Criminal Records Bureau. In effect, the passing of the motion will allow the Disclosure and Barring Service to undertake barring functions in this region and decide which individuals should be included on barred lists on the basis that they have harmed or are a danger to a child or vulnerable adult.

The Committee took evidence on the legislative consent motion from the NSPCC and the Children's Commissioner. Both organisations endorsed the motion, and the Committee shared their view that the new vetting and barring scheme that will be implemented under the Protection of Freedoms Bill will enable vital information to be effectively shared on an east-west basis. That will have a considerable impact in making sure that people who are a threat to children or vulnerable adults do not obtain either paid work or volunteering opportunities with them.

However, the Committee was strongly of the view that the motion is only one element of safeguarding children and vulnerable people. We are concerned about the arrangements both between the North and the South, and with European jurisdictions outside these islands. During our evidence taking, we were alerted to gaps in the information that is shared between the PSNI and the gardaí. We understand that conviction data is shared but that soft information is not. Therefore, when someone applies for a job here and a check is carried out, only any convictions that that person has in the South will show up. However, if the guards have suspicions about that person or cautions have been issued, that will not show up. I think that we can all agree that that is very worrying.

Members have heard what the Minister said about this issue, and that he supports further legislation. The Committee urges the Minister to continue the good work that has been started by the North/South Ministerial Council on

this matter. We have heard that the South is drafting legislation that will make provision for arrangements with other jurisdictions on the sharing of information for vetting purposes. That will include soft information. The Committee welcomed that news and encourages the Department to offer what support it can to their counterpart officials in that process.

I think that we would all agree that, given the relationship that we have with the South, that information needs to be shared and we need to do much more to protect children and vulnerable adults. That is particularly the case, given how easy it is for people to move between Monaghan and Tyrone or between Fermanagh and Cavan.

A lot more work needs to be done through a European-wide approach. Conviction information is not currently shared between European member states, with the exception of the arrangements on these islands. That will require further investigation by the Assembly.

The Committee welcomes the legislative consent motion. The Protection of Freedoms Bill will mean that we will have a strong vetting and barring scheme that will help to protect children and vulnerable adults from harm. I commend the motion to the House.

Mr Wells: I also support the motion. Legislative consent motions present slightly difficult issues for Committees because, to some extent, we are handed a done deal — a fait accompli. Not to support a legislative consent motion would put us completely out of line with the rest of the United Kingdom and force us to devise our own legislation. However, it also means that we have to slavishly follow whatever is put on the table in front of us. That can be difficult because, sometimes, there are particular problems that arise in Northern Ireland that are different to other parts of the United Kingdom. However, obviously we do not want to do anything that would impede the protection of our children, so we are more than happy to support the motion.

As the Chairperson and the Minister mentioned, during discussions on the motion, an issue arose that alarmed us greatly. If you are a person with a predisposition to molest children and are convicted in Strabane, and then move to Lifford or vice versa, that information moves with you. However, if you have been removed from a position as a teacher in Lifford because of indulging in activity that is clearly beyond the pale, but which does not lead to conviction,

and you move to Strabane, you can continue as a teacher, and that soft intelligence does not move with you.

The Minister has reassured us by saying that legislation is going before the Dáil in the Irish Republic to address that situation.

That is very welcome, and the sooner it occurs, the better. I urge the Minister, under the auspices of his colleague in the Republic, to urge the Department in the Republic to move as fast as it can on that issue, because not doing so will leave a loophole that could be exploited by the more sinister elements of society.

4.30 pm

Another issue that arose during discussions on the motion was that soft intelligence in the European Community does not follow people who come to live or work in Northern Ireland. Indeed, in some instances, no intelligence at all follows them. With Northern Ireland becoming a more diverse society and more people coming in from eastern Europe and other EEC states, there is a danger that our children could be exposed to those who have a conviction or have at least been charged with a serious offence that is not known when they apply for a job looking after children in Northern Ireland. Therefore, anything that can be done to plug those loopholes and address that issue will be very much welcomed. I hope that the Committee, the Minister — I accept that we are straying slightly into issues that are under the control of the Department of Justice, but the two are linked — and his counterpart will keep a close eye on the situation to ensure that the flaws in the present arrangements are plugged as soon as possible. We must do everything that we can to ensure that our children are protected.

In the field of clerical sex abuse on the island of Ireland, there has, unfortunately, been a tendency to move perpetrators on to the next parish or diocese rather than seek a prosecution. The difficulty is that such moves often cross borders, and we have seen practical examples of how that can lead to problems and, unfortunately, to the ruination of children's lives by those who should never have been in control or charge of them. Notwithstanding those concerns, I am more than happy to support the Minister's proposal.

I apologise that I have to dash away to an important meeting so, unfortunately, I may not

be here to listen to the Minister's response. I am sure that it will be full of wisdom and useful information. My departure is no reflection whatever on the work that he is doing. Things have just come together to create an unfortunate set of circumstances this evening.

Mr McCarthy: I will be brief, as everything has been covered by the Chairperson and the Deputy Chairperson. My party and I fully support the legislative consent motion. There can be no greater issue than the protection of vulnerable groups, such as children and young people, from devious, sinister and vile individuals.

To reduce the need for multiple checks on the same person, the Protection of Freedoms Bill will ensure that criminal record checks are constantly updated and will transfer when a person changes job. That should reduce the number of background checks and will, I hope, mean that there is no backlog and no case can slip through the system. However, one or two issues remain, such as the potential gap that Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) highlighted. It believes that the definition of regulated activities is too restrictive. I understand that NICCY is concerned that those who are not involved in regulated activities but have contact with youngsters will not be covered by the motion. Perhaps the Minister could clarify the matter for that body and for those of us in the Chamber this afternoon. It is vital for the safety of our youngsters that vetting and barring arrangements are carried out in the most thorough and efficient manner to ensure that they receive the highest possible level of protection at all times. Like Mr Wells, I have to vacate the Chamber for a short time, but, undoubtedly, I want to hear the Minister's response.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I, too, support the legislative consent motion. The Minister, the Deputy Chair and the Chair adequately covered the issues involved. However, as someone who represents a border constituency, I know that the exchange of what is termed "soft information" is essential. The lack of such an exchange creates a real worry because, as has been stated, people can cross the border at will. Some in my constituency live within a stone's throw of the Twenty-six Counties, so it is an ongoing worry. Therefore, I certainly support the legislative consent motion.

Mr Poots: The success of child and adult protection often stands or falls on the presence of good communication, co-ordination and collaboration. Under the VBS, for the first time we will have vetting and barring arrangements that operate broadly consistently across the UK. Each jurisdiction of the UK will have in place arrangements that facilitate the sharing of information on individuals who potentially present a serious risk to children and vulnerable adults. Also, barring decisions will be made consistently, making it possible to recognise barring decisions made in other parts of the UK. That will mean that a person barred from working with vulnerable groups in England, Wales and Scotland can and will be barred from similar work in Northern Ireland.

My officials will continue to work closely with colleagues in the Republic of Ireland. It is imperative for the Republic to get the legislation that is being drawn up right. It is a country that has had very difficult situations to deal with and has not handled them well, to the extent that it brought down a Government. It is absolutely incumbent on the current Government to get the strongest possible legislation to ensure that paedophiles and others who want to prey on innocent children and vulnerable adults do not have the opportunity to do so. The Government in the Republic must take every step they can to assist us in ensuring that those activities do not happen. Reciprocal arrangements need to be put in place so that neither jurisdiction holds back any information on individuals who wish to behave in a manner that could harm children or vulnerable adults.

Mr McCarthy raised an issue that NICCY brought to his attention, and the definition of "regulated activity" has been reduced in scope, with the intention of covering posts that have the most intensive control of children and vulnerable adults. The DBS needs to be supplemented with other arrangements, such as supervision, training and management, which are issues that I have already commented on.

With all of that in mind, I commend the motion to the House. It is a move forward and a step in the right direction. I trust that the legislation that will emanate from my counterpart in the Irish Republic will sufficiently strengthen how we handle all of this and that the record that Northern Ireland and, to a greater extent, the Republic of Ireland have of past child abuse will be looked back on as something that we

ensured did not continue. I further trust that we will ensure that children and vulnerable adults receive adequate protection and are not left in a situation where they can be preyed on by the most evil, pernicious and vile people who would abuse them.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the provisions of the Protection of Freedoms Bill dealing with the Disclosure and Barring Service contained in chapter 3 of Part 5 of, and schedule 8 to, the Bill as amended at Committee Stage in the House of Commons.

Committee Business

Higher Education: Tuition Fees

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

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

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning to ensure that funding is available to maintain the excellence of Northern Ireland's higher education system and is consistent with our aim of maximising educational opportunities for all.

I am pleased to move the motion to debate the important issue of how higher education is to be funded in Northern Ireland. The issue is also being addressed in other parts of the United Kingdom, and I am sure that many colleagues here have had the opportunity to discuss it with the electorate.

It is vital that the House gives time and space to debate the wider arguments for and against the implications of increasing student fees in Northern Ireland. The level of tuition fees, even if they are not paid up front, has significant implications for affordability and access to higher education. That is not just a matter of concern for students and universities; it has far greater ramifications for the economy and society at large.

The Committee for Employment and Learning has been working closely with the main stakeholders. The Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) has just closed its public consultation on higher education tuition fees and student finance arrangements, and it will brief the Committee this Wednesday on the 40 responses that have been received. However, time is running out. Prospective students urgently need a clearer indication of the Minister's plans, so that they can make university applications for the 2012 academic year.

As the House will be aware from its scrutiny of the Budget for 2011-15, the Department for Employment and Learning has focused the bulk of its cuts on the higher education sector.

Those cuts are expected to be met in two ways: through the universities making £28 million of annual efficiency savings and through the replacement of a further £40 million per annum core funding to the universities with higher tuition fees for students.

Towards the end of March 2011, the Department for Employment and Learning received additional funding amounting to £51 million. That was widely reported by the media as plugging the gap in the Department's budget. However, that was not the case, and it is important to stress that that was not the case. I particularly want Mr Wilson, the Minister of Finance and Personnel, to take note of that. The additional funding was earmarked for committed capital expenditure transferred from his Department for inescapable pressures on the employment service and for innovation funding discontinued by the Executive's innovation fund. There was no further money for higher education, a fact that the Minister of Finance and Personnel must take on board.

Last week, the Committee heard evidence from Queen's University Belfast and the University of Ulster, both of which are urgently looking for solutions to meet the £40 million shortfall. We have made it clear that the higher education system must convince the wider community that it is not an ivory tower devolved from the lives of ordinary people but a force for economic development, opportunity and wealth creation. In that regard, I was pleased to see representatives from Queen's University and Members of the Assembly in the Long Gallery today, where they were attempting to engage and explain. We should do more of that. However, they are to be commended.

The University of Ulster's Professor Barnett has stated that the university will need to shed up to 200 jobs to effect the required £28 million in efficiency savings. Queen's University has also indicated that the jobs of some 200 of its employees are under threat and that some planned programmes will not go ahead. Both universities have described the devastating impact of trying to cope with the funding being reduced by £40 million, with the vice chancellor of Queen's University referring to it as a doomsday scenario in which student numbers would be drastically reduced or two faculties — for example, the faculty of arts and humanities and the faculty of social sciences — would have to close. Two faculties in Queen's University would

have to close if the funding gap is not met. Similarly, the vice chancellor of the University of Ulster, Professor Richard Barnett, stated that he would be forced to close one of his campuses should such funding pressures be enforced.

The Committee is also aware of the knock-on effect on the Northern Ireland economy of any reduction in the capacity of universities. Higher education plays a significant role in a nation's economic development, acting as a driving force behind technological change, expansion of industries and skill building in the workforce. The universities here attract just under £100 million of research income per annum, and Queen's alone makes a further contribution of around £700 million to the economy.

The Committee also consulted the CBI, which suggested that there should be a modest increase in tuition fees and a reallocation of money from other Departments. In addition, the CBI addressed the benefits derived by graduates. The latest Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) labour force survey shows that the employment rate for graduates in Northern Ireland is 85.7%, compared with 60.9% for non-graduates. It is argued that those graduates could well afford to pay fees later in their working life, shifting the burden of payment from the taxpayer to the recipient of the benefit. The CBI went on to say that, since the original introduction of variable rate tuition fees, there has been no reduction in student uptake from lower income groups.

4.45 pm

Other stakeholders have raised concern over the time it is taking to come to a definitive decision on tuition fees. In her letter, the chief executive of Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) informed the Committee that time is running out fast, as the 2012 admissions cycle is already under way. In fact, the deadline for applications for medicine, dentistry and veterinary science courses, as well as for the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, is 15 October 2011, and the deadline for the majority of other courses is 15 January 2012. Pupils in sixth form need to be deciding the next step in their educational journey now, and these financial considerations are central to the decision-making process. Currently, it is impossible for potential undergraduates to make informed choices as to where and what they will study, due to the uncertainties over

what level of tuition fee loan will be available through the Student Loans Company and what other maintenance support will be made available to them.

This morning, together with other Committee members, I met Minister Farry. I asked him to ensure that funding was available to maintain the excellence of Northern Ireland's education system, while ensuring that educational opportunity for all is maximised. The Minister has indicated that, unless fees are increased, either the universities will face severe cuts or the Department will be forced to drastically curtail its work in other areas.

Dr McDonnell: Has the Committee or the Minister had any investigation or study carried out of the economic cost of students being forced to go to England, Scotland or further afield for an education, with many of them not coming back to Northern Ireland?

Mr B McCrea: I thank the Member for his intervention. I am sure that the Minister will address that in his response, so I will leave him to deal with the issue. However, the point is well made.

I will make a few comments now on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party. One of the real issues that needs to be brought to the Assembly's attention is the comment by the First Minister in his statement to the Assembly after the successful Washington economic conference. He said:

"when the Executive start to look at their Budget and areas in which they have to look for cuts, they should use only a light touch — if they touch the Department for Employment and Learning at all — particularly in this area of expenditure, because it pays back dividends." [Official Report, Bound Volume 57, p30, col 1].

When I looked at the submission from the vice chancellor of the University of Ulster, I was struck by something that he said about that quotation. He alluded to the First Minister's comments about the light touch, but said:

"the fact is that it was given the heaviest touch of anywhere, with a £68 million per annum cut in the HE budget."

This must be addressed by the Executive and the Minister of Finance and Personnel. I could rehearse all the arguments put forward by the vice chancellors, but they are all on record in Hansard.

When I try to bring these matters to the attention of the Minister of Finance and Personnel, his usual retort is, "Where are we going to find the money?". We seem to spend a lot of time in this place going through the motions, and we do not get the time to talk about serious issues. This is arguably one of the most serious issues to face the Assembly.

If we are really stuck, one thing that we could do is merge our universities —

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

Mr B McCrea: — and our higher education authorities. That would show some form of administration, but that is a debate for another day.

Mr Ross: The motion is probably easy enough for everyone in the Assembly to support. However, it is the subtext, which we read as opposing any increase in fees but maintaining or increasing the funding available, that will give the Minister and, ultimately, his Executive colleagues more of a headache.

In his opening comments, the Chairman mentioned the importance of the issue to the economy. I am aware that there is a motion scheduled for tomorrow, tabled by the Chairpersons of the Committee for Finance and Personnel and the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, that supports in principle the devolution of powers to allow the Assembly to lower the rate of corporation tax in Northern Ireland. When companies across the world are looking to invest in a country or a region, there is no doubt that they look for a standout corporation tax rate. Beyond that, however, they look at other things. They look at the standard of the education system; at the quality of the universities; at the links between the universities and businesses; at the skills base; and at the quality of the graduates coming out of the universities. In its paper on the potential reduction of corporation tax, the Economic Advisory Group estimated that an additional 58,000 jobs could be created in Northern Ireland by 2030. That would be an additional 4,500 jobs a year in the first number of years, if we were to get that power. Therefore, it is very important that we continue to produce highly skilled graduates from quality universities to meet that demand from business.

It is important that we maintain the reputation of our universities so that we continue to attract international students, who come to Queen's or the University of Ulster because they know the quality of a UK university and the sort of education that they will get. Of course, the fees that they pay for that privilege are substantially higher than those for students from the United Kingdom.

It is a privilege to go to university, but university should not be just for the privileged. That is one of the key issues that will come out of this debate. Many are concerned that a further increase in student fees would be the tipping point for many families. On previous occasions, Members from across the House expressed grave concerns that we were heading towards a market approach to higher education that would lead, inevitably, to some students from less well-off backgrounds being priced out of the market. I do not believe that that is the sort of equality of opportunity that we want. It could lead to students making decisions about where and what to study on the basis of cost rather than academic considerations, as some universities and courses would be seen as cheaper options than others.

If, as looks likely, we make the decision not to raise fees, we are, in a way, marketing ourselves as somewhere where the cost of going to university is lower than in the rest of the United Kingdom. That raises a number of questions, a few of which the Chairperson raised in his opening comments. Would that attract more students from outside Northern Ireland to our universities? Would that mean that we could raise or scrap the maximum student number (MaSN) cap? What would the impact be on students from Northern Ireland if we were able to open up and have more students from elsewhere in the United Kingdom come to study here? Would there be an opportunity to freeze fees for students from Northern Ireland but raise them for those who come from elsewhere in the UK or beyond? Would there be protection so that a certain level of our university make-up was indigenous students from Northern Ireland? Those are questions that that would raise.

It is important to mention that Northern Ireland has a pretty good record when it comes to getting young people from disadvantaged areas into university. That is partly to do with our education system. I very much see academic selection and grammar schools as a driver

of social mobility and a means of helping many young people from areas of deprivation. However, it is also because universities, such as the University of Ulster, operate the Step-Up programme and work and develop links with many schools in which, traditionally, pupils have not gone on to university. The universities were able to raise that aspiration among young people. However, there is little point in raising that aspiration if, ultimately, the cost of going to university proves prohibitive for those students.

It is unrealistic to suggest that we can scrap student fees. Indeed, the potential return of a good degree and the job that may come with it should be viewed as a long-term investment. However, it is important that fees are not a deterrent to those from less well-off families. University entrance should be based on ability rather than on the affluence of an individual or an individual's parents.

That brings me to my key point. If we are to maintain funding for our universities so that we can cope with that additional and increasing demand for well-trained and skilled graduates and given the tighter public finances that we operate, how can we ensure that excellence is maintained? I do not think that there is a prospect of raising the cap on student fees for Northern Ireland. Therefore, if they make that decision, it is up to the Executive, collectively, to find elsewhere in the Budget —

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

Mr Ross: I will conclude on this, Mr Deputy Speaker. If the Executive make that decision, it must be the collective agreement of the Executive as to where they can find additional money. There is also an onus on the universities to look for increasing private finance.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. At the outset, I want to state Sinn Féin's position: access to higher education must be based on the ability to learn and not on the ability to pay. Sinn Féin was opposed to the introduction of tuition fees and remains opposed to any notion of increasing tuition fees. It is wrong that the ability to pay for higher education should become the benchmark for accessing educational opportunity. Any increase in student fees at this time would undoubtedly have a detrimental impact on the people who could least afford it. It would be at the least another psychological obstacle to

students from low-income families and middle-income families and to those from socially deprived backgrounds. It would lead to more debt for students and their families and would lead to a two-tier third-level education system. I have spoken to young students from my community, and they have said that it would deter them from taking up higher education. We believe that education is a basic right and that a university campus should be a learning place not a market place.

The motion refers to the excellence of our universities here in the North. I accept that Queen's University and the University of Ulster have been relatively successful in widening participation. They are a key contributor to the economy, and they help to achieve strategic priorities set out, for example, in the Assembly's Programme for Government. Queen's University is, as it says, a magnet for talent. It harnesses global excellence for local purposes. I am a graduate myself, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Major investment in the university's new health campus is helping to bring about transformational change, and it is good to see the medical school at work. Development of the centres for cancer research and cell biology and for vision and microvascular sciences, and excellence in public health are some of the things that Queen's University is particularly proud of. The University of Ulster is also justifiably proud of its achievements. Three of its top subjects are biomedical sciences, with a Nobel laureate on the staff, nursing and Celtic studies. I have also visited the sports institute recently, and it continues to inspire young people and provide opportunities for young people in sport and education.

I support the bid to the Department for Employment and Learning for a relaxation of the MaSN figure for the University of Ulster's Magee campus in the north-west by over 1,000 in the current comprehensive spending review (CSR) period because, when higher education is located in your local community, it is far more accessible.

The Committee is learning about the work of the seven other universities on this island and about the partnership that is Universities Ireland, and I want to see more working in partnership there.

Mr B McCrea: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. He was quoting the work of

the Committee, and I noticed that he asked whether Queen's University had any idea how the Department for Employment and Learning's budget might be reconfigured. Does the Member have any knowledge or insight that he can put on that? I accept his statement about his party's position on tuition fees, but there is a funding gap of £40 million. Does he accept that there is a gap there? If so, is there any way that we might deal with it?

Mr McElduff: That is the £40 million question. That question was doing the rounds all day today at the showcase event in the Long Gallery. In a question for written answer, I asked the Minister to outline his Department's revenue generation proposals to offset any shortfall in the budget as a result of tuition fees not being increased.

The Minister said that it would inevitably lead to a reduction in services and training opportunities for young people and the unemployed were it to come about. I do not necessarily accept that.

5.00 pm

I agree with the Committee Chairman that this is an issue for the Department for Employment and Learning and a matter of great urgency for the Minister of Finance and Personnel and the wider Executive. That is where the answers need to come from. We cannot recurrently transfer that £40 million funding gap to students. I think that that is an issue for the wider Executive.

I will briefly restate my key points. Access to excellent universities is where Sinn Féin places its emphasis. We want people to be able to get to university on the basis not of their ability to pay but of their ability to learn. This hugely important issue requires urgent attention from the Department, the Minister of Finance and Personnel and the wider Executive.

Mr P Ramsey: I speak as the SDLP spokesperson on employment and learning and as a member of the Employment and Learning Committee. The motion, as outlined by the Chair, reflects the opinion of not only the Committee but those across the board from not just the business community but Queen's University, from whom Members will have heard at today's showcase event, and the University of Ulster, from whom we receive presentations on a regular basis. As we heard from the Chair, we are talking about the loss of 200 jobs at Queen's and 200 jobs at

the University of Ulster, with 200 of those 400 jobs being key academic posts.

The additional £40 million will have a catastrophic effect on higher education in Northern Ireland. We must ensure that we can afford to maintain our higher education system as best as possible in this time of austerity, while protecting, as Barry McElduff said, participation rates and ensuring that we do not price future generations out of higher education.

The financial position makes for stark reading. We all know the funding position that we have been given to work with in this comprehensive spending review period. The Department for Employment and Learning spends approximately £200 million on supporting universities and colleges and a further £200 million on supporting students with fees and loan expenses, which, when taken together, account for 50% of its budget. According to DEL, the aim of its higher education policy is:

“to promote and sustain the development of an internationally competitive higher education sector, accessible to all who are able to benefit and meeting the needs of the Northern Ireland economy and wider society.”

It is going to be extremely difficult for us and the Department to stay true to those words and that aim due to the further pressures on us from the Treasury to maximise opportunities and from the economic challenges going forward in this particularly difficult budgetary period. For me, the key phrase of that aim is:

“accessible to all who are able to benefit”.

We must ensure at all costs that those words continue to refer to educational achievement and not access based on income, as many Members said. If the latter were to happen, all the good work that has been undertaken to open up the system to those from poorer backgrounds will have been undone and will have failed. As I said earlier, we must protect participation rates in particular, which we know are best in the wider region. It is imperative that we balance any cuts with the ability to accommodate people who would not normally have had the opportunity to attend university.

The previous Member who spoke referred to the Magee campus, and I want to take this opportunity to thank the Minister for hosting a meeting with me and a number of key players from the University for Derry campaign so

early in his ministerial portfolio. It was a very positive meeting. The Magee campus issue is about regional disparity and about ensuring that people in sub-regions have access to third level education and higher education. It is an economic and a social argument, and it unites everyone in the city. No other subject matter, apart from the radiotherapy unit, has united people in the north-west as much as it has. We need and have received encouragement from the Minister, and we want to see that from the Executive, too. I say to other colleagues and parties in the Chamber that there are going to be increased demands from young people to meet the needs in both universities.

What will we do to try to facilitate those young people? We know that universities, particularly those in England, will charge the maximum £9,000 a year fee, and that that may deter a lot of people from going to university. We also know that there has been increasing demand for places in universities in Northern Ireland in recent years. During the meeting this morning, I asked the Minister how many young people were unable to gain a place at university as a result of that increased demand. There is no scientific approach for defining how many young people were affected, but many young people missed out on that opportunity and now form part of the NEET— not in employment, education or training — fraternity.

Mr McElduff: I thank the Member for giving way. He mentioned Magee College and how important investment in that college is for access to higher education in the north-west. Does the Member agree that the six regional colleges deliver a significant proportion of our higher education provision and that investment in regional colleges is crucial in helping with access to higher education?

Mr P Ramsey: We must get the balance right. Across Northern Ireland, 40,000 young people find themselves in the NEET bracket and that is an issue that the previous Committee for Employment and Learning prioritised through an inquiry. Indeed, the former Chairperson of that Committee, Dolores Kelly, is sitting behind me, and she will also speak in this debate.

It is important that we recognise how difficult the situation is. There is no appetite among any of the political parties to increase student fees in Northern Ireland. The Chairperson of the Committee said that the challenge lies not just

with the Minister of Finance and Personnel but with all the Ministers, and I am sure that the Minister for Employment and Learning will also point that out. If we are serious about ensuring that future generations of young people have access to third-level education, the Executive will need to find the £40 million that is missing from the Department's budget.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mr P Ramsey: I encourage my colleagues from the other parties to ensure that we deliver on this issue and do not let future generations down.

Mr Lyttle: I welcome the opportunity to return to the debate. It is vitally important to thousands of families and to our regional economy that the Minister and the Executive act decisively on the issue of higher education funding. We know that the teaching and research capabilities of our universities are key drivers to economic recovery and that higher education changes lives. We must, therefore, call on the Executive to allocate adequate public funds to maintain our record of promoting social inclusion and the academic excellence necessary to produce the skilled workforce that is needed to grow our economy and to provide companies with the calibre of employees that they need to bring their investment to Northern Ireland.

My party had consistently opposed the situation in which people from low socio-economic backgrounds are deterred from going to university because of the cost. However, the Alliance Party recognises the serious pressure that is on our public finances and the need to consider the impact that fundamental changes in England will have on our universities.

Mr A Maginness: The Member has quite correctly referred to the need to protect the situation in which people from lower-income groups can go to university. However, the net effect of any substantial increase in fees will be that not only those from more deprived backgrounds but those from middle-income groups will be prevented from going to university. They simply will not be able to afford the substantial increase in fees.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Member for his intervention, and I agree that the concern also stretches to middle-income groups. We must find a way to adequately resource higher education to safeguard their attendance at university.

We must also expand our understanding of how we deliver skills to our population. Although my party voted against uncapped tuition fees at Westminster, the Browne report contained a number of proposals that might help our universities to deliver more modern and efficient teaching. One recommendation of that report, which I welcome, is the extension of student finance arrangements to part-time students, particularly given the increasing number of students who must work to fund their study and the need to upskill workers who are already in the workforce.

Other modes of teaching such as two-year degrees, distance and virtual learning and, as has been mentioned, closer co-operation with further education colleges should also be considered.

The Alliance Party is committed to the fundamental principle that universities should be free at the point of delivery, that we protect access for students from low socio-economic backgrounds and that an appropriate financing system be put in place to ensure that our universities sustain their global competitive reputation. However, it is time for the Assembly to get real. The Department for Employment and Learning budget has a funding gap of approximately £40 million, so how else do we make the savings? That question has been asked today, but, to be honest, few answers have come back.

I continue to call on the Executive to take seriously the cost of division in Northern Ireland and the impact that failing to tackle that waste is having on our ability to invest in vital services such as education. The £40 million shortfall in the DEL budget pales in comparison with the estimated £1 billion cost of division every year. It is obviously not a saving that can be realised overnight and would also require fundamental change in our society. However, I hope that the absolute necessity to produce a highly skilled entrepreneurial population could be a catalyst for the Executive to work together and to target the long-term savings possible through a more shared and integrated society.

Mr B McCrea: Does the Member think that the higher education sector has any part to play in the creation of an integrated society? Are there any opportunities to share or rationalise facilities in that sector?

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Member for his intervention. That suggestion could certainly be considered. Our universities make unique offers on the subjects in which they have expertise, but there could be increased co-operation in research and innovation, and efficiency savings could be achieved in that way.

No Government in the world would seek to address the financial situation that we face through savings alone. My party has been open about the need to consider progressive revenue-raising measures. Devolved Administrations can make their own judgements about what they do with the block grant. The Welsh Government, for example, have decided to subsidise the fee increase imposed by Westminster. However, we have to recognise the fact that the Welsh people also pay prescription charges and water charges.

The time for electioneering is over, and it is time for the Assembly to deliver. As we stand here today, no student from Northern Ireland who seeks to study anywhere in the UK or Ireland in 2012 knows what fees they will have to pay. It is vital, therefore, that the Minister for Employment and Learning and the Executive provide direction before recess to allow families, students and institutions to plan for the future.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mr Lyttle: If rebalancing our economy, job creation and protecting the vulnerable in society are real priorities of the Executive, they have to allocate the resources needed to achieve those aims.

Mr D McIlveen: Obviously, this issue is hugely involved and emotive. In my short time in the Assembly, I have not been lobbied so heavily about any other matter. It is clearly an issue. I have been contacted by constituents and representatives from our higher education and further education sectors and various focus groups that, at times, have given analyses that are poles apart. Given that public interest in the topic is so high, it was particularly disappointing to hear one of the members of the Committee for Employment and Learning describe that Committee as being one that does not matter. I hope that the said Member will lower himself to take part in today's debate. Hopefully, he will join us in the Chamber before much longer.

Our party position on tuition fees has been crystal clear. We are convinced that to raise the fees charged to students in Northern

Ireland beyond £3,290 outside inflation is not a constructive way forward. There are many reasons for that, but I will highlight just a couple. First, if our economy is to prosper, we must ensure that every opportunity is given to nurturing our home-grown talent. The message that we got on the doors leading up to the election was that many parents would be very reluctant to send their children to university if the fees were to be increased.

5.15 pm

The argument is well rehearsed that, even if fees are increased, university is still free at the point of entry. However, we cannot ignore the fact that debt is debt, and for graduates to be shackled by vast debts before they have their first full-time job is both uninspiring and demotivating.

Another reason to oppose a rise in fees is that, for the first time in a generation, we can fight the brain drain from which Northern Ireland has suffered. In a recent survey commissioned by the Consumer Council, it was found that over 80% of graduates live within 20 miles of where they studied. It is well known that many of our brightest students left Northern Ireland to study in other UK universities, never to return. It is expected that most of the other Russell Group universities will take full advantage of the lifting of the cap on fees in mainland UK.

Therefore, by setting our fees at the current level, we can compete and do what we can to keep our academic talent in Northern Ireland, and that can only be a good thing for the economy.

Mr A Maginness: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. I have listened carefully to his argument, as I did that of Mr Barry McElduff. Both arguments are similar in their opposition to increases in fees. However, I think that I saw Mr McIlveen go through the Aye Lobby about an hour ago to vote in favour of the Budget. Mr Barry McElduff also went through that Lobby, voting for a Budget that prevents the Department from expending the money that is necessary for the universities to provide for their students and services. Will the Member explain how he can reconcile that contradiction?

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the Member for his intervention. If he will permit me to continue, that point will be covered in less than a few moments.

Over £28 million of efficiencies have already been absorbed by the sector, and if a further hit of £40 million a year is to be taken in, it will only come about in one of two ways: money going in or less money going out. I applaud the work that our universities and colleges have done and where legitimate efficiencies can be made, they should continue to make them.

However, in the Assembly, there is a job to do to ensure that that insurmountable gap is plugged. It will not be easy, and there is no single solution to the problem of accumulating the £40 million that the universities and colleges need to meet their annual shortfall. First, there is an obligation on the businesses that benefit from the incredible skills that our universities offer to pay a little more to fill the gaps that exist in the budget. Secondly, we should lift the cap on fees for the universities but ensure that it is set in law that a rise in fees is not inflicted on our indigenous students. Thirdly, universities may have to endure some further efficiencies.

I speak directly to the Minister. Our world-class education is worth paying for, and, as such, I appeal to you not to leave the Executive table until you get the money you need to ensure that our universities are funded.

Mr Deputy Speaker: This is the first debate in which the Assembly will hear from Cathal Ó hOisín, so I remind the House that it is the convention that a maiden speech be heard without interruption.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Is mór an onóir domhsa a bheith anseo inniu ar son daoine bródúla Dhoire Thoir. Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a thabhairt dóibh ag an am seo.

I am accorded liberties on this occasion that I will not be again; liberties, indeed, that I sometimes do not have even in my own house. I intend to take advantage of them. I may digress somewhat from the subject matter, but my remarks will be interconnected.

I want to thank the proud people of East Derry, republican and otherwise, who sent me to this place. I also thank our party structures, an chomhairle ceantair, and the local cumanns, particularly the O'Carolan/Kilmartin Cumann in Dungiven. I thank my family for their sacrifice and for the support they have given me, particularly my wife, Eileen, and my son, Peadar. As I said before, I thank all those from

Coolnamonan, Clontygerach, Tamlaght Finlagan, Tamlaghtard and elsewhere.

Another person I thank is the Member previously elected to this place, Francie Brolly.

Francie Brolly is a political mentor of mine; more than that, he is a neighbour, a friend, a comrade and a teacher. Francie imparted to me the radical revolutionary tradition of the United Irishmen: the unification of Catholic, Protestant and dissenter by the common name of Irishmen, and its central tenets of liberty, equality and fraternity through song and story and through the realisation of great Irishmen and, indeed, great Ulstermen, such as Henry Joy McCracken, Roddy McCorley and my fellow Dungiven man, John Mitchel.

Francie also imparted to me the legends of Lig na Peiste and Cooney na Gall, Queen Meadhbh and the Fianna. I believe that those should appear on all primary-school curricula. He also imparted a grá for an teanga bheo, our own native language, which has remained with me all this time. Francie's involvement in many campaigns at home is legend, as is that of the rest of my party.

A burning issue for our area, for the constituency, and indeed for the entire north-west is the Dungiven bypass, and I welcome the fact that the public inquiry will begin at the start of next year. I hope that construction work will start as soon as possible afterwards. The previous Minister identified moneys for it, and the process of decoupling the bypass is under way. I also welcome the upgrading of the Derry to Coleraine railway line and realise the essential nature of the infrastructure there in regeneration. Regeneration is an issue for Coleraine, Limavady, Dungiven and all the smaller villages across the constituency, as you well know, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

The jobs and immigration issues that affect our constituency are legend. I was speaking to a couple at the weekend who were attending a leaving party for two 2:1 graduates, a man and his wife who were emigrating to Australia; she to work as a nanny and he to work for a landscape gardening company. Those people are lost to us if we let them go.

We need to look at the tourism product in our area; the opening up of Benone, the Binevenagh area of outstanding natural beauty, the Sperrins tourism issue, the preservation of the

Greencastle to Magilligan ferry, and the widening of the City of Culture bid in 2013, where we hopefully may welcome fleá cheoil na hÉireann. We also have the Ulster fleá in Dungiven in the next couple of years.

We need to look at the redevelopment of the Shackleton complex in the hope that the recreational and educational facilities and infrastructure there can be used to maximum effect.

The previous incumbent, Billy Leonard, touched on the Coleraine to Limerick waterway on occasions. I had the opportunity last week to talk to Waterways Ireland about the increase in the delivery of that project: £34 million was spent by people visiting waterways in Ireland last year.

We would like to benefit in the wider north-west area from the high-tech jobs that will come with Project Kelvin. In that respect, the research and development capacity of the University of Ulster at Coleraine and Magee will be essential, as will the work with the Causeway and Altnagelvin hospitals.

As my colleagues mentioned, there should be increased co-operation with the seven other universities under Universities Ireland.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your time is up.

Mr Ó hOisín: I am sorry?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mr Ó hOisín: OK. Thank you. The equality issues of the United Irishmen come to the fore once again. Equality of jobs, services, housing and education —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up.

Mr Ó hOisín: We want to avoid the inequalities of unfair transfer tests, elitist schools and the inequalities that would be created through an increase in tuition fees. Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Chairman of the Committee, Mr Basil McCrea, for bringing the debate to the Chamber. It is very important, and I welcome the opportunity to participate.

Throughout the election campaign and in the Programme for Government, the economy has been central to our theme for the future. The

need to improve our economy in Northern Ireland has been our focus, and integral to that is growing the private sector. The DEL Committee heard representations from various bodies, and changing the focus to the science, technology, engineering and mathematics subjects has been very important.

We need to ensure that the universities have the ability to promote economic growth. We heard from the universities and the Committee for Employment and Learning, and it has been proven that higher education makes a significant contribution to the Northern Ireland economy, directly in bringing over 12,000 jobs and £1.5 billion to the economy, and indirectly in providing highly skilled graduates, attracting inward investment and as a director of innovation. As a past student, I also add my support to extending the University of Ulster's Magee campus.

The skills of the workforce are a major selling point of Northern Ireland. We will be debating corporation tax tomorrow, and the contribution that the higher education sector makes to the Northern Ireland economy is important to that. No one should be priced out of education. The previous Ministers for Employment and Learning succeeded in getting the highest proportion of students from deprived backgrounds into higher education. I hope that continues with our new Minister.

Other Members went through the details of the DEL budget, and I do not intend to go through that again except to say that the universities must be applauded in being prepared to meet the £28 million in efficiencies. However, that £28 million in efficiencies does not take into account inflation, VAT, National Insurance, etc, so the universities will have to meet additional efficiencies, and it will be very difficult for them to do that. So, the additional £40 million in cuts will, as the universities said, be catastrophic for them, and we must take into consideration all the details of what the universities told us about that with regard to the loss of jobs, etc.

The Ulster Unionist Party has always said that it is committed to ensuring that higher education remains accessible to everyone, regardless of ability to pay.

I welcomed the opportunity to speak to people from Queen's University in the Long Gallery today. It was interesting hearing exactly how they contribute to the Northern Ireland economy. They explained that, because the fees in GB

have already risen to £9,000, they now have an important buying power. The universities here are already seeing some of their staff being brought across to GB. That is another consideration, so the timing of the Minister's decision is important, and I urge him to make it as soon as possible.

Welfare reform means that a large number of people will be moving from incapacity benefit to jobseeker's allowance. So, the Department for Employment and Learning will need more finance for job support programmes, which will be an additional burden for the Minister.

I urge the Minister to take all those considerations on board, look at the timing of his decision and bring it to the Assembly as soon as possible.

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

Mrs D Kelly: I congratulate the Committee for highlighting this important subject for debate before the summer recess. Unfortunately, we are engaged in yet another debate in the absence of a Programme for Government. I am sure the Minister will feel somewhat constrained, given that he does not, I take it, have any indication as yet from his Executive colleagues about the £40 million that is required by his Department to ensure that there is no increase in tuition fees, which would enable all the parties that made manifesto commitments during the election to live up to them.

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

I noted with interest that the First Minister stated that no rise in tuition fees and an additional £40 million for the Department for Employment and Learning was a price worth paying. Let us hope that that is one promise that the DUP and others live up to.

5.30 pm

I urge the Alliance Party to look with some level of fear and trepidation to the experience of their Lib Dem colleagues across the water. They paid the price for the rise in tuition fees and the breaking of their electoral manifesto promises. It is also worth putting on record that the Alliance Party, the SDLP and the DUP all voted against tuition fees at Westminster, so, hopefully, they believe that what is good enough for students in GB will also be good enough for students here in the North.

People have said many times that devolution must work for the people of the North, and this is one example of where it clearly should. Wales and Scotland introduced and legislated for different fee income structures in their respective jurisdictions, and that ought to be the case here in the North. However, I am conscious that the shape and make-up of students here does not allow the same level of flexibility as in, for example, Wales, in that far fewer students come to study here in the North compared with Wales. I am also conscious of the fact that tuition fees should not be debated in isolation from other rising costs, such as maintenance and living costs. Those must also be factored into the consideration.

Earlier in the year, Joanne Stuart's review and the Browne review were published. The Stuart report recognised that fees and student loans are not paid upfront but are paid off much later, when students start to earn over £15,000. The review said that that requirement should not kick in until they start to earn £21,000, which is an uplift. Nonetheless, Joanne Stuart's report recognised that families here in Northern Ireland were very fearful and mindful of debt and did not like entering into huge debts. The argument that you do not pay until later did not wear well with people here who wish to study.

Other Members who contributed to the debate had the opportunity to visit, and thus refer to, the Queen's University's exhibition in the Long Gallery. Not only is Queen's the leading university here in the North, it also a world leader in many different areas and subjects, from agrifood, cancer research and waste management to initiatives supporting communities and, indeed, international development. The range and skill of the teaching and research staff are enviable, not only at Queen's but at the University of Ulster, and, indeed, our teaching universities.

It is difficult to divorce how other commentators, such as Declan Kelly, when jobs for Derry were announced earlier in the year —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to draw her remarks to a close.

Mrs D Kelly: — referred to the workforce —

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mrs D Kelly: I will indeed.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member tell us what Declan had to say?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mrs D Kelly: Now that I have a minute to tell you, I will. Thank you very much, Mr McCrea. Declan Kelly clearly said — as have others who invested in the economy here in the North — that one of the main overriding factors for any investor was our skilled workforce. I have heard the First Minister and deputy First Minister paraphrase that statement in a number of debates. I have also heard others use it, so we should all bear that in mind.

How we can ever separate tuition fees and the number of places available in our universities from the economy is beyond me. It would be inexplicable to many families and to young people hoping to go to university.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member must draw her remarks to a close.

Mr Nesbitt: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I also thank the Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning for bringing the matter to the House.

I wish to make two points: one academic and one economic. We all know that the previous Assembly and its Executive Committee put the economy at the heart of the Programme for Government. There is no reason to believe that it will not be the same this time around. Within that, there is the medium- to long-term ambition of rebalancing the economy. We will know that we have succeeded only when our people enjoy the sort of prosperity that is the UK average and when we deliver the sort of productivity that is measured in gross value added that, again, reflects something close to the average around the United Kingdom.

To achieve that, we will need many drivers and engines, and among them will be our universities. They must achieve two things. First, they must continue to analyse global markets, look at the trends and identify niche markets, and develop spin-out companies. I will not rehearse the figures detailing the number of companies, the employment or the wealth generated, because those are all well documented.

Secondly, they must achieve a reduction in corporation tax, if and when we get it and deploy

it to effect in order to transform our private sector. There will be a need for an ever-widening pipeline delivering educated workers into the private sector. Mr Ross, I believe, has already referred to the numbers — 4,000 to 5,000 per annum. Woe betide the Northern Ireland economy if we fail in that and the pipeline dries up, because we will be sending a message around the world not that Northern Ireland is open for business but is shut. Getting people into our universities is not about satisfying those who can afford to pay for their education. Rather, it is about making sure that we get into university those whom our economy cannot afford not to educate.

I am in no doubt that we are looking at a very competitive world, particularly when it comes to the STEM subjects — science, technology, engineering and mathematics. Some years ago, I had the pleasure of facilitating some of the STEM workshops that were organised jointly by DEL and the Department of Education. One speaker made a point that has stuck with me, and it is this: every 10 years, China and India alone produce 65 million new scientists, which is the equivalent of the entire population of the United Kingdom. To compete, we need to throw all the resources that we can into that area. It emphasises to me the importance of proposals such as turning the Magee campus of the University of Ulster into an area of expertise for STEM subjects and associated goods.

I come seamlessly to the academic point with a reference to the new library at Queen's University. A library, of course, is the epicentre of academic study. However, this new library was funded by and named after perhaps Northern Ireland's greatest industrialist of his generation, Sir Allen McClay. It was made clear in evidence given by the registrar of Queen's University to the Committee for Employment and Learning last week that, if the two universities are to absorb not just the £28 million of efficiency savings to which they have already committed but the additional £40 million shortfall, Queen's University, in order to take that additional £20 million hit on funding, would have to take out two of its faculties. The university's registrar and chief operating officer, Mr O'Kane, made clear what that would mean. He told the Committee:

"We would have to take out our faculty of arts and humanities and the faculty of social sciences."

Can we really imagine not investing in trying to locate, foster and make the most of the next Hewitt or Heaney, or the next historian of the calibre of Jonathan Bardon? That to me is just unimaginable. We must find that money. If we do not find it, it might be a good thing that we do not have any new historians coming out of the universities, because, if we decide not to fund our universities properly, a historian would certainly look at that and would identify the crime and identify the guilty as Members of the House. I support the motion.

Mr A Maginness: I rise to speak as the Chair of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment. It seems ironic that, today, Queen's University has come here to showcase the university and to explain to Members the wide range of services and academic disciplines that are available in the university, as well as its great value to Northern Ireland, not just in academic but in economic terms. It seems logical and reasonable to say that, without our universities, we would be much poorer not just in learning but in our economic performance. It is important, therefore, that the message goes out from the Assembly that we regard the universities not just as centres of learning but as economic drivers in our community. I believe that universities should be places not only of learning but should feature largely in shaping and forming our economy and in helping us out of the economic depression that we are in. So, if we do not invest in our universities, we will not be investing properly in our economy. That is the message that should go out from this debate.

To some extent, the argument about university fees is historic. I and my party are against university fees, but we have to accept the reality that they are there. Although the vast majority of people thole university fees, they certainly do not welcome them and would love to be rid of them. However, if we increase them to an unacceptably high level, which is what will happen if we do not plug the £40 million university funding gap, we will certainly discourage school pupils from applying to our universities. There is no doubt that there would be a fall-off in student numbers.

In other countries in the European Union, there are no fees for university students, or, if there are, they are kept to a basic minimum. For example, the Netherlands provides high quality science and technology-based courses through the medium of English that are largely free. Will

our students be going to Holland to study? We must encourage indigenous students to stay here to study. If we do not, we will be, in effect, damaging our economy.

In the South, although students pay a registration fee, they do not pay tuition fees. There are a lot of differences between North and South. In many respects, such as with air passenger duty and corporation tax, the competitive edge is in favour of the South. Are we now to create another inequality between North and South that will be to our disadvantage? We must address that issue. We must urge the Executive to find the money that is necessary to plug the university funding gap. If we do not, we will be damaging our economy. That is the message that must go out from here today, and I hope that everyone in the Chamber will endorse it.

5.45 pm

Mr McDevitt: I welcome the debate and the fact that the vast majority of parties in the Assembly sought a mandate that prevented them from placing a further burden on potential university students and their families. It basically said to the people of this region that we would not ask students to pay for the shortfall in the funding of universities and higher education. Today, however, two of the parties that made that commitment have voted through a Budget that continues to place uncertainty on whether students could end up having to pay for the shortfall in university funding. I do not understand how that is possible. I do not understand how you can make a commitment in your manifesto not to increase fees and then, within five weeks of the new Assembly taking power, vote through a Budget that continues to place a fundamental question over those fees.

The Minister, to his credit, has been slightly less than certain about university fees. He has been indifferent about whether university fees should remain at the current level. That may be a position that he feels able to justify politically; I am sure that he can. However, it is not the will of the people of this region. Nor, I suggest, is it the true will of those whom they sent to this House. In the coming weeks, it is essential that we find a way of plugging the shortfall in university funding without placing a further burden on working families and young adults whose only ambition is to try to further themselves in the world.

Universities do two things: they teach undergraduates and postgraduates and they research. For some bizarre reason, we see those as the same function. They are not. As Member after Member has highlighted, the teaching part of a university is quite distinct from the research function, which is a fundamental part of economic strategy. It adds value to our economy. An entirely different type of academic is attracted to it. The teaching function prepares the ground for the decades ahead. It provides those who seek to enhance their professional qualifications or knowledge with the ability to do so.

In the previous mandate, we received a very important piece of advice from a man who runs a university. We invited him to chair the independent review of economic policy. Professor Richard Barnett said that we need to stop seeing universities as something that you fund as a whole and get outputs from as if it were all the same. He said that we need to start seeing them as what they are: diverse and complex organisations that perform a multitude of functions on our behalf. Those functions are educational, social, historical and key, economic functions.

We made a manifesto commitment to create a Department for the economy. We said that it was time to stop thinking about whether DEL, as it is currently constituted, is able to meet the needs of our economy and students and start facing up to the reality that it probably is not. I will not ask the Minister to respond to that. He has to be the Minister for what he is; the Department for Employment and Learning. However, it is particularly important that we stop the dance of the seven veils only five days before students will be asked to fill out their application forms for university next year and start introducing some certainty into the argument.

I want to hear from the Minister a firm commitment that no increase in university fees means just that. I want to hear from the House a commitment that the shortfall will be found.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he recognise that we ask students to enter into a social contract to go to university, study and get a degree so that they can contribute to our economy, yet we have failed to provide them with jobs at the other end?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member will have an extra minute.

Mr McDevitt: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank Mrs Kelly for her contribution. The disconnection in our economic planning is nowhere more evident than in this debate. It lays bare for all to see how disconnected our economic planning is in this region. We can begin to address that by making the basic decisions that will allow us to plan the next five or 10 years. The first one that we have to make is the basic decision that there will be no increase in tuition fees; we will not close the door of access.

The second one is to say that, in not increasing, we are not saying that universities must get by on less. In fact, we need to say the opposite, which is that we will find the money to make sure that universities can be the economic generators that we need them to be and that innovation and research can continue to be not at the heart of the propagandising that we do when we leave these shores to try to get inward investment but at the heart of what we are and of the type of economy that we would like to be.

Mr Agnew: I declare an interest as a former student who has a debt in the region of £16,000. I do not want the next generation of students to look at my generation and say that those were the glory days. It would be a sad state of affairs if we were to see a figure of £16,000 as a manageable debt to start your adult life with.

Like many others, I am concerned by the attitude of parties that voted today for a Budget that leaves funding for higher education short. Indeed, the Minister and his party voted for a Budget that he accepts leaves his Department having to work on the assumption that fees will rise because there is no room in his budget to find funding elsewhere. In its manifesto, his party committed to no unfair rise in tuition fees. I suspect that, with that commitment, it learnt a little from its sister party, the Liberal Democrats, which unequivocally opposed a rise in tuition fees and then voted in Parliament for such a rise. I hope that the Minister will not try to use the word "unfair" as a back door out of the issue. He may deem it a fair rise to increase the fees to £4,500 or maybe more, but I do not, and I suspect that a lot of the people who voted for his party would not see that as a fair rise.

Equally, the DUP and Sinn Féin voted for the Budget today yet committed in their manifestoes not to increase fees. I suspect that they did

that, knowing, as they went into the election, that they would never take on the Department for Employment and Learning. They left the Alliance Party with the Ministry that was last pick. I hope that they will prove me wrong and show a genuine commitment to the issue. I hope that they will work together in the Executive and in the Budget review group to find the money that is needed to plug the gap in higher education funding and ensure that fees remain at their current level and that students do not have to bear an increase.

Mr Ross: I thank the Member for giving way. If the DUP's tactic was to say that we would not increase student fees and then not take the Ministry, it would have been a pretty stupid one, given that we were hopeful that we would still have the Finance Ministry. Will the Member agree that, if a collective Executive decision is taken not to increase student fees, it will be up to the Executive collectively to find that funding? I can assure him that our party will not shy away from that.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member will have an extra minute.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Member for his intervention, and I hope that, when the decision is taken and whatever it is, there will be collective responsibility. I will remember his remarks.

It has been stated time and again that the Executive are focused on growing the economy. I and my party believe that funding further and higher education should be a first step in that process, not merely an afterthought after rushing headlong into a cut in corporation tax. My views on corporation tax are well known. If we can find anywhere between £200 million and £400 million a year to make up the loss that would result from reducing corporation tax, we absolutely can and should find the £40 million needed to plug the gap in higher education funding.

I want to make one further point about our higher education system. In GB, the argument has become very narrow, focusing solely on the function of universities as an economic driver. Although there is no doubt that that is an important role of our universities, we would be a much poorer society, as Mr Nesbitt pointed out, if we lost our arts, humanities and social science departments. If we are to ensure a rounded society, our universities must be rounded. I was the beneficiary of a humanities degree, and I

hope that it has served me well. I will let other Members judge that for themselves.

I was the first member of my family to have the privilege of receiving a university education. That was due to a policy of widening access beyond the privileged classes. If we increase fees, I fear that we will put that policy at risk.

Mrs McKeivitt: As stated in our manifesto, the SDLP will continue to oppose any increase in university tuition fees. We will not allow others to attempt to take society back to a time when only the well-off could go to university. We will remain committed to ensuring that education is fairly based on the ability to learn, not the ability to pay. Everything else has been said.

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): I am almost tempted to be equally brief and leave everyone hanging. I am very grateful to Mr McCrea and the Committee for Employment and Learning for bringing the issue before the Assembly and for the opportunity to respond to the debate. I have no doubt that it is a debate in which there is much interest across Northern Ireland, not least from the universities and current or prospective students and their families. I would also like to express my gratitude to members of the Committee who met me this morning to discuss the issue in more detail and to express their views on some of the complex issues that we face. I am also grateful to Members for their comments during the debate.

While I am on the subject of gratitude, I want to make it clear that I am very pleased to be standing here as the Minister for Employment and Learning. There is a notion that, in some way, the Department for Employment and Learning was a poisoned chalice that was left to the very end of the d'Hondt process and that the poor old Alliance Party was left to pick it up. I want to be very clear: when my party qualified for a ministerial position under the d'Hondt formula, this was the Department that we wanted. It worked out extremely well that other parties did not choose it.

We wanted this Department because it lies at the heart of the engine room of Northern Ireland's economy. What happens through this Department will make a huge difference to the transformation of the economy over the next decade. It is all about skills across a very broad spectrum, from dealing with basic numeracy and literacy issues, through essential skills, to what

happens with our universities and producing high-quality graduates and postgraduates. What we have to do spans a very broad front, and there is a broad and exciting agenda in employment and learning. How we act on tuition fees is only one part of the landscape of issues that the Department faces, and there are huge opportunities in everything that we can do.

I return to today's debate, which is primarily about the funding of the higher education system in Northern Ireland. Perhaps inevitably, given the stage that we are at, a lot of comments have been made on the future of tuition fees. I will come to that shortly.

6.00 pm

First, however, it is important that I provide some contextual information on the budgetary situation that the Department for Employment and Learning faces. The Department needs to achieve savings of £150 million annually by 2014-15, some £68 million of which is to come from higher education. The universities will contribute £28 million in cash savings over the next two years, which will be met through a 12% reduction in teaching and research grants. In addition, the higher education sector is addressing internal pressures associated with, for example, pay and price inflation and VAT and is absorbing other reductions in income associated with cessation of or reduction to specific funding streams for innovation and research. That leaves a balance of £40 million annually by 2014 that has to be found from other measures. An increase in tuition fees to about £4,500 would be one way of addressing the shortfall but, clearly, would not be a popular approach. However, to be clear, as things stand, that is what the budget in my Department is premised on.

DEL is not immune to the cuts in the block grant. In these austere times, there is a role for government, taxpayers and individual service users that needs to be reflected in future policy and funding decisions. However, it is important that the Assembly recognise the economic importance of investing in higher education in general and, specifically, in supporting efforts to raise the skill levels of the population. It is recognised that Northern Ireland is at an economic crossroads. Continued access to education and training and efforts to raise the skill levels of the population are crucial to

ensuring that we take the path to economic recovery and economic growth.

I am acutely aware that the future of skills delivery centres around much more than the debate on student fees. Changing demographics and the lifelong learning agenda mean that the future of the education and skills landscape is likely to be significantly different from the one that we are familiar with. Nevertheless, the need to address a shortfall in the budget and to provide clarity to families, students and institutions necessitates a focusing of my efforts on the student fee issue.

Before that, however, I want to reflect on an aspect of today's motion that is a key issue for all of us: how do we maximise education opportunities for all? Widening participation in higher education to students from groups that are under-represented is one of my Department's key strategic goals. In particular, our focus is on students from low-income backgrounds and those with disabilities and learning difficulties. Our vision for widening participation is that any qualified individual in Northern Ireland should be able to gain access to a higher education that is right for them, irrespective of their personal or social background.

At just over 50%, we now have the highest participation rate of any area of the United Kingdom. In addition, we have the best record in the UK of attracting students from low-income backgrounds to higher education. Therefore, we have already been very successful. However, we recognise the need to do more. I am committed to developing a new approach to widening participation in Northern Ireland. It is based on a future vision of the sector in which the people who are most able but least likely to participate in higher education are given every encouragement and support to achieve the necessary qualifications to apply to and benefit from the higher education that is right for them. The implementation of the new widening participation strategy will be a key element in ensuring that university education will continue to be accessible and affordable to people from all economic backgrounds.

I will move on to tuition fees and funding. Members will be aware that my Department's consultation on tuition fees and student finance arrangements in general concluded recently. We must urgently determine and communicate fee levels and support arrangements for entry in

September 2012 to prospective students, their parents, the institutions and other key stakeholders. Therefore, the final decisions must be made by September 2011 to provide that clarity. Clarity will also provide me with a firm course of action for the wide range of other priorities that are supported by my Department. Although any change to fee levels will affect only those entering higher education in or after 2012, the legislative, operational and other requirements mean that agreed decisions need to be communicated to key stakeholders almost one year in advance of the academic year in which they are due to take effect to enable them to undertake the necessary preparations and other activity. Our universities and colleges need to be able to set and include fee levels in their prospectus documentation. The Student Loans Company and Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs need to devise the required IT and communication infrastructure for the new cohorts of students, and all the public bodies involved need to prepare tailored guidance booklets, application forms and online information for prospective students and their families.

The Universities and Colleges Admission Service will be open for applications from September. The deadline for courses such as medicine, dentistry and veterinary science, as well as for Cambridge and Oxford courses, is 15 October. The deadline for the majority of other courses is 15 January 2012. Financial considerations are an important part of the decision-making process for all applicants, and it is critical that we are in a position to tell our future students what fees will apply and what support will be available. For those reasons, the fee levels for 2012 and whether there is to be an inflationary or above-inflation uplift need to be reflected in the relevant subordinate legislation in September 2011.

The issue of fees is inextricably linked to my Department's budget, and I intend to table a paper to the Executive within the next few days that will, in part, reflect the outcome of the debate. That paper will set out the potential options for addressing the £40 million budget shortfall and the consequences of those options. It would not be appropriate of me to rehearse exactly what that paper to the Executive will say, but I want to give some sense of its likely content because it is relevant to today's debate.

As I said, one option for moving forward is for fees to be increased to £4,500. Indeed, the

current budget is premised on that. However, an above-inflation increase requires the Assembly to endorse such an approach by way of a vote on the relevant legislation. Arguments in favour of an increase in fees will be reflected in the paper to be presented. It is clear from the debate that there is limited or no support for an approach based on an increase in fees.

If fees are not increased, the Department will face a recurring funding shortfall of some £40 million a year by 2014-15. Therefore, other options must be considered, including passing the shortfall on to universities and asking the higher education sector to absorb it. An alternative option is to find the money by reducing investment and other services offered by my Department. Finally, additional resources could be sought from the Executive.

As I said to the House during recent Question Times, passing the £40 million funding gap on to universities would have a catastrophic consequence for them and would most likely result in a reduction in the number of students and the closure of university departments. It would mean reducing the institutions' annual block grant by 50% in real terms by 2014-15. Although there may be a block grant reduction of around 80% in England, it should be noted that that will be offset for English institutions by increased fees of up to £9,000.

Our local higher education institutions are already being asked to contribute a 12% reduction — some £28 million — in their funding and to bear the cost of inescapable pressures and the effects of inflation. Those additional pressures are estimated to cost in excess of £20 million a year. So, overall, we are talking about a real reduction in funding of £90 million to £100 million: the equivalent to the funding for one of our universities in its entirety. The viability of our universities and colleges would be threatened, and it would be difficult for us to sustain an argument that we have world-class facilities.

As well as a significant reduction in our local capacity, many more students would go to Great Britain for their education, the cost of which would still fall to the Northern Ireland block. In effect, we would be financing the brain drain, which is utterly self-defeating. All this comes at a time when we are trying to give out a message that Northern Ireland is open for business, that we can grow our own local companies and that

we can attract companies from overseas. Such companies will be looking for a guarantee that we have a highly skilled workforce. That includes highly skilled graduates of our local universities. The result would be a smaller and second-rate higher education system for Northern Ireland.

If my Department is asked to bear the cost, I would have to take £40 million from other programmes, which would have serious consequences for other aspects of our budget. The employment service is already overstretched. It is configured to deal with a jobseeker's allowance headcount of 35,000 per annum, but 60,000 people are on the books at present, with a further 20,000 to come across as a result of the migration from incapacity benefit under welfare reforms.

It is crucial for Members to reflect on the fact that DEL is not solely the Department for higher education. My Department supports and funds a range of areas, such as further education, apprenticeships, essential skills training and employer skills engagement, all of which address the twin goals of economic growth and social mobility and some of which have a particular impact on addressing social disadvantage. The prioritisation of academic education over vocational education or of higher education over initiatives to address social disadvantage would be counterproductive to the wider priorities of the Assembly.

A further option is for the Executive to provide additional recurrent resources to my Department's baseline to address the shortfall. That would avoid an increase in fees and the damaging cuts to universities or the other DEL programmes that I mentioned. I am aware that my Executive colleagues and their Departments also face significant financial challenges. However, the development of the economy is an overarching and key strategic priority for the Executive. I cannot emphasise enough the importance of higher education to our economy and our future.

Members will be aware that our universities are the major suppliers of research in Northern Ireland. They play a vital role in supporting the economy through the production of high-quality research and translating that research into markets through knowledge transfer. That has been recognised through the work of MATRIX, the Northern Ireland science industry panel. Our universities are recognised nationally and internationally for world-class research and development. They performed extremely well in the most recent research assessment exercise

in 2008, which showed that half the assessed research in Northern Ireland is rated as internationally excellent or world-leading and that more than 98% of Northern Ireland's researchers work in disciplines in which world-leading research is taking place. As we approach the next assessment, in 2014, I want to ensure that that research quality is maintained.

In the coming academic year, recurrent research funding in the two universities will reduce by 6% compared with the 2010-11 academic year, and a similar reduction will have to be delivered next year. That is in stark contrast to the rest of the United Kingdom, where recurrent research funding has largely been protected and ring-fenced. It is critical that I am able to maintain the funding of research at an appropriate level to enable our universities to fulfil their central role of developing and sustaining a world-class research base in Northern Ireland. The core funding provided by my Department drives research excellence and enables the universities to bid for grants for specific projects from the UK research councils, the European Union, charities, other Departments and industry. Therefore, the public funding that we provide to universities is critical in leveraging those additional resources. In the absence of that public support, there is no prospect of those other forms of finance picking up any shortfall.

In conclusion, I will respond to the comments made by Members during the debate. There was some talk about the impact on student flows and the MaSN cap in Northern Ireland. It is worth recognising that the whole range of political parties and the University of Ulster in particular have a strong interest in an increased MaSN. A host of unintended consequences, some welcome and others not so welcome, may arise from our decision on student fees. There will be a desire and a pressure for more Northern Ireland students to study locally, when they look at the fees regime elsewhere in the UK. It is important that we are able to respond to that demand. It is critical that my Department looks at the issue of MaSN.

6.15 pm

Mr Byrne: Does the Minister accept that many students want to study locally for the first two years of a degree and it is, therefore, important that consideration is given to increasing the MaSN and caps in the FE colleges that provide higher education?

Dr Farry: We are very mindful of the desire for people to study locally. We are also particularly aware that this is an issue not only for higher

education institutions but for further education. Higher education through further education is an important theme that we will be developing through the forthcoming higher education strategy.

Reference has also been made to the expansion of Magee. That is an issue for the University of Ulster to take forward as an independent body. However, if we are in a position to look at MaSNs, that may well be something that can happen on the back of that.

I also want to stress that whatever we do about fees will carry policy risks. We can sit here and take decisions, but students will vote with their feet, and they may move in unanticipated ways. We will have to be mindful and monitor what happens with regard to those flows and take action. No doubt, the paper that I will present to the Executive will set out what can be anticipated in those areas and some of the measures that will have to be taken to mitigate some of those responses.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Minister assure the House that he will impress on his Executive colleagues how important it is that the standard of lecturing, teaching and research in our universities is maintained to the highest possible level?

Dr Farry: I fully concur with the remarks from the Chairman of the Committee; that is a critical issue. It is something that both universities are very alert to.

In conclusion, I thank Mr McCrea and the Committee for bringing the issue to the House. I am bringing a paper to the Executive forthwith, with a view to addressing the issue and giving clarity to all the stakeholders.

Mr Buchanan (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning): I welcome the debate that has taken place in the House this evening and the many contributions to it. It is clear from the debate that Members have reflected the passionate concerns of all the stakeholders involved. The stakeholders include not only corporate entities, such as the universities and Departments, but the young people who are reaching the brink of adulthood and are seeking to find a career path and the educational experience that they require to equip them for the future. Also among the stakeholders are the parents who are concerned about their future financial ability to have their children educated, if there is to be that financial burden on them.

It is a role of the Committee for Employment and Learning to ensure that all avenues have been explored, so that those young people are able to progress into higher education on the basis of their academic ability and regardless of their parents' income or background. Equally, the Committee is mindful of the benefits enjoyed by graduates, who have had an opportunity to access a higher level of education, and the fact that young people who have taken a different career path may well be contributing, through their taxes, to the support of students in higher and further education.

All Members are mindful of the £40 million deficit. The collective view that has emerged from around the House is that we cannot fail our students in this matter; we must find a way around this difficulty. I believe that that can be done collectively in the Executive. That is why most of the Members who spoke today urged the Minister to make sure that he takes this matter to the Executive table and remains at the Executive table until such times as a resolution is found. Again, that is a challenge for the Minister.

We can look at this negatively, but we can also look at it in perhaps a more positive light. There are ways in which the money can be found. Some of those ways were spelled out today. Look at the beneficiaries: there are creative ways in which those who benefit from the students coming out of universities could make some financial contribution towards the £40 million deficit. We can also look at other things. It is not always suitable and it is not sustainable that, every time there is a funding crisis, the burden is placed on the students. That is totally unacceptable. It is not sustainable, and it is not the way forward. If the Minister brings the matter to the Executive and puts his case for the funding, I believe that some way around it can be found. It always is. The old saying is that where there's a will, there's a way. There is no doubt that, around the House this evening, there is a will for that £40 million funding gap to be plugged. When we have that collective will in the House, there is a way forward.

Of course, the whingers were in the Chamber again today, complaining about the DUP and Sinn Féin going through the Lobbies in support of the Budget. It appears that we have people in the Chamber who do not want a Budget and do not want the Assembly to move forward. I hear the SDLP Members, especially, talking about student fees and how they are so much against them. Yet they have such a short memory:

was it not the SDLP that introduced student fees on day one? I know that we have had this debate in the Chamber before, but it was rather hypocritical of SDLP Members to say what they did, given that the SDLP introduced student fees at the start. Nevertheless, that is what we have to deal with when we are dealing with issues such as this.

I like people who are prepared to stand up and make the hard decisions, and there are hard decisions to be made. When it comes to making those decisions, my party will not shy away from them. We will make them. I trust that all the other Ministers will do exactly the same thing and will not run away from the Executive but be there to make the hard decisions when the time comes.

I will deal with some of the issues that Members raised, because I know that time is moving fairly quickly. The Chairman mentioned the budget. He spelled out the £28 million in efficiencies that are required of the universities and the £40 million shortfall. He spoke of the ramifications for students and businesses if that gap is not plugged. We can all agree with that. He also said that the higher education sector is not an ivory tower but an economic force in Northern Ireland. There is no getting away from that. Our higher education sector is an economic force and, as has been mentioned by a number of Members, an economic driver in Northern Ireland.

Alastair Ross spoke of foreign inward investment and how those businesses will consider the quality of our graduates and the level of our skills. He talked of the importance of maintaining the reputation of our universities and attracting overseas students and the income that that brings in. He said that we do not need to raise the cap on student fees but that the Executive have a collective duty and responsibility to look at the funding gap and see whether there is some way around it.

Barry McElduff highlighted Sinn Féin's position on fees, saying that education should relate to ability to learn rather than ability to pay. He talked about the psychological deterrent experienced by students from low-income backgrounds when a fee is placed on them going to university.

I am going through the contributions quickly. Pat Ramsey said that the work carried out to widen access will be lost without adequate funding.

He is concerned about that and about the increased demand from young people to get into local universities because of the higher fees in England. How can we meet that need? Pat Ramsey went on to say that there is no appetite for the increase in tuition fees. That has been well enough highlighted around the Chamber this evening.

Chris Lyttle spoke of the need to promote a highly skilled workforce that will act as a catalyst for the education system, to have increased co-operation and to work with further education colleges to see what efficiency savings can be made. That needs to be looked at.

David McIlveen spelt out the party's position. He said that there would be no increase in fees outside inflation and that raising tuition fees would not be a constructive way forward. He also highlighted different areas where we can look at matters and get other funding streams brought in to help to plug the gap. He highlighted the fact that many Northern Ireland students have left Northern Ireland not to return. We must do something to stop the brain drain and keep our students in Northern Ireland.

Many other issues were raised that we do not have time to go into this evening as the debate draws to a close. However, the Committee calls on the Minister to take account of the concerns raised by Members today and to reflect those concerns in the final drafting of the policy for higher education tuition fees and student finance arrangements in Northern Ireland. That is a challenge to you, Minister, as you go to the Executive and place your case before them. Do not leave the Executive until you get an answer on the way to plug this gap.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning to ensure that funding is available to maintain the excellence of Northern Ireland's higher education system and is consistent with our aim of maximising educational opportunities for all.

Adjourned at 6.28 pm.