

# Official Report (Hansard)

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They should be sent to:

The Editor of Debates, Room 248, Parliament Buildings, Belfast BT4 3XX.

Tel: 028 9052 1135 · e-mail: [simon.burrowes@niassembly.gov.uk](mailto:simon.burrowes@niassembly.gov.uk)

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# Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 12 September 2011

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## Assembly Business

**Mr Allister:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I ask for your guidance and information on some matters relating to the business of the House. It is more than four months since the Executive came to office, yet no indication has been made to me, as a Member, of any prospect of any plan for how they propose to govern through a published Programme for Government. I ask that you, as Speaker of the House —

**Mr Speaker:** Before you say any more, I must tell you that that is not a point of order. That is clearly a matter for the Executive, not for the Assembly. The Member may disagree with me on that, but in this House, at this minute, that is not a point of order. I ask the Member not to proceed down that road and to consider where he may end up.

**Mr Allister:** You did not hear my question. It was whether you, as Speaker, have any information as to when we might expect a Programme for Government.

**Mr Speaker:** Let me impress upon the Member as clearly as I can that that is not a point of order. It is not an appropriate point of order for the House. I will now move on.

**Mr Allister:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. It is on a different matter: the business of the House and the level of deference shown to the House. Yet again, a matter that should have been announced to the House, namely the important statement on tuition fees, was directed publicly to the media several days before any statement to the House. Have you, as Speaker, any view about what that does to the standing of the House?

The third matter that I want to raise is whether you have any information as to when, if at all, the House will receive a statement from the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP)

about the review that was supposedly carried out on special advisers?

**Mr Speaker:** I will take your first point of order first. I always encourage Ministers to come to the House before they go to the press. However, on that particular issue, the Executive took their decision and the Minister made a very brief statement to the press.

I received a letter on Thursday at 5.00 pm, which noted the Minister's clear indication to come to the House with a further statement. Therefore, on this occasion, I believe that the Minister acted appropriately. I agree with the Member that there have been occasions on which Ministers have been inclined to go to the press before coming to the House. However, on this occasion, the Minister acted appropriately in going to the press with a brief statement and then coming to the House with a further and wider statement. I believe that the Minister in question, Dr Farry, acted in an appropriate manner.

Sorry, what was your second point of order Mr Allister?

**Mr Allister:** It was whether there was any indication of a statement from DFP on the supposed review carried out on special advisers.

**Mr Speaker:** It is a matter for the Executive and for individual Ministers as to when they come to the House with statements. The Member will know that all I can do is to encourage Ministers to come to the House with statements as frequently as possible. However, on all occasions, it is up to Ministers, and the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, to determine when to come to the House with any statement on any matter. That is not really the job of the Speaker. All I can do is to encourage Ministers to come to the House with statements at appropriate times.

## Executive Committee Business

### **Budget (No. 2) Bill: Royal Assent**

### **Damages (Asbestos-related Conditions) Bill: Royal Assent**

**Mr Speaker:** We will now move on to the next item of business, and I welcome all Members back after the summer break. I wish to inform Members that two Bills have received Royal Assent. The Budget (No. 2) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 and the Damages (Asbestos-related Conditions) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011. Both became law on 25 July 2011.

## Ministerial Statements

### **North/South Ministerial Council: Trade and Business Development**

**Mr Speaker:** The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment wishes to make a statement to the House.

**Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment):** With your permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement in compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, regarding the meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in trade and business development sectoral format. The meeting was held in the offices of the North/South Ministerial Council in Armagh on Monday 25 July 2011. The Executive were represented by me in my capacity as the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and by John O'Dowd MLA, the Minister of Education. The Irish Government were represented by Richard Bruton TD, Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation. This statement has been agreed with the Minister of Education, and I make it on behalf of us both.

The Council received a presentation from the chairperson of InterTradelreland, David Dobbin, and its CEO, Liam Nellis, about its performance and business activities. Ministers discussed progress on the development of InterTradelreland's corporate plan 2011-13 and its business plan 2011.

The main focus of the meeting was a discussion on co-operation on innovation. InterTradelreland has specifically dedicated resources to increase collaborative participation on the EU research, technological development and innovation framework programme, and it has established a steering group to increase such collaboration. The Council noted the success of the Collaborate to Innovate conference, which was held in Belfast on 30 June and which aimed to increase co-operative participation in current and forthcoming EU framework programmes. Ministers also welcomed the continuing success and development of the US-Ireland research and development partnership, and the initiation of a study to determine the characteristics of an innovation ecosystem across Northern Ireland and Ireland. InterTradelreland's draft annual report and accounts for 2010 were also noted.

The Council noted a number of additional matters, including Tourism Ireland's annual report and

accounts 2010 and a determination that was made by the board of Tourism Ireland on the remuneration on its chief executive. The resignation of Mr Hugh Friel from the board of Tourism Ireland Limited was noted, and Ministers thanked him for his contribution as chairperson. They also approved the appointments of Mrs Ann Riordan as chairperson of Tourism Ireland Limited and Mr Jim Flannery as its director.

The Council agreed to meet again in trade and business development sectoral format on a date to be confirmed. I commend the statement to the Assembly.

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

I thank the Minister for her report. I note, in particular, that InterTradeIreland has specifically dedicated resources to increase collaborative participation on the EU research, technological development and innovation framework programme, and that a steering group has been set up. That is a very important development. When does the Minister see the steering group getting down to work and bearing fruit by increasing collaboration, which is essential to accessing EU funding in this area?

**Mrs Foster:** I thank the Chairperson for his question. I very much hope that the steering group is already down to work. The conference that was held in Belfast in June was really a signpost to action. As you know, we have been working hard on framework programme (FP) 7 to try to get as many small companies, in particular, to work together along with universities to try to access the huge amount of funding that is available to us from Europe. As a result of the conference, we felt that it was necessary to set up the steering group to get more and more out of Europe.

As the Member knows, we have moved on to look at the next framework. If I am correct, it is not being called FP8 but Vision 2020. I was quite comfortable with it being called FP8, because I could remember that. It is vital that we continue not only to draw down money but to obtain more money. Indeed, the economic strategy for Northern Ireland that is being developed very much puts an onus on research and development and innovation, and the commercialisation of that research and development and innovation. At the next sectoral meeting, we will have a report on how the steering group is taking those matters forward.

**Mr Newton:** I thank the Minister for her statement. I agree with the Chair of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment that the formation of the research and technological development innovation framework programme is very important. Does the Minister agree that it is vital that we involve small and medium-sized enterprises in the work that will be done under that programme to increase collaboration and that we ensure that those organisations have much the same opportunities to engage in research and development as larger organisations?

**Mrs Foster:** Yes. I thank the Member for his question. Part of the difficulty in the past has been the question of scale and the bureaucracy and amount of form filling that has been done before money is able to be drawn down from Europe. Indeed, when Máire Geoghegan-Quinn visited earlier this year, she heard that point time and time again from me and, indeed, from many business leaders from across Northern Ireland. It is vital that InterTradeIreland continues its work with small businesses. InterTradeIreland is already working very closely with small businesses across Northern Ireland through its Acumen, Innova and Fusion programmes. All those programmes are designed to work with small and medium-sized businesses. It is important for me as Minister that small businesses begin to move on to the next stage of drawing down those European funds.

**Mr Flanagan:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas. I thank the Minister for her statement. I welcome the increased progress on collaboration and co-operation on an all-Ireland basis, particularly with regard to tourism. Following the appointment of the new chairperson and director of Tourism Ireland, what are that new management structure's main priorities, apart from the drive to increase golf tourism in Ireland over the next year?

**Mrs Foster:** During the meeting, there was only a very brief mention of Tourism Ireland because it was, of course, a trade and sectoral business meeting. However, I am happy to answer the question. The chairperson who has been put in is just an interim chairperson until the new chairperson can be appointed. The new director is also in place. Just last week, I announced a £12 million advertising campaign to draw more people into Northern Ireland. As the Member will know, next year is a huge year for tourism in

Northern Ireland. The year 2012 is a signature year across Northern Ireland. Therefore, I am challenging all the tourism industries, whether the Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board or Tourism Ireland, on how we can give stand out to Northern Ireland across the world and take advantage of 2012.

### 12.15 pm

**Mr Nesbitt:** I thank the Minister for bringing the joint statement to the House. Did the presentation by InterTradelreland include an assessment of whether Her Majesty's Treasury's contribution of £7 billion to the bailout of the Irish economy brought any benefit to Northern Ireland's exporters, or are we suffering as much as everyone else?

**Mrs Foster:** The Member mentioned two different areas, and he may want to direct that question to the Minister of Finance and Personnel when he makes his statement. The Member is aware of our position on exports, and that it will be a major driver for us over the coming years. In the past, many small companies used the Republic of Ireland as a test bed for exporting products before they went into the wider world. There have been problems there, including difficulties arising from the Republic of Ireland's sovereign debt crisis and the reduction of available money across Northern Ireland and the Republic. Some of our firms have had difficulties in gaining money from some companies in Southern Ireland but we are working very hard at ways to innovate to get exports to the Republic of Ireland.

An example of that can be seen in the way that the Superquinn issue was dealt with. I intervened directly when the Musgrave Group took over Superquinn to ensure that small businesses in Northern Ireland were not disadvantaged by the takeover. That has turned into a good-news story, because the Musgrave Group has said that it will guarantee that suppliers in Northern Ireland that worked with Superquinn will continue to do so. I see this as an opportunity to increase the market share for Northern Irish companies in the Republic of Ireland, and I will support them in that.

**Mr Lunn:** I thank the Minister for her statement. Have discussions taken place about how we can learn from the experience of the Republic in how to orientate our research and development offering, particularly in view of the anticipated

reduction in corporation tax, which may well stimulate activity in that area?

**Mrs Foster:** If the reduction in corporation tax comes about, there will be more focus on Northern Ireland as a place to do research and development. However, even now, a lot of companies from across the world come initially to do research and development in Northern Ireland and proceed with the commercialisation of what they are able to discover. That is used to bring more investment into Northern Ireland. We have seen that happen with American companies, which first bring about five or 10 people to Northern Ireland and then come up with a 50- or 60-person proposition.

The Member said that we could learn from the Republic of Ireland about research and development. However, there are other countries across Europe that we could also learn from, particularly some of the smaller Eastern European countries, which seem to be able to do this very well. Although we will look at all that happens, we certainly will not just look to the Republic of Ireland for learning on research and development.

**Mr Dunne:** I thank the Minister for her statement. What measures have been put in place to stop the duplication of work between InterTradelreland and Invest Northern Ireland?

**Mrs Foster:** That is the first issue that I took up with the board of InterTradelreland when I had my first meeting with its board. There is absolutely no point in InterTradelreland doing the same job for Northern Ireland companies as Invest Northern Ireland. I am glad to say that there has been progress because a lot of the programmes that have been developed by InterTradelreland are specifically engineered to deal with companies with 10 staff or fewer, so it is adding value to the work that Invest Northern Ireland does here, and that is continuing. Meetings take place between the chief executives of Invest Northern Ireland and InterTradelreland to ensure that duplication does not happen. We are dealing with public funds, and therefore we need to proceed in the most appropriate way.

**Mr Cree:** I also thank the Minister for her statement. She mentioned the Collaborate to Innovate conference that was held at the end of June, and said that it was very successful. Will she explain how that success is measured and quantified?



**Mrs Foster:** On the day of the conference, there was the fact that there were so many academic institutions from across Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and businesses of all sizes there and that they were able to network. I am happy to share with the Member the list of people who attended the conference.

Obviously, we will know about the output of the conference at a later stage, because it takes a while for networks to develop into propositions and propositions to move into applications to FP7. However, I am satisfied that the conference was successful and that we shall see its outworkings in the future.

**Dr McDonnell:** I welcome the statement, Minister, and thank you for all of your efforts on the economic front. However, when I talk to some business interests, they tell me that we could do more, and perhaps your reference to Superquinn and Musgrave shows that there are opportunities to do more. Are we pushing InterTradelreland as much as we can, or are we just in a low gear? What can we do to push forward with North/South developments in trade, business and, basically, in growing jobs here?

**Mrs Foster:** I thank the Member for his question. I think if he was to speak to some of the executives in InterTradelreland they would think that they were getting pushed enough. However, I will continue to push at them, because I think that there are some developments that are coming across to me at present about a level of protectionism that is growing up in the Republic of Ireland. That is something that we need to challenge at all times. In a free market, we need to be able to allow our companies to export into the Republic of Ireland, and it is therefore something on which I will keep a close eye, and I will challenge InterTradelreland to make sure that it does not happen.

**Mr Allister:** Minister, there have been many of those structured cross-border meetings with the Republic about trade, investment and all things economic. In contrast, can you tell us how many times since coming to office that you have met with UK trade Ministers to help enhance the indigenous, internal trade of the United Kingdom? Would the perceived imbalance not be one of those things that encourages the sort of nonsense that we had to listen to from your colleagues in the Waterfront Hall this weekend about the supposed economic advantages of Irish unity?

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I continually say to the whole House that questions need to be on the particular statement, not on a wide issue or other issues that are outside the statement. I want to remind the whole House.

**Mr Allister:** With respect, Mr Speaker, I said, in light of the imbalance, what impact does it have? On a more specific matter, the Minister approved or noted the salary now paid to the —

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I really must insist that the Member should come to his question. We should not have long statements around a question, and I insist that the Member comes to his question.

**Mr Allister:** I would if I could.

**Mr Speaker:** Order. The Member has already asked a question, and I am going to ask the Member to stay in his seat until the Minister answers the question.

**Mrs Foster:** I do not know if the Member was watching RTÉ all weekend — I certainly was not — but I do not think he would have seen any of my party colleagues in the Waterfront Hall. First of all he asks me a question, and then he says, “In light of the imbalance”, so he is actually trying to answer the question before I have answered it. The reality is that the Republic of Ireland is an export market for Northern Ireland, and the rest of the UK is not an export market for Northern Ireland, because it is the same market. He needs to understand that. Of course, I talk to my colleagues in Westminster in relation to the matter, and I am quite happy to give the Member any of the details that he requires, because I am sure he is very well aware that questions can be put to the Minister in writing.

## **North/South Ministerial Council: Special EU Programmes**

**Mr Speaker:** I have been informed by the Minister of Finance and Personnel that he wishes to make a statement to the House.

**Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel):** The North/South Ministerial Council met in special EU programmes sectoral format in Armagh on 18 July 2011.

The Council last met in that format in January 2011. Michael Noonan TD, the Republic of Ireland's Minister for Finance, chaired the 18 July meeting, accompanied by Brendan Howlin TD, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform. I represented Northern Ireland, accompanied by junior Minister Martina Anderson.

The Council noted that the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) will continue with its current complement of 65 staff in 2011 and 2012, falling to a number in the fifties in 2013 and a number in the forties the following year. The Council agreed that a further staffing review would be completed at the end of 2012 to confirm the precise numbers. It also discussed the Special EU Programmes Body's work in progress to develop its corporate plan for 2011-13 and its business plan and budget for 2011. Those are likely to be presented for Council approval in September 2011. Mr Pat Colgan, the chief executive of SEUPB, updated the Council on how SEUPB's work had progressed since January 2011.

The Council also noted that the closure of the 2000-06 Peace II and INTERREG IIIa programmes is nearing completion. The Peace II programme was fully committed, with a total expenditure of around £820 million. The total expenditure on INTERREG IIIa was around £162 million. The Council noted progress on implementing the current Peace III and INTERREG IVa programmes. As of 30 April 2011, Peace III had approved 144 projects, worth some £225 million. At the end of May 2011, INTERREG IVa had approved 56 projects, worth approximately £147 million.

The Council noted that Peace III had spent £70 million in total and was therefore close to achieving its 2011 spending target of £74 million. In contrast, INTERREG IVa had spent £43 million, compared with a target of £55 million. INTERREG's spending performance reflects, in part, somewhat slower progress

in committing the programme's funds. SEUPB assured the Council that there was no risk to achieving this year's INTERREG spending target of £55 million and that the 2012 target was also likely to be achieved. However, the body reported a significant risk to achieving targets in 2013 and 2014. SEUPB advised that it is managing that risk and that it will work closely with officials from the relevant Departments to ensure that all future targets are achieved. The Council noted that local authority-based groups have had 19 projects approved, worth some £22 million under INTERREG IVa. A further batch of local applications in the policy areas of enterprise and tourism are under assessment, with the first approvals likely in the autumn.

SEUPB informed the Council that the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) had recently completed its first estimate of community uptake under the Peace III programme. Based on the funding allocated to date — approximately half of the Peace III budget — NISRA estimated the Protestant community uptake at 46% and the Catholic community uptake at 54%. SEUPB noted that that was an interim analysis and that a further estimate would be commissioned later in the life of the programme, when more funding had been allocated.

The Council noted that SEUPB continues to facilitate North/South participation in the INTERREG IV transnational and inter-regional programmes. To date, 51 projects with Northern Ireland partners have successfully applied for funding across the four programmes for which Northern Ireland is eligible. The Council noted that SEUPB continues to communicate the positive impacts of the EU programmes through high-profile publicity events, many with ministerial involvement. Recent events have included the launch of the Ilex peace bridge in Londonderry on 25 June 2011. A major seminar on the INTERREG IVa programme is planned for later this year.

### **12.30 pm**

The Council noted that, in keeping with its statutory remit, SEUPB will offer advice to assist in the preparation of programmes for the new EU programme period 2014-2020. It was agreed that the Council would meet again in Special EU Programmes sectoral format in October or November this year.

**Mr Murphy (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel):** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement and for the opportunity to discuss it with him earlier.

I am sure that the Minister will share my concern, which is in the report, about the risks to achieving the spending targets in 2013 and 2014. Can he reassure us that everything possible is being done to work with SEUPB and all other partners to ensure that that risk is reduced as far as possible? That leads to a discussion about future Peace and INTERREG funding in the 2014-2020 period, given that that underspend will have a negative influence on securing additional funding. What is his Department doing to promote the cause for additional Peace funding and enhanced INTERREG funding from 2014 to 2020?

**Mr Wilson:** The Chairperson rightly identified that any underspend would weaken the case for applying for funds for the 2014-2020 period, and, given the profile of present INTERREG IVa spending, it is estimated that there could be a substantial underspend. Of course, much of that spending is on construction projects, so, given that we are trying to eke out as much capital spending as we can, it is essential to our economy. So, it is important. We have been through the issues as to why there have been delays. In some cases, it was because projects did not come forward quickly enough. Sometimes, even when money has been allocated, there has been slowness in getting it spent, and, sometimes, there have been delays in getting programmes approved when there has been input from Departments on, for example, business cases. That multiplicity of reasons has to be addressed. SEUPB has assured us that it will address them, and my officials will push it on that.

The future programme, of course, will be taken forward by the UK Government, and we have already had discussions with officials. Indeed, my officials are in regular contact with London officials — almost on a weekly basis. We would like a commitment from the UK Government in the autumn on pushing for spending beyond 2014. The Irish Government have indicated that they are supportive. The Westminster Government have indicated support for this, but I suppose that it is a case of timing as to when they make it known to Europe that they intend to push for further spending after 2014.

**Mr Speaker:** I remind the House that, apart from the Chairperson of the Committee, Members should ask one question to the Minister on the statement; they should certainly not make further statements. In addition, the question must relate to the statement. If Members go outside the statement, they will be asked to take their seat, and I will move on to the next Member.

**Mr Girvan:** I thank the Minister for his statement to the House. I appreciate that he gave figures showing 54% funding to the Roman Catholic community and 46% to the Protestant community. What mechanism is SEUPB putting in place to address the imbalance in funding? I appreciate that money is getting to the ground, but I would like to ensure that a fair process is in place so that the Protestant community capitalises on money coming from Europe.

**Mr Wilson:** In previous statements to the House, I have made it clear that that issue has been raised at all the sectoral meetings. I will give a word of caution about the figures that we presented today. We are about halfway through the programme, and approximately half the money has been allocated. Of the half that is yet to be allocated, about 60% of applications are from what would be called the Protestant community. Therefore, on the basis of the imbalance in the applications still to be dealt with, I expect the percentage to go up.

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

The figures of 46% and 54% are distorted a little by the fact that one of the big projects on which £8 million was spent, the Ilex bridge in Londonderry, would have been attributed mostly to the Catholic community. Had that been taken out, it would have been about 50:50. Nevertheless, there always was an imbalance in Peace I and Peace II. So far, the situation has improved with Peace III. A lot of outreach work has been done. In my constituency, many organisations such as community groups, the Orange Order etc have acknowledged that the SEUPB is talking to them to try to encourage them to put forward programmes and projects. Hopefully, that will help to remove the past imbalance.

**Mr Cree:** I also thank the Minister. I trust that he is keeping the pressure on Mr Colgan. I am concerned about the end of the current period: we must spend the money, otherwise we will be in a very weak position to negotiate an extension.

Will he update us on the Maze project and the £20 million that has been earmarked for that? Is that in the current lot of projects?

**Mr Wilson:** I do not have the details of all of the projects that are still to be evaluated. I cannot remember, but I think that about 61 projects are to be evaluated and are being looked at. I do not have the details of all those projects, but I will write to the Member about the one that he mentioned.

**Mr D Bradley:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. Was there any discussion at the meeting of the use of SEUPB funding by certain victims' groups? Will the Minister update the House on that issue?

**Mr Wilson:** Since the groups to which, I presume, the Member is referring are still under investigation, he knows that it would be totally inappropriate for me to make any comment on that.

**Mrs Cochrane:** I thank the Minister for the statement and the update. My question follows on from what was said on the other side of the House. Given that Peace III funding is premised on shared future objectives, does the Minister agree that statistics that focus solely on uptake in a shared-out manner, i.e. Protestant versus Catholic, is unhelpful and that it would be better to assess Peace III on the basis of outcomes that are focused on integration?

**Mr Wilson:** There are not pockets of money in Peace III for one community or the other. Projects are assessed on the basis of their attractiveness, what is being presented and the case that is made for them. However, one has to recognise that, in a society as divided as ours, there always will be some focus on the way in which the funds have been allocated. If there are communities that should benefit from Peace money but do not, we should look at the size of the problem and at what can be done to deal with it.

It is very odd to hear this from the Alliance Party. I have said time and again that I want to see us move away from the focus on how many Catholics are employed and how many Protestants are employed. The party from which the lady comes was the very one that promoted the Fair Employment Commission, the Equality Commission and all the quangos that delve into that all the time. It has permeated our whole

society. I find the question a wee bit odd from her, especially since her party seems to be the one that most wants to promote the bodies that delve into that and dabble their fingers in it regularly.

**Mr McQuillan:** I thank the Minister for his statement. How will the SEUPB ensure that all future targets are met in 2013 and 2014?

**Mr Wilson:** This afternoon, I have been open with the Assembly that there are difficulties, especially with the INTERREG IVa money. First, SEUPB is well enough resourced to deal with that. Secondly, it is aware that there is a problem, and, thirdly, it is aware of the issues that may have caused that problem. My officials will work with SEUPB, Departments and the bodies that are funded to ensure that we do not have that shortfall. It may well be that we have to look at some mechanisms for dealing with that, perhaps introducing some bigger projects, which will ensure that the funds are soaked up. The important point is that those projects have to stack up. We will not spend money for the sake of spending it. They will have to be projects that meet the criteria that are laid down and make some contribution.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I call Mr Basil McCrea.

**Mr B McCrea:** On this occasion, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will pass.

**Mr Humphrey:** I thank the Minister for his statement. I welcome the figures that the Minister has announced today on the improvement in distribution inequity, although he did give a health warning on that. The Minister will be aware that, in the Protestant, unionist and loyalist community, weak applications have come in because of a lack of competence, confidence and capacity. As we, hopefully, move forward to Peace IV, what will the Minister ensure will happen to ensure that that capacity is improved?

**Mr Wilson:** I am really glad that I have left the Member for Lagan Valley without a word to say. That is an unusual situation for him, but it is good to see that he is in that position. Hopefully, that will happen more frequently during this session of the Assembly.

The Member for North Belfast asked what can be done to help groups. If we say that we have to build capacity to allow people to make more robust and competent applications, we

are probably approaching the issue from the wrong direction. On some occasions, we should ask SEUPB, “What can you do with the system so that people do not have to have all that expertise to make applications? Why do the applications have to be so convoluted? Why does the information have to be addressed in a certain way, and why do you need almost a new language to make some of the applications?”. The Member is quite right: that gives an unfair advantage to people who have become application junkies and who know how to do the job and have done so many times before.

The first thing that I would say to SEUPB is, “Can you make the process a bit easier for people so that they do not require a huge degree of expertise?” It should really be doing that at this stage. Of course, there are ways in which some help can be given, and perhaps some of the organisations themselves should look at that. Last week, I spoke to a group, and it seems that, although there are lots of groups associated with it, they never shared any information on what was done to make a successful application. That expertise remained with the group that had made a successful application rather than being spread around the associated groups.

**Ms Ritchie:** I thank the Minister for his statement. He said that the body reported a significant risk to the achievement of targets in 2013 and 2014. Is the Minister aware that it has taken considerable time to process applications to decision stage? I have written to him about that. It is having a detrimental impact on the outcome of potential projects that could bring about economic regeneration at a time of economic downturn and when challenges are being faced by local communities.

**Mr Wilson:** I am aware of that, and I think that I made that clear in answers to previous questions. Some of that may be due to the complicated procedure in making the applications and the information that groups are required to get. They have to get consultants to do work for them, and there is slowness in SEUPB. Of course, they sometimes argue that, when business cases go to Departments, they can be slowed down there as well. There is a host of reasons for it, and my officials are working with SEUPB to ensure that we do not have the kind of shortfall that I have highlighted to the Assembly this morning.

## 12.45 pm

**Mr Hilditch:** I thank the Minister for his statement. Given the community imbalance, does he anticipate a further programme and, perhaps, a potential change of direction for Peace funding?

**Mr Wilson:** I have given information to the Assembly this morning that there was some distortion because of the £8 million for the Ilex bridge. About half of the programme funding is still to be allocated, and about 60% of the applications will come from what is broadly described as the Protestant community. I hope that the final figure will be much more balanced than the figure that I gave this morning.

I have found no resistance — in fact, I have found great support — from Ministers in the Irish Republic, who have also made it clear at the sectoral meetings that they expect SEUPB to ensure that funding is allocated on a basis that is seen to cover all the community. I want to make this point: I do not wish to see quotas for the money. I have resisted that time and again, and I hate the whole equality industry that has grown up in Northern Ireland. However, in unionist areas, such as the one that I represent, there are groups that could benefit from Peace money and could do a good job with it and make a difference in their area, but they are perhaps not getting it at present. I want to remove the barriers — whether those groups believe that they will not get it so do not bother applying, or whether it is a matter of the difficulties that were referred to by the Member for North Belfast — so that the funding can go to the communities that deserve it and to the communities that should qualify for it anyway.

**Mr Nesbitt:** I welcome the Minister’s statement. Following on from his last comment, my question is about NISRA estimates on Peace III. Does the Council take any view on whether the Peace III criteria favour one community over the other? The Protestant/unionist/loyalist community is seen to be quite badly fractured, and, indeed, there may be so many factions within it that they need to reach out to each other before they can meaningfully engage in cross-community dialogue, which is at the core of Peace III. That issue needs to be addressed urgently.

**Mr Wilson:** I am not aware of and no one has drawn to my attention any criteria that impact in the way that the Member has suggested. I can

think of some examples where money has been allocated to what are called — here is some more Peace III jargon — single identity groups. It is felt that money needs to be spent to enable them to get on the first step and to do exactly what the Member has suggested. So, I do not know that that is an impediment or, indeed, that the criteria create that impediment.

**Mrs D Kelly:** How many of the INTERREG IVa projects are linked to job creation? Has there been any appraisal of why there has not been as much spend as people had targeted and whether match funding is a problem for people trying to realise the potential of that fund?

**Mr Wilson:** First, all the spend will, to one extent or another, be job-creating, whether that is in the construction of projects or in the employment of people who run the projects. So, spending money will, by definition, create employment.

As I have said in previous answers, I do not think that any one impediment or barrier has been identified. A range of issues has been identified, right from the beginning of the process, from the quality of the applications to the assessment of the applications and, sometimes, when the money has been allocated, the slowness in starting to spend it. To me, that is an odd situation, especially at a time when you would have thought it would be easy to get firms to tender for work. However, throughout the process, we find examples of delays for all the reasons that I have given.

**Mr Allister:** Did the Minister take the opportunity of the Council reviewing staffing matters in the SEUPB to raise the gross disparity in the community backgrounds of SEUPB staff? If not, why not, given that this has been worsening, to the point at which a recent reply from him confirmed that, of the 49 staff employed in SEUPB offices in Northern Ireland, only 14 — two in seven — come from the Protestant community? That is a wholly unacceptable statistic, and, with the remainder of the staff employed in Monaghan, the overall picture is so much worse. So, did the Minister take the opportunity to raise the persistent failure to address and to better the representation of the Protestant community in the staffing complement of SEUPB? Might there just be a nexus between that and the disparity —

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order. Will the Member come to a question?

**Mr Wilson:** First, I am surprised that the Member raised that question, because, in times past, he and I would have taken the same view, the view that I expressed here today: I am sick and tired of all this equality industry, which insists that you select people for employment on the basis of their religious or community background. I want to see the best people for the job doing the job. On occasions past, I remember going with the Member to the Fair Employment Agency, as it then was, and berating the unfortunate Bob Cooper for his obsession with community background, percentages and everything else, so there seems to be a bit of a turnaround.

Secondly, my big concern is to ensure that cross-border bodies of this nature are not bloated and do not grow and that they use the staff they have efficiently. That is why I concentrated on saying, “Do you need that number of staff? Are there efficiencies which can be achieved? And let’s have a programme of reducing the number of staff, so that we have a more lean, more efficient organisation”. That was my chief emphasis.

If the Member has evidence that people applied for and were refused jobs in SEUPB because of their community background, that is a different matter, but, if he thinks that I will go down the route of saying that there must be a certain percentage of Catholics and of Protestants, regardless of their qualifications or their ability to do the job, he has the wrong person.

**Mr Allister:** You do not care. Two in seven do not matter.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order. That concludes questions on his statement to the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

## Higher Education and Student Finance

**Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning):** I am grateful for this opportunity to address the House on the future for higher education in Northern Ireland and tuition fees. As indicated last week, the higher education funding deal agreed by the Executive last Thursday is an extremely good news story for Northern Ireland. Our student representatives and others have already gone on record to commend the decision. It is important that we recognise that this deal is not about students in isolation but about our economic recovery and the future prosperity of Northern Ireland, to which our students and universities are so critical.

Members will recall that we were here just before the summer recess to debate a motion that the Committee for Employment and Learning tabled on higher education funding. During that debate, I was given a very clear message. That message, which was delivered on a cross-party basis, was that tuition fees should not be increased. Furthermore, the strong consensus was that I should go to the Executive to seek the necessary resources to make up the very significant funding shortfall to my Department that would arise from adopting such a position on tuition fees in Northern Ireland.

It may be helpful if I take a few minutes to remind Members of the financial position facing my Department. To address extant pressures, my Department needs to achieve savings of £150 million annually by 2014-15. Some £68 million of those savings have been targeted at the higher education sector, and that sum is proportionate to the level of investment in the HE sector relative to other DEL business areas. The sector is contributing £28 million in cash savings over the next two years by way of a 12% reduction in the teaching and research grant. In addition, it is addressing internal pressures associated with, for example, pay and price inflation, VAT, National Insurance contributions and pensions, and it is absorbing other reductions in income associated with the cessation or reduction of specific funding streams for innovation and research. The balance of that £68 million was expected to be funded by an increase in tuition fees. The decision to hold fees at their current level, with inflationary increases only, therefore means that the balance of the £68 million cash reduction — £40 million — has to be found from other measures. I will come to that shortly.

Funding decisions in England will see English universities charging fees of up to £9,000 from next September. Those fees will help to offset the reduction of around 80% in the core teaching grant that is currently allocated to English universities and will bring increased income into the sector in England, which is estimated at 10% over the comprehensive spending review (CSR) period.

In England and Wales, fees have been used to shift the balance of funding between government and the service user. An increase in fees in Northern Ireland was a viable option that merited consideration by my Department. It would have allowed additional revenue to be brought in outside the context of the block grant and would have avoided the otherwise inevitable decisions to reprioritise resources within the overall Northern Ireland Budget. However, in Northern Ireland, we wanted to take a different approach: one that continues to maintain the current balance between public funding and user contribution. That balance reflects the Executive's priority of growing the local economy through maximising participation in higher education and recognising the critical role that our local universities play in producing graduates with the necessary skills to meet existing and new economic opportunities, as well as recognising their centrality to research and development in Northern Ireland.

As I indicated, there is no support for significant increases in the fees charged here. Therefore, arising from the local political consensus against above-inflation rises in fees, the clear consequence is that the resultant funding gap has to be addressed. That gap will be £15 million, £30 million and £40 million in each of the three forthcoming financial years, and the final figure will then become a recurring annual pressure. Those are hugely challenging issues, and it has required significant effort to bring us to an acceptable solution. I am grateful to my Executive colleagues for the leadership and foresight that they have shown. By agreeing to take a collective approach to higher education funding, they have recognised the economic importance of investing in higher education and supporting efforts to raise skills here and, in particular, to provide a critical mass of highly skilled graduates.

The decisions reached by the Executive last week mean that I can now confirm that higher education tuition fees for local students in

Northern Ireland will be kept at current levels, subject only to inflationary increases, and that a funding package has been put in place to address the resultant budgetary pressures while ensuring the sustainable funding of the higher education sector. My overarching concerns are to ensure that Northern Ireland continues to have a world-class higher education system and that access to university is not determined by the ability to pay.

As we look to grow our economy and to take full advantage of the economic opportunities coming our way in the near future, it is critical that we support and recognise the role that higher education plays in producing skilled graduates and in research and development.

### 1.00 pm

Today's announcement on tuition fees and funding for higher education demonstrates that we are delivering on those policies and commitments. These decisions are a clear indication that the Executive are working for Northern Ireland — for our future students and graduates, for their families and for the wider economy. Furthermore, that commitment to skills, research and development and a knowledge-based economy is a clear signal to potential investors and others that Northern Ireland is open for business.

Of course, these decisions are not without pain, nor are they without risk. I have agreed that my Department will provide leadership in addressing the funding deficit through shouldering a significant proportion of the burden. In the 2014-15 financial year, my Department and the higher education sector will find £22 million to meet that pressure. That will be done without any further reductions to the critical front line services provided by my Department, including further education, skills in industry, apprenticeships and the employment service, beyond those anticipated in my savings plans. That £22 million includes a further £5 million contribution from the higher education sector, already factored in through discussions with the universities. A considerable element of that will be financed by charging higher fees to students from England, Scotland and Wales. The remaining £17 million pressure will be addressed through my Department's generating further internal savings in addition to those initially required for Budget 2010, and from money that I had identified for what would

have been higher notional loan subsidy costs for students in the event that above-inflation increases in tuition fees had been introduced.

I had initially considered using the savings resulting from the notional loan subsidy to provide for a larger expansion of student places, but the Executive felt that it was financially prudent to assess the actual distortions in student flows, and to consider additional resources in due course. In addition, the £22 million contribution is partially offset by £3 million coming from the Executive to my Department to allow us to begin to address the inescapable pressure on student places locally that will arise from having different fee regimes in different parts of the United Kingdom.

The balance of the overall £40 million pressure and the initial investment in additional student places will be met by other Departments, with the exception of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Department of Education, and the Department of Justice, and from a review of the education maintenance allowance. I fully acknowledge the implications and pain for the other Ministers and Departments as their budgets are adjusted to enable the Executive to contribute collectively to the funding deficit that arises from the decision not to increase fees by more than inflation.

Following agreement by the Executive, my officials and I will work with our counterparts in the Department of Education to develop a consultation document on the education maintenance allowance, for approval by the Executive in the autumn. I wish to stress that, unlike England, we are not looking to abolish the education maintenance allowance (EMA). Rather, the review is targeted at unlocking the inefficiencies within the current system and ensuring that young people who require assistance continue to receive it. The review should also be placed in the context of the overall access agenda for higher education and the overall protection of the education budget in this settlement.

I recognise that the settlement reached with the Executive and the overall funding package create many challenges for all the Departments involved, including my own, and for the higher education sector, which is already facing substantial reductions and other cost pressures. However, I believe that the decision by the Executive can be justified on the basis



that we are working collectively to invest in the economy and to address the critical challenge of upskilling the workforce. It is important to recognise that maintaining tuition fees at current levels, subject only to inflationary increases, demonstrates the importance that we place on access to higher education.

Of course, like others, I would have liked to have been able to do even more on access, but there are inevitable trade-offs between available funding and limited resources. It must be remembered that we work within the context of a block grant. That having been said, maintaining the level of tuition fees here and ensuring a sustainable higher education sector will clearly help to ensure that we continue our proud record of having the best higher education participation rates in the United Kingdom for those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, while ensuring that our universities and colleges can remain internationally competitive.

It is important, too, that I highlight the risks up front. Having different fee and support arrangements in each jurisdiction of the UK will create an enhanced risk of distortions in student flows. Around 30% of our undergraduates currently study in other parts of the UK, while a smaller percentage study in the Republic of Ireland. It is too early to predict how the tuition fees and student support arrangements of each Administration may impact on or influence behaviour with a resultant increase or decrease in the number of our students going to Great Britain or the Republic of Ireland or in the number of students coming here from Great Britain or the Republic of Ireland.

I know that many of our young people want to study in Great Britain for a variety of reasons. The decision by the Executive means that I can confirm that we will continue to provide tuition fee loans for Northern Ireland-domiciled students who attend university in any part of the United Kingdom. Those loans will be available to cover the cost of a loan up to a maximum fee of £9,000. I am sure that that will allay the concerns of many young people hoping to enter higher education in September 2012. However, that decision does have a significant cost implication for my Department and is an issue that we will need to monitor carefully. If there are increased cost pressures from changes in student flows, the Department may have to review this decision for new students entering higher education in future years.

Some Members have referred in the past to a brain drain, whereby our young people leave to study elsewhere and do not return to Northern Ireland. Although I am pleased to announce that we will provide tuition fee loans for young people who opt to study in Great Britain, I would be even happier if they were also able to return to work here and to apply their skills in the future.

That brings me to the issue of places for students here in Northern Ireland. We anticipate that increased fees in the rest of the United Kingdom will result in greater demand from Northern Ireland students to have the opportunity to study at home. We need to be responsive to that demand. Although the decisions on meeting the overall budget shortfall mean that I have very limited funding available to allow me to increase the number of student places in Northern Ireland, part of the package agreed with the Executive will allow for a modest increase in supply across higher education providers. We will work with higher education providers on this issue. Any additional places we are able to introduce during the CSR period will help to meet the expected increased demand from local students. In recognition of the importance of being responsive to the needs of industry and business in Northern Ireland, those places will be targeted at science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects only.

Anything we are able to do to increase student numbers will contribute towards protecting our participation rates, particularly among those from low-income backgrounds, as the extra competition for places locally may lead to those with lower or marginal grades being squeezed out. Those students are disproportionately from disadvantaged backgrounds.

I turn now to students from Great Britain who wish to study in Northern Ireland. I believe that it is important that we have a diverse student population in Northern Ireland and that our local universities should be open to students from all jurisdictions. However, I want students coming here to do so for the right reasons: because of the quality of our institutions, the quality of the university life and the future opportunities that are open to them. I do not want the determining factor to be cost. For those reasons, I can confirm that my Department will shortly be bringing subordinate legislation to the Committee for Employment and Learning that will allow our universities and colleges to

charge higher fees to students from other UK administrations. We want to avoid a parochial situation in which our universities service only a local market. Equally, we should not be seen as a cheap option.

Consequently, tuition fees for students from other parts of the United Kingdom will be higher than those for our own students, but they will be no higher than what our students would have to pay if they were studying in England or Wales.

Turning to support for living costs, the key point is that the options set out in the consultation paper were linked to the level of fees that might be charged. As I am not increasing tuition fees above inflation, I can confirm that our current grant levels will be maintained. That means that they will be £225 higher than the levels recently announced for England. Higher education providers will also continue to be required to provide bursaries to eligible students from low-income backgrounds.

The options set out in the consultation paper for the repayment regime were also linked to the level of fees that might be charged. As fees will not be increased above inflation, the current regime will also remain. That means that repayment will not begin until after borrowers leave higher education and are earning above a specified threshold. The earnings threshold is currently £15,000, but it will be uplifted by inflation each year throughout the comprehensive spending review period.

The quality of Northern Ireland universities is also important. At present, our two universities are increasingly recognised for the quality of their teaching across the UK and further afield and are respected as a source of leading-edge, world-class research. They have trained most of the professionals who work in Northern Ireland in science and engineering, business and legal services, health, education and many other sectors. They attract more than 50,000 students a year. Participation rates, particularly for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, are the highest in the UK. However, they are not only seats of learning. The higher education sector also makes a significant contribution to the local economy by acting as a hub for research and innovation; actively engaging in knowledge-transfer activities; promoting entrepreneurship; and providing industry, the professions and the public sector with experts and leaders. Clearly, we need to ensure that that excellence and

quality can continue. There is no point in holding fee levels down if it means that we are disinvesting from local universities and reducing the quality of their services.

Higher education is an important element of the skills agenda, but it is only one element. My Department's skills strategy, Transforming Futures, and its associated implementation plan, which I propose to publish shortly, will set out ambitious targets in relation to upskilling our workforce to meet the economic challenges ahead. Equally, I am committed to tackling issues around the levels of basic skills in our society, which will help to address our productivity gap.

The public consultation on tuition fees and higher education funding attracted responses from universities, university colleges, further education colleges, schools, student representative bodies, sector skills councils, trade unions, public sector organisations, individuals, business representative bodies and local development agencies. The range of organisations and individuals who responded to the consultation demonstrates clearly the impact of higher education on the economy, the community and society in Northern Ireland. I am grateful to all who responded, and I am grateful to the Committee for Employment and Learning for its continued interest and constructive feedback.

I have been giving detailed and careful consideration to all the responses received, and much of that is reflected in today's announcement. A number of other issues raised through the consultation will also be given further consideration in the context of the higher education strategy, which will be published in the autumn.

Details of all today's announcements will be available on Student Finance NI, NI Direct and the departmental websites. That will include question-and-answer materials to help students, families and others who are interested in arrangements for entry to higher education in 2012. I strongly encourage all to take a look at the sources of information.

In closing, my statement today on future fees and funding is genuinely good news for Northern Ireland. We have agreed a "Made in Northern Ireland" solution, which addresses the concerns of our young people in relation to their higher education prospects, sustains our universities'

standing and reputation in an increasingly competitive global market, and will deliver huge benefits to our economy and to society in general.

**Mr B McCrea (The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning):** Mr Deputy Speaker, I consulted the Speaker earlier this morning and he thought that it would be appropriate for me to say a few words on behalf of the Committee and then to say something on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party.

### 1.15 pm

There are some questions to be asked about the information provided by the Minister, and I am quite sure that the Committee will want to understand more about the risks that the Minister outlined in his statement. He said:

*"In the 2014-15 financial year, my Department and the higher education sector will find £22 million to meet that pressure. That will be done without any further reductions to the critical front line services".*

Frankly, I am interested to see how that will be done, because in previous consultations with the Minister and his permanent secretary, I was led to believe that £7 million would be hard to find, let alone £22 million. The Minister also highlighted the fact that there is a risk of differential student flows in different jurisdictions. I do not believe that we have really got to the bottom of that, so we will need to keep an eye on it.

I reinforce the fact that the Committee will no doubt be concerned about the Minister saying:

*"that decision does have a significant cost implication for my Department and is an issue that we will need to monitor carefully."*

The Committee will, in the fullness of time, consider those matters and engage with the Minister and his Department.

Speaking on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, I would like the Minister to explain why, given the huge contribution by the taxpayers of England and Wales to the people of Northern Ireland, he thinks that it is fair for students from England and Wales to be charged almost three times as much as students from Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland or elsewhere in the European Union for exactly the same course.

Will the Minister also explain why he is seeking to increase the number of students at our

universities, when 10% of students fail to complete their first year and many of those who do graduate cannot find jobs? Does he concede that encouraging young people into an educational pathway that may not suit them and that does not provide them with the support they need or the skills demanded by industry is a bigger concern than any amount of debt that they may incur?

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order, please. A large number of Members have put down questions, and we have just one hour. I think that you have enough questions to occupy you, Minister.

**Mr B McCrea:** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I will take your point of order after we have dealt with the statement.

**Dr Farry:** I thank the Committee Chair not just for his questions this afternoon but for the role that he and, indeed, all the Committee members have played in dealing with the issue over the past number of months. It was important that a clear political signal was sent out that there is consensus in Northern Ireland on maintaining the current level of tuition fees and that a collective approach was needed in the Executive to address the shortfall. Indeed, the Committee Chair's comments have been particularly helpful in that regard.

I do not want to address each and every one of the Chair's points, but I will address some of them. First, the Chair talked about risks. Let me be clear: there are many risks with the policy announced today. Where there are differential fee levels in different parts of the UK, there will be distortions in student flows, and we will have to manage that. Those risks are an inevitable consequence of the decision to keep fees at their current level. Although we want to keep fees down, we recognise the flip side of the coin. No one is going into this process with their eyes closed to what those risks may be.

I want to make one thing perfectly clear: there is no risk whatsoever with the budgetary figures from my Department and the Executive that have been presented here today. I made it clear all along that it would have been impossible for me to make any announcement about the level of tuition fees in Northern Ireland without, at the same time, securing and having certainty about the budgetary figures. I am sure that the Finance Minister would give exactly the same

message that the Executive would not sign off on any revised financial figures relating to the issue unless they were prepared to stand over them. Therefore, the risks that we talk about relate to student loans and not to the numbers in the budget that I have announced today. I have always been clear that I was not prepared to move until there was surety on that issue.

Of course there will be pain for my Department. We have factored in the additional costs as added efficiencies beyond the £145 million that was asked of my Department as part of Budget 2010. Those costs have been factored in and will be internalised in, for example, how we manage the estate and staff issues, such as vacancies, travel and subsistence. I am prepared to make it clear that the arrangement that I have announced today does not come at the expense of further education, the wider skills agenda, apprenticeships or the employment service. For sure, there are pressures right across my budget, and I will continue to highlight them. However, I am not prepared to make a difficult situation worse owing to the higher education settlement. It was always regarded as an issue that had to be addressed discretely.

On the issue of the fairness of charging higher fees to students from the rest of UK, I accept that what we propose to do may seem strange and, to some people, unfair. It is less about raising resources, although that is important in order to make the budget figures work. I stress that, in a situation in which fees are potentially £9,000 in many institutions in England, Scotland and Wales and just over £3,000 in Northern Ireland, we can expect a flood of applications from other parts of the UK. If we are prepared to take measures to protect the market for local students — every one of us has received masses of correspondence from disappointed students and their parents, who are frustrated that they are unable to secure places in local universities — and although I do not like the fact that we must go down that route, when we take a decision on differential fees, that is the inevitable decision that we must take as an Assembly if we are to act responsibly for our citizens.

The issues around the increase in places while people are dropping out are separate. We have to address retention in our universities. However, let us be clear that, equally, there is a requirement to upskill Northern Ireland's

population. As the economy grows in years to come, we are required to produce a higher number of skilled graduates. A large element of Northern Ireland's productivity gap, not only with the UK but with the rest of Europe, is linked to its skills deficits. My Department will address that across a broad front, but a large element of that has to concern what happens in higher education institutions.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Before I call Mr Alastair Ross, I remind Members of the Speaker's ruling earlier today that Members should confine themselves to one question.

**Mr Ross:** I thank the Minister for his statement. He is correct to say that prospective students will welcome his decision and that those who aspire to go to university will welcome the fact that they will not have to pay higher fees. However, he referred to the financial burden that that will place on his Department and the significant savings that have to be made. Can he assure the House that that will not be achieved at the detriment of those young people who do not go to university but who still need to be upskilled and get training in order to find a job in the current climate?

**Dr Farry:** I thank Mr Ross for his comments. I am happy to give that assurance. I have a commitment to addressing skills right across Northern Ireland's population. My Department is the Department for Employment and Learning, not the "Department of Higher Education". A discrete solution for higher education is needed. I am clear, as I have always been, both internally and in discussions with other Ministers, that we must ensure that other aspects of the Department's work are protected. Indeed, I will seek to invest further in those areas in the months to come.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the statement. I ask the Minister to detail his Department's strategy for widening participation, including perhaps delivering a higher percentage of foundation degree courses through regional colleges. I say that as a member of my party, which states in its manifesto that it absolutely opposes tuition fees per se and, latterly, any increase in tuition fees. I welcome the Minister's decision. I ask the Minister for further detail on the widening participation agenda to ensure that people from low- and middle-income families and from rural communities can access higher education.

**Dr Farry:** I thank Mr McElduff for his question. I am always pleased to try to help Sinn Féin to deliver its manifesto.

The important thing to stress about widening participation is that there has been a separate consultation on that as well as a consultation on a higher education strategy. I intend to bring those two consultations together and to make a more detailed announcement on that during the autumn, once this issue has been addressed.

On the particular issue of further education and foundation degrees, it is important to qualify my remarks by saying that we need to ensure that we maintain a distinction between further education and higher education, because they provide distinct roles. However, higher education in further education is something that is of importance to our economy. When you hear me refer to additional places for higher education providers, as opposed to higher education institutions, you may get an indication that I am very open to exploring what we can do through further education.

**Mr P Ramsey:** Like other colleagues, I thank the Minister for coming forward with most welcome news for many families and young people across Northern Ireland. However, it would appear that DEL has taken a big hit and has been short-changed. You can talk about protecting existing services and employment opportunities, but it would appear from your statement that there is an £18 million deficit, which you indicate will be met entirely from the EMA budget. That will cause us major concern, given the not in education, employment or training (NEETs) inquiry that the Committee for Employment and Learning has carried out and the contribution that DEL and other Departments were meant to make.

Given what the Minister is telling the House in respect of additional student numbers across Northern Ireland, where does that leave his commitment to create 1,000 additional student places at the University of Ulster's Magee campus?

**Dr Farry:** I thank Mr Ramsey for his general support for the policy and his questions.

First, let me stress that this is, overall, a good deal for Northern Ireland. This is a good deal for the Executive: it is a demonstration of the Executive working and delivering for Northern Ireland. This is also a good deal for my Department, and I would not be here and would

not have accepted the package in the Executive if I did not feel that this was the best balanced deal for us all.

I recognise that my Department has to provide a leadership role in addressing this issue, which is why we have taken on a disproportionate share of the overall burden. However, that burden has been shared out collectively. An element of the share that my Department has to bear will be addressed through increased efficiencies that will not impact upon front line delivery in the sectors that I mentioned. It also includes an element that will be borne by the higher education institutions.

There is also money that I had originally hoped to be able to use for a more expansive increase in places at this stage. That money, however, has been used to assist with the overall package. The Executive felt that it was more prudent to adopt a wait-and-see approach to see the real evidence on additional student flows before setting aside additional resources, although we can, of course, go back for those resources in due course, and that has been made clear by the Executive. However, we have some money that has been set aside for an immediate increase in places to be discussed and implemented over the current CSR period.

I want to be very clear in case any misunderstandings occur around this. The level of resourcing that we have — about £3 million in the 2014-15 budget — will only allow us to provide several hundred additional places. We cannot be precise until we have proper discussions with all the institutions to work out exactly how those will be implemented. However, based on these figures, it is not realistic to expect an expansion of the Magee campus of the University of Ulster on the scale that Mr Ramsey has set out.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I remind Members that another 14 Members have tabled questions. I ask Members to be brief, and I also ask the Minister to be as concise as he can.

**1.30 pm**

**Mr Lyttle:** I join the House in welcoming the good news that the Minister brought to the Assembly today. It will ensure that our universities retain their competitiveness and accessibility. My Committee colleagues pointed out that, in its NEETs inquiry, the Committee identified that the education maintenance

allowance played an important role in other forms of further education. Will the Minister further clarify the timescale for the review of EMA and how the Committee will play a role in that consultation process?

**Dr Farry:** I thank Mr Lyttle for his support for the statement and, indeed, for his question. I omitted to address the EMA points that the previous questioner made.

Let me be clear: I support the education maintenance allowance in Northern Ireland. I am sure that I speak for the Minister of Education when I say that we both feel that it plays and will play an important role in ensuring that people from disadvantaged backgrounds are encouraged to remain in education. However, within EMA, there is considerable inefficiency. There is money that is not being used effectively, and it is not making a difference in keeping people in education. It is important — indeed, it is the only responsible act for the Executive — to try to release those funds and to put them to more productive uses. Certainly, I believe that maintaining the agenda of having access to higher education is one such use.

At present, EMA in Northern Ireland costs about £28 million. That is split between the two Departments. Indeed, there is some uplift pressure due to increased demand in that regard. We can expect, however, to realise some savings from a review. Certainly, the Committee will be kept fully informed of the consultation once the Executive agree it, and, indeed, it will be an integral part of the decisions that we take on the matter in due course.

**Mr Campbell:** I thank the Minister for his statement. He was at pains to try to be as unambiguous as he could, and I welcome that. He talked about a modest increase in supply across higher education providers. For the avoidance of any doubt, will he spell out approximately how many additional places there will be in the CSR period in the University of Ulster at its Belfast, Coleraine and Magee campuses?

**Dr Farry:** I thank Mr Campbell for his question. These are important issues. It was my intention and hope that I would have had more resources for a wider expansion of student places at this stage, but the Executive decided to adopt a more prudent and measured approach. Through to 2014-15, we have £3 million allocated for an expansion of places. At this stage, I cannot be

prescriptive about precisely how many that will fund, because we have to have discussions with the higher education providers to work out exactly what sort of courses they want to provide through those additional resources. Obviously, some courses cost more money than others.

We are talking about the overall number of places across Northern Ireland that that level of funding would provide being in the low hundreds. That will be split between the different providers. It is not for me as Minister to micromanage how those places are distributed internally in the universities; it is for Queen's and the University of Ulster to allocate their shares between their various campuses. I certainly would not direct that at all, although the University of Ulster has made comments about what it views as its priorities. In the light of the more, shall we say, modest scale that we are able to offer at this stage, that is a decision that it may wish to reflect on further.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I call Ms Michelle Gildernew.

**Mr Allister:** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. This point of order relates to the order of business, here and now.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Sorry, I have to be consistent. I did not take Mr McCrea's point of order until after —

**Mr Allister:** I want to refer you to a ruling that says that those who have not been present in the House throughout the entirety of the statement should not be called until those who have been have been called. I think that you are about to call someone who has not been present throughout the entirety of the statement. I refer you to the ruling of 24 September 2007.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Yes, I give consideration to the ruling. Ms Gildernew was absent for only a very short period of a very long statement, and, on balance, I decided that it was not appropriate.

**Ms Gildernew:** Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement and the fact that resources will not be extracted from the Department of Education, which is already under enormous financial pressure. As the Minister said in his statement, given that lower and middle income families are already being squeezed out, it

is important that we ensure that those from disadvantaged backgrounds have access to quality primary and post-primary education in preparation for third-level education.

Minister, in your statement, you alluded to the fact that 30% of students leave here to pursue further and higher education elsewhere. How many of those students leave out of choice, and how many leave out of necessity?

**Dr Farry:** I thank the Member for her question. We do not have a precise breakdown of that 30%, but it is a combination of the reasons that the Member set out. At this stage, I am minded that we should continue to fund students who find themselves in that situation. For me to do otherwise would create a two-tier system in which those who can afford to study and pay higher fees elsewhere in the UK are able to leave to Northern Ireland, while those from more disadvantaged backgrounds cannot. It is also worth stressing that some courses, such as veterinary science, are offered only outside of Northern Ireland, and we have a specific obligation in that respect. There is also the issue of those who do not get the necessary grades for the institutions in Northern Ireland, which, as competition for places heats up, may become more acute. It is important that we offer our local residents the option of accessing higher education.

The only plea that I would make, and I am sure that the entire House would concur, is that if students want to go and study elsewhere, do so, but please come back and invest your future in growing the economy of Northern Ireland.

**Mr D McIlveen:** I also welcome the statement. This is a very brave move by the Minister and one that will come as very good news to many of our students. The interest in this subject undoubtedly proves how the work of the Committee for Employment and Learning, and the Department, really matters, despite some of the comments that were made by a certain Member before the summer recess.

However, although we fully welcome the decision, it came on the back of crisis management and the possibility of an entire department having to close in one of our universities as the result of the gap in funding. What provisions are the universities making for the next four years to ensure that in four years' time we are not back at square one and having to have this conversation all over again?

**Dr Farry:** I thank Mr McIlveen for his comments. The settlement illustrates how the institutions in Northern Ireland can work. Decisions were taken in time. I will say no more than that, but the various stakeholders involved were extremely keen for us to make clear what was going to happen in the future.

I want to say two things on what Mr McIlveen asked. First, our universities, like all other aspects of the public sector, are addressing cuts that were passed on through my Department. Therefore, the universities will have to undergo pain, and those who are closely associated with both of the institutions will be very much aware of that. Secondly, what is good about the financial package that was agreed by the Executive is that it is hard-wired into my Department's baselines. It is not a monitoring round solution and it has a degree of permanence. However, it is worth stressing that our understandings cover only the current CSR period to 2015, and there is a potential for the debate to be reopened on both the level of fees and funding. Once the decision has been taken and it beds down, I would like to think that what we are doing today will roll forward into the future, and not least because it has been baselined. However, obviously, we cannot bind future Executives on what budgetary decisions they should take.

**Mrs Overend:** I thank the Minister for his statement. Minister, in your statement you said that we have a requirement to upskill our population, but has your Department carried out an analysis of courses that are not available in Northern Ireland? In furtherance to a previous answer, will you detail your Department's plans to deal with the disproportionate effect of university tuition fees on those would-be undergraduates for whom there is no third-level education provision in Northern Ireland? Included in that are students who wish to study veterinary science, but there are others, and they can expect to be burdened with debts in the region of £80,000 or more on graduation.

**Dr Farry:** The commitment to upskilling permeates everything that my Department does, from essential skills through to higher education. Indeed, what we do on welfare issues and getting people off the unemployment register is also about skills, including employability skills.

It is worth stressing, as Mrs Overend has done, that there are courses that are not offered in Northern Ireland. We have highlighted veterinary science as the clearest example. For that reason and because we may well have increased competition for places in Northern Ireland, it is important that my Department continues to fund students from Northern Ireland who go to Great Britain. However, I want to make it very clear that we are doing so based on my Department's current projections. In the event that the cost exceeds what we are currently budgeting for and any additional resources that we can find internally to manage those pressures, we may have to review that policy down the line. As we welcome the decisions that we are taking on fees, it is important to also be aware that, once different parts of the UK have different funding regimes, there will be risks that we will have to manage. If those risks go wrong, we will have to take mitigating measures in Northern Ireland.

**Ms Ritchie:** I thank the Minister for his statement. Notwithstanding the financial challenges faced by the Executive, and considering the centrality of further and higher education to growing the economy and building the skills base throughout Northern Ireland, will the Minister ensure that all actions are taken to increase the maximum student number (MaSN) cap and thus ensure full access for students, particularly those from low income and working class families throughout Northern Ireland? I think, in particular, of the MaSN cap for STEM subjects for the South Eastern Regional College, which the Minister opened recently.

**Dr Farry:** I thank Ms Ritchie for her comments and echo them. What happens in higher education is central to our economy in two key respects: increasing the number of skilled graduates and the offering of research and development. A disproportionate amount of our research and development in Northern Ireland is focused through our universities compared with other jurisdictions, so we are very dependent on that sector.

In relation to MaSN, I am conscious of the need, and the future need, to increase the number of places offered in Northern Ireland. An inescapable pressure emerging from the decisions that we are taking on fees throughout the UK will have an impact on student flows. The Executive have decided that we will have a modest increase in MaSN at this stage, starting next year through to 2014-15. Once

we see the flows in practice next year, we have the potential to go back to seek additional resources based on the actual evidence of the student flows rather than on what is essentially still speculation.

**Mr Storey:** I welcome the Minister's statement. He is just after saying that what happens in further education is central to our economy, and he referred to risk in his statement. I have raised an issue with the Minister over the last few days regarding the Ballymoney campus of the Northern Regional College. Can he dispel any rumours that there may be an attempt to look at particular campuses for closure over a short period, in some way as a result of the budgetary pressures that his Department will now face after today's statement?

**Dr Farry:** I thank Mr Storey for his question. There are budgetary issues facing the further education (FE) sector, as there are in any other sector in my Department that was part of Budget 2010. The current level of efficiencies asked of FE is proportionally less than in other sectors in my Department. Therefore, generally speaking, FE has had a good settlement as part of Budget 2010 compared with other areas.

The institutions have to manage their estates, but there are processes in place to do so. On the discrete issue of this settlement, I want to make it clear that not a penny is coming from the FE sector to fund higher education. The FE sector will be judged entirely on its own merits, and I regard its sheer breadth of engagement with the skills agenda to be critical for the future of our economy.

#### 1.45 pm

**Mr Elliott:** I thank the Minister for his statement. He said that there will be higher fees for students from other parts of the United Kingdom. What level of fees will students coming from the Republic of Ireland have to pay?

**Dr Farry:** As Mr Elliott probably knows, students from the Republic of Ireland are treated as European Union students and have the same status as those coming from any other part of the European Union. Under EC laws, we cannot do anything but charge the same level of fees as we will for Northern Ireland students.

**Mrs D Kelly:** I thank the Minister for his statement and think that it is good news for higher education. However, I am sure that the



Minister will have some concerns about the number of young people who are in the NEETS bracket. Young people in my constituency have fallen into that bracket through no fault of their own because there are not sufficient places in either higher or further education. What does the Minister intend to do to help those students?

Will he also clarify a point about the review of the education maintenance allowance? I understand that that is a Department of Education policy and that the £22 million that the Department for Learning and Employment (DEL) has to fund towards the £40 million deficit is not part of that pot. Therefore, in theory, DEL will be putting more than £22 million towards the current shortfall. It will be up to the Education Minister to announce reductions in EMA to a number of students.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Question, please.

**Mrs D Kelly:** I have already asked it.

**Dr Farry:** NEETS is another issue that my Department is working on: we are an extremely busy Department as you can all see. A report was commissioned through the Committee, which I think Mrs Kelly was chairing at that stage. A paper has gone to the Executive for wider consultation. We are working on a NEETS strategy, which we will bring to the Executive and the Committee in the near future and which will, hopefully, address some of those issues.

EMA cuts across the Department of Education and my Department. In crude terms, around 60% of the spend is held in education and around 40% is held in DEL. When we have a review, depending on what decisions we take, there will be a differential impact in how much each Department will be able to contribute to the centre. Those moneys are part of the Executive's half of the overall equation.

**Mr McCallister:** Is it not strange that the Minister has set up this review and consultation, yet he has already factored in the savings that he needs to make? What savings does he need to make from EMA?

**Dr Farry:** It is not unusual for budget decisions to be taken around anticipated savings from reforms. Bearing in mind the fact that the figures we are announcing today are based on sound budgetary assumptions and very prudent and conservative estimates, it is fair to say that

the overall amount that we spend on EMA in Northern Ireland is around £28 million. There is some increased demand on the system given the current economic situation. Equally, there is considerable inefficiency. The current Executive figures are based on realising a sum in the region of £4 million and £5 million by 2014-15. So, even though we may be able to generate greater savings through the reform of EMA, the actual figures that this settlement is based on are a conservative capture of inefficiency in EMA at present.

**Mr Allister:** In respect of the Minister's belated statement on tuition fees, I note his determination to assure us all that the huge cuts that his Department now has to bear will not impact on the skill provision and creation of employment opportunities for which his Department has responsibility at present. I am expressing some scepticism about that, given the fact that, for four years, meeting the tuition fee threshold is the Department's top priority and the fact that there are imponderables such as the possibility — hopefully not — of the mooted challenge in Scotland in respect of the viability of the fees structure kicking in.

Will the Minister really assure us, and does he agree that, if he cannot, it would be a travesty, that young people who do not aspire to go university and who do not have that opportunity should not end up seeing detriment to facilitate those who, thankfully, are going to university? That travesty could emerge unless the most stringent efforts are made. Of course, the Minister could have been helped —

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Question, please.

**Mr Allister:** — if other Departments had borne their share of the burden, particularly the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) with its many over-funded and underspent programmes.

**Dr Farry:** I do not regard my statement as being belated. I am sure that, if I were here today announcing unilateral fee rises, Mr Allister would be the first person to accuse me of being irresponsible for doing so without budgetary backup. For me, the issues of fees and budgets are clearly inextricably linked. I am here today and am confident of the figures for my Department and for the Executive overall. I am also very clear that there will not be cuts elsewhere in my Department. That was an issue that was going to be addressed for higher

education or, alternatively, for the Executive overall, and we have found a combination of the two to address that. So we can be confident of the figures that we have here today.

I assume that Mr Allister shares in the consensus that we do not want to increase fees in Northern Ireland. Once we take that decision, there are implications on budgets in Northern Ireland because we have a fixed block grant, and we have to live with the consequences on our local priorities of the decisions that we take as a devolved Executive and Assembly. That is what devolution is all about.

**Mr Agnew:** I thank the Minister for his announcement today, and I certainly welcome it. If I remember correctly, I think that he told me in hustings on the campaign trail that anyone proposing not to increase fees was being unrealistic, so I am glad that the Minister has joined me in the realm of the unrealistic.

The Minister mentioned the brain drain and the attempts that have been made to keep students in Northern Ireland or to attract them back after their university studies. What is his policy on students coming from other regions of the UK as well as Europe? Do we want an inflow, given the skills that that would bring and the benefits to our economy, or are we trying to discourage that? Indeed, is the future policy to increase the MaSN cap to try to bring as many high-skilled workers as possible into Northern Ireland?

**Dr Farry:** If people come to Northern Ireland to study, to work or to do both, it is a strong indication of the health of our society and the future prospects of our economy, which is a good thing. In the current profile of our two local universities, there are not many students who come from Great Britain or, indeed, international students who come from further afield. I speak for both institutions in reflecting the fact that they want to increase those numbers to have a diverse student body in Northern Ireland.

The fees that our local institutions will potentially charge for students coming from other parts of the UK will be no higher than the fees that they face elsewhere in the UK. So in some senses there is a level playing field about the choices that they will make. The numbers of students whom we have attracted from elsewhere in the UK and internationally have been artificially depressed because of the Troubles and other divisions in this society.

I will be very keen to see our student body becoming much more diverse in the future. When we talk about student places in the future, international and GB students will be separate from those considerations because, hopefully, those students will be self-financing, and the funds will not have to come out of our block grant.

**Mr McCartney:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an ráiteas an tráthnóna seo. I welcome the Minister's announcement this afternoon. I want to ask him about the particular point in his statement in which he addressed the issue of an increase in places. He said that he was going to take a wait-and-see approach. When he does that, will he ensure that any increase in places is demand led? The Magee campus of the University of Ulster has made its case, and it has been accepted. When we try to increase places, we should do it on a demand-led basis, and we should look for a maximum outcome. The need for more student places in the Magee campus and the wider social and economic impact that an increase will have are widely accepted by Ilex and in the regeneration plan.

**Dr Farry:** I am very conscious of the interest in the north-west in an expansion in university places. I will be visiting Ilex and the Magee campus on Wednesday. The Member talked about my wait-and-see approach. However, that is an Executive approach, and wait and see is probably not the right way of putting it. We are looking for an evidence-based approach to policymaking, which is not an entirely irresponsible thing to do.

That said, we have secured the resources to allow us to fund a modest increase in student places in Northern Ireland, starting from next year, on a phased basis through to 2014 and 2015. For the sake of clarity and to prevent unrealistic expectations building up, that increase will only provide for several hundred places across all the different providers in Northern Ireland, including the University of Ulster. To be fair, the Magee campus's plans will not be addressed on the basis of this announcement. However, there is scope to go back to the Executive in due course, over the coming years, based on the evidence of the demand to which Mr McCartney referred, to make a strong case for additional resources. This is not necessarily about resources for the north-west. That will be a bonus if that is the way that it works out; the University of Ulster will have to make those decisions. It will be about the

Executive responding in kind to the evidence of increased demand for places from local students.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** That concludes questions to the Minister for Employment and Learning.

**Mr B McCrea:** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I was a little disappointed that you were not able to take my point of order during the ministerial statement. I presume that that was because it is not really in order to take a point of order during such proceedings. Perhaps we will get some clarity on that. I would like you to convey to the Speaker my disappointment that I was not able to make my final point in my questions to the Minister. I had taken the precaution of speaking to the Speaker about how to go about it, and I thought that I had carried matters through under his direction.

It seems to me that there is some confusion about the latitude that a Committee Chairperson has in making his initial points to a Minister. Given the interest in this particular issue, we might have had a little more latitude in the matter. That is not an attack on you, Mr Deputy Speaker, but we might, perhaps, have organised things a little bit better. What will happen now is that the debate will take place outside the Chamber rather than within it.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I will respond to the Member by saying that one is, sometimes, not perfect. However, I am sure that Mr McCrea will agree that he had moved on to speak as an Ulster Unionist. Today, the Speaker made it perfectly clear that each Member would ask one question. I hope that the Member also appreciates that there were 20 people down to ask questions, all of whom were accommodated. That was a big achievement for the Minister and for all Members who took the Speaker's earlier advice and kept their questions concise.

Nevertheless, I understand the Member's feelings. He had an important point to make, but, in future, perhaps he will make it earlier.

2.00 pm

## Committee Business

### Committee Membership

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** As with similar motions, the motion on Committee membership will be treated as a business motion. Therefore, there will be no debate.

*Resolved:*

*That Mr Paul Maskey replace Ms Caitríona Ruane as a member of the Committee for Finance and Personnel; that Mr Oliver McMullan replace Mr Gerry Kelly as a member of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure; and that Mr Pat Doherty replace Mr Paul Maskey as a member of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee. — [Ms J McCann.]*

## Private Members' Business

### Green Economy

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech.

**Ms Lo:** I beg to move

*That this Assembly calls on the Executive to make the development of the green economy a priority within the next Programme for Government and to affirm that an overarching strategy for the development of the green economy should be implemented; and further calls on the Executive to bring together existing policies and initiatives, to identify gaps and to address them.*

I am delighted that the first motion for debate after the summer recess is on the green economy, which the Alliance Party believes can create new jobs and tackle climate change by developing energy efficiency and renewables. We urge the Executive to prioritise the green economy in the Programme for Government and to agree an overall development strategy.

We need a joined-up approach to address the triple crunch of recession, energy prices and climate change. Businesses are still struggling, and, in February this year, Northern Ireland saw the largest increase in unemployment in the 12 UK regions, with over 59,000 people finding themselves unemployed. Compared with February last year, this year's figures were up 6.3%, while other UK regions saw a decrease of 9.1%. People who have lost their job or closed down their business ask politicians what they have done to get us out of the economic downturn.

*(Mr Speaker in the Chair)*

Northern Ireland already has the highest levels of fuel poverty in the UK. Nevertheless, over the past few months, households have been hit further by huge price increases in domestic gas, electricity, coal and home heating oil. This winter, thousands of households in Northern Ireland will struggle to heat their home adequately. Energy costs are also the single biggest competitive disadvantage for local businesses. The Alliance Party sees the potential of new forms of economic growth

and employment from the green revolution, and, given our rich natural resources in wind and tides, it believes that Northern Ireland has an opportunity to become a world leader in renewable energy.

The environment sector is one of the fastest growing sectors in the world economy. Other countries are already well aware of that and have embraced green energy. The Danish wind industry employed 28,400 people in 2008 and contributed €5.7 billion to the economy. Germany employed 160,000 people in the renewable energy sector in 2004.

**Mr McCarthy:** I am grateful to the Member for giving way. Does she agree that it was rather disappointing that, on a recent trip down Strangford Lough on other business, we saw the SeaGen investment, which was supposed to be a major investment for green energy, sitting doing nothing? We were advised at the time that it would produce good, cheap, clean electricity and bring jobs to the local economy. It is disappointing to see that, for some reason or other, it was sitting doing nothing on the day on which we had our trip.

**Ms Lo:** I agree. I believe that it will be put back together again soon.

In 2004, Germany employed 160,000 people in the industry. That rose to 278,000 following a stimulus plan in 2008 to create a green economy in the country. There is a growing demand for the manufacture of wind turbines, hybrid cars and solar panels, but we are missing out on that potential market. Some of our companies, such as Harland and Wolff, have made small inroads into the sector, but not enough is being done to help to grow the industry overall.

Countries no longer have a choice when it comes to developing renewable energy. European targets for 2020 mean that 15% of the UK's energy and 16% of the Republic of Ireland's energy must be renewable energy. Failing to meet those targets will mean huge fines from the EU. If countries are being forced to produce renewable energy, there is the opportunity for us to develop a sector in which we can build wind turbines or tidal technology for the local and overseas markets.

Research has indicated that targeted investment and growth of the renewable sector could create up to 30,000 jobs. Employment

opportunities include high-tech manufacturing jobs, maintenance jobs at wind power plants and biomass production jobs in the agriculture sector. Biomass production can often be a very good way for farmers to diversify and gain much-needed grants, particularly from land that does not contribute much to their farms. I am sure that everybody agrees that we have the agricultural expertise to accomplish that, but farmers need help from the Executive to realise that potential. The market can drive a certain degree of innovation and change, but there is a rationale for state intervention, such as providing incentives through the tax and regulatory systems.

**Mr Newton:** Does the Member agree with me and the director of the Renewable Energy Foundation, Mr John Constable, who argues that hopes that the low-carbon economy will deliver thousands of green-collar jobs are “staggeringly far-fetched”?

**Ms Lo:** I am not sure whether there is evidence to back that up.

**Mr Newton:** It is from a press statement that was issued by Mr John Constable, who is the director of the Renewable Energy Foundation.

**Ms Lo:** There are certainly competing bodies of evidence. That is perhaps for another debate on another day. Thank for your intervention, anyway.

Scotland has shown an exemplary way in which to go about creating jobs and investment in renewable energy. The Scottish Parliament passed a law that designated parts of the country and the surrounding waters as a renewable energy enterprise zone. That makes sense because, given Scotland's location, it has perhaps the largest potential in Europe for renewable energy production. Northern Ireland has perhaps the second best location in Europe, but we are not harnessing the wind and tidal resources that we possess. The Executive must invest more in research and development on renewable energy technology. The cross-departmental group on the green new deal needs to work with all relevant Departments, our two universities, other universities, businesses and NGOs to achieve a strategic and overarching plan to develop the green economy. We have the potential to become world leaders —

**Mr F McCann:** Will the Member give way?

**Ms Lo:** Yes, sure. I am getting a lot of interventions.

**Mr F McCann:** The home improvement grant used to be available to homeowners, but it has all but dried up. Over the next number of years, thousands of houses will fall into disrepair. Would it not be better to look at how we provide additional grants tied to eco-friendly building, which could put thousands of construction workers back to work?

**Ms Lo:** I absolutely agree. The retrofit scheme is very important. Insulation is a way to cut energy bills. There is plenty of scope for working with —

**Mr McCarthy:** You had better hurry up.

**Ms Lo:** Mr Speaker, am I getting an extra minute?

**Mr Speaker:** No.

**Ms Lo:** Oh dear. There is plenty of scope for working with the South on renewable energy or further development of the single energy network and the North/South interconnectors to create economies of scale. North/South co-operation —

**Mr Speaker:** Bring your remarks to a close.

**Ms Lo:** — can be beneficial to all of us on a green island basis. A green economy will not only create jobs and investment but undoubtedly improve our environment —

**Mr Speaker:** Time is up.

**Ms Lo:** — and help to cut carbon emissions.

**Mr Speaker:** I remind Members to watch the clock.

**Mr Spratt:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. I will not give way as many times.

I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. There has never been a better time to consider moving towards a green economy. All too often, we hear of pensioners having to make the choice between heating or eating due to the soaring costs of fuel and food. In the twenty-first century it is simply not acceptable that older people are faced with that unreasonable choice. At the heart of the green economy is resource and energy efficiency, and we must accept that many sources of energy are finite. As they become less available, they become more expensive and, unless we manage them more effectively, they will run out completely. Making

homes more energy-efficient tackles poverty, not only for the elderly but for other vulnerable members of society. It is good news that new houses being built for social housing must meet high standards in being low-carbon and energy-efficient. In fact, with strong insulation and ventilation systems, those houses should not require any heating at all. That is good news for tenants in the future.

I welcome the fact that all Departments and agencies are working together to develop the green economy. An interdepartmental working group, chaired by the Department for Social Development, has set up work on the green new deal. DETI, through Invest Northern Ireland, funds the Carbon Trust, which promotes energy efficiency. DEL has issued guidelines to encourage colleges to develop curricula to enable students to develop the skills and knowledge that will contribute to sustainable development. Those are only a couple of examples of how the green economy is already being developed in Northern Ireland.

It is vital that resource efficiency is promoted at all levels of society. In particular, schools should educate young people to promote longer-term, sustainable production and consumption. If we can get the message through now, we will benefit in the future. We must be innovative if we are going to create opportunities for business and employment.

Our workforce must be prepared for the jobs that will be created as a result of the development of the green economy. The areas that will benefit most include the agriculture, building, energy, forestry and transport sectors. Tourism also contributes vast sums to the Northern Ireland economy through the natural heritage as well as built heritage. Yesterday was a European heritage day, and many of our castles, churches and listed buildings were open to the public free of charge. We are sometimes not aware of how much potential is there, and we must find innovative ways to exploit that potential to grow our economy.

### 2.15 pm

For a period, I worked in NIEA, when it was the old Environment and Heritage Service, and I often felt that many of our most treasured tourist attractions, such as Scrabo Tower and the abbey at Greyabbey could do with some investment to encourage tourism, because we now see tour ships and so on coming in.

Therefore, as part of the green new deal, we need to look at that whole area and make sure that tourism is encouraged. We have hundreds of sites throughout Northern Ireland, and we need to take a holistic look at how tourism can be developed and at how we can form an overall strategy.

My party broadly supports the development of a green economy. However, in this difficult economic climate, it is important to ensure that public funds be used to provide the best value for money for the taxpayer. That should be our top priority. We on this side of the House support the motion.

**Mr W Clarke:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Sinn Féin also supports the motion, and I thank the Members who tabled it for bringing it to the House. The green economy is a term used to describe a broad range of economic activities, including improving our environment and quality of air, water and food. I will deal with energy issues in my contribution, because they are most relevant to the motion.

The green economy, in my and Sinn Féin's opinion, is the future. We have the technology, but we sometimes have to ask ourselves whether we have the political will to bring it about. To support the transition from fossil fuel, we need to make the green economy a priority and invest in it. The green economy can do more than create business opportunities. It can get people back to work, particularly our young people who are leaving our island in their thousands to find work. It will help people who have lost their job in the manufacturing and construction industries, and it provides an opportunity to retrain a workforce for future needs. In my constituency, where there have been heavy losses in the construction sector, there are opportunities for offshore wind farms. I want resources to be dedicated to training a workforce to deliver that. We must take up the opportunity that will exist. We should not allow people from outside the island of Ireland to take those jobs because we do not have the skill base.

Investment in priority areas such as renewable energy, alternative fuel for vehicles, energy efficiency and high-performance buildings are essential to our communities. Energy efficiency projects are of huge benefit to local communities from both an environmental and a jobs perspective. Energy efficiency concepts in buildings, constructions and retrofits —

**Mr Newton:** I thank the Member for giving way. Does the Member agree that a green economy cannot be market-led? Green economies require two things: a decrease in the overall quantity of goods being produced and an increase in democratic decisions about the production of goods. Therefore, market economics cannot be applied to a green economy.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an extra minute added to his time.

**Mr W Clarke:** Go raibh maith agat. I agree. The most important point to get across is that we need the political will to drive a green economy.

The main aspect of a green economy is that it should take people out of fuel poverty. The Member who spoke previously also talked about that. If we need a wake-up call, we just have to look at prices at the petrol pumps, at the price of fossil fuels and at the huge increases that were announced recently in electricity and gas charges. I think that this is the wake-up call. Fossil fuels will not get cheaper, and they will not be made available to our most vulnerable at a cheaper rate. We have to look at new technologies, and we need to reduce our oil consumption by promoting clean, renewable fuel alternatives.

There needs to be a cross-departmental approach to developing effective strategies, which include installing renewable power systems in our public sector buildings, such as the Assembly itself and its estate. We need to ensure that we put renewable power systems into all government buildings, and we need to work towards that in a phased approach. We need to look at district heating schemes and provide planning and resources to deliver them for our communities, particularly where there is a great onus on us to do so. Whenever we build a leisure complex, we should put a district heating scheme with it to provide energy to the houses that are in close proximity.

I will touch on employers who benefit from subsidies to provide renewables, such as offshore wind farms. There has to be an onus on providing a percentage of apprenticeships for local people, and that will, in turn, increase the opportunity to have well-paid jobs in our communities. Last week, I had discussions with a further education college that said that it needed resources to provide training for renewables. I am back to offshore wind energy: if we are to have that qualified workforce, we

need to put resources in place. The college told me that a Dutch firm was looking for the college to provide training. When that came to the Department, it said that it would not fund companies from outside the North of Ireland. I find it rather strange that we could be developing offshore wind opportunities and not have a skilled workforce to take up those jobs. I do not think that that is acceptable to the House or to the greater community.

Planning is a big issue, and I think that my colleague will discuss it in greater detail. However, when it comes to anaerobic digestion proposals or to single wind turbines, so is Nimbyism. Those proposals were meant to be fast-tracked, yet they are stalling in the system.

**Mr Newton:** Energy from waste —

**Mr W Clarke:** That is your opinion.

**Mr Newton:** Do you agree with that?

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

**Mr W Clarke:** Thank you for your leniency, a Cheann Comhairle. I support the motion.

**Mr Kinahan:** I too am extremely pleased to speak on and support the motion, as I think it is extremely important that we have a seismic shift, if I may use that term, towards a green economy. I am pleased to hear that all the other parties support the motion. I had written in my notes that I would make a little quip about climate change and about whether we believed that it was our fault. It is good to have our colleagues on the Benches to my left support the green economy.

At the beginning of the weekend, we heard President Obama tell us how important jobs are. Over the following two days, we were reminded of 9/11 and terrorism. If we add all that together, it makes the green economy even more important, as we will have greater concerns about whether there is enough money to create the jobs or to keep the economy going so that we have no terrorism at all. We have to get that balance right. We have to get it correct, because we must not forget the green economy. Therefore, I go back to my point: we need a seismic shift towards a green economy so that every decision we make leads in that direction.

I want to take a slightly different route from the other Members who have spoken and concentrate on getting this institution to do —

that is, to take the action that creates jobs and to rewire the economy so that it goes green. I read the brief that we had this weekend. It is all very highbrow; it is all motherhood and apple pie. There is very little action in it and very little listing of what should be done and whether we should be buying 200 turbines, planting 10,000 trees or borrowing £200 million. We, in the Chamber, need to get on, produce action lists and start making things happen on the ground.

The documents are full of beautiful prose, but we are not good at producing or having the skill to produce the plans that make it work. We need a timetable, we need to see those plans on the ground, and this institution needs to start specialising in making things happen. When people say, "No", let us ensure that it becomes, "Yes, let us find a way of doing it". We need action plans.

We have some targets, but let us have more targets. One target is to have 15% of energy consumed from renewable resources by 2020 or 12% by 2012. However, we need to do that in much more detail. We need to have targets so that we can achieve.

I sat at the alternative energy table at an NIEL conference, where half were for wind farms and half were not. We cannot go on discussing and arguing endlessly. We must produce actions and make decisions based on the information that we have today. We should have targets for hydro, wind, biomass energy, geothermal — I could go on. We need a broad mix. Let us have the decision, and let us have the actions on the ground.

We need to improve our planning system. I have been lobbied hard by alternative energy groups who cannot get their planning through because there are too many little details that need to be resolved. Let us find a way of fast-tracking it and making the rules less cumbersome.

The brief also said that we needed rigorous prioritisation of the activities. Exactly; let us see that happening. Let us see people in all government buildings looking at better ways of using energy. Let us look at all our uses of land to see how we can do things differently. We have the experts on the new wind turbines here in Harland & Wolff. Let us improve our skills and get back to action plans, timetables and a short-, medium- and long-term set of plans. However, we must ensure that we are dynamic and flexible and, most importantly, that we

deliver. If we borrow from Obama, we should start working together and start doing. Let us all ensure that no becomes yes. The UUP supports making the green economy a priority.

**Mr Speaker:** As we are approaching Question Time, I propose to suspend the debate. The first Member to speak after Question Time will be Alban Maginness.

*The debate stood suspended.*



2.30 pm

## Oral Answers to Questions

### Regional Development

#### Cycling

1. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the road infrastructure improvement programmes designed to improve protection of the growing number of cyclists using the roads network. (AQO 249/11-15)

**Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development):** I am grateful to the Member for his question. The Member and, indeed, the House, will agree that it is always a great tragedy when lives are lost on our roads. I was deeply saddened to learn of the recent deaths of two cyclists in April and August of this year. Of course, we had the more recent tragedies of the motorcyclists Wayne Hamilton and Adrian McFarland who, I understand, is being laid to rest later this afternoon. My thoughts and deepest sympathies go out to the families and friends of all of those people.

I stress that Roads Service is committed to providing safer roads for the growing number of road users, including cyclists and pedestrians, by using a range of measures, such as road safety engineering, traffic calming and enhancement of the pedestrian and cycling network. I recognise very much the benefits to be obtained from infrastructure investment in the short term through construction employment and, in the long term, as a catalyst for wider economic growth combined with the obvious environmental and health benefits of incorporating cycling into an integrated transport system.

The longer term Roads Service target for cycling is laid out in the Belfast metropolitan transport plan and identifies a Northern Ireland-wide target to quadruple the number of trips by cycle by the end of 2015. I am entirely committed to seeking to achieve that target. Cycling has benefited from several years of investment, and the cycling infrastructure laid out in the Belfast metropolitan transport plan is well established. In the 10-year period including this financial year, Roads Service will have invested £8.6

million in the provision of 225 kilometres of cycle lanes.

**Mr Speaker:** I should have alerted the House to the fact that questions 5 and 6 have been withdrawn. I remind Ministers of the Standing Order on the two minute limit. I know that I give Ministers some latitude round it, but I am reminding them.

**Mr A Maginness:** Minister, I think everybody will be appreciative of your words in relation to those cyclists and motorcyclists who have lost their lives. It is appropriate to make those comments. In order to encourage cycling, one has to make roads safe. I appreciate and welcome the Minister's commitment to quadrupling the number of cyclists on our roads. How many kilometres of cycling lanes have been built this year in order to achieve that target?

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful to the Member for his question. I am also mindful of the advice from the Speaker. After recent events within the Member's party, I wondered whether he would take the opportunity to indicate his line of thought. Perhaps he could use a cycling analogy to say whether, at this point, he wanted to ride to the rescue of the SDLP or, at least, get his spoke in. *[Laughter.]* I will ensure that the Member receives the information that he has requested as quickly as possible.

**Mr Spratt:** I too sympathise with the families of those who have lost their lives on the roads recently. The Minister recognised the very valuable amount that cycling puts into the local economy. You can see that when you look at well used cycle routes, such as the greenway and the towpath in my constituency. Will the Minister consider a long-term strategy to create more cycle ways and paths to increase the contribution to the local economy?

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful to the Member for his contribution. I very much agree. My Department does indeed promote sustainable modes of transport, including cycling, through its Travelwise initiative. Travelwise expenditure during the annual Bike Week campaigns, which relate solely to the promotion of cycling, has seen year-on-year increases over the past four years. My Department is also working on a draft active travel strategy, which is being brought forward under the guidance of the active travel forum. That draft strategy is expected to be issued for consultation later this year.

I can tell the Member that £3.3 million of capital funding has been secured to fund demonstration projects over the next four years, and the provision of cycling infrastructure will be considered as part of those projects.

**Mr Beggs:** I understand that investment in cycling was cut in the Budget that was approved earlier this year. Does the Minister recognise that cycling reduces congestion, has environmental benefits, and has health benefits for people such as me who occasionally cycle? Will he be arguing with his colleagues that other Ministers should recognise the cross-departmental benefits that come from cycling?

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful to the Member, who is indeed no mean cyclist himself. I got on my bike earlier this summer, and enjoyed it, for a limited period, of course.

There are significant challenges with the agreed budget that my Department has to work through and manage. That will reflect on some of the initiatives that we would have preferred to have done and would like to do. I will continue, of course, through monitoring rounds or any other opportunities, to try to improve the overall finance situation, with cycling and other transport issues in mind.

**Ms Lo:** One of the cyclists that the Minister mentioned recently lost his life tragically on the Ormeau Bridge. The daily flow of cyclists down the Ormeau Road is about 400. The majority of those cyclists go on the footpath, because it is too dangerous for them to go on the road. It is not really about how many miles of cycle lanes we build, it is about where those cycle lanes should be. Will the Minister urgently look at that stretch of road, which is the main arterial route into Belfast?

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful to the Member for her contribution. I am mindful of the sensitivities after that tragedy, and I do not want to specifically refer to that incident. I hear what the Member asks. Obviously, the paramount concern of my Department has to be safety. I will look again at that particular stretch of road, with officials, to see whether any further improvements can be brought forward.

## Aviation Strategy

2. **Mr McLaughlin** asked the Minister for Regional Development if he intends to respond to the review of the aviation strategy, and if so,

if he will ask that consideration be given to the development of an all-Ireland aviation strategy to remove inefficiencies and competitive disadvantage. (AQO 250/11-15)

**Mr Kennedy:** Mr Deputy Speaker — sorry, Mr Speaker. Demoted on your first day back.

Aviation, as the Member will know, is a reserved matter. My Department has been assisting the Department for Transport in London in its work to develop a new UK policy framework for aviation by March 2013. The policy development process is in its early stages, and my Department has been encouraging Northern Ireland's aviation stakeholders to respond to the Department for Transport's current consultation on a scoping document designed to shape the main elements of the new strategy. I am monitoring that process to ensure that Northern Ireland's specific aviation interests are being properly addressed.

As to the suggestion of an all-Ireland aviation strategy, I do not share the Member's enthusiasm for that and do not intend to progress it.

**Mr McLaughlin:** Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his answer, although I am sure that he is as aware as everyone in the House of the real challenges that air passenger duty imposes on our regional airports. Will he reflect on the fact that it would be very much in the interests of our regional airports — not just to their development but to their very survival — if air passenger duty could be included in the context of an updated aviation strategy? Perhaps he will rethink his approach.

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. I am not sure at which party he sought to love or cherish me, but, nonetheless, he raised the issue of air passenger duty. Of course, there is widespread concern in Northern Ireland's airports about that issue. It is a revenue and taxation matter, which is being pursued by Executive colleagues in the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP), Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) and the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM). I am aware of that issue and seek to see it resolved as quickly as possible. As I have indicated, I do not share the Member's enthusiasm for an all-island approach at this point. We would be sensible to wait for the outcome of the consultation by the Department for Transport in London, seek to

influence that and then bring things forward at that point.

**Mr Campbell:** I thank the Minister for his emphatic response in respect of any all-Ireland aviation strategy. In the assistance that he will offer to central government in discussions about an aviation strategy, will he ensure that a much more practical approach will be taken, rather than a political strategy, and that the close proximity that we have in all of Northern Ireland to Ayrshire and the Strathclyde region will be looked at rather than looking at Cork, Limerick and the Republic?

**Mr Kennedy:** I accept the point that the Member makes. It is a well-made point. We want to concentrate on how that strategy will impact on Northern Ireland airports in particular and on the travelling public of Northern Ireland. That will be the first useful part of the work, and I assure him that we will bring those issues to the fore.

**Mr Byrne:** Does the Minister accept that there has been a gross distortion to air passenger traffic through Northern Ireland airports in recent times because of air passenger tax? Given that two Irish aviation companies — Ryanair and Aer Lingus — operate out of Northern Ireland, would it not make sense if some moves were made to try to align what is happening in the North and what is happening in the Republic so that we are not at a continued economic disadvantage?

**Mr Kennedy:** I understand the point that the Member makes, and I draw his attention again to the fact that air passenger duty is not primarily an issue for my Department. Obviously, I have an interest in it, and we continue to be apprised of progress on the issue, but it is a revenue and taxation matter. I understand its implications, and they are potentially serious, but I am aware that Executive colleagues, including the First Minister and deputy First Minister and other Executive Ministers, are making active representations to find a resolution to it.

**Mr Agnew:** Regardless of whether we have a national aviation strategy, a regional aviation strategy or an all-Ireland aviation strategy, will the Minister ensure that any such strategy protects the needs of residents living close to city airports and/or under the flight paths?

**Mr Kennedy:** The Member raises some of the key issues that will impact locally on the

eventual outcome of such a strategy, and we are all aware, from a constituency point of view or from a departmental or ministerial point of view, of the concerns of many people, but everything has to be considered in the round, and that is how I intend to approach the issue.

### Roads: Newry and Armagh

3. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the total spend on minor road maintenance in the Newry and Armagh constituency in the last 12 months.  
(AQO 251/11-15)

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful for the Member's question. Roads Service's annual accounts for 2010-11 have yet to be laid before the Assembly and, as such, are still subject to audit adjustment. Therefore, I regret that I am not yet in a position to release details of spend in that financial year, but it is anticipated that the annual accounts will be cleared within the next few weeks. However, I will confirm that this year's maintenance budget for Roads Service's Newry and Mourne section is £6.4 million, and the Armagh section is £7.1 million.

I appreciate that those sections cover a high proportion of the road network in Northern Ireland as well as areas of the Newry and Armagh constituency, but I assure the Member that funding for those areas is distributed in a fair and equitable way on the basis of need.

### 2.45 pm

**Mr Irwin:** I thank the Minister for his reply. Does he accept that, given the state of many rural roads, it is imperative that the budget be increased to keep those roads up to standard?

**Mr Kennedy:** As someone who shares the same constituency as the Member and sees at first hand the impact of the lack of structural maintenance, I have great sympathy for his argument. The budget that I inherited and am now expected to manage has a shortfall of some £210 million for structural maintenance over the next four years, which is obviously a huge sum of money. It will be particularly difficult over the next couple of years. However, I will of course make representations during monitoring rounds and will keep bringing the issue to the attention of Executive colleagues.

The Executive continue to take decisions, and their most recent decision on student fees,

aside from its merits, means that my budget has been cut further. That will undoubtedly reflect in some shape or form on roads maintenance. We are all aware of the competing priorities. I am patently aware of the need to maintain a road infrastructure that makes it safe for people to travel on the roads of Northern Ireland.

**Mr D Bradley:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I was wondering whether the Minister travelled on the Tullyherron Road during his freewheeling this summer. If he did so, he will be aware of how bad the road surface is. I know that representations have been made to him on the issue in the past and, indeed, that he attended a site meeting there. Will the Minister undertake to have that road surveyed with a view to ensuring that its surface is improved?

**Mr Kennedy:** I compliment the Member on his stalking abilities in respect of my movements throughout the constituency. *[Laughter.]* I am aware of the Tullyherron Road and will make further enquiries, on a proper ministerial basis, into the present situation there. The Member knows that there is a huge network of roads in the Newry and Armagh constituency and, indeed, in other parts of Northern Ireland. Resources have been significantly trimmed, and we therefore have to make the best use of the money available. I know that the local section engineers Cindy Noble and her counterpart in the Armagh office, John Hall, are doing their level best with their staff to achieve as many structural improvements to those minor roads as possible and will continue to do so.

**Mr McCallister:** Has the Minister raised with his ministerial colleagues the wisdom of proceeding to invest so much in one single road project while he struggles to maintain the existing road network?

**Mr Kennedy:** The Member is a party colleague and will know that his question is largely led by the future of the A5 project, which I am not in a position to comment on. We are awaiting the outcome of the public inquiry. I understand entirely his point and the logic behind it. However, it would be unwise and improper of me to speculate in advance of the outcome of the inspector's report on how we will move forward.

## Belfast Rapid Transit System

4. **Mr P Maskey** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the plans and timescale for Belfast's rapid transit system.  
(AQO 252/11-15)

13. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on his Department's rapid transport proposals for Belfast.  
(AQO 261/11-15)

**Mr Kennedy:** With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will take questions 4 and 13 together. My Department is currently preparing an outline business case due for completion in 2012 that will identify the preferred options for a bus-based Belfast rapid transit system for the network routes, a procurement strategy, a commercial business model and a fair system.

As part of that outline business case process, a 12-week public consultation exercise will commence in October 2011. In the initial weeks of the consultation, public exhibitions will be held in east and west Belfast and in the city centre. That will give everyone the opportunity to view proposals, ask questions and make comments, which will assist my Department in planning the system. Following completion of the outline business case, DFP and Executive approval to proceed will be sought. Funding for the planning and commencement of initial implementation measures for Belfast rapid transit is included in the budget for 2011-12 to 2014-15.

Proposals for the Belfast rapid transit system include the provision of park-and-ride sites at key locations in the east and west of the city. One of the proposed locations, in Dundonald, will enable the use of the rapid transit system by those who commute from the Strangford constituency. The target date for the operation of the system is 2017. That is, of course, dependent on the availability of funding in the next budget period. At the appropriate time, my Department will bid for the required resources.

Later in September, I intend to make a study visit, along with members of the Committee for Regional Development, Belfast City Council, Lisburn City Council and Castlereagh Borough Council, to Nantes to see at first hand the operation of an integrated bus-based rapid transit system that is similar to the one proposed for Belfast.

**Mr P Maskey:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Go raibh maith agaibh, a Cheann Comhairle agus a Aire. I am delighted to hear that progress on the work is still ongoing. I appreciate, as the Minister said, that the consultation will open in October. It is an important project for the city; not only for the west and the east, but for the entire city of Belfast. Obviously, it is hoped that it will create employment opportunities for one of the most deprived areas of Belfast, namely my constituency of West Belfast.

With regard to bids that the Minister will propose for the rapid transit system, will he reiterate when he foresees that the system will be complete in the Belfast area?

**Mr Kennedy:** I accept the supplementary question that the Member has posed. I understand his interest in the issue. We met recently to look at such matters. However, I am loathe to give specific dates. Promises and indicators of timings that are not, perhaps, being met — and I can think of a significant one at this stage — seem to be a problem for the entire Executive at present. That causes considerable unrest among Members and the wider community. As things stand, 2017 is the target date. However, that is very much an aspiration and is subject to available finance.

**Mr Lyttle:** I, too, welcome the Minister's update on the Belfast rapid transit system. Modern, fast and efficient public transport will be much welcomed in Belfast. Given the Minister's stated aim to enhance Northern Ireland's existing cycle network, will he assure the House that the excellent Comber greenway dedicated cycle and walkway in east Belfast will not be considered as one of the preferred routes for the system?

**Mr Kennedy:** I hear what the Member says. I understand why he makes that point. I will consider it in due course.

**Mr Humphrey:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he agree that the project and plan that he has inherited from his predecessor is not, in fact, for a rapid transit system for Belfast? The system is for west and east Belfast with no inclusion of south and north Belfast? Does the Minister plan to include north Belfast? If not, what assurances can he give the House and the people of north Belfast that in years to come they will have a transport system that will allow them to travel to the city centre

and to other parts of the city as easily as those from east and west Belfast?

**Mr Kennedy:** I hear what the Member says and the passion with which he makes his point. Certainly, the intention is that we will create a rapid transit system for the city of Belfast that makes it easier for all of its citizens and visitors to gain speedy access to their various destinations whether it is for business, retail, tourism or other purposes.

I will be interested in the experience in Nantes. It is helpful that councils such as Belfast City Council, Castlereagh Borough Council and Lisburn City Council, as well as members of the Regional Development Committee, will be able to get an up-to-date sense and proper assessment of a model that we could potentially apply to Belfast and that would help all its citizens.

**Mr Copeland:** I thank the Minister for his indulgence with the questions. I, too, to a degree, echo Mr Lyttle's sentiment regarding the Comber greenway. I seek the Minister's assurance that, when arriving at a balance, importance will be attached not only to the money and the interests that will benefit from the decision as and when it is taken, but to the voice of the individual citizens who live on the fringes of these developments and may not always share the corporate vision of the future from their own little place. It is vital that progress is something that is done for us all, rather than being done by some of us to some of us.

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful to the Member for the view that he has expressed. I hope that I am still considered to be reasonably balanced in my judgements, and I seek to continue that consistency in dealing with an issue of this nature.

**Mr Speaker:** Question 6 has been withdrawn.

## Roads: Strangford

7. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he will increase his Department's budget for the repair of potholes in roads in the Strangford constituency. (AQO 255/11-15)

**Mr Kennedy:** Roads Service has advised that, in distributing the resources available for road maintenance, it makes allocations to the four Roads Service divisions on the basis of need, using a range of indicators. Roads

Service divisions use similar indicators when apportioning budgets across council areas, and I am satisfied that allocations are made on the basis of need in a fair and equitable way.

The Member will join me in welcoming the work under way in Kircubbin on the Parsonage Road as well as the work recently completed on the Deer Park Road.

**Mr McCarthy:** I am delighted to hear the Minister throw up to me about Kircubbin and Deer Park Road in Portaferry. Well done, Minister. It has been a long, long time in coming. Keep up the good work; there is much more to be done.

Does the Minister agree that it would be much better for his Department to fill in potholes and uneven surfaces before people are hurt, cars are damaged and the Department has to pay huge amounts in compensation?

**Mr Kennedy:** I thank the Member for his contribution. Of course, he is a man of many roads, and on an ongoing basis he raises them with me.

I take the point that structural maintenance is important: we had that debate earlier in response to one of the questions. The Member will know that the budget that I have to operate within is being significantly affected as a result of savings to be made. Over the next four years, I am losing £210 million from the maintenance budget, which clearly will mean pressures.

I am very confident, as I mentioned earlier, about the road section engineers in the Newry and Armagh area, and I am equally confident that both Stanley Lamb in Ards and Steven Duffy in the Down office will attempt to manage the situation as best they possibly can for all roads in their network.

## Employment and Learning

**Mr Speaker:** Questions 6 and 10 have been withdrawn.

### Queen's University, Belfast and Stranmillis University College: Merger

1. **Mr S Anderson** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on the proposed discontinuance of Stranmillis

University College and the suggested merger with Queen's University, Belfast.  
(AQO 264/11-15)

**Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning):** As the Member will know, a public consultation was carried out on the proposal earlier this year, and the responses received were discussed with the Committee for Employment and Learning.

However, several key stakeholder groups have subsequently requested meetings with me to discuss the proposal, and arrangements are being made to facilitate those. I expect to be able to make a decision shortly.

### 3.00 pm

**Mr S Anderson:** I thank the Minister for his response. I know from my contacts with academic staff at Stranmillis that they are strongly opposed to the proposed merger and that morale there is extremely low at present. Will the Minister confirm that there will be legislative guarantees to protect the continued delivery of the religious education curriculum? If the new college operates under the QUB charter of 1908, which is non-denominational, how will that work in practice?

**Dr Farry:** I thank Mr Anderson for his supplementary question. It is important to stress that, while Stranmillis is a non-denominational college, its student population has traditionally come from a Protestant background, and most go on to find employment in the controlled sector. In response to the consultation document, the Transferor Representatives' Council made significant representations on that. Certainly, the ethos of Stranmillis — we can have a discussion about what exactly that entails and how it is defined — will be carried through and reflected in the merger, if indeed that is what we take forward. Proper consideration will be given, through a stakeholder group, to all the different faith interests.

**Ms Gildernew:** Will the proposed merger lead to savings for the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL), and can that money be used to offset other pressures in the Department?

**Dr Farry:** The key points to stress in relation to Stranmillis are the urgent need for investment in the college and that it needs to be made financially sustainable. I stress that the only viable means by which that can be done seems

to be the proposed merger with Queen's University. We are talking about some £16 million being necessary for capital improvement. I toured the estate last week and saw for myself the very dilapidated state of some buildings. Indeed, some buildings have been condemned and are beyond use. In the event that the merger does not go ahead, that shortfall in capital investment will have to be found. There is no money available — we discussed student finance today — so that is going to be sitting there as an unaddressed and unresolved issue if we do not get the merger moving.

**Mr McDevitt:** I join the Minister in acknowledging the need for investment on the Stranmillis college site, and I welcome his commitment to identifying and acknowledging that need. Specifically, will the Minister give the House a commitment that teacher training will continue at both Stranmillis and St Mary's teacher training college for the foreseeable future and that that will remain the policy of his Department?

**Dr Farry:** Queen's University, Stranmillis and St Mary's are all independent institutions, and decisions on the future are for them to take. Funding will be made, as appropriate, to all those institutions. At this stage, we have the potential for a merger between Stranmillis and Queen's University to create the Stranmillis school of education at Queen's. That is certainly something that we are focused on at the moment.

**Mr Allister:** As I understand it, Minister, the only vote that this Assembly will have if the merger proceeds is on the order to discontinue Stranmillis. Will you give an undertaking that, to enhance democratic control, the vote will be taken at a sufficiently early stage to make a difference, that it will be determinative and that it will not simply be presented as a fait accompli if and when this destructive merger is presented?

**Dr Farry:** I certainly would not describe the merger as destructive in any sense, shape or form. It is something that the board of governors of Stranmillis requested on a unanimous basis, and, indeed, there is significant support for it from the staff. I make a commitment that whatever is required by way of legislation to get it through will be done. I am certainly very happy that the Assembly address the issue at the earliest opportunity, and I intend to make a decision

formally on the matter in the very near future and to set the wheels in motion in that regard.

## EU Agency Workers Directive

2. **Mr A Maskey** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline how his Department will implement the EU agency workers directive to reflect the particular circumstances of this region. (AQO 265/11-15)

**Dr Farry:** In August this year, the Department published its response to the public consultation on the agency workers directive, which sets out in some detail how the Department will transpose the directive in Northern Ireland. It addresses a number of specific local concerns that were raised by stakeholders, who included the Assembly Committee for Employment and Learning and Members of the Assembly.

One of the key elements in the transposition will be the inclusion of a 12-week qualifying period before the equal treatment provisions of the directive will apply. That, I believe, finds the optimum balance between affording agency workers additional employment rights and mitigating the financial impact of the directive on local businesses, many of which come from Northern Ireland's SME sector. Officials are currently working with representatives of agency workers, the recruitment sector and employers to develop guidelines on the practical application of the directive's regulations, which will specifically address local requirements. Finally, as is required under the directive's review provisions, my Department will actively monitor the effectiveness of the implementation arrangements, taking account of the views of stakeholders. A copy of the Department's full response is available on our website, and I will ensure that the Member is provided with a copy.

**Mr A Maskey:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his response, and I look forward to seeing the rest of the information. Is the Minister in a position to advise the House of how many workers will be affected by such a transposition?

**Dr Farry:** It will benefit a significant number of people. However, we must ensure that there is also flexibility for business. That is why the 12-week qualifying period is so important, as it will allow businesses the flexibility to respond rapidly to different labour needs. However, it

is important that the real protections come in in the longer term and as workers bed down. In practice, those workers are the same and should be treated the same as others who work in those organisations on a more formal basis.

**Mr Nesbitt:** The Minister spoke about the specific needs of Northern Ireland's private sector. Will he be specific and define those needs and tell me how he intends to shape the directive to meet those needs?

**Dr Farry:** I thank Mr Nesbitt for his question. The policy has already been discussed during a debate in the Assembly, and it was endorsed by the Executive as a whole. We reflected the parameters of the national agreement on a UK-wide level, which was negotiated between the CBI and the TUC. There was a particular issue with those negotiations, because the local trade unions are not formally part of the TUC structure. However, I have highlighted that and responded to it.

We have reflected the overall balance between the needs of business and the interests of workers. In the absence of the 12-week qualifying period, the costs to businesses would have risen significantly, with hundreds of millions of pounds in additional costs. What we have done is good news for business and for workers.

**Mrs D Kelly:** The Minister made the point about recognition being given to the trade unions in Ireland. What specific weight will he give to their concerns and issues, such as rights to maternity leave?

**Dr Farry:** The interests of the trade unions locally will be fully taken into account in implementing the directive, and I have already given that commitment. There is a specific issue about how we got into this situation as a result of the national discussions and the slight anomaly of the local trade unions not being part of the TUC. I have written to the Minister responsible for employment law at a UK-wide level to highlight our situation.

Members may be interested to note that Northern Ireland is the only devolved region to which employment has been devolved, with Scottish and Welsh employment matters still being run out of London. It is important that we make our voice known in wider national discussions.

**Ms Lo:** I very much support better protection for agency workers, but I also understand that it may deter some employers from employing workers from the EU. Does the Department have any means whereby it can monitor the level of recruitment and reflect on that to help employers to cope better with the directive?

**Dr Farry:** I thank my colleague for her question. The Department is very willing to work closely with business, trade unions and other representative groups to ensure the smooth implementation of the directive. It is a complex issue, which applies in many different respects, and the interests of all stakeholders will certainly be taken into account. We are also happy to review matters and come back to the House if that is deemed to be appropriate.

### **Queen's University, Belfast and Stranmillis University College: Merger**

3. **Mr P Maskey** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the concerns submitted by St Mary's University College regarding the proposed discontinuance of Stranmillis University College and the suggested merger with Queen's University, Belfast. (AQO 266/11-15)

**Dr Farry:** I thank Mr Maskey for his question. The concerns raised by St Mary's University College were in its response to the public consultation document on the proposed merger between Stranmillis and Queen's University. The college stated that, before any decisions are made:

*"The protection of the tradition, values and ethos of St Mary's (in the context of preserving educational diversity and pluralism in Northern Ireland) should be taken into account."*

It also commented that the college's traditions, values and ethos and its relationship with the maintained sector should be protected in legislation passed at the same time as legislation enabling the merger. I am due to meet Mr Maskey in the near future to discuss those issues, and I look forward to our meeting.

**Mr P Maskey:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I appreciate that that meeting will take place soon, but I will try to tease out some further stuff prior to it. There are concerns, and, if there is no proper engagement or consultation, a bit of a fear factor can sometimes be created. Sometimes it may



be the case or it may not be the case, but people have an understanding of that. Such consultation should continue and on a much larger scale than it has up to this point. Is there a possibility that St Mary's itself can increase its student intake?

**Dr Farry:** St Mary's is an autonomous body under law, and the Department very much respects that. It has its own governing body, and it determines its future strategic direction. Its views on the way forward are very well known.

As regards student numbers, I stress that we are training too many teachers in Northern Ireland. That leads to frustration at the other end when people are not able to access employment locally. So I think that we need to look realistically at how we manage student flows and expectations and respect the range of institutions that work in this area.

The numbers of teachers going through the system are actually determined by the Department of Education rather than by my Department, although my Department ultimately picks up the cost. Given the various pressures that I face, I am keen to discuss the issue with my colleague Mr O'Dowd in the very near future.

**Mr Speaker:** Once again, I remind Members that they need to rise in their place if they want to ask a supplementary question.

**Mr Storey:** I thank the Minister for referring to the fact that we train too many teachers. He concluded those comments by mentioning a meeting with the Education Minister. Does he accept that it is untenable for one Department to continue to set the numbers and for another to pick up the tab, given the way in which St Mary's intake figures have been dealt with over the past number of years? Will he give an undertaking to the House that he will look at the issue of the duplication of teacher training provision in Northern Ireland? As is the case in education, those structures will be untenable in further and higher education in the future.

**Dr Farry:** I have several comments to make. I am very eager to discuss the issue with John O'Dowd, because I think that we need to come to terms with it. Against that, I would say that I am committed to ensuring that we train teachers in Northern Ireland for the fullest range of situations that they will face. Whether that needs to be done through separate institutions or whether it can be done through single bodies

is a debate that we can have. Certainly, we need to avoid a one-size-fits-all approach to teacher training, and I suggest that there may be a number of ways in which that can be taken forward. In saying that, of course, we have to work closely with the different autonomous institutions, respect their independence and engage with them constructively to find a way forward for teacher training in Northern Ireland that we can all sustain and stand over in the years to come.

**Mr D McIlveen:** Does the Minister's last answer mean that, if a proposed merger went ahead, there would be facility to make Protestant teachers fully qualified to teach in Roman Catholic maintained schools?

**Dr Farry:** Let me put it this way: there is a very distinct ethos in the Catholic maintained sector in issues of pastoral care and so on. However, a lot of the subjects that are taught, whether in a Catholic maintained school or a different school, are reflected in the common curriculum under which we all work. Whether a teacher is from a Protestant or a Catholic background and whether he or she is straight, gay or a member of an ethnic minority is irrelevant, provided that they are a professional teacher who is capable of teaching the same core curriculum in the various settings that we have. However, the issue around such regulation is not one for my Department: it lies under equality law, which is for OFMDFM to take forward.

**3.15pm**

## Benefits

4. **Lord Morrow** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline his Department's links with the Department for Social Development in relation to the reassessment of people in receipt of sickness and incapacity benefits. (AQO 267/11-15)

**Dr Farry:** I thank Lord Morrow for his question. My Department has a key role to play in getting people back to work and has a complementary project in support of the Department for Social Development's Social Security Agency's reassessment project. The aim is to ensure that an appropriate level of support is available to individuals who move from incapacity benefit to the employment and support allowance or jobseeker's allowance, to help them to prepare for and move into employment.

Moving from incapacity benefit to employment and support allowance can be considered a positive step and is designed to help everyone who is able to work to move from benefits into employment. Research has shown that work increases confidence, health, well-being and self-esteem, as well as benefiting the economy.

**Lord Morrow:** I thank the Minister for his welcome answer. I have a supplementary question about what might change around disability. Will the provisions of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 be applicable and protected in all cases where there are changes as a result of anything that will happen in the days ahead?

**Dr Farry:** It is useful to draw a distinction between the two roles that are played. A lot of the assessment is done through the Social Security Agency, and there has to be sensitivity towards disability issues. We need to be sensitive about how we engage with people with disabilities in the employment service. The disability employment service is a distinct strand within the overall employment service that provides a full range of support for those with health-related conditions to find and stay in work.

If someone has a disability, we have to be sensitive and recognise that. Equally, however, we should not write them off. Whether it is a mental issue, a physical issue or a combination of both, there are many people who can make a contribution to work and would like the opportunity to do so. That may not necessarily be a nine-to-five job, five days a week; it may be part-time work. The forthcoming reforms may make that a little bit easier.

**Mr Brady:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I listened to the Minister speaking on the radio last week about the 76,000 people who are being migrated from incapacity benefit to jobseeker's allowance. He certainly tried to seem positive, and he said that it would take approximately three years for this to reach fruition. One concern shared by claimants and stakeholders in this area is about what training staff will be given to deal with people with particular mental health problems and other disabilities, such as autism and so on. Can the Minister reassure us that such people will be dealt with in a proper and sensitive manner?

**Dr Farry:** I am happy to give Mr Brady that reassurance. Those are similar questions to the ones that I asked myself as our policy

around service delivery was being formulated. I am sensitive to the fact that the population in Northern Ireland, particularly those in receipt of benefits, is diverse. It is important that staff are trained in understanding the complex needs that people have. I echo the point that we should not write people off just because they have mental health conditions. The employment service is about encouraging people back to work, not forcing them into it. The focus will be on employability skills in the first instance and giving people confidence that they can consider new challenges rather than feeling that they have to step out of the workplace for ever.

**Mrs Overend:** Employment services seem to be underfunded. Will the Minister confirm whether he has allocated or set aside funding to be sufficiently able to deal with the increase in the number of people seeking work? Does he have enough staff to deal with the increase, or will he recruit more staff for employment services?

**Dr Farry:** I thank Mrs Overend for that question. It is true that our employment service is under severe strain. We are currently configured to deal with around 35,000 people in relation to jobseeker's allowance, and we are currently pushing towards 61,000 claimants on the books. Clearly, that puts pressure on staff. On top of that, we have to deal with the forthcoming migration from incapacity benefit. We have secured some additional resources through the Executive and through the Social Security Agency, which will assist us in increasing the number of staff and providing a better service to people. However, it is important that I stress the sheer scale of the challenges facing us. Over the months to come, when we start developing future work programmes in line with wider welfare reform in the rest of the UK, those challenges will become even more acute. Although we can maintain parity at the moment in the level of benefits that are paid out, parity also applies to the level of service that we provide in Northern Ireland, and there is a real question that we will have to face as an Executive and Assembly over the months to come about how we sustain that.

### Higher Education: Tuition Fees

5. **Mr Kinahan** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning when he will announce his decision on the future of student tuition fees. (AQO 268/11-15)

**Dr Farry:** I thank Mr Kinahan for his question, and I am happy to answer questions 5 and 10, although I think that question 10 has been withdrawn.

As Members will be aware, I made a statement to the Assembly this morning which contained full details of the position on tuition fees, student support and the funding of the higher education system in Northern Ireland.

**Mr Kinahan:** I thank the Minister for his answer, and I apologise for not hearing him this morning, but I am fairly certain that I am touching on an issue that was not fully explored. Does the Minister agree that a modest rise to, say, £4,500 per student would have been affordable and would have given his Department and other Departments more resources, particularly for apprenticeships?

**Dr Farry:** I thank Mr Kinahan for his question. It is probably a brave question to ask in the manner that he did. The budget that I inherited as Minister was premised on fees being introduced at a level of £4,500. Obviously, the attraction of an increase in fees would have been to bring additional resources into the system in Northern Ireland, and it would perhaps have avoided to some extent either the Executive or my Department identifying other resources to make up the shortfall. However, I think that it is fair to say that there was no political consensus in Northern Ireland for any rise in fees beyond the level of inflation. Once that was the political reality that we were working in, the issue was about confirming the budgetary support to enable the policy to move ahead. That is what the Executive achieved last Thursday.

**Mr Humphrey:** Unfortunately, I too missed the statement this morning, but I would like the Minister to assure the young people in the areas that I represent and those that adjoin them who are not seeking to go into third-level education at university but are looking to have vocational training in traditional trades and apprenticeships and to go into the world of work, industry, commerce, tourism and so on that they have a future as well. Can he assure the House that the freeze on tuition fees that he announced last week will not have an adverse effect on the courses that ensure the education of those young people and prepare them for the world of work in the years to come?

**Dr Farry:** I thank Mr Humphrey for his question. I am very happy to stress that I am committed

to addressing the skills agenda in Northern Ireland across a broad front. Although that includes what happens in universities, it also includes further education, apprenticeships, essential skills and addressing issues regarding employability and those who are currently out of the labour force. I can also give a commitment that the funding package that I announced today has not come at all at the expense of what is currently invested in further education and those other areas. Of course, we have a wider and very challenging financial settlement overall but, in relation to this discrete issue, there is not a penny coming from any of those services to fund what I announced for higher education today.

**Mr P Ramsey:** I will follow on from my colleague's supplementary question. In relation to the statement to the House on fees, is it not correct that the Minister is depending on a saving of almost £20 million that will come out of the moneys that are set aside for young people in the education maintenance allowance? As my colleague pointed out, it is those young people who will be deprived of college places if that money is reduced. There are 40,000 people here who are not in employment, education or training, and the numbers are increasing. Will such a course of action not worsen the situation?

**Dr Farry:** It is worth stressing how the £40 million gap is being addressed, just to make sure that people fully understand the facts. The EMA element, to which Pat Ramsey referred, comes out of the Executive's half of the overall equation. However, I particularly want to stress that any reform of EMA that will be taken forward by John O'Dowd and me will not be designed to stop anyone accessing further education or continuing their secondary education. We are wholly committed to and understand the rationale of ensuring that people from disadvantaged backgrounds are encouraged to stay in education.

The point that we are making is that there is significant inefficiency in the current EMA policy, and money is going to people who are telling surveys that it is not making a difference to their personal decision to stay in education. Those are resources that we are spending inefficiently as an Executive; in effect, they are what we call in economics a dead weight. Any reform of EMA is designed to capture that inefficiency; it is not designed to abolish the scheme at all or even to stop people in the system who clearly benefit

from it today. I fully expect that that will continue into the future.

**Mr Lyttle:** I join the House in welcoming the good news that has been delivered today. Does the Minister plan to undertake any work with his colleagues in the Executive, the Minister of Education and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to ensure that people engage in sound career planning when they decide to take up further or higher education?

**Dr Farry:** I can report that I have very good relations with the Minister of Education and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. Indeed, John O'Dowd and I have arranged to meet on a regular and recurring basis to discuss matters of common interest to our Departments. The issue of careers planning cuts across the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning. We have a careers strategy in place, and I am keen to review that strategy in light of a rapidly changing economic and educational situation in Northern Ireland. It is something that John O'Dowd and I will discuss in the near future.

**Mrs Overend:** The Minister has assured us of his commitment to upskilling the citizens of Northern Ireland. I want him to clarify what he said about needing to review the financing of students from Northern Ireland who may need to travel outside Northern Ireland to attend certain courses. He also said that he is unwilling to consider the financial implications of reviewing the financing of student funding here. Is that the case?

**Dr Farry:** I am not quite sure what I am supposed to review after having just announced policies today. As things stand, I intend to continue funding Northern Ireland students who go to Great Britain to allow them to borrow fees of £9,000 and cover the notional loan subsidy costs associated with that. Until we see what happens in practice, we do not know what the cost implications of that policy will be. I have made assumptions in my budget to enable that to move forward, but, if the actual trend is significantly ahead of what we have planned for, that will create an unaccounted cost pressure. In those circumstances I will certainly have a duty to review the policy. As things stand, rather than cut it off today, it is important that I preserve that choice and enable students to access courses in Great Britain, particularly those that they cannot access here. I also

recognise that, with increased demand for local places, there will be students who miss out who will benefit from higher education if they can go to Great Britain, provided that they promise to come back.

**Mr Speaker:** Question 6 has been withdrawn.

### **South Eastern Regional College: Killyleagh**

7. **Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what discussions he has had with the South Eastern Regional College regarding the use of its Killyleagh premises as a library. (AQO 270/11-15)

**Dr Farry:** I have had no discussions with the South Eastern Regional College about the use of its Killyleagh premises as a library. However, I am aware that there are ongoing discussions between the college and Libraries NI. Accommodation at Killyleagh, part of which is used by the library, transferred to the South Eastern Regional College at its incorporation. There has been significant investment in its other campuses, and the college considers the Killyleagh premises to be surplus to requirements for education purposes.

Libraries NI indicated that the future of Killyleagh Library will be determined as part of its strategic review. In an effort to be helpful, the South Eastern Regional College has agreed to await the outcome of that review before making any decision regarding the premises.

### **3.30 pm**

**Mr Hamilton:** Now that I have drawn the issue to the Minister's attention, will he assure me and, more importantly, the users of Killyleagh Library that the South Eastern Regional College will do nothing to impede the maintenance and continuance of a library on the current site, if that is ultimately Libraries NI's decision?

**Mr Speaker:** I will allow the Minister a quick answer.

**Dr Farry:** The college is an independent body. I will certainly bring the matter to its attention, so it will hear what the Member just said.

## Private Members' Business

### Green Economy

*Debate resumed on motion:*

*That this Assembly calls on the Executive to make the development of the green economy a priority within the next Programme for Government and to affirm that an overarching strategy for the development of the green economy should be implemented; and further calls on the Executive to bring together existing policies and initiatives, to identify gaps and to address them. — [Ms Lo.]*

**Mr A Maginness:** I welcome the motion and the debate, and I congratulate Ms Lo on bringing the motion to the Floor of the House.

Ireland, north and south, has a unique set of natural resources. We have wind aplenty — as we can see today — we are surrounded by the sea, and we have the ability to grow crops, such as grass, rapidly and well. That unique set of natural resources puts us in pole position to exploit the renewable energy agenda. We can use the wind, the sea and our natural vegetation to produce renewable energy. Most other European countries, particularly those in mainland Europe, do not have those advantages, so, given that unique set of natural resources, Northern Ireland has a particular advantage.

So what should the Assembly and the Executive be doing? We should be leading the charge. We should be setting the pace on the renewable energy agenda, which, of course, is an integral part of the green economy to which Ms Lo's motion refers. We have to energise the Executive to develop renewable energy and other aspects of the green agenda. We know that there is plenty of potential, so, given our circumstances — we are in recession, and our economy is in the doldrums and not growing as fast as it should — we should put every effort into developing the green agenda.

Earlier this year, the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, which I chair, produced a report on renewable energy. The report presented a number of renewable energy issues to the Assembly, and anyone who believes in and is committed to that agenda should read the report. We said that there is enormous potential here and that a greater emphasis should be placed on developing all forms of renewable energy, not just wind. We said that we should diversify and that there is a need

to integrate energy policy and economic policy, because both go together. Furthermore, in order to develop the economy, the Committee wants us to develop indigenous energy resources. We have the potential, so we must use it.

The green new deal, which is a separate but related issue, is very ambitious. The Green New Deal Group's agenda is to produce a situation in which, over the next three years, more than 100,000 homes will be renovated to make them energy efficient.

That is an ambitious target, but we need to be ambitious. The Government have provided £12 million for that agenda, which is insufficient to deal with the problem of energy efficiency.

We have no control over our incomes in Northern Ireland. We have no control over the international price of energy, but we do have control over the development of energy efficiency in our homes and workplaces. The emphasis should be on that green new deal.

**Ms Lo:** I thank the Member for giving way. I had a conversation with members of the Bryson Charitable Group about the green new deal and retrofitting homes. It has plans for two pilot schemes, but those have been put on the backburner, and there is a question mark over them.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an extra minute in which to speak.

**Mr A Maginness:** That was a timely and worthwhile intervention. There should be a new look at the retrofitting of our homes for energy efficiency. It is one thing that we can control and is one way in which we, as an Assembly and an Executive, can reduce the level of fuel poverty in Northern Ireland.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member should bring his remarks to a close.

**Mr A Maginness:** I will conclude there. I support the motion, and I think that the Committee generally supports it. I wish —

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

**Mr A Maginness:** — the Member well in promoting it.

**Mr Boylan:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún. I speak in favour of the motion. Given the present climate, if you mention the green economy and the green new deal, other

Departments and other areas will argue whether it should be a priority. However, there is an opportunity through the programme. We should look at new models and new ways to bring things forward to try to address the recession and the hard times that we are in, and the green economy is one method to do that.

In the previous Assembly term, scrutiny Committees challenged all Departments on their respective budgets and how they prioritised. Unfortunately, through the climate change debate that I experienced in the Committee for the Environment, we saw how Departments operated in silos. We all know that Departments have their responsibilities, but we saw that Departments reacted to things such as EU infractions in respect of the green new deal, waste infrastructure and everything else that is inclusive of the green economy. We saw that Departments only reacted rather than being proactive, so we need to get all Departments to work together across the board to try to address the issue. It is up to the Executive solely to bring that about. The motion states that we should bring together existing policies. There are some good policies, and good collaborative work has been done, from which we must learn. We have worked with statutory agencies. We do not need to reinvent the wheel, but there is work that we can continue.

I will touch on some of the points that will bring us forward. We need to introduce new innovative technologies. I was sad to hear my colleague talk about the Dutch firm that could not get people from here because they were not trained. We need to look at our universities. We are all talking about job losses and everything else. Surely there will come a point at which we need to train the young people who leave schools or universities and cannot get jobs. We need to look at that. I would like to think that some work has been done in that field, because I believe that they have a contribution to make.

On the issue of EU regulations in respect of the environment —

**Mr Newton:** Is it not somewhat hypocritical of the Member's party to support the motion while having a policy that is opposed to energy from waste?

**Mr Boylan:** No, it is not. We are talking about the green economy and bringing forward new models. Earlier, the Member talked about the market. I do not know whether he said "market-

based" or "market-led". There needs to be competition, as he mentioned to my colleague earlier.

**Mr Newton:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Boylan:** No, I have already given way. *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order. The Member has the Floor, and he has taken an intervention already. The Member will have a minute added to his time.

**Mr Boylan:** I will let the Member clarify his point, as long as he is quick.

**Mr Newton:** I will read out what I said so that there is no ambiguity:

*"a green economy cannot be market led. Green economies require two things: a decrease in the overall quantity of goods being produced and an increase in democratic decisions about production of goods."*

Market economies do neither.

**Mr Boylan:** I thank the Member for his intervention, and I will go back to the point about open competition. *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order.

**Mr Boylan:** I cannot see how it is open competition when those businesses have not even been established yet.

**Mr F McCann:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Boylan:** No, I cannot. I want to make this very important point. We have heard all of the ideas that have come forward, but one of the key issues is leadership in the Assembly, and I want to raise the matter of planning. This week, the Minister refused to adopt a planning policy, PPS 24, which would have gone some way to help with efficient and effective planning. There has been a failure to address the issue of the review of public administration (RPA). If we address RPA and the governance issue, we will be able to move planning to local councils and get more authority there.

We are talking about renewable energy and wind turbines, but the policy and the guidelines on those make development very difficult. We are promoting something that the policy does not facilitate. The Minister of the Environment has not addressed the issue of resources and aggregates mapping.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member will draw his remarks to a close.

**Mr Boylan:** One of the key issues is planning. That is part of the debate, and I hope that the Minister will take that on board. I hope that all Ministers will play their part in bringing forward the green economy.

**Mr Nesbitt:** I welcome the opportunity to expand on the Ulster Unionist Party's policy on the economy. I have said previously that we believe that rebalancing is not a two-dimensional action involving purely the private sector and the public sector but that there is a third leg to the stool, namely the social economy. It is the so-called not-for-profit sector, although we see it as profitable, even if that profit is not measured in pounds and shillings. The profit comes in the development of individuals and communities. All three sectors must play their part if we are to exploit the potential of the green economy. We believe that the green economy should be a priority of the Programme for Government.

In the industrial revolution —

**Mr A Maginness:** Does the Member agree that not only should the green economy be a part of the Programme for Government but that we should have a Programme for Government? We have yet to see that.

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

**Mr Nesbitt:** I thank the Member for his intervention. I fear that he confuses me with the First Minister. I very much agree.

During the industrial revolution, Northern Ireland made its mark on the world stage by choosing its sectors: shipbuilding, linen and rope works. It is the job and the responsibility of the Executive to choose the sectors that will lead us to our next golden age.

I had the great honour and privilege some years ago to work as a consultant for Sir George Quigley during his time as chairman of the Institute of Directors when he came out with the big idea to establish an economic corridor between Belfast and Dublin — an eastern seaboard corridor to boost the private sector on the whole island. Today, we offer a modern twist on that proposal — a green economic corridor between Belfast harbour and the Ards peninsula.

### 3.45 pm

Before I am accused of being geocentric, let me say that there are probably seven good reasons why this makes sense. First, at one end of that corridor, Belfast harbour is currently investing some £50 million in an offshore wind logistics terminal for DONG Energy of Denmark, which will farm wind in the Irish Sea on a quite massive scale. Secondly, at the far end of the corridor, in the Strangford lough narrows is SeaGen, which is a world leader in tidal energy experimentation. Thirdly, in between, Portavogie is a once proud fishing village where the fleet has shrunk and struggled against the incessant and yearly demands of the EU for people there not to play their trade. However, with DONG coming on board, they see a bright future as part of that logistical supply chain into the Irish Sea.

Fourthly, the Ards campus of the South Eastern Regional College (SERC) is already embracing the green economy, and I am particularly impressed with its partnerships with the private sector through ventures that are eager to test the commercial viability of the campus's products. There is a clear synergy between the SERC in Ards and the development at Belfast harbour, particularly the composite research and development facility that is proposed there. Indeed, those two unlock the further potential for agglomeration economics, with the final aim of the green corridor becoming a UK centre of excellence for research and development and innovation for the green economy.

My seventh and final point is that those partnerships are ideal for unlocking EU backing, particularly through the seventh framework programme for research and technological development, FP7, which, as we all know, is worth some €50 billion in the coming years. That is an enormous cake, and, with something such as the green economy corridor, we could help ourselves to quite a slice.

I will finish with a quote from William Shakespeare that is apposite to green energy, particularly at sea. The bard said:

*"There is a tide in the affairs of men.*

*Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;*

*Omitted, all the voyage of their life*

*Is bound in shallows and in miseries."*

If the House is to provide the leadership that the people expect of us, it is time to catch that tide. I support the motion.

**Mr Molloy:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I support the motion, and I congratulate Anna Lo and the Alliance Party for bringing it to the House. The green economy is a very important issue, and the first question that I want to ask is why it has taken so long to come up. We should have started to put it in place in the early stages of the Executive. Unfortunately, that has not happened. When we had the Executive programme funds (EPFs), we suggested that the various Departments could be brought together to bring about a green economy in different ways to ensure the viability of different projects for the future.

However, this time, the Executive need to have a co-ordinating role across all the Departments, because, unfortunately, Departments still seem to operate a silo mentality, and we need to get an overarching role to ensure that the green economy can kick off. It has taken so long because the Department would not look outside the box and would not look at ideas bigger than what it had been doing for many years. As my colleague said, the Environment Committee needs to deal with the issue of planning, because every proposal that is put forward for either single wind turbines or for wind farms meets with opposition from everyone, and the planners are turning down most of those applications at the present time.

Farmers want to diversify and have the opportunity to create their own energy, and that is being turned down. Anaerobic digestion is the use of farm material — slurries — to create energy from waste. Energy is not obtained from waste just from an incinerator, as Robin Newtown indicated. That is not green energy; that is bad energy. That is stale, burned energy that is not good economy. We want to see a green economy, not one that is outdated, and incineration is of the past not the future. We need to look at the possibilities on farms to develop the use of waste to make energy, and that can be done in a simple way —

**Mr Newton:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Molloy:** No, I will not. In the past, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) has provided funding for tanks and silos in which to keep slurry. The next stage should be to fund anaerobic digestion

to use that waste to generate electricity. DARD also needs to support the development of energy on the farm, the use of that slurry, so it is not seen as waste but energy.

I go back to planning. Unless the Planning Service is more flexible in its approach and approves applications, we will not go forward on the green economy. It has to develop a new, flexible, encouraging approach and come up with strategies to do this. We are far behind the rest of Europe on this. We visited farms six years ago in Norway where slurry was collected to create energy to run the bus company and heat an entire village. All that is long-established practice in Europe, and we are, again, far behind.

European funding is available for those types of projects. We should be co-ordinating across Departments and linking with the countries across Europe to ensure that we maximise the support available from Europe for this. European funding is essential and it is important that Departments start to drawdown the maximum available, which Barroso identified as a means of funding future developments in this country. So, it is important to look towards the green economy. It is important that we start to get our studies in place to be able to make sure that we maximise it. The European Union is one aspect of trying to maximise the funding available to Departments and to the farming and rural community to make sure that they take best advantage of it.

Another issue relates to the Department for Social Development (DSD) and housing. At the moment, we have a bad Housing Executive policy that means we are down to a single fuel for heating a house, which many people are finding particularly difficult. Across Europe, it is compulsory to have dual-fuel systems in housing to prevent being confined to one form of fuel. We need to find ways to bring forward new environmentally friendly housing stock that has alternative heating systems and sustainable development as part of the infrastructure.

Hopefully, the motion will pass and we will start to get Departments coming forward with new ideas that will lead to a new solution and the green economy.

**Mr Allister:** The green economy is one of those fashionable topics to talk about, around which, when I listen to most discussions, I conclude that all critical faculties have been suspended. We have had some examples of that today.



The apple-pie aura that envelops it makes it unpopular to ask any difficult questions, but ask them I will. That is not because I oppose in any way a clean, efficient economy or a clean, efficient energy policy, but because I am concerned about what we can afford and what works. It is also because I refuse to be swept along by the green hysteria, and that is nothing to do with the colour, it is about the topic.

Look at our energy prices and ask how renewables have assisted. They have not. Some renewable energy sources are among the most expensive and inefficient. The wind is only of use when it blows. The drive forward into offshore wind energy will be the most expensive venture of all. Some use the whole green debate and hype it to such an extent that they get carried away into thinking that we have to put green taxes on everything. Now, if you want to fly, you pay exorbitant prices.

**Mr Agnew:** Does the Member not accept that all our energy sources, whether they are fossil fuel based or renewable energy — oil, gas or nuclear — have required subsidies?

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an extra minute.

**Mr Allister:** Thank you. The subsidy is greatest on the renewables, compounding the energy cost situation. The EU has imposed wholly unrealistic targets on emissions, which has imposed huge costs on industry as we struggle through the worst recession in years.

I have not heard too much reference in the debate to any outside deliberations. However, I noticed that the TaxPayers' Alliance produced some interesting figures that show that the burden of green taxes and regulations is in excess of £26.4 billion. In large measure, that is driven by the increasing price on emissions under the trading policy and the increase in the costs that we as a nation must bear because of the renewables obligation. All of that increases electricity prices, which we have recently seen go through the roof again.

Spain's economy is worth considering. Under its socialist Government of a few years ago, it went head over heels for a massive green economy programme. Where is it today? An independent report commissioned in 2009 by the Juan de Mariana Institute demonstrated that every green job created in Spain cost 2.2 ordinary jobs because of the export of jobs that resulted from swingeing restrictions and the subsidies that

were directed towards the green economy. How many jobs are those in the House who advocate this policy going to create and how many are they going to lose? That is the question that few wish to face.

The USA introduced a green new deal in 2009. It promised to spark economic recovery and create three million jobs. Where are they? Since then, unemployment has increased. How is the great collective brain that is the local politic going to be able to do what the United States and Spain could not do? At the heart of all of this is responsible spending and learning to live within what is affordable. Jobs cannot be conjured up just by saying, "green new deal". Spain and the USA are testament enough to that.

**Ms Lo:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Allister:** Not at the moment.

Northern Ireland needs to see a dramatic fall in energy costs, and everything points the other way. One of the fuellers of that is the headlong, unthinking push for the green new deal. My goodness, we cannot even buy cheaper light bulbs any more. However, this motion calls for more of the same: more of the same crippling green taxation, more restraint on the operation of business, more jobs driven abroad and more increases in energy costs. I certainly do not. Therefore, I oppose the motion.

**Mr Agnew:** I hope to address some of Mr Allister's points, as well as to support the motion and promote the green economy. That will be no surprise to anyone. A green economy is characterised by resource efficiency, social inclusivity and low-carbon living. In other words, in a green economy, the needs of the economy, the people and the environment in which they live and work are balanced.

Investing in the green economy will help us to meet a number of policy objectives. Jobs can be created, and to back up my point I will refer to the housing documents of phase 1 of the green new deal that was produced by the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), the Irish Congress of Trade Unions and Friends of the Earth, which are among its member bodies.

They estimate that 10,000 to 15,000 jobs could be created or sustained in Northern Ireland through investment in that housing scheme. I do not think that the TaxPayers' Alliance has enough expertise in this area to be trusted as a source.

**4.00 pm**

Through investing in energy efficiency measures, we will not only create jobs but help address policies such as those to tackle fuel poverty. Investing in renewable energy production will help us increase our energy independence. Regardless of whether we believe that the subsidies required for green energy are acceptable, the fact is that oil and gas are running out. Dr Birol, chief economist at the International Energy Agency, stated that we hit peak oil in 2006. Therefore, the price of oil is only going to go up. We know how damaging that has been to our economy already and to people struggling to heat their homes, so we must do something to address that. Investing in renewable energy is a good way of doing that, as it meets a number of policy objectives.

Our poor public transport infrastructure has been pointed to by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board as a barrier to achieving our target to double tourism revenue by 2020. Given that 40,000 jobs are reliant on our tourism industry, there is no doubt that it is an important sector of our economy. Clearly, investment in sustainable transport will have economic, social and environmental benefits.

Those are some of the benefits of investment in a green economy, but I use the term investment advisedly, because investment is exactly what is needed and what is lacking in the current Budget. Perhaps it is the gap in taking the new green deal forward that is referred to in the motion. Without the financing required to back it up, a Programme for Government that states that it prioritises a green economy will never be realised. The business plan from the Green New Deal Coalition, which I mentioned, outlines how an investment of £72 million of government money will unlock a total investment of £253 million in energy efficiency measures that would see 100,000 homes improved over three years.

**Mr Allister:** With regard to that scheme for homes, has the Member also read that it has emerged that unless you can afford to pay for it, the loan system that has been put in place affords the repayment only to the degree of the energy savings, and that there is, therefore, a nil return for the household? Where, therefore, is the incentive for anyone to buy into it, except those who can afford it in the first place?

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an extra minute.

**Mr Agnew:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank the Member for the question. The scheme that is proposed is a pay as you save scheme. It is estimated that households will save £100 a year on energy bills after their loan repayments. So the householder will see savings immediately, while also seeing an improved quality of living in their house.

I said that investment is lacking. We have a budget that allocates a mere £4 million a year over three years for a scheme that requires £72 million. We need a joined-up approach at Executive level, and I do not believe that we are seeing that yet.

I welcome the fact that most in the House have spoken in favour of the motion, but given that 105 Members are represented at some level on the Executive, I am somewhat confused as to why the spirit that is being conveyed in the House does not seem to be reflected in the Budget. It is fair to say that my party opposed the Budget, and one of the main reasons for that was the lack of funding for the green new deal. It is interesting to see the same Members who supported that Budget say how great the green new deal and green economy will be, but they supported a Budget that does not provide the finance for it.

We need a holistic approach to deliver a green economy. A green economy is not a little corner of our economy; it is a radical way of looking at how our economy should look in the future. It is clear that that vision does not exist at Executive level. I see no better example of that than the spending of more than £500 million on a roads project that does not meet the outline of what the green economy should look like.

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

**Ms M Anderson (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister):**

Go raibh maith agat. Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to the debate today. I thank those Members who brought the motion forward. I welcome the fact that we have had the opportunity to debate this important and relevant issue, and I have listened with great interest to the contributions that have been made.

An advance draft of the new Programme for Government is under consideration by Ministers with a view to bringing it forward to Executive colleagues in the near future, following which

we will begin an extensive consultation period internally and externally to government. I believe that I can say with absolute confidence that our new Programme for Government will deliver to prioritise the growing of a sustainable economy, tackling disadvantage and investing in the future. Those were themes that came out through the contributions today.

We need to see the promotion of a green economy as an opportunity. The world economy is changing fundamentally, with greater emphasis on resources and energy efficiency. The global low-carbon market is worth more than £3 trillion and is projected to reach £4 trillion by 2015 as economies around the world invest in low-carbon technologies across a broad range of sectors. That involves energy efficiencies running alongside the promotion of renewables. Businesses and organisations in the North that do and can recognise this opportunity for what it is will create wealth for all our people. Efficient homes can help to address and alleviate poverty, and businesses that harness the natural resources in our environment or utilise waste can create significant wealth for our community.

Members made a number of points, and I hope that I will get an opportunity to respond to them all. However, I want to pick up the point that Jimmy Spratt raised. We do recognise that there are costs associated with this, and we are very mindful of those. However, we believe that those costs will be outweighed by the benefits, which was also a point that Jimmy raised. Without doubt, this priority will not be without challenges. We are very much aware of that. Businesses will face challenges, and those will differ across sectors. Those challenges will include competitiveness issues, which may arise from additional costs and increased energy prices; challenges that may arise from the need to build climate change adaptations into future business planning; building and meeting consumer and business demand and expectation through greener products and services; and changing business models and production processes. The behaviour and influence of employees and consumers will also be an important factor in helping businesses become greener and more efficient.

The opportunities associated with enabling the transition to a greener economy are where our focus should lie. The transition towards a green economy can bring many advantages

when it comes to managing risk and increased resilience, such as those associated with the increasing and fluctuating fossil fuel prices and the impact of climate change. In that regard, I will respond to what Jim Allister said. Security of supply and protection from market fluctuation is essential.

Opportunities can be seized from new and emerging markets, nationally and internationally. Furthermore, businesses across the whole economy can save money through increasing energy and resource efficiency. In looking towards those opportunities, it is imperative to recognise the importance of collaboration and working across, and in many cases beyond, existing boundaries, whether those are administrative, legislative or political, to ensure cohesion of thought and action. I want to return to that in relation to OFMDFM's responsibility and the kind of collaborative work in which we are involved.

In our new Programme for Government we intend to focus on those imperatives. We have already shown our intention to embed sustainability in the operation and thinking of government with the recent publication of the new sustainable development implementation plan. Members should be encouraged by the express commitment given in the plan that we intend to run the development of future Programme for Government and sustainability plans in parallel.

Sustainability is a fundamental requirement in the progression towards greening the economy here. We are absolutely correct in building our plans around the rebuilding and rebalancing of the economy and we intend to do so by recognising the fact that a prosperous and thriving green economy will generate investment, innovation, skills and entrepreneurship to transform products and services, develop cleaner technologies and capture new markets. Almost 80,000 adults here have achieved qualifications in maths, English and ICT through the Department for Employment and Learning's essential skills strategy. That is a good foundation from which people can participate in and progress the green economy.

Clearly, the priority of sustainable economic growth must be underpinned by plans and actions. We are very much aware of that. We support innovation, target skills and encourage entrepreneurship. That comes down to one

thing: people. Our young people need to be supported to access high-quality education and achieve better educational outcomes. I hope that the announcement made in the Chamber today with regard to student fees will go some way in contributing to that.

Our workforce, currently and in the future, needs to be quick to participate in the twenty-first century world that is built upon a global economy and has technology at its heart. It is important to create conditions to encourage participation in the green agenda. That is why the draft Programme for Government seeks to interweave education, skills and training into the green economic tapestry.

That is no easy task, I admit, and my Executive colleagues are aware of that. However, it is vital to tackle problems strategically, systematically and collaboratively. We must seek to rebuild and rebalance our economy while simultaneously prioritising the creation of opportunities, tackling disadvantage, improving health and well-being, creating safer, stronger and shared communities and protecting our environment. We need to ensure that every penny of public money makes the maximum impact through the use of social clauses, which Willie Clarke and Mike Nesbitt spoke about, whereby expenditure is used as an opportunity to tackle disadvantage and create sustainable jobs. Both Members spoke about the importance of social clauses and entrepreneurship in Departments. OFMDFM openly acknowledged the importance of social clauses in the sustainable development implementation plan, which I encourage Members to take a look at. We have actions to grow the sector, including embedding social value clauses in public sector procurement processes. We encourage other Members to adopt the approach that OFMDFM and some other Departments are taking, and which we need to see across the board.

In many cases the green economy is seen as a subset of the economy at large. That is not our view at all. Our whole economy needs to be green. A green economy will maximise value and growth across its whole extent while it manages natural assets sustainably. Therefore, our Programme for Government must ensure that our economy can grow sustainably and for the long term. We must use our natural resources efficiently and develop resilience to market fluctuations and unforeseen events, and we

need to exploit comparative advantages where they exist.

During the last Programme for Government cycle, Invest NI undertook an awareness-raising programme to promote global business development opportunities in the field of renewable energy and energy efficiency. OFMDFM intends to undertake a strategic assessment of the opportunities to make greater use of national and international programmes associated with innovation and sustainability.

**Mr A Maginness:** I thank the junior Minister for giving way. I have listened carefully to what she has said and it seems good to me in its aspirations. However, in the Budget, the Executive has allocated £12 million in relation to the green new deal, as opposed to the green economy. Can the Minister assure the House that that figure will be looked at and revised upwards in order to provide adequate funding for the green new deal in retrofitting our homes to ensure maximum fuel and energy efficiency?

**Ms M Anderson:** I assure the Member that Ministers will do all that they can to address the opportunities that we have identified in the green new deal. Anna Lo spoke about the initiatives that are required from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD), and we need to recognise DARD's work on previous and current rural development programmes, especially on biomass. DARD also intends to provide co-funding. I hope that that will address the previous Member's comment about the issue being very strategic and visionary, but it is actually about actions and what Departments and Ministers are doing.

#### 4.15 pm

As I said, DARD intends to provide co-funding for industry-led, collaborative research projects to promote innovation in the rural community, and the Department of the Environment (DOE) is taking forward work under the waste infrastructure programme, which is expected to lead to a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions and to generate additional employment during the construction and operation of the new plants. That having been said, we also know that the planning process needs to be streamlined, which some Members mentioned, and quick decisions need to be made, particularly with regard to large-scale planning proposals.

I want to make specific reference to what Members said, particularly about work in OFMDFM. Forgive me if I cannot attribute any of these comments to one particular Member. Anna Lo and others talked about collaborative work to deliver outcomes, and Alban Maginness talked about the preparation and development of skills to match emerging economic opportunities. There was talk from other colleagues about innovation and the use of new and clean technologies as drivers for change, and we heard from Members about the opportunities associated with greening the economy. Each of those issues is under consideration in shaping the Programme for Government, and, equally important, in delivering it.

With reference to the sustainable development implementation plan, our focus is on the future. Our programme must be balanced, and there must be long-term thinking with actions to address the immediate and significant economic and social issues that we face. I want to highlight the work on OFMDFM's joined-up approach to the green economy. Over the past months, OFMDFM officials have been working as part of a green economic policy group with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Department of Energy and Climate Change, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and with other devolved Administrations to provide input into a paper entitled 'Enabling the Transition to a Green Economy: Government and business working together', which sets out not just the vision for the green economy but the rationale for making that transition.

OFMDFM officials have been working with colleagues in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) to provide input into the draft economic strategy and to encourage the recognition of sustainability as an underpinning theme of economic growth. In fact, a ministerial subgroup meeting is taking place at the moment at which I should be in attendance, but my colleague Jonathan Bell is there representing the office. That is why he is not in the Chamber.

Without doubt, one of the most innovative projects has been Project Kelvin, which will result in an opportunity for a package of data to take 53 milliseconds to get from the North to America and will reduce the carbon footprint. We could have partnerships all over the world with

such a project. Indeed, the First Minister and the deputy First Minister are in America today marketing here as a place that is open and ready to do business.

Jimmy Spratt spoke about the Carbon Trust, which is supported by DETI with Invest NI's help. It helps companies on a strategic basis to reduce their carbon emissions and to increase the competitiveness of their business through lower energy bills. Overall, since 2002, it has helped local customers achieve around £200 million in direct cost savings and around £2.5 million —

**Mr Speaker:** I ask the Minister to draw her remarks to a close.

**Ms M Anderson:** I could outline much more work that OFMDFM and other Departments are doing. I apologise to Members for not getting to their points. I want to take this opportunity to thank Members for this, my first time responding as junior Minister to a debate on such an important matter. If anyone wants to return to these issues with me or junior Minister Bell, they should feel free to do so.

**Mr Lunn:** I congratulate my party colleague on bringing this issue to the House. This is not the first time that we have debated the green economy or the green new deal, and I am sure that it will not be the last. I am particularly pleased about the level of agreement and co-operation between parties; it has been almost unanimous. I did not hear very much dissent at all. It is quite unusual for an Alliance motion not to be amended and to receive such agreement. That highlights the importance of the matter and the serious attitude that the House takes to it.

A lot of Members stressed the need for urgent action, and that remains the case. Like other Members, I encourage the junior Minister, in the words of the motion, to prioritise the green economy, in conjunction with all the other ministries involved. That principle or theme could apply to every ministry in the House, but it applies particularly to the ministries of Social Development, Finance and Personnel, and Agriculture and Rural Development. There are so many pluses involved — the only downside, frankly, is the need for finance — that it is difficult to know where to start.

The geography of Northern Ireland, to say nothing of the weather here, certainly puts us in an enviable position. We certainly have wind

and waves. Everything I read and hear about the green economy or the green new deal, call it what you will, indicates that — I will contradict Mr Allister on this point — targeted investment will produce an acceptable return. That has been proven over and over again. We are a long way behind the rest of the world on some of this. The models are there, and the appropriate action can be taken if we can find the money. If we reduce our dependence on fossil fuels by moving towards renewables, we will get a return, be it environmental or economic.

We have alternatives: wind, wave, solar, power from waste, and biomass. Mr Newton, who is not here now and probably had more to say in this debate than some of the others who spoke, challenged a point about generating power from waste. Let me make it absolutely clear: we support the generation of power from waste. There are plenty of models where it has been used on the continent and in the UK. I am glad that no other Lagan Valley MLAs are here, because they would probably slaughter me on the issue of the Glenavy incinerator. There is a question about where you put it. An area of special scientific interest and outstanding natural beauty on the shores of Lough Neagh is perhaps not the right place, but there are places, closer to industry and so on, where it could be located, and we should be looking at that.

We should look seriously at the issue of biomass. We all got an information pack, as usual, from the Assembly Research and Information Service. Yesterday, I got 'The Sunday Times', which is a very useful source of information. If all the biomass plants proposed for the UK, through whatever scheme is running there, come to fruition, there will be a need for 40 million tons of biomass. At the moment, only 10 million tons is produced in the UK. So what does that say? It says that they will not be making any more furniture there or that they will need to plant a lot more trees. My goodness, we have the facilities, the space and the climate here to grow trees such as willows and conifers, or whatever it takes. We have that opportunity as well as the one provided by the wind and waves here.

On the potential for job creation, again, I disagree with Mr Allister. It is there for all to see. If the green new deal project that has again been advocated in the Chamber, namely the insulation and retrofit of homes, were to go ahead, what sort of fillip would it give the construction industry? It jumps off the page that

that is what should be done. However, again, finance is needed. It would produce a gradual reduction in home heating costs and also reduce the pressure on people who can ill afford to pay for oil and coal. It might even reduce pressure on the Health Service.

With regard to agriculture, a move away from spreading noxious materials on the land, as is demanded by European directive, would have direct effect on the quality of waterways and the improvement of fish stocks. Following on from that would be better tourism potential. I could go on. There is always an upside; I do not hear many downsides. One might even be able to eat fresh wild salmon again instead of farmed stuff. That would be a step forward. Coarse fishing has stood up well to the amount of pollution that is involved; however, game fishing of trout and salmon has suffered badly over the years.

As a small country, Northern Ireland has a limited effect on global warming. However, it must do what it can on carbon emissions, waste recycling and reduction in the use of fossil fuels. Our waste management and recycling performance is improving — it needs to improve by 2020 to meet European targets. We may be on course.

We can draw on plenty of examples of good practice on all those matters; it has all been done before. With regard to recycling, I also noticed in 'The Sunday Times' that in Britain we seem to think that we are doing fairly well at present to recycle about half our aluminium cans. I am not sure whether Northern Ireland recycles half its cans, although the figure is probably similar. The figure for Norway is 93%; for Switzerland and Finland it is 88%. We are probably somewhere near the bottom of the league. There is so much that we can do.

I want to deal with some matters that Members raised. I will not go over what Anna Lo said because she made the case convincingly. In his contribution, Jimmy Spratt used a telling phrase that pensioners had to choose between heating and eating. He has got it in one: that is how bad it is for some people. He also referred to the potential to educate schoolchildren on those matters, although in some ways children are way ahead of us. They have better awareness than we do of their environment and the need to recycle and produce clean energy. However, we are the ones who must make decisions.

Willie Clarke mentioned the need for political will, and other Members came back to that issue. He also said that fossil fuels are not getting cheaper; I believe that the junior Minister made the same remark. One thing is sure: fossil fuels are not getting cheaper and will never again get cheaper. Anyone who thinks that they are not running out has their head in the sand. It is happening. It is supply and demand: as fossil fuels become scarcer, up will go the price. Furthermore, control of fossil fuels will not be in the realm of UK-controlled countries. The UK has little in the way of fossil fuels — at least, any that are obtainable. It will have to rely more and more on countries with which it may or may not have a good relationship.

Danny Kinahan talked about a seismic shift. I believe that he said that there is a need to plant about 10,000 trees. Ten million would be more like it. Northern Ireland has the space; we can do it. I believe that he was the first Member in the debate to mention planning and the need to fast-track planning for suitable schemes that involve the green economy. I could not agree more.

Alban Maginness talked about leading the charge and the need to integrate approaches to energy and the economy.

In his intervention to the Minister, he also mentioned the derisory figure of £12 million, which probably needs another nought put on it. I do not say that I know where the money will come from, but that is what is needed.

#### 4.30 pm

Cathal Boylan mentioned planning restrictions, a joined-up approach and Departments acting together.

Mike Nesbitt — I am going to run out of time here, but not to worry — gave us a history lesson about manufacturing in Northern Ireland. He is absolutely correct: historically, we are a very innovative manufacturer. He managed to put in a good plug for the Ards peninsula, and he mentioned the possibility of unlocking EU funding with a green economy corridor.

I know that I have run out of time, so I thank everybody for their contribution, particularly the junior Minister —

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

**Mr Lunn:** She was reasonably positive about the whole thing. I commend the motion to the House.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly calls on the Executive to make the development of the green economy a priority within the next Programme for Government and to affirm that an overarching strategy for the development of the green economy should be implemented; and further calls on the Executive to bring together existing policies and initiatives, to identify gaps and to address them.*

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

## **Railways: Londonderry Line**

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

**Mr McQuillan:** I beg to move

*That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Regional Development to ensure the future of the Londonderry railway line, which links Coleraine with Londonderry and which connects the east and west of Northern Ireland.*

I rise as a Member for East Londonderry. This issue arose over the summer months during recess, when it emerged that the Coleraine to Londonderry railway line was at risk of closure, as Translink announced that the number of daily journeys was to be reduced from nine to five, despite an increase in use. I should point out that any threat of closure has been denied by the Minister. However, if there is no investment in this vital transport connection over the next four years, the line will fall into a further state of disrepair and pose major safety concerns, meaning that its closure will surely be imminent as it will not be fit for purpose. I therefore welcome the opportunity to raise the issue in the House as a matter of major concern.

Over the years, we have seen the railways diminish. Railway connections were once central to the economic development of Ulster, securing transport links across our Province and ensuring easy access to our ports, allowing for the import and export of goods across the British Isles and the world. There is therefore merit in securing the future of this line, which links Londonderry to Coleraine, Antrim and Belfast. The Coleraine to Londonderry line provides a service for the people of this Province who are travelling from the Maiden City — now the UK City of Culture 2013 — to Belfast or further afield. Londonderry, being the closest city within reach of my constituency, provides a vital connection for my constituents for shopping or working. The line also provides an important link for students attending any of the three University of Ulster campuses — Magee, Coleraine and Jordanstown — and for tourists visiting the

north-west region. It therefore seems illogical to see the service cut and at risk of closure at a time when fuel prices are soaring and more people are being forced from their car to public transport. That has been a long-term aim of government in order to reduce congestion on our roads and cut greenhouse gases.

In any society, it is normal to increase supply when there is an increase in demand, rather than the other way around. In 2007, the then Minister for Regional Development announced an upgrade for the Coleraine to Londonderry line, which included laying a whole new line of track. That was after significant pressure was placed on him by local railway campaigners. Work was scheduled to start this year and would have resulted in shorter journey times and more, not fewer, trains. The current Minister has stated that work on the line will not happen this year and instead will happen in 2014 and that there will be a £55 million cut in the funding. Also, the 2010 comprehensive spending review reduced the money available to our Government. It is somewhat ironic that the Minister responsible for that decision comes from a party that advocated cuts during the 2010 general election campaign under the Tory banner. People remembered that in the recent election to this House in May, and the party was punished at the polls as a result.

The north-west is being wrongly targeted and discriminated against by the Minister's party. I back that statement up with yet another example. When the previous Health Minister, Michael McGimpsey, decided not to proceed —

**Mr Allister:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr McQuillan:** No, I am carrying on.

He decided not to proceed with the new radiotherapy unit in Altnagelvin. That decision was overturned by my party colleague Edwin Poots within weeks of his being appointed to the health post.

In 2009, a report was compiled by PricewaterhouseCoopers to consider the possible long-term social, physical and economic developments that could be achieved through the enhancement of the northern corridor railway in the north-west. It demonstrated that passenger numbers had increased by over one third since 2001-02 and the largest increase in the entire network was on the Londonderry



railway line. It was identified that the Londonderry line was key for tourism in the north-west region.

As jobs are difficult to come by, people are now expected to travel outside their own area to secure work. That means travelling to one of the two major cities in Northern Ireland where jobs are in better supply. Given that my constituency falls between the two cities, maintaining that railway line and securing investment means a great deal to my constituents and to me as an elected representative. The PWC report pointed that out, arguing that investment in the line would increase labour mobility and improve access to tourist destinations, thus facilitating growth in that sector.

Savings and financial benefits were also identified by the report. By securing this investment, estimated at £2.5 million per annum, the Department for Regional Development has a role to play in rejuvenating and strengthening our economy. It is, therefore, disappointing that the investment has been cut, which effectively risks closing the line down in the medium to long term. Given that the Minister does not envisage the scheme happening before 2014, to be completed by 2015-16, tourists and residents of Northern Ireland will not benefit from the upgrade in time for 2013, when Londonderry is the British capital of culture and an influx of tourists and visitors is expected.

I commend the motion to the House and look forward to the debate and the Minister's response, which will hopefully be positive. I look for a response that is not a fudge but action and an announcement that the work will begin this year, not in 2014.

**Mr McCartney:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Beidh mé ag labhairt i dtacaíocht an rúin. Tá sé an-tábhachtach go rachaidh an obair ar an líne ó Chúl Raithin go Doire ar aghaidh. Ach tá díomá orainn nach bhfuil an tAire ábalta a rá go bhfuil an t-airgead aige ag an bhomaite.

I want to say that — *[Interruption.]* Do you want to say something? Do you have something to say?

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Order.

**Mr McCartney:** Somebody speaking from a sedentary position had something to say.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** I ask all Members to make all remarks through the Chair. Continue.

**Mr McCartney:** I am just asking, through the Chair, whether the Member wants to make a statement.

Sinn Féin will be supporting the motion. It is a welcome motion on an important issue. It is an issue that is particularly important to the people of Derry. I welcome the Minister's recent statements and, indeed, his commitment to the line, but what we need to see now is delivery on that commitment. I think that, on his recent visit to Derry, the Minister got a sense of the feeling right across the political spectrum and from civic and business leadership of the need to progress the work that has already been carried out on the much-needed upgrading of the line from Coleraine to Derry and, obviously, the linkage between Derry and Belfast and beyond.

Until recently — indeed, up until Conor Murphy became the Minister for Regional Development — the Derry view was that there were always questions around the future of the line. An options paper was put to the Executive in 2001. I am sure that we all sometimes have memory lapses, and I know that some Members here have recently accepted that they have memory lapses. They will find that an options paper was put to the Executive, and that is where the terminology around “lesser-used line” and “more-used line” and that type of confusion crept in. However, when Conor Murphy went into office, he removed that uncertainty. He lifted the restriction on the investment, and the sense that the Derry line was lesser used was put to bed. It is not a lesser-used line; it is a core service to Derry and Belfast and beyond.

Conor Murphy also made the commitment. He visited Derry, as the current Minister did, and listened to the views of the city. He heard from right across the spectrum about issues that the people of Derry feel need to be tackled to ensure that regional disparity and the inequalities of the past are brought to an end and to service the regeneration that would allow the economy of Derry and the north-west to grow. At the heart of that were the road infrastructure and the airport but also the railway, and the Minister will be well aware of that.

The big concern now is that, despite some cutbacks in the Department's budget, there was an overstating of the funding required to complete the work, and the Minister heard that at first hand in Derry. We need to send a clear signal that the original proposal is still

there and still necessary. Progress against the commitment to tackle regional disparity, which the Executive made in the previous mandate and which the current Executive continue to make, will be clearly seen in how we advance the project to enhance the Derry to Coleraine railway line.

At the meeting in the Guildhall in Derry, the Minister heard that people are supportive and will be supportive of any attempts that he makes. People can make special cases, and we can continue to make special cases, which is fine. However, we do not want a special case to be made for this project, and that was alluded to in the Guildhall by Gregory Campbell. In this instance, the funding was in place and is still in place. The project must be carried out in such a way that the line is completed. The Minister would have heard that when he came to Derry, and, in fairness, his officials made a counter-argument about the need to complete it in 2013. We all know that the City of Culture is coming to Derry in 2013. We all know that there is massive tourist potential as a result and that the line must be working at its maximum.

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

**Mr McCartney:** The number of passengers using the line will be boosted as a result of the City of Culture coming to Derry in 2013. The tourism legacy of 2013 will be boosted by the Minister delivering the Derry to Coleraine line.

**Mr Beggs:** I support the motion, as, I believe, most people in Northern Ireland will. I greatly value our rail infrastructure, and I think that it will become increasingly important in the future. Energy prices are rising, and, with many believing that we have already reached peak oil production, those prices can only increase further. In addition, the increasing pressure to reduce our CO2 emissions makes it likely that increasing taxation will fall in that area. It is important that we retain our rail network because of the efficiencies that it can deliver.

There are many similarities between the Coleraine to Londonderry railway line and the Whitehead to Larne railway line in my constituency. Mr McCartney referred to lesser-used lines earlier: both lines fall into that category, and both are threatened with a potential reduction in services through the timetabling that is planned. Both also serve universities, with the Whitehead to Larne line

serving the University of Ulster at Jordanstown. It also links Larne to Newtownabbey, and it is the only easy way to get between those two places via public transport. Therefore, both are important routes. This is not an east versus west issue, as some may be attempting to play it, and there are issues in my constituency in the very east of the Province involving the railway line that cause me concern. I hope that funding will be made available by the Executive and the Department to protect the services.

As to how money is being spent, we must return to the Budget. Mention was made earlier about where difficulties arose, and we must remember that the Assembly and the Executive made decisions in the Budget in March. They decided where they were going to prioritise the money that was given to us, and, when potentially up to £850 million is dedicated to the A5, guess what happens? Money is not available for other options. I ask Sinn Féin, the DUP and the Alliance Party, all of whom supported the Budget, which committed huge sums to a project that still does not even have planning permission, how they can justify that. Even at this stage, would it not be better to rethink that project so that the A5 can be upgraded and other important routes and the railway lines can also be improved?

**4.45 pm**

**Mr Allister:** I understand the point that the Member is making about others' embarrassment about what they have supported. However, will the Member now support his Minister and urge him to find the £75 million that is needed for the Coleraine-Londonderry route by reducing the lavish scale of the A5 and spend that money there, where it would be a better spend? Will he encourage the Minister to make that practical solution to the problem of the Coleraine-Londonderry line?

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

**Mr Beggs:** That is an option, of course. I represent East Antrim, and I can ask only that that money be used to improve the A2 bottleneck. The Minister told us that that money was delayed to enable the A5 to be completed. Therefore, representing East Antrim, I ask for it to be given priority in the funding. If any money is available thereafter, I would have no difficulty with it being used to upgrade the railway line.

Of course, as we speak, that route has not even got planning permission.

It is important that people understand that, when they chose to prioritise that Budget, they also chose not to put the money into a budget line to upgrade this railway. Indeed, if they look carefully at the draft Budget statement that was issued by the Department, they will see clearly that no money was available in it until a very late point in the Budget period, when some £20 million would become available. The £75 million needed was not included and would be available only in the latter part. Why did others decide not to prioritise the railway? Will they rethink that now? That is the challenge, that is the realpolitik, and there is no point simply pretending that it is not an issue.

The statements made in the press by the previous Minister should also be clarified. There is a lot of confusion about the issue. On 1 September, the previous Minister was quoted as saying that Danny Kennedy was being disingenuous by saying that he had not got the money to finish the project. Is the money to finish the project in the Budget, or is it not? Has the money been earmarked for real investment? On 5 September, the 'Belfast Telegraph' said:

*"Last week former Transport Minister Conor Murphy said he saw no reason why the work could not proceed. He also confirmed that he had budgeted for the full project during his term in office."*

When the Minister took over the budget that was handed to him, was there money in it for this railway, or are people doing some late rethinking, having committed too much money to certain projects? Are some people getting cold feet?

It is important that we invest in our capital infrastructure carefully, strategically and wisely. I fear that that has not been the case to date.

**Mr Dallat:** I thank those who tabled the motion. When I heard the news last July that the number of trains between Coleraine and Derry would be reduced from nine to five, I felt a mixture of anger and disbelief. There was a fear that we would become the laughing stock of Europe at a time when, in every other country, new lines are being laid and old ones are being reopened. This is the railway line, of course, that Michael Palin described as the most beautiful railway journey in the world. The proposal is to reduce speed limits on it right down to 5 mph on at least one stretch. People fear that this

is the end. They feel angry, let down, betrayed, deceived and, yes, that they have been lied to.

The railway is, of course, not simply about trains and tourist potential; it is about people and the whole economic and social development of the north-west. The people know that; they are not stupid. They know that this is a direct blow at people who, for many years, have struggled to build their economy, social infrastructure and communications to link railways and roads with the population. That is the way forward, and it is the way that it has been done in other places.

Quite honestly, I do not think that the Assembly has the luxury of sparring across the debating table or engaging in disputes. We need to pull collectively in the same direction, because our responsibilities go well beyond those of Translink. Translink is there for the economic delivery, but we have a political responsibility to deliver the aspirations and principles of the Good Friday Agreement, which promised faithfully to the people across this land territory that we would deliver it and deliver it equally.

I am not a violent person, but the decision was a slap in the face. It was a clear indication that people, including elected representatives, were not listened to. Such people include, for example, the Northern Corridor Railways Group, which spent thousands of pounds and addressed this Assembly and the Dáil. Yes, the railway runs beyond Belfast — it runs to Drogheda, Dublin, Cork, Limerick and Galway. It is part of the rail network of this island as it existed before partition. I sometimes do not agree with the Into the West lobby group, but it again has been let down by what has happened.

I support steps to reverse the madcap idea of substituting buses for trains on what should be our intercity train service between our two principal cities. Where else in the world would this happen? We have a choice. We can take this on the chin and forget about the railways and the ambitious plans for the future that I and many others, including Adrian McQuillan, have been involved in for many years. We can give in to Translink, which dangles a 15-minute substitute bus service in the hope that the people of the north-west might give up on the railways. However, they have not, because they were told by direct rule Ministers and others that, if they wanted a railway, they should use it. By God, they have used it. More people are travelling now on the Belfast to Derry railway line

than use the Belfast to Dublin line, for example. You see, however, that those who gave us that advice have been caught.

In two years' time, as has been mentioned, the Maiden City will be the City of Culture. What a wonderful opportunity to portray that city to the world, including all the talent, culture, music, language and everything else, yet we are substituting buses for the railways. I ask you, Mr Deputy Speaker. If some other city had the opportunity to be City of Culture, millions of pounds would be poured into the infrastructure to ensure that that city had the best opportunity to showcase itself.

I ask you on bended knee — I am not the first one to use that term — to please rise above the petty politics, rise above the wee rows —

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

**Mr Dallat:** Yes, I will do that; do not worry. Please, let us put the money back in place and honour the commitments of the past.

**Mr Dickson:** From the outset, I declare my support and that of the Alliance Party for the motion. I commend the Members who have a can-do attitude to the proposal, and I regret that there are those who seem to have a cannot-do attitude to it. It was disappointing to hear that funding for the upgrade of the Coleraine to Londonderry line is to be deferred. As one who has seen the A2 road project in my constituency deferred once again in the Department's budget, I assure representatives from the north-west that I share their disappointment and frustration.

The railway line from Coleraine to Derry is a vital infrastructural asset. The line has seen the largest growth rate in passenger numbers, but I am not sure whether Mr Dallat is correct in comparing it with the Belfast to Dublin line in the past decade. Its development has been described as providing significant scope for further growth of the north-west region. The upgrade of the line would allow for a reduction in journey times from Belfast by some 30 minutes and would enable trains to reach Derry by 9.00 am, enabling people to expand their opportunities for employment in that city. As with other public transport infrastructure, it plays an important role in building a Northern Ireland based on fairness and equality. Not everyone has access to a car, and even those

who have access to cars know the price of fuel and need to spare the environment by travelling on trains. The upgrade of that line will allow people greater access to the labour market, public services and friends and family, regardless of their economic status or background. Furthermore, as has been consistently noted in the tourism literature and, indeed, remarked on by Members today, the Coleraine to Derry line is one of the most beautiful train journeys in the world. It is a real shame that significantly fewer passengers will enjoy the stunning views that it provides, especially during the City of Culture year, when numbers visiting the city will undoubtedly increase.

The students who, as Mr Beggs said, benefit from the line in east Antrim will not be able to benefit from the line between Coleraine and Derry, two places where universities flourish, or when travelling from places further away, such as Belfast. Despite the Minister's reassurance that bus services will be provided, one can really understand that travelling with luggage and suitcases, as many have to do, is a lot better experienced on a train than it ever will be on a bus. The Minister said that he is committed to the line and has no plans to close it, and I welcome that. However, some of those things may be beyond your control, Minister. Indeed, Translink engineers warned earlier this year that a failure to invest in the line over the next four years would simply lead to its closure.

Although I welcome the allocation of funding for engineering work to improve safety and keep the line operational, that is not a sign of enthusiasm or commitment. Even if the full funding of the project does not proceed urgently, significant investment in the interim — for example, on the passing loops — would at least signal the Department's genuine dedication to the line. The Department has reneged on its promises before, and, without such urgent investment, there is no doubt that the railway bosses will wonder whether that is going to happen again. In those circumstances, it would not surprise me if Translink put the future of the line between Coleraine and Londonderry under consideration. I call on the Minister to consider at least investing more in the interim on passing loops and other upgrades to prevent such a situation.

Finally, I want to highlight the wider implications of the Department's policy on the Coleraine to Derry line. The failure to fund that project points to the Department's contravention of its

own regional development strategy, outlined in January of this year, in which it stated that the Department for Regional Development (DRD) is committed to:

*“Adapt the existing transport network to facilitate the modal shift away from the car.”*

We all know about emissions from cars and the pollution that they cause on our roads and in our atmosphere. Clearly we have a disproportionate problem in Northern Ireland. The failure to fund the upgrade of the Coleraine to Derry line shows a lack of commitment to tackling that problem. That failure is further emphasised by the disproportionate allocation of funding for road building, which is exacerbating, rather than ameliorating —

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

**Mr Dickson:** Finally, I assure the House of the Alliance Party's support for the proposal.

**Mr Spratt (The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development):** I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion as the Chair of the Regional Development Committee, as it is a subject that was debated in Committee during the previous session and will come before the Committee again on Wednesday. Members will also be aware that there has been substantial press coverage of the subject over the summer recess. I advise the House that I met the Minister and, separately, the chief executive of the Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company in August to discuss the matter.

The Committee has expressed its concerns to the Minister and his Department regarding the decision to suspend the upgrading of that important link. We accept that these are challenging times from a financial perspective and that there are competing priorities. However, in these difficult times, the focus must be on rebuilding and recovering our economy and on generating income and investment in Northern Ireland plc. How significant, then, is that stretch of railway — those 30-odd miles of track? How and in what way can it be expected to make a contribution to reviving our economy?

### 5.00 pm

Its impact is very significant, and the consequences of not committing to the upgrade should not and cannot be contemplated. Londonderry is the UK City of Culture in 2013.

In their bid for that designation, the bid team stressed that being awarded City of Culture status was not just of significance to the north-west as a region but to the entirety of Northern Ireland. In their bid, they stated that they sought:

*“to win designation...as the City of History, the Child Friendly City, the Digital City, and the Connected City.”*

They were confident, as a connected city, that they could, for example, achieve almost 300,000 extra visitor nights. The upgrading of the railway line was seen as being of great significance, as it would allow for increased journey frequencies and speeds, allowing the city to exploit the tourism potential in the region and farther afield.

Although I accept that Liverpool was a European City of Culture, I still find it interesting to look at some of the outputs achieved as a result of that designation, as I believe that it highlights the potential of Londonderry as a City of Culture for the economy of Northern Ireland. In the year that Liverpool was designated, it realised an economic impact of £750 million. What if Londonderry achieved a tenth of that? That would put £75 million into our economy. Liverpool recorded increases of 30% to 35% in tourist visitors. What impact would a similar increase mean to Londonderry and Northern Ireland as a whole?

One of the key factors in those achievements was, however, an appropriate infrastructure. Undoubtedly, good rail networks were a vital component of that. I fear that postponing the upgrade of the track will have a negative impact on the 2013 celebrations. How many tourists will be attracted to travel by rail from Belfast or farther afield, knowing that, at Coleraine, just 30 miles from the centre of Londonderry, the train will stop and their luggage will be hauled onto a bus in order to complete the journey? What sort of message does that send out?

There are other considerations that need to be taken into account, such as the impact on those who commute to work in Londonderry or elsewhere. What about the students who travel to the University of Ulster campus or our citizens who make journeys to hospital services in Belfast? What impact will the postponement have on planning their appointments or classes?

The Londonderry Chamber of Commerce publicly stated that it would write to me, as

Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development, to ask that the Committee investigate the departmental budget in order to gauge where the money that is alleged to have been allocated to the upgrade has gone. I confirm that I have received that letter and that the matter will be discussed by the Committee at its meeting on Wednesday. It would not, therefore, be appropriate for me to comment on the budget allocations or give other views on that correspondence until it has been discussed formally by the Committee and an agreed position is reached.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** The Member must bring his remarks to a close.

**Mr Spratt:** I am content that the views expressed at the Committee on this matter are sympathetic with the motion.

**Mr Ó hOisín:** Ba mhaith liom cúpla focal a rá i bhfabhar an rúin, agus ba mhaith liom mo thacaíocht a thabhairt dó. The nineteenth century marked a high point in civil engineering in this country. Indeed, at that time, a person could have travelled from Coleraine to Cobh and from Roundstone to Ranelagh and, according to recent reports, probably quicker than we could today. By the 1890s, it was possible to get to virtually every market town in the country. I think of my home village, which at that time had a population of only 700, a quarter of the figure now, and which was served for 65 years by a branch line.

I have travelled widely in Europe, where the option for rail travel is still very much in place despite two world wars and many other conflicts that destroyed its infrastructure. That option is not available to us. What are the reasons behind that? Of course, the roads have been improved, although we are not so sure about that in the west. Freight haulage was taken off the trains some time in the 1960s. Every Thursday morning when I come to this place, I sit behind a queue of lorries that are coming up the M2, heading for Larne and biding their time. All our transport now goes by road, and quite a percentage of it comes through Dungiven.

In the 1950s and 1960s passenger numbers fell. However, according to figures given in reply to a question asked by Mr Campbell, the Member for East Derry, on 21 May 2010, in 2009-10 276,157 passengers travelled on all or part of the Coleraine-Derry line; an increase of 75% over the previous five years. That figure did

not include passengers using travel cards and school passes.

The report commissioned by the Northern Corridor Railways Group made a number of proposals, including a fast and reliable intercity service between Belfast and Derry. Were I to commute to this place, to be here for 8.50 am, I would have to leave Derry station at 6.30 am. That is not acceptable. Were I to commute to Derry from Coleraine, I could not get in before 9.00 am. It is as simple as that. That is not acceptable. The report also called for an enhanced commuter service to Derry from Coleraine and for the area along the Coleraine-Derry corridor; a fast and reliable inter-urban route between Derry and Coleraine; and a fast and reliable inter-urban route between Coleraine and Belfast. Those are the improvements required on the Coleraine-Derry line.

On the last day of summer, I travelled on a family pass with my nine-year-old. Although it represented good value, the contrast between the Coleraine-Portrush section and the Coleraine-Derry section was remarkable indeed.

In 2001, the consolidation option, which identified core and lesser-used lines, was put to the Assembly. In 2007, Minister Conor Murphy removed the distinction. The business case for upgrading the line identified a cost of £75 million to £80 million, with work to start in 2011-12. Between 2001 and 2003 — I wonder how much this represents previous Ministers' commitment to the Derry-Coleraine line — only £1.5 million was spent on essential repairs, and some of that was forced in areas such as Downhill because of accidents and near misses.

The Northern Corridor Railways Group's development study identified other low-cost but medium-high impact proposals, including park and ride; integrating ticketing and timetables; the tourism and education sector; and cross-border linkages. In addition, the Peace Bridge in Derry has opened the city side to the train, and I believe that there are benefits to be had from that. We are also missing out many things along that stretch of line. The track passes Lisahally harbour; you could literally spit into the harbour compound. The train goes through City of Derry Airport; indeed, planes sometimes have to stop for it. It goes by the Ballykelly/Shackleton base, which is under review for an economic appraisal.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** The Member should bring his remarks to a close.

**Mr Ó hOisín:** It goes through places such as Benone, Downhill, Castlerock, where there are tourist attractions such as steam trains and various designated areas of outstanding natural beauty.

A LeasCheann Comhairle, I commend the motion to the Assembly.

**Mr Nesbitt:** In the previous debate, I highlighted the advantages of my constituency of Strangford as a worthy beneficiary of any developments in the green economy. On this occasion, let me start by saying that, as far as I am aware, there is not a single millimetre of working rail line in Strangford. I now have the full attention of the Minister, who is wondering where I am taking this. My interest is in the context of the debate.

Of course, the railway network is part of our industrial infrastructure. If you ask any of those charged with promoting inward investment and growing the private sector, be it Invest Northern Ireland from the public sector or PwC or KPMG from the private sector, they will tell you that infrastructure is one of the keys. They will tell you that our education system is a big positive and is very attractive to foreign direct investment. However, when it comes to our infrastructure, we have a mixed bag. Project Kelvin, which we heard about earlier, is a major positive, but our road and rail network is more of an inhibitor to industrial growth.

Like anything else that we debate in the House, the motion is good in isolation. However, there is a broader context. If we are to promote, support and fund the development, we will have to find a pot of money, which means taking the money out of another pot to put it into the development of the railways. The regional development pot faces peculiar circumstances. A huge percentage is devoted to one project; as it happens, to one road. Following the recent announcement about student fees, a percentage of what is left, as I understand it, is to be top-sliced to fund that initiative. Once again, money from one pot is being taken to fund a development in another.

Her Majesty's Treasury's latest national infrastructure plan identifies:

*"The OECD found that, between 1970 and 2005, investment in UK roads, rail and electricity generating capacity had a stronger positive effect on the level of GDP per capita, and on short term growth, than other types of capital investment.*

*Failing to make the right choices risks slower economic growth and ultimately puts the UK's international competitiveness in jeopardy."*

Are we making the right choices? Would I like to see a renewed rail link between Coleraine and Londonderry? Of course I would. Would I like to see a better road link between Belfast and Derry? Of course I would. For that, however, you must take money out of one pot and put it into another. You cannot look at the proposition in isolation.

During the debate, many Members have made reference to the City of Culture in 2013. Why are we highlighting our infrastructure needs only today?

**Mr P Ramsey:** I thank the Member for giving way. It is very clear from the bid for the UK City of Culture, which included an Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) presentation, that the railway line would be modernised and up and running for 2013. It is not that the infrastructural problems have arisen now. The work was planned for, and the Executive indicated that the money was there. It is not about creating a problem now; it is about trying to solve it.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** The Member has an extra minute in which to speak.

**Mr Nesbitt:** I thank the Member for his intervention, but I return to the question of where it is in the Budget. Is the money available for the initiative or not? It seems that a huge percentage of the DRD budget — a percentage that is disproportionate and out of kilter with priorities of any other Department — has been reserved and ring-fenced to promote one single project.

The previous Executive seemed quite proud of their four-year budget and the fact that this is the only region of the United Kingdom that has such long-range certainty in respect of its spend. However, I suggest to the House that that is but a blink of an eye when it comes to infrastructure planning. The populist act would be to support the motion, the responsible act would be to ask how it fits into the big picture, and the brave act for the House and the Executive would be to revisit the plans.

**Mr Byrne:** I support the motion. As the SDLP's spokesperson on regional development, I am very happy to add to the debate on the nature of the strategic route. Essentially, we are talking

about refitting 30 miles of railway track. The line is a strategic route between our two main cities, Belfast and Derry. We must enhance it, not put it in jeopardy. I recognise that it is about the funding that the Minister has. However, we should not add to the uncertainty about the track.

### 5.15 pm

We have only a small rail network in Northern Ireland, and we need to expand it rather than propose to reduce it. We have only the Belfast-Larne, Belfast-Bangor, Belfast-Dublin and Belfast-Derry lines. The railway should be part of our tourism infrastructure. Earlier, someone referred to Mr Palin, the journalist who talked about his experience of that great northern route. It is crucial to have a viable, modern, inter-city rail network service, and, given that they are our two main cities, we have to improve the track and the travel times between Derry and Belfast.

As other Members have stated, Derry or Londonderry is to be the UK City of Culture in 2013. That offers a big promotional opportunity for the north-west and Derry in particular. We do not want to jeopardise that. For over 10 years, the DRD has wanted to promote a shift in transport from road-based vehicles to public transport and to rail in particular. In the past 10 years, the Department has been largely successful in improving investment in the rail network. One of the good aspects is that there are modern train sets on the lines, and that is a tribute to the advances that have been made in the past 10 years. Travel journey figures from Derry to Coleraine are not great, but they are much better than they were 10 years ago. A better rail service with a better timetable will lead to a big increase in passenger figures in the future.

More and more tourists will travel by rail in the future, and students have an inter-city rail experience in Europe. We can also have that experience in Ireland. Because of events to do with the 2013 City of Culture, timing is of the essence. I hope that, in some way, the Minister and the Department can reschedule spending on capital works projects and programmes to try to facilitate that better rail service.

**Mr P Ramsey:** I thank the Members from East Derry for bringing the motion to the Floor of the House on what is a hugely important issue. It is becoming an unacceptable routine for Members from west of the Bann, particularly from the north-west, to secure debates to implore the

Assembly to reverse detrimental decisions when it is apparent that Members from a great many constituencies in Northern Ireland do not have to do that. If we are to bring an acceptable level of self-governance to the people, we must ensure that it is equitable and absolutely fair. I for one did not come to the House to apologise to my constituents when Departments take decisions that do not take into account the needs of the people in my area. I came here to make positive changes for the people of Derry and for all the people of Northern Ireland. We should all be working together for all of its people. After all, the issue is not about east of the Bann.

I am grateful to the Minister, who, over the holiday period, attended a meeting in the Guildhall. He will readily accept that that was a very constructive, informed and hugely important meeting. Every aspect of the people of the city was represented, including the social partners; the business community as represented by the president of Londonderry Chamber of Commerce; the Into the West campaign delegates; and all elected leaders. They came forward strongly with the right rationale, whether that is economic, social or environmental.

I resent some of the comments of the Ulster Unionist Member who spoke previously. As Eamonn McCann said at the debate at the Guildhall, we are the second city and we are not second-class citizens. At times, that is how the people of the city feel, whether it is on the cancer debate that was important to Derry or on the debate on the railway. This issue did not start last year, or in July when John Dallat referred to it. It started decades ago when the people of the city and across the region started the Northern Corridor Railways Group and the Into the West campaign. I resent the question "Why now?", because it is not an issue that has come up now but decades ago.

I made the point to the Minister in the chamber in Derry that, in the 1970s and 1980s when money was allocated for infrastructure in Northern Ireland, it was based on car ownership. That was the priority in Northern Ireland. So, what chance did areas with high unemployment or high deprivation levels have? They had absolutely no chance. So, we are catching up —

**Mr Nesbitt:** I appreciate the Member giving way. Does he accept that, when I spoke, I said that,



in isolation, of course I accepted the proposal? I simply sought that it be considered in context.

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

**Mr P Ramsey:** I accept that. If that is an apology for comments that I may have misinterpreted, I accept that.

In going forward, the rail link is, naturally, a great concern for all of us in the Foyle and East Derry constituencies. We have been promised that work and, as Raymond McCartney said earlier, we are sick, sore and tired of hearing that it is one of the lesser-used railway lines. That was thrown in our face. It was never marketed, and I say to Translink and to the Minister that it is still not marketed properly. However, over the past number of years, we have seen a serious increase in the number of passengers and, as John Dallat said, more passengers now go from Derry to Belfast than from Dublin to Belfast. So, in recognition of that, it is important that we are not doing a piecemeal exercise.

When I made the intervention during the Ulster Unionist Member's speech, I made the point that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, as part of the business case for the UK City of Culture bid, made it absolutely clear that the rationale was that we would have in place the infrastructure needed. Why did it say that? To maximise the importance of the UK City of Culture, but not just to Derry. People across Northern Ireland will benefit hugely from the UK City of Culture bid, because some events would never come to Northern Ireland if not for that bid. Everybody gets very passionate about the debate because we are catching up, but we always seem to be on the back foot. We are on the back foot today again when the Minister for Employment and Learning, for the first time, is conceding in the new mandate that plans have been abandoned to allow the maximum student number (MaSN) at Magee to expand to 1,000 students. He said that that is going out as well.

So, on behalf of all the people in that city, I say to the Minister directly: I asked you during that meeting whether you will go to the Executive and make a special case for funding for this project because, if you do not, we will fail the people of Northern Ireland and fail the efforts of so many people to bring the UK City of Culture to Derry. However, it is not just about the UK City of Culture. I was in the Chamber and heard Jimmy Spratt talking. We have 350 students

from Coleraine who regularly come to the Magee campus to study. I do not know how many go the other way. Those students will now have to come off and on to get to Derry or will have to use the bus, which does not suit them.

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

**Mr P Ramsey:** At least they can study on the train, and I appeal to the House to support the motion.

**Mr Agnew:** I welcome the motion, but I need to be clear from the outset that I do not think that survival of the line is sufficient: a full upgrade of the line is required.

As Roy Beggs said in his speech, it is not an east versus west issue. I represent North Down, which is very much to the east of the region. To me, it is a roads versus sustainable transport issue. We have just finished a debate on the green economy in which I questioned the actual commitment to the green economy. Although there were many fine words in the House about the benefits of investment in the green economy and in sustainability, the money has not followed. This motion highlights the lack of investment, particularly in sustainable transport, of which there are many benefits. There are economic benefits. The Derry UK City of Culture bid has been raised, and it is a perfect example to highlight the problem that Derry, which is our second city, does not have an efficient sustainable link to Belfast. Travel times on the Belfast to Derry railway have increased rather than decreased over the years due to the level of disrepair on the line.

As a member of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, I listened to representatives of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board talk about how they wanted to double tourism revenue in Northern Ireland by 2020. They described our poor public transport infrastructure as one of the major barriers to that. When a body that represents around 40,000 jobs in Northern Ireland states that we have a problem, we should listen.

There are obvious social benefits to investing in rail and in this line. Northern Ireland is one of the most car dependent regions in Europe. The price of oil, and therefore petrol, continually increases. As was said in the previous debate, we have probably surpassed peak oil supplies, so that price will only keep going up. We need to

find alternatives because private car ownership is becoming increasingly unaffordable for many families.

There are obvious environmental benefits in investing in this railway line. It is estimated that the full upgrade would save 20,000 tons of carbon every year. Therefore, we are meeting environmental as well as economic and social targets through this investment. This is exactly the type of investment that, when times are tight, we should be looking at — investment that is good for the economy, for people and the environment.

Rail passenger numbers are going up and nowhere more so than on that line. Since 2008, passenger numbers have increased by 122%. The increase in passenger numbers is there but the investment trend is in the opposite direction. Spending on public transport as an overall percentage of our transport spend is going down. It is currently less than 20% of the overall transport budget, largely because of the hundreds of millions of pounds going into one road project that does not meet the sustainability criteria, which I outlined in this debate and the whole House seemed to agree about in the previous debate.

I support the motion. I call on the Minister and the Executive to find the £75 million needed to upgrade the line. Perhaps they will look at their other priorities and decide that, given where we are and what we need to achieve in sustainability, those other projects are not as big a priority after all.

**Mr McClarty:** I thank the Members who tabled the motion and all Members who have spoken in favour of upgrading the railway line. I am also grateful for the opportunity to voice support for the upgrading of the line.

It is nothing short of scandalous that the much needed restoration of the Coleraine-Londonderry railway line has been postponed until 2014. Although I welcome the Minister's commitment to maintain and eventually upgrade that stretch of railway, we need his solid assurances that the money will be secured to start and finish the long promised critical upgrade for the line.

Public sector cuts are today's harsh reality, but the lesson should surely have been learned that we cannot rebuild our economy by dismantling the Province's infrastructure. The Londonderry to Belfast line is the artery of Northern Ireland's

economic heart. It provides a vital economic connection between Northern Ireland's two main cities. It is an essential element of the tourism project of the north coast. It provides cost effective, efficient transport into Londonderry for local commuters.

### 5.30 pm

Many, many people will be affected if the railway is forced out of service because it does not get the upgrade it so badly needs. I put it to the Minister that it is simply not acceptable to "work towards securing money" for the essential upgrade of this significantly important line. He needs to ensure that the money is secured.

I am also concerned that the Minister claims to have secured £20 million to begin refurbishment of the line in 2014. Although it is reassuring that some money has already been set aside, it falls far short of the £75 million required to finish the project. I urge the Minister and his Department to prioritise the upgrade of the Coleraine to Londonderry railway line and to put it into their future budget strategy to guarantee that the remaining £55 million is secured to finish what has been started. The case for the immediate upgrading of the Coleraine to Londonderry railway line is compelling, and I urge the Minister to find the necessary funding. I support the motion.

**Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development):** I am grateful to the Members who tabled the motion and to those who have contributed to the debate. It gives me an opportunity to outline the events surrounding the issue, to deal with some of the issues that have been raised by Members, to outline the plans to upgrade the Londonderry to Coleraine line and to explain why the full relay project has yet to start.

I start by dispelling the notion that there is any plot on my part or on behalf of my political party, the Ulster Unionist Party, to close the Londonderry to Coleraine line. I want to make it absolutely clear, as I did recently in Londonderry, that that is simply not the case. On my behalf and on behalf of my party, I confirm that I am committed to upgrading — not simply maintaining — that section of railway network as quickly as possible. As evidence of that, I recently committed £7 million in funding for immediate engineering works. That is a point that Mr Dickson was looking for clarity on. That

demonstrates a clear commitment to the future of the line, and that work is already in planning.

I agree that the railway service to and from Londonderry is an important investment for the north-west region and for the overall development of Northern Ireland. Creating fast, reliable and comfortable train services will bring benefits to all parts of Northern Ireland and could help attract and support major cultural and sporting events in the future, such as a major golf tournament in Portrush. It could also play an important role in developing tourist opportunities.

The original relay project is about securing the life of the line over 30 years. I know that stakeholders and political representatives from the north-west are expressing concern about the delay in the commencement of the Coleraine to Londonderry track relay project, and I will try to outline my understanding of the circumstances that led to that delay and the detail of the current plans.

Before Budget 2010, Translink had already begun preparations to take forward and complete the track relay. An economic appraisal was sent to the Department for Regional Development and, because the estimated costs of £75 million were above the delegated limit, it was forwarded to the Department of Finance and Personnel for approval. That approval was received in November 2010. The aim was to have the work completed by the end of 2012 or the start of 2013. The recommended option at that time envisaged a full track relay and it was hoped that the project would start as soon as funding could be secured.

As part of the outworking of Budget 2010, my predecessor decided to defer the start of the Coleraine to Londonderry track relay project until 2014. In fact, funding of £20 million was allocated for 2014-15 to allow the project to proceed at that time. That decision, which was made by my predecessor, Mr Murphy the Sinn Féin Member for Newry and Armagh, took account of the budget constraints faced, but it was also clear that the full relay —

**Mr P Ramsey:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Kennedy:** No, I will not. I have heard quite a lot today, and you are going to get it now.

It was clear that the full relay could not be completed for the start of 2013, Londonderry's

year as City of Culture. That was confirmed in a written response to Mr George Robinson, a Member for East Londonderry, on 21 February 2011, from my predecessor, who clarified the situation. The issue was raised as part of the consultation on the budget, but the budget position did not change when it was finalised. There are those, like Mr McQuillan, who blame it on the Conservative Party, those from Sinn Féin who blame it on the Ulster Unionist Party and those who, perhaps, suggest it was Danny Kennedy's fault. It was not. That is the current situation. I hope the House and one of the sponsors of the motion will accept the background to the issue that I am outlining now. I await that clarification in his final remarks.

To emphasise the importance of securing the future of the line under any option now taken forward, my Department is providing £7 million so that Translink can plan and implement a programme of engineering work to maintain safety on the line and to keep the line operational. However, while that work is in progress, there will be a need, for safety reasons, to reduce train services between Coleraine and Londonderry from nine services a day to five services a day, with speed limits in place. However, public transport provision between Coleraine and Londonderry will be increased overall from nine services daily to 15 services daily by co-ordinating rail and Goldline coach services. By using that approach, Translink plans to deliver an integrated bus and rail service throughout the day. However, I must emphasise that the use of buses is required to maintain effective public transport services when work on the railway line is ongoing. That should not be interpreted or sold in any way as an underhand attempt to permanently discontinue rail services between Coleraine and Londonderry. Those who peddle such a view do no service to those who want to continue to use the railway service between Coleraine and Londonderry. It is also critical that Members appreciate that a closure of the line will be required at some stage to enable major capital works to be completed, whatever the timing. That is inevitable, because of the condition of the line.

Once the immediate safety works are completed, Translink will be in a position to continue providing five services a day for some time, with a view to introducing a fully enhanced service when the full relay is completed. The aim of moving to an hourly service and improved speed depends on the track relay or a

variant of that project. As is currently the case, commuters from Belfast to Londonderry can use the Goldline 212 service before 9.00 am.

I will outline the sequence of events. Once Translink developed a corporate plan based on budgets notified, it initiated a period of consultation on different aspects of the plan over the summer. That raised a number of concerns about rail services, particularly from representatives in the north-west. However, the question rightly put today by a number of Members, including the Chairman of the Regional Development Committee and other local representatives, is "What happened to the £75 million allocated to DRD for the Coleraine to Londonderry upgrade?". Here it is: it was never the case that £75 million was allocated to my Department for that project.

The DRD submitted a bid for £75 million for that upgrade as part of the CSR 2010 exercise. Allocations were made to all Departments based on available budgets and taking account of contractual commitments. The DRD considered the available funding and made decisions about how that funding should be allocated across the Department. It must be noted that the £75 million referred to was never separately allocated in the budget within this Department, because it always depended on the outcome of the CSR 2010. The budget outcome — the Minister responsible was Conor Murphy — meant that the relay was deferred to 2014, with £20 million allocated to the 2014-15 year. That was the basis of consultations on the DRD budget until April 2011.

I have recognised the difficulties in light of the concerns raised with me about the current plans. I could, very easily, dump on the previous Minister. I could even dump on the previous Executive or on the Finance Minister. I could dump on Uncle Tom Cobley and all, but I am not prepared to do that. I have initiated discussion with key stakeholders in the north-west. Members are aware of that; it has been referred to. I attended a meeting with political representatives and other interested groups in the council chamber in the Guildhall. I asked to be part of that meeting and was able, at least, to hear at first hand the concerns, as indeed I was today. I have also raised the issues with my Executive colleagues and, separately, with the Minister of Finance and Personnel. I give the House and Members the assurance that I will continue to review options and discussions

on what is technically and financially feasible. Any revised proposals would have to be considered in the light of budget constraints and demonstrate value for money, but I will be active in pursuing this.

Not only am I committed to the upgrade of the Coleraine to Londonderry line, I would like to see options pursued to develop the line further, with high-speed intercity rail links between Londonderry, Belfast, Dublin and Cork. Such a vision is very much in line with European Union thinking, which emphasises the role of the railways in the future development of all regions. We need to be realistic about what is achievable and affordable in the short term, but I am committed to pursuing those opportunities.

In conclusion, let me firmly reiterate my commitment and that of my political party, the Ulster Unionist Party, to developing the Coleraine to Londonderry railway line. Yes, it is a very scenic line; Michael Palin is right. However, it is vital we ensure that it is also a safe route. We want it to be brought forward on that basis as quickly as possible. I assure Members that I intend to actively monitor and pursue these matters with Translink, my officials, my Executive colleagues and the House.

**Mr Campbell:** I thank the Minister and those who contributed to what was, undoubtedly, an extensive and wide-ranging debate. By and large, it was a fairly comprehensive debate that covered a lot of ground and a lot of railway line. For example, my colleague Adrian McQuillan, who proposed the motion, covered very comprehensively the issues on the line, including the number of students and workers who use the line for commuting, the UK City of Culture issue, which seemed to permeate quite a number of contributions, the congestion that occurs on our roads and the overall government cutbacks that have brought us to this issue today, to which the Minister alluded — more of which anon.

Mr McQuillan's contribution was followed by that of the Member for Foyle Mr McCartney, who referred to the Minister's recent visit to the Guildhall in Londonderry. A number of Members — Pat Ramsey and others — also referred to that. I was there myself. The Minister got a flavour of the views held, as they were made very clear to him. There was a comprehensive response, with one exception. In that meeting, one reference was made to the decision not to

proceed as a sectarian one, which others and I deeply resent: Protestants use the railway line as well. Some people need to learn that. That reference was made in passing at the Guildhall meeting. It was very unfortunate, and I hope that that sentiment was not shared by anyone else in the room. One of the campaigners made that ludicrous, absurd and unacceptable reference.

Mr McCartney also referred to the options paper of 2001. For once, that was a helpful contribution from Mr McCartney, which is more than can be said for his contributions on previous occasions. It gives me the opportunity to say that there was indeed an options paper drawn up by one of Mr Kennedy's predecessors, namely me. The options presented in the paper were total closure of the line or retention of it and building it up for the future. I very clearly indicated how I would like to see the decision go. The 2001 paper should have put the notion that the line was to close into a grave from which there was no resurrection; unfortunately, it has not done that.

Mr Beggs is not in his place, like many others from that neck of the woods. He indicated the similarities between the railway line in the north-west and in east Antrim and made some pertinent points. He also raised the issue of the A5 dual carriageway, which came up on a number of occasions, and asked whether the money for it was in the Budget.

John Dallat, the Member for East Londonderry, referred to the reduction in the number of trains, which he heard about in the summer. Then he used a phrase which, unfortunately, people use from time to time when such announcements are made:

*"people fear that this is the end".*

That is what the Minister has to nail finally: any concept that this line is up for closure.

**Mr Storey:** I thank the Member for giving way. I place on record my support for the motion and add a caveat. We need to resist the notion that the issue is somehow only the line from Coleraine to Londonderry; it is about that from Belfast to Londonderry. We do a disservice to Members who have spoken on the issue. As a Member for North Antrim, I value greatly the railway line that we have, and the Minister is well aware of the issues that we have raised with him about it. Will the Member ensure that

the debate on this issue is all-inclusive, that it includes the line from Belfast to Londonderry and that we do not segregate it into pieces, which would be to the detriment of the whole campaign?

**Mr Campbell:** I thank the Member for his contribution. That sentiment was prevalent throughout the debate. Members from across geographical as well as political lines indicated support in various ways and for various reasons.

I conclude on John Dallat's comments. He managed to insert a reference to the Good Friday Agreement. I am afraid that, at that stage, I glazed over. I could not see that concept there, but he managed to. He indicated that there was a sizeable increase in the numbers using the line, and that is relevant.

Stewart Dickson talked about the lack of commitment that must be addressed and the need for a "can-do" attitude. That is to be commended, and I hope that the Minister will adopt such an attitude.

Jimmy Spratt talked about the award of UK City of Culture to Londonderry and the benefits that Northern Ireland as a whole would derive from it. He made a pertinent point about Liverpool, which derived £750 million of economic activity from being European City of Culture. He said that, if we could get just 10% of that, it would be £75 million.

Pat Ramsey said that this should not be seen as either just a Londonderry or even just a north-west issue, because a number of the events that will take place as a result of the successful UK City of Culture bid will be Northern Ireland-wide events, from which everyone across the country will benefit.

Cathal Ó hOisín gave us a bit of history and background to the railway lines and talked about the number of people who are increasingly using the line, as well as the scenic beauty of the line. Yet again, Michael Palin was quoted, and I am sure that it is about the most often used quote that has ever been made, yet it is relevant and appropriate.

Mike Nesbitt talked about the need to get the issue into a broader context to make the right choices, and I hope that the Minister makes the right choice. Joe Byrne also talked about the strategic route and referred to the UK City of

Culture again, and there is much merit in that comment.

Pat Ramsey talked admirably about the equitable and fair decisions that need to be made and referred to the Guildhall meeting at which the Minister received the message loud and clear. He also talked about the usage of the line by students from Coleraine to Londonderry and from Londonderry to Coleraine. Steven Agnew took the opportunity to promote the green project in respect of sustainable transport, and that is fair enough. Although he seemed to indicate that it was a case of roads versus sustainable transport, many of us would say that it is not an either/or option. It should be a case of trying to develop roads and railways. He also talked about the benefits that would flow from that sustainable transport. David McClarty talked about the line being the artery to Northern Ireland's heart. That is accurate and appropriate.

In replying, the Minister said — I know that he has said it before — that he wanted to dispel the notion of closure. He also indicated the £7 million spend. We thank him for that and, hopefully, it will be the first element of much more spending. He then talked about the previous Minister's decision. At some time between last summer, when the new Government came into power in London, and this summer, when we had our Assembly elections, there was a definitive move in respect of funding. Whether it was the previous Minister or the existing Minister, the point is that the money that most of us assumed 18 months ago would be there to upgrade the line is not there. At some point, a decision was taken that the money that we anticipated would be there would not, in fact, be there. What most of us here want to know is how and when we are going to get that money to ensure that the line is upgraded.

In closing, I want to make a point that I do not think has been made until now. Reference has been made to the massive increase in the number of people using the single-track line between Coleraine and Londonderry. A passing loop somewhere between Eglinton and Ballykelly would allow the potential to double the number of trains and passengers. A commitment from the Minister in the next 12 months not just that he wants to maintain the line and upgrade it but that he wants to put money into the beginnings of the provision of that passing loop would send a message that not only is the line not going

to close but its maintenance, improvement and upgrading is at the top of his agenda. We look forward to getting that sort of commitment from the Minister and seeing it in place for the UK City of Culture and so that everyone in Northern Ireland can use what Michael Palin told us all was a tremendous line.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Regional Development to ensure the future of the Londonderry railway line, which links Coleraine with Londonderry and which connects the east and west of Northern Ireland.*

*Adjourned at 5.54 pm.*

# Written Ministerial Statements

**The content of these written ministerial statements is as received at the time from the Ministers. It has not been subject to the official reporting (Hansard) process.**

Office of the First Minister and  
deputy First Minister

## **Memorandum of Understanding and Supplementary Agreements**

*Published at 9.30 am  
on Wednesday 29 June, 2011*

### **Mr P Robinson (The First Minister) and Mr M McGuinness (The deputy First Minister):**

We have today presented to the Assembly a revised Memorandum of Understanding and supplementary agreements between the United Kingdom Government, the Scottish Government, the Welsh Government, and the Northern Ireland Executive.

The Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) is the principal agreement between the UK Government and the three devolved administrations and sets out the principles which govern relations between them. The MOU was last revised and presented to the Assembly in March 2010 and this version now replaces that document.

The revisions, which were agreed at a plenary meeting of the Joint Ministerial Committee on 8 June, are to the protocol on dispute avoidance and resolution and will provide a facility for the commissioning of independent analysis to inform inter-administration disagreements.

We have a responsibility for ensuring effective working relations and communication between the devolved administrations, and for helping to resolve any disputes which may arise. In the context of the MOU we will continue to seek to ensure its effective operation to further develop these relations and uphold the interests of this administration.

Culture, Arts and Leisure

## **Reported Fish Kill at Loughbrickland Lake**

*Published at noon  
on Friday 22 July, 2011*

**Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure):** I am writing to update members on a reported Fish Kill at Loughbrickland Lake and subsequent media reports regarding the quality of the water on the lake.

Firstly, I would like to assure members that officials in my Department are working closely with the Northern Ireland Environment Agency to accurately identify what is causing this pollution and to come up with solutions to alleviate the problem.

The Inland Fisheries Group in my Department has assessed the occurrence at Loughbrickland Lake as a minor fish kill. In fact, on assessing the extent of the problem, my officers found six dead fish.

My Department stocked the lake with farm-reared brown trout on 29 June and 7 July 2011. Around the 12 July there was a very rapid increase in aquatic weed growth on the lake, specifically a surface algal bloom. Summer weather conditions often give rise to periods of sudden and very rapid plant growth that thrive on the nutrient levels in the water column and lake bed. This can lead to reduced oxygen levels in the water, which can reduce chances of fish survival. This increase happened after my Department stocked the lake.

I should point out that the six dead fish recovered from the lake were Roach and not Brown Trout. Roach can be particularly susceptible to environmental stress after they have spawned.

Any reported fish kills are treated seriously by Departmental officials, who investigate the reports in conjunction with a range of agencies. A wide range of factors – both natural and man-made – can impact upon the ecosystem in a body of water.

Loughbrickland Lake, in common with many inter-drumlin lakes in the north of Ireland, reflects land use around it. The lake is now becoming eutrophic<sup>1</sup>. Invasive aquatic weed is now common to the lake and Filamentous green algae, known as blanket weed, grow on this submerged weed. This is cleared by my Department using a purpose-built weed cutting machine. The cost effectiveness of this is under review as it treats only the symptoms rather than the cause of weeds.

In conclusion, I would like to assure members that my Department has commenced another schedule of weed cutting which began on 20 July. This work will be carried out and the results assessed before further stocking of the lake continues.

My Department will continue to work closely with the NIEA and other agencies to address water quality and invasive aquatic species issues under the EC Water Framework Directive.

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1 A eutrophic body of water, commonly a lake or pond, has high primary productivity due to excessive nutrients and is subject to algal blooms resulting in poor water quality.

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