

Official Report (Hansard)

Tuesday 15 November 2011
Volume 68, No 6

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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 15 November 2011

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Private Members' Business

Universities: Students' Community Background

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The first item on the Order Paper is the motion on disparity in community background of students attending university. As two amendments have been selected, up to one hour and 45 minutes will be allowed for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. The proposer of each amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members will have five minutes.

Mr Campbell: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with concern the disparity in the number of students from a Protestant background attending universities in Northern Ireland; and calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning to explore why this is the case and to bring forward a strategy to address the issue.

This motion was debated in the Assembly almost two years ago. Obviously, the matter concerns a number of Members. Hopefully, because of the statistics that have been supplied helpfully by the Research and Information Service in preparation for the debate, it will concern everyone. The various figures for all enrolments show that 2,500 students who are domiciled in Northern Ireland attend universities in Liverpool alone. Nearly 1,500 attend universities in the Glasgow region. Of course, there are multiplicities attending other universities in Dundee, Newcastle, Edinburgh and Aberdeen, and throughout Wales and north-east England. However, when 4,000 students attend universities in those two main conurbations in England and Scotland, we see the scale of the number of students leaving Northern Ireland.

Some people ask whether that is necessarily a bad thing. It is not if most or all of those students return. I notice that during the previous debate, before Dr Farry became Minister, he intervened during a speech by my colleague the honourable Member for North Down Mr Easton to say:

"Will the Member clarify why, as a self-proclaimed unionist, he views a person from Northern Ireland who wishes to study in another part of the United Kingdom as any more of a problem than someone from London who wishes to study in Newcastle?"
— [Official Report, Bound Volume 47, p229, col 1].

When I read that quote, I not only thought that it was innocuous but wondered what on earth would have provoked such an intervention because however many hundreds or thousands of people leave London to study in Newcastle, they will not leave a knowledge gap or a skills gap or create a huge problem in London. However, that is not the case in Northern Ireland.

I would have thought that the obvious difference is that if many thousands of our best brains leave Northern Ireland to study at universities in GB, many will not return, and that will leave a huge gap in the Northern Ireland job market. I hope that the Minister, who I am glad to see in his place and who will respond, will have had almost two years to reflect on that intervention. Sometimes, on mature reflection, we can all see the wisdom of possibly changing our attitudes.

Just before that time, a report was prepared by the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) that gives us quite significant insight into some of the issues. Although some of those issues have changed over time, some remain relevant and pertinent to 2011. For example, when students were questioned about information that they could receive about finance in the place where they would take their higher education courses, 70% of Catholics were likely to have received information about funding arrangements but only 55% of Protestants were

likely to have received that same information. So there is obviously an information gap. It will become less relevant in years to come, but that issue was flagged up some three years ago in the Department, and those who are preparing for their exams need the most information communicated to them in order that they can take an informed decision on the best place for them to proceed with their studies.

As a result of the debate, there will hopefully be much closer liaison between the Department of Education and Dr Farry's Department, the Department for Employment and Learning, because it is fairly clear that in the preparation period, whether it involves knowledge about finance, information about the courses that students are likely to want to undertake, or possible chill factors in Northern Ireland universities, which I will return to in a few moments, all that work needs to be done before a student takes the decision to study in GB.

For example, I have had reports in the past — thankfully, they are less prevalent now — of problems in freshers' weeks in Northern Ireland universities. For example, a situation with army cadet stands in Magee was reported to me, and, of course, once people get an impression that there is a cold house for a particular outlook, and once that spreads amongst 17- and 18-year-olds, others may well take the decision that that may not be the place for them, particularly if they or their family are in the cadets. Fortunately, that has dissipated to some degree.

The figures are stark, and a series of questions has been tabled regarding the numbers that lie at the root of this debate and the previous one. There have been improvements in some quarters, and I mentioned Magee College: six or seven years ago, an abysmal 10% of its students were Protestant. That was absolutely appalling; there was no justification for it. When you take the travel-to-work area, not just the Londonderry area but a 15-to-20 mile radius around the college, you would expect it to be about 30%, so it was one third of what it should have been. Some good work has been done, and the figure is now about 15%. That is an improvement, but it is still half of what it should be.

That is not to be ultra-critical. I want to be supportive, and I have made that very clear to senior people in Magee College. This is not exclusive to Magee. We see in the campuses of the University of Ulster and at Queen's University

that there is under-representation of Protestants in the numbers of students applying.

Mr Allister: Does the Member agree that one of the most alarming and inexplicable situations pertains in the Jordanstown campus, where there is a gross disparity vis-à-vis the population catchment area, accentuated, strangely, by the success of the University of Ulster, and particularly Jordanstown, in attracting students from the Irish Republic? The Jordanstown campus seems, for some reason, to be more successful in attracting students from the Irish Republic than it is, proportionately, in attracting students from the controlled sector. Does the Member agree that that is one of the issues that the Minister needs to get to the bottom of?

Mr Campbell: Yes, I do. The figures for Jordanstown are stark, which returns us to whether there is a perceived cold house, a perception of particular activities that, for example, manifest themselves at freshers' week that percolate down to other 17- and 19-year-olds who have not yet committed themselves to that particular campus and who may decide that if that is the kind of place that it is, they will take their higher education elsewhere. Those factors have to be examined. Given the catchment area at Jordanstown, you would expect the proportion to be significantly higher, as you would at some of the other campuses.

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

Mr Campbell: In closing, I turn to what needs to be done. There must be closer liaison between Departments, an in-depth study on the report of three years ago commissioned by DEL, which indicated some of those problems, and the possibility of examining bursaries that could assist particularly under-represented groups.

Mr Lyttle: I beg to move amendment No 1: Leave out all after "notes" and insert

"the current background of students attending universities in Northern Ireland; calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning to take all appropriate measures to ensure that this balance reflects the relevant cohort of the population; and further calls on the Minister to work with the Minister of Education to address barriers to students accessing higher education."

I welcome the debate. If the Assembly is to be regarded as meaningful by local people — there seems to be some doubt about that at the

moment — it has to deliver for them. I cannot imagine that too many Members will disagree that there can be few more meaningful issues on which we need to deliver, as an Assembly, than provision of a world-class and inclusive system of education in Northern Ireland. Providing all local people with a first-class education and relevant skills is vital for their individual health and well-being. It is also vital for the social and economic well-being of this region, to the delivery of the Programme for Government and to building a shared and better future for all.

I hope that the entire House will give fair consideration and support to the amendment that I propose. I agree that a strategic approach to higher education is vital to providing a pool of the relevant skills necessary for economic recovery and personal development. However, any serious approach to widening participation in our universities must be joined up with the Department of Education and an Executive approach to improving educational aspiration and attainment and tackling child poverty amongst our children and young people. I hope that that is a position that the entire House can support in order to demonstrate to the public that we are willing and capable of working together to improve the lives of the people who put us here.

10.45 am

Of course, policy and legislation produced by the Assembly should be evidence based, and it is essential that we consider the figures and research available to us. However, they can be interpreted and presented in different ways. Although the Department for Employment and Learning must, of course, have a strategic approach to widening participation in higher education and require our higher education institutions to produce implementation plans on the delivery of that aim, perhaps the most fundamental issue that the Assembly and the Executive must tackle is a persistent lack of education aspiration and attainment, wherever it exists. To achieve that will require not only the Minister for Employment and Learning and the Minister of Education but the entire Executive to work together. I believe, therefore, that we have to increase the scope of the motion in order to more accurately examine the nature of the problem and how we respond.

I urge caution in regarding identity as a fixed issue, but if we look at figures for school-leavers who gained a place at university in 2009-2010,

we see a breakdown of 53% from a perceived Catholic background, 38% from a perceived Protestant background and 9% undeclared. That is, in fact, broadly representative of the perceived background of the relevant age group in our community. However, research also suggests that 58.4% of females have two A levels at grades A to E when they leave school, compared with 42.8% of males. In relation to those from a low socio-economic background, the 55.2% of pupils who do not qualify for free school meals will leave school with two or more A levels, compared with 25.4% of those who do qualify. In addition, 88.5% of grammar-school pupils leave with two or more A levels, compared with 26.9% of secondary-school leavers. They will find access to university particularly difficult due to that relative underachievement and lack of qualifications.

The factors that contribute to that underachievement are complex. However, they may include poverty, a lack of value of education, deindustrialisation, a lack of parental participation, a lack of readiness for schooling, and in-school factors. What is clear, however, is that if we are serious about tackling the fundamental issue of underachievement and under-representation of that group at university and in general, it will require the Minister for Employment, the Minister of Education and the Executive to work together with a shared commitment to delivering different outcomes and equality of opportunity for all our children and young people.

That will have to include Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) delivery of a robust child poverty action plan and an effective early years strategy from the Department of Education. It will also require Executive leadership to tackle the post-primary transfer chaos and a compromise solution of transfer at the age of 14 to be given immediate and serious consideration. Progress on that issue is essential not only for the individual but for the entire economy and for building a shared and better future for all in Northern Ireland. I urge the House to support the amendment.

Mr P Ramsey: I beg to move amendment No 2: Leave out: "with concern".

I welcome the motion from my colleague in East Derry Gregory Campbell. I also welcome the opportunity to discuss this most important and crucial issue. It has wide-ranging implications

for confidence in parity within our third-level sector, and it gives the House an opportunity to understand the issue in more detail and to act to address the issues that Members, as Chris Lyttle said, feel might add to the perceived disparity in the number of students from a Protestant background attending our local universities.

That is something that I have been personally involved with in my constituency for a number of years. I acknowledge, even at this late stage — as Gregory has done — the contribution of Jim Allen, the former provost of Magee, who passed away recently. He made a significant contribution in attempts to ensure that the controlled sectors are well informed of the places available at Magee. Recently, I met a number of young Protestants who are studying at Magee to determine their perceptions of studying there. They had no resistance or reservations and they were happy to study at Magee.

In the course of researching this subject, I contacted the three Liverpool universities — Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool Hope University and the University of Liverpool — to determine the range of backgrounds of their students. I do not have that information but I will share it with Members and the Committee when I receive it.

I have total confidence in the work that our local universities are doing to ensure that those who are most able to go to university can attend on the merit of their educational attainment and not their religious or community background. That has been further enforced by the extensive information that I have received from them on this issue. The statistical data presented by Queen's University and the University of Ulster on students from each background from 2006 to 2009-2010 shows that there is no great disparity between one community and the other. Indeed, there are ebbs and flows both ways.

I was interested to note, however, that a pattern emerged from the Coleraine and Jordanstown campuses of the University of Ulster, where the number of students from both backgrounds steadily increased from 2005-06 to 2008-09. Both groups increased their numbers in 2008-09 again. I enquired at length about that in particular with the University of Ulster, but found no evidence to suggest that it had any strategy or plan in place to drive numbers up in that period; those students were simply in the system. Indeed, there was a rise in uptake

throughout the University of Ulster of 600 students in 2008-09, which could explain the increase.

Mr Allister: I hear what the Member is saying, but has he not looked at the statistics that show that, particularly at the Jordanstown campus, there has been a distinct fall in the number of Protestant students attending between 2005 and 2009-2010, from 4,670 to 3,850? Likewise at Coleraine, the numbers have fallen from 2,200 to just over 2,000.

Mr P Ramsey: I accept totally what the Member is saying. At the Committee, I have raised the issue of what we can do. We could get an action plan as a result of this debate. The Committee has a duty to scrutinise and, as Chris Lyttle said, to get an evidence base so that we can go forward to make sure that that disparity, which the Member outlined, does not occur in the future. We all have a job at hand to ensure that we do that. It is not just for the Minister for Employment and Learning; it is for the Department of Education and OFMDFM going forward.

The University of Ulster in particular pointed out to me that there has been an increase in students who are deemed "other" or "no religion" when they are enrolled, from 2% of all students in 2006 to 9% in 2010. If that steady increase continues, which, I believe, we can expect, the disparity will grow even further, according to the university. The University of Ulster in particular is at pains to underline that it is committed to the equality of opportunity to which I referred earlier. The university conducted an equality impact assessment (EQIA) on its student recruitment and admissions policy in 2005-06.

Mr Campbell: I thank the Member for giving way. I do not disagree with some of what the Member is saying. He is outlining some of the rationale for the changing numbers. However, if there were a significant under-representation of students from the Catholic community in higher education, and the nationalist party, the SDLP, were to table a motion viewing that with concern, how would Pat Ramsey feel if a unionist party said that it would agree with the motion if the words "with concern" were dropped?

Mr P Ramsey: I am going to continue my presentation to the House and explain how I and the SDLP see the situation going forward.

The EQIA to which I referred concluded that patterns of migration show that Protestant students are twice as likely as Catholics to

leave to study outside Northern Ireland. We accept that. Since that EQIA, the university's new marketing strategy has identified which schools provide low numbers of student applicants and the schools that had no existing relationship with the University of Ulster. We have a job to encourage the controlled sector, the grammar sector and our secondary schools and to motivate those students. That tells me that the University of Ulster is making the effort, as Gregory Campbell said. It understands the difficulties and disparities. We all know about those; we are not trying to hide them. We know that Protestant students possibly feel a sense of alienation and do not go to Magee, but we have a challenge to try to overcome that.

We need a cross-departmental strategy to address the issue. The Equality Commission's report entitled 'Every Child an Equal Child: An Equality Commission Statement on Key Inequalities in Education and a Strategy for Intervention' states very clearly — I make it very clear to the House that I understand this — that a Catholic student from a disadvantaged background has a one in five chance of going to university while a Protestant child has a one in 10 chance. We have to overcome that and change as we go forward to address that problem.

Arising from that, we, as a legislature, should look at the issue in the round. We need to tackle, through finance and resources, the disparity at grass-roots level in the post-primary education system, before university is even on the agenda. The report entitled 'Educational Underachievement and the Protestant Working Class', which was undertaken last year by a working group that included Dawn Purvis, a former Member, showed that educational attainment issues begin at an early age due to wide-ranging issues in the Protestant community. We have to decide the way in which we should go forward. I agree entirely that there is a problem in Northern Ireland, particularly for young boys as they try to achieve third-level education.

Normally, I would fully concur with the Alliance Party amendment. I fully concur with the DUP sentiments, but we need to get to the bottom of the issue if we are to make a difference. I am glad that the Minister is here today. The Committee should look at the problem in much more detail. Perhaps an inquiry is needed. I would fully support such a call from the unionist section, because there needs to be a qualified

evidence base going forward. Ultimately, we need to look at how we can change the situation.

Gregory Campbell referred to our young people who go to Glasgow or Liverpool in their tens of thousands. From now on, young people will try to obtain a place in Northern Ireland because of the student fees. An old sore of mine is the Magee campus. Strong efforts are being made to try to ensure that young Protestants go to it. The maximum student number (MaSN) cap needs to be relaxed. If that happens, we will be absolutely certain that young Protestants will attend.

The SDLP understands the complexities of the problems. We want to ensure that —

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

Mr P Ramsey: — that disparity is addressed in future.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Sinn Féin does not support the motion because, effectively, it sectarianises the public debate about our universities.

The information pack that the Research and Information Service helpfully provided to all the parties ahead of this debate contains a number of quotes from spokespersons from the University of Ulster. One states that it is a sad reflection of society here that the religious composition of the North's student population should be a matter for public comment. It is also stated that the university engages in outreach work across the cultural and education spectrum to encourage students from all backgrounds to study on its campuses. Other similar quotes are dotted throughout that information pack.

11.00 am

In January 2010, Reg Empey, former leader of the Ulster Unionist Party and the then Minister for Employment and Learning, rejected any notion that there were any strong chill factors that alienated either of the two main traditions from Queen's University and the University of Ulster. He continued:

"We are all aware of the importance of encouraging equal access to higher education, irrespective of a person's background, and my Department has put measures in place to widen participation. Without doubt, this is a complex issue whose roots

reach back into primary and post primary level education."

Perhaps the DUP education voices should focus on the primary and post-primary experience of Protestant children in many educationally disadvantaged areas.

The evidence and the report undertaken by Osborne, Smith and Gallagher show that where students choose to study is complex and nuanced. For example, 81% consider choosing the best place for the preferred course to be important. It is not impossible to offer every course at the two local universities or the Open University. Other factors that influence decisions include the following questions: "Can I keep my part-time job?"; "Will I have a good social life?"; and "Will my friends go there?". It is well established that many students choose — they are not forced — to go to universities in England and Wales for a wider educational experience.

Mr Campbell: Will the Member give way?

Mr McElduff: I will not give way.

Jim Allister and Gregory Campbell have collaborated well in this debate. They regularly table questions seeking to focus attention on the religious breakdown of students at individual universities and campuses or of those who have applied for places; no great surprise there. However, rather than being concentrated on the religious background of students attending local universities, perhaps their energies would be better spent trying to ensure that the opportunity to attend university is there for anyone who wishes to attend. Their attention should focus on the quality of education provided to students who secure admission. They should be concerned about keeping costs for students attending university to a minimum. The Executive deserve commendation for capping student fees in the way that they have.

Effectively, this persistent line of questioning and the tabling of this motion could mislead the public. It could create the wrong impression that Queen's University and the University of Ulster are cold houses for Protestants. That would ignore the evidence. It is not the case, and it is not true. If the motion were to be passed, it would send a disturbing message to those who run our local universities, the students who attend and the wider public.

My main point is that there is no qualitative or quantitative evidence to support the motion. Indeed, there is plenty of evidence to the contrary. In June 2008, DEL published research that stated that universities in the North were welcoming to all groups in respect of religion, disability, ethnicity and socio-economic status. We could very well be sending departmental officials on a wild goose chase for explanations for circumstances that do not exist.

Mrs Overend: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion today, but I urge those who tabled it to look beyond simple numbers on a sheet. The issue is much more complex than that.

There is most definitely a serious problem attracting young people from the Protestant faith to our local universities. Having attended the University of Ulster at Magee College in Londonderry, where only one fifth of students came from a Protestant background, I believe passionately, as does my party, that religion should not be a factor in deciding where to attend university. I accept that those attending Magee College may feel happy while they are there, but I am concerned about why so many choose not to attend there. Unfortunately, that is the case, and it is an issue that most definitely needs additional attention to rectify. Therefore, I support Mr Campbell's call for the Department for Employment and Learning to explore the reasons behind the disparity in the community backgrounds of Northern Ireland students.

I believe that the imbalanced make-up of our universities reveals a problem that is deeper than just many people from one faith going across the water and many from another staying in Northern Ireland. I believe strongly that the underachievement of working-class Protestant young people, combined with an apparent fear factor about heading to university here, adds to the problem that we are discussing.

In January 2010, the DUP brought a similar motion before the House. It is sadly typical of the Assembly and the Executive that, more than 18 months on, we are debating the same issue. Indeed, the Member who tabled that motion called for a robust action plan. Today's motion, which is in a similar vein, could be seen as nothing more than a PR exercise. If the DUP were serious about the issue, why has it not yet sought to address it from the Executive? I would be interested —

Mr Ross: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Overend: I would like to finish this paragraph. What specific actions has the DUP taken? If it has not done anything, the fact that it has tabled a second motion on the matter shows that it is only willing to pay lip service to the issue.

Mr Ross: Will the Member remind us who the Employment and Learning Minister was in the previous mandate when the motion was tabled?

Mrs Overend: In 2009, that Minister said:

"I am determined that students should have total freedom of choice when deciding where to study, but I am also focused on addressing issues of under-representation wherever they occur, irrespective of religion, so that none of our young people are held back from realizing their full potential."

The problem of working-class underachievement in the Protestant community was highlighted by Dawn Purvis during her time in the House, and, in her report, Dr Peter Shirlow of Queen's University stated:

"Disadvantaged Catholics are twice as likely to attend university as Protestants... Many working class Protestants were heavily involved in manufacturing industry and viewed getting a trade as the main educational requirement. With the collapse of the labour market this has changed."

That statement highlights the challenge that we face. We must encourage as many Protestants as possible to study at our universities and, indeed, colleges throughout Northern Ireland. However, if we are to be effective in achieving our long-term economic goals, we must guide and help the underachieving areas that were previously reliant on the old industries into the new areas of the economy.

The Assembly has failed to get to grips with the current economic crisis and to make opportunities out of it. Six months after the House returned, we are still waiting for the Programme for Government, which we are told will be released next week. The lack of vision, focus and direction from the two largest parties in the Assembly is damaging to tackling such problems as the one that the motion raises. We must highlight and promote the STEM subjects for our long-term economic future. Universities and colleges have to take the lead on that. A number of subjects offered in our universities are not suited to providing or able to provide the graduate employment that is deserved or desired. If we want to attract the high-end jobs

that will attract Protestant youth, universities must offer the right skill sets. The previous Ulster Unionist Ministers for Employment and Learning did some excellent work in that area, promoting university and further education to all and highlighting and promoting STEM subjects.

In summary, there has to be action in working-class Protestant areas to promote not only university but other areas of educational achievement. University is not the only route open to students. That having been said, the statistics around the disparity between Protestants and Roman Catholics are a bad report for local universities. The motion misses the whole picture. It addresses the need to attract more Protestants, particularly those from working-class areas, into higher education. There is a need for action, and, in this case, a one-size-fits-all approach will not work. Many underlying issues need to be addressed before we can correct fully that terrible disparity. Therefore, I encourage and support the motion in the hope that some action will come from it.

Mr Buchanan: I support the motion, as it is now time for the Minister and his Department to do more than pay lip service to the concerns that the motion raises and to put into action a strategy to address the issue and reverse the imbalance. Almost two years ago, a similar motion called on the then Minister, Sir Reg Empey, to introduce measures to ensure that more students from a Protestant background were encouraged to opt for universities in Northern Ireland as their first choice. I see little evidence, if any, that that Minister put in place such measures. Today, universities in Northern Ireland attract only 40% of Protestant students, an imbalance and disparity that can no longer be ignored.

Mr McElduff talked about examining the evidence. Let us examine it and weigh it up. The fact is that two thirds of the 35,000 students attending our two universities in Northern Ireland are from a Roman Catholic background. Surely that highlights a serious chill factor for Protestant students, and, no matter how we may try to dress it up with fine words or fair speeches, there is still a gross religious imbalance that our universities must take in hand and address.

The startling figures for the University of Ulster campuses at Jordanstown and Magee — one third of students at Jordanstown and only one fifth at Magee are from a Protestant

background — raise the question about the sort of recruitment drive used by the University of Ulster to attract those from our controlled schools. I hope that it will now take its recruitment drive much more seriously.

What is it that drives our students away? What makes them more willing to study outside Northern Ireland rather than stay here? Is it really all down to student choice, or could it be because of an imbalance in teaching in our universities? For example, a series of history lectures at one of our universities was based solely on a nationalist perspective and completely failed to reflect the unionist background. Does that not play a part in making our universities cold houses for unionism and help to create the disparity witnessed in recent times? We have a diverse culture, which our universities must recognise and address, if they are determined to deliver equality of choice for our students.

Another factor that the Minister must examine is the availability of information on funding for our students. Recent figures reveal that 74.2% of those in Catholic grammar schools received information on the availability of funding, compared with only 58.9% in Protestant grammar schools. In Catholic secondary schools, 57.1% received such information, compared with 24.4% in Protestant secondary schools. Given those figures, is it any wonder that we are having this debate again on the disparity between the numbers of Protestant and Catholic students attending our universities?

Other issues, such as the type and length of course and a closer working relationship between our universities and colleges and our post-primary schools need to be factored into a strategy. I urge the Minister to look into those matters and give them his urgent attention. We do not want to be back here in another two years having the same debate with no action having been taken in the meantime. We want to see the disparity brought to an end and consigned to the dustbin of history for ever. We want to see a level playing field for all our students across our universities in Northern Ireland.

11.15 am

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I have listened to some rubbish in the House in my day, but this morning probably comes close to beating it all. I have just listened to Tom Buchanan say that

there is no evidence that the Department for Employment and Learning has taken steps to counteract this so-called disparity. However, no matter where we look today, there is no evidence of that disparity or of a cold house for Catholics or a chill factor for Protestants entering the University of Ulster or Queen's University.

The reality is that there are many complex and diverse reasons behind students going to the university of their choice. A number of members of my own family decided to study across the water. My sister has a distinction from Oxford University and another sister went to Heriot-Watt University in Edinburgh. They went there because of the course that they wanted to do, as well as for a different university experience across the water. That choice is available to any student who reaches third-level education.

The Members who tabled the motion need to understand that there are other factors behind the fact that young people from a unionist background may not feel like going into third-level education. One such factor, which I have mentioned a number of times in the Employment and Learning Committee, is early educational disadvantage and the difficulty that some of our communities have preparing their children for primary 1 and primary 2. John Simpson, the economist, said in a meeting in this Building, which, from memory, Gregory Campbell may have attended, that there are children aged five and six within a five-mile radius of here who are no longer suitable for an educational environment. That is an awful indictment of our society, but, unless we provide support at early years, we will not get the results that we need to see.

We need to address some of the reasons why people underachieve at school. Much more needs to be done, and I have been pressing the Health Minister to do more to ensure that programmes such as Home-Start and Sure Start are funded so that we can continue to give parents support to enable their children to go on to benefit from their school experience, both primary and post-primary, thus equipping them to proceed to third-level education.

We also have to look at the demographics. At the moment, there are 43,000 more Catholic pupils in our schools, from nursery to sixth form, than there are Protestants. Dr Peter Shirlow, an academic from Queen's University, said that

the percentage of Catholics and Protestants attending our universities reflected:

"the share of what the population is."

We have to look at how many children are coming through our schools and likely to want to go into third-level education.

The figures that have been quoted today by Members such as Jim Allister are a bit misleading. We have an excellent third-level college in the form of the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise, which contains many young people from all different backgrounds. If the student figures from that college were to be incorporated into the statistics that have been thrown out today, Members would see a much more balanced picture.

Of course, some Members speaking in the debate do not want to be balanced or objective or to look at the problems facing our society, not just when it comes to Stephen Farry's area of responsibility but when it comes to the responsibility of the Department of Education and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Some Members here are indulging in a scaremongering exercise and causing unnecessary concern among those tasked with running and teaching in our higher-level institutions, among parents whose children attend those universities and among the student population.

I want to finish on a point that some Members who spoke in the debate need to take on board. I spoke last year to a number of people from the Royal School in Dungannon who were horrified at the attempts made by the DUP, UUP, TUV, Orange Order and Tories to drag us back to the past through their attempt to mobilise Protestants to vote against me in the Fermanagh and South Tyrone Westminster election.

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

Ms Gildernew: Young people were horrified that, in spite of so much progress, there were unionist politicians who still wanted, to use those young people's words, to drag us back to the past.

Mr Campbell: Wake up.

Ms Gildernew: No, the point is that you need to wake up and smell the coffee.

Mr Ross: I will return to the motion at hand.

First, I want to refer to the amendments that the Alliance Party and the SDLP tabled. Effectively, the two amendments remove the word "concern" from the motion, but at least those two parties have recognised that the student population in Northern Ireland is not reflective of broader society. They are fairly genuine in their recognition of the fact that we need to ensure that there are no barriers to any young people in Northern Ireland attending universities here.

The Sinn Féin spokesman, Mr McElduff, claimed that the motion is about sectarianising the debate on further and higher education. That argument may suit Sinn Féin today, but, on a range of other issues, if there were under-representation of one section of the community or society in any area in Northern Ireland, that party would be the first to jump up and down about it and claim that something must be done

Mr Campbell: I thank the Member for giving way. I wonder whether the Member thinks it ironic that, on every occasion that there is under-representation of the Catholic community in any sector of society, for Sinn Féin the factors are black and white and systematic: "The Brits are to blame" or "It is 'cos we is Cafflics". Yet, when we discuss a matter such as this, they say it is very complex, very difficult to understand, very unusual and we have to get to grips with it. It is funny that, when it is the other way around, there does not seem to be any complexity; it is very clear, stark and black and white.

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

Mr Ross: I thank the Member for his contribution. Consistency is not something that Sinn Féin is renowned for, and I do not think there is any difference with this issue. The reality is that, if we have a student population in Northern Ireland that is not broadly reflective of Northern Ireland society, clearly something is driving that situation. That is what the Assembly should be concerned about.

In proposing the motion, Mr Campbell laid out some statistics. He told the House that there were considerably fewer people from a Protestant background at universities in Northern Ireland than from a Roman Catholic background. Some of the starkest figures are at Magee College, where 20% of the student population between 2005 and 2010 was from

a Protestant background. Those figures cover a broad period. The fairly uneven figures at the University of Ulster at Jordanstown, which is in my constituency, were also mentioned. There are over 6,500 Roman Catholics on campus compared with fewer than 4,000 Protestants. Not only are those figures not representative of the catchment area as such, they are not representative of the whole of Northern Ireland. Therefore, it is something that we need to look at.

I am glad that the Member from the Ulster Unionist Party recognised that this is an issue. She said that it was a disgrace that nothing had been done about the issue since the DUP tabled a similar motion two years ago, but perhaps she should have remembered that it was her Minister who did nothing about it then. Perhaps, a bit like her welcoming of the student fees announcement and the gradual wind down after that, this might be an issue on which she needs to reconsider what she said.

We need to look at three specific areas when dealing with this issue. First, entrance to university is based on grades; therefore, we need to look at whether there is a difference between the grades being achieved by young Protestants and young Catholics. The statistics for young people getting two or more A-level grades show a slight disparity of 56% versus 49%, so perhaps we need to look at that. However, that disparity is not wide enough to lead to the imbalance in our student population.

As Members have said, we recognise that there is a problem with underachievement in Protestant working-class communities, particularly among boys. That is well known. It is not something that this Minister has to deal with, but it is something that has to be addressed by the Education Minister and within communities. Parents and local representatives have key roles to play, not only in raising achievement but in raising aspirations, so that young people can feel that they too can go to university and further themselves by getting good qualifications and a good job. It is important that young people from every community and area in Northern Ireland put a value on having a good education in order to get a good job. I agree with the Member for East Belfast Chris Lyttle who highlighted the importance of early years education. That is a crucial point: much of the disadvantage in education begins at the earliest years.

Secondly, as Mr Campbell said, more unionists go to GB to study than Roman Catholics. I, too, went to Scotland to study at Dundee. I did so not because I felt that I could not go to university here but because I wanted to have a different experience and that level of freedom. I certainly enjoyed myself, but I always wanted to come back. The question is whether more unionists are going away to study and not coming back. That is why other areas of the Executive have to look at lowering corporation tax and creating more graduate jobs so that we get people back.

Another issue is the chill factor. Mr McElduff said that there is no such thing, but, frankly, I will not listen to his opinion on it, I will listen to the young people who tell me that they feel they would not be comfortable going to a particular campus because of a chill factor. They feel that they would not be welcome and that that campus would not be particularly friendly for them. If there are campuses where young unionists or young Protestants feel that they are not welcome and would be put under pressure because of their background, there is a problem.

The issue is a serious one and must be addressed. It is important that the Executive look at the three areas that I mentioned.

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

Mr Ross: I support the motion.

Mr Douglas: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to speak on the motion, which I support. This week, Bob Collins, chief commissioner of the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, responded to statistics published last week. They clearly showed the disparity in the community backgrounds of Northern Ireland students who have enrolled in our local universities. He raised thorny issues that are integral to today's debate. He said:

"Imbalance in educational outcomes is a crucial issue, one that goes well beyond the composition of University student bodies. It has the capacity to deprive Northern Ireland of a great reserve of potential talent and skills."

The Member for East Belfast Chris Lyttle highlighted that point, and my colleague Gregory Campbell mentioned the thousands of students who, perhaps for the reasons that another colleague talked about this morning, go across the water. We have to talk about those issues.

This is not a sectarian motion; it is a motion that asks why these things are happening. The issue extends from early years to when people apply to university. Bob Collins went on to say:

"It is welcome that it is receiving increasing attention from elected representatives."

Those words were spoken by the head of the Equality Commission. He also said:

"It must engage the urgent concern and action of all who can influence these matters."

That is the head of the Equality Commission saying that he has concerns. What is the main concern of Bob Collins and many in the Chamber? It has been highlighted before and today that only one in three of the 35,000 university students in Northern Ireland is from a Protestant background, as revealed recently. The motion demands an explanation; that is all we ask for. Let us dig deep and find out why. What are the reasons for the disparity?

If we drill down into the statistics, we will see another scary statistic. A socially disadvantaged pupil in a Catholic maintained school will have a one in five chance of going to university, as my colleague Pat Ramsey said this morning. We recognise the problem of educational underachievement in Catholic and nationalist areas. However, let me compare that situation with a similar pupil in a Protestant controlled school. That pupil has a one in 10 chance of getting anywhere near a university. Why does only one in 10 Protestant working-class males get an opportunity to attend a university? We all need to address that question, because it has a bearing on the future of our society and relates to a big percentage of this community. Only one third of university students are from the Protestant community. That figure is below what we would expect, so we need to look at that as well.

The debate is not about sectarianism; I would not be here if it was. Recently, a spokesman from the University of Ulster seemed to have implied that it was when the issue was raised. He said:

"It is a sad reflection of society here that the religious composition of our student population should be a matter for public comment."

It is an even sadder reflection of society that, at the heart of those statistics on participation in education as a preparation for life, are individual

young people, mainly young Protestant males, whose lives will be permanently influenced by the choices that they are able to make. Those facts have consequences for the individuals, their families and their communities. We all understand the importance of education as a passport for life and as a powerful influence on access and advancement in employment.

There is a great risk that those already disadvantaged will face further disadvantage as a result of increased competition for scarce jobs from those who have secured greater benefit from their education. I want to conclude with the words of Bob Collins:

"There has to be an appreciation of the real consequences for Northern Ireland of a growing number of people whose chances of realising their full potential are consistently diminished by educational disadvantage. Here is an opportunity to set aside partisan focus and, instead, genuinely to share the task of finding solutions."

That is all we ask for here this morning. I agree with Bob Collins, and I support the motion.

11.30 am

Mr Allister: This is an important debate because it focuses on an issue that some people would rather not discuss, but the facts demand that we discuss it because they indisputably show that there is a disparity in higher education, which disadvantages Protestant students from the controlled sector. It is most marked in the University of Ulster, and if the Minister does anything out of this debate, I implore him to sit down with the leadership of that university to have a serious discussion about why its figures have got so out of kilter, particularly with regard to the Jordanstown campus, where, since 2005, there has been an 18% reduction in the intake of students from a Protestant background.

Given the location of the Jordanstown campus, that figure is quite startling. Yet, at the same time, that university has been remarkably successful in attracting students from the Irish Republic, particularly to its Jordanstown campus. There are 2,800 students from the Irish Republic at the University of Ulster; half of them are enrolled at the Jordanstown campus, yet that campus is struggling to attract Protestant students, and there is a falling Protestant enrolment. That is an issue that should alarm the Minister. It has to be

addressed, and I implore him to exhaustively explore that with the Ulster university.

One of the reasons might be found in research that was done for the Committee for Employment and Learning 18 months or two years ago, which found that 43% of university students from a Catholic background had had their school visited by a university, but only 20% of Protestants from the controlled sector had had their school visited by a university. Therefore, if the recruitment drive is misaligned and misfocused, it is no surprise that the follow through is what we have today. The universities need to address their recruitment efforts with regard to what is working through in the system.

We have had some interesting contributions in this House. The SDLP has tabled an amendment. That party apparently expressed itself with great sincerity in understanding, sympathising with and being regretful for the disparity, yet its amendment takes out the very manifestation of that concern by removing the word "concern". In terms of its credibility, the SDLP would do much for the stand that it has taken in this debate and the words that it uses if it were not to press its amendment, which contradicts so much of what Mr Ramsey had to say.

With regard to Sinn Féin, of course, as has been pointed out, it is unbelievable. This is the party that, at every drop of a hat, is up, shouting about perceived and manufactured discrimination if it dares to touch on the Catholic community, but when it is staring that party in the face in respect of the Protestant community, we have such sanctimonious phrases from Mr McElduff that it really is a sad reflection of society that we even discuss it. His sanctimonious approach is a demonstration in itself of his own sectarianism because although he is interested if there is disadvantage to Catholics, he rejoices if there is disadvantage to Protestants and tells us not to be so foolish and not to demean ourselves and that it is a sad reflection to even discuss it. However, whether Sinn Féin likes it or not, it has been, and will be, discussed.

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

Mr Allister: As for the Alliance Party —

Mr McElduff: I thank Mr Allister — my colleague — for giving way. Can I point out that it was not just me who made the point that neither of

the two local universities — Queen's University and the University of Ulster — has strong chill factors that alienate either tradition or community? Reg Empey, the former leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, made that exact statement; it was not just me.

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

Mr Allister: I carry no candle for Reg Empey. The facts speak for themselves.

The Alliance Party's amendment uses a lot of useful words and it seems to identify that there might be an issue that needs to be addressed. Sadly, however, it is contradicted by an answer that I hold in my hand from the Alliance Party's Minister who, in reply to a question for written answer on 20 October, said:

"In general, there is no underrepresentation of Protestants in higher education."

If that is what the Minister thinks —

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

Mr Allister: If that is what the Minister thinks, it calls into question something of the credibility of the Alliance Party's amendment. I trust that he will reflect on and retract from the position that hitherto he has taken.

Mr B McCrea (The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning): Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I apologise to the House for my late arrival, which was caused by circumstances beyond my control.

The issue does, at least, bear discussion. I heard Mr Douglas say that, and, on the face of it, there is a disparity between the number of Protestants and Catholics going to Northern Ireland institutions. So, it is right that we should have a look at the matter and talk out the issues. However, just because that is so, I am not necessarily led to the conclusion that Mr Allister reached, which is that there is cause and effect and some sort of a problem.

As a unionist, I think that it is good that students go to universities throughout the United Kingdom. Personally, I would like to see them go, and I would like to see them come back, because I think that it enriches their experience. I know that it may not be a popular thing for everybody here to consider, but that is exactly the route

that I took. My primary degree was at the University of Birmingham, not that it taught me a great deal, to be honest, but it was certainly a very interesting experience. Later on, having got work experience, you eventually come back. I came back to the University of Ulster. Therefore, I was one of the Protestants who went to the University of Ulster, and I have to say that I was very pleased with the education that I got there.

When I read DEL's report, I found that it told me certain things that I was not expecting. I thought that it would say that unionists/Protestants were happy enough to go to the United Kingdom and that Catholics/nationalists would prefer to stay here. However, that was not what it said. It said that they go across in equal numbers. From what I can see, the real problem is the continued under-representation of people coming from the controlled sector into higher and further education. That is why I am pleased that the matter has been raised. It seems that that continued under-representation has more to do with either a lack of aspiration for that type of employment or with parents who are not convinced that that is the way that they want their child to go. You have to tackle that issue, which is at the root of the statistics.

Of course, it is absolutely right that people should have a choice about where they go. However, they should also be aware that the choices that they make when they are young will have profound effects on their employability, their income stream and their contribution to society in the years to come. Therefore, there is an issue about getting out more and explaining to people in the controlled sector that getting a university degree or some further education is a really good route to take. There will be a significant skills gap for level 3 education in the years to come, and we have to tackle that.

However, I look at a number of other issues with some concern. Although it is not a general problem, one of the issues that stands out is the perception that Protestants are not welcome at St Mary's — they represent about 20% of students there, and that needs to be looked at. Conversely, the figures suggest that Catholics feel that they are not welcome at Stranmillis. That does not seem to be a healthy situation, and it must be addressed.

When I looked at the report in some detail, I was struck by the impact of costs and how that influences people. It seems that those students

from, shall we say, better-off backgrounds in the Protestant community tend to go to local universities. I had not expected that. *[Interruption.]* I seem to have lost the attention of the House temporarily.

Ms S Ramsey: We have no interest in you. *[Laughter.]*

Mr B McCrea: Through you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I know that Ms Ramsey, as a previous Chair of the Committee for Employment and Learning, will have looked at this issue and have been very interested in the outcomes.

The issue that comes out of the report, which forms a good basis for going forward, is that cost matters. People, particularly those from areas where they do not normally go to university, do not want to put themselves in debt, because they are unsure whether they will get an economic return. The report also points out that Protestants are significantly less well informed than their Catholic counterparts.

With all of that, I commend the proposers of the motion for tabling it. I have no doubt that the Committee will want to talk about it further —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Time.

Mr B McCrea: The issue requires absolute inquiry rather than shooting from the hip.

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): I welcome the opportunity to speak on this motion today, and I thank all the Members who have contributed to the debate. In Northern Ireland, we must seek to secure a sustainable and globally competitive economy. To achieve that, we must move from a position that relies on low costs to compete to one that is based on higher value-added products and services, innovation, creativity and, most importantly, high workforce skills. Therefore, I strongly recognise the importance of maximising participation in higher education and, moreover, of ensuring that that happens on an inclusive basis.

Turning to the specifics of the motion, I must be clear that there is no pervasive under-representation of Protestants in higher education. Based on the statistical information that is available, participation in higher education among the Protestant section of our community is broadly in line with Protestant representation in the school-leaving population of Northern Ireland and the relevant age cohort as recorded in the 2001 census. There is, however, evidence

of under-representation among some specific sections of our society, including young Protestant males, particularly those from inner-city areas.

Before I look at representation in greater detail, a word of caution is important about how we consider statistics. It is also important that we take care in how we put labels on people. It is very simplistic to assume that people's religious, national and political identities all reinforce each other, and that people can be neatly pigeonholed into the two communities that are often referred to. Rather, it is becoming increasingly clear that many people, particularly young people, have open, mixed and multiple identities. Northern Ireland is becoming a more diverse society: we are seeing that in the statistics, and it should be welcomed and cherished. More and more people are defining themselves as different to the traditional identities, with more people in, or the product of, mixed marriages and mixed relationships and more people coming to live here from elsewhere, including a growing ethnic minority population. All of that calls into question a fixation on a narrow Protestant versus Catholic analysis, particularly when we look at the figures.

That said, let us look at the figures; people seem determined to do it. In 2009-2010, over 9,600 Northern Ireland school leavers entered their first year in higher education institutions in the United Kingdom, Ireland and elsewhere. Of those, 3,631 were Protestant, 5,137 were Catholic and 855 were of unknown or no stated religion. That translates into participation rates of 38% for Protestants, 53% for Catholics and 9% for others, which closely reflects the backgrounds of 39%, 54% and 7% that were recorded for the relevant age cohort in the 2001 census. Also, by comparison, the Department of Education's 2009-2010 school leavers survey indicated that the religious composition of the school leaver population was 40.5% Protestant, 50% Catholic and 9.5% other. It is also worth noting that around 1% of the total participation figure represents fewer than 100 students. Therefore, relatively small changes in student numbers each year can have a disproportionate effect on the perceived profile of participation.

Let us drill down further and look at the specific situation in Northern Ireland's universities. In 2009-2010, according to Higher Education Statistics Agency data, 38% of Northern Ireland-domiciled enrolments with known religion at Northern Ireland higher education institutions

were Protestant, 56% were Catholic and 6% were other religions or none. That, again, is broadly representative. In 2009-2010, of the 2,764 students who chose to leave Northern Ireland to study in Great Britain, approximately 1,238 were Protestant, 1,146 were Catholic and the rest were other religions or none.

11.45 am

Mr Campbell: I thank the Minister for giving way. While he is drilling down through the figures, would he care to comment on his Department's report of June 2008 on the attitudes and perceptions of Northern Ireland school leavers towards higher and further education, which indicates possible chill factors that might discourage students from applying to a particular institution? The report states that although 63% said that they felt no chill factor, 33% did not answer the question at all. Does he think that that figure is quite high?

Dr Farry: Statistically, it may well be quite high, but one must take great care in making any assumptions when people do not declare an answer. I will comment in a moment on the specific research to which Mr Campbell referred.

In looking at the Great Britain figures, I make the point that we are in a situation where proportionately more Protestant students migrate than the population as a whole, and that fact is acknowledged in the context of overall lower Protestant participation rates in higher education. Another 1,165 Northern Ireland-domiciled students are enrolled in higher education courses in the Republic of Ireland. However, we have no breakdown of the religious composition of those people because it is not collected there.

Some people have drawn particular attention to the participation profiles in specific campuses of the University of Ulster. It is important to remind the House that the University of Ulster is Northern Ireland's only multi-campus university, with different courses offered on different campuses. No simplistic conclusions can or should be drawn from the student profile at any one campus. It is important to stress that the participation rates overall from the Protestant section of our community across all University of Ulster campuses are broadly in line with that section of the community's representation in the school-leaving population of Northern Ireland.

Moving to the issue of chill factors, it is important to stress that I firmly believe that the two local universities provide genuine shared space and practise genuine equal opportunities. A number of recent studies have challenged previously held perceptions that more Protestants than Catholics choose to study in Great Britain due to a perceived chill factor for Protestants in Northern Ireland's universities.

In June 2008, my Department published research by Professor Osborne et al, to which Mr Campbell referred, on participation in higher education by Northern Ireland students. The evidence presented in that report indicated that there were very few negative perceptions of local institutions among the then current generation of school leavers. In fact, most respondents reported that local institutions were very welcoming to students of all religions, disabilities, ethnicities and socio-economic status.

If we look specifically at the issue of religion, we can see that only 1.5% of respondents felt that QUB was not welcoming to the Catholic section of the community and that only 2.9% responded that it was not welcoming to the Protestant section. Only 1.6% of respondents felt that the University of Ulster was not welcoming to the Catholic section of the community, and only 2.6% responded that it was not welcoming to the Protestant section.

The same report indicated that, in the main, those who opt for a university place in Great Britain as their first choice do so because they believe that their chosen institution is the best place to study their preferred subject. Other reasons given included a preference to study at a particular university and the development opportunity of living and studying away from home. That mobility level is also related to relative affluence. Others opt to study elsewhere because particular courses are not available here or because they have insufficient grades to access courses locally.

In an increasingly global society, it is right that Northern Ireland students should continue to have the opportunity to participate in higher education elsewhere. It is also right that we continue to welcome students from outside Northern Ireland to study at our institutions. A degree of inward and outward migration is of value to Northern Ireland. External students bring new ideas and skills, and we have one of

the best retention rates of such students after graduation.

However, excessive or permanent outward migration can, of course, have social and economic costs. Ideally, young people who go elsewhere to be educated and trained will return home, bringing with them their new-found skills to help to grow our economy. Nevertheless, that will happen only if we have quality jobs locally to entice potential returnees.

I will now look in more detail at widening participation. We must ensure that there is availability of opportunity in Northern Ireland for all who want to study at home and have the potential to benefit from higher education. Widening participation in higher education is one of my Department's key strategic goals and is certainly one of my personal goals. It will be a fundamental component of the forthcoming higher education strategy.

My vision for widening participation is that any qualified individuals in Northern Ireland should be able to gain access to the higher education that is right for them, irrespective of their personal or social background. Indeed, Northern Ireland has one of the highest participation rates in the United Kingdom. Nevertheless, there are still some stubborn pockets of under-representation, which is particularly acute among those from less affluent socio-economic groups and, in particular, young Protestant males in those socio-economic classifications.

Working-class Protestant males who were entitled to free school meals make up only 4% of new entrants each year, which is significantly less than their representation in the wider community. Therefore, the key to raising the uptake of university places from the Protestant working-class section of the community is to raise aspirations and attainment levels while young people are still in school. That is the broad thrust of the Alliance Party amendment, which most Members acknowledged, even though some of them stated different voting intentions. Although that is primarily a matter for the Department of Education and the schools sector, my Department provides special project funding that allows the universities to develop partnerships with non-selective schools in disadvantaged areas. Pupils from controlled post-primary schools in areas where there have been traditionally low levels of participation in higher education are specifically targeted for

inclusion in programmes such as Step-Up and Discovering Queen's.

The University of Ulster's Step-Up programme provides an opportunity for young people from disadvantaged areas in Belfast and Londonderry, many with low attainment levels and relatively low expectations, to improve their academic performance and to gain entry to universities. The programme is very well regarded, with a completion rate of 95%, and has helped over 1,000 people to access university courses.

The Discovering Queen's initiative also targets pupils in non-selective secondary schools who have experienced disadvantage. To date, some 20,000 pupils have engaged with the programme, and 87% have reported that the initiative has made them more likely to want to attend higher education.

In addition, my Department provides funding directly to the higher education institutions by way of a widening participation premium for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. In the academic year 2011-12, that amounts to £2.2 million. Higher education providers are also required to have access agreements in place, which include the provision of student bursaries and outreach activities. The philosophy behind access agreements is that the introduction of student fees should not have a detrimental effect on widening participation and that institutions are explicitly committed to increasing participation rates among under-represented groups. Those initiatives have had a degree of success and will undoubtedly help to address some of the underlying issues. However, as I outlined, I recognise that various groups are still under-represented, and we clearly need to do more to address that. However, my Department cannot do it alone.

Last year, a higher education widening participation regional strategy group was established, including the formation of four expert working groups, comprising relevant experts from education, the public and private sectors and other Departments, to consider the issues involved and to examine a new approach. In March 2011, a public consultation paper was launched, offering a different vision of the higher education sector and targeting people who are the most able but least likely to participate in order to ensure that they be given every encouragement

and support to achieve the qualifications and the confidence to apply to higher education.

The draft consultation document proposed a new regional awareness campaign for adults and young people to improve understanding of the relevance and benefits of higher education to the individual. It proposed better outreach from the higher education institutions to local communities, including employers, workers and adult returners, as well as young people from areas where there are low participation levels. The strategy for widening participation and an associated implementation plan will be incorporated into the higher education strategy for Northern Ireland, which I intend to publish in early 2012. It will address the issues outlined in the consultation document to maintain and to develop participation rates across society.

In conclusion, freedom of choice, including the choice of one's preferred university, is a central tenet of our society. However, the key to our future economic success will be the promotion of equality of opportunity for all sections of our population. My Department is sharply focused on addressing issues of under-representation wherever they occur, irrespective of religion, so that issues of low aspiration and other barriers to success are addressed and not seen to hold back any of our young people from realising their full potential.

I hope that the statistics and research that I outlined show that it is wrong for people to portray an underlying religious divide in our higher education sector. Indeed, raising undue uncertainty and concern in the student population can have only a damaging effect on the higher education sector. We must send out the message that we are focused on having a world-class education and training system in Northern Ireland that is open and accessible to all. Indeed, that is critical if we are to have the world-class economy that we all deserve.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister and the proposer of the motion. At times, many of us feel uncomfortable addressing such matters because they bring an inevitable perception of issues being dealt with in terms of sectarianism, which is the last message that the Assembly wants to send out. However, if issues need to be addressed, they must be looked at and tackled head on.

As issues emerged and evolved during the debate, I felt as though we were almost living in parallel worlds, those of perception and reality, so I was glad to hear the Minister's words. However, the perception must also be addressed. I was glad that the Minister reinforced the view that our concern should be that our student population feels comfortable, confident and adept at developing the necessary skills to help themselves and, indeed, society throughout their lives.

The Minister referred to the need for a sustainable, competitive economy and for a highly skilled workforce. He also referred to a fact that seems to have been missed during the debate: participation in higher education by people from a Protestant background is broadly in line with the composition of the population. During the debate, I was almost blinded by stats, but I picked up the Minister's general thread and was glad to hear him outline those matters.

Mr Douglas specifically mentioned that based on free-school-meals criteria, only 4% of university entrants are from a Protestant working-class background. The Assembly must return to that issue to try to tackle it because some Members appear to have missed it and others ignored it during the debate. It is inevitable that the issue will be discussed.

Mr Campbell referred to the topic being debated two years ago, and here we are again. He mentioned a skills and knowledge gap and a disparity in information dissemination. I do not know why that should be the case or why some schools do not avail themselves of information. Perhaps the universities should address the problem. If that is an issue, it must be addressed because people must have access to as much information as possible about universities, bursaries and financial matters in order to help them through life. From Mr Campbell's comments, I picked up the fact that there were issues about previous freshers' weeks, and I hope that any perceptions remain in the past.

The matter is much wider than simply numbers and stats, and Mr Lyttle took a wise approach by broadening the issue to include child poverty, early years and the involvement of the Department of Education.

It broadens its remit right throughout other Departments. It is important that we look at such issues as the participation of grammar and secondary schools and the figures that Mr Lyttle

gave on educational attainment standards in those schools. The value of education, poverty, parental values and, indeed, wider community issues are very important factors in seeking to address the matter and to bring people to the point where they feel valued, where educational values are upheld in their communities and, more importantly, where society as a whole benefits from that.

12.00 noon

In proposing amendment No 2, my colleague Mr Ramsey discussed where there is disparity or the perception of disparity with regard to the number of students from Protestant backgrounds. He referred specifically to very good work that has been done at the University of Ulster's Magee campus. He also referred to its work with the local community and people from different backgrounds in Derry.

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

Mr McGlone: In conclusion, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle, I say that my party proposes its amendment. In view of all the wider issues that need to be incorporated into the motion, we stand by that amendment.

Mr Lyttle: I thank all Members who contributed to the debate. I continue to urge the House to consider and to support the Alliance Party's amendment as it stands.

On that note, I thank Mr Gregory Campbell MLA for citing the need for close co-operation between DEL and the Department of Education in order to tackle the problem. I also thank Mr Pat Ramsey MLA for referencing the need for early intervention and a focus on the post-primary sector if the Assembly is really to provide a solution to the problem.

I thank Mrs Sandra Overend MLA for reminding the House that it is in danger of sounding like a broken record on the issue and that it needs to work together as an Assembly and an Executive to bring forward real solutions.

Ms Michelle Gildernew MLA referenced statistics on the demographics that are at play in the issue. We take note of them as well. Mr Alastair Ross MLA referred to the need to improve educational aspiration at an early stage of the education system and for the Assembly to take that particular issue seriously. My East Belfast colleague Mr Sammy Douglas MLA

quoted some important comments from the Equality Commission and Bob Collins, which did, indeed, illustrate the fact that an imbalance in educational outcomes goes way beyond university education and that the Assembly must take serious heed of that. Some time ago, Mr Douglas was involved in research into poverty amongst plenty. Therefore, he is aware of and familiar with the issue. Hopefully, we can work together to tackle the real consequences of educational disadvantage.

I thank the Minister and the Department for their continued work to assist pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. It is important that the Assembly puts on record its support for the University of Ulster's innovative Step-Up programme, which provides a double award A level in applied science. That exposes young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to real academic and vocational experience of STEM skills at an early stage, in a university setting and with industry relevance, in order to increase vastly their chances of availing themselves of the university experience. Indeed, 97% of participants progress to higher education and go on to study in fields such as biomedical science, ICT, engineering and maths — all industry-relevant skills with real employment prospects.

In conclusion, we have heard some disputed statistics in the debate. I urge people to examine the statistics closely. There is evidence to suggest that, generally speaking, the make-up of the student population at university level is broadly representative of the community. However, most Members have recognised a more fundamental problem, which is educational disadvantage in certain groups; most notably, working-class males.

Indeed, Ms Michelle Gildernew MLA recognised the need for early intervention long before university and was supported by Alastair Ross MLA, who cited as potential solutions the further roll-out of Home-Start and Sure Start and really drilling down to tackle poverty, encouraging parental participation and tackling some in-school factors.

All those solutions will require Executive co-operation, including from the Department for Employment and Learning, the Department of Education and OFMDFM, and I hope that in supporting the Alliance Party amendment today, we can send out a clear message to the public that this Assembly is up to the challenge

and that we will provide a world-class system with equality of educational opportunity for all our children and young people regardless of community background.

Mr McQuillan: I thank everybody for taking part in the debate. I thank my colleague Gregory Campbell for proposing the debate and thank the Minister for giving up his time and sitting through it.

Some weeks ago, it was unfortunate to hear that inequality and difference continue to exist in our education system, namely in our universities. The information revealed in the headline stated that our universities in Northern Ireland are home to only 40% Protestants. That is grossly worrying, not only from the point of view of equality but because of the number of young people from a Protestant background who are failing to pursue further or higher education. A report written by three academics — two from the University of Ulster and one from Queen's University in Belfast — revealed that more students from a Roman Catholic background were likely to be determined stayers whereas those from a Protestant background were more likely to be classed as determined leavers. That is very worrying.

I will now touch on some comments that have been made this morning. Gregory Campbell proposed the motion, and he started off by saying that the issue was debated in the Chamber about two years ago and that nothing had really been done since then. He hoped that, with it being debated again today, Mr Farry would take the issue on board and do something. He highlighted that 2,500 students from Northern Ireland study at university in Liverpool and a further 1,500 study in Glasgow. He said that that is no bad thing but it is unfortunate that a lot of those students are not returning home and that, mainly, we want to try to keep as many of those academics as possible in education here. He mentioned how Magee college had improved over the past few years but not to the extent that it needs to. Mr Allister made an intervention to highlight that the campus at Jordanstown was more fitted to attracting students from the Republic of Ireland than Protestant students from Northern Ireland. That is a worrying fact as well.

Mr Lyttle proposed amendment No 1 and said that the Assembly needs to deliver a first-class education system, and everybody agreed with

that. We all agree that there has to be equality and quality in the system. He went on to quote some figures and finished off by saying that an OFMDFM child poverty action plan is needed and that the transfer of children at the age of 14 would help as well.

Pat Ramsey moved amendment No 2. Mr Ramsey is very sympathetic to the cause. Although he agreed with a lot of what Mr Campbell said, he still did not really outline his reasons for wanting to leave out the word "concern". That continued throughout the debate.

Barry McElduff spoke next, and this was the one chance for Sinn Féin to prove to us all that it is really serious about equality. It failed to take that chance today, and Mr McElduff made light of the motion and said that it was something sectarian, which it certainly is not. He went on to raise some issues. However, Sinn Féin missed the boat and did not get the real meaning of the motion at all.

Sandra Overend said that this issue had been debated before in the Assembly and criticised the DUP for bringing it forward. I do not apologise one single bit for bringing this motion forward and being part of it. It is a very serious matter that we need to talk about. When Alastair Ross intervened to ask her who the Minister was during the last mandate, she admitted that it was Sir Reg Empey and that he did not do very much about this. He actually ignored the situation.

Tom Buchanan welcomed the debate and outlined some figures. I cannot read my own writing here; that is the problem.

I will move on to Michelle Gildernew's contribution. She did not pick up what the debate was all about and said that Mr John Simpson had once said that within a five mile radius of this place, there were people who were unfit for education. She said that the figures were all a bit misleading, so Sinn Féin again questioned the figures.

Alastair Ross turned to the two amendments and what the debate was all about. He stated that Sinn Féin was against the motion. He said that he had studied in Dundee but always had it in his head to return to Northern Ireland, which is a very welcome attitude.

Sammy Douglas quoted Bob Collins of the Equality Commission and said that Bob Collins had agreed that there was a disparity and that something needed to be done about it.

Jim Allister said that this was an important debate and that some did not live up to that. He asked how Jordanstown was fit to attract 2,800 students from the Republic of Ireland but not enough from a Protestant background in Northern Ireland. He said that the SDLP should not push its amendment and that although Sinn Féin Members would shout about inequalities at any other time in this House, they failed to live up to that today.

The Minister said a lot. He urged us not to look into figures so deeply, then he went on to quote a powerful lot of figures. He said a lot, but, he did not say very much, and that was a bit disappointing.

Mr McGlone gave the winding-up speech on amendment No 2, but he still did not tell us why the SDLP want to drop the words "with concern". Chris Lyttle then gave a winding-up speech on amendment No 1.

Let me make it clear that the DUP supports the motion as it appears on the Order Paper and is not accepting either amendment.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before I put the Question on amendment No 1, I advise Members that if the amendment is made, I will not put the Question on amendment No 2 as the wording to which it relates will have been deleted.

Question put, That amendment No 1 be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 33; Noes 58.

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Attwood, Mr Beggs, Mr D Bradley, Mr Byrne, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Copeland, Mr Cree, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Durkan, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Gardiner, Mrs D Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCallister, Mr McCarthy, Mr McClarty, Mr B McCrea, Mr McDevitt, Mr McGlone, Mrs McKevitt, Mr A Maginness, Mr Nesbitt, Mrs Overend, Mr P Ramsey, Mr Swann.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mrs Cochrane and Mr Lyttle.

NOES

Mr Allister, Ms M Anderson, Mr S Anderson, Mr Bell, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Ms P Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr W Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Doherty, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Flanagan,

Mr Frew, Ms Gildernew, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr G Kelly, Ms Lewis, Mr Lynch, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCreagh, Mr McElduff, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr McQuillan, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Murphy, Mr Newton, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mr Poots, Ms S Ramsey, Mr Ross, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Buchanan and Mr McQuillan.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That amendment No 2 be made, put and negatived.

Main Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes with concern the disparity in the number of students from a Protestant background attending universities in Northern Ireland; and calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning to explore why this is the case and to bring forward a strategy to address the issue.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately on the lunchtime suspension. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The first item of business after lunch will be Question Time. The sitting is, by leave, suspended. *[Interruption.]* Nobody is listening to me.

The sitting was suspended at 12.27 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Social Development

Mr Speaker: Questions 1 and 5 have been withdrawn. Question 1 requires a written answer, and question 5 is being dealt with. The Member who was due to ask question 2 is not in his place.

Fuel Poverty

3. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister for Social Development whether he has held discussions with any other Departments about tackling fuel poverty. (AQO 753/11-15)

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): The cross-cutting nature of tackling fuel poverty means that all Departments must work together to ensure that progress is made on that crucial issue. I, alongside my officials, have had discussions with other Departments, including the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI), the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). Recently, I chaired a meeting of the interdepartmental group on fuel poverty, which will merge with the fuel poverty advisory group to form a single forum. That will be a more focused group and, I believe, will work more efficiently. My Department is working closely with OFMDFM to discuss options to utilise the social protection fund in that regard.

Mr McGlone: I thank the Minister for his reply. Can he provide more detail on his short-term, medium-term and long-term strategy for tackling what is a pressing problem in the community?

Mr McCausland: The Department has a number of initiatives that address fuel poverty in different ways. First, the primary tool in tackling fuel poverty is the warm homes scheme, which offers insulation and heating measures to vulnerable householders who are in receipt of a qualifying benefit. In addition, the Housing Executive continues to roll out its annual heating replacement scheme for its tenants. The

Northern Ireland sustainable energy programme also funds schemes that offer assistance to a range of householders, and further information on those schemes is available through a free phone number, 0800 512012. We also have a pilot boiler replacement scheme, and that will be assessed in connection with the warm homes scheme. Alongside that, my Department runs an annual benefit uptake campaign, which encourages people to claim their full benefit entitlement and administers the winter fuel payment and cold weather payments.

Three areas of fuel poverty need to be addressed: one is to maximise income, and the benefit uptake campaign focuses on that; secondly, you want houses to be as energy-efficient as possible, and we are dealing with that through the measures that I outlined; the third is the cost of fuel. Those are the three things that contribute to fuel poverty.

On cost, there are some explorations regarding brokering schemes for energy. We have had contact with businesses that are introducing products that will help to deal with some of the difficulties regarding the purchase of oil, and so on. We are doing a number of things and, together, they constitute our overarching approach to fuel poverty.

Mr Easton: Has the Minister been in contact with any private sector companies to see whether there are any solutions towards helping those who are having the most difficulty with high energy costs?

Mr McCausland: I have met Kingspan Environmental and Carillion Energy Services on the issue of emergency oil drums. I have also held exploratory talks with their representatives on the implementation of a pay-as-you-go system for oil heating. That is a very exciting proposal, with the potential to make significant savings to homes that struggle to afford large fills of oil and, consequently, rely on purchasing smaller drums. Those drums cost significantly more per litre, and many Members will have had representation to their constituency advice centres on that issue and met people in their constituencies who have identified that as a problem. It places more pressure on already struggling incomes. There are early indications that the oil industry is also keen to be involved in that proposal, and I am confident that significant progress will be made in the coming months. I will keep Members updated.

I also visited the Dimplex factory, where they are working on much more energy efficient heaters, and Kingspan has its system for the solar heating of water. I understand that there are a number of other examples, such as that from Mitsubishi for piloting heat pumps, which we also want to explore.

Mr Molloy: I thank the Minister for his answers. Does the Minister agree with me that the Committee for Social Development's fuel poverty event in the Long Gallery tomorrow night is a means of bringing different communities together? Will he be involved in that event?

Mr McCausland: I welcome the Committee's event tomorrow evening. I understand that arrangements mean that there may be an Executive meeting at that very time. My intention was to be at the event, which was in my diary, but I think that the other meeting may have precedence on this occasion. However, I wish the event well.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. Does he agree that recent press reports, albeit that they are unsubstantiated, indicate that Northern Ireland, which has 2% of the UK's population, may endure 30% of the cold-weather-related deaths and that that is an indictment of the Executive's effort thus far to eradicate that scourge?

Mr McCausland: You can either go around speculating and trying to frighten people or you can do something about it.

It is good to see that Basil McCrea has now arrived in the Chamber. He obviously cannot read his own watch because he was not able to be here on time for his question.

It is good to be focused on dealing with problems. That is why, in this instance, I was able to identify to the Assembly the very strategic things that we as a Department are doing and the things that others are doing. I was also able to identify the practical measures that the Department and others are taking, as well as to note the excellent work that a number of private sector companies are doing and that we want to highlight. Yes, there is a problem with fuel poverty, but as the Member identified at the start of her question, some of the things that she was suggesting may well be unconfirmed.

Ms Lo: I understand that a strand under the Executive's green new deal was meant to

upgrade homes to make them more energy efficient but that that has been stored. Will the Minister elaborate on that, please?

Mr McCausland: The business case for the green new deal was rather late in arriving; it arrived with us only in the past few weeks. My officials are looking through it at the moment, and the economists are also going through it. I do not want to see us focus our attention on creating infrastructures; I want to see us delivering practical things that will make a real difference. We will certainly do whatever we can in that regard. However, the green new deal to which the Member refers arrived with us only the other week. It was to be with us, I think, before the summer.

Motability Cars

4. **Mr Ross** asked the Minister for Social Development how many Motability cars have been supplied in each of the last three years. (AQO 754/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Motability is an independent voluntary organisation that is responsible for the administration of the Motability contract hire scheme. My Department does not hold information on the number of Motability cars supplied in the past three years. That information may be obtained directly from Motability.

In the past five years, my Department transferred the following amounts to the Motability scheme: in 2006-07, the figure was £600,000; in 2007-08, it was £861,000; in 2008-09, it transferred £1,097,000; in 2009-2010, the figure dropped slightly to £1,058,000; and for 2010-11, it was £1,003,000. That gives us some indication of the scale of the Motability scheme in Northern Ireland.

Mr Ross: I thank the Minister for his answer. Obviously, proposed changes to disability living allowance (DLA) will have an impact across the entire system, including Motability. Will the Minister outline what changes are being made to disability living allowance by the introduction of personal independence payments?

Mr McCausland: It is proposed that the personal independence payment will replace DLA for working age claimants from 2013-14, and it will be payable to people in and out of work.

Personal independence payments will be available to people who have a long-term health

condition or impairment and will be closely targeted at disabled people in greatest need, supporting those who encounter the greatest difficulties in leading full and independent lives. There will be two components: a mobility component based on an individual's ability to move around and a daily living component based on an individual's ability to carry out a range of key everyday activities.

Entitlement will depend on the outcome of a new objective assessment, which will use evidence from claimants, independent healthcare professionals and other support workers to deliver more consistent outcomes and greater transparency for individuals. A number of current Northern Ireland DLA cases are being used in the development of the new assessment criteria, and those in the most difficult circumstances will continue to be supported by special rules for terminally ill people.

The Department for Work and Pensions Minister with responsibility for disability, Maria Miller, is in Northern Ireland tomorrow, and I will be meeting her to highlight the particular impacts that could potentially be felt by people in Northern Ireland as a result of the changes.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Does the Minister agree that the intention of the present assessment of DLA and of the proposed changes to DLA in the welfare reform legislation is to move as many people as possible off that benefit and that that will have a knock-on impact on the supply on much-needed forms of transport?

Mr McCausland: The Member is getting to the heart of the whole issue of welfare reform. I believe very much that there is a need for a reform of the welfare system, but that is not the same as welfare reform as envisaged by the coalition Government at Westminster.

There are certain things in the proposals around universal credit that are good, such as facilitating people back into work and removing the benefit trap, and we should recognise that. However, there are other things that are quite clearly intended by the coalition Government to be a cost-saving exercise. Removing those people from the benefit system is clearly a cost-saving measure on the part of the Government.

Mrs McKevitt: Does the Minister agree that the Motability scheme is successful?

Mr McCausland: The Department's role in the scheme is to provide the funding. It is a privately run scheme, and it certainly brings benefit to the individuals who receive the vehicles. I do not know what the outcome regarding the scheme will be in the longer term. We will have to wait and see. There have been examples of certain abuses of the system. We are all only too well aware of that, and it is something that needs to be borne in mind. However, in any system, you will always find people who are willing to abuse it.

Mr Speaker: Question 5 has been withdrawn.

Welfare Reform

6. **Mr McNarry** asked the Minister for Social Development for his assessment of the levels of communication between the Department for Work and Pensions, his Department and the Committee for Social Development on the issue of welfare reform. (AQO 756/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Officials from my Department have regular and ongoing communication with the Department for Work and Pensions. As I already mentioned, I will be meeting Maria Miller tomorrow. I would be surprised if there was not daily contact at some level.

The Department for Social Development (DSD) and the Social Security Agency are represented at a wide range of meetings and workshops at all levels with the Department for Work and Pensions. That is done to inform the introduction of welfare reform.

Departmental officials, along with representatives from the Social Security Agency, have also scheduled a number of meetings with the Social Development Committee over the next two months to brief it on key elements of the upcoming Welfare Reform Bill. I take the opportunity to reaffirm the point that we need to draw a distinction between the reform of the welfare system, which we think is a good and necessary thing, and what is being proposed as welfare reform by the coalition Government, because they are not the same.

Mr McNarry: I appreciate the Minister's response. I wonder whether I could tempt him to go a little bit further for the House and clarify how the particular needs of Northern Ireland, having been identified by him, will be taken into account in the overall formulation of UK welfare policy.

Mr McCausland: In developing the policy, work is ongoing at Westminster to determine how decisions taken on particular benefits will work out on the ground. As the community profile and demographics of Northern Ireland are different, it is important that we, and the folk at Westminster, understand how the proposed changes will work, not just in Great Britain but in Northern Ireland. The particular circumstances of Northern Ireland are being taken into account, which is why we have such a high level of input from staff in the Social Security Agency and DWP almost daily.

2.15 pm

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I am pleased to hear that the Minister is not that happy with the proposed changes. My question follows on from Mr McNarry's supplementary question. Has the Minister had a specific discussion with his counterpart in the Department for Work and Pensions on how severely the benefit cuts will impact on a wide range of citizens in this jurisdiction?

Mr McCausland: It is difficult to be clear about the precise impact at this stage. Any precise measurement will be very difficult until we are further down the track and have seen more detail on the precise changes being made. Calculations have to be done, which will involve staff from here working with the folks in London. There will, undoubtedly, be a major impact but the extent of that is very difficult for me to determine at this stage.

Mr D McIlveen: Does the Minister have any proposals on how to reduce the burden that the proposed reforms will place on the most vulnerable?

Mr McCausland: I am aware of the concerns being voiced about certain aspects of the reform programme. Although I fully support the principles behind the positive elements of the reform, which are to incentivise individuals to take up work and to ensure that work always pays, I am mindful of those who justifiably rely on the welfare state for essential support. We have had some discussions with the First Minister and the deputy First Minister about the social protection fund, particularly on how we can utilise it and other mechanisms to provide support as necessary. The aim is to ensure that the already vulnerable will not be further marginalised.

Mr Durkan: One key element of welfare reform will be the transition to universal credit. Although a single payment has undoubted benefits, there are risks involved. Does the Minister have any plans to mitigate the risks that may result from people receiving all their benefits, as the title suggests, in one go? That could lead to further debt and poverty, particularly given the lack of a financial capability strategy here.

Mr McCausland: Interestingly, I was discussing financial capability with some folk earlier this morning. That issue has not been forgotten.

The transition to a single payment will, undoubtedly, bring change but part of the thinking behind it is to increase financial responsibility. It is good to teach people to be financially responsible and how to manage money. On the other hand, I am sure that we can all think of particularly vulnerable sectors of society, where the arrival of a single payment may lead to money not being used in the way that was intended. That is a matter of concern to all of us, and we highlighted to Westminster the fact that it must be taken into account. That will not apply only here but across the United Kingdom. There are going to be questions about the ability of some people who are vulnerable and who may not have the capability to handle that payment.

Single payment means that all the payments will come to one person in the family. In families, it is quite often the woman who looks after the financial matters. That is certainly the case in my home; my wife looks after the cheque book. I think that that happens in a lot of homes. Issues such as to whom the payment is made are a cause of concern.

Alcohol Pricing

7. **Mr Eastwood** asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the proposal for introducing a minimum price per unit of alcohol. (AQO 757/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Through his chairmanship of the city council of Londonderry's civic alcohol forum, the Member will be aware of the impact that alcohol has on society and the need to take action to tackle alcohol misuse.

A joint DSD/Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety consultation on the introduction of minimum pricing for alcohol and other alternative measures to tackle the availability of cheap alcohol ended on 26 June.

Responses are being analysed, and an options paper is being developed for consideration by the Health Minister and I before a decision on the way forward is taken. As that measure is intended to help to protect and to improve public health, any proposed legislation will be brought forward by the Health Department.

I am sure that the Member noted in last night's 'Belfast Telegraph' the reference to the fact that alcohol abuse claims an average 266 lives in Northern Ireland every year. There is a great human cost as well as the financial cost. The newspaper article also stated that 140,000 sick days a year could be attributed to alcohol misuse, and it quotes the chairman of the British Medical Association's public health committee in Northern Ireland as saying:

"The figures are truly shocking and entirely preventable. Doctors are increasingly saddened and frustrated at seeing increasing illness due to alcohol misuse in all age groups."

Mr Eastwood: I thank the Minister for his answer. Can he provide the House with an appraisal of the social responsibility levy?

Mr McCausland: At the moment, the social responsibility levy applies to public houses. They have that levy built into the rates that they pay; they pay more than others. The problem, in large measure, is that the nature of the alcohol trade in Northern Ireland has changed dramatically. The focus has moved away from public houses to off-licences and, in particular, the large supermarkets, which, at the moment, do not pay that levy. That could well be looked at.

We need to take a holistic view of this. There are a number of sectors within the trade. There are issues about the cross-border trade in alcohol. We need to look at what happens across the border in the Irish Republic, and we need to look at Scotland. All those things are being taken into account. We need to take a comprehensive approach to address what is a substantial problem.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his responses. Has an impact assessment been carried out on how the proposals would affect the pub trade? I ask that because all of us have seen recently a number of scary figures regarding potential job losses in the industry.

Mr McCausland: Over the past number of months, I have met representatives from a

range of organisations and businesses that are involved with the alcohol trade. The conversation with publicans, in particular, was quite helpful. Clearly, they are losing out to a number of others. The sector has contracted, and there are not the same numbers of people purchasing alcohol in public houses as there were in the past. I think that some of the changes that we are talking about introducing would benefit that sector because it is losing out substantially to the large supermarkets, as I said already, which are undercutting everyone else. No one could possibly compete with them, and that is the main source of the problem.

Mr Copeland: I thank the Minister for his answer, and find I myself somewhat edgy asking a supplementary. Does the Minister agree that the fight against the misuse — if that is the right word — of alcohol should also take into account jugs of cocktails, which can contain anything between 1 litre and 1.5 litres of generally non-described spirits and are sold in family restaurants, chain restaurants and nightclubs? The person who buys those jugs has absolutely no indication of the amount of alcohol contained in them, and I am told that the effects of drinking them are extreme.

Mr McCausland: I do not know whether the Member has a greater expertise in this field than I could possibly have, but minimum pricing is simply one aspect of this issue. The other aspect is clearly around the promotion of cheap alcohol that we see in nightclubs, and so on. That type of thing is clearly irresponsible. The other problem that we have relates to irresponsibility. That sort of thing should be taken into consideration when we look at the overall package of measures that will come forward in regard to alcohol abuse.

People who have a licence for premises need to realise and be made aware that those things should be taken into consideration when their licence is up for renewal. There are a whole range of issues around irresponsible promotions, minimum pricing and the sort of behaviour that the Member has identified. All those things need to be taken into account.

Boiler Replacement Scheme

8. **Ms Ruane** asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the eligibility criteria for the boiler replacement scheme.
(AQO 758/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The qualifying criteria for the pilot boiler replacement scheme have recently been amended and will now include people aged 60 and over who are in receipt of rates relief and people aged 70 and over who are in receipt of lone pensioner allowance and have a boiler that is at least 15 years old. Housing benefit is not a qualifying benefit for this pilot scheme. To date, there have been over 500 successful applications.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat as an fhreagra sin. I understand that the scheme has been amended, but given its restrictive nature, it is a bit worrying that many people are still ruled out. Given the level of need, does the Minister have any plans to look at expanding access to that important scheme?

Mr McCausland: It is a pilot scheme. The total amount of money available was £2 million, which we estimated would assist over 1,300 households. It is a limited amount of money, and it is a modest scheme, but it is only a pilot scheme. The intention is to review the outworkings of the warm homes scheme and the boiler replacement scheme and to bring forward further proposals.

Mr Byrne: Will the Minister give some consideration to extending the scheme to meet the needs of older people who suffer adversely in some of these situations?

Mr McCausland: The reply to that is something similar to the reply that I have just given, in that we have only a modest amount of money — £2 million — and we understand that that will assist over 1,300 households. It is a pilot scheme, and as we come to the end of it, the key thing is that we learn lessons and make sure that the pilot scheme and the warm homes scheme are amended to make them fit for purpose moving forward.

The long-term situation should be foremost in our minds. At this point, I am not minded to extend the scheme further unless there is compelling evidence to the contrary. However, the intention is to see the pilot scheme through to completion. Then there will be a review of the two schemes to see what can be done moving forward.

Mr Swann: I thank the Minister for his widely known response. Can he detail how many boilers he expected to have replaced at this stage, and is he content with the current progress?

Mr McCausland: We estimated that the total amount of money would have assisted 1,300 households. The most recent figure that I have is that there have been 500 successful applications. By the end of the year, I hope that we will be well up towards our target.

2.30 pm

Culture, Arts and Leisure

Salmon Conservation

1. **Mrs Dobson** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure when she expects to consult on a suite of robust and effective measures which will make a significant contribution to the drive to conserve salmon. (AQO 766/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Member for her question. The wild Atlantic salmon is an iconic species, and I am aware of widespread concern at the decline in the number of adult fish returning from the sea to spawn in our rivers. The UK, through the European Union, is party to the North Atlantic Salmon Conservation Organization (NASCO), which aims to conserve, restore, enhance and rationally manage Atlantic salmon stocks through international procreation. DCAL is responsible for the conservation of wild Atlantic salmon in the North, and the EU expects it to work towards meeting the objectives of NASCO agreements and resolutions. The Department commissioned scientific research on the issue, and DCAL fisheries staff, working with Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) staff at the Bushmills salmon station, have undertaken long-term research into the ecology and population dynamics of wild Atlantic salmon. The results of that research are vital in informing the development of DCAL policy on the conservation of wild Atlantic salmon stocks, and the process is at an advanced stage. Departmental officials are preparing advice for my consideration on the way forward on any new measures proposed to enhance the conservation of wild Atlantic salmon stocks in the North.

Mrs Dobson: When does the Minister intend further to restrict the remaining commercial fisheries, particularly those identified as intercepting mixed salmon stocks?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member may be aware that, from 2001, the number of commercial fishing licences decreased from 55 to six, with five in full operation. That reduction was the result of a voluntary buyout scheme. Before we can suggest a way forward, we must wait for advice based on the research determining how great the impact is

Miss M McIlveen: Is the Minister aware of the ADSEA project led by the Ards and Down Salmonid Enhancement Association? Is she willing to meet the group involved to look at options for progressing the project with a view to creating a sea trout fishery in Strangford lough?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have met representatives from a few other projects, particularly those to do with recreational angling, but I am not aware of that project. Angling is part of their core business, but they also look at the countryside and environmental impacts. I am very keen to meet the group. I am not too sure about a proposed fishery. However, I suppose that the purpose of a meeting is for groups to put forward their proposals. Through officials, we will take steps if they are appropriate.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat, a Aire, as an fhreagra sin. Will you detail why the wild Atlantic salmon stocks are in such a state of decline?

Ms Ní Chuilín: There are a few reasons for the decline. The scientific evidence so far indicates that the decline in the number of salmon returning to our rivers is consistent with international evidence, which points to habitat degradation, pollution, barriers to migration, the imbalance of predator/prey relationships and ecosystems and recreational and commercial exploitation. There are also concerns about the survival rate of stocks during the marine phase of the salmon going back into the rivers. The decline is the focus of international research, which aims to better understand the reasons that I outlined and any additional factors.

Mr Allister: The use of drift nets continues, particularly along the County Antrim coast. Why has there been a successful buyout virtually everywhere else, yet the ravaging of the stocks by drift nets continues to affect the River Bush and Bushmills area of the north coast? When will the Minister take action?

Ms Ní Chuilín: As I pointed out to Jo-Anne Dobson, the issue in 2001 was the 55 licences for fishing wild salmon commercially. Now, there

are six licences, five of which are active. If the Member has any specific information about activity outside the conditions of the licence, I would expect rather than encourage the Member to bring that forward so that I can pass it on. That applies to all Members. Those licences are regulated, and if there is any sign of their abuse or misuse it is incumbent on the Member to bring that information forward.

Sport: Volunteering

2. **Mr Ó hÓisín** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for her assessment of the importance of volunteering within sport. (AQO 767/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The role of volunteers in our society is significant, and volunteers are to be commended for their active support and the roles that they play in many aspects of sport. I recognise that the development and maintenance of sport and sporting organisations in the North is heavily dependent on volunteering.

My sports strategy, Sport Matters, estimates that there are more than 5,000 sports clubs and over 100 recognised sporting activities in the North. The evidence that is available from Sport Matters also indicates that those organisations and activities are, in the main, volunteer-dependent. It is for that reason that Sport Matters identifies capacity building and the empowering of sports volunteers as a major issue in sport that needs to be tackled over the 10-year lifespan of the strategy.

Mr Ó hÓisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I know that the Minister recently visited the excellent GAA conference in Armagh that dealt with volunteering. Does the Minister recognise any challenges that face sports volunteers in the North?

Ms Ní Chuilín: For the record, the GAA conference was a huge success. Well over 500 people, all of whom are volunteers in that particular sporting code, were at that conference at 9.00 on a Saturday morning.

There are many challenges to volunteering, mainly as a result of the fact that there are big expectations of the sporting bodies. The challenges are particularly in the areas of increased responsibility and accountability for governance requirements, child protection

controls and health and safety compliance. There is also a greater expectation from funders and Departments that sporting bodies and volunteers will become more professional and take on leadership roles. We all recognise the role that volunteers play in the community, particularly in sport. However, those expectations place a considerable strain on existing sports volunteers. The introduction of the Sport Matters strategy and the prevalence of volunteers within it is timely and will hopefully place additional value on the role of volunteers in sport.

Mr Swann: Does the Minister agree that, if it were possible to reduce the financial burden on amateur clubs, volunteers could spend more time on coaching and engagement and less time on fundraising?

Ms Ní Chuilín: One of the contradictions that sports clubs have pointed out to me when I have met them is that, because many of their sports are not funded, they must fundraise, particularly for additional activities. They spend most of their time fundraising. They did not volunteer to be fundraisers; they volunteered to be coaches, to wash kits and to turn up and do whatever they can. I do not know how that balance will be struck for many of those clubs, but I encourage Sport NI to take a more prominent role in helping clubs. Some pressure needs to be taken off them so that they can get on with doing the work that they want to; after all, they volunteered and gave up their free time to do that.

Mr McDevitt: I want to add my voice to those who have paid tribute to the role that volunteers play in all our sports. The Minister will be aware that the World Police and Fire Games are coming to our shores next summer. Will she tell the House what specific steps she is taking to encourage the maximum number of volunteers to get involved in that important event?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The role of volunteers in the World Police and Fire Games will be immense, and volunteers will be key to that event. Approximately 5,000 volunteers will be needed, 1,500 of whom will assist in the delivery of sporting events, as, for example, technical volunteers such as referees, linespeople and so on. I have met representatives of Volunteer Now, the board of the World Police and Fire Games and members of some of the services that are competing in the games. A volunteer strategy has already been developed, and recruitment

will be open to all. The role that volunteers will play in the World Police and Fire Games in 2013, the Olympic Games and the Paralympic Games in 2012 and the Commonwealth Games in 2014 will be absolutely pivotal.

GAA: Tyrone Centre of Excellence

3. **Mr Doherty** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether her Department is assisting the Tyrone county board of the GAA with completion of the centre of excellence at Garvaghy. (AQO 768/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Sport NI is the lead development agency for sport in the North with responsibility for the distribution of funding. I am aware that the County Tyrone board has applied to Sport NI's Sport Matters community capital programme for assistance towards completing the centre of excellence at Garvaghy. I understand that that application exceeded the quality threshold and demonstrated a significant need for the facility. The difficulty is that sufficient funds are not available at present. The project has been placed on a call-off list for future funding, subject to available budgets.

Mr Doherty: I thank the Minister for her answer. Does she agree that the Garvaghy project is an important development, not only for the GAA in Tyrone but for surrounding counties?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Yes, I agree. I, along with Barry McElduff and Michelle Gildernew, recently met the County Tyrone board on this matter. The initiative is primarily about sport but is also a cultural project to drive forward all aspects of GAA in County Tyrone and beyond. It will help to meet the ongoing demand for Gaelic games provision in the county at all levels for men and women and boys and girls. It will facilitate the cultural and heritage aspects of the GAA and the management of Gaelic games in the county, act as a regional GAA resource in Ulster and, indeed, provide a clear GAA brand in Tyrone. I think that it is an excellent project that, when fulfilled, will leave a lasting legacy for Gaels in County Tyrone.

Mr S Anderson: In light of the appalling levels of violence at GAA matches and particularly bearing in mind the incident at the weekend in County Tyrone, does the Minister agree that one of the first things that should be taught in any centre of excellence is the basic rule of behaviour on and off the field of play?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. I listened to the chairperson of the Tyrone county board on the news last night and this morning. As far as I can ascertain from what he said, violence is the exception rather than the rule. For the record, I condemn all acts of violence. I condemn what happened at the weekend. Should it be in GAA games or whatever sport, it is totally unacceptable behaviour. I think that it was upsetting for everybody involved. It is not behaviour befitting Gaels or any sportspeople. I note that the GAA has acted promptly over such matters in the past. Indeed, it has imposed appropriate disciplinary sanctions, including lifetime bans. That is the type of clear message that will be sent. I noticed that this morning's news reports stated that a robust investigation is under way, and I am sure that we all await the result of that. If the point of the Member's question was to get me to do so, I have absolutely no difficulty in condemning what happened at the weekend.

Mr Byrne: Does the Minister accept that the facility at Garvaghy in Ballygawley is primarily for the youth development of young footballers in Tyrone? Will she consider visiting the facility to see what is on offer?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have already been asked by colleagues to visit Garvaghy and will do so, diary permitting. From what I have seen in my meetings with the county board and from the plans, I think that the facility will service the games that there are currently and, given its scale, will help to meet the county's assessed and ongoing needs. It will be a lasting legacy for young players and future players for that county.

Mr Kinahan: I welcome any promotion of excellence in sport. Will the Minister ensure that centres of excellence expand to include facilities for and to encourage other sports not necessarily linked to traditional GAA clubs?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I understand the point that the Member has made, but, in this case, I would have a brass neck to insist that the GAA does that, given the fact that DCAL has not put any money into the centre.

I understand that the Department's ongoing development of its Belfast pitches strategy is for a range of field games. There was an absolute lack of GAA facilities in Belfast, but that, thankfully, has started to be addressed. The GAA is looking at making those facilities multi-use. However, it is honestly not my place

to comment on whether this GAA facility, which is funded by Gaels, should be multi-use. I have no remit whatsoever to do so. Nevertheless, I congratulate the GAA on that work.

2.45 pm

Community Arts: County Fermanagh

4. Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what financial assistance the Arts Council has provided to community arts projects in County Fermanagh over the past four years. (AQO 769/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Arts Council has provided almost £400,000 to community arts projects in County Fermanagh over the past four years. It has also provided an additional £193,000 in capital funds to the Clinton Centre in Fermanagh, which was completed in 2004. The centre is a multipurpose arts facility, including a community workshop and gallery space, which provides excellent arts facilities for local people in that area.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. Will the Minister provide details on which funding programmes were used to bring arts funding into County Fermanagh?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I will personally write to the Member and include a detailed breakdown of all the funding programmes. I can, however, give him a snapshot of them. They are as follows: the musical instruments for bands scheme; the small grants programme; the Start Up programme, which aims to build capacity in the community and to develop new organisations; and lottery grants, which are distributed to various community arts organisations and projects.

Mrs McKeivitt: Will the Minister provide a breakdown by constituency of the individuals and organisations that made a successful application to the creative industries innovation fund for 2011-12, which was administered by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, before the deadline of 25 August?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I think that the issue of the creative industries will be dealt with in a later question. I do not have information with me on the breakdown by constituency. However, even if I did, it would take me half an hour to read out the detail on some of the constituencies.

Nevertheless, I am happy to furnish the Member with that detail.

Mr Speaker: To be fair to the Minister, that supplementary question was slightly outside the topic of the original question. I just want to make that point. It is very important that supplementary questions are, as far as possible, tied to the original question.

Once again, I say to Members that they need to continually rise in their place. Even if they catch my eye, they still have to rise in their place.

Mr Humphrey: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I was trying to catch your eye so often that I had almost taken root.

I hope that the Minister will take half an hour to answer my question. What financial assistance has the Arts Council given to the Orange Institution, not just in Fermanagh but throughout Northern Ireland?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am sure that the Member knows that I do not have that information to hand. However, I will certainly write to him when I get it. As far as I know, quite a lot of money is going into it, but I am sure that the Member will probably feel that that is not enough. Nevertheless, I am happy to provide him with the detail.

Arts Funding

Mr McCarthy: Question 5. Yes, question 5.

Ms Ní Chuilín: It is question 5, Kieran, you're grand. It is on my list too anyway.

5. Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether she will consider allowing arts groups to access funding on a longer-term basis. (AQO 770/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department delivers support for the arts through the Arts Council. I am pleased to be able to update the Member about a recent change that will provide arts organisations with longer-term funding awards. A recent evaluation of the Arts Council's major funding programme, the annual support for organisations programme (ASOP), carried out by officials recommended that the Arts Council should extend the usual one-year award under ASOP to reduce uncertainty and the administrative burden on arts organisations. The Arts Council had been considering such a move and has implemented a change that will see

awards made to arts organisations for a three-year period from April 2012 to March 2015. The programme is currently open for applications.

Mr McCarthy: I am delighted to hear the answer. That three-year period will give all arts groups the opportunity to plan well in advance. The Minister will know that funding for arts groups has been cut, so at least that move will give them the opportunity to plan. Does the Minister agree that further future planning is in the interests not only of arts groups but of tourism, which we are trying to promote in Northern Ireland?

Mr Speaker: The Minister has enough to go on to answer the question. Move on.

Mr McCarthy: The arts groups will have that time in which to plan.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I appreciate the sentiments behind the Member's question. He has raised the issue previously, particularly for community-based organisations. In this instance, arts groups face a somewhat uncertain future because of annual funding. By the time that arts groups complete their evaluations, it is almost time to reapply. Similar issues were raised earlier about volunteering. It puts an inordinate burden on people and restricts their ability to plan and develop future programmes. This is good news. I cannot comment on tourism, but funding periods of more than one year — if possible, at least three years — would give groups the opportunity to get on with their work, deliver, monitor, evaluate and plan for the future.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as na freagraí sin. Will the Minister outline the strategic approach to arts funding?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I recently reviewed the Arts Council's business plans, and I will ensure that its priorities are in line with mine before giving final approval. I am also considering the results of the ASOP review. My officials are working with the Arts Council to develop its new five-year strategy, which will cover the period from 2012 to 2017. In fairness to the Arts Council — credit where it is due — its approach to governance and the provision of strategic support for groups has been exemplary. I am confident and look forward to reading its new plan on the way ahead.

Mrs Overend: Does the Minister accept that new groups as well as those that have been in

existence for some time must have access to funds and that, that being the case, quality must be considered in funding decisions?

Ms Ní Chuilín: New groups should have access to funding. The perception is that some programmes are closed. Indeed, technically, some are closed: once a group is in, that is what happens. Therefore, I encourage Members to support groups in their area that have not previously applied to apply now. Funding rounds are competitive, and applications are made on the basis that they compete with others for funding. Applications are based on criteria and nothing else.

Mr Eastwood: Can I ask the Minister how many local arts groups face closure this year because of a lack of funding?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am not aware that any arts group faces closure because of withdrawal of funding by the Arts Council. If the Member knows of specific cases to do with Arts Council or other DCAL funding, I am happy to meet him and offer a bit of support. I have heard about lots of threats in the past, and we try to find the basis and evidence for those. However, there is nothing on my desk at the minute.

Creative Industries

6. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the work that she is undertaking to recognise the rate of growth in the creative industries. (AQO 771/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The creative industries are recognised locally and internationally for their potential for job and wealth creation. They also stimulate wider innovation and export-focused growth and can therefore make a major contribution to rebuilding and rebalancing the economy. As government lead on the creative industries, my Department actively stimulates collaboration between industry, government and academia to support and grow the local sector.

The creative industries innovation fund has been relaunched to support creative businesses, in particular export-focused and high-growth areas such as digital content. It seeks to encourage collaboration across the creative industries to develop new ideas and products capable of competing in global markets.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Minister. Given that so many young people leave school without GCSEs and may find themselves unable to develop

within the creative industries, does the Minister agree with the former Education Minister, Caitríona Ruane, who last week at the OFMDFM Committee described the situation as criminal? Is that a reflection on Martin McGuinness's tenure as Education Minister?

Ms Ní Chuilín: As part of the creative industries, there is a phone application that will direct you to places; I must share that with you. The question was about creative industries, not about Caitríona Ruane or Martin McGuinness. If the Member is serious about young people, perhaps he will write to me instead of making cheap political points.

Mr I McCrea: In her answer to the initial question, the Minister referred to the creative industries innovation fund. Does she agree that a lot of collaborative work can be done with, for example, further education colleges to ensure that the areas to which Mr Nesbitt referred can be addressed? Can she give an update on the uptake of the fund?

Ms Ní Chuilín: With regard to uptake, £4 million has been set aside in the current Budget period for the creative industries innovation fund. I agree that development of the creative industries needs to be addressed through the curriculum in primary schools, post-primary schools and, indeed, further education colleges. To that end, I will have an initial series of meetings with my colleague John O'Dowd. After that, I will talk to Minister Farry.

Young people who use animations and graphics but do not have an interest in academia have shone, developed and flourished through the digital and creative industries. We hope to capture that in our work so that we can contribute to the development of talented young people who have nowhere to bring their talents and are not specifically supported by government. It is important that we try to join some of this stuff up and use the fund and any other opportunities that exist to support something that we currently talk about but have yet to take proper action on.

Mr Humphrey: I declare an interest as a member of Belfast City Council. The Minister will be aware of the tremendous work that the council has done on creative industries. Does she support the location of a digital hub for Belfast in North Belfast?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I do, yes. All politics is local. I am aware of the tremendous work that Belfast City Council has done and continues to do. In fact, its work has been an exemplar to many people. Creative hubs, particularly in deprived areas, are part of the future. Setting aside the fact that I am one of the six MLAs for North Belfast and that the hub would be situated right in the heart of my constituency, areas such as Girdwood are ideal for the creation and development of digital knowledge and information and, indeed, the digital economy, particularly given that the lack of investment in those areas has continued. That is one way in which the area could be enhanced.

Cross-departmental Links

7. **Ms Lo** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what her Department is doing to develop cross-departmental links and initiatives to ensure that the professional arts and theatres are included in strategic planning for the whole cultural economy. (AQO 772/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department plays a key role in the Executive's plans for building our cultural economy. I recognise the arts' ability to drive social and economic regeneration in our towns and cities. The arts infrastructure of theatres and other arts facilities also contribute to the North's growing reputation as an exciting and vibrant place for tourists to visit.

My Department is involved in a number of key projects with cross-departmental links and objectives. The Cultural Olympiad provides an opportunity to celebrate and showcase our diversity in culture, people and languages. My officials also work closely with DETI on the new regional economic strategy and the Tourism 2020 strategy to ensure that the arts and creative industries form a key part of future cultural and economic development plans.

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for her response. Given Northern Ireland's great success in hosting the MTV European music awards, is the Minister taking steps to replicate that success in other ways and to help to promote and grow the cultural economy?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for her question. The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is also in the Chamber, and I am sure that she also heard the Member's comments. The success of Departments and agencies working together to promote what we

have in the North and to use it to its best possible potential was clear at the MTV awards. As the Member will know, there will be celebrations next year for the Titanic, the Cultural Olympiad and the Olympics. In April, MTV will return, albeit on a smaller scale. There will be many opportunities in 2012, 2013 and 2014 for Departments, through tourism, arts and, indeed, good and better relations, to promote arts and cultural opportunities for the North.

3.00 pm

Private Members' Business

Mobile Phones: Roaming Charges

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer will have 10 minutes to propose the motion and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. One amendment has been selected and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the importance of affordable telecommunication costs to achieving economic recovery; welcomes the recent reductions in roaming charges across Europe; further welcomes the European Commission's plans to abolish roaming charges by 2015; and calls for the immediate introduction of an all-Ireland telecommunications tariff to expedite this objective.

Tá áthas an domhain orm a bheith anseo leis an rún a mholadh. I am very happy to be here to move the motion, and I am happy that the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is here to listen and to respond to it because I know that it personally affects her in my constituency. In fact, I share the constituency with her, so I will not claim it as my own.

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

Roaming is a massive problem for residents in border areas, for those who have to cross the border to do business and for our local economy as a whole. Roaming charges are an unfair private taxation on customers who make phone calls, send texts or transfer mobile data to or from another part of this island. In 2007 alone, £11 million was removed from our local economy through inadvertent roaming, which is when mobile phones choose a roaming network without someone having actually crossed the border. Inadvertent roaming is a completely separate issue to the one that we are here to discuss, but that figure paints a picture of the magnitude of the effect that roaming has on our economy.

Introducing legislation to deal with roaming charges is primarily a matter for the European Commission, and efforts have been made to reduce the costs that roaming customers pay. That progress is very welcome. However, we need much more co-operation from the mobile phone industry. Since the first legislation to cap roaming rates was introduced in 2007, there have been significant reductions in the charges per minute and per text. However, there have also been massive jumps in the use of data, including sending and receiving e-mails and the use of social media on a smartphone.

That increase in data usage will undoubtedly be at a massive cost to our local economy, and the actual figure is bound to be much more than the £11 million that Ofcom predicted in 2007. We cannot just stand by and allow such money to flow out of our economy. In a recent meeting with Ofcom to discuss the motion, I asked it to try to update that figure in its next communications market report, and I look forward to seeing the results of that.

The European Commission has introduced plans to reduce roaming, and one of its current proposals is to abolish it by 2015. However, steps need to be taken by the mobile phone industry to deal with the issue of roaming in advance of that. We cannot simply sit back, wait for 2015 to come and wonder how that will happen. The European Commissioner for Digital Agenda has described the price gap between domestic mobile charges and roaming rates as unjustifiably high. She has suggested that the mobile phone market in Europe is dominated by a few large players such as Orange, Vodafone and O2, which means that there is too little competition on prices. It is clear that pressure needs to be brought to bear on mobile phone operators.

Poland has the presidency of the European Union and has brought forward proposals to reduce difficulties with cross-border transactions and roaming charges. I welcome such moves. Being from a border county, I know the extreme challenges in electronic services being faced by families and businesses who straddle the border. The border continues to be a financial burden on families and restricts businesses. It is, therefore, important that barriers are removed to cross-border electronic services and internet access.

Although recent reductions to roaming costs are welcome, they fall well short of what is

required, especially at a time when electronic communications and services have overtaken fixed line and manual services and when the knowledge economy is increasingly becoming available through mobile phones and on the internet. How on earth can normal trade relations be established when the commercial sector is being penalised in developing telecommunications contacts and operating with customers and suppliers in the rest of Ireland? In other parts of the world, mobile phone operators have taken steps to abolish roaming rates, including between Australia and New Zealand and between Finland and Russia, and similar steps need to be taken here.

In the past, some networks introduced bolt-ons to reduce roaming, meaning that some customers would not be charged extra to use their phones on the other side of the border. However, consumers have had to pay an additional fixed monthly rate for that. It was not available to all consumers, and there were a number of loopholes in those tariffs. It is clear that those measures did not go far enough. For example, consumers on a pay-monthly scheme who get an allocation of minutes and messages every month cannot use that allocation in the South. They were charged to make calls, send texts and use data whether or not they had a bolt-on. That is wrong, and the industry has to tackle that issue.

Take O2, for example, which has two thirds of the market share here and one third of the market in the South. When an O2 customer here roams on to O2 Ireland, they are charged the maximum legal roaming rate. However, O2 incurs no additional costs as a result of that roaming. It does not have to pay costs to any other network or operator. Any charge incurred is all profit, and it goes straight to Telefónica, the parent company of both operators. That is sheer greed and profiteering at our expense. The money does not even stay in the local economy but goes off to the head office in Spain. It is not used to improve infrastructure or mobile phone coverage in border areas. That is a ridiculous situation and is not something that we should tolerate.

I know that I singled out O2, but Vodafone, Three, Orange and T-Mobile are no better in their attitudes towards roaming, and neither are any of the Southern networks. Extortionate roaming rates have a massive impact on our ability to grow the island economy and to increase cross-border trade. They reduce our economic

competitiveness. Mobile phone operators need to do away with roaming rates, not only on the island of Ireland but across all Europe, and that needs to happen long before the target date of 2015. The best way for that to happen here is for an all-island telecommunications tariff to be put in place immediately.

I welcome the Dublin Government's commitment to work on the issue, and I hope that it is a priority that they will extend to the Irish presidency of the EU, which begins in 18 months. We have always advocated, for example, an all-island telecommunications market, and we hope that the EU can advance that project in co-operation with the industry. There can be no more profiteering at the expense of people in the border region at a time when we need to foster greater linkages and trade ties. If enough public and political pressure is brought to bear, there will be no difficulty in having complete ease of access to cross-border electronic services, whether you live in Cork or Belfast, Cavan or Enniskillen.

Finally, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle, I will address the DUP amendment. I understand where it comes from, and I support the broad thrust of it. Sinn Féin will not make a big issue of the amendment and will not oppose it. However, I am personally disappointed that after criticising the SDLP for apparently bringing an all-island amendment to every single motion, the DUP submits an amendment that removes an all-island solution to a problem facing everyone — but then, that is politics for you.

Mr Newton: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after '2015;' and insert

"and calls on the mobile network operators to abolish roaming charges in advance of 2015; and further notes that regulation of telecommunications on a UK-wide basis is key to a competitive Northern Ireland marketplace."

The issue before the Assembly is, indeed, a serious one. It is of concern to the business community and to the individual. It imposes a cost on business, on tourists who come here and on all who need to travel outside of or come to Northern Ireland. That cost is incurred even on occasions when you do not leave the jurisdiction. When you approach the border area and even before you move into the Republic, you can start to incur a cost.

The motion recognises the problem, but it presents as an answer a solution that the proposers know is impractical, without logic and not achievable. I will come back to that. The motion is political and has nothing to do with addressing the issue. If the proposers were serious about the issue, they would not have gone about it in this manner.

It is geared only to portray an all-Ireland approach to a solution, when the proposers know that it is not achievable. Indeed, it falls into the same category as a proposal from Sinn Féin just a week or two ago on an all-Ireland job creation strategy. It is the same type of approach.

I suppose that we should not be surprised at that. If you look back — I was going to say into the annals of history, but you do not actually have to go too far back to examine Sinn Féin's approach to the telecommunications industry. You have the telecommunications industry wanting to erect masts, and the opposition campaigns that were orchestrated against the erection of masts. Indeed, sometimes damage to masts occurred through and around that campaign. I believe that Sinn Féin carries some responsibility for that. That was the approach to the telecommunications industry, which is now recognised in the motion as being so important to the development of the economy. At one stage, they were going to stop the erection of telecommunication masts, and now we are recognising that they have come full circle and now want good communication systems. I suppose that we should be grateful for that.

We also remember that, not too long ago, there were proposals from Sinn Féin on an economic basis and to raise money for the economy that were actually going to put a tax on those who wanted to send text messages or use their mobile phones. We are now complaining at this stage about roaming charges.

Ms S Ramsey: I want to make two points. The Member said that we were happy to add an additional burden on people sending texts. I have a lot of respect for the Member as an individual, but if he goes back to the document, he will see that we were going to tax the telecommunications company, not individuals. On the second issue about the phone masts, you are absolutely right. I have been to the fore in opposing phone masts, like everybody in this Chamber, but it was about opposing phone masts that were being put in built-up areas. We

were giving alternative solutions to phone masts in our constituencies.

Mr Newton: I thank the Member for her intervention, but let me just ask this question: does anyone actually believe that a penalty put on to a phone supplier would not have resulted in that being put on to the user of a phone? Let us be honest about it. It is fairy-dust economics. That is what it is all about. It is not practical.

Mr McLaughlin: This is an interesting discussion. We supported the work that was done by the European Commission on roaming charges. We were also part of the lobby that drew attention to the significant profits from text messaging that were being made by the phone operators. It transpired that 10% of the bandwidths that were licensed were allocated for the management software that the companies were using, and it was actually the spare capacity, which was absolutely unproductive and not required by the mobile telephone service operators, that they used for the text messaging. So they were charging for a service that did not cost them a penny. What we were drawing attention to, which the European Commission was unable to get the mobile companies to divulge, was the vast profits that they were making from text messaging. The point —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I think that we need shorter interventions.

Mr McLaughlin: Let me finish with a point that you might want to address. The issue is that the phone companies would have had to justify any charges and to explain where the costs underlying them were. They are making vast fortunes from text messaging, for little outlay.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I think that we should return now to the amendment.

Mr Newton: Thank you very much, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I have been extremely liberal, but I make the point that there is no legislation that makes the telecommunications companies justify their costs. They can charge — as they are doing — what they like, unless legislation is introduced to ensure that they do not.

3.15 pm

Let us inject a wee bit of realism into the debate. We are all aware that this is not a devolved matter and that the Assembly can have no real say in it. Telecommunications are regulated by Ofcom and the House has no

powers to bring the mobile phone companies to book. We can express our concerns about issues, and have done so. The man in the street has expressed his concern that he is being ripped off. However, this is a matter for Ofcom, and the telecommunications companies will not change voluntarily until there is legislation that makes them change. As has been recognised by the proposer of the motion, the matter is one for the European Union.

The Assembly has no powers to regulate mobile phone companies that operate across national boundaries. They do so without any real cost to themselves while exploiting national boundaries, so that when you begin to roam, you incur an additional cost through the imposition of their additional tariffs. That is not a new subject in the Assembly; over the past number of years, questions have been asked of the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment by Members from all sides of the House. Hansard records the concerns of Members and the actions of the Minister on the matter. Not so long ago, on 13 September 2011, Mr Pat Doherty asked the Minister:

“what discussions her Department has had with Ofcom, the mobile phone industry and the European Commission to secure a further reduction in roaming charges.” — [Official Report, Vol 66, No 2, p92-3, col 2].

Sinn Féin recognised that it is an Ofcom problem. The Minister replied:

“That is not a devolved matter. However, I am in discussion with Ofcom regarding mobile phone coverage in Northern Ireland.” — [Official Report, Vol 66, No 2, p93, col 1].

She also mentioned improving access to 3G services. In his supplementary question, Mr Doherty thanked the Minister for her answer, and asked, given that excessive roaming charges are a serious barrier to growing the economy, what steps the Minister was taking. The Minister replied:

“the matter was regulated by the European Union, which introduced a regulation in 2007 — amended in 2009 — on the maximum that could be charged”. — [Official Report, Vol 66, No 2, p93, col 1].

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

Mr Newton: Sinn Féin knows where the answer to the motion lies. The answer is not contained in its motion.

Mr Nesbitt: First, I acknowledge Mr Newton's point that this is not a matter over which the House has any control. Indeed, were we to be discussing European matters, perhaps we might be better set to take a look at the implications for cohesion funding for 2014 and beyond, because I believe that that has very serious implications for the development of our economy. However, we are where we are.

We have a motion and an amendment, and I support the amendment rather than the motion. To explain why, perhaps, I could unpack the motion, which seems to come in four distinct parts. The first asserts:

"That the Assembly notes the importance of affordable telecommunication costs to achieving economic recovery".

I can support that. Telecommunications is a massive industry, and its affordability undoubtedly has a role to play in economic recovery, given the detrimental effects that charges can have for businesses and tourists. In 2009, as I understand it, the EU market for mobile roaming services, which can be divided into voice, SMS and broadband, accounted for €4.777 billion in the retail market alone. Wholesale revenues came to €1.253 billion. It is a massive market that has implications for Northern Ireland.

The second part of the motion welcomes the recent reductions in roaming charges across Europe. Again, we have no difficulty with supporting that. Indeed, the Ulster Unionist Party welcomed the recent reductions in roaming charges through EU Regulation 717/2007 of the European Parliament and European Council. It was adopted in 2007 and amended in 2009. Our MEP, Jim Nicholson, voted in favour of those proposals, which introduced caps on roaming prices and placed an obligation on operators to provide customers with specific information on their roaming charges. The regulation was designed to improve transparency and affordability for all customers affected.

The third part of the motion welcomes the European Commission's plans to abolish roaming charges by 2015. The Europe 2020 strategy aims to ensure that Europe is turned into a smart, sustainable and inclusive economy

that delivers high levels of employment, productivity and social cohesion. One of the building blocks of that new strategy is the digital agenda for Europe, which defines a number of key performance targets for attaining a digital single market. The target for international mobile roaming services is that the difference between roaming and national tariffs will approach zero by 2015.

There is one caveat. I, along with other Members, attended a business breakfast this morning with the Assembly and Business Trust. We heard a briefing about the European Commission's seventh framework programme (FP7), which has a budget of more than €50 billion. We were told that from conception to decision, an application under FP7 takes one year. I question why it appears to take so long to do away with roaming charges. The year 2015 seems a long way out.

Finally, we come to the call for an immediate introduction of an all-Ireland telecommunications tariff to expedite the objective. Having listened to Mr Flanagan, my question with which I entered the House remains valid. I do not understand what the benefit would be to Northern Ireland. What happened to competition? What happened to the House having a duty to try to ensure that Northern Ireland has a competitive economic advantage? A pertinent issue cited in a report from the European Commission to the European Parliament on roaming on public mobile communications this year is:

"at this stage competitive market forces have not developed sufficiently and prices are still clustered at the level of the caps. This lack of competitive pressure is still felt both at wholesale and at retail levels, mostly due to the fact that structural problems such as barriers to market entry and high switching costs that prevail in the roaming market have remained unchallenged."

That is why we have high roaming charges, and that is why the market forces are not coming to bear as they should.

Although I have outlined elements of the motion that my party would have no difficulty supporting, I oppose calls for the immediate introduction of an all-Ireland telecommunications tariff because I do not understand how the Northern Ireland economy would benefit.

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

Mr Nesbitt: I do not support the motion, but I support the amendment.

Mr P Ramsey: I support the motion. I welcome the debate, and I welcome the amendment and the discussion around it. This issue has been in and out of the peripheral vision of Departments, North and South, for the past number of years, so I am glad that we have the opportunity to debate it in the House with the Minister present.

When household finances and, in turn, the wider economy are in a slump, we need to find innovative ways of creating growth and doing business more efficiently as well as being able to cut household bills and stick to budgets. To that end, there are particular circumstances on the border that I believe that Members do not understand. In my constituency, for example, the issue of mobile tariffs needs to be tackled by regulators and statutory bodies. It is a big issue for so many people. Similar to what was said by the proposer of the motion, Mr Flanagan, it is clear that Members who represent border constituencies understand, in a much stronger way, how the tariffs affect people's budgets.

Mr Wells: This honourable Member certainly understands that. When I drive from Kilkeel to Newry, I am regularly welcomed to the Irish Republic by various Irish mobile phone companies even though I have not set foot outside the United Kingdom. Does the Member have the same problem in Londonderry that I face in places such as Rostrevor and Warrenpoint, where people are on O2 UK while downstairs in their properties but move to O2 Ireland and pay roaming charges when they move upstairs? Does that not indicate how ridiculous the situation is that we face at the moment?

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

Mr P Ramsey: That is the essence of the motion and the discussions. You need an all-Ireland tariff. Why should O2 — *[Interruption]*. Sorry, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

Thirty per cent of the people in the border regions are forced to pay roaming charges when receiving a call or a text or when making a call if they are on a contract or on pay-as-you-go with, for example, O2 UK. Therefore, it makes absolute sense to have an all-Ireland tariff for those companies and to force them down that route.

Mr Wells: There is a very simple solution. O2 Ireland and O2 UK are owned by the same company, so the company is charging one section for roaming to the other. If it were to eliminate that, O2 customers would not have to pay roaming charges. You do not need an all-Ireland tariff for that.

Mr P Ramsey: Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I will continue. I thank the Member for his intervention. He may be charged roaming charges on a limited basis, but it happens daily to thousands upon thousands of people in the border regions.

Co-operation between InterTradeIreland, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) and the Republic's Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation led to the digital Ireland initiative working group being established in June 2003 to pursue:

"the fullest exploitation of the digital technologies by businesses across the island."

That co-operation was needed to benefit not only the consumer but business. Ministers from both sides of the border who attended those meetings made clear reference at all times to the impact of mobile tariffs on the business community and to the issues that businesses that operate in the border communities face. High-level meetings that took place between the two respective regulators led to the ComReg/OFCOM joint working group in 2005, which raised some practical issues.

In particular, I make the point to Mr Wells that due to county, rather than geographical, boundaries in the North, mobile companies are unable to limit the scope of their signals on both sides of the border. If you try to get an O2 contract so that you can use a mobile phone in Donegal, O2 Ireland will tell you that it is a different company than O2 UK. Although the Member said that a Spanish company owns O2 overall, you will be told that it is two different companies. That shows that regulators are not taking the issue seriously, and I agree that there is a lot of greed and, at times, criminality and abuse in taking advantage of the situation.

Mr Byrne: Does the Member agree that people who live in close proximity to the border feel very alienated? They are asking the two Governments, North and South, to collaborate and to put pressure on the O2 companies to make sure that there is a single all-island tariff. Do not

worry about whether it is called an all-Ireland tariff; let us call it a single all-island tariff.

Mr P Ramsey: The Member represents a border constituency and comprehends fully the difficulties that affect not only the business community but consumers.

I welcome the efforts that the Minister has made in trying to tackle the issue. I have raised questions with her on the Floor of the House about the matter. The rural communities have been the worst affected by the level of provision of telecommunications that they have received, particularly broadband. I appeal for a united front on the matter. Although the European Union has a target to abolish roaming charges by 2015, it is imperative that we make a difference at a time when businesses and families in particular are working on streamlined, tighter budgets. It is such an important subject that I appeal to the Minister and anyone who is attending the North/South Ministerial Council meeting on Friday to raise it there. I support the motion.

Mr Dickson: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to speak to the motion. Although I am unable to support it, I support the amendment. I will explain why I believe the motion does not achieve what it sets out or purports to do.

It is clear that the massive expansion in the number of people who use mobile devices has revolutionised the way in which we communicate. Other Members referred to that.

Given the dividends offered, it is vital that communication costs are affordable, to encourage business expansion and to ensure that the public do not incur unnecessary costs. Both those factors impact on our economic recovery. With that in mind, the announcement by the European Commission of a plan to end roaming charges by 2015 is welcome, although slow. It seems that the Commission is as tired of introducing cap after cap as we are of hearing about them.

3.30 pm

The new plan does, however, rely on increasing competition to drive down prices. As I understand it, consumers will be allowed to sign up to a separate operator for their roaming calls while keeping the same number and even the same SIM card. How that will work

in practice has not been worked out. The prospect of having to deal with different bills from each operator and to jump through a series of administrative hoops has me concerned. In principle, however, it is a good idea. We should attempt to tackle the annoyance of roaming charges and we wait in expectation to see how the plan affects costs.

Anyone who has spent time, as I have, in and around the border region will know that you often get messages saying that you are now roaming even though you have not crossed the border. Other Members also referred to that. Inadvertent roaming usually occurs because there is a poor signal or no coverage at all from the home network. We should, therefore, encourage service providers to look at how signal strength and the technology of base stations can be improved.

For those visiting border regions, it may be an infrequent, minor problem, but it is a serious problem if you are a resident or a business there. Regular roaming between networks can add huge costs. Therefore, I understand and sympathise with the call by Sinn Féin to introduce an all-Ireland tariff. However, they have gone in the wrong direction. I have concerns about how an exclusively all-Ireland tariff would work in practice, because you cannot distinguish between a Northern Ireland mobile number and one from anywhere else on the UK mainland. Also, if huge changes were made to facilitate an all-Ireland tariff, could that possibly lead to an increase in costs for Northern Ireland residents calling the rest of the United Kingdom?

Surely a much more sensible plan would be to advocate what may be described as a pan-island tariff, which would encompass Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales, given the practicalities and high level of interaction between all those countries. It would be much easier to instate a United Kingdom/ Republic of Ireland tariff, which would effectively abolish roaming charges and introduce standard rates across these islands, than to merge the Republic of Ireland with Northern Ireland while cutting Northern Ireland off from the rest of the United Kingdom.

With regard to business, the value of UK exports to the Republic of Ireland is greater than the combined value of its exports to China, India, Brazil and Russia. The UK is the Republic's top trading partner. On a more personal level,

hundreds of years of migration between the islands have created a large diaspora of communities with family members scattered across the whole of the United Kingdom and Ireland. Therefore, it makes sense to harmonise tariffs, North and South, and east and west, to encourage business and other communication between all areas of the region.

I believe that the Minister recognises that, and although not a devolved matter, I believe that those are the areas that she will, and needs to, concentrate on. It would be of benefit to businesses across the island of Ireland, North and South, and I am sure that Sinn Féin would welcome that. I recognise the importance of affordable telecommunications to our economic recovery, and I welcome the European Commission's efforts. However, considering the great difficulties that the establishment of an exclusive all-Ireland tariff could bring, and believing that working towards a pan-island tariff would be much more beneficial, I cannot support the original motion but will be supporting the DUP amendment.

Mr Moutray: I support the DUP amendment. Telecommunications are evolving at an immense pace, with new, up-to-date IT products being launched on an almost daily basis. The world has, ultimately, become a much smaller and more accessible place, much to the benefit of business and the individual. Indeed, the use of telecommunications is now seen as a life vein running through many businesses. Therefore, roaming charges are something that this Assembly needs to continue to lobby the European Union and Whitehall on, given that it is not, as many have said, a devolved matter.

Additionally, we need to try to bring as much pressure to bear where possible on mobile phone network operators to abolish roaming charges in advance of 2015. They must take cognisance of the fact that in the past, they have charged extortionate prices to the detriment of the customer.

Everyone around the House has probably been hit with roaming charges at some point. It is all too easy to use our mobile devices in other jurisdictions only to later receive a hefty bill over and above what we thought it would be. I have the utmost sympathy with folks living in many areas of Northern Ireland who, because of poor reception, are diverted to another provider that costs much more. Therefore, I, too, believe that

it is time that roaming charges were abolished to aid business growth, grow our worldwide market accessibility and ensure that travellers and holidaymakers are not hit with extortionate prices.

Unfortunately, telecommunication operators are still able to charge outrageous margins, particularly on data downloads. Quite frankly, customers are getting a raw deal when it comes to cross-border usage, whether it is in the Republic of Ireland, France, Spain or wherever.

Like the proposers of the motion, I welcome the EU changes that have brought about a reduction in roaming charges and benefits to the consumer. However, we are all agreed that they do not go far enough, with network providers pricing at the higher end of the European maximum tariff rates. It is, however, very noticeable in this debate that, once again, some Members are using this issue as a political football and are politicising all-Ireland telecommunication tariffs. Is it not the case that it should happen throughout Europe so that customers benefit no matter where they are? We need this to work right across European divides to bring about real and tangible change.

As I already stated, this issue is not a devolved matter and, therefore, we are somewhat limited in what we, as a House, can do. However, I welcome Minister Foster's continued interest in this matter. The Minister has been active in endeavouring to intervene where possible and to encourage change with the providers, particularly with regard to improving 3G access. I welcome the fact that the 4G spectrum will soon be on the market, and we hope that we will have a regional target for mobile phone coverage that will not only help with coverage but with roaming charges.

The Minister has been active in publishing a telecoms action plan for Northern Ireland, which sets out clearly our objectives and goals for future development and investment. In that document, the Department acknowledges the importance of investment in improving the telecommunications infrastructure throughout Northern Ireland and of growing our competitiveness within the UK market place, which is renowned for its forward thinking, and within the telecoms marketplace. I also welcome the ongoing discussions with Ofcom that Minister Foster and her officials have had, particularly on the fact that many areas in Northern Ireland are sent to roaming because of bad coverage.

Quite simply, this is an issue right across Europe. It is not unique to this island, but we, as a House, must do everything within our powers to negotiate and lobby with Europe, Ofcom and mobile phone providers to bring about change. The telecommunications market is fast moving, and competitive advantage can be quickly eroded if regions fail to respond to an emerging demand for new services. We cannot be left behind on this issue. Our consumers cannot afford to be left behind, and the quicker roaming charges are dealt with and infrastructure improvements for coverage in Northern Ireland are made, the quicker our local businesses will be assisted in providing an enhanced service and reducing overheads. I support the amendment.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Like other Members, I welcome this important debate. Like Members who spoke previously, I welcome and commend the work of the Minister and her Department thus far on this issue, because it affects us as individuals, our constituents in border counties and businesses.

I am a bit concerned when some Members say that because we do not have jurisdiction over the matter or cannot do anything about it, we should not raise it. I, like others, have been involved in a lot of debates in this Assembly on issues that we do not have much say on. However, if something is of concern to our community and to our constituents, we bring it here as a matter of interest. Just because something does not come under the control of our Executive Ministers and Departments does not mean that it should not get to the Floor of this Assembly. This issue is relevant to people, businesses and our economy. I, for one, support any person who brings a motion of interest to the Assembly for discussion.

A lot of people have gone over many facts and figures, and I do not think that it is worth going over them again, except for a few. We have talked about roaming charges in the border counties, and I read some of the documentation that the research people provided for the debate; I thank them for that. The Minister gave her own example of travelling home to her constituency and the impact that that has.

I am trying to come up with sensible suggestions. I was going to get up to say that I support everything that Jim Wells said, and then sit

down again, but I did not want to get Jim into trouble. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Ms S Ramsey: Let me finish this point; then I will give way. In fairness, I understand what you said. It is a sensible solution to a problem. I know where you are coming from, and I support what you are saying. I will give way. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Wells: Just in case it could ever be misconstrued that I support any form of all-Ireland anything, I will explain. O2 Ireland and O2 UK are owned by the same Spanish holding company; we accept that. Therefore, there is no reason for them to charge roaming charges for taking a call from a different branch of the same company. That does not require an all-Ireland telecoms solution; that just requires the company to stop fleecing its customers, be it O2 Ireland or O2 UK. It is not rocket science; it is simply a way of generating profits and money for that company.

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

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat. I agree with you totally, because if the Minister is in one part of her house, she is charged O2 prices, but if she goes into another part of her house, she is charged on another network. I am not saying that you have a big house, Minister. *[Laughter.]* I am not for one minute suggesting that.

I agree with what you are saying; there seems to be a sensible solution to this major problem, but how do we get to it? It is to ensure that there is one tariff. Whatever way you want to set it up, whether it involves one company or two companies, there has to be one tariff. We have gone into the amount of people affected by this, especially around the border counties. Figures suggest that it impacts on around 105,000 people living in and around the border counties. We have talked about the impact that it has on businesses, so there is an economic need for this to be sorted.

To date, I support and welcome the work that the Minister has done, because work has been done. We talk about what Ofcom can and cannot do and about the EU, the work that it has done and how it will ensure that roaming charges will be abolished by 2015. That has to be welcomed. We need to live in the real world. However, is there anything that we can

do between now and 2015 to put pressure on the telecommunications companies, through the Assembly, the Oireachtas or our involvement with our MEPs? Mike Nesbitt, who is not in the Chamber, raised the point that we can use them to put pressure on the Commission, so that at least between now and then, we are working —

Mr Dickson: Will the Member give way?

Ms S Ramsey: OK.

Mr Dickson: Does the Member agree that in addition to the issue concerning residents living on the border, the bigger and better lobby would be the business lobby in Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom, as it depends on mobile phones for doing its business between the two jurisdictions? There are far more businesses in the United Kingdom that need to make phone calls to the Republic of Ireland than anyone living in the border areas.

Ms S Ramsey: Absolutely. In the Good Friday Agreement, there is an onus for us not only to work North/South, but also to work east-west. We want to have a common sense approach that will have an impact on people's lives, and I have no difficulty with that.

A Member: Why did you bring the motion?

Ms S Ramsey: What we are trying to do is move forward, so —

Mr McLaughlin: Will the Member give way?

Mr Flanagan: You are not going to get time to answer.

Ms S Ramsey: I will write to the Minister.
[Laughter.]

Mr McLaughlin: If we are discussing roaming charges, we also have to consider something that has already been referred to — I do not need to rehearse it — which is what the Commission is doing and what it intends to do. It has recognised the problem. The difficulty is that from Westminster's perspective, England, Scotland and Wales do not have a roaming problem. We have it here on the island of Ireland and what we are exploring is what we can do between now and 2015.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Time is up.

Mr McLaughlin: Does the Member agree that that is what we should address?

Ms S Ramsey: I agree totally. I know that my time is up. Will the Minister raise the issue at the next meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council so that we can see what we can do between now and 2015?

3.45 pm

Mrs McKeivitt: I support the motion and welcome the opportunity to speak on it, particularly as so many of my constituents in South Down, which borders the shores of County Louth, are so badly affected by inadvertent roaming charges.

Like many mobile telephone users in border areas, I have experienced the unexpected excessive charges each month. You can manually switch off roaming but only if you are prepared not to receive what might be an urgent call from a family member, constituent or, indeed, the emergency services. You find yourself asking what the point of having a mobile phone is when you have to switch it off to save on exorbitant charges. It should also be noted, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, that most phones that handle data prevent you from manually switching off roaming.

I have called many people in the Warrenpoint/Rostrevor area on their mobile phones only to be asked whether they can call me back on the landline or send me a text message. I am currently roaming on the Irish network. That gives me an idea of the number of mobile users who experience the high cost of international roaming without ever leaving home.

If the immediate introduction of an all-Ireland telecommunications tariff can be expedited, as the motion proposes, it will support the European Commission's plans either to abolish roaming charges or to reduce them to as close to zero as possible, as well as righting a great injustice to border users. The key phrase in the motion is "the immediate introduction". The Assembly should do all in its power to ensure that the goal of minimising or eradicating cross-border roaming charges in all of Ireland, as set by the Ofcom/ComReg joint working group in 2005, is implemented now.

The idea that a transmitter on a hilltop overlooking County Down and County Louth can charge two different rates, according to where you live, is fundamentally wrong and discriminatory. It is like a petrol pump in Dundalk charging one price to locals and

another to motorists crossing the border, or two prices being charged on a toll road: one to cars registered in the South and a hugely inflated price to cars registered in the North.

The aforementioned report states that 700,000 mobile customers in the North could benefit from an all-Ireland tariff that reduces roaming charges, so it is understandable that the mobile network operators are reluctant to move with any speed to implement such a tariff. However, they must be encouraged to act immediately. If they do not, legislation should be introduced to remove the unwarranted roaming charges.

I want to make a point before I finish, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. My mind might have been roaming in the Chamber when Mr Flanagan spoke earlier, but I got the impression that he understood that the SDLP had tabled an amendment. We most certainly did not.

Mr Elliott: At this stage of the debate, I suppose that almost everything has been said about roaming charges. I note that one issue is the amount of profit made by some mobile phone companies. Recent statistics show that in 2009, Vodafone, O2, Orange and T-Mobile made a profit from the charges. Together, they rake in about £2 million a day or £750 million a year. In these austere and economically difficult times, it is unfortunate that some of that cannot be passed back to the consumer.

I live in broadly the same border area as the Minister. She commented during a previous Question Time that she was on something that she should not be on — I wondered then what mobile phone company she was with.

People enter roaming areas very quickly, even when 10, 12 or 15 miles from the border. Given those distances, I cannot understand how we can be charged a totally different and highly inflated rate for outgoing, and even incoming, calls.

Some of the issues go back a number of years, when some politicians objected to the erection of phone masts, which would have resolved some of the problems in border areas. I remember Sinn Féin actively opposing mobile phone masts, which would have resolved some of the transmitting problems, in the border areas of Fermanagh, and I would be very surprised if the situation was not similar in other areas. Thankfully, that appears to have diminished now, but if the erection of a lot of those mobile phone masts had been permitted at the time, instead

of the widespread opposition to them, particularly from Sinn Féin Members, we might have fewer roaming charges in Northern Ireland now.

Mr Flanagan: Does the Member agree that the issue of mobile phone masts and coverage in black spots may be a problem with regard to inadvertent roaming, but the motion refers to roaming when one actually crosses the border? Therefore, no amount of mobile phone masts in rural Fermanagh would address that issue.

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

Mr Elliott: I thank the Member for that point. However, the point that I am trying to make is that we are roaming even though we are not in the Republic of Ireland. I am sure that the Member will accept that point. There are black spots that incur roaming charges, which add significantly to the costs to the business community and private users every month.

I will be interested to hear whether there is any resolution to the issue because it has been talked about for some time. Phone companies keep telling us that they are trying to reduce roaming charges and that they are going to bring them down, but every time I get my phone bill and there are roaming charges on it, they do not appear to have come down very significantly. In fact, they almost appear to have gone up in price. The fact is that we need a resolution.

The second issue relates to the mobile internet because roaming charges for that are also significant. If you try to use a dongle from any of the main mobile phone companies in any country outside the United Kingdom, the roaming charges are significant. In fact, I have been advised by those companies not to use them because the charges are so high. They have suggested that I find another method of logging on to the internet when I am abroad because the charges are much too high. I am keen to hear what resolution there is to that.

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): I welcome the debate. It has been good and many points have been made in relation to the issue. As Mr Nesbitt said, there are four elements to the motion. First, there is the importance of access to affordable telecommunications services for economic recovery. Secondly, there is the reduction in charges for mobile roaming, which apply right across Europe, not just between Northern

Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. I think that Mr McLaughlin said that this problem does not happen in England, Scotland and Wales, but people in south-east England also have a problem with roaming because they go onto a French network on some occasions. Therefore, it happens in south-east England as well. Thirdly, there is the proposal that we welcome the abolition of the roaming charge by 2015. Lastly, the motion calls for an all-Ireland tariff to be introduced to expedite that objective.

The importance of the telecommunications sector has long been recognised by the Executive, and there were telecommunications objectives in the last Programme for Government, which has seen an unprecedented amount of government funding being used to stimulate improvements in telecommunications infrastructure right across Northern Ireland. Building on that and recognising the pace of change in that market, my Department recently consulted on and published a telecommunications action plan, which was mentioned by some Members, under which it has set out its priorities for further investment over the period 2011-15.

The motion highlights the importance of affordable telecommunications costs. Bearing in mind that what is affordable to one business may not necessarily be viewed as being affordable to others, we have looked at reports from a variety of sources to ascertain whether, in the round, our telecommunications costs are affordable. In particular, the European Commission and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) have undertaken a couple of international surveys that focus on telecommunications costs. The survey from OECD notes that the measurement of communication prices is inherently complex. Obviously, that is the case.

One only has to look at the range of offers available, whether for fixed-line services, broadband services, mobile, TV or any combination of those to see that that is absolutely the case. That said, OECD produces a regular report on international telecoms pricing. Its most recent publication for 2011, which compared prices for some 25 countries, including the UK and the Republic of Ireland, suggests that although fixed-line costs in the UK are slightly higher for businesses compared to ROI, the UK costs for mobile services for business are some of the cheapest in the world.

That takes out the roaming charges and relates only to the domestic mobile cost.

The Commission has also been studying costs, and its most recent report into the matter indicates that prices for mobile services continue to fall. That report seems to indicate plenty of choice for consumers, with over 30 companies offering mobile services in the UK. Furthermore, Ofcom, our telecommunications regulator, reports in its most recent communications market report for 2010 that the average monthly revenue for a business line for mobile subscribers continues to fall in nominal terms to £25.51, yet overall mobile revenues have increased compared with 2009, which suggests that businesses are using mobile services more now that costs are coming down. It is also important to note that as Northern Ireland is part of the wider UK marketplace, business and residential consumers benefit from being part of one of the most competitive telecoms marketplaces in Europe.

As Minister with responsibility for the economy, I particularly welcome speaking about the next two points in the motion. Anything that reduces costs for businesses is to be welcomed, especially if we are to further develop our business links and trade with Europe. However, in the slightly longer term, I wonder whether further cost reduction will happen even more rapidly than required in the European Commission's targets due to the operation of market forces. A lot of people have talked about 2015 and the need to do something before then. I wholeheartedly agree with that. Sometimes, market forces move more quickly than the European Commission. Sue Ramsey asked a very meaningful question about what we can do now, and I want to address that in my final remarks.

Increasingly, we have devices that can use Wi-Fi hot spots, internet phones and Skype technology. Already, companies such as Three and O2 allow for free internet calls. Many operators also provide free calls to users on the same network. It would not surprise me if some of our best entrepreneurs were already exploiting those technologies to make free calls across Europe and to reduce their overheads, which would be welcomed by everybody in the Chamber. That is why it is notable that my Department's telecommunications action plan is seeking to improve mobile voice and data services across Northern Ireland. I firmly believe

that that is one of the main areas on which we should focus our efforts going forward.

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

Members referred to the fact that I have had ongoing communication with Ofcom on these issues. However, there is more that we can do. Our efforts should be focused more on trying to reduce the barriers for investment in telecoms infrastructure, whether that is streamlining the planning processes, incentivising investments, establishing suitable access to infrastructure for service providers or, as many Members said, rejecting taxation proposals for masts. Indeed, attacks have taken place, and we must recognise that that was a disincentive to companies in the past, particularly with regard to masts in border areas. It is clear that the demand for mobile services is increasing. Therefore, we should be planning ahead so that adequate infrastructure is in place to allow our businesses and entrepreneurs to fully exploit that technology and the potential productivity and efficiency gains that it offers.

Members have been asking whether more steps can be taken to improve mobile coverage in certain areas. Some of you have noted that the Chancellor of the Exchequer recently announced a fund aimed at improving mobile coverage. My officials are already in discussions with their Whitehall counterparts on how we might access the fund and have begun a round of discussions with the mobile phone companies to gain a better understanding of their requirements and some of the constraints that they face in Northern Ireland.

I also meet NIO Minister Hugo Swire quarterly to discuss this issue and other telecommunication and economic matters. Furthermore, I hope that our Members of Parliament will highlight Northern Ireland's case in relation to this issue at Westminster. I want to record my gratitude to Ian Paisley Jnr, who offered his assistance in that regard, and I hope that other Members of Parliament will do the same.

4.00 pm

Mr Humphrey: Not all of them will.

Mrs Foster: Sorry?

Mr Humphrey: Not all of them will.

Mrs Foster: I am sure that all of them will.

I will answer Ms Ramsey's question. We can, in a meaningful way, engage with Whitehall and Westminster to see if there is something that we can do ahead of the 2015 target. I intend to discuss that with Hugo Swire in the near future. He has been a good advocate for us on these matters.

I must say to Ms Ramsey that it was not in my house that I got the different roaming charges; it was just down the road. I was hoping that people would not remember the Brookeborough incident, when I said that I was on something that I should not have been on: obviously, everybody did.

A solution to the problem is available to home users, and it is called femtocell. I am happy to send the details of that system to Members, if it would be of interest to their constituents.

Mr Flanagan: For clarification, the Minister may be aware that the use of femtocell systems is approved only by Vodafone here and not by any of the other networks.

Mrs Foster: I was just coming to that — I am sorry, I thought that someone else wanted to speak. We have funded trials of the technology in Ballintoy and, as the Member probably knows, in Ballinamallard. That technology is promoted by Vodafone. I mention it because some people will have that difficulty, and I want to make it known that there is a solution. However, I accept that it is only promoted by one mobile provider.

The last part of the motion deals with the issue of expediting an all-Ireland tariff. However, as has been referenced, the Assembly has little direct control over that, and I remind the Assembly that our powers to intervene are non-existent, because telecommunications is not a transferred matter. We need to work on this with our Westminster colleagues, and I will continue to push them on the issue. It is an issue not only in border areas but across Northern Ireland. Indeed, for some bizarre reason, you move to a different network when you are on the Giant's Causeway.

Members will know that this is not the first time that this issue has been raised with me. In reply to an Assembly question in September, I referred to the European Commission's plans for a reduction in roaming charges in 2015, and I understand that proposals will come forward for consultation in the near future. However, I share Mr Nesbitt's concern that that is four years

away. There is something more that we can do to push the issue forward, and we should very much consider using our Members of Parliament and our MEPs.

Two organisations raised issues during the consultation process on the telecommunications action plan for Northern Ireland 2011-2015. One response suggested that we should establish a buffer zone in border areas in which roaming charges were not permitted, but it was indicated that we have no power or mandate to establish that buffer zone. Another response — I am telling the House this for the sake of the transparency and clarity of that action plan — complained of savage roaming charges, and we pointed out that work was being taken forward by regulators across Europe to deal with the issue.

The call for the immediate introduction of an all-Ireland telecommunications tariff to expedite the European Commission's objective is something that, frankly, the Assembly has no power over. The issue of roaming charges is one that we should and will continue to deal with through the Westminster Government. Instead of raising the issue in a ritualistic way at meetings of the NSMC, where it will not make any difference, we would be much better dealing with our Westminster colleagues to highlight the impact that the issue has across the Northern Ireland economy. That is what I intend to do over the next few weeks. I thank Members for their contributions, and I look forward to the closing speeches. Thank you very much.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for her comprehensive response to the debate. If Members bear with me, I will endeavour to summarise some of the issues that were raised.

Paul Flanagan raised a number of issues. He made it clear that it was a border issue.

Ms S Ramsey: You are roaming. That is Phil.

Mr Dunne: Pardon?

Ms S Ramsey: You are roaming. That is Phil.

Mr Dunne: Sorry, Phil Flanagan. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will Members make all their remarks through the Chair?

Mr Dunne: Sorry, Phil.

Mr Flanagan: You were close.

Mr Dunne: Yes, very close. He said that roaming charges were very much a problem in border counties and reckoned that it placed a great financial burden on people living there. He talked about bolt-ons to reduce costs. However, the loopholes in those were their extra cost to the customer. He acknowledged the need to do away with roaming because of the extra rates. He said, as he would, that he wanted a commitment from Dublin, and he talked about the profiteering going on along the border.

Robin Newton is not here, but he said that there was no legislation to regulate the cost of telephone operators, and that is a big problem. He also said that the Minister had been involved in discussions with Ofcom and that telecommunications were not a devolved matter.

Mike Nesbitt raised various issues. He asked why it took so long in the run-up to 2015 before this question could be addressed. He said that an all-Ireland tariff would reduce competitive pressure and its introduction would be of no real benefit to the Northern Ireland economy.

Pat Ramsey also said that roaming charges were a big issue in border constituencies. He felt that something needed to be done. He was concerned about domestic and business charges. He said that, when questioned about this issue, phone companies said that they operated as separate companies in Northern Ireland and the Republic.

For this to work, Stewart Dickson said that an increase in competition would be relied on — different operators for normal calls and roaming services.

Stephen Moutray made the very good point that customers get a raw deal, not just across the border but across Europe. He said that the charges did not affect just those in the Republic of Ireland but those in Spain, France and right across Europe.

Sue Ramsey made a very good point: she supported Jim Wells in all that he said, so we are making progress. She went on to say that we needed to put more pressure on telecommunications providers.

Karen McKevitt made the point that customers had to switch off their phone because they could not afford the excessive charges. Obviously, that is not satisfactory.

Tom Elliott said that mobile phone companies made a profit of £2 million a day. Was it £2 million? That is £750 million a year in excessive costs at the expense of users.

Internet charges were also an issue. The Minister recognised that they affected not just those in Northern Ireland or the Republic but those in south-east England. She said that she is doing what she can to use her influence to reduce the cost before 2015. She recognises and fully supports the increased use of phone systems, and she made the point that it is important that we try to improve the infrastructure to help those in business. The Minister assured us that she is doing everything that she can to help. She is engaging with Whitehall and Westminster. She mentioned meeting Hugo Swire, and she is endeavouring to use all her influence to get this matter resolved as soon as possible.

I thank —

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

Mr Dunne: Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak. I support the amendment. No doubt, the future is bright; the future is Orange. *[Laughter.]*

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The end of the debate has just added to the confusion that there has been the whole way through it. We put forward a simple motion to put pressure on phone companies in order to make a difference. Many people across the island of Ireland, including the North, where we are elected representatives, are affected day and daily by roaming charges, and yet we cannot agree on how to deal with the issue. As Phil said when proposing the motion, we will not have a hissy fit about the amendment or make a big deal of it; we will work our way through it instead.

All the major phone companies will be laughing at today's debate, because they have got away scot-free. That is the reality of the debate. We cannot get agreement on whether this is an all-Ireland issue, an east-west issue, a pan-European issue or a pan-islands issue, which was mentioned in the debate. I do not care what it is, as long as we get a fair deal for the people we represent. Phone companies make a complete and utter fortune and will continue to do so over the next four years until 2015 and possibly

thereafter. If we cannot get agreement on the issue, the phone companies will be laughing, because they will be able to charge customers whatever they want. In fact, after listening to the debate, I would not be surprised if they increased their charges once again. We have not been able to show solidarity. So, roaming charges it is, I think, and that is a shame.

When Phil Flanagan moved the motion and opened the debate, he started off by stating clearly why everybody in the House should support the motion. One of the reasons was that phone companies make millions from roaming charges. Who pays that money to the phone companies? It is our constituents and the other people on the island of Ireland. He also said that Ofcom stated clearly that it hopes that roaming charges will be abolished by 2015. However, 2015 is four years away, and people will have to pay that additional money until then.

I feel for businesspeople. It is difficult to make a profit in this day and age, and their profit margins are squeezed day and daily. We have not represented them today. If we stand with them, we can make a difference. We have not done so today; far from it. You can talk about bolt-ons, add-ons or whatever, but phone companies are only interested in themselves and in how much money they can make.

In moving the amendment, Robin Newton said that the motion is political: of course it is. This is a political institution, and every motion tabled here is political. You need to face reality, Robin: the motion is political, and you are in a political institution, although sometimes you might not act like it. Those are some of the serious issues that affect us all.

Robin deviated a bit from the debate by talking about the position of Sinn Féin councillors on the issue of phone masts. I lobbied and voted against phone masts outside primary schools, nursery schools, old people's homes and people's houses. That is a big issue, and I will continue to raise it, because it is not clear whether such masts emit radiation or cause contamination.

Mr Moutray: I thank the Member for giving way. It is one thing to protest and lobby against phone masts in certain areas. However, it is quite another for people to pull down phone masts in rural areas such as Ballygawley, which is what happened some years ago. Does the Member agree that that is not acceptable? To

this very day, there is no mobile connection between Dungannon and Ballygawley along the main A4 road.

4.15 pm

Mr P Maskey: I thank the Member for that. Given Mr Newton's earlier comments, I intend to raise this issue with the Principal Deputy Speaker, who was in the Chair at the time. I ask the Speaker's Office to read Hansard. Mr Newton said that Sinn Féin had some responsibility for doing damage to phone masts. If the Member has that information, he should bring it forward.

Mr Moutray: Answer the question.

Mr P Maskey: Should property be damaged? No, it should not. However, I am not going to stand here to be accused by other Members. That is why I am asking the Speaker's Office to take a serious note of the issue. If Robin Newton is saying that Sinn Féin may be responsible for damaging phone masts, I want that to be checked out. I want the issue to be taken on board.

Unfortunately, Mike Nesbitt has left the Chamber. He said that the motion had no links to the Assembly. We have tried to make the motion Assembly-relevant by putting as much pressure as possible on those who are responsible. The big issue for me is that we do not have the accountability mechanisms to do that.

Mr Ross: Will the Member give way?

Mr P Maskey: Let me finish my point, and then I will give way. I ask the Minister to organise meetings with the telecommunications companies, which is where the pressure needs to be applied. After listening to the concerns of everyone in the Chamber, the Minister and her Executive colleagues should meet to ensure that that pressure is applied and those companies do the right thing.

Mr Ross: The Member is probably better placed than most in the House to make his argument in the place where it actually matters. He is elected to the House of Commons at Westminster, which is where authority on the issue rests. If he took his position in the House of Commons, he could make those arguments there.

Mr P Maskey: That point proves why I am an abstentionist. Assembly Members have been sitting in that Chamber for many years and have

done absolutely nothing about the matter. That shows your point. *[Interruption.]* Do you want to come back in?

Mr Deputy Speaker: All remarks should be made through the Chair, please.

Mr P Maskey: The debate is relevant because pressure must be put on the telecommunications companies. Figures released today show that they are making absolute millions while we are all hindered by their costs.

Sue Ramsey said that there was a sensible solution — one tariff — whether that tariff applies across the island of Ireland or extends to England, Scotland and Wales. Mitchel McLaughlin said that it is not a big issue in England, Scotland and Wales, which have only one network. The Minister pointed out that there can be roaming charges between the south-east of England and France, which we may need to examine in a European context.

We should send a clear message from the Chamber today that we want fair charges for everyone. Nobody should be hindered by this matter. Businesses working on the island of Ireland should not have increased charges every year. Karen McKeivitt spoke about people in homes being affected and hit by roaming charges whether they live in the North or the South. She spoke about discrimination against mobile phone users. That is the point of the debate, which we highlighted well. There is discrimination against mobile phone users, who are being charged extraordinary and extortionate rates by phone companies. Only the phone companies are getting richer, and we have done absolutely nothing about it today.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the importance of affordable telecommunication costs to achieving economic recovery; welcomes the recent reductions in roaming charges across Europe; further welcomes the European Commission's plans to abolish roaming charges by 2015; and calls on the mobile network operators to abolish roaming charges in advance of 2015; and further notes that regulation of telecommunications on a UK-wide basis is key to a competitive Northern Ireland marketplace.

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [Mr Deputy Speaker.]

Adjournment

Housing: Girdwood Barracks Site

Mr Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the topic for debate will have 15 minutes in which to speak, the Minister will have 10 minutes to respond and, on this occasion, all other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr A Maginness: Of all the problems that exist in North Belfast — we have many problems, Mr Deputy Speaker — housing is probably the most critical. Without a roof over your head and a place to call home, your life is devalued, your self-worth is diminished and your dignity undermined. That applies not just to individuals but, more importantly, to their families.

We have a chronic housing shortage in North Belfast. That was recognised as long ago as October 2000, when the north Belfast housing strategy was produced to tackle the area's endemic housing problems. In preparing the strategy, the Housing Executive analysed the state of housing and concluded that there was differential need between the Catholic community and the Protestant community in the area. According to the strategy, the Catholic community had much greater need for newbuild housing than the Protestant community. Although it recognised that the Protestant community had very serious housing needs, it also recognised that both communities in North Belfast had different levels and types of housing need. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive recognised the need for newbuilds in Catholic areas and the need, to a lesser degree, for newbuilds in Protestant areas. However, there was a need to raise housing standards in Protestant areas in particular.

A two-pronged approach was employed to address the differential housing need in North Belfast. That remains the Housing Executive's basic approach a decade after the launch of the 2000 housing strategy. The basic problem of housing shortage and increased demand remains. Actual demand for social housing in 2011 exceeds what was predicted in 2000. Housing demand far outstrips supply. Put simply,

more houses are needed than was originally anticipated in 2000.

That is not to say that the Housing Executive has not done a good job over the past decade: it has. Given the difficulty in procuring land and building sites, it has performed well. In total, 1,034 units were built under the housing newbuild programme between April 2006 and March 2011. The reality is, however, that there is still a very real and pressing housing need in North Belfast. The latest figures for March 2011 indicate that 2,427 applicants are on the waiting list. Of those, 1,335 are in housing stress, and, of those, 422 are families and 675 are single people. The problem with single people is very serious indeed. It is due to lifestyle choices and marriage and relationship break-ups and so forth. Of the families, 350 are Catholic, and approximately 80% of those who are in housing stress are Catholic.

The Northern Ireland Housing Executive has tried to complete roughly 250 homes each year. In 2010-11, it achieved 254 completions. The Housing Executive has projected housing need as 1,262 units over the next five years, which is approximately 250 a year with an emphasis on family homes. Girdwood, which consists of 20 acres, would make a significant contribution to the achievement of that target this year and beyond.

Accepting the argument that the housing problem was chronic and, therefore, required a significant boost through newbuild housing and given the serious shortage of building land in North Belfast, the previous Minister for Social Development, Alex Attwood, quite properly approved the building of 200 houses at Girdwood, appointed Apex Housing, the north-west housing association, to develop the scheme, provided the necessary budget cover and teed up the scheme for formal planning processes. By now, that planning process should have been largely completed and the way should have been open for building in 2012. In doing so, he saw the pressing need to address substantially the housing shortage in North Belfast by way of a significant newbuild programme. However, this year, the target has been seriously reduced to 172 units, which are spread across 14 different schemes in North Belfast. Frankly, there is simply no alternative to Girdwood: it is the banker for North Belfast housing.

Mr Humphrey: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. Does he agree that the timing of the former Minister's announcement of

200 houses in North Belfast at Girdwood was purely to do with the election, was an SDLP attempt to outmanoeuvre Sinn Féin in the run-up to the election and was a gross insult to the community in lower Oldpark, where many residents live in conditions that are akin to those during the blitz in 1941?

Mr A Maginness: You may not be surprised to hear that I do not accept that. In fact, the Minister made a considered, meritorious decision and attempted to address the chronic housing shortage in North Belfast. It was right and proper for the Minister to make such a decision on foot of a previous preparatory decision by Minister Margaret Ritchie, and it was right and proper that follow-up should take place.

You refer to conditions in lower Oldpark. Of course those conditions must be addressed, and, indeed, the Minister, Alex Attwood, attempted to address them in part, as he did in other parts of North Belfast.

Mr Humphrey: I am grateful to the Member again. The Minister's attempt to address, as the Member put it, the appalling housing conditions in lower Oldpark was rejected by the local community. When the Minister turned up to launch the document, the community would not even be in the photograph. The Minister was well aware before he left office of the feelings, concerns and frustrations of the people in lower Oldpark, and the proposals never had the endorsement of that community because they were an insult to the people there.

Mr A Maginness: To some extent, you are accusing the Minister of acting in a neglectful fashion and, perhaps, of deliberately ignoring the needs of people in lower Oldpark. If the Minister had been so minded, why did he go to lower Oldpark and engage with the community there? You may be right when you say that the community was not satisfied with what was on offer, but you must give credit to a Minister for going to a community, engaging with it and attempting to address the housing problems there. So your observations are quite unfair, and it is quite wrong to suggest that he in some way neglected or ignored the interests of that community. The fact is that the Minister took the time and made the effort to engage with that community.

4.30 pm

Having outlined the objectively established extensive housing need in North Belfast and the

wonderful opportunity that Girdwood provides for housing development, it is very difficult to understand the present Minister's decision to drop Girdwood from the social housing development programme for this year. There does not appear to be a rational explanation.

Here is land owned by DSD. Therefore, it does not cost it or the Housing Executive a penny to purchase, as it is in DSD's ownership. Here is a brownfield site that is completely clear, uncontaminated and free to be built upon at any time. Indeed, it has been in that condition for quite some time. Certainly, if planning permission were granted, the housing association would be in a position to commence building immediately, because there is no need for clearance or any further preparatory work to be carried out. Yet the Minister drops this important housing scheme from the housing development programme for this year without rational explanation. Clearly, the Housing Executive is disappointed with the Minister's decision to drop from the programme, without explanation, the building of 200 houses at Girdwood. I understand that the Housing Executive has written to the Minister asking him to explain the deletion of this scheme from the housing development programme but, to date, no reply has been received.

It has been limply put forward by the DUP that no housing development should take place at Girdwood until other developments at the site are agreed. I strongly disagree. Housing is an overriding need of such proportions that it requires to be satisfied as soon as is practicable. The development of the Mater Hospital, St Malachy's College and a business park can all be accommodated in due course in the same way that the community hub facility sponsored by Belfast City Council can be accommodated. I agree with those developments; they should take place, but they should not be an excuse to exclude or delay housing. Lack of consensus around those issues should not be used as a veto.

What is extremely disturbing is that of all the housing schemes in Northern Ireland, this was the only one removed from the programme by the Minister and without explanation. Therefore, the question is: why did the Minister unilaterally exclude this scheme, above all others, from the programme?

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: I am running out of time. I am sorry. I have given way twice. Thank you.

Many suspect that his decision is based on political prejudice. I hope it is not. However, on the face of it, the Minister's decision is perverse. What he has done is to pervert the noble aim of the north Belfast housing strategy, which is to satisfy the pressing housing demand in North Belfast. What I ask today is for the Minister to review what I regard as a perverse decision and to give hope to hundreds of families and people who are looking for homes to renew and to improve their lives. Even at this late stage, the Minister could redeem the situation by reviewing his decision so that Girdwood can be reintroduced into the housing programme at the earliest stage.

I very much hope that the Minister will reflect on what I have said and change his mind. I believe that Girdwood offers a golden opportunity for the whole community, particularly in satisfying housing need, and I hope that the Minister can contribute to that by expediting housing development at Girdwood.

Mr Humphrey: When the Girdwood advisory panel met, the following mission statement was agreed:

"To create a regeneration project of international significance which brings maximum economic, social and environmental benefits to the local and wider community and in doing so creates a vibrant, inclusive and diverse environment which attracts present and future generations of people to live, work and visit."

The Girdwood site provides a great opportunity for North Belfast and the wider city, and that ripples out into Northern Ireland. It is a site that should be developed as a shared site, as set out in the principles of the Dunlop/Toner report of 2002 on delivering a shared space for North Belfast.

Mr A Maginness: I agree with the Member that it should be a shared site. The developments at St Malachy's, the community hub, the Mater Hospital and the business park are all opportunities for the whole community to share. I do not rule out shared housing on that site — for both the Catholic and Protestant communities — so I agree with what you are saying, but that does not exclude the commencement of a housing development on the site now.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Humphrey: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

The Democratic Unionist Party is absolutely determined to deliver a shared space in that area. The first piece of the jigsaw is the agreement by the Special EU Programmes Body to take forward the next phase of Belfast City Council's hub concept. I listened to the Member, and I am grateful to him for giving way on two occasions, but he is fundamentally wrong about housing. It is the one issue that was not agreed by the advisory panel and the parties. The Member accepts that.

Officials at every public meeting that I attended, whether in lower Oldpark or lower Shankill, gave assurances to those communities — it may well have been the same in Cliftonville, and so on, on the nationalist side — that no decision would be made without those communities being consulted. It was, therefore, a source of great regret that during the previous SDLP leadership election, Minister Ritchie announced in the House that 200 houses would be built, without there having been any consultation with the local community. Then, earlier this year, as part of the election, Minister Attwood announced the building of 200 houses, in what I think was a tactical move to outmanoeuvre Sinn Féin for the nationalist vote. Those are very disappointing and retrograde steps by the SDLP. That site, which was to be taken forward on an agreed basis for a shared future and a shared space, is unfortunately being used for party political reasons.

The lower Oldpark community remains concerned, fearful and anxious about the development of Girdwood. I frequently meet people in the lower Oldpark community, and we will not let that community down. Unfortunately, both SDLP Ministers for Social Development jettisoned the principles that were agreed.

If we develop the site, there must be buy-in from all communities that abut the site. The lower Oldpark struggles with the impact of intense and deepening poverty, underinvestment by the Housing Executive, sectarian violence and sectarian attacks. At a recent public meeting that I attended, a member of that community asked me, "Are we to be the new Torrens?" It is a challenge for the Department for Social Development and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to ensure that communities in lower Oldpark, lower Shankill and Cliftonville be

facilitated in this concept. We must always consult widely with those communities and take their views on board.

I recently brought two members of the SDLP from Belfast City Council to the lower Oldpark area to see it at first hand. It resembles something from the Blitz in 1941. The way in which that area has sat for so long, ignored and neglected, is appalling.

The previous Minister's plan for the area simply did not have buy-in and would not have regenerated the area. In fact, it was an insult to that community. The community could not endorse the proposals and so set about establishing its own action group, which has put forward a plan that has been endorsed by that community.

I will return to the issue of Girdwood. The DUP is determined to endorse the plan for the lower Oldpark. That is why we attended a recent community event and met local people from both sides of the community to listen to their concerns and fears. We will work to see the plan realised. To that end, we have met representatives of local schools, officials from the Mater Hospital, the Roman Catholic bishop Noël Treanor, the Lower Oldpark Community Association and the Greater Shankill Partnership Board.

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

Mr Humphrey: We have met St Patrick's and St Joseph's Housing Committee and the immediate past moderator of the Presbyterian Church. We have met the Ulster Unionist Party, Sinn Féin and the SDLP.

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

Mr Humphrey: We are determined to see a shared future on a shared site that benefits the entire community in North Belfast, not just one community.

Mr G Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank Alban Maginness for securing this important debate. Most of us here represent North Belfast, but we are not here for an argument, even though, clearly, there are disagreements. The two Members who spoke at the beginning talked about the community — perhaps, at times, about different sections of the community — but all this is about a very disadvantaged area that needs assistance. Housing is at the core, whether that be the

need for newbuild in the nationalist area, as Alban Maginness pointed out, or, as the Member opposite described, upgrading and renovation of housing in the lower Oldpark.

We all agree that it is a disadvantaged area. Some wards are the most deprived not only in the North of Ireland but in Europe. We are in the middle of an economic downturn, and we have a site that has been lying empty for years. From my time as a junior Minister, I recall that it is a 26-acre site, which included the jail. In fact, the jail site has been substantially renovated for tourism, which will help to create jobs in North Belfast in the near future. I believe that it is opening again in January 2012. We submitted a successful application for a composite project to the SEUPB. It is important to say that it was a composite project — that has already been pointed out — by all the parties on Belfast City Council. The community hub, which is at the centre of that project, needs to be acceptable and, I think, is acceptable to everyone.

However, there are issues that we cannot ignore. Before I got up to speak, William Humphrey read out the mission statement drawn up by the first advisory panel. Its aim was to create a regeneration project for the wider community that:

“creates a vibrant, inclusive and diverse environment which attracts present and future generations of people to live, work and visit.”

I emphasise the word “live”. That mission statement was agreed by all the parties. The issue is how to deal with living in such an environment. It is about local practice and international best practice on a site of such importance for regeneration, which goes beyond North Belfast. On any major regeneration site, however, the people living there are crucial. That is accepted right across the board.

From the start, the Housing Executive aimed to build 200 housing units. Let us be honest, 200 units will not deal with the severe and crucial lack of housing in North Belfast but it certainly would be a way of moving the whole process forward. As Alban Maginness pointed out, there are not that many sites on which we can do that.

4.45 pm

It is very important to say that I understand what I think is described as the nervousness around the lower Oldpark and all of that. No person — and, in particular, no elected

representative — in North Belfast wants an interface. That issue came up very early, and it was dealt with very early. For the record, therefore, there was agreement on that as well; nobody wants to create an interface. However, it is a huge site. It can accommodate all the things that were discussed in the advisory group at the beginning.

One cannot ignore the fact that 95% of the housing list is nationalist. That is a huge area that needs to be dealt with. We have two Ministers from North Belfast: Minister McCausland and Minister Ní Chuilín, who could not make it today because she has other ministerial business. They, of course, have duties outside of North Belfast, but what an opportunity for those two Departments to get together on an issue like this. There are issues beyond housing that involve the Mater Hospital, St Malachy's College, small and medium-sized enterprises, the social economy, leisure, tourism, culture —

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

Mr G Kelly: — the Crumlin Road jail and others.

We can make a difference. Leadership is needed from the political parties on the basis of objective need, and we need a strategy for that. Go raibh maith agat.

Ms P Bradley: The DUP recognises the importance and huge potential of the Girdwood site and the adjacent Crumlin Road jail to North Belfast and, of course, the wider city. Given its significance, it is vital that any decisions are based on a shared vision for the site and have the aim of bringing benefits to all the communities that live nearby. The site offers an opportunity to stimulate economic development and job creation, to provide a shared community hub and to allow for the expansion of healthcare services at the Mater Hospital.

Mr Humphrey: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. Does she agree that space is required for the Mater Hospital to expand the services and facilities that need to be there, particularly given recent medical announcements? Does she also agree that the prison can very clearly provide a site for the digital hub for Belfast, and that the prison cells could be used as incubation units for business development? Furthermore, as regards the cultural corridor of that part of the city, does

she agree that the hotel, tourism and hospitality industry can be of great benefit to North Belfast?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Ms P Bradley: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank my colleague. I agree, especially about the expansion of the Mater Hospital. There is definitely a need for that. There is also a need for North Belfast to get into that league and to have more tourism. There is so much potential.

Mr A Maginness: I agree with the Member that the Mater Hospital needs to expand. Will she support me and others in asking for the heritage people to remove their preservation order on the wall so that the rear part of the jail can be used by the Mater Hospital?

Ms P Bradley: As the Member probably knows, that matter has been explored. The wall has to remain intact.

The development could be a beacon for the rest of the city and elsewhere if it is based on inclusion and the principle of shared space. However, if that vision is not adhered to, the huge potential of the site will be lost and it will serve only to reinforce division in that part of our city. It is for that reason that the unilateral announcements by the previous two SDLP Ministers for Social Development about social housing on that site were wrong. Those announcements were made without Executive approval, and they ignored the established inter-community planning process. That approach regarding a site at a major North Belfast interface represented the abandonment of the principle of creating a shared space and was destabilising for local community relations.

As my colleague Mr Humphrey has said, the announcement that was made in March in the run-up to the Assembly and local government elections appeared to be an example of blatant electioneering on the part of the SDLP Minister. I am, therefore, pleased that the now Minister for Social Development, Nelson McCausland, has returned the process to a holistic and collaborative approach. I warmly welcome Minister McCausland's intention to develop Girdwood in a manner that will bring benefit to and have the support of the entire community.

The promotion of economic development, shared services and shared community space should be central components of activity at the

site to address the issues of disadvantage in adjacent areas. The issue will be a strong test of the Executive's commitment to their shared future strategy, and it is vital that the decisions made are in the best interests of all the people and communities in North Belfast.

Mr Copeland: I rise to speak on the matter with the words of my late great uncle Fred Loney ringing in my ears. He had a saying: "Girdwood: don't go near it". That was largely predicated against his experience in 1939, when he received at his place of work a letter that instructed him to go to Girdwood and to bring a packed lunch. He went, and he got home in 1946, having been evacuated out of France several weeks after D-Day and having spent several months as a guest of the Japanese, which seriously jaundiced his view.

The site offers a combination of opportunity and challenge, and those are a dangerous mix at the best of times, and even more so if you take them into a district without a completely thought-through plan such as the location of the site. I vividly remember two things that strike me from my early youth. First, I remember speaking to our foreman joiner at work, who, the night before, saw the house that he was born into and in which his parents had lived for decades, in what was called the Bally streets, burned. He never really recovered his trust or his faith in society. Secondly, a little-known fact is that my wife lived on the Oldpark Road when her father was a police constable, in the days when policemen lived in rented accommodation.

The eyes of a considerable number of people look at the site. As I said, it offers a mixture of challenge and opportunity. The way in which it is developed must be according to a plan and a strategy, and the single most important component of that is agreement on the ground. If it is seen to be a victory for one side over the other, it simply restates the integrity of the argument that got us to where we got to some decades ago. There have always been pressures in inner cities, and there are competing pressures in this one. There are competing pressures for houses, for those who will occupy the houses, for recreation, for industry and commerce and, possibly, for the expansion of the hospital. It is difficult to make an argument that we should have 100, 200, 300 or 400 houses in the absence of a plan that shows how those houses relate to the district that they are in.

Mr G Kelly: On that point, everyone who has spoken has agreed that it should be a multi-use site and that housing should be one of those uses. Will the Member accept that housing should be a part of it, leaving aside the numbers that are involved?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Copeland: Sir, there is barely a working-class district in this city where the provision of social housing is not an issue about which we should all be rightly concerned. The issue is the way in which it is provided and the way in which it allows the occupant of each house to relate to his neighbours and to those in the district in which he lives. In my view, the secret to a settled society is a citizen in his home with his family, in close proximity to his place of employment, if such a thing exists, living in an established and defined relationship with his neighbours. If this is not done right — I am not suggesting that it will not be done right — the ramifications for the entire district will be lifelong.

Mr Humphrey: Given that the Member knows the area, he will know that, to the north of the site, there is a wall that had to be built by the Northern Ireland Office a number of years ago as a peace wall. North Belfast has more interfaces than any other constituency in Northern Ireland, and as other Members have said, it serves no community and is for the betterment of no community for more interfaces to be created. I am sure that the Member will agree.

Mr Copeland: I agree absolutely that interfaces are a legacy — a blight to some — and the steps that have been taken to solve interfaces provide to others a source of comfort, no matter how difficult they are for others to accept socially.

My point is that were I to be presented with a plan that showed the various component parts in totality — the housing, the recreation, the potential for commerce or industry, the relationship with the hospital, and the wall — I would personally feel that I could make a judgement. I give no guarantees that the decision that I would take from that judgement would be right, but I would feel that I had available to me all the information on which I could make a judgement.

I do not think that the right way to bake a cake is to determine, first of all, that there will be fruit in it and then to pick one type of fruit and

judge everything else from that piece of fruit. The entire thing has to be integrated, thought through, consulted upon and judged by the people who will be most affected; namely, those who will live, bring up their families and be educated there and, hopefully, find a method of earning a living for themselves.

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

Mr Copeland: Thank you very much indeed, sir.

Mrs Cochrane: I appreciate being able to contribute to this debate as I consider it to be of great significance. As we are all aware, North Belfast is one of the most deprived areas of Northern Ireland and the most fragmented part of the city. It also has one of the lengthiest waiting lists for social housing, largely because housing areas have remained highly segregated. There tends to be overcrowding in nationalist areas and vacant spaces in some unionist areas. As a result, a significantly higher proportion of those waiting to be housed come from a nationalist background.

Tackling disadvantage and normalising good relationships belong together, so improving access to housing, employment and education is crucial. Yet the idea of creating additional housing on that prime site has become an extremely contentious issue, with other parties splitting along their usual lines. The true concept of a shared future does not mean a shared-out future.

Although I recognise that the site has its sensitivities, those alone cannot be a reason not to develop it. There is serious need for more housing in North Belfast, and it would be absurd if the finished site had no residential aspect. It is my understanding that housing was historically always part of the plan for Girdwood, and as long as it is designed with local sensitivities in mind, it would go a long way in significantly relieving housing stress in North Belfast.

One of the primary development principles that the draft master plan was based on was:

“there is a common aspiration for a transformational shared future scheme, whilst also addressing pressing needs in the locality and wider area”.

In accordance with that aim, shared housing standards need to be created in order to promote good relations and to create a diverse, inclusive and aspirational environment in which

to live. However, social housing should always be allocated based on need alone. We need to be practical and recognise that due to a significantly higher need from the nationalist community, more nationalists are likely to be housed in that area. Therefore, a task vital to the success of the Girdwood site will be to ensure that people may live in and use the site freely without necessarily belonging to the numerically dominant resident group.

Considerations should be given to equal access to the site, for those living on it and those coming in to the site, so that there are no chill factors to any access. Therefore, it is essential that the site includes plenty of shared space that is viewed as safe and welcoming to all. Shared space also allows maximum opportunities for positive interaction and minimises opportunity costs arising from blighted or segregated land.

Mr Humphrey referred to the aims laid out by the Girdwood advisory panel. Mr Kelly drew attention to the word “live” in those aims. Therefore, housing needs to form part of that regeneration.

In order to create a project of such international significance, those homes should seek to set a new benchmark for housing by incorporating the highest standards of energy efficiency and use of renewables. Consideration should also be given to incorporating and integrating a significant number of social housing properties as well as affordable family homes and suitable housing for the elderly, single persons and those with a disability. Therefore, I urge the Minister to progress urgently the development of the site.

5.00 pm

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social

Development): First of all, I thank the Members who contributed to the debate today. I welcome the opportunity to respond and clarify some of the issues that have been raised this afternoon.

Unfortunately, I have to start with a short history lesson. Back in December 2001, the then First Minister, deputy First Minister and Social Development Minister asked Roy Adams, Monsignor Tom Toner and Rev Dr John Dunlop to look at the problems across North Belfast and bring forward a report with recommendations that could start to address the issues affecting that community. The Dunlop report, as it became known, was published in May 2002 and, among other things, recommended that government

develop a major site involving mixed usage to serve as a symbol of hope and economic regeneration for North Belfast. I note in the report the little phrase that the project would have to be taken forward over a sustained period and include dialogue, partnership working and a non-coercive approach, which would be fundamental to success. For that reason, when the Girdwood site became available in 2006, DSD acquired it to make good that recommendation and quickly established an advisory panel to make recommendations on the use of the site. A draft integrated master plan for Girdwood and the adjacent former Crumlin Road jail was published in October 2007. It maintained the theme in the Dunlop report that the site should be developed on a mixed-use basis for the benefit of the entire community.

Excellent progress has been made on the refurbishment of the jail, and we look forward to its opening next year as an exciting new tourist destination in North Belfast. It will bring employment, enjoyment and new opportunities to the area. The master plan also envisaged mixed-use development on the Girdwood site, with provision for a range of activities, including community leisure, playing fields, work space, residential units and space for the Mater Hospital. One of the key points, however, was that:

“the issue of residential development on the Gaol/Girdwood site is extremely contentious - a legacy of the civil unrest in Northern Ireland which has resulted in highly segregated housing in North Belfast ... Fundamental to obtaining community support will be ongoing commitment by government to securing the regeneration of the deprived residential areas adjacent to the site.”

That is a reference to lower Shankill and lower Oldpark. Reference has been made to those communities already.

Mr G Kelly: Will the Minister give way?

Mr McCausland: Yes, as long as I get an extra minute.

Mr G Kelly: I thank the Member for giving way.

Mr McCausland: I will not get an extra minute, so I will not give way. *[Laughter.]*

Mr G Kelly: It is a very small point.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Sorry, Minister, you had already given way.

Mr G Kelly: The Minister mentioned lower Shankill and lower Oldpark. Does he accept that the reference was also to Cliftonville?

Mr McCausland: I was on the working group and was key in getting that phrase in. The reference was to the differential deprivation. When you look at lower Oldpark and lower Shankill, you are dealing with communities that have been seriously neglected. I agree that there is deprivation in all of the general area; I do not dispute that. That was the particular issue there. Sadly, there was not the work done over the intervening period in regard to those two communities, in spite of repeated requests from the local community and political representatives.

The master plan also said:

“The Panel recommends, therefore, the continuation of cross-community dialogue on the housing issue, which should involve learning more about successful initiatives elsewhere, in terms of mixed-use, multi-tenure regeneration projects. With time, dialogue and goodwill, the Panel is convinced that a solution will be found to this very sensitive issue.”

Unfortunately, in the intervening period under the previous two Social Development Ministers, Margaret Ritchie and Alex Attwood, there was, first of all, no progress on lower Oldpark and lower Shankill. The only thing that we managed to get in lower Oldpark was an extension of a peace line to protect some houses. Apart from that, nothing was done to regenerate the area, and year after year passed. So, there was no real progress on that score. Secondly, we did not see the development of the dialogue that was talked about in the master plan. As a result, we had four wasted years. Gerry Kelly asked why, during the intervening period, there had not been progress. He is right: it is an opportunity for the whole community, and there should have been progress. Sadly, those were four wasted years.

Now we come to February 2010. The terms “Slieve Donard”, “SDLP council” and “SDLP leadership” come to mind. In that context, Margaret Ritchie made an announcement. Most people, if they are honest about it, will admit that there was a connection between her bid for the leadership of the SDLP and her grand announcement about the site, a point already made by William Humphrey. The second announcement, which was almost a repeat of the first, was made by Alex Attwood on 14 March 2011 and was possibly not unconnected to an election that was due to take place some

weeks later. On each occasion, it would seem to most people — certainly to anyone I spoke to — that this was political opportunism and they had abandoned the vision of a shared site and a shared future and pursued a narrow political agenda.

Unfortunately, little progress has been made. However, since coming into office, over the summer months, I have instructed my officials to work with Belfast City Council and the local community to finalise the council's plans for a community hub on the site. We are all pleased that £9.6 million has been provisionally granted to Belfast City Council for that project. That is central to the development of the site. Building on the refurbishment of the jail and the opportunities presented by the hub, I have asked my officials to review the implementation of the other uses proposed in the master plan for Girdwood to see what further progress can be made to deliver those. That work is under way, and I expect an initial report to be ready for my consideration early in the new year. So, after four wasted years, we aim now to have the initial report ready in a matter of months.

The implementation review will also look at the wider development context for inner north Belfast to maximise the opportunities for regeneration across the area. However, I am conscious that, since the advisory panel highlighted its options for the site in 2007, the economic climate has changed, and that will obviously have an impact on what happens. However, I recently met my colleague Edwin Poots, the Health Minister, and together we toured the area to discuss the options and see the potential that the Mater Hospital could contribute to the regeneration efforts. In that context, I also privately met Bishop Treanor, and we have had conversations on the issue with a range of stakeholders.

My approach is to develop the site on an integrated and comprehensive basis rather than through piecemeal developments. That strategic approach is, in my view, consistent with the recommendations in both the Dunlop report and, more recently, the report by the advisory group on Girdwood. Although we have heard much today about the need for housing on the site, housing development alone cannot regenerate or sustain communities, certainly not in an area of the city that has suffered so much in the recent past. I have said for many years that Girdwood represents a significant

opportunity to regenerate this part of the city in a way that both communities can buy into and benefit from. It must be delivered for the good of all the community in a genuinely shared manner. The previous Social Development Ministers made announcements about housing on Girdwood in order to move forward on one element of the required regeneration package. In my view, that goes against the very principles first outlined in the Dunlop report nearly 10 years ago and flies in the face of what was included in the report produced as a master plan by the advisory group.

In the meantime, we continue to meet housing need across North Belfast as we do everywhere else in Northern Ireland. North Belfast has benefited from over 1,000 new homes in the past five years alone, and we have made nearly 3,500 allocations in the same period as a result of new housing alongside the reletting of existing homes. Even in this current financial year, there are plans to start building a further 166 new homes in this part of the city. In that respect, Girdwood is perhaps something of a red herring.

Alongside our existing stock, we will continue to help those in greatest housing need. The recent funding I made available to support first-time buyers will also help to move people off the waiting list and into low-cost home ownership. In looking to meet housing need, we must not be fixated on newbuild alone.

As an elected representative of the constituency, I assure you that North Belfast is never far from my thoughts. Only last year, my Department announced plans to replace 276 old terraced houses along the upper long streets, Parkside and Queen Victoria Gardens with 147 new and modern family homes. That work is well under way and represents a commitment of £38 million. It is not dependent on Girdwood in any shape or manner.

I welcome what has been said today in highlighting the issue. I hope that this brings the clarity that everyone was looking for. I will finish with a quotation from Alban Maginness. In March 2006, he said:

"The windfall sites of Torrens and Girdwood will do much to relieve the pressure over the next two or three years but we are going to continue to have a short-term housing crisis in relation to the Catholic community in North Belfast."

The point about Torrens being a windfall site was one of the comments that did more than anything else to poison community relations.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Please draw your remarks to a close.

Mr McCausland: A lot of work has had to be done to rebuild the relationships that were damaged by his comments, and those relationships are being rebuilt.

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

Adjourned at 5.10 pm.

Written Ministerial Statement

The content of this written ministerial statement is as received at the time from the Minister. It has not been subject to the official reporting (Hansard) process.

Culture, Arts and Leisure

DCAL: Arm's-length Bodies

*Published at 12.00 noon on
Tuesday 15 November, 2011*

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): I am writing to members to notify them of the commencement of the second phase for the Review of our Arms Length Bodies (ALBs).

The Department initiated a review of its ALBs in December 2010 on a phased approach, with the first phase (a desk based review) completed in March 2011. Following Phase 1, the following bodies will now be taken forward to Phase 2, Sport NI, Arts Council NI, National Museums NI, NI Screen, NI Museums Council, Armagh Observatory and Planetarium.

I have established a small team to take forward the second phase of the review. The team is currently drawing up a project initiation document for completion of Phase 2 review.

The purpose of this review is to determine if the functions of the ALB are still required and, if so, whether the current status of the body is the most effective way of delivering these functions. The Project team will carry out a detailed examination of each ALB and will look at how functions are currently delivered, the legislation under which the body operates and consider the implications - legislative, operational etc, for any proposed change of status included in a delivery options analysis.

In deciding the order in which bodies should be reviewed the project team have considered the level of spend, the Departmental Risk Rating for each ALB, clarity around setting and agreeing business plans and budgets and any cross cutting issues for all the bodies (e.g. Armagh Observatory and Planetarium operate under the same legislation and are considered as one body) and have concluded that Sport NI and National Museums should be first. No decisions have been taken on the sequence of reviews for the remaining bodies but will be agreed with a Project Board prior to commencement of each review.

The Project team will take into consideration any recommendations from BRG (Budget Review Group) and they will also consider any implications that arise from any future decisions under the Review of Public Administration (RPA)

In conclusion, I would like to assure members that my Department has no preconceived view on the preferred outcome for any of the six bodies and that we will be open and transparent and will consult with the ALBs and all key stakeholders throughout the review.



information & publishing solutions

Published by Authority of the Northern Ireland Assembly,
Belfast: The Stationery Office

and available from:

Online

www.tsoshop.co.uk

Mail, Telephone, Fax & E-mail

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PO Box 29, Norwich, NR3 1GN

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ISSN 1463-7162

Daily Editions: Single copies £5, Annual subscriptions £325

Bound Volumes of Debates are issued periodically during the session: Single copies: £90

Printed in Northern Ireland by The Stationery Office Limited

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ISBN 978-0-339-50510-0

